

PRISONER OF THE MIND

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My Eating Disorder Story.” Out of the billions of videos on its platform, YouTube recommends this one to me. I watch the full 20-minute video: picture after picture of one girl’s past struggle with anorexia. Her name is Carolyn, and she made her video to raise awareness, to show how destructive eating disorders can be. She wanted her story to inspire those who suffer from eating disorders and to create a sense of community. At first, I feel relief—that I’m not inherently crazy for feeling the way that Carolyn had. I see myself in Carolyn.

But Carolyn had lost a lot of weight. She was so disciplined, so in control of everything in her life. I feel like an instant failure for not being better. I’m not sick. My friends and family are crazy, not me. I look nothing like Carolyn did. There’s no way that I’m sick. I watch the suggested videos next. Video after video of skinny girls. Beautiful, disciplined, controlled, skinny girls. Girls with hollow cheeks, ribs jutting out of their clothes, legs so thin that their thighs look like toothpicks. The voice in my head reminds me of how worthless I am, of how I am not disciplined, of how I’m lazy and fat. I watch every single video suggested to me until my parents call me down to eat dinner. “I’m not hungry!” I yell and go back to watching my videos. I feel the hunger in my stomach. I drink water hoping that it will fill the void where food is meant to be. I don’t deserve to eat anyway.

The best way to describe how an eating disorder feels is to imagine the stereotypical “mean girl” living inside your head, constantly putting you down but claiming that it is for your own good instead of her satisfaction—a voice more powerful than my own rational thought. I understood the irrationality of my thoughts and actions, but I could not fight them. The rational part of my brain felt sorry for those girls for having to deal with the cruelty of an eating disorder. The irrational part just kept pressing *play*. For two years I watched image after image of emaciated girls who, by the end of the video, looked more like corpses than people. The thumbnails began to blend together after a while. The descriptions warned that those easily triggered by eating disorders should not watch these videos, but I watched anyway. After all, if I did not weigh 80 pounds or did

not look as thin as those girls did, then I couldn't possibly be sick. I was fascinated with the stories that these girls were telling—stories of how they had developed their disorders, how they had restricted their diet, how they had managed to survive despite losing so much weight. I convinced myself that if a 5'6 girl could survive being 80 pounds, then I, at 4'11, should not be worried about dropping to 110. Every single video served as further justification for my actions. I became addicted to these emotions and addicted to their stories.

In her essay “Authors of Injustice,” novelist and author Leslie Jamison explores her own fascination and connection with another form of confessional storytelling: the accounts of those unjustly imprisoned. Jamison reflects on the letters she received from both innocent and guilty prisoners, as she considers her own response to *Anatomy of Innocence*, an anthology of essays about wrongfully convicted men retold by professional crime writers. While those around her justified the treatment of prisoners, Jamison learned from her correspondence with prisoners that “[the idea that] ‘If they committed a crime, they deserve it’ . . . never quite worked for [her], its gears jammed by the what ifs of class and race, a hundred kinds of privilege and accidents of circumstance” (2). Reading these stories encourages her to rethink how we perceive the concept of justice. She explains that “[she’d] like to imagine an understanding of justice in which that sense of contingency—that sense of could-have-been-me—applies to the guilty as well as the innocent, and it is acknowledged that the legally innocent are not the only ones whom the system has harmed” (5). Many other people could have heard those same stories and might still only consider the factor of innocence vs. guilt, but Jamison approached these narratives with the belief that the justice system is not always fair, which shaped the way she reacted to them.

Jamison writes about how those around her fixated on the crimes committed by the men she corresponded with. There was so much focus on characterizing those prisoners by their guilt that the main question Jamison would receive was not, “Why are you doing it?” but rather, “What did they do?” Many people who hear prison narratives instantly believe that the identifying characteristics of those prisoners is their crime, which then changes the way they perceive those stories. Before I even pressed play on those YouTube videos, I entered the world of these girls, believing that their identifying feature was their eating disorders, which shaped the way that I reacted to their stories. Though I was unaware at the time, my eating disorder voice forced me to fixate on the disordered behavior exhibited

by these girls rather than how they had managed to recover. In fact, I completely ignored the recovery part of the videos. My eating disorder voice enjoyed the power it had over me too much to let me think that there could be a time when I did not rely on it. Jamison was open to the idea that there was more to these men's stories than just their incarceration. I was perfectly fine with seeing these girls as victims of a mental illness and nothing more. Though I did not realize it at the time, my mental health was permanently changed by my reaction to those stories.

How can examining our reactions to the narratives we consume allow us to learn more about ourselves? The videos I watched focused only on the events leading up to and during the eating disorders from which these girls suffered. I had limited information about them, nothing else to base my characterizations on. I was forced to partake in their dehumanization, to see them as just anorexic. When we are not given access to a full, complex narrative, many of us tend to oversimplify our understanding, leaning heavily on broad generalizations. For instance, the general public has no idea about what goes on in the daily lives of prisoners and the cruelty that is found within those jail cells. However, shows such as *Orange Is the New Black* have found ways to share those experiences with the public.

Orange Is the New Black focuses on the daily lives of prisoners in a women's minimum-security correctional facility. Throughout the seven seasons of the show, audiences bear witness not only to the everyday lives of the women during their incarceration, but also to their lives prior to incarceration. As a result, each character's personality and background is showcased. Their backgrounds range from growing up in foster care to being raised in an upper middle-class family. Likewise, their crimes range from carrying a bag of drug money to committing manslaughter. Providing this glimpse into the lives of the women before their incarceration has the effect of humanizing them and adding nuance to their crimes. We begin to see that, contrary to stereotype, prisoners are not simply soulless criminals; most are ordinary people who made mistakes due to a broken system. Exposure to their backstories allows us to empathize with the women because we are forced to see them as human rather than as simply prisoners. The series depicts how prison has changed these women, but it also shows, through contrast, how they have managed to hold onto pieces of their outside lives while behind bars. *Orange Is the New Black* does what Jamison hopes to achieve and

“[brings] the voices of the incarcerated into an enclave of privilege and freedom [and forces] its inhabitants to reckon with what their justice system had done in the name of their safety” (10). Every character’s story is so well-rounded and detailed that it is nearly impossible not to empathize with them. Watching a show like *Orange Is the New Black* reminds us of our common humanity.

Personal narratives are so powerful because they offer us a glimpse into someone else’s world. Omitting parts of those narratives, however, can change the way we react to them. And while it may be impossible to include every last detail about a person, background context is crucial when telling a story.

After I began my recovery, I realized that part of why I enjoyed watching those YouTube videos so much was because I was sick and needed validation for my behavior. I only wanted to see those girls as the embodiment of their disorder, but I recognize that now. My biases were also shaped by what those girls wanted me to see. Their own narratives were clouded by what they wanted me to know about them, which in turn affected how I reacted to them. Providing a fuller representation of an individual (rather than simply fixating on certain parts of a person’s life) creates more space for connections. Had I had access to more information about those girls, I may have held onto another aspect of their stories instead of just their eating disorders.

If I were to tell my story today, it would be this: I developed anorexia at 12 years old because I was a perfectionist who saw controlling every aspect of my life, especially what I ate, as the only way to cope with stress and anxiety. I starved myself for almost two years before seeking treatment. I am currently in therapy and, while my eating disorder voice is still there, my own rational thought is stronger than the disorder. I thought that those girls and I were the same. But the truth is that I had little in common with the girls in those videos. One girl had grown up being bullied about her weight. One girl had a mother and older sister who both struggled with anorexia, which had exposed her to disordered eating at an early age. One girl was a Type 1 diabetic and had grown tired of having to measure out her insulin every time she ate, so she stopped eating. We may all share a diagnosis, but we do not share a story. I did not see myself in those girls; rather, I saw my emotions mirrored back at me. I felt comfort not because other people were also anorexic, but because other people validated my feelings. Those emotions remind me that my words and my story can impact those around me as well, including some of you who are reading this essay right now. If I can be so

changed by someone else's story, then surely someone else can be changed by mine.

WORKS CITED

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