

Stephanie Ng

Big

Bites

Break

BOUNDARIES



PREFACE

This is technically not my first book.

When I was 10 years old (or thereabouts), my dad compiled several creative writing pieces of mine, and proceeded to print 500 copies of this compilation. As a kid, I had a very busy brain – constantly day-dreaming and creating stories in my head – and writing it all down was the best outlet I could find. I also think that, as an only child, writing stories was the quickest way for me to communicate what I was thinking. I didn't have to wait for anyone else; I could be in conversation with myself.

I begin with this anecdote to illustrate that storytelling has been a central part of my life since a very early age. It is the primary way in which I constructed (and deconstructed and reconstructed) my sense of identity, the way in which I came to an understanding of who I was in relation to the people and the world around me, and eventually, the way in which I made sense of my life again in the face of mental illness.

And I know that I am not alone.

Through my work of running my charity, Body Banter, which aims to spark conversation surrounding body image and mental health issues amongst Hong Kong youth, and my Ph.D. studies exploring how storytelling shapes our understandings of mental illness and recovery in Hong Kong, I have learned just how central storytelling is in many of our lives. I have witnessed people navigate traumatic and triumphant memories in real-time as they piece together pieces of experience, watched people’s eyes light up when they hear a story that resonates with them, and heard people share with me how surprised they felt with the extraordinary relief that came with finally disclosing their story to loved ones.

For most of my life, storytelling came naturally to me; my mind was never in want of ideas. But when I was confronted with mental illness in my teens, I found my mind at a loss for words. Recovering in the cultural context of Hong Kong where mental health stigma hangs over our heads like a dense canopy of vines, and where conversations about mental health are often few and far between, I found myself trying to make sense of experiences for which there was no template. Unlike the stories I had written in my youth – guided by the reliable frameworks of the fantasy novels I was obsessed with; ones that inevitably ended happily no matter the scale of the challenge – my story with mental illness had no framework to fall back on. For the first time in my life, I was left entirely to my own creative devices. *And I was terrified.* But – it was precisely in this terror, in this desperation to make sense of my experiences – that I felt prompted to create my *own* framework, to build my story from scratch, to weave together new ways to make sense of my life.

Each section in this book – “PRETTY GIRL” 靚女, “GOOD GIRL” 乖女, “ACCOMPLISHED GIRL” 叻女 – represents a set of expectations that I needed to break through in order to release myself from the shackles of cultural norms surrounding food, body, and fem-

inity. I compile the chapters under each section in a way that I feel best reflects the way that these narratives formed in my mind: fragmented, sporadic, and not in chronological order.

The story that I tell in this book is by no means “finished.” As I was writing this book, I found myself repeatedly trying to revise old sections and add new sections, and it struck me that if I kept doing this, I would never finish writing this book. This book is more of a *compilation of polaroids than it is a livestream*: it is not meant to be an exhaustive, continuous documentation of my life so far, but rather, distilled lightbulb moments that have dotted my recovery journey. Some snippets are diary entries, some are Instagram captions, and some are notes fervently scribbled in a notebook I keep on my bedside table.

I have outgrown some perspectives that I wrote at the beginning of the book, and am already beginning to outgrow some that I have written about at the end. I am embracing the idea that stories don’t have to be polished or finished to be valuable and worth listening to. I am learning to stop feeling embarrassed when I re-read my own outdated perspectives documented in older pieces of writing – it is *enough* that these perspectives felt true to me at the time, and that I spoke with intention and authenticity at the time of writing. I’m recognizing that each past version of myself contributes a new shard of coloured glass to the kaleidoscope that is my worldview – mesmerizing in its fluidity and variability.

As you read this book, I ask of you one thing: give yourself permission to experience the full spectrum of emotion and sensation, everything from joy to confusion to anger to sadness to empathy to defiance. There will be some perspectives in here that you deeply resonate with, some that you find completely ludicrous, and some that you’ve never even considered. I hope you give yourself space to feel all of those things – to give yourself a chance to practice embracing the feeling of not following a coherent storyline. Give yourself time

to sit in that discomfort. And give yourself plenty of compassion and grace when you need to take a break or step away. Think of it like the experience of getting into a jacuzzi: step in slowly, allow yourself to get used to the temperature of the water, let yourself be caught by surprise when a jet-stream of water comes your way, and get out when your fingers get wrinkly.

And with that: *let's dive right into the messy stuff.*



PART ONE:
“PRETTY GIRL”
靚女

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Bathrooms are brilliant places to learn about beauty standards.

I remember the first time I saw a bottle of slimming cream in my mom's bathroom. I was mesmerized by the pearly pink hue of the bottle, but more importantly, I was captivated by the promises plastered loudly on the front of the bottle: "*Eliminate cellulite and tone up! Lose 10 inches in 10 days!*" Oh, but the best was yet to come. The back of the bottle called out to me, "*Frustrated with stubborn fat deposits? Our patented formula makes it easy to achieve firm and flawless skin.*"

I remember thinking to myself how interesting this combination of words was. There were words that I had seen before (as a moody pre-teen, I *definitely* knew what "frustration" felt like) and others that sounded funny in my mouth (what the fruitcake was cellulite? Some sort of lantern party in my cells?). More intriguing to me was how these words came together – why did cellulite have to be *eliminated* (what did it do wrong)? Where did I have to lose 10 inches *from*? And why did I have to be frustrated by fat deposits – and by the way, what did it mean for fat deposits to be *stubborn*? I mean, I for one, had frequently been deemed "stubborn" by friends and family, but had no idea how a non-human substance could be similarly characterized. The words swirled around in that pre-teen brain of mine, working its

alchemical magic, moulding the lens through which I would begin to view my body and myself.

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I am always curious to know about people's earliest memories of when they began to see their bodies as 'projects in progress' – a flawed thing that one is obligated to work on, change, and perfect. This first experience, I think, plays a significant role in the nature of the inner landscape that governs our sense of self – the tone and the vocabulary used by the internal voice that narrates our lives, and the glasses through which we perceive ourselves and our world.

That I found a bottle of slimming cream in my mom's bathroom is by no means a statement of blame towards her – in fact, it is an acknowledgment of how pervasive harmful messages about our bodies and ourselves can be in our everyday lives, and how effortless it is for these messages to become integrally entrenched in our worldviews. It is freeing to realise that *everyone is just trying their best to stay afloat in an impossibly dense forest of societal expectations*. When we can recognise this fact, we put ourselves in a position to forgive and heal, because we see that any person who has ever promoted or succumbed to beauty standards is simply another victim of diet culture messaging – a human being just like ourselves who wishes to be seen, heard, and validated, and who has unfortunately learned that changing their appearance is the most efficient and effective way to achieve those outcomes.

It is also freeing to realise that just because people around us get caught in this forest of diet culture ideology, doesn't mean that we ourselves cannot choose to cut through the branches. It is possible to release the expectation for other people to emerge from the forest, while actively choosing to do so ourselves. As an advocate for eating disorder awareness and body acceptance, I believed for many years that I had to save everyone around me, considering myself a 'bad'

advocate if I couldn't do so. It wasn't until I found myself exhausted, frustrated, and defensive about my work that I realised that *I am not accountable for saving anyone*. I can only embody what I believe, and hope that speaking my truth can resonate with those around me.

This first collection of stories depicts my journey of entering and eventually emerging from the forest of expectations about what my body “should” and “should not” look like. I narrate the twists and turns that brought me deep into the woods, the torchlights of family and friends that served as beacons of hope during my darkest times, and moments where I started to find my way out of the woods on my own.

Let us walk into the woods together. Adventure awaits.

A STORY OF SMALLNESS

I was ‘small’ from the day I was born.

According to my mom, I emerged from the womb on November 23rd, 1996 – exactly one month and two days before my due date on Christmas Day – about the size of a loaf of bread. “A very wrinkly loaf of bread”, she usually likes to add.

In primary school, I was always the kid in the front row of every school photo. “Your bag is bigger than you,” my teachers would joke. More often than not, I was the person chosen to be catapulted from the top of the human pyramid during the gymnastics unit of P.E. class. “You’ll be the easiest for us to throw off,” my peers would laugh.

On the day that I started high school, I waved to the guard at the gate of the apartment complex that I lived in, and excitedly told him that I was starting school again. “Are you entering 5th grade?” He cooed.

I like to think of life as a paint palette, with each experience that we have represented by a squirt of paint in a different colour. The storyline of our lives is shaped, dictated, and limited by the colours we collect over the years.

The first colour that we add to our palette can have an enormous effect on who we believe ourselves to be, or in my case here, who we believe we *should* be. The snippets above come together to form what I call the “story of smallness” – a defining narrative in my storyline of life that I held onto for many, many years and sometimes continue to struggle with untangling myself from. This story was a colour on my paint palette that seeped into all areas of my life, embedding itself in my worldview and making it notoriously difficult for me to distance myself from.

In the second year of high school, I came in the top ten in the school cross-country race – a surprise to everyone, including myself, considering that I was an asthmatic and wildly unathletic child growing up.

After the race, I was peppered with questions and compliments from friends, peers, and teachers: *how did you do it? You must have trained so hard! Will you join the cross-country team? You're so small – no wonder you're so fast!*

For the first time in my life, I began to see my small body as something that was capable of *achieving* – not merely something that kept me alive and breathing. Having struggled with chronic stomach pain and asthma as a child, I didn't have particularly high expectations for my body, and honestly, didn't particularly care. I very literally had to be *dragged* to weekly swimming classes (my best friend Cara can attest to this) in primary school, and I found every possible excuse to avoid intentional exercise.

And so, this experience of being recognised and applauded for what my body could do was foreign to me. In my early life, my accomplishments lay almost entirely in the realms of school and music, and it simply didn't cross my mind that my body could be used as a means to perform and achieve.

My curiosity surrounding the topic of physical fitness burgeoned, and I began to delve into various fitness-related resources – books, magazines, workout DVDs, YouTube videos – anything that I could get my hands on.

These explorations fanned the flames of the rapidly spreading fire that was this ‘story of smallness’, expanding its presence in the narrative of my life. I acquired new vocabulary to describe this association I was beginning to make between who I was and how I looked – that being *perfectly sculpted* was what I should *want*, and that I needed to have that *summer bod* to be the object of everyone's *envy*. With each resource that I devoured, I became increasingly acquainted with the concepts and the language of diet culture – I learned that food contained ‘threatening’ substances called ‘calories’ and that the main purpose of exercise was to get rid of them as quickly as possible. I learned that appetite was to be strictly controlled, and cravings firmly denied. This new world I entered was mesmerising with every bold claim, flashy headline, and perfectly-edited image drawing me in like the hypnotic voice of a circus ringmaster – *come one, come all!*

As my body changed in response to the new forms of exercise that I started to explore, I also began to receive more and more comments from others that continued to shape and mould my ‘smallness story.’ There were comments that *affirmed* smallness as a defining trait of mine (“I can see why you're so fast – you're so light and tiny!”), and comments that framed my smallness as a *condition* for my uniqueness (“how is it possible that you can lift so much? You're tiny!”).

And I became scared to lose this supposedly defining trait of mine.

As the storyline of smallness became increasingly more deeply entrenched in my sense of identity, I began to feel a creeping sense of fear as to what might happen to my sense of self should it be taken away – if my body were to grow and change and evolve beyond what it currently was. In my adolescent years where my internal and exter-

nal worlds were constantly in flux, that something even felt *remotely* stable seemed too good to be true. I could hardly believe that, as someone who felt incredibly socially awkward, I could reliably receive praise from others about my fitness regime and my body. It felt surreal to me that, as I watched my peers experience drastic physical changes and its associated emotional insecurities, that I could somehow exempt (or at least delay for as long as possible) those uncomfortable realities on my horizon by keeping my body small. The story of smallness was a temporary life raft in the most tempestuous sea I had ever found myself in, and I clung on for dear life. I clung on so hard that eventually I forgot why I was holding on so tightly in the first place – what purpose it had been serving and what it was protecting me from. *The very act of clinging to this storyline began to feel necessary and indispensable.*

At the lowest point in my trajectory of illness, I remember being so exhausted that I couldn't even muster up the energy to acknowledge a decrease in weight – a marker of change that had most prominently represented 'progress' and 'success' for me throughout the illness.

By that point, I had almost entirely stopped going to social gatherings, experienced few physical changes because my body had all but grinded to a halt, and had little capacity to think or feel anything in addition to what was necessary to keep me alive. The initial reasons for which the story of smallness had been attractive to me – the easy access to social approval, and the physical, psychological, and emotional stability that it offered me – had ceased to exist.

But how do you even begin swimming away from everything you thought you knew?

I recognised at this point that the life raft I had been hanging onto for dear life was not bringing me closer to an island. The storm had calmed, and now I was just left clinging onto a piece of wood that was rotting before my eyes. As much of a relief as it was to come to this

epiphany, it was also absolutely mortifying to realise that something – *everything* – had to change, and I had absolutely no clue how to begin that process of change.

Unpeeling a defining storyline, as harmful as it has evolved to be, can be gruelling and deeply uncomfortable. Beyond the considerations of how these changes would be viewed by others, a much deeper fear that I felt was how these changes would destabilize my *own* sense of self. *Who was I without this story of smallness?*

Not everyone will experience an eating disorder or a mental health problem in their lifetime, but I'm certain that most of us can resonate with the desire to cling onto some semblance of stability and safety during times of great transition and change.

It feels safer to know that we are constituted of a *certain* constellation of traits than to not know at all – even if we don't remember from where we first began collecting these traits, or why we identified so strongly with them in the first place. When we begin to 'grow out of' past storylines, it can feel like shedding a skin to reveal raw flesh. It feels cold, foreign, vulnerable – and we almost immediately gravitate towards wanting to cover ourselves again, even if our old skins don't feel like home either.

There can be an enormous amount of shame attached to this desire for familiarity, especially when we recognise the harmful nature of existing storylines. But it becomes easier to extend compassion when we realise that seeking safety in a storm is a natural human tendency, and sometimes the only form of safety that is available is a rotting wooden log. *Holding on is human.*

And we can learn to let go. We can swim away from the log, at least temporarily let go of our relentless mission to find land, and simply be with the sea. We can be a storyline in progress, rather than in print.

THE FROG IN THE WELL 井底之蛙

There is a Chinese idiom – 「井底之蛙」, or ‘the frog at the bottom of the well’, which describes a person who believes that they have already seen it all, blissfully ignorant to the other opportunities and possibilities that exist.

As the story goes, the frog has spent its whole life living at the bottom of a very deep well, content with believing that the small, round patch of sky above it represents all the world has to offer. Grappling desperately to define the elusive concepts of ‘success’, ‘happiness’, and ‘confidence’ in my teens, I came face-to-face with the beguiling voice of diet culture: *I can offer you all of those things. Trust me.*

And trust I did.

I let diet culture define my patch of sky, sinking comfortably into the belief that all the possibilities and opportunities in the world could be achieved through my pursuit of a ‘perfect’ body.

And for a while, this ignorance was blissful. I revelled in the seeming ease with which I could access social approval, respect, and self-confidence through changing my body. Even when I started to see

cracks in the illusion, my eyes would glaze over and fill in the gaps with justifications and excuses. I would get to the end of a ‘fitness challenge’ or a month-long diet plan, having attained all the physical outcome goals I had set for myself, and still feel pangs of yearning and emptiness. But I didn’t – *couldn’t* – believe that the problem lay in this worldview that had captivated my heart and mind hook, line, and sinker. *How could this pathway to happiness be broken when it was the only one I knew?*

The nagging feeling that something was ‘not quite right’ intensified as I continued along the path that diet culture had set for me. But each time when I felt a pang of this feeling, I automatically resorted to chastising myself for *not trying hard enough and not waiting long enough* without ever registering that perhaps I needed to start asking myself why I didn’t think that *I* was fundamentally *enough*. It never occurred to me that there was the option of asking for my *own* input, to invite my *own* voice into the conversation about my wellbeing.

Diet culture is Ursula from The Little Mermaid.

She offers you mesmerizing descriptions of what life on land can be like – the sights and scenes that you have never seen. Accessing this life is easy, she tells you, but on one condition. *Give me your voice*, she whispers.

At first, the choice seems easy. What *wouldn’t* you give to live the life that she has just described? To walk on legs? To feel empowered, loved, free – *everything that you’ve ever dreamed of?*

And so you let her take your voice. You feel a brief twinge of longing and regret as you watch this part of you leave your body. You silence those feelings almost immediately, recoiling from the sting, but telling yourself that *it was worth it* and that you need to stop missing it. There is no looking back now. You are headed for a better life – the one that you have always wanted.

You find yourself on land. As promised, your mermaid’s tail has been replaced by two legs. *This is everything I’ve ever wanted*, you think to yourself. *I can do whatever I want now*. The first few moments of walking are blissful. Everything in this new world seems magical; you seem to be seeing the world with a new pair of eyes.

You see someone walking towards you, and you instinctively open your mouth to start a conversation. And your heart drops into your stomach as you remember, *I have no voice*.

Some of us may prefer to live voiceless.

This is not a statement of blame – I say this with full understanding and compassion for why voicelessness may be preferable. In a society where women are applauded for being smaller and submissive, it can be unpleasant – jarring even – to hear the sound of your own voice. *There is safety and security in shrinking* – it is more difficult to cause friction when you don’t expand to fill the spaces you occupy.

But I pray for you to experience, explore, expand.

I pray that you walk up to Ursula one day, and ask for your voice back: *I don’t want your version of life on land – I’m ready to discover my own*. I pray for you to realise that no version of the picture-perfect life you had been chasing compares to the rugged, imperfect, exhilarating life you’re already living. I pray that you feel adrenaline coursing through your veins as you recognise and reclaim your inherent ability to encompass and encapsulate the expansiveness of life.

“AM I HUNGRY?”

I can still taste the desperation with which I typed these words into the Google search bar.

In the early days of dieting, I relied heavily on tangible changes – a lower number on the scale, more muscle definition – to make myself feel happy. And so, when these changes started to slow and stall, I felt frustrated – *betrayed*.

This stalling of physical changes after an extended period of dieting is incredibly common; at the 12-month mark, the vast majority of people experience diminished weight changes or regain the weight they lost (1). But I refused to believe that this could be my fate. I fell heavily for what I refer to as the ‘unicorn bias’ – the belief that despite robust scientific evidence, I could somehow be the exception to the rule, a unicorn in a herd of horses. *Diets may not work for most of humanity, but what if it works for me?* It feels good to buy into a storyline where you can defy gravity, as long as you try hard enough. It feels good to see yourself as the one who might be exempt from the fate of the mundane. *It feels good to float in the illusion of being in control of what you cannot control.*

Part and parcel of my ‘unicorn bias’ was a strong confirmation bias, which is the tendency to search for and believe information that already confirms your prior beliefs (2). I collected only pieces of evidence that helped me build an image of the idea that dieting *could* work for me so long as I put in enough effort. In doing so, I dismissed not only external forms of evidence (e.g., empirical studies showing that the effects of dieting are not sustained in the long-term), but more crucially, also internal forms of evidence against this view (e.g., distinct feelings of exhaustion in my body, and my intuition telling me that dieting was not bringing me any closer to being happier, and was in fact, making me more miserable by the day).

Years later, it occurred to me that my ‘unicorn bias’ was heavily informed by feelings of deep self-loss that increased in their prominence as I spiralled into the eating disorder. As I sunk deeper into the web of diet culture beliefs, I also began to develop a sense of distrust towards my own intuition, leaving me with the sole option of seeking validation from external sources. To return to the beginning of this story, I found myself at a point where I felt like I needed external permission (A Google search) to ascertain an internal feeling (hunger).

This sense of self-loss is embedded in the guiding principles of diet culture. These principles say: our bodies cannot be trusted, we cannot possibly be the experts of ourselves, and we must therefore invest our time and money in ‘experts’ who know better. The value of any kind of food, exercise, or dieting regime is only valid when it is endorsed by the majority, but at the same time, you only have yourself to blame if you ‘fail’ to experience the desired outcomes (of weight loss or other physical changes).

I started disappearing from my own storyline, hurtling through an unfamiliar video game with no cursor. *I couldn't see who or where I was anymore.*

It has been interesting for me to reflect on how, even when I began to develop a sense of awareness that there was absolutely no way that a generic article on the Internet could cater to the health needs of everyone on the planet, I still continued to gravitate towards the Google search bar for answers.

The urgency with which I needed answers – an exacerbated form of my inherently curious personality – gripped at my chest like an unrelenting cobra intent on strangling its prey. In the depths of the eating disorder and in early stages of recovery, I felt poorly equipped to sit in the discomfort of uncertainty. I was terrified by my own mind which I felt no one understood. Looking back, I realise how sad it was, that I considered even the mass confusion of the outside world preferable to the silent space of my own mind. I remember a friend’s definition of mental illness that is hauntingly apt: *a mental illness is characterized fundamentally by feeling unsafe within yourself.*

Repositioning myself in my storyline has been a process of learning to grant myself full, unconditional permission – to see myself as the only ‘expert’ I need to consult in validating an experience.

Like switching on a GPS for the first time, it has taken time to get used to hearing the sound of my own voice, and to configure the settings so that it can lead me to where I want to go. This has meant experimenting with how much food feels enough or not enough. This has meant sitting alone with the voices in my mind, even when all I want is to be surrounded and distracted by other peoples’ voices. This has meant recognizing that learning to listen to my voice may not ever feel like as ‘stable’ or ‘secure’ of an option as following the structured, one-size-fits-all guidelines prescribed by ‘experts’ on the Internet.

Time and time again, and particularly in moments of deafening doubt and uncertainty, I have found myself revisiting the question of why I *ever* even considered trading the parachute (the structure and standards of diet culture) for free-falling into nothingness. I wondered

whether letting go of my accountability to these rigid external standards meant that I was undisciplined, irresponsible, and purposeless.

It suddenly became clear to me why so many of us would rather feel trapped than to be free. *Being free means being boundless.* It means that there are no walls to keep the water from flowing straight out of the dam. It means swimming in a limitless pool of your own feelings, watching the water slip straight through your fingers, and being swept into a swirling sea.

They say that good swimmers drown, not because they can't swim, but because they panic and lose the ability to conjure up possible solutions.

In the early days of recovery, I flailed. The infinity pool of feelings just seemed too overwhelming for me. But as I emerged, gasping from one emotionally tumultuous experience after another, I began to reach a place of patience and clarity. The waves of emotion were just as strong as they had ever been before, but now, I could see them for what they were. They no longer rushed right over my head, and I could finally keep my head above the water.

So, *am* I hungry?

I recognise that I may never have a clear, objective answer to that question. I can only hope to surrender to the truth of my experience in this moment, finding comfort in the fact that I know everything and nothing at all.

BREAKING MIRRORS

If falling prey to diet culture was seeing truth in warped reflections, then recovery was a journey of breaking mirrors.

Being captivated by the voice of diet culture is like walking through a 'house of mirrors' – that terrifying yet mesmerizing attraction at carnivals that plays with your reflection until you don't really know what to believe anymore.

In each of the mirrors of diet culture, I saw a reflection of myself – *me, but not quite.* There was a part of my brain that knew with strong conviction that these mirrors that stretched me and shrunk me and compressed me and elongated me could not possibly reflect reality. And yet, there was also a part of my brain that entertained the possibility that they did. *There is always a part of us that falls for fantasy.*

From what my parents tell me, I was always a very pensive kind of kid. The kind that thought 'too' much about things ("does the tooth fairy take care of my dead grandmother?"), the kind that asked more questions than was considered socially acceptable ("no but seriously... *does she??*"), the kind that often had to climb into my parents' bed at night because my mind couldn't stop replaying one scary scene from

a movie (to be fair though – my dad did sing the theme song to the horror film series ‘Freddy Krueger’ to me before bed every night).

Some of us can walk straight out of the theatre when the credits roll, and some of us stay glued to our seats long after the last scene. Some of us forget easily, and some of us can’t stop remembering. We all have our own, idiosyncratic ways of processing events, and we all integrate these events into the fabric of our lives differently. Some laugh at their reflections in the house of mirrors – and I couldn’t stop staring. Some walk past diet culture messages completely unscathed, and some will carry battle scars for the rest of their lives.

In this chapter, I want to tell you about my journey of breaking the illusion of one of my most long-standing diet culture-informed beliefs: that weight equals worth. I remember the first crack in the mirror, and the ultimate shattering of glass – the final liberation.

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The ‘weight = worth’ belief was the first diet culture mirror that I became captivated by. It was also the last one to shatter – a testament to its strength and resistance to change.

During stressful and uncertain periods of my life, I found myself clinging onto this illusion for dear life, finding solace in its seeming simplicity. I found comfort in the way that this belief kept me safe from the intricacies of my stressful situation – from all the winding paths of thought that both made me a fascinating human being as well as a complicated one. But at the same time as I was saving myself from fear and uncertainty, I was also hiding myself from opportunities to discover, explore, and adventure.

I made the first dent in this mirror during my senior year of college.

Stressed out about finishing my degree requirements, nostalgic about my dwindling college days, and apprehensive about my future, I found myself returning to old, familiar patterns of food control as methods of coping. And for a while, they certainly *seemed* to help. Planning my meals and tracking my food intake and micromanaging my life shut out the noise of all my messy feelings – but it also drew me farther and farther away from finding peace. And here lies the irony of using food as a coping mechanism – the more you use it to cope, the more you withdraw from the people and the activities that remind you that there are *so many other ways to cope*. The more you withdraw from the world, the more you become convinced that controlling your eating habits was the ‘right’ way all along. People stop inviting you to their parties and gatherings, and you think to yourself: *see? I knew that they didn’t like me anyway. I can’t control how other people think of me but at least I can control what I eat.*

On the morning that I hit the weight that I had been aiming for, I woke up feeling *absolutely terrible*, which was only compounded by the grey day that I saw outside my window.

I stepped on the scale, fully expecting it to bear bad news – to not only tell me that I had gained weight, but also to somehow corroborate how I was feeling on the inside. I half expected the scale to come alive, to bite my toes like a hungry piranha, to yell at me for being useless. It was in that moment that I saw how the number on the scale had come to represent my worst fears: fears of being consumed by something bigger than myself and drowning in this sea of nothingness, never to be found again; of never being able to contribute meaningfully to the world around me.

I didn’t even know whether to be happy, sad or angry when I saw that the number on the scale was technically ‘everything’ I had been waiting for, since I started my latest diet about a month ago. The part of me that had become so well-trained by diet culture informed me

that I *should* be happy. It shook me, asked me what was *wrong* with me – how could I not be happy, after all of this? After I had acquired the scale’s approval? And yet objectively, I was acutely aware that I most definitely was *not* happy. *Weight just wasn’t it.* My diary entry on that day reads: “I am tired, unhappy and as insecure as I have always been.”

At this point, pieces of this mirror had splintered off, but it was still mostly intact. I was beginning to see gaps in the logic of the ‘weight = worth’ framework, but I forced myself to turn a blind eye to these glaring imperfections. Part of me resorted to self-blame – believing again that it was *me* that had been at fault. The other part of me was just lost and scared – *I simply didn’t know what else I could do or believe in.*

For so long, I had used this funhouse mirror to decipher reality, and truth be told, I wasn’t even sure I would recognise myself if someone had offered me a real mirror. *What did it even mean to interpret the number on the scale neutrally? What did it feel like to derive my sense of self-worth from the various facets of my being, instead of just a single number displayed on an inanimate object?* I wasn’t sure yet, but I felt like I was beginning to find out.

I travelled a bit after I graduated, and during that time, I mostly didn’t have access to a scale. But when I returned back home to Hong Kong in the summer after my senior year, I found myself in possession of a scale once again.

Again, I fell prey to the vicious pattern of weighing myself, instinctively quantifying my worth based on the indicated number, and returning repeatedly to the scale for validation in times of doubt. I can’t recall exactly how it happened, but at some point, the edge of my bathroom scale chipped off, leaving it unbalanced and teetering to the side each time I stepped on. To use it, I either had to stuff tissue under the broken edge, or had to balance precariously on the even side of the

scale and hold my breath as I waited for the scale to report the fateful number.

For days, *weeks*, I did this: standing on this broken scale, often needing to get off and recalibrate it because it teetered towards the broken edge before I could acquire a number. Sometimes, I recalibrated not because it teetered but because fundamentally, I didn’t trust the number on this broken scale. It was, after all, *broken.* And yet – I continued to use it, day after day, week after week.

One morning, as I held my breath on a tissue-balanced scale, waiting for it to tell me a number that I wasn’t even sure I trusted – the illusion broke. I felt my emotions *tangibly* change, as I watched the broken scale sputter and spasm, struggling to report the number that it was built to report. I felt my emotions ride the waves of this number, increasing in hopefulness as the number dropped, and immediately decreasing as the number rose. It was so ridiculous that it was hilarious; I felt a giggle escape my lips. In those split seconds, I saw the scale for what it was, and what it always had been: *broken. Incapable of determining my worth. Unfixable by all the tissues in the world.*

The illusion was finally broken:

The mirror on the wall finally cracked, sapped of its omnipotent power to tell me what beauty, truth, and worth meant. The fact that it had been an illusion didn’t make it less real, though – my deeply held belief in the validity of this illusion manifested into actions that transformed it into a reality. I believed that the number on the scale could set the tone for the rest of my day, and so it did. I didn’t give anyone or anything that occurred during the day fair opportunities to sway me – and so the number on the scale continued to dominate. Nothing is ever “all in our head” – the narratives we write for our ourselves *are* our lives. The way we make sense of our world *is* the way we move through it.

The irony of breaking an illusion is that I first had to acknowledge how *true* it had all felt to me.

I acknowledged all the ways in which this belief had dictated the timbre of my days, the ways in which it had affected me in very real ways, the ways in which it had helped me decide how I was supposed to feel and what I was supposed to do. It was in recognizing the *shape* of this illusion – its angles and corners; what my belief in this illusion had given me and what it had not – that I was finally able to pick it up in my bare hands and *smash it into smithereens*. I decided that I would rather be lost for a while and left alone to discover my truth somewhere in the desert of my mind than be lost forever in the land of diet culture lies.

Tangibly, this meant engaging in active efforts to break rituals and disprove long-held assumptions. I got into the habit of meditating first thing in the morning, relying on the inherent wisdom of my body to tell me how I felt and what I wanted. I took note of the fluctuations in mood and sensations that I felt throughout each day, which served as timely reminders that the magic of human life lies in our ability to experience diverse sprinklings of stimuli, rather than being constrained by a single static metric. I intentionally incorporated snippets of joy into my day – tea times with friends, spurts of journaling, fifteen minutes of puzzle-making, a quick dance party around my house – all of which served as reminders that I am in the front seat of this car that I'm driving. I may not have full control over where I'm going, but I most certainly get to decide what kind of music I'm playing along the way.

Destroying the illusion that my worth was determined by my weight meant first *defining* it, then taking the steps to *deconstruct* it. Or, as my friend and mentor Liv Park likes to say: *Shine a light on the monster under the bed, and watch it turn into dust bunnies.*

SILENCE

Diary entry: February 10, 2012

I think that I was truly possessed by my anorexia on the 1st of January, 2012. During the days prior, I found my behaviour strange, and was somewhat conscious that once school started, I wouldn't be able to maintain my unreasonable exercise habits, and mom would definitely find out.

But on the first day of the new year, I felt this hollowness inside of me, and I was in this dream-like state that I couldn't seem to get out of. I simply couldn't care about anything other than the obligatory task of exercise at hand; I didn't have the energy or the willpower. **I wasn't even doing it to be skinny any more, I was doing it because I had to.** I was a perpetual motion machine, repeating the same routine over and over again.

I felt this change because normally I would check my “progress” in the mirror, and see if my abs had become more defined, or if my ribs had become bolder, **but that day, I simply forgot.** Even the real me beating its way out inside of me had given up – my mind was no longer in conflict between whether I should put myself through the pain of exercising or let my very very tired body finally get some rest. I knew that the momentary happiness that came after exercising would become shorter and shorter – until I would feel nothing but anticipatory dread for what was to come the next day.

That was the first time that the silence set in, and the lack of will to fight was the scariest thing I had ever experienced.

. . . .

This diary entry still sends chills down my spine.

In the depths of the eating disorder, I found myself in a complete daze – hardly remembering why I had let myself come to this place of emptiness and loneliness in the first place. Unlike how I had felt at the beginning of my ‘quest towards health’ – when I had felt that I knew *exactly* what I was doing, that my goals were crystal clear, and that I was striving towards a meaningful end goal – I found myself at the pit of the eating disorder spiral feeling absolutely empty, both emotionally and physically, with absolutely no clue what I had set out to achieve in the first place. I remember standing in front of a mirror after one of my gruelling workouts, looking at my body and not even having the energy to criticize it any more. I was just so very tired.

What was the scariest part of an eating disorder? What was your lowest moment?

When I narrate my experiences, people often want to know what the ‘worst’ part of the illness was, assuming that it is something dramatic, sensational, *noisy*. Most people assume that mental illness is characterized by chaos.

But in my experience, the scariest part was the silence. The chilling silence that settled in when it felt like even the critical voices in my mind had given up on me. The feeling of being in a soundproof room, with my ears ringing from the absence of sound.

The lack of will to fight was the scariest thing I had ever experienced.

How do we tell our stories when we don't have the words?

Navigating an eating disorder in her early teens in Hong Kong, Steph Ng knows all too well what it feels like to be voiceless in a cultural environment that frowns upon open discussions about mental illness.

In *Big Bites Break Boundaries*, Steph brings together pieces of personal and professional experiences to recount her journey of breaking free from deeply-entrenched cultural narratives - stories that have shaped her perceptions of what it means to be a “pretty (靚)”, “good (乖)” and “accomplished (叻)” woman. A collection of sporadic story fragments, this book is a statement of resistance against cultural norms that often silence and dismiss stories that are ‘unfinished’ or ‘unpolished.’

Big Bites Break Boundaries is not a story of triumph from challenge. Instead, it is a story that celebrates the inherent messiness of being human.

This book announces that to be wholly human is not to be embraced and beloved despite our mess. It is to be embraced and beloved for it.

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ISBN 978-988-8868-04-9



Price: \$160