HOW BEING HOSPITALIZED FOR ANOREXIA HELPED ME SAVE MY OWN LIFE

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There’s a place where going outside is a privilege, where phones and nail clippers are contraband, and where being woken up at 4 a.m. is normal. Lights out, no matter your age, is 10 p.m. Guests here enjoy home-cooked meals three times a day and never have to worry about being alone.

Metal letters tacked on the side of a brick wall spell out The Klarman Center. The girls here sit in a circle outside the building still as stone; if they so much as bounce their legs nervously, a nutritional supplement will be added to their next meal. The front walk leads to stairs accompanied by a wheelchair ramp, used only for those unfortunate enough to have lost their walking privileges. The outside of The Klarman Center looks like a college dorm. But once through the doors, you find a different world.

This is the place where eating disorders go to die, and girls go to be reborn.

No one told me I was crazy; I made that distinction on my own. I couldn’t nibble a piece of bread without imagining a baseball-sized lump appearing on my stomach afterwards; I filled pages and pages of journals, obsessively calculating how many calories I burned exercising. I wrote down lists of foods I could eat without guilt, and covered pages with the same phrase repeated, “I’m fat.” Waiting for the school bus, I paced back and forth because five minutes of walking burned more calories than just standing there.

I was allowed to pack whatever I wanted, but was warned that my bags would be searched upon arrival. As we pulled up the long driveway past looming brick buildings, I turned up the volume on my iPod. If I could drown out the outside world with noise-canceling headphones, the whole nightmare would go away.

My dad dragged my suitcase behind him while I clutched my cell phone. The staff would have to pry it out of my fist before I would make this easy for them. Even if I thought I was crazy, I would not be treated as such.
As we came up the steps, the metal letters gleamed in the sunshine. I let down my guard enough to read them, trying to arrange them to spell out “home.”

My first meal was a disaster. They put too much butter on my bagel. After my months of compulsive measuring and counting, I could eyeball a tablespoon with ease. They were corrupting me, tricking me, making me think my thoughts were distorted when I was really the one who was right. My plea for them to remeasure the condiment in front of me went unanswered, so I choked back tears as I forced down the bagel, butter and all.

My first days at Klarman were filled with anxiety and loneliness. I had sworn not to get too close to anyone for fear that I wouldn’t recover. And yet, I found myself making friends. There was my roommate, a thirteen year old who loved pink and sparkles and became one of my best friends. We would blast music in our room, jumping from one bed to the next and decorating the bland white walls. Abby, who lived down the hall, was a big sister to me, rubbing my back when I was upset and talking me through the heaviness I felt after each meal. And Danielle, covered in tattoos and quick to let the staff know when they pissed her off, was the one person who helped me forget where I was. When she and I hung out, we talked about anything but food, from boys to school to our plans for the future.

Each morning, we endured the weight checks in dark hallways. Every meal, we distracted ourselves from the task of eating by telling jokes. And at night, we gathered in the Big Day Room and gave out the You Go Girl award to the patient who made a breakthrough in her recovery. The Klarman girls became a family with a bond closer than any that could be formed in the outside world.

After being at Klarman for two weeks, I earned the privilege of going outside. A cool breeze blew across the front yard, and sun reflected off the slate roof of the gazebo. I joined some friends on the porch with sidewalk chalk. We knelt on the pavement and drew curvy designs, polka dots of bright colors, and tracings of our hands. From the edge of the porch all the way to the end of the front walk, chalk lit up the dull area. Accompanied by four other girls, I scrawled out a signature next to our artwork, The Klarman Girls. Suddenly, the entrance to our prison seemed cheerful. Looking at the walkway and colorful décor, we could pretend Klarman was a sort of summer camp. In the warm glow of the afternoon sun, my friends and I admired our handiwork and imagined that the unit really had been transformed into something other than an eating disorder center.

A few days later, it rained. The chalk washed away in a thick muddy stream.

One minute I was lying in bed nearly asleep, the next I was on the floor of my room on my back, knees bent, abs tightened. My thoughts wandered to what I had eaten for dinner and the disordered thoughts quickly followed. I despised myself for allowing the calories to remain in my stomach. I imagined waking up the next morning bloated and ten pounds heavier.
That’s how I found myself on the floor, raising my torso up and down in a repetitive motion. Klarman forbade exercise, so after just ten sit-ups my muscles burned. My eating disorder’s voice reminded me of why I had spent all those months starving myself and compulsively exercising.

“You’re fat, Jamie. You can’t sleep with those calories festering inside you,” the voice screamed. I moved faster, breaking a sweat for the first time since I’d been admitted to Klarman.

As abruptly as I found myself on the floor, a new voice floated into my head. It sounded like my own, gentle and understanding.

“Jamie, stop. You don’t need to do this.” I paused, mid-sit-up. “All the time you’ve spent here would be a waste if you go back to this.” I got up off the floor. I crawled back into bed.

That was the first time I consciously fought off my eating disorder’s voice. Until that night, I had only been complying with Klarman’s strict guidelines in a desperate attempt to convince my doctors I was recovering. Getting up from the floor that night of my own free will marked the first time I had battled my eating disorder for my own sake. I wanted to get out of the hospital, but more than that, I wanted to recover.

The Art Therapy room’s walls were covered with feathered masks, oil rubbings, and spray paint designs. Dee, the therapist known for her scarf-covered head and quirky personality, waited for me next to a human-sized piece of paper lying on the floor. She handed me a pen.

“Draw yourself. Draw the outline of your body as you see it in the mirror. If you were to lay down on top of it, you should fit inside perfectly.” My hands shook as I reached for the red ballpoint. I knelt next to the canvas and began outlining the figure I was supposed to look like. Broad shoulders, wide hips, and thighs that touched reminded me of how disgusted I felt every time I looked in the mirror. Stepping back to admire my work, I redrew my stomach area, making it wider and disproportioned. When I was convinced I had accurately portrayed myself, I handed the pen back to Dee with tears in my eyes.

She instructed me to lie down on the paper inside the outline. She then traced my figure with a different colored pen and told me to stand up. I stayed on the floor, motionless.

“Come on, get up,” she urged. “What are you so afraid of?” I shook my head. I couldn’t bear the thought of being even larger than how I perceived myself. Dee grabbed my hand and pulled me up from the canvas.

Inside the red outline of my gargantuan figure lay a thin, petite composition — the real me. I stared, dumbfounded. Inches were taken off the original outline, my arms thinner, my waist
narrower, my proportions much more even than I had ever imagined. The distortions I had believed to be true suddenly seemed trivial. The mirror, and my own head, had betrayed me. By the time I was discharged from Klarman, two months had passed. Medically, my weight was stable, my vitals sound. Mentally, though not perfect, I had come a long way. Between my sessions with Dee, group therapies, and even just the quiet sanctity of hanging out with the girls, The Klarman Center had done all it could for me.

The nurses helped me pack my things — my sheets and clothes, the drawings I had made during Art Therapy. Coloring books friends had brought me lay in a stack on the floor, accompanied by my nail clippers, mirror, and hair straightener that had been confiscated when I checked in.

If someone had told me two months earlier that leaving would be so hard, I would have laughed in their face; but now, a dull ache penetrated my stomach at the thought of saying goodbye. Afternoon therapy group was going on when it was time for me to check out. I cracked open the door and poked my head in. As soon as the other girls saw me, they jumped to their feet and surrounded me. One by one, they tearfully hugged me goodbye and wished me a healthy future. Abby brushed back a loose strand of hair stuck to my tear-stained cheek. Danielle nearly toppled me as she closed her arms around me. “Kick E.D’s ass, okay?” she whispered, kissing the top of my head.

My chest ached as I imagined life without these girls. They had become sisters to me, related by something deeper than blood. My eating disorder had torn away many beautiful parts of my life, but it also had led me to them.

My dad dragged my suitcase behind him down the walk. As we drove away, the building that had become my home faded away, and I imagined it as it had looked on the day I’d arrived. I remembered the fear, the hatred towards my parents for making me go there, and the naïve belief that no one could save me. In a way, no one had. I had saved myself.