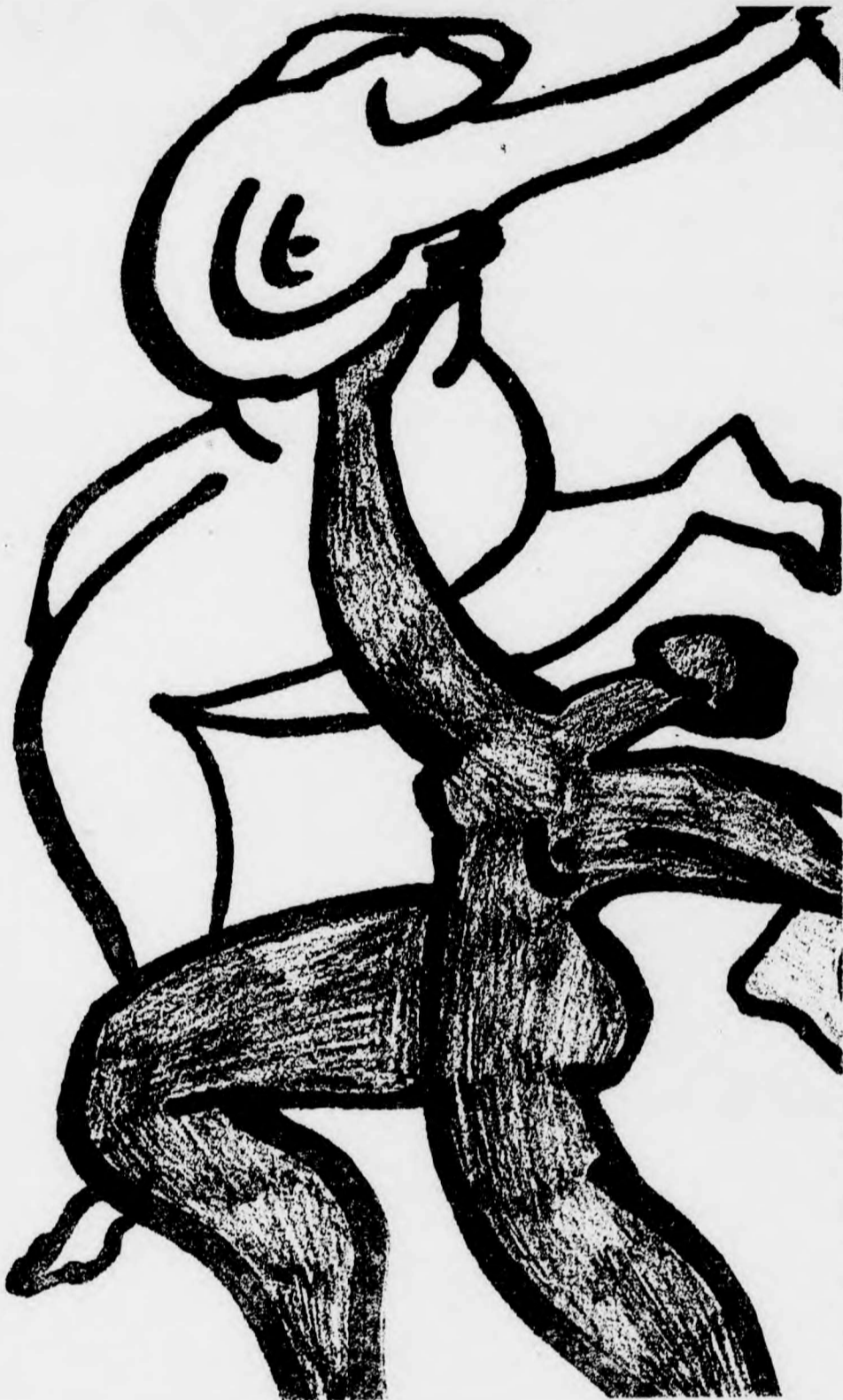


# Body Battle

## One woman speaks up about the struggle that is stealing lives

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by Jeannine Amber

I suffered through puberty the way many girls do, with breasts and baby fat. I must have been a little chubby because one day someone called me fat.

My first diet was easy enough — no bread, no sugar, no butter. I remember a lunch entirely of carrots.

I read all the diet books, gave diet tips to girls at school and developed a preoccupation with my skeleton. I'd touch my ribs each morning and note the degree of curve in the concave between my hips. I was fourteen years old.

By the time I was fifteen my diet had become impossible. Sunday nothing, Monday an apple, and Tuesday an apple and a muffin.

I stopped eating meat and fish and chicken because I had read "there's no such thing as a fat vegetarian." I wouldn't eat after five pm because I heard a dancer say that's how she kept thin. I stopped eating everything white.

No matter how much weight I lost it was never enough to make me happy, yet in my mind the two were inextricably connected. Ten years later I still don't know why.

I was hardly alone. I remember the girls in the high school washroom talking about how they made themselves throw up. And one tall girl who said she could vomit just by contracting her muscles. She said she used to study with a plastic bag beside her desk so she could eat potato chips and vomit them up.

By second year of high school I was hopelessly despondent over my inability to control my body. When I thought I couldn't survive the depression I ate a bottle of pills and ended in hospital. I learned there is no better place in the world to learn how to do damage to yourself than in a psychiatric ward.

The anorexics there were professional. They told me about laxatives, diuretics and how to muffle the sound of vomiting to make sure you don't get caught.

One girl had almost choked to death on a

spoon she had shoved to the back of her throat in the hope of bringing up some chocolate cake. One woman lost her job in a bank because she kept leaving work after lunch to go home to vomit and exercise.

There was a twelve-year-old who was so fanatical she used to throw up water. And there was Alison who was carried to the hospital because she didn't have the strength to walk. Her body was covered in hair, even her face — that's what happens when you have no fat to keep you warm. The nurses used to force-feed her with a tube through her nose and she would shriek for hours.

And Martha who was tall and rich and beautiful and slowly starving herself. With a stool propping the door open the nurses would watch her use the toilet and take a bath. She traded away her privacy and dignity just to stay under 78 pounds.

And there was Mary who had been bulimic for fifteen years. She had the ravished face of a woman twice her age and her hair fell out in clumps.

Mary told us a horror story: she said that she went on an eating binge once and no matter how hard she tried she couldn't make herself vomit. So she went to the hospital where the doctor told her she had eaten so much that her stomach was distended to the size of a nine-months pregnant woman. He refused to help her get rid of the food so she had to lay on the stretcher for hours until she could walk.

When I came out of the hospital I began to fall apart. I wouldn't leave my house during the day because I was afraid someone would see me and call me fat. Every day I filled my appointment book with exercise charts and lists of food. I spent hours in drug stores trying to pick a diuretic or diet pill or laxative that would undo all the damage I had done eating. I took pills I bought on the street to make me not hungry. I remember once shaking on my bed with a racing heart, positive I was suffering an overdose.

I was always tired, I never menstruated, I fainted a few times. I had constant stomach aches and horrible headaches and because I had altered my electrolyte balance I began having convulsions.

By the time I was nineteen my body had become so alien to me I didn't know if I was hungry or full, thin or fat, sick or healthy. All I knew was that if I didn't stop I was going to die.

I tried to get better on my own and I then I tried to get some help. I saw a therapist who argued with me, one who cried with me and one who tried to tell me I was being foolish.

Finally I found the right doctor. He was kind and patient and didn't laugh at me.

He said I had to learn to eat again. So I would sit in restaurants for hours staring at a menu trying to figure out what was a normal meal. I had no idea how much to order and what to eat. I was supposed to take my cues from other people but every woman in the place looked to be waging her own war with her appetite. I cried a lot.

One day I found my inspiration. There was a woman, a little older than me, eating and laughing and not seeming to notice the food on her plate as much as the company she was with. She looked well and I wanted that for myself. Her image grew in my head until it blocked out the pictures of stick women I had cut from magazines.

Slowly I got better. My fingernails started to grow, my hair didn't break, my hands stopped shaking.

By the time I was 22 I stopped writing my weight on my calendar.

When I was 23 I stopped weighing myself altogether.

And last week someone called me chubby, and I didn't even care.

## Eating disorders strike many women

by Elaine Bellio

"The statistics on who is affected by eating disorders and weight preoccupation are appalling," says Ruth Pentinga, founder of the Women's Body Images Support Group at York.

One to three per cent of women in North America have anorexia, 3 to 5 per cent have bulimia, and another 10 to 20 per cent engage in some of the symptoms on an occasional basis.

Anorexia is characterized by a fear of weight gain and the relentless pursuit of thinness through restrictive dieting.

Bulimia involves a cycle of binge eating, followed by purging to get rid of unwanted calories. Vomiting, laxative abuse, fasting and excessive exercise are common purging methods.

Both anorexia and bulimia can have severe physical and emotional effects. In 10 to 20 per cent of cases they can be fatal.

"We live in a culture where there is a tremendous obsession with food and weight and pressure on women to be thin and not to have fat on their bodies," says Carla Rice, program coordinator for the National Eating Disorder Information Centre.

Women are taught to find value in their appearances. "A fundamental difference

occurs because men grow up to learn what they do is the most important," says Rice. Women, on the other hand, get their self worth from their appearances.

Girls and women make up 90 to 95 per cent of those struggling with anorexia and bulimia. Ten to twenty per cent of women engage in many of the behaviours associated with both eating disorders. Seventy per cent are preoccupied with their weight and 90 per cent of women are dissatisfied with their bodies.

"It is not surprising that most women in our society are dissatisfied with their bodies, given that less than 5 per cent of us fit the ideal," says Carla Rice, Coordinator of the National Eating Disorder Information Centre.

This ideal is that of an adolescent or underdeveloped body. "This is a complete denial of the mature woman's body, thus, it is a denial of womanhood itself," Glendon student Melissa Barrett wrote in *Excalibur* last year.

"It's no wonder we're all scared to get fat," said a bulimia sufferer who wished to remain anonymous. "Everywhere we look, we see beautiful, slim women. The media links beauty to success and power."

"The media doesn't create these attitudes," Rice said, "but responds and reinforces them. The media picks up society's values and throws them back in our faces."

Last week the Body Images Support Group celebrated Fearless Friday, a day when dieters are encouraged to eat what they want without feeling guilty and without fearing weight gain.

"People have to learn not to blame themselves for failing at dieting and to accept their bodies," said Rice.

The day also marked the conclusion of eating disorder awareness week, which featured information campaigns by the Support Group and national organizations. This year's motto was "Taking up space in a slender society — celebrating our natural sizes."

"The goal is to reduce the prevalence of anorexia, bulimia, dieting and body image problems through a public education program emphasizing social factors causing their development," Rice said.

"There is help available to people who suffer from eating disorders," said the bulimia sufferer. "The problem is in realizing that you do have a disorder that has to be dealt with. Most women refuse to admit they have an eating disorder."