

CW: eating disorders, body image

Through the Dimensions of Control

At 12 years old, I began taking laxatives recreationally, a pre-test, so to speak-- weighing myself before and after, timing the results, and measuring how long the overall effects took to manifest. The first time I tried, I had nested on the toilet as my new home for the next few hours, crippled with stomach pains, out of control of my own bodily functions. I later learned through trial and error that chugging a liter of coconut water would produce the same effects.

At 12 years old, I was competing at the US Junior National Karate Team Trials and needed to cut a pound within a day to make the under 45-kilogram division. "Why don't you try layering up and running outside?" my sister, Crystal, suggested. She was a member of the junior national karate team for multiple years and had plenty of experience cutting weight.

Later that day, I felt the instant gush of cold air bursting through the automatic doors of the Peppermill Resort cool the beads of sweat rolling off my face. However, the piercing in my lungs still had not subsided. I was too exhausted to be amazed at the Reno summer heat for still being able to make me sweat, despite being deprived of water for the past few hours. After patting myself dry and trying to force out any extra substance I could in the restroom, I gingerly walked to weigh-ins with my sister.

"Remember, clothing weighs a little too," she nudged.

Before the smooth, open basketball court with an adjustable hoop and glass backboard, our backyard had uneven concrete with weeds growing through the cracks, a once-filled fish pond turned into a planting ground for a plum tree and more weeds, and a homemade basketball hoop with a wooden backboard and rusty rim. In the back left corner of the yard, there was an old shack with rusty weightlifting machines, made by my paternal grandfather back when my dad's family used to live there when he was growing up. I used to zoom around the old pond on my little plastic tricycle, rain or shine, alone or with cousins. Feeling the wind breeze through my

hair as I dodged the spikes from the rose bush, whipping the steering handles to the side to avoid a crack in the ground provided a rush that felt irreplaceable, even as I spent countless hours per week doing flips at gymnastics class.

The next year, I was resolute in competing in the +45 kg weight class. After such an intense, exhausting two-month process to lose two pounds of natural weight, there was no imaginable way I could keep it up for the next year as well. When I was weighed at the following national championships, I had gained 15 pounds.

It was hard to imagine myself being categorized in the heavyweight division at 13 years old. When we'd line up from shortest to tallest in PE class or size each other up in a basketball game, I was more often than not one of the shortest in the class or court. I knew that I didn't inherit my dad's bulging belly that he rubs when he's full or have one of the scary bodies that would show up on TV advertisements, the kind that would make my mom say, "Keep eating healthy so you don't look like that."

Eventually, my body outgrew my tricycle when I entered childhood. To compensate, my parents gifted me with a shiny red kid bicycle and a sparkly purple bicycle for Crystal. The plan was for us to learn how to bike at the same time, recreating the scene of carefree racing in the backyard but with my sister now in the picture. I started with training wheels, which gave me the same comfort as the tricycle: 1 wheel in the front, 1 in the back, and a half-size on each side still added to 3.

When I started making significant progress riding with training wheels, my dad decided it was time. Despite my protest, he took off the wheels and said, "It's the same thing as riding with them! Now, you just... don't."

As I entered my teenage years, my concerns regarding the weight class divisions gradually diminished. I accepted that I'd be straddling the lines between the middle and heavyweight divisions while needing to cut a few pounds if I wanted to compete in the middleweight class. Perhaps it was just the internalized karate weight standards after competing that triggered a different way I viewed my body. Seeing the weight flash on the scale at boarding school and thinking *Holy shit, if I was still competing I would absolutely be in the heavyweight division*. I would pick apart my body in the mirror, pinching the skin on my stomach, dissecting target areas that could shed some mass. I questioned why or how I've gained so much after reducing my eating.

The bike swung to the left as I tried to mount it from the right side. The bike seat felt a little higher and stiffer than usual, or perhaps that's just how it appeared. My legs straddled the bike, one foot resting on the ground, the other prepped to push the pedal. "Breathe, Claudia!" my dad encouraged. I closed my eyes and took off. The biking only lasted a few seconds, not even the length of the backyard, but there was enough uncertainty of trajectory, balance, and stability that I stopped myself before I fell. The same fear that ended my gymnastics career before injury had once again saved me. It wasn't long until I had replaced cycling with a new pastime and my red bike became part of the rusted collection of things under my grandfather's old shack.

During my senior year, my dorm threw a pool party in the fall quarter. While deciding which swimsuit to wear, I concluded that none of them would do. Or maybe it was my body that was incompatible with the swimsuits. My breasts, too small for the strapless bikini top. My stomach skin hovering over the bikini bottom, creating a flap that I was only comfortable with being hidden in the water. *You'll look better in a starved state*, I assured myself.

I imagine feeling a combination of the warm Santa Barbara breeze and sunlight caressing my skin as I hear my friends' laughter while they bike next to me. The sun casts a golden hue on the soft waves and glittering sand. We play chill beats and talk about the future, without stress or

worries. I wonder what it'd be like to experience those psychological benefits of biking by the seaside— to allow the calmness to embrace my anxious mind, to naturally increase my serotonin so I wouldn't need to depend on SSRIs (selective serotonin uptake inhibitors).

At the party, the banana float was too irresistible. I squirmed, squealed, slipped, and repeated, trying to finally mount the banana from inside the pool. After around the sixth attempt, the banana flew forward toward the pool wall out of reach. Unwavered, I lunged forward to topple onto the banana again only to graze my wrist on a broken tile wall. The sharp edge sliced my skin and I instantly felt the chlorine sting. I sharply sucked the air through my teeth as the stinging sensation continued and blood droplets rolled off my wrist and into the pool, disappearing after a few swishes. I slowly climbed out of the pool, nursing my wrist like a wounded child, careful not to aggravate the opening, and explained to the faculty members what had happened. Somewhere during the conversation they instructed me to go get a drink of water. Perhaps they noticed the quick rising and falling of my chest, or that my body would sway in place like an unstable tree branch, hanging on the last of its strength, or the blank look in my eyes— fading consciousness.

As I walked to the water fountain, which was around twenty feet away, my feet felt heavy. Objects became figures which became blurs. I wondered if I had put on my contact lenses that morning. I wondered where the water fountain was and where exactly I was going. I kept walking until I stumbled in front of a silver box with an opening facing me. I leaned toward and felt a cold, solid sensation on my forehead and attempted to locate the circular push button. As soon as I started rehydrating, my vision returned and I regained bodily control. The scar on my wrist still serves as a reminder of my body's limits from malnutrition and dehydration and my mind's limits on how much control I'm willing to lose.

In the Spring of 2020, I decided to give biking another serious attempt. It's a good life skill to have, the most common mode of transportation at UCSB, and I might as well reduce the amount of time spent vegetating on the couch. According to the Global Cycling Network's guide to

biking for beginners, most of the prep work is in getting familiarized with the bike and learning how to balance and scoot. I practiced this in our flat, paved backyard as my dog watched. *Mount, glide (for a few feet), panic or lose balance, repeat.* Since learning how to bike was the only tangible goal during an indefinite period of time, I picked up scooting a lot quicker that time around. I was ready for the next step: pedaling.

WikiHow advises that “going faster makes balancing easier, but don’t go so fast that you lose control.” Scooting down the length of the yard took a good portion of cognitive load, but trying to maintain balance while putting one foot on the pedal was nearly overload. Every time I grazed my foot on the pedal, the bike would sway in the opposite direction. The moment I felt like I might lose control over the bike, I’d set my foot down. “You’re overthinking it too much! Just keep the momentum going,” my dad shouted from upstairs.

Also during quarantine, I wore a crop top to go on a walk with my dog, finally letting my mind and body breathe. Upon arriving home, my dad paused his paperwork to comment that I should work on my belly while laughing. “You’re starting to let yourself go,” is what I remember. Perhaps this was what triggered nightly Chloe Ting ab workouts in the pitch-black of my room while my dog soundly slept. Perhaps this was what triggered the daily and sometimes nightly progress photos because Chloe said in the YouTube title that I would get defined, lean abs like hers in two weeks. From this process, I learned a few things:

1. To hasten results, take photos with good lighting
 2. While posing, suck in and flex abs. Leaning back also helps with showing off ab lines (or ribs)
 3. Take photos before meals and water, usually the first thing in the morning. You look better in a starved state.
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At UCSB, I don’t ride a bike. However, once during the winter quarter I borrowed a housemate’s bike to go home from a sorority house since the bus line generally doesn’t run consistently

during the late night. Liquid courage had never worked for me. I at least had the comfort in knowing that it'd be late enough that there shouldn't be too many bikers or drivers out. *Mount, glide, foot on the pedal, go* I repeated in my head. The brisk wind slapped my face as I began to scoot down the street, but the adrenaline and jungle juice had kept my body ablaze. Once I got my momentum going, I quickly placed one foot on the pedal and pushed. Feeling the wind blow through my hair, almost creating a horizontal extension of my head felt the same as those days with the tricycle. Racing through the darkness with only dim lighting along the sides of the street still felt nostalgic despite never having cycled at night before.

Two headlights approached me as I continued biking forward. It was as if I was suddenly ripped out of a state of trance– the cold wind almost shaking me awake yet blurring my vision. The decreasing distance between us created a sense of unease and restlessness. Perhaps this was a result of the alcohol as well though. Ignoring the key tip from WikiHow, I slowed down to help ease my mind. The bike began to swivel, zig-zagging toward the parked cars and then to the opposite side of the street. With this, I lost control over the bike, my body, my mind. I slammed my feet on the ground causing an immediate halt and pain from the pedals ramming into my calves. The front tire stopped inches before the car. I dismounted the bike and walked the rest of the way home.

When refining my deadlifting form, my trainer advises me to brace myself– “Breathe in and pretend that you're really fat. You should feel your stomach expand as it fills with air.” But it's countering the years of training my body to suck in my stomach and my mind to endure the stomach cramps and gurgles from hours without food. I want to be free, to experience the same feelings like the wind blowing through my hair, carelessly zooming through the backyard like before. But somewhere along the way, my mind or body, or both betray me. I lose control, composure, fall off the bike, go too long without eating to the point where I experience the physical consequences. But this is normal, I just need to keep the momentum going.