

# Life with Ana

*Amber Esplin*

A few days after Halloween 2004, I came home from visiting my cousin in Texas and found a letter from my grandmother. It was late at night by the time I arrived at my apartment, and it was election day, so I turned on the television, hoping to hear the reporters announce the next president of the United States. I might have eaten a snack; I don't remember. I do remember several trips to the vending machine while I waited for my flight in Dallas and then devouring slice after slice of the homemade bread my cousin had sent home with me. I was so hungry. I kept trying to calculate calories, and the numbers went up and up, but I couldn't help it. With every slice, I hoped it would be enough to finally fill me up. But it never was. I think that was my second binge. The first one, a couple of months earlier, was very brief and involved chocolate and French bread. I wrote it off as a fluke, a tiny blip in a long, neat pattern of discipline. I wasn't starving then. I don't think I knew yet what it was to be so hungry I couldn't see straight.

That night in November I hated myself for what I had eaten, but I tried to let it go. After all, I had been off my normal routine. I had been traveling, with nothing to do or think about for hours. Now that I was home, I would go back to my usual pattern of careful consumption and calorie counting. And, I reassured myself, I had kept up my running. I had run every day while I was at my cousin's house, except for Sunday, when I never ran anyway. So even though my indulgence horrified me—the thought of actually eating half a loaf of bread in a single afternoon—I held out hope for the future. Besides, it was late, I was tired and maybe even a little punch drunk. I sorted through my mail and opened the letter from my grandmother. It contained a bunch of photocopies of articles on eating

disorders. I read the handwritten note. She thought I needed professional help. I laughed. Grandmas are so funny, aren't they? They worry about the silliest things. I had heard that my grandmother thought I was anorexic, but she had seen me only once that summer. I saw myself every day, and I knew that I wasn't too thin. Sure, I had lost some weight without meaning to, just because I had started running so much and trying to eat healthier, and now I didn't want to gain it back. But I loved food. Hadn't I just proven that? I loved it way too much. Ironic, I mused. She thinks I'm anorexic, but if she only knew.



I think of that day as Ana's anniversary. Some people personify eating disorders as "Ed," but that makes me think of a fat, hairy guy on the couch drinking beer. Ana isn't like that. She is light and quiet but very strong, so strong that she is beyond needing. I want to be beyond needing, too.

I didn't agree with my grandmother then that I was anorexic. I still don't. But over the coming winter, the number of people who did agree with her grew, and in the spring I spent a month in a residential treatment center for eating disorders. The whole time my "team" and I were at cross-purposes. I guess we both wanted to save me from myself, but they wanted to save me from an imaginary, too-thin self, and I just wanted to save me from me.



Whenever my grandmother comes to visit now, she wants to take me out for food. I start dreading the effort it will take to push aside her insistence. I am not upset by her concern or even by her encouraging me to eat more. Instead, I am frightened and repulsed by the idea of spontaneous eating—going out for a sandwich that I hadn't planned on or budgeted for. I simply can't fit it in; I can't allow it. And her reluctance to accept that reinforces my conviction that no one understands the real problem here—that I have fooled everyone without meaning to. Why can't they see me for the pig that I really am? I am a compulsive overeater. That is the true me. I am an obese person in a temporarily thin body. When I look in the mirror, I see my real self, the fat self, the out-of-control self. I see it all the time, and so I know it is there. But my grandmother doesn't. She sees the image I am struggling to hold onto—the thin arms, the shrunken chest. The fake me. The façade.

It is my own fault if no one understands, because I have tried so hard to hide this ugly person inside me. I eat in secret. I skulk about in the middle of the night with a plastic spoon and a container of uncooked oatmeal. I feel ashamed. I think of the Book of Mormon, the secrets of the Gadianton robbers, and I know that God doesn't like secrets because it is dark inside them. Dark and lonely and unclean. Just like the fat, I realize. Because the fat is hardly even physical. Something purely physical could never be so scary. Oh no, it is much more ethereal. It is floaty; it is dirtiness, laziness, ugliness in the most spiritual sense. It is unworthiness, and I am covered up in it. It is all over inside me. It *is* me. I am a bad person, but I am fighting so hard to keep away from the filth, to stay one step above it, and every morning and every evening the scale judges me. "Today you slid deeper into slime," it tells me some nights. But other times it says, "Good. You were clean today." Always, though, it warns me to stay vigilant. I cannot let my guard down, or the pounds, the guilt, will pile on.

Every day I struggle to survive. I run because I have to. I run and I fast, not to get anywhere, not even to lose weight. Just to stay where I am. It takes all the energy I can muster to cling to my present state because I am being pulled down so hard, and I don't know how much longer I can hang on. I am more tired than ever before in my life. I fall asleep everywhere except in my bed, and there I stay awake, chomping on tropical fruit gum and hearing the kitchen call to me: "Come, eat, feel safe. Pile up food against this darkness, against the pain of waking in the morning and facing another day." And all too often I listen. I throw back the covers and walk out to the fridge for an apple. This apple can't hold me or protect me or tell me it loves me. I know that. But I eat it anyway, in despair, because it is all that I have, because I ran seventy-five miles last week and it wasn't enough. I ran and I ran, and still I couldn't escape the real me.



One night I have a dream that haunts me. I dream that the sun is shining and the weather is fine, and I am standing up in a parked pink convertible, leaning out slightly over a ledge beyond which the ground drops steeply to a highway below. A breeze caresses my cheek. A pair of yellow leaves dance by, swirling like a couple in a ballroom. I lean out farther to watch them, and suddenly I am falling. I am not surprised because now that it is happening it seems inevitable, as if the leaves and the pink convertible and even the highway all came into existence for the sake of this very moment. Nevertheless, I cannot restrain a dissociated shock of horror, what a stranger might feel upon witnessing a disaster that he cannot

prevent. I know I will die when I hit the asphalt, but no, it is more awful than that. I don't die. I fall onto the highway, and I live, and my body is hideously broken.

In the hospital I am conscious, but I am separated from myself too. I don't feel the pain of my injuries, but another kind of anguish overwhelms me. I can't bear it. No, no, make it stop! I don't want to recognize how much human beings can suffer. All the agony of this world—let it not be real, let it not be true. Our capacity to experience is too deep. We feel too much.

Someone is stroking my hair. "We have to tell . . ." I stammer, "we have to let my mom know." The nurses frown; they have more pressing concerns. I can barely weep, but I choke out the words in a sob of desperation. "I want my mother," I cry like a little child. "I want my mother."



I don't want my mother to know that I need her. I don't want to need her at all, just like I don't want to need protein or fat or even my favorite, carbohydrates. If I were a stronger person, I insist to myself, I wouldn't eat so much and I would exercise more. I would run until . . . until what? I don't know. Secretly I have always hoped that someday I would just collapse on the treadmill. Unless that happens, I have to face the knowledge that I could have done more. So I ran ten miles. I should have done twelve. So I ran a marathon. Everyone is doing that these days. Where does it end? When does someone say, "Let me take this burden of the world from you so that you can rest for a little while"? Never, I guess, but there must be a point where your body simply refuses to take another step. I'm too self-indulgent to let that happen. I get close, maybe, and my legs swell with water and get heavy, my whole body feels weak, and my lungs function as if I have never run before. My eyes tear with the effort of pushing through the fatigue, and finally I give in. I take a break from running. I "crash," but I don't crash literally, so there isn't any glory in it.



My mother is fat. She is also beautiful. I remember as a child running fingers through her beautiful dark hair. She asked me to trim it for her once. It took forever as I nervously separated dense locks into manageable strands. It used to take her three hours to get her hair permed. Luckily she doesn't do that anymore.

No one ever believes that my mother is in her fifties. Many mistake her for my sister. That's because her skin is smooth and soft. She complains of wrinkles, but only she can see them (just as my fat is visible only to me). I want my skin to be like my mother's when I'm older, but I am not counting on it. Since the eating disorder, my skin is drier. I somehow have more wrinkles than my mother, and I am nearly twenty-five years younger. My hair is no longer thick like hers, either. My hair is falling out.

"You aren't her," my therapist tells me when I confide my fear of being sucked into a destiny that has already been laid out.

"In my extended family," I explain, "I have no identity of my own." They have written me off as another copy of my mother. Surely that is my doom anyway, to have all the same problems. Later I find amusement in reflecting that my life mirrors a Greek tragedy. The more I fight against my fate, the more I ensure that it will happen. Irony is my favorite form of humor, and luckily there is a great deal of irony in an eating disorder. Like the way I changed my diet to cut out salt so that I could avoid high blood pressure, and then a year later my doctor blamed the edema in my legs on a salt deficiency. Like the way I took my first long-distance walk on Valentine's Day to "do something good for my heart," and last month my doctor gave my heart a fifty-fifty chance of hanging in there for the next five years. (Ha, I thought to myself, another worrier like my grandma.) Like the way I don't want to gain weight because I like fitting into a size-small sports bra, and in the end having an eating disorder is far more costly than breast reduction surgery. Like the way I used to exercise to numb the loneliness, and now I am assured to be alone because food is at the heart of so many social occasions and I can't eat with other people. I can't imagine being married. I can't imagine having children. I'd never know how to feed them. I'd worry constantly that I was giving them too much or, worse, failing to provide the nourishment they need. I was so afraid of what I would become, that I am becoming the worst possible me.

Fear—that seems to be at the heart of it all. Like fear of chocolate chip cookies. "I saw the cookies laid out on the table," I tell my therapist, "and I thought to myself, 'Would it kill me to eat just one?' And the answer was yes, it would." Easier to not have any than to have one and then stop, because if I let myself feel the intensity of my desire, it will overwhelm me. Easier to pretend that I don't need anything or anyone because if I let myself feel how much I need love, the hurt will be more than I can bear.



For a long time, I feel myself moving away from God. Religion is another standard to be judged by, another set of criteria that I am not living up to. I stop reading my scriptures. I stop going to the temple. I don't want to need God, either. But in the end, I have nowhere else to turn. Still, how can I ask for comfort? How can I ask for anything? I push God away because there are too many things I have to do before I can ask. I have to start reading my scriptures again the way I used to. And I don't, so I'm stuck. I am too tired to move forward, so I let myself drift backward.

One night as I lie awake, a new thought occurs to me. Could God come to me in my darkness? Instead of my wading through the heaviness that oppresses me, would he come down to me, take my hand, and walk with me? Would he? If I threw out my list of prerequisites, could I seek his help? Even before I have reestablished my regular scripture reading? I am breathless with hope.



It's funny the way you can know things without realizing you know them. I tell myself I don't have the answers, but maybe they are there inside all along. When my therapist asks me what step I need to take first to get better, I know what to say. "Receive the love of God," I affirm, but then I cry because I can't imagine how I will ever do it.



So, if love is a chocolate chip cookie, will it kill me to eat it? I don't know. A friend at church wants to bring me a miniloaf of pumpkin bread for Christmas, but only if I promise not to let it go to waste. It's a special recipe, she informs me. I can appreciate this. After all, I have spent hours poring over cookbooks for entertainment. The food channel is one of the few I watch regularly. "Something like that has to be honored," I say, and she nods. "I put chocolate chips in it," she declares. I smile. I can't remember the last time I had a chocolate chip, but I remember exactly what they taste like. "I used to put in nuts, but then my son said, 'Can you put some chocolate chips in this thing?'"

"Well," I say, "why not?"