

# intimate enemies

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My body is long, white, marked. It has blue-green eyes and red hair. It smiles, moves, sleeps. Once flying and free. Inwardly crazy, longing. Sometimes my natural sense of spontaneity is too much for it, and I want to escape, crawl into another, healthier body and become reckless.

But my body has disciplined itself, and it disciplines me. It is a body straining to breathe, often unable to eat. It punishes me when I give it the wrong air, the wrong food or not enough of either. My body has a mind of its own, and it rules me. It tells me, "You can't sleep here, I won't be able to breathe in the morning," and "You can't eat that, or I'll be in some serious pain."

I was born with a food allergy so severe I would vomit certain foods as soon as I swallowed them. I couldn't eat eggs, nuts or anything containing them. The list of foods I was allergic to grew over time, and now includes anything that once had feathers and wings,

some fish and all nuts. Sauces with mayonnaise (more common than one might think) and soups made with chicken broth are out. Even two bites of bread or pasta that contains egg whites can put me in agony for hours with cold sweats, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach cramps that leave me in the fetal position. More than two bites, and I get skin rashes, and breathing becomes difficult.

As a child, I was outgoing, a Sagittarian clown and a singer. At three, I was swinging on the swings sideways, upside down and, according to my dad, "any way but the way all the other kids were doing it." At age seven, I was running around the playground teasing the boys and playing on the monkey bars with the girls. Stopping to use my inhaler was a pain in the butt but became a pattern in my life. Although inhalers became more plentiful by the year, the only thing my allergies stopped me from doing was eating what most other people ate.

It was at age seven, around the same time I was shaking empty inhaler canisters like some kind of fiend trying to get the last hit that I first heard women tell me, "Oh, you're so skinny!" At that age, *skinny* sounded like an insult to me. I was angry they were talking about my body when I just wanted to shine, to be confident in the world. Their words precipitated my first sense of self-consciousness.

I wanted to do so many things. Soccer and a run longer than ten minutes were nixed from my plan—but not from lack of trying. In P.E. class, I was always the kid who brought up the rear when we had to run laps. I was still doing laps when everyone else had moved on to basketball. I lost the joy of competing with the boys in sports, something I desperately wish I could have done. And, God, was I mad. Who was sitting up there during my conception and mixing up the genes to make me?

When my period came, things got weirder. The hormones surged, and I was stuck on steroids and too many inhalers and still unable to

eat all the good things my friends had at their birthday parties—chocolate cake, pancakes after the sleepover. Because I couldn't eat anything with eggs in it (mayonnaise, most pastas, many breads, cake, cookies, crepes, on and on), I continued to be thinner than other teenage girls I knew. Not only was I a novelty at the dinner table, but, ironically, I became the object of envy.

Yes, my food allergies kept me thin. But what price would some women pay for thinness? Would they pay my price? When women—of all ages—tell me, "I sure wish I had your problem," it only shows how our culture screws us every day. We're taught that fat is bad, so thin is best, regardless of the sacrifice. Women who are probably otherwise pleasant sneer at me in fitting rooms. They envy my thinness but don't realize it's a product of trying to survive. Our culture still teaches us that thin equals healthy. Most women refuse food because they're scared to death of getting fat; I refuse it because I'm scared to death I'll kill myself by eating it. When you can't eat, eating well becomes a luxury.

I've considered what would happen if my asthma and allergies had made me overweight instead of the so-called thin ideal. I have no doubts that, in our culture, larger people encounter more biases and more negative stereotypes than thin people do. I've even excused myself for being thin and therefore offensive to some by explaining that I have food allergies. But if I had gained weight instead, would I make those same explanations? More important, would anyone believe me?

As it is, I am not immune to body image pressures, although many women assume that thin women have no problems with body insecurity. Last year, I was finally feeling content with my body (ignoring that my face had swelled like a chipmunk's, as do the faces of people who must use high levels of steroids), thinking that I had "filled out." However, when I went off the steroids, I discovered the

"filling" was just water retention. Weird body image problems, I tell you, thinking you're too thin.

As I write this on my twenty-second birthday, all that steroid use has suppressed my adrenal glands so that my body does not make cortisol (our bodies' natural steroids), the swelling in my face is just going down and I was recently diagnosed with an early form of osteoporosis. So now I am walking every day with two-pound weights on each ankle and wrist, taking my Tums for calcium after every meal, puffing morning and night, telling waiter after waiter "I have a severe allergy to eggs," and I'm still trying to figure out where the freedom and joy went.

Once I was spontaneous, in love with my life; I felt as if I was flying. Now I take care of my body so well that my life seems boring: Colder than twenty degrees and I have to wear a scarf over my nose and mouth that quickly gets sweaty and soggy; more than forty-five minutes in a smoky bar and I awaken the next morning gasping for breath; seven puffs of three different inhalers twice a day, two tablets of asthma medication—all or any of these forgotten, and that's another three hours sucking vaporized medicine in the emergency room, another eight hundred dollars down the drain for the visit and many more hours trying to recover emotionally. As an adult, I blame myself when I forget or rebel against the routine. So I live very carefully; I take nothing for granted.

How does it happen that such a creative and free spirit becomes stifled by its own body? I am angered—and yet blessed. Perhaps my wildness would have killed my intellect. Perhaps my wildness would have killed *me*. Maybe I was saved by my body's own weaknesses.

I can't simply be furious with my destiny. What hasn't killed me has made me stronger—much stronger. I pick my fights well and often: I fight for women's rights, I fight to be informed about my health, I fight for other people to be comfortable in their bodies. I

have learned that my time is limited, and that I will do nothing for this world if I don't do it fast. On a number of occasions, I have thought I might die. Any one of my asthma attacks, any time I eat eggs by accident, could be the end. Our time is not endless—and my illnesses have taught me that much.

I release the anger in any and every way I can. It's still an inefficient process. Sometimes I internalize the stress and depression from the asthma and food allergies so much that I have moments of self-pity. But I have become myself in a way I never imagined I could. I talk about the things I care about with great fervor. My life is absolutely sacred to me in a way it wouldn't be without my health problems. I decided at age seventeen, when I went to the emergency room for the first time, that I would "live juicy" as the author and artist SARK advises, doing everything I've ever wanted to do before I die. I'm packing those plans into my life right now.

Because of my asthma, I have been in contact with doctors who pumped me full of steroids "just in case," despite the health consequences, and doctors who didn't listen when I told them, "My asthma attacks only happen three days before my period starts, so I think it has to do with my menstrual cycle." Emergency room doctors have routinely ignored me when I told them I was fine to leave the clinic. While I have a wonderful allergist now, others have said, "You will be dependent on steroid inhalers for the rest of your life." I refuse to believe them, and it pisses me off more than anything else I've been told.

I know this happens to many women in many doctors' offices, for many diseases. We have been under the thumb of doctors who "know best" for far too long, and we've looked upon them as gods. We've been told we're helpless without their services, and we sometimes end up believing it because we're desperate for a treatment that works. Well, I've decided I'm not helpless anymore. My strength

on this issue comes from my illnesses, which I someday hope to cure *by myself*. After all, who knows women's bodies best? The answer is clear to me.

My body and my spirit continuously struggle. It seems one must lose for the other to win: It's either the freedom to go to that late, smoky party or the freedom to expand my lungs in the morning. It's a weird life, but it's life and I'm still thankful for it.

Besides, there's so much more than those parties, those bars, that smoke and dust. There are friends who make me special egg-free chocolate chip cookies, who try their best to understand why I can't stay overnight, who vacuum often because they know I can't handle dust, who put their cats in a separate room when I come over. There are waiters who understand when I explain I can't have the linguine or the bread on a sandwich, and who check the rest of my order with the chef, too. And roommates who scrub the frying pan thoroughly after they make an omelette.

In the war with my body, we have become intimate enemies. My body is my own, although it betrays me without mercy. I live with it and take care of it. My body talks to me. I have a talent in knowing exactly when I need to sleep, when I need to eat, when to stop the stress of research papers and exams. I'm so in touch with my body that I sleep when I should be writing those papers. I don't have less energy than others; I'm simply more aware that I'm running down before I actually run myself down. I have been given the gift of self-awareness, an awareness that other people I know haven't developed as much.

Most people say they don't even think about breathing, which is a totally alien concept to me. I am constantly aware of what my lungs are doing and what my breathing sounds like. My body keeps me in check by making it more difficult for me to breathe when I'm not giving it what it needs. It keeps me responsible for it. American culture

teaches both women and men to cover our ears when we hear our bodies talking to us. By silencing our bodies, we end up with health problems, because we've driven ourselves hard, ignoring the instinct to take a nap *before* starting on the bills, the big report or all those errands.

Most days I try to revel in the things I *can* do. It's the stuff of which self-help and motivational tapes are made. I am "able" in so many ways. I can be joyful and still take care of my body. I can fight for a woman's right to fabulous medical care. I can rally for the elimination of that despicable female body "ideal" that results in eating disorders. When I go somewhere, I just happen to be the woman who brings her inhaler, her Medic Alert bracelet and her insurance card with her. I strike bargains with my body constantly: "If you let me have a good soul, I will take care of you as its home." Somehow, the two end up reciprocating, and I remain strong.