

The Patient

by Heather Goff

The first time she walks into my office, I can't help but look twice. I cover for myself well, though, and quickly shake her hand, her bird-like fingers almost disappearing in my own large sturdy ones. She sits down carefully, perched on the edge of the chair, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles in her jeans. I watch as her hands first twist around themselves, then reach toward her ankles and hug her knees closer to her chest. We sit like this for several moments, the tapping of her feet the only audible sound. She looks around my office anxiously, and I can't catch her eye no matter how hard I try.

"My sister made me come," she finally says, breaking the silence. I don't answer for a moment, perhaps hoping that she will tell me more. Nothing. "What was she worried about?" I ask, but already seeing. Hipbones jutting through worn denim jeans. The fine blue lace of veins shining through paper thin skin. Angles where there used to be curves. The girl frowns and looks down at her feet, then straight at me. "She thinks I'm crazy. She says I'm too thin." I take a deep breath and we begin as I ask her, "What do you think?"

She tells me, then, about her ballet teacher, her plans for a career as a dancer, her regimented exercise schedule. "My sister just doesn't understand," she says. "I have to do this. I have to be thin." She does agree to return, if only to appease her family. I don't know what to feel. Instead, I go for a run, sprinting until I can barely breathe, much less think.

The next week comes too quickly, and the girl is once again sitting in my office, her

right foot nervously tapping her knee. I try not to show my surprise when she gives me an official-looking letter from her primary care doctor, detailing her medical history, as well as her current height and weight. I ask how her week went, and she announces that according to the doctor, she has lost only one pound, but her scale showed a two pound weight loss. I would be lying if I said I didn't recognize that fierce pride that so many women have embraced before her, but I push the thought aside in order to address the girl in front of me. We talk of calories, fats, carbohydrates, sisters, mothers, and boyfriends. Ninety-six pounds has dropped to ninety-four pounds. I still do not know what to feel.

I sit in my office after she leaves, and stare at the uneaten lunch in front of me. I can not bring myself to eat. The meal is thrown away, traded in for a cup of coffee, and I work on making sense of the girl. I write in charts and return phone calls, and still she does not leave my mind. When I return home at night, I look in the mirror, and I realize what has been bothering me all day: she looks like me. Or I look like her. Short dark hair, dark eyes, nervous energy. I stare into the mirror and she looks back at me. I stand on the scale and she looks back at me. I go to bed without dinner.

I begin to present her in supervision. I am in uncharted territory, and I do not know how to navigate our work together. The consequences of my failure could be severe. Ninety-four pounds becomes ninety-two pounds. My supervisors talk of the oedipal phase and the self, of cognitive

distortions and medications. I am overwhelmed. The weeks pass, and we each continue to struggle through therapy. She is fighting for independence and I am fighting for clarity. Each week she promises to stop restricting, and each week the pounds continue to drop away. 92. 91. 88.

My desk is covered with pink phone message slips from the Primary Care Office. There are too many to answer. Instead, I push them into the back of a drawer, where they begin to gather dust, and I go running. I return to my office sweaty, but clearer, lighter. I resolve to be stronger.

The next week, she sits down in the chair across from me and sighs. "I just can't stop," she admits. She has lost another pound. She bargains with me about hospitalization versus outpatient treatment, and I give in to her pleading. "Just one more week," she begs. "Just one more week." Most nights I sit awake wondering how long this can go on. I have not slept in weeks, and I am living on black coffee. During the days I am too anxious to eat. I lose three pounds, then another two. My supervisor does not understand my reluctance to hospitalize her. I can not explain. 88. 85. 83.

Winter comes early to New England, and the drafts whistle through the cracks in the walls. She sits across from me wrapped in a wool scarf and her boyfriend's sweater. She tucks her feet under her knees, and as she does, she laughs. "What's so funny?" I ask her. "Look at us," she says. "We look alike today." I look down at my feet hidden under my legs, and self-consciously put them back onto the floor. I want to tell her that my sweater is my own, not my boyfriend's, but instead I ask her how her

week has gone. She hands me a pile of dog-eared notebook paper, her food diary for the week, which I put into her chart without a glance. She begins to tell me about an argument she had with her boyfriend, but as she does, I realize that I haven't eaten since this morning. Hunger rises up in my throat like bile, and I spend the rest of the hour trying to ignore the pain in my gut. We agree to meet in a week, and I remind her that our next session will include a weigh-in.

The following month passes in a blur. I cancel one of my long-term patients so as to have more time to spend with her. I begin to see her three times a week, with twice weekly weigh-ins. The more I see her, the more worried I become. 79. 77. 75. 72. Still no hospitalization. My supervisor is now calling me daily, convinced that I have become overly involved with this patient. I tell him that I'm handling it, I'm fine. He asks if I'm in therapy. I tell him I don't think that's pertinent to this conversation. 72, 70, 69...

At sixty-nine pounds, something happens. She sits in my office and looks at me and says, "I think there's a problem." I look at her long bones, her elbows, her collarbone delicately protruding above her blouse. So very thin compared to the rest of us, and yet so unhappy. As I start to speak, I feel a strange flutter deep inside my chest, and then everything goes dark...

When I wake up, there are wires attached to my chest and a tube in my arm and an incessant beeping noise all around me. A nurse is adjusting one of the monitors next to me, and I try to ask her where I am. "You're in the hospital, honey," she says. "Sixty-nine pounds is just too thin for you..."