Just One More

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Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Nonfiction Writing Honors Program in the Department of English
at Brown University

April 9, 2020

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To the little girl who fell in love with gymnastics:

I do this for you.

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"Shit."

The voice comes from behind me, or beside me, but maybe also within me.

Toe hechts are one of the most common causes of elbow dislocation in gymnastics. To perform the move correctly, the gymnast is required to release the low bar, rotate her body, and catch the high bar. The dislocation happens if the high bar isn't caught, which it wasn't, and the arms reach down to break the fall, which they just did.

Before the "shit," there was the almost indistinguishable "snap" of dislocation as the bone dislodged from its normal positioning. Actually, maybe it is more of a pop than a snap. Like a water droplet on tin, but more guttural.

Alli ducks under the low bar and stabilizes my arm before I register that it's the source of discomfort. Pinpointing the irritation is like squeezing sand: the more I try to grasp it, the more it slips away and spills everywhere. I'm thinking about my mom worrying about me, and about how dumb this mistake is, and about all my teammates who see me crumpled, and if someone just pops it back into place, then I can compete next week, right?

An unidentified body appears with ice packs that wrap around my disjointed limb. I sink deeper into Alli's lap. The slow, rhythmic beat of my pulse in the back of my throat is oddly mesmerizing. Later, at the hospital, I'm told that I'm "a real trooper" and that this pain "is worse than the pain of childbearing," but at the moment, I mostly just notice how cold my bare toes are and how bright the fluorescent lights are and how far away the stereo sounds. I'm 16 years old; I have no interest in knowing how my pain measures up to that of childbirth. I'm much more concerned with the fact that Level 10 Nationals is less than two weeks away, and my left arm is now estranged from my being.

Another coach is tugging off my grips on the gym mat while my teammate is gingerly passing me my water bottle. Someone swats away the water. The de-gripping attempt is awkward, fumbly, disruptive. It feels all wrong; all of it feels wrong. No one is supposed to take off my grips for me. That's like someone brushing your teeth for you. There's no way to communicate all of the subtleties that make it work, that make it second nature. I have no choice but to surrender to the awkward prodding and pulling as the questioning continues—"Does it feel better if I put the ice here or if we move your arm there or if you sit like this?"

None of this feels "better." It would be "better" if we stopped drawing attention to it. It would be "better" if Alli stopped shifting her hand and if Cori just let me close my eyes and if I hadn't missed the high bar. It was a good toe hecht, dammit. I get this feeling in my gut, a feeling of true unencumbered flight, when I release at the correct moment and rotate well during a toe hecht. I had that feeling just moments ago.

The ambulance arrives, and an IV is thrust into a vein on my right arm not once, not twice, but three times. "Sorry, I don't know why I can't place it," says the twiggy EMT man kneeling beside me. Maybe this is his first rodeo, because the veins are bright and clearly visible. Or maybe he's just nervous or having an off day, or maybe the visibility is deceiving because I'm dehydrated. It's the latter. "Sokay," I say from a thousand miles away. I honestly hadn't even realized he was having trouble. Thankfully, I'm not accustomed to this procedure. Another man is wrapping a black splint-like device with orange straps around the left arm. I think there's been a mistake. I don't think I'm inhabiting the body to which he's tending.

A sharp prick in my right arm brings me momentarily back: I'm sprawled on the blue mat under the uneven bars, chalk covering the majority of my body, left arm MIA. If it weren't for the last detail, this would be an entirely routine situation. I've splattered on this mat hundreds of times, and I'm covered in chalk more often than I'm not covered in chalk.

But then there's the arm. I still can't bring myself to look at it. What's the point of being able to accurately picture its grotesqueness when I'm already withstanding its discomfort? I know the image will be permanently burned into my memory, and I'll picture it alongside the elusive popping feeling every night while trying to fall asleep. I'll take the ignorance for now.

Suddenly I'm floating, more distant than I was before. It feels like the times when I've been on the brink of panic, when the colors seem especially bright and the sounds are muffled and everyone feels so far away. Except this time there's a physical event to explain its instigation, and I greedily absorb the disconnect. The pain is more like an aggravating mosquito bite than a yellow jacket sting.

People—Alli, my mom, the paramedics—are chattering; plans about who is going where and when and how swirl around. I remember that Alli's birthday is tomorrow. I immediately feel guilty. I'm not even supposed to be on bars right now. Practice starts in five minutes. I was just here with Alli for extra training, because I always want "just one more."

Like clockwork, I'm lifted onto the stretcher and wheeled into the ambulance as the ice packs are returned to the freezer in the upstairs waiting room.

Chapter 1:

Have Fun

I stood with beet-red, tear-streamed cheeks and static-strewn, duck-fluff hair while my clenched fists pressed against the plexiglass that separated the waiting room from the gym. A mere 5.9 miles away from my family's house in Amherst, Gymnastics Village is one of 27 training facilities in New Hampshire that is sanctioned by USA Gymnastics ("USA Gymnastics: Find A Gym"). The gym is 13,500 square feet filled with competitive equipment for men's and women's gymnastics, three loose foam pits, and additional training apparatus (*Gymnastics Village – About Us*). From the waiting room, the main area of the gym, with a full-sized floor, bars, beam, and vault, is visible, but the side room and the back area, with the trampoline, loose foam pits, and rock climbing wall, are out of sight.

Even with a limited view, the gym seemed much more appealing to me than the dingy, stagnant waiting room with its plastic chairs and scratchy rug. At one year old, I was too young to do "'nastics" like my older sister, Kate, so for 18 months, my mom faced the cumbersome task of keeping me contained while I spent the duration of my sister's lessons protesting this injustice. In the interim, I made the world my gym; I climbed out of my crib, onto cabinets, and up my mom's limbs.

"I'm not a jungle gym" she would say while hiding a smile and pushing her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. I had climbed halfway up my mom's legs and was prepared to catapult my body backwards and upside down, placing my trust entirely in her grip on my miniature hands. When I turned two and a half and was finally permitted

to test out whether the grass really was greener on the other side of the plexiglass, my parents' relief almost outweighed my excitement.

The grass was greener. I sported a ponytail at all times, which left me with a semi-permanent dent in my hair, and I wore my leotard as often as possible, including under my clothes on the plane ride to Florida when I was four despite my mom's worry that I would overheat. When I wasn't at the gym, I used the couches, beds, and doorframes throughout our four-story, colonial-style house to climb on or somersault over.

"Everything's okay!" I'd squeak after accidentally kicking a cabinet or thudding to the carpet from a handstand. When I was five, I fell off the bathroom countertop, ripped the towel holder from the wall, and landed on my left wrist. "Okay" was a bit of a stretch this time. During my gymnastics lesson the next day, my instructor noticed that I was climbing the rope almost entirely with my right arm. I was questioned further about the countertop incident, despite insisting that I was "fine," and was told that I wasn't allowed back in the gym until I went to the doctor. Sure enough, the X-rays revealed that I had fractured my left wrist, so my arm was sausaged into a glow-in-the-dark cast.

It was my sister who introduced me to the sport, but Kate, who is two and a half years older than me, was never entirely taken by it. Like most kids, she became more interested in horses and playdates and other sports by the time she was seven. Over the next few years, while I was learning how to do pullovers and cartwheels, Kate earned a black belt in tae kwon do.

Curious as ever and eager to be involved in our athletic endeavors, my dad, Pete, followed suit and enrolled in adult tae kwon do classes. Based on his background, the choice wasn't a surprise. He was an ice hockey player in high school; his shorter stature

and fierce competitive nature allowed him to weave in between players who weren't as quick as him or whose drive wasn't as intense as his. To cater even more toward his adrenaline-seeking side, he became a racecar driver and a firefighter in his late-teens and early-twenties. Adult tae kwon do was a win-win situation: it allowed him to both rekindle his competitive nature and actively participate in one of his daughter's athletic experiences.

My mom, Diane, grew up with two older brothers, so she was surrounded by competitiveness as a child, too. "I'll go easy on you" was practically a sin in her family. She dabbled in ice skating and then played lacrosse in high school, helping her team remain undefeated all four consecutive years. Despite spending her teenage years participating in athletics, my mom was relieved to be out of the gym after my Mommy & Me days. In many ways, gymnastics is neither particularly welcoming nor particularly forgiving for parents and participants alike.

My parents were introduced to one another through a mutual friend when they were in their late 20s. The first time they met, my mom attended my dad's softball game and, after leaving the game in separate cars, paid for my dad's parking. It's apt that both a sporting event and an act of kindness were involved in their first date.

By the time I was six, my dad had already taught me how to play catch, ride a bike, and, most importantly, drive our John Deere tractor, so, as far as he was concerned, I was good to go. Meanwhile, my mom put a valiant effort into introducing me to ballet, swimming, and tennis, activities that I'd be able to continue into adulthood. These sports never really stood a chance against gymnastics in my eyes.

Even after the days of Mommy & Me lessons, I repeatedly asked when it was time to go to "'nastics" and begged my mom to stay for the duration of my lessons, excitedly motioning through the windows for her to watch me if I learned a new skill. When I turned six years old, I was invited to join the team program at Gymnastics Village. The selection process went over my head at the time, but apparently it involved assessing how much promise I held. Each year, the coaches selected seven gymnasts in the same age range, all roughly six years old, who excelled in strength, flexibility, coordination, and work ethic.

Being a part of the team meant participating in the USA Gymnastics Junior Olympic program, which is an organization that includes developmental, compulsory, and optional divisions for artistic gymnastics. The competitive levels spanned from Level 4 to Level 10, with the jump from compulsory to optional occurring in Level 7. Although the rules and regulations have changed over time, I was allowed to compete Level 4, the first competitive level, when I was six.

My competitive edge was apparent early on—as soon as my sister learned how to tie her shoes, I spent days sitting on the floor near our back door, eyebrows furrowed, fingers fumbling, determined to figure out how to catch up to her. Advancing to the team allowed me a new space in which to kindle and express my competitive side. Before my first competition, my parents saw me off with big hugs and enthusiastic "have fun!!!"s. This was the start of my dad's regular practice of pep talks. Before each competition, he would recite positive mantras while I nodded along. It started with "have fun," and we added to it as the years passed. With "have fun" as my ultimate goal, it was unsurprising that I exclaimed, "When do I get to go again?!," after my first gymnastics competition.

Even though Kate wasn't doing gymnastics anymore, she still came to watch my competitions. It didn't take long for her to show a lack of interest in attending these long, loud, and chaotic competitions, and soon she began begging to bring her Nintendo Game Boy so that she didn't get bored.

Around this time, we were at the beautiful stage of sisterhood where we either deeply loved or deeply despised each other. She often frustratingly sneered, "Stop following me" while simultaneously complaining that I didn't play with her enough. I could deal with these tiffs, but when she debuted the "You'll understand when you're older" card, I was annoyed to no end. To escalate the situation, like any self-respecting little sister would, I devised counterarguments to this flimsy logic. At the end of the day, I knew we were on each other's good side if she let me borrow her Nintendo on my way to practice.

In addition to participating in competitions, joining the team meant more practice time—a dream come true. I was placed in a training group with six other girls my age and skill level, which meant I was quickly exposed to the blessings and curses of team dynamics at a young age. I met my best friend at the time, Riley, in this training group. With similar blond hair, blue eyes, and muscular frames, parents would joke that they mixed us up during practice and in competitions. The racial makeup of both Amherst, New Hampshire, a small, quintessential New England town about an hour northwest of Boston, and the gymnastics world did not make our almost identical appearance uncommon or far-fetched.

Our friendship included many post-school, pre-practice playdates and, if we were lucky, sleepovers. Riley lived on a proper cul-de-sac lined by visible three-story houses—

unlike the dead-end road I lived on, which was lined with houses hidden by long, winding driveways and thick woods. With two brothers, a playful dog, and a deck with a hot tub, Riley's life sometimes seemed like a slightly more sparkly version of my own. Her driveway was perfectly sloped down toward her backyard, which meant we were allowed to ride our bikes down it without worrying about skidding into the street, which was the case at my house. We played baseball with her brothers in her front yard, another pastime that my sister and I couldn't quite pull off, and raced handstand walks down the long, open hallways in her house.

Although I had friends at both school and gymnastics, I spent less and less time with my school friends outside of the classroom. In addition to sleepovers being banned during weekdays because of school, they were now also off-limits during weekends because of competitions. Other commitments were becoming secondary to the sport, too. Despite being regular churchgoers for my entire childhood, we began missing worship service on Sundays if I had a competition.

I counted down the hours until practice as soon as I woke up in the morning and visualized my routines to wind down at night. I tried on my maroon, long-sleeved, sparkly competition leotard in my room, loyally slathered Hand-E-Balm (a petroleum jelly-based product for athletes) on my calluses and rips every night, and fantasized about having my very own pair of grips (those white, leather strips with metal buckles that gymnasts wear on their hands during bars). Grips meant big girl gymnastics: fancy skills and longer practices.

Eventually, it was time to move on from the comfortable, familiar setting where my gymnastics career began. At the end of third grade, or, perhaps more relevantly, at the

end of my first season as a Level 6 gymnast, the head coach of Gymnastics Village moved to a different state. It was time to gym hop.

With our family MacBook, I searched the web for gymnastics clubs in the area. My parents put a 60ish-mile radius on my search, which offered me enough space to search for gyms in both New Hampshire and Massachusetts. I attended trial practices at at least four different gyms, which exposed me to a variety of practice structures and coaching styles. Some gyms were much more relaxed in their approach—practices were shorter and not very structured. Other gyms were strict, with coaches raising their voices if athletes were late to events, talked too much while waiting in line, or made too many mistakes.

We decided to land on Atlantic Gymnastics Training Center, which offered a beautiful balance of rigorous training and compassionate coaching. Situated in Portsmouth, a port city in New Hampshire that borders the southeastern corner of Maine, Atlantic was a whopping 62 miles from my home in Amherst. Thus, the commute time jumped from a meager 12-minute drive to a hefty one hour and nine-minute drive (without red lights).

In addition to the increased commute time, my training time ramped up significantly, too. To compromise, my parents made me a deal: joining Atlantic meant trying homeschooling. The idea of doing schoolwork at my own pace and from the comfort of my pajamas with my mom right around the corner sounded ideal. So, in April of third grade, my teacher, Mrs. Kennedy, sat me down in front of the rest of the class to make my homeschooling announcement. I left out as many details as possible, barely murmuring something about doing gymnastics. Mrs. Kennedy smiled, noted how humble

I was, and proudly stated that I was a stellar, dedicated athlete who was going off to achieve great things in the world of gymnastics. Or something. Off I went.

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My first summer at Atlantic saw an exponential jump in the hours I spent training. My feeble 12 hours per week training schedule amped up to over 20 hours per week. Practice began at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 3:00 p.m. In addition to the four events—vault, uneven bars, balance beam, and floor exercise—we also had one rotation for dance and one for conditioning.

A one-hour break in the middle of the day allowed us to eat lunch, run through the sprinkler, and/or swim in the sometimes-inflated above-ground pool tucked at the far side of the parking lot behind the gym. With no air conditioning, summers at the gym reached a new level of hot. In desperate attempts to cool down the gym, we'd turn off the large, dome-like overhead lights. Even with all of the windows open, the fans on full blast, and the lights dimmed, it was typical to have at least one gymnast relegated to the air-conditioned lobby to sit through a spell of nausea or faintness.

New norms accompanied this new environment. At Atlantic, it was protocol to line up to receive instructions from our coach when we rotated to a new event, and part of the protocol was to appear attentive and composed, with "good posture" and "eye contact." My squirmy nature made adhering to these simple rules tricky. When I was younger, eating dinner meant taking one bite of food, running a lap around the dining room table, taking another bite, and so on. I had yet to outgrow this impatience.

From my perspective, Matt, one of my new coaches, always seemed to take too long to give directions, or encouraged too many questions while giving directions. Matt was around 5'6", and he usually wore basketball shorts or Adidas training pants and a gymnastics-related T-shirt, if not his beloved Patriots jersey. At 20-something-years-old, he ran almost entirely on coffee, namely caramel macchiatos from Starbucks, and his voice, which hardly ever rose and never held any notes of aggression, was somewhat nasally.

My nine-year-old self wanted to *practice* the yurchenko timers rather than *listen* to his monologue on the importance of the hurdle. When I stood in line, shoulder-to-shoulder with my teammates, my toes would curl into the frizzy, blueberry-colored, lint-strewn vault runway, I'd crack my knuckles, and my eyes would glass over as I visualized the skills about which he seemed to be droning on and on. When I did this, Matt would pull me into the present—"Hey, Annie, I'm right here." I would glance hesitantly toward his shaggy brown hair and goatee while gnawing the inside of my cheek. Years later, when I'd ramble to him about what I thought I did or didn't do well on after a skill, routine, or meet, we'd laugh at how hesitant I was to even say "hi" when he first coached me.

Somehow, despite all of the training, I still had plenty of time and energy to be a kid. After coming home from practice, Kate and I would do "normal" summer things, like swim in our neighbor's pool and ride our bikes to the end of the cul-de-sac. At night, we would watch the Disney Channel with overflowing bowls of ice cream in front of us.

As a devoted bookworm, I also spent hours plopped on various pieces of furniture around our house fully engaged in fictional worlds. *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

trilogy, the *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* series, and *The Hunger Games* series lent me alternative worlds to which I could escape. Reading and the imagination it curated also acted as a means of connection between my teammates. My teammates and I would fabricate fictional worlds: Erica and I would pretend to sprinkle pixie dust on each other before performing a tough skill as a way to help each other feel more comfortable and confident.

It was this summer, the summer of 2007, that I was introduced to the Talent Opportunity Program (TOPs). USA Gymnastics (USAG) values early indications of "talent" in the sport, so TOPs was created to set apart gymnasts ages nine to 11 who had exceptional skill early in their careers. Or, as described by USAG itself, "the basic premise underlying Talent Opportunity Programs is that the development of the youthful athlete can be best served if the athlete trains in a sport of discipline for which he/she is best suited" ("Talent Opportunity Program"). Essentially, USAG wants to tag the gymnasts who seem to hold the most promise.

For TOPs, gymnasts participated in testing sessions over the summer that measured five physical ability tests: rope climb, press handstand, leg lift, handstand, and flexibility. The purpose of testing these skills was to qualify for TOPs National Testing at the Karolyi Ranch in Texas. An iconic space in the world of gymnastics, the Ranch is where the USAG National Team trained monthly.

I had always been a conditioning junkie. In my book, holding handstands, climbing the rope, and doing leg lifts were fun challenges. At home, I scaled the walls semi-Spiderman style. With the increased focus on TOPs training at Atlantic, I was able to build both my physical and mental strength.

Testing strength required me to tap into a new mindset. One minute might not feel like a long time as an adult, but, as a nine-year-old, holding a handstand for 60-seconds is a real test of patience. Personally, I reveled in the time I got to spend quietly upside down. We had the choice of holding the handstand on the beam or on the floor; I preferred the beam because it allowed for better finger grip and, thus, control; more importantly, I found it entertaining to identify different patterns, objects, and scenes in the almost imperceptible squiggles in the beam's leather surface. There was a certain meditative aspect to herding my thoughts, dismissing them, and focusing only on the specific positioning of my thumbs, elbows, shoulders, or toes.

I was primed to want more, to push my body to the limit, to chase the perfect 10. I expected to have trouble squatting down and standing up from the toilet because of my sore legs, to struggle to sit up in bed because of my sore stomach muscles, to have calluses and rips lining my wrists and hands. I learned to associate pure exhaustion with success, and I didn't want it any other way. Although all of the physical activity drained me physically, I still exited the swinging doors of the gym with a smile on my face. My hair would be askew and my body would be caked in chalk, but I was far more concerned with the progress I'd made on my vault timer, with how many presses I'd done during conditioning, and with Alli's promise that I could work on a new bar release move the next day.

During practice, my coaches praised my work ethic. If anything, they wanted me to loosen up more. If I appeared particularly serious, they would encourage me to crack a smile, sometimes poking a little fun of me—"Straighten your back leg on your switch leap, and definitely don't smile." Parents of my teammates, coaches of other gymnasts,

and my own coaches commented on my intense, calm demeanor during competitions—"You're so mature for your age," they'd say. I was just as determined to achieve perfect composure as I was to perfect my giants on bars and whip back to full twist on floor.

My teammates sometimes got fed up with my demeanor. Erica called me out for having a short temper, complaining that I was quick to lose my patience with her antics. She'd roll her eyes and exclaim that it was "no big deal" if we got in trouble for talking too much when I urgently "shushed" her as she chatted non-stop. Other teammates said that I was a "goody two shoes," twisting my unwillingness to cheat on conditioning into a character flaw.

By age 10, my New Year's resolution was to not cry for the entire year. I vowed to never complain. I apologized profusely to Alli after practice if I felt like I hadn't been present enough during the workout. My understanding of "right" and "wrong" was unwavering, black-and-white.

Chapter 2:

Do Your Best

"You okay, Nut?" Alli asked me as I perched myself on the edge of the floor while waiting for practice to start. Notorious for her nicknames, Alli addressed me with the shortened version of the one she'd given me: "Peanut." I nodded, mute. "You'd tell me if you're not okay, right?" I glanced down, bit the inside of my cheek, blinked, and nodded again.

Alli had exceptionally expressive eyebrows that hovered over her wide chocolate brown eyes and the kind of voice that was loud and noticeable enough to carry all the way across the gym, over blasting music and screeching children. Her trademark French Manicured nails would sometimes leave scratch marks on my skin, reminders of the innumerable times that she'd kept much worse from happening. Her ability to spot gymnasts shone through when I royally messed up on a skill I should have mastered. Some fluke—a grip slip, sore hands, chalk in my eye—would send me soaring from the high bar to the mat 10 feet below, but somehow Alli would catch my flailing limbs before much damage was done.

Like she did as I was balanced on the edge of the floor, Alli consistently asked how I was feeling, requested input on the structure of our workouts, and wrote motivational sayings on the whiteboards near each event in the gym—"Attitude is Altitude" paired nicely with vault. As my primary bar coach, she even continued to spot me on difficult bar skills during the entirety of her first pregnancy. She heaved me over the bar on a new release move, a tkatchev, squatting wide and deep enough so that her

bulging belly wouldn't get in either of our ways. My mom would shake her head from the upstairs waiting room in disbelief; Alli refused to let anything stop her.

My parents were also quick to check-in on me. Daily, they asked me, "How was practice?" Since I was homeschooled, this was a natural substitute for the "How was school today?" question. Sometimes it elicited a short response: "Good." Other times, it prompted an elaborate play-by-play of practice, from our conditioning circuit, to our beam workout, to an anecdote a teammate had told me about *their* school day. Annually, even when I was training 25 hours each week and spoke almost exclusively about the sport, my parents would earnestly ask me, "So, do you want to do gymnastics again this year?" I'd instinctively respond "Yes, of course," then become a little defensive—"Why *wouldn't* I?"—yet secretly appreciate their "no strings attached" sports philosophy.

They wanted me to do the sport if it made me happy, and they had no stakes in whether I won competitions, performed a new skill, or advanced to a different level. They just wanted me to do *my* best. This isn't the case for many gymnasts. Arguably, parents tend to get overly invested in the sport. Former gymnasts project their ex-hopes and dreams onto their children, hoping to live vicariously through them. Perhaps it helps that my parents never did gymnastics, so they had no means to compare their past experiences with my present situation.

The documentary *Achieving the Perfect 10*, released in 2003, follows a group of high-level, elite gymnasts through their day-to-day life, and it highlights parent-athlete and coach-athlete approaches to motivation that contrast with my own experiences. In the film, one gymnast semi-jokingly recounts all of the gifts she's gotten that act as incentives from her parents to do new skills or to win. "Her parents try to keep her going

by giving her incentives," says the narrator (*Achieving the Perfect 10*). Her dad appears on screen, asking his daughter, "So, what are some of the things you've gotten out of us over the years?" "Cat, hamsters, bedroom furniture," she says while half-hiding a smile (*Achieving the Perfect 10*).

Based on my training schedule, I was at risk for burnout at age 10. I was waking up at 5:15 a.m. multiple times a week for 6:30 a.m. practice. I'd train for two hours, then do schoolwork at the library. After completing my lessons, I'd get ready for my second training session, which was 4.5 hours in the evening. I was spending roughly 25 hours training in addition to at least 10 hours of commuting each week. Adding in physical therapy and the extra conditioning sessions I attended, I was working overtime by many adult standards.

Several of my teammates started to balk at the regular training schedule in addition to academic and other extracurricular demands. I witnessed my teammates fall out of love with the sport. They began to question their commitment, their progress, the end goal. Like the gymnasts in *Achieving the Perfect 10*, they needed external motivation to continue.

I was far too susceptible to the magnetic pull of the gym. I arrived to practice early, playing games of tag with teammates before practice, and I'd linger at the doorway at the end of a long day of training, reluctant to leave, even if it was just for 10 hours. The rule was: "If it is bad enough to need cold medicine or Ibuprofen, then it is bad enough to stay home." So I played with the boundaries of "bad enough." I learned to dismiss sore throats and pulled muscles. I was the one convincing my parents to bring me to practice rather than them being the ones to dragging me to the gym.

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Erica stacked weights on her kneecaps while sitting in a pike, attempting to reroute their natural tendency to bend. I stood with my toes curled over to try to fix my finicky flexed feet during my jumps. Attempts to change our body's natural forms were normal, suggested, reinforced. In some instances, like stretching, the attempts were relatively healthy. We need to be flexible to be safe. We need constructive criticism to improve.

"Your right foot is flexed in your straddle jump."

"Squeeze your stomach at the end of your blind-full."

"Keep your head neutral when you set on the double back."

Sometimes, though, the comments wandered from helpful feedback to toxic remarks, the line between the two apparently ambiguous. "She's ripped;" "I wish I still had a six-pack like that;" or, ominously, "Just wait 'till you hit puberty." All of these were typical comments I heard from unassuming teammates.

Even coaches would comment on the apparently inevitable doom of adolescence. We were warned that we would need to learn the bulk of our skills by the age of 13 or 14; after that, we would be subject to the wrath of hormones. Fears would bubble up, and our changing bodies would throw us into a pit of constant confusion. A strict dichotomy between "before" and "after" arose in my mind. There was now, the time before puberty,

when my body was working with me, and then there would be later, when my body would be working against me.

Another popular comment was a variation of "You have nice lines." I heard this from my parents, my coaches, and my teammates. It was meant as a compliment. It meant my body was somehow aesthetically "correct." It meant I looked graceful or lean or something. In reality, I had little control over my "lines." They were just there; it was how my body was put together. Nonetheless, those "lines" were used as a measure of my ability to succeed.

As teammates looked in the mirror and said they were getting "pudgier," I promised myself, time and time again, that I would never talk to myself like that. "Careful, you won't be able to eat like that for long," Elizabeth, a teammate a couple of years our senior, said to Erica while we were plopped on the floor of the locker room. Erica was snacking on a Luna protein bar, one of those chocolate cookie dough ones with fewer than 200 calories. Erica had nonchalantly mentioned that it was her second bar of the day, a reflection of her preference for the snack. Suddenly, though, it became a lesson in nutrition, a lesson in how we would need to be constantly vigilant of what we were putting into our bodies. This wasn't the first time I was made aware of the pressures surrounding food and body image, and it wouldn't be the last.

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In October 2007, just a handful of months after switching from Gymnastics Village to Atlantic Gymnastics Training Center, I qualified for the first round of TOPs

National Testing in Texas for the first time. After flying from New Hampshire to Texas, with a brief layover somewhere on the way, my mom and I found ourselves navigating our way to the Ranch.

Sand, dust, and gravel billowed out from under the tires of our rental car as I tugged at the seatbelt sawing into my neck and then peeled my thighs from the sticky leather seat.

Karolyi Camp

This Way →

We saw the sign just a few yards ahead. Cellphone service would soon be nonexistent, so my mom pulled one of her famous U-turns and swung into a seemingly abandoned convenience store parking lot so that I could call my dad. He was back home in New Hampshire, working and watching my sister and our dog. I left a quick message, "Hi Daddy, it's Annie. Just wanted to say hi before we get to camp for testing. I'll let you know how it goes later. I love you." I recited the mantras I was positive he would've said had we spoken live, clinging onto the sentiment "do your best," which brought me a familiar sense of comfort in this new environment.

The Karolyi Ranch was a 36-acre establishment in unincorporated Walker County, Texas. If that location doesn't sound familiar, then the Ranch did its job—the Ranch is purposefully located in an unreachable, uninhabited location to create an atmosphere of focus while gymnasts are training. It was big; it was eerie; and it was the location where champions have been both built and broken.

Even though I was just nine years old the first time I qualified, I noticed subtle trends in the oddities surrounding the Ranch. I had picked up on my parents' skepticism

surrounding our accommodations while we were there. They wanted me to attend the testing, but they were adamant that I was only allowed to go if they could stay with me. This seemed straightforward to me: I had never traveled on my own, and I was not even legally allowed to stay in a hotel room alone. Plus, I was such a homebody that I didn't even like sleeping over at a friend's house for two nights in a row. It seemed absurd that my parents were even questioning whether they'd accompany me.

It wasn't until I discovered that the Karolyis were strict about who was allowed to step foot on their property that I began to understand my parents' apprehension. Parents were not allowed to watch as gymnasts trained, and, more alarmingly, gymnasts were often required to stay in the cabins at the camp while parents were forbidden from doing so.

I guess because we hadn't been dubbed the "best of the best" yet, those who qualified for this initial round of TOPs testing were given some slack regarding accommodations. We weren't required to stay on site and our parents could bring us to the facility, although they still weren't allowed to watch during the testing itself.

Flash forward to the following year: October 2008. I had qualified for TOPs National Testing for the second year in a row. I took comfort in knowing that I'd already been through the process once, but I was a bit shaken up due to other circumstances. A few months before, I'd fractured my right hand while bodysurfing in the ocean. Even though it was healed by the time I was leaving for Texas, my training had been disrupted over the summer, and I was a bit unsure about the consistency of some of my skills due to the injury.

On top of the injury recovery I was juggling, I was also grappling with the recent loss of my older cousin, Blake. Blake had passed away just a week prior due to complications from cystic fibrosis. Although his condition wasn't new, his death was sudden. As a 10-year-old, I didn't quite know how to conceptualize the fact that my 19-year-old cousin was dead. Plus, there was the added unknown of whether my mom would have to leave Texas early to attend his funeral in Maryland.

I held it together, for the most part. I tapped into the same mindset that I used when convincing my coaches that an injury was a three out of 10 on the pain scale. I knew three was a safe bet because it was high enough to reflect some shadow of honesty, yet it was low enough that they wouldn't make me stop practicing. In both cases, I was unknowingly training myself to disregard my own feelings in order to prioritize other people's perceptions of me.

A small chip in my facade came during the beam skills test. I should've asked the coaches and judges to let me wait to compete until my coach came back. Alli had gone to the other arena to watch my teammate compete in a strength event, and she'd left me with explicit instructions to wait to go until she came back, even if it was technically my turn. Even though Alli wasn't back by the time it was my turn, I couldn't follow through with her advice. I wasn't about to tell a random coach, not to mention a random judge, that I'd prefer to wait until my coach came back before I started competing. That was lame. Half of these girls looked like they'd rather they didn't have their coaches with them anyway. I was flustered, but I went, and then I fell.

"Why didn't you ask to wait for me like I told you to do?" Alli asked in an I'm-upset-but-trying-not-to-be-mad-at-you tone when I was done. I shrugged to the squishy

blue mat below me and only dared to look at those French manicured nails. Mad that my eyes were burning and my head was throbbing, I evaded her attempts to look directly at me. She gave me one of her all-encompassing hugs anyway, the kind where I'd melt into her as she'd lift me up a bit, reinforcing that she could carry the weight of whatever I was attempting to hold on my own.

I wasn't off the hook yet, though. Moments later, Matt asked, "What's the matter, kiddo?" as I stared at his characteristically worn-out black Under Armour sneakers.

He probably noticed my slightly furrowed eyebrows while we were switching to the next event. He asked if I was sad about making a mistake on the beam test. This seemed like a decent excuse, so I nodded. I immediately regretted nodding. Because then it seemed like I was getting emotional over a stupid mistake on beam.

I was actually thinking about Blake. And I was upset about not speaking up before competing beam. And I was angry about not speaking up about being upset about Blake. And then I was annoyed because the chalky air, thick with the silencing effects of reinforced rules and behaviors, felt momentarily suffocating instead of refreshing.

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In hindsight, I am indescribably grateful and lucky that my visits to the Ranch were safe. The Karolyi Ranch was the training center for the U.S. women's national gymnastics team from 2001 to 2018. In 2018, the Ranch was permanently closed due to the investigation of the Larry Nassar sexual abuse scandal. The crimes that Nassar committed are disgusting and heartbreaking, and I urge everyone to read and listen to the

voices of the women who have courageously shared their stories. A few sources include: the "Believed" podcast, the *At the Heart of Gold* film, Rachael Denhollander's book *What Is a Girl Worth?: My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth about Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics*, Rachel Haines's book *Abused: Surviving Sexual Assault and a Toxic Gymnastics Culture*, and the 204 impact statements read at Nassar's sentencing hearing. The Larry Nassar scandal is a frightening, infuriating account of the irreversible damage that is done when power is abused. Even now, almost three years after Nassar was sentenced for 60 years, there are *still* investigations that need to be done in order to understand what happened and steps that need to be taken to ensure that it will never happen again.

Chapter 3:

We Love You

My sister and I have ocean blue eyes. I've always thought that Kate's are even brighter, clearer, deeper, her lashes longer, more enticing, entangling. At 14 years old and in the midst of meds and psychiatrists and bland hospital rooms, they became shallower: the water murky, the lashes meek.

When I was 10 and my sister was 12, she was shuttled off to a five-day environmental sleepaway camp with school. This was the first time I had spent a prolonged period of time without Kate. When we went to pick her up at the end of the week, a friend's mom asked me, "So, how did you like being an only child for the week?" I smiled shyly and shrugged, quietly remarking that I was glad Kate would be back soon.

Despite the strife of having an older sister, and strife there was, I missed her when she wasn't there, or maybe I missed that I couldn't wish that she wasn't there. Either way, I didn't like being the center of attention, and the house felt empty without her pitter-patter.

Two years after she went to sleepaway camp, Kate was hospitalized due to a mental health crisis. For the first several weeks of her hospitalization, I'd go with my mom or dad or both to hang with her when she was allowed visitors. Her shapeless, pocketless hospital-approved apparel mirrored the lack of personality she was exhibiting. "You must be the sister! We hear so many great things about you!" Nurses greeted me enthusiastically, their cheery reactions vividly contrasting the reason for our encounters. I

felt guilty that I didn't feel like I had many great things to say about Kate at this time. She was a shadow of the sister I grew up with. I had watched intently as she toggled between retreating in and lashing out at home, so the state of numbness I saw her in at the hospital brought me a profound sense of unease.

No one had any answers whether I asked or not, so I just didn't. I eavesdropped on phone conversations my mom had with nurses, social workers, and psychiatrists, clinging onto mismatched nuggets of information. She had shown signs of "abnormal development" since toddlerhood? She was prescribed new medication? She was caught trying to sneak banned objects into her room? The elephant in the room was causing increasing damage, knocking over lamps, eating the carpet, and there I was, darting around like a fool, simultaneously trying to avoid it and tame it.

I drifted back as medical professionals closed in on, around, over her. I caught myself questioning whether this was all just an act, an exaggerated, prolonged nightmare. I had known that there was something a bit "off" with my sister, but I didn't know that the things that were "off" were deep-seated and priming to take over. I thought all of the things you aren't supposed to think about a person experiencing mental illness: "Can't she just snap out of it?" "This isn't real," etc. I held onto these cruel misunderstandings as though they were flotation devices.

Eventually, I could no longer ignore the fact that she was being unwillingly kept at various hospitals and treatment centers, that her behavior, both past and present, wasn't voluntary, and that I will never really know what's going on with her. The challenges she faced and continues to face on a day-to-day basis are greater than many will ever face over their entire lifetimes.

The one-hour commute to practice became more cumbersome now that my mom was also navigating the one-hour commute to the treatment center to which Kate had been transferred. With my dad working full-time, and with me as a license-less 13-year-old, my mom was the primary kid-taxi. Sometimes, Cori, one of my coaches who lived in our general direction, would drive me halfway to or from practice to help with the commute. Other times, Alli hosted me overnight in the spare room at her townhouse. I'd play hide-and-seek, watch TV, and read picture books with her toddler before crashing for the night, grateful for the breath of fresh air and liveliness that contrasted with the eerie quietness at home.

When she was in the hospital or treatment center, Kate wasn't sleeping two doors away from me at night, but the vault table was exactly where it always was. Kate and I couldn't go swimming at our neighbor's pool after summer practice, but practice would still happen. When we talked on the phone, I didn't know what she'd say, or what she wasn't saying, or what I should ask, or what I should *not* ask. Sometimes she'd tell me how much she hated the treatment center, and then how much she loved the treatment center, and she didn't know when she'd be home, or if she'd be home. At practice, I always knew how to react to the correction to squeeze my core, shrug my shoulders, or do three more repetitions. The fluorescent lights kept me present; the chalky air helped me to breathe easily.

I was trained to deflect comments or questions that revolved around Kate. As a family, we valued my sister's privacy, so it was both explicitly and implicitly conveyed that I wouldn't go around sharing details about her mental health with everyone. Since I

am a private person, I agreed and complied with this philosophy. On the flip side, this required me to swallow the fear, confusion, and anger I harbored.

I explained away my need to catch rides to practice with coaches or to stay at their houses by saying that it greatly helped the commute time. This wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the entire truth. I evaded questions about what my sister was up to, and I wouldn't offer counter anecdotes when my friends would rant about their sibling rivalry. Slowly but surely, she drifted out of my day-to-day lexicon.

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There's a song by flor, a 2014 American Indie band, called "where do you go." It begins, "Where do you go, oh, whenever you disappear?" The song is dedicated to blissful places, people, and moments, to the things that make us burst with love and that perpetuate our energy. "Will you show me what it is that makes you so extraordinarily beautiful," it asks.

Especially around this time, when I felt alone in what seemed like inconceivable ways, I went to the gym both to disappear and to be seen. I went to the gym when I was teeming with energy, when I was so sore that I crawled up the stairs with my hands and feet, even though I was 12 years old. I went to the gym when my friends went to middle school dances and sleepovers. I went to the gym rain or shine or snow. I went to the gym, period.

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Chances are, if I wasn't at the gym doing gymnastics, then I was at home doing homework.

When my sister and I were little, the "dining room" in our house was our game room. We stored our toys, not to mention our hamster, Pink Nose, there. Then, it housed our childhood pride and joy: the air hockey table, alongside my sister's ginormous, Albino rabbit: Lily. By seventh grade, Lily had moved out, and this room had become my official "schoolroom."

I had graduated from the living room next door, where my workspace was a plastic picnic table, and I was graciously treated to a new office desk. To top it off, I was allowed to pick out my very own office chair from Staples every few years.

In the winter, I'd switch from the schoolroom to station myself in the family room. I sat next to the blazing fireplace with Kitzel, our German Shepherd, cuddled against me, and Tippy, our slightly older and more independent Smooth Collie, a few feet removed. I studied while the sounds of sizzling onions and barking dogs filled the background. My mom would frequently pop her head in, scrunch her nose, and whisper, "Sorry," before using the food processor to chop vegetables just a dozen feet away.

While several of my teammates dabbled in homeschooling during elementary and early middle school, I was one of the only gymnasts still homeschooling by eighth grade. By now, the pull of doing school in sweatpants failed to compete with the pull of the growing social scene for many of my teammates. Additionally, some parents were skeptical to play such an instrumental role in their children's education.

Even my parents, intelligent college graduates, were wary of this complication. My mom is a grammar whiz—give her a red pen, and she immediately becomes giddy. In middle school, she excitedly corrected my sentence diagrams, dismantling the cobweb of words effortlessly. Regardless, neither she nor my dad were chomping at the bit to be my primary teachers. Instead, they found programs that would provide me with instruction and resources for help. In ninth grade, I transitioned to K12 International Academy, a virtual school with teachers assigned to me for every subject.

Through K12, it became possible to work around the worries parents often have about teaching their kids. Since I was a stubborn, independent learner, there were times that my parents hardly knew anything about what I was learning. I wouldn't ask for help; I wouldn't complain about assignments; and I wouldn't dare let them read my essays.

Around this time, the beginning of high school, my teammates began to realize that gymnastics wasn't everything to them. The reality of the sport hit a lot of us square in the face. Instead of operating under the assumption that attending the Olympics was a feasible goal for most gymnasts who dedicate their lives to the sport, the growing consensus was that even attending a Division I gymnastics program would be a stretch, much less obtaining an athletic scholarship. Attendance at morning practices dropped, and pretty soon entire workout groups were being consolidated due to the reduction in team members.

I quickly became a token listener at practice, since I didn't go to "regular" school. Callie talked incessantly about boy drama; May complained about awful teachers; and almost everyone jealously commented on my lack of homework before semi-sarcastically noting that all of my work was "homework." I was an outsider, a third party, an alternate

perspective. When May huffed, “you wouldn’t understand,” she was right. I didn’t have to face a temperamental pre-calc teacher every day. The same went for Callie; I didn’t lose sleep at night wondering what outfit I should wear tomorrow.

Since I didn’t have my own school drama per se, they filled me in on everything on which I was “missing out.” However, the more my teammates discussed the issues they faced at school, the less I felt like I was left out by being homeschooled. Instead, I used their experiences to inform my understanding of others. I constantly put myself in their shoes, which required a shift in perspective—how did their situations differ from mine? My social interactions were largely based both on the firsthand experiences I had with people in the gym and on these second-hand experiences.

The question remained: was I being deprived of, or opting out of, a fundamental aspect of growing up? Was gymnastics dominating too much of my life? Was my social life *too* nonexistent, even for a high-level athlete?

The older I got, the more polarized this issue became, in other people’s eyes, that is. Abby took it upon herself to declare that I was, in fact, sheltered. She didn’t condemn my education, but she rolled her eyes in response to my dismissal of my lackluster social life. She was convinced that I just “wouldn’t get it,” if she discussed her relationship with me.

Matt, who was the head coach by this time, took this issue rather personally. He, too, had been homeschooled as a child, and although our families had different approaches to, and reasons for choosing, this route, we shared this unique experience. He showed his support in numerous ways, asking what I was learning about in different

subjects—what was going on in AP Bio? Had I written anything recently? But I usually shrugged off his inquiries, wary of bringing school into the gym.

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"Do you think life is black and white?" Matt asked me in response to my apparent disgust after accidentally casting over and falling into the foam pit beneath the bar.

I was standing in a cloud of chalk on a large square, squishy mat, about to leap back onto the pit bar above me. Discussing worldviews while practicing blind-fulls might seem unrelated, but gymnastics has an uncanny ability to reflect big ideas. Moments before I competed bars at Level 10 Regionals during senior year, I was discussing the multiverse theory with him.

But it wasn't senior year yet. It was 9th grade. We were zoomed in, just talking abstractly about my life, not the entire universe. Matt's open-ended question made me think.

Was life black and white? How could things be "right" and "wrong" but not black and white?

Chapter 4:

Go Big

The Level 10 National Championships are arguably the pinnacle of Junior Olympic USA Gymnastics. The USAG Junior Olympic Nationals website describes the competition as featuring "twelve age divisions, which are determined by birth date. These gymnasts are vying to become Junior Olympic national champions in the all-around, as well as in all four events: vault, uneven bars, balance beam, and floor exercise" ("Event & Parent Info"). Participants qualify from each of the eight Regional Championships across the United States by placing in the top seven in the all-around in their age division at the regional competitions.

Before nationals, then, are regionals. Region 6 is home to Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont—aka, New England plus New York. Growing up, I was more familiar with the term "Region 6" than with the term "New England." For instance, when I was nine, my mom pointed to the area of New England on a map, asking, "Which region is this?" With full confidence, I promptly responded, "Region 6!" Close, but no cigar.

In April 2013, at age 15, I competed in my first Level 10 Region 6 Regional Championships. For that particular year, there were 23 competitors in my age group, Junior B, which meant the pickings were not slim. I shushed my teammates when they brought up the topic of qualifying, and my parents did not preemptively purchase plane tickets or book hotel reservations for nationals—an act of true willpower for my dad. My coaches emphasized the experience over the outcome, reinforcing that The Most

Important Thing was to do my best and have fun. I could only control my outcome, and how other people performed was, in the wise words of my second-grade teacher, “nonya” (none of your business). Similarly, my dad took this opportunity to emphasize the “go big” statement in our pre-meet pep-talk. Now was the time to leave it all on the floor and not the time to play it safe.

However, during the weeks prior to regionals, I couldn’t help but to secretly scope out my competition. In between school lessons, I’d find the results for the Level 10 State Championships for each state in Region 6, piecing together which gymnasts were likely to be in my age group and what their average scores were over the season. Then, I’d rank the whole lot of us based on this patchwork of information. By the time Regionals rolled around, I had run through the possibilities countless times, and I had religiously visualized my routines before falling asleep, after waking up, while eating dinner, and during car rides.

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Regionals went just fine. So fine that now, six years later, I don’t remember the specifics. According to my recorded scores (9.25, 8.875, 9.050, 9.225), I had a solid, steady performance on each event. This consistency led me to place third in the all-around in my age group, Junior B, securing my spot on the Region 6 team for Nationals. Four minutes after the award ceremony, my dad was on the phone with the host hotel for the competition to book a room; four weeks later, my mom and I showed up to said hotel in Minnesota.

One of the beautiful aspects of gymnastics is that it opened my eyes to various spaces and places. My mom took it upon herself to prioritize soaking in a historical, educational, or cultural event wherever we traveled.

This approach worked to my advantage more obviously in some cases than in others. On the one hand, I was able to entertain my dream of being an F.B.I agent when we visited the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C. while we were in the city for a competition. Other times, I followed her lead with a bit more skepticism, such as when she proudly announced that we would be visiting the Swedish American Institute in Minneapolis during our trip for nationals. We strolled through the exhibits, my mom eyeing the Dala horses, me amused by the nesting dolls, and both of us stopping in the children's section to write letters to Tomte, a mythical figure said to keep the family and land safe against misfortune. Despite my initial skepticism, the experience was educational and enjoyable.

In addition to the Swedish American Institute, my mom and I also squeezed in a visit to Hamline University. One of my old teammates attended the school and was a member of the gymnastics team. Despite the fact that I was still just a freshman in high school, I was slowly becoming aware of the fact that my future demanded attention if I was going to mold it into something I wanted: a full athletic scholarship to a Division I school. With all of this rumbling around in the back of my mind, it was difficult to take in everything the head coach was saying as he showed my mom and me around.

Eventually, it was time to actually compete. As one of the few level 10 gymnasts at my gym during that season, I frequently competed alone or with just a few other teammates. At nationals, I was a part of the Region 6 team, and we were among the best

gymnasts our age in the country. It was hard not to look like a little kid in a candy store, gaping at the polished difficult skills being performed left and right. Someone's coach handed us all "R6" face tattoos, and the seven of us were enamored with this small, 1x1 inch sticker that we were encouraged to stamp next to our eyes. None of us said it, but it was hard to ignore the feeling that this was a slice of college gymnastics: big arenas and extra attention.

Adding to the starstruck nature of the meet, my mom and I separately saw, her from the stands and me from the competition floor, Liang Chow, the coach of Olympians Shawn Johnson (2008) and Gabby Douglas (2012, 2016). My mom took blurry photos from her iPhone, zooming through spectators, gymnasts, and coaches to snap a photo of his constant smile. Although less unusual to the both of us, Mihai Brestyan, coach of Olympian Aly Raisman (2012, 2016), was also there, since two of his gymnasts were in my squad.

Region 6 began on bars, my favorite event, and I was immediately distracted by the gaggle of gymnasts cheering me on during my warm-up. Cydney belted, "YOU GOT THIS ANNIEEEE," and Lindsay's coach, a petite firecracker from Long Island, New York, screeched, "CMON, NICE, NICE ANNE." I dismounted and stared at Matt with wide eyes, eager for his calm demeanor to melt away the other blaring, albeit encouraging, commentary.

Pandemonium seemed to erupt after each gymnast took a warm-up turn. We all had different settings for the uneven bars; some of us were trained to swing on a wider, higher set, while others were trained to swing on them lower and narrower. Due to this personalized approach, coaches needed to change the setting for each gymnast. Lindsay's

coach took the lead shouting out orders; she had a piece of paper that mapped out who was supposed to go after whom to make the setting as smooth as possible.

Warm-up was over, and it was time to compete. I was first. The routine went by so quickly that it felt like it didn't even happen. Matt's fist bump, pat on the back, and "nice job, bud," came before I realized that I had saluted.

Our next rotation was beam. Competing on beam feels a bit like walking on water—or, at least, what I imagine it feels like to walk on water. When you watch, it seems physically impossible. The balance beam is a whopping four inches wide and 16 feet long. For context, four inches wide is the width of parking strips. Needless to say, there is not much room for error.

Before I competed, I repeated the following mantras in my head. "One step at a time," and "look at the beam." Cori, my primary beam coach, had reminded me of these two key phrases for months, and she would continue to remind me of them in the years to come. "One step at a time" reminded me to stay present, and "look at the beam" reminded me, quite literally, to look at the beam. When I was nervous, my body would run on autopilot, and my eyes would glass over a bit. Remembering to take in those little squiggles in the beam's surface allowed me to lock into the moment.

With these two sayings in mind, the beginning of my beam routine was solid. I landed my jump series (split jump, straddle three-quarters) solidly. My flight series—a back handspring, back-layout stepout—and my full turn were a little off at the end, but I quickly covered up the wobbles. I stuck my leap, a switch side, and incurred only a miniscule bobble at the end of my front handspring. I took a somewhat big step on my

dismount, a round-off to one and a half twist, but, at that point, I was just happy to be off the beam.

Unlike beam, where everything sounds like it's underwater, competing on floor is a collaborative experience between the athlete and their floor music. The moment my music started, I tuned right into it, even over all of the cheering. Although floor wasn't my favorite event to train, it was one of my favorite events to compete. Adrenaline pumped through me, and—instead of this working against me as it often did on bars and floor—it accelerated my power. I was so amped up that I even bounced back out of my last tumbling pass, a double tuck. Matt joked that I could've added a fourth tumbling pass to my routine.

Vault is another event that benefitted from my increased adrenaline during competitions. Additionally, it is the only event where we received two attempts, which always felt like an exceptionally gracious offering. My vaults, yurchenko layouts, were decent, rounding out a positive experience at my first J.O. Nationals.

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Although I had spent a copious amount of time in the gymnastics world, college recruiting was a different universe. The summer after ninth grade, my dad and I unknowingly approached, poked, and woke the beast with a classic summer college road trip.

We started early. Knowing my dad, it would be worrisome if this were not the case. He was German through-and-through; rising early was a given, and "on-time"

meant arriving *at least* five minutes early. When he said we should leave our house by 7:30 a.m., I knew our departure time would be closer to 6:45 a.m. By the time we reached middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania, it was barely midday, and we'd already covered over 400 miles since our starting point in southern New Hampshire.

The speed limit was 70 miles per hour as opposed to the 60 miles per hour speed limit in New Hampshire. My dad's former race-car driver self was pumped, but I was dubious of our fast-paced travel. It was as if the universe wanted me to accelerate full-speed ahead into the future, but my skepticism about this trip grew with each passing mile: how was I supposed to know which college was right for my future self? Even if I did figure that out, how was I supposed to convince the coaches that my future self was right for their program?

I clasped a manila folder that contained printed Google Maps directions, hotel reservations, and coach contact information. My sweat made the thick paper wither, so I released it and peered through the decently clean passenger-side window. Corn fields. Farms. Cows. Miles and miles of wind-turbines silently mocking me with their representation of independence, transformation, and potential. I supposed it shouldn't surprise me that rural America was subtly urging me to forge my own path, but I wasn't even old enough to operate the vehicle transporting us. My dad broke the silence to discuss interviewing techniques with me—the topic every 15-year-old would be itching to delve into.

Pulling out my iPhone (and subsequently breaking interviewing rule #1, which was to have a pen and pad of paper ready *at all times*), I made a list of talking points. We covered the basics, including strengths and weaknesses, and brainstormed questions to

ask. As a man who has worn many professional hats, my dad had been on both the giving and receiving end of interviews. His background spanned from firefighting, construction working, information technology (IT), owning his own blacktop sealcoat business, and project management. Even if it made me squirm, he certainly had the credentials to be giving me advice.

"When asked about your weaknesses, mention how you've learned and grown from them and how they are tied to your strengths." Suddenly, my perfectionistic tendencies reflected my work ethic rather than my perpetual engagement in obsessive, self-deprecating thoughts and behaviors. It was all perspective.

He then added, reassuringly, that I was interviewing them just as much as they were interviewing me—"They don't have all of the power, so don't act like they do"—explaining that I had the opportunity to share my skills with them just as they had the opportunity to share their program with me.

I rehearsed and added to my notes as we barreled down I-80, naively daydreaming about receiving a scholarship offer to compete in Division I collegiate gymnastics, the pinnacle of many high-level competitive gymnast's careers.

Our first stop, Pennsylvania State University, ripped the Band-Aid right off my tender, hopeful being. The gymnastics program had ranked 15 out of 82 in the most recent 2013 season. Compared to the other college gymnastics programs I was considering, they were the most competitive. Despite their reputable standing in terms of athletic caliber and performance, the coaches had a subpar reputation, which I experienced firsthand. As we pulled out of the campus parking lot, I mindlessly flipped through the radio stations in search of classic rock, my dad's favorite. I was hoping the

music would keep my dad at ease while I silently processed the meeting. There was nothing a little Rush couldn't fix, right?

The meeting in short: I wouldn’t be offered a scholarship, but I was encouraged to try out for the team if I ended up attending the school. This shouldn’t have been surprising given the program’s expectations regarding skill level, competition scores, and overall performance consistency, all of which were noticeably above my own personal performance.

I was more shaken by the coach’s response to my query, “Are there any questions I should ask that I haven’t already?” The coach squinted his eyes, scoured his brain, and replied, “Ask whether the girls get weighed. We don’t, but many programs have a history of keeping tabs on weight and body fat.” Four years later, in 2017, this man’s contract was terminated due to abuse allegations.

Moments and memories flickered through my mind—coaches acknowledging my lean, muscular frame at just nine years old, older teammates speaking about their former six-pack abs with nostalgia, and my gradual and unnoticed weight loss over the past three months. I was no stranger to the body image epidemic in female athletics.

Momentum is a beautiful defining characteristic of car rides; I used this to my advantage. Although I was a bit disappointed by the rejection and more than a bit alarmed by the tangent about the dangers of monitoring female collegiate gymnasts’ weights, I focused on our forward movement.

West Virginia jolted me awake. New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania all had a familiar, distinctly New England feel with their hemlock trees and dairy farms and Dunkin’ Donuts. Now, I pressed my right hand up against the interior of

the car door as we navigated a winding, tapered “highway” a few hours after driving through another lackluster campus. We passed mailboxes and driveways as though we were on a dead-end road, and dense trees that crowded the edges of our route created a slightly claustrophobic feel. I did a double-take as I noticed a lighter patch of foliage, catching sight of a half-dozen mountain goats sidestepping their way around the slanted field. My attention was diverted again as we spotted the headlights of an oncoming vehicle working its way up the hill we were perilously working our way down. It was a tight squeeze, but we snuck around each other “without even scratching paint,” as my dad proudly noted.

Our radio drifted in and out of consciousness and eventually reduced to a constant buzz. Maybe *now* was the appropriate time to claim that we were in the middle of nowhere. I pressed the off-switch, dousing us in silence. Often seen as the enemy, I warmly welcomed the space that silence provided, the potential it held. The passenger side window had become dusty from the backroads, and the semi-occluded glass caused my eyes to drift in and out of focus. Despite how enamored I was by the varying environment at first, I’d already become somewhat jaded by the mountainous terrain. How much change of scenery would I need to feel differently?

Before I knew it, we were three days and seven states deep into our trip. The air was thick with humidity, and the land was lush with greenery. Sporadic, flood-warning-worthy downpours chased my dad and me into random buildings on the University of North Carolina’s campus. Through the ebbs and flows of the storm, I admired the beautiful structures, homey feel, and meticulous landscaping. The coach here was friendly and respectful, but he had already recruited my class, and there were no walk-on

spots available. I was like a pinball getting bounced from location to location, unable to control my route or end point. The hazy air combined with this train of thought catalyzed me into yet another daze as we hit the road (or, in the low, slow hums of my dad quoting Willie Nelson, "*On the road again, I just can't wait to get on the road again"*).

I was shocked into awareness as a towering man with short, white, spiky hair shook my hand a bit too tightly for a bit too long. Another day. Another head coach. Another couple of hours in which it became exponentially more exhausting to withstand both the summer heat and the pressure to appear excited about this next stage of my life. This time, I was shaken by the assistant coach's approach to promote the program. While whisking me through North Carolina State's campus, she listed numerous articles of apparel every team member received and attached a price-tag to each item as though we were discussing a business transaction. Apparently, bragging about how many and which kinds of gems are on the competition leotards was a technique used to entice potential walk-ons. They'd just signed a contract with Adidas, which obviously was exactly what I was searching for as a prospective student-athlete.

The halfway mark of this trip was behind us, and I felt less convinced than ever about the goal I had spent hundreds of thousands of hours working toward. Almost every coach interaction I had left me with a sinking feeling in my gut. I'd not even begun tenth grade, yet I was forced to construct an answer to the elusive "what do you hope to study, and what are your career aspirations?" questions. I noticed a pattern in responses that prompted me to consider the ideals of these so-called adults, supposed leaders, and potential mentors.

My answer was vague: I shrugged, reflecting my genuine indecisiveness, and remarked that I was generally a "humanities kind of person." The majority of the time, this response was enthusiastically welcomed, which I found startling and then perturbing as I hypothesized why—humanities majors were, stereotypically, less time-demanding. In other words, my studies supposedly wouldn't get in the way of my athletics. While some coaches half-heartedly mentioned the one or two girls they'd coached who had pursued more "rigorous" majors, they were visibly relieved to hear that I was supposedly unlikely to trade my gym-time for schooltime. My people-pleasing compartment was satisfied, but every other fiber in my being shuddered from the underlying assumptions and misplaced values these people appeared to hold.

I was not only underwhelmed, but also unsettled by the facade of it all. "Selling myself" was not an enjoyable pastime; hearing about high scores and championship rings did not impress me, and the campuses were beginning to blur together—*everything* was beginning to blur together. The farther we drove, the more distance I wanted to place between myself and the future for which I was supposedly paving the way. But the show had to go on.

We were on my grandparents' alma mater's turf: the College of William & Mary. I was again taken by the lush scenery and grand, colonial architecture. Eventually, we coordinated with the assistant coach enough to be at the same place, at the same time. The man's glasses continuously slipped down the bridge of his nose, and a weathered walking stick assisted him as we trekked, and he laboriously limped, through campus. I later learned that he'd survived a serious car accident a few years before. He'd sustained ongoing injuries and impairments, but his physical and cognitive recovery had been

tremendous. His vulnerability was refreshing, and for a change of pace, he told me, “you know…we don’t recruit early, but *mumble mumble* you. Would love *mumble* if you’re interested.” Honestly, it was helpful that he was difficult to understand, for it forced me to stay semi-present. I finally decoded his speech to discover that he’d expressed his interest in my gymnastics, and he would welcome me to come on an “unofficial visit” the next year if I was still interested.

Retreating to the safe confines of our car, I felt my dad’s excitement slice through the thick Virginia air. I sighed, craving more of this fleeting sense of control over my athletic and academic fate. With only two destinations left on our itinerary, Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia, my opportunities seemed to be dwindling. Simultaneously, I began to register the risk of ambitious, face-paced travel, which was the lack of attention to detail it endorses. My dad and I walked over eight miles during our mere 10-hour stay in Washington, D.C. Other than the routine campus visit, we were unable to get in touch with any member of the coaching staff at George Washington University, and we speed-visited various monuments and museums. I felt saturated, unable to give each element of this rich, diverse city even an iota of the attention it deserved. This same revelation rang true with the previous seven days of our trip. The more I saw, the less I saw.

We reached Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. How? I couldn’t tell you. My dad navigated well into the night using the age-old windows-cracked and radio-on trick to stay alert. I, on the other hand, knocked out—neck bent, mouth open, arm twitching unpredictably. Every so often, the wind whistled through the cracked window, and my eyes fluttered open just long enough for me to cautiously glance over to my dad; his face was unwavering, his right hand was wrapped around the steering wheel, and his left

elbow was perched on the edge of the windowsill. His hand poked, outstretched, out of the car, as if attempting to grasp onto the fleeting, calm summer air. I momentarily marveled at this man's even-keeled, persistent character before licking my lips, stretching my cramped neck, and drifting back to sleep. By the time we reached our modest accommodations for the evening, I zombied my way through the lobby and sank into bed.

The next day, we commenced our final campus tour of the trip. I spent the majority of our time outside attempting to dodge the direct sunlight by shadow-jumping through the University of Pennsylvania's campus. It was the same old, same old, by this point. Yes, the fabulous architecture was breathtaking, and, of course, I was completely and totally enamored with the rigorous academics, and you best believe I was hoping, wishing, and praying that my skills would catch the gymnastics coaches' attention once I sent them a follow-up email about my visit.

Aside from that, though, I was more distracted by the sweat dripping down my spine and the emptiness swallowing my stomach than the intricacies of the campus life, extracurricular opportunities, and residential options. The inside of the car never seemed so welcoming with its cool air conditioning and its ability to deliver me back to the life I had carefully and comfortably constructed for myself back home. I let the scenery buzz by as we headed north, unable to pick apart the city lights from the stars.

We pulled into our long, winding driveway by early evening. It was July 5, 2013, my mom's birthday. The trip had officially been rounded out. If you'd asked me where I'd been 12 hours before, I could've given you, at best, a vague answer—perhaps "somewhere on the east coast." If you'd asked me where I'd been during any of the previous eight days, my answer would have been similar.

Chapter 5:

Concentrate

It was a Tuesday in August 2013. The summer practice schedule meant a sleepy 8:30 a.m. start time. Even though the forecast predicted temperatures in the upper 80s, the cool, seacoast morning air combined with the constant chill I felt creeping up my spine compelled me to wear a sweatshirt during warm-up at the gym, something only typical for mid-winter practices. After our 15-minute warm-up jog, I peeled off the protective layer with mild hesitation.

I stole glances at myself in the full-length mirrors that lined the walls adjacent to the floor. This morning, as with every morning for the past couple of months, the result of stepping onto the scale had brought me a fleeting, eerie rush of adrenaline. I couldn't figure out whether my body reflected the same shrinking number, though.

The same competitive edge that pushed me to learn how to tie my shoes, make my first kip on bars, and outrun all but one of the boys in second grade had reached a new, twisted level. The high I got from shrinking fueled me. My joints ached; I was short of breath; my left ear mysteriously echoed, but I hardly cared. Whatever energy I had was spent on covering up the fact that I was operating within a severe energy deficit.

"Annie, come here."

Cori's voice cut through the musty, muggy air and over the chattering of other gymnasts. We had just started active-flex. This wasn't a typical moment for coach-athlete interaction. I jogged lightly across the floor, passing behind dozens of my teammates,

attempting to look like this was a planned and/or nonchalant conversation. It wasn't planned, and I had a gut feeling it also wasn't going to be nonchalant.

She quickly and quietly asked me to follow her as she slipped through the double doors and entered the Staff Office in the lobby. This wasn't a good sign. No one was brought here. If anything, we were pulled to the corner of the gym for a stern talking-to or serious questioning, but we almost always stayed within the confines of the blue swinging doors.

We proceeded through the main office, Cori motioning to my mom to join us, and entered the cramped, closet-like space in the back, which was the gym owner's office. The prospect of this meeting was no longer just "not good"; it was decidedly "bad."

My lips formed a straight line across my blank face. Cold sweat beaded on my fingertips and toes. James Dean was plastered on a poster on the wall opposite me—"Dream as if you'll live forever, live as if you'll die today." The flimsy wooden door muted a surprising amount of the hustle and bustle from the main office and lobby, leaving the three of us in a chilling silence, which Cori broke directly, with something along the lines of, "I can tell that you don't have enough energy to practice, and it is not safe for you to continue like this."

I don't think I responded. I don't think I so much as blinked. I sure as hell didn't dare look at my mom. If Cori had the gusto to bring this up, then I was going to make her suffer through the consequences of my unwillingness to engage.

"How much do you weigh?"

My initial lack of response did me no favors, and I was soon faced with the horrifying, humiliating task of affirming her suspicions. Not only was I admitting that I

was underweight, but I was also forced to cough up evidence that I had been tracking my weight.

After a brief discussion, which I don't remember precisely, I was told that I wasn't allowed to return to practice that day, and that I'd better change something if I planned to continue with my gymnastics career.

My face flushed, and my stomach dropped. I worried about what my mom thought, what the other coaches thought, and what my teammates thought. I was gut-wrenchingly embarrassed by the prospect of explaining that I had to leave practice because I wasn't *eating enough*. I decided that I would shrug off any future inquiries by saying that I hadn't been feeling well, which was still closer to the truth than I felt comfortable admitting.

I feared that this intervention of sorts would force change. Despite my prevailing denial, deep down I was terrified of the prospect of altering the world I had created for myself. Everything was predetermined, measured, controlled. I was worried that I would be forced to eat a lot and that gymnastics would be taken away from me. At this point, the sport was my lifeline; I clung to it, needing the reassurance that there was something worth *being* for, even if it was simultaneously driving my self-destruction.

I was handed a pear to snack on while my mom finished a few office tasks. By this time in my career, she was working in the gym's office a few days a week since she was already there so often and to offset tuition costs. We then made our way to the beach while avoiding further discussion of the reason for our impromptu outing. Any conversation we had at the beach or during the car ride home was measured. I attempted to explain away my behavior by saying that I didn't like to practice on a full stomach, so

summer practices were tough because that meant I didn't really eat much until the afternoon. I said that my eating habits would change when afternoon practices began in a few weeks, but she gently pushed back, remarking, "I don't know that they will."

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There's not an easy way to track down the beginning of elusive patterns, contradictory convictions, secretive behaviors. It didn't start when I was eight and an avid fan of steak tips and mashed potatoes. It didn't start when I was 10 and asked for chocolate chip muffins from Panera Bread after morning practice. It didn't start when I was 12 and ate a bowl of Hood's Red Sox Comeback Caramel ice cream blanketed in a layer of Hershey's chocolate syrup almost every night. Not that it actually had to do with food, anyway.

It also didn't start with a coach saying that I needed to lose weight, either directly or indirectly. It didn't start with a sibling, parent, or teammate mocking me about unhealthy eating habits. It didn't start with others' backhanded insults or ulterior motives.

In a lot of ways, then, it shouldn't have started.

It started sometime after I promised myself I'd never, ever, ever call myself fat. It started sometime after the innocent comments about my lean, muscular build had sunk in deep enough that I felt like this tangible aspect of myself mattered, and maybe even mattered the most? It started around the time I began to care about my appearance in a way that I never thought I would, in a way I swore to myself that I never would.

In a way, then, it was starting all along.

I knew what the stereotypical gymnast looked like. I knew that she was lean, short, muscular, and pre-pubescent. I knew that, at 14-almost-15, I was teetering on the edge of adolescence, so I gingerly tiptoed toward the scale with the belief that this number system would keep me grounded.

It had already happened by the time I swore I would never, *ever* be someone with an eating disorder, as if that was a decision I could make for myself. It had already happened by the time my toenails were bruised and peeling, by the time I crashed on my bed after climbing a flight of stairs, and by the time my skintight leotards were baggy. It had already happened by the time I was learning about eating disorders from an online "Skills for Health" class over the summer. In my clouded mind, symptoms became guidelines.

Admittedly, there is a lot that I don't remember. The summer before my sophomore year of high school passed in a haze. But there are a few things I do remember. I remember stepping onto the scale in the bathroom every morning, a brief feeling of relief when the number would loyally decrease. Cause and effect. This was appealing, straightforward, and comforting.

I remember being confused. Why did everyone seem so excited about the prospect of getting ice cream after practice? Why was snack time accompanied with relief and banter? Why did moving my body feel more and more difficult when there was less and less of it? Why was I thinking so much about food when it was the very thing I was desperate to avoid?

I remember feeling sad, cold, lonely, and numb. Mostly numb. Quick science lesson from the humanities girl: if you aren't nourishing yourself properly, then your

body goes into survival mode, both physically and mentally. I could no longer meaningfully invest in who was going to the beach after practice, whether my sister was having a particularly tough time, which colleges were interested in recruiting me, and vice versa. At the same time, I cared about all of those things way too much. I guess that's what perpetuates the cycle. Caring too much, not knowing how to deal with the caring, so attempting to stave it off by numbing yourself to the world.

Restricting meant further differentiating myself from my sister. We weren't particularly similar looking to begin with—for one, she had shorter, curlier brown hair, and I had longer, waiver blonde hair; for two, she was roughly 5' tall, whereas I was closer to 5'4"—but this way I could distance myself from the weight gain that she'd experienced from the medications. This way, I could shrink away from whatever was swallowing her. This way, I could point to the physical side effects of her condition and concretely determine that I was not dealing with the same thing.

Restricting meant creating rules that made sense to me, following through on goals that were definitive, and proving to myself that I had discipline (as if training over 20 hours a week and doing well in school didn't already determine this characteristic). Restricting meant fabricating a world in which things were straightforward, in which avoiding food sparked change in my body. Restricting meant "right" and "wrong"; it meant black-and-white thinking.

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Classic. Another athlete—no, another white, female, high-level gymnast—falling into the age-old trap of appearance and control and perfectionism. Another case of a somewhat difficult home life, a performance-based sport, and a type-A personality teaming up against physical existence. Another perfect storm.

I almost want to roll my eyes at the obviousness and absurdity of the situation. At the time, it felt like the biggest secret I could keep from people. But, of course, although it is not defined solely by physical symptoms, it manifested in a way that was hard to miss.

There were days coaches asked me about my energy levels. There were days when teammates' moms would question my intake and physique—"Where are the carbs?" one mom pried while peering into the plastic Tupperware containing my post-practice salad. Another unsolicited remark, "You should bulk up," came months later from a parent I was making small talk with as I grabbed an ice pack from the freezer in the upstairs waiting room. As innocent as these, and countless other, remarks might have been, each one weighed me down even more.

When confronted in medical settings, I refused the opportunity to seek help. I wore leggings under my thickest sweatpants and three layers of clothing on my upper body when I was weighed at the doctor for my annual check-up. No eye contact was made with my doctor either when I admitted to "accidentally" losing weight over the summer or when I divulged that I hadn't had my period in months. I was met with a steady nod from a woman with medical credentials who reassured me that it was "normal" for competitive athletes to lose their cycles, that I should try to gain weight, but that I shouldn't just "sit on the couch and eat potato chips." Months later, when a

nutritionist calculated my body fat, I met her concerned eyebrow raise with a false air of surprise. I reassured her that I would adjust my diet accordingly, but a sickening sense of pride settled in my stomach. Fear constantly competed for my attention and determined my behavior.

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Christy Henrich was a female American artistic gymnast and a member of the 1986 U.S. national gymnastics team. Her Wikipedia page consists of three "comprehensive" segments: "Early career," "Weight issues," "Aftermath" ("Christy Henrich").

Imagine your life summed up into three concise (read: insensitive) sections, all of which revolve around one activity in which you were involved. In a cruel summary of the already cutting Wikipedia overview, Henrich was a gymnast who had anorexia nervosa and died at the frail, young age of 22. Christy represents, in a sense, the countless female gymnasts who have put their health in danger due to the pressures surrounding body composition in the sport. In other words, this is an extreme situation, but it is not an isolated scenario.

Henrich's death brought much-needed awareness to this issue in women's gymnastics. By the mid-1990s, American media coverage of women's gymnastics no longer directly mentioned or listed gymnasts' weights in captions ("Christy Henrich"). Resources for nutrition and wellness circulated around the community. Henrich's story might have helped pave the way for other top-tier gymnasts—including Cathy Rigby,

Cathy Johnson, Nadia Comaneci, and Erica Stokes—to acknowledge and/or speak publicly about their experiences with eating disorders in the sport.

Even still, eating disorders and body image continue to plague gymnastics over 30 years after Henrich's death. We are taught to chase perfection. We are judged on appearance. Despite past evidence that shows the prevalence of eating disorders in gymnastics, there are very few recent studies to help us better understand the nature of this issue or the steps we can take to reduce the chances that young female gymnasts will develop unhealthy body images or eating pathologies.

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As I write this section, I have a tab open with a mirror selfie (oh, the horror) I took in October 2013 (I was 15). The photo was taken after I had been sitting in a hot tub, my bathing suit still on, my hair still slicked back. It's an omnipresent reminder of some past version of myself that still exists in some capacity (both in the sense that the picture is in my photo library and in the sense that past versions of myself are stacked within me like Babushka dolls). The combination of pixels creates a pictorial representation of my twisted frame of mind. Hovering next to this document, haunting my every word, insisting that I approach and portray this theme accurately, but not in a "triggering" way, but not in a glossed-over way, but not in an overly dramatic way. Nothing feels real when it comes to eating disorders, anyway. They create a prolonged period of liminality. Deadly liminality.

In the photo, my body reflects the conditions of deprivation, both from the hot tub and from restriction. Blue veins snake around my arm, down my bicep, and across my lower abdomen. Muscles I don't even know exist are outlined. I'm not flexing, just tense, in a constant state of rigidity. My face is blank; the glow from my iPhone flash blurs out details around my face and neck. At this point, the eczema hadn't erupted. That came the following week, when my entire body broke out in hives and everyone looked to blame soap and laundry detergent and, eventually, "*stress*?" If anything, my legs were just tinged red from the hot water.

I wish I could say that I feel nothing when I look at this picture. Or, even better, I wish I could say that I feel glad and grateful and relieved that I don't look, feel, or think like that anymore, that I'm healthy, happy, that the hardest "battle" I've ever "fought" is in my past. I see some of that, but that's not all I see.

I also look at it with a sickening sadness, a sense of loss, a surge of longingness, nostalgia. I know, logically, rationally, realistically, that it isn't the physique I crave. I know I don't miss the periods of brain fog, the midnight eczema flare-ups, the glaringly obvious stares, the not-so-soft whispers about how I look and act and what I eat or should eat or am not eating. I know I don't miss the fear of being discovered, "called-out," diagnosed.

I miss what could have been: the sister, daughter, student, and gymnast I might have become without food and body image plaguing my thoughts. At the same time, I have no way to say that this path would have been any better; it never happened, so there's no proof. The result is a midline—recognizing what happened without wishing for what could have been.

While I still mourn the loss of who I would be without this part of my past, I recognize that this wasn't a choice. I don't blame myself for latching onto the sense of comfort that this behavior gave me. I don't blame myself for thinking and feeling that I was at least doing something right, that I knew one way to cause change. I don't blame myself for retreating inward, to a place it felt like no one could reach me. Is this an example of how being in an environment that inherently judges appearance leaves its mark on you?

Chapter 6:

Feel No Fear

I dislocated my elbow almost exactly one year after the first time I wrote down everything I ate in a day in a little pocket-sized notebook. The dislocation was bad, but I was lucky. I needed to go to the hospital to have it reduced (popped back into place), but I didn't need surgery. I would be out of the gym for several months, but I would be able to return to the sport if the rehabilitation went as planned.

At the time of the injury, I was two weeks away from the biggest competition of the year. Coaches from colleges across the country attended Junior Olympic Nationals to watch for potential recruits, and the end of tenth grade was prime time for recruiting. Instead of visualizing routines, I was visualizing the easiest, most efficient way to wash my hair with one arm. Putting in my contacts, cooking eggs, and brushing my teeth were casual tasks that became multi-step ordeals.

Rehabilitation was multifaceted—there was the physical aspect of regaining strength, mobility, and range of motion, and there was the psychological aspect of staying motivated, optimistic, and committed to the rehab process. Not even three days after the dislocation, my dad handed me the book, *Coming Back Stronger: Unleashing the Hidden Power of Adversity* by Drew Brees; I clasped it with my right hand while my splinted left arm was propped up on a cloud of pillows. When I came across particularly hard-hitting sentences or paragraphs, I'd hold the book open with my forehead while clumsily opening my iPhone camera to capture the sentiment. I especially clung to the words, "I have faith to believe there was a reason for it," finding comfort in the idea that my injury,

like Brees's, which was a career-threatening shoulder injury, would serve a greater purpose for me (Brees xxi). Slowly, my eyes were being pried open to face the world of in-between, the gray area.

Similarly, the owner of my gym, Tony, gave me a workbook about coming back from an injury that was created by the United States Elite Association for Women's Gymnastics. The last page read: "Remember, do not focus on that which you cannot do, but instead, focus on that which you can do, and give it 110%. Good Luck." As simplistic or cheesy as this concept might sound, I clung to the concept of purpose. The idea that I had no control over some aspects of my life terrified me. The idea that there were healthy ways of channeling this fear became appealing.

"Slow and steady," Matt would say if I was too eager to try no-handed skills while my arm was still in what we affectionately called my "Gronk" brace. At the time, Rob Gronkowski, who was a tight end for the New England Patriots, sported a black elbow brace that vaguely resembled the one I wore. The Gronk reference helped to lighten the otherwise painful reality that my left arm was MIA. Echoing Matt's sentiment, Alli gave me a bracelet with the saying, "It's a marathon, not a sprint." Thanks to my supportive parents and coaches, I was both exposed to and encouraged to apply this mindset to my elbow recovery.

In parallel, my relationship with my body and with food also shifted. In many ways, I started changing my eating behavior because I had to; by April 2014, I had already reached several breaking points. During these breaking points, I would realize that the only way I thought I could survive was killing me. Those moments were fleeting,

but the more they occurred, and the more they lingered, the more courage I had to challenge destructive thoughts and behaviors.

One meal of not spitting half-chewed mouthfuls of food into a napkin eventually turned into willingly preparing myself a midmorning snack. One night of eating a square of chocolate after dinner eventually turned into asking for ice cream for dessert. The process was excruciatingly slow, even slower than it took me to relearn how to open the car door after dislocating my elbow, but there was movement.

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The subsequent competitive season, during my junior year of high school, was one of my most successful years as a level 10 gymnast. After I competed for the first time since recovering from my elbow injury, Alli texted me the following:

"So overly proud of u! What a joy it is to coach u! Such a relaxed and cool competitor u are! And with 2 brand new crazy hard skills and a new tumbling pass! Amazing!"

By no means did I knock it out of the ballpark at this competition; I fell on bars, and I landed a 34.525 all-around score, which was a point and a half lower than my previous season's average all-around score (36.00). Nonetheless, Alli's response reinforced the positive aspects of my performance: coming back from an injury, adding new skills to my routines, and remaining composed. I acknowledged the profound impact of this feedback loop, responding, "Thank you so much! I had a great time and I'm super

excited to keep working all these fun new and not so new skills! Very thankful to have such great coaches!"

Taking a step back, this is a clear-cut example of how the messages I received from my coaches directly impacted my mindset. Arthur W. Frank's "socio-narratology" theoretical framework (2010), which primarily suggests that narrative scripts shape lives, offers perspective on this phenomenon (Kuhlin et al.). For example, I placed my trust in Alli time and time again. She was by my side the moment I dislocated my elbow, the first time I stepped foot in the gym after the dislocation, the first time I swung on bars after months of rehab, and my first competition after dislocating my elbow. Thus, when she provided me with feedback, I integrated it. Similarly, when Matt reminded me that "We were in it for the long haul," I took this to heart, refusing to stay upset over silly, little mistakes and setbacks. Based on Frank's research, the narratives I heard from my coaches had the power to influence how I viewed myself.

The remainder of my season proved how powerful this influence can be: I scored career highs on vault (9.6), floor (9.5), and all-around (37.3), and I qualified for Junior Olympic Nationals after placing third in my age group at Regionals. The progression I showed in the gym helped me to jump back onto the recruiting train, too. I sent videos of my training and competitions via email, spoke to coaches over the phone, and squeezed in a few more college visits throughout the year.

Again, the long-haul approach paid off. I had been in the recruiting pool since the summer before sophomore year. A few weeks before the start of my senior year in high school, I was offered a spot on the Brown University Women's Gymnastics Team. The prospect of attending an Ivy League Institution as a Division I gymnast felt unreal.

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My senior year, I qualified for Level 10 Junior Olympic Nationals for the fourth consecutive time. Since I had already been accepted to Brown University, the biggest pressure I was facing at Nationals was not related to recruiting. Instead, I wanted to do my Junior Olympic gymnastics career justice.

My mom accompanied me to the competition in Fort Worth, Texas while my dad stayed at home to work and to watch my sister and our dogs. By my senior year in high school, Kate and I had almost completely reversed roles as younger and older sisters. Our childhood bickering morphed into surface level conversations and silence. I helped her with everyday tasks, like warming up a microwaveable dinner and tucking her into bed, and I barely spoke to her about my gymnastics, my high school courses, or even my upcoming move to college. While she was learning and relearning how to navigate the world right in front of her because of a developmental disorder, I was navigating a world ahead. The distance between us felt heavy.

Kate was the epitome of a gray area. Doctors continued to falter when asked for answers. Social workers, teachers, and psychiatrists continued to trip when asked to walk through their understanding of her condition. If there was no way to either fully understand or relieve my sister of the pain she was experiencing, then there had to be some sort of middle ground. Since consistency was paramount to my sister's continued well-being, it was necessary for my dad to stay at home with Kate while I went to Nationals. In place of his physical presence, he gave me the following note:

"I am sad that I can't join you and mom at Nationals in Texas. As you know, there are sacrifices that one has to make at times in order to accomplish a goal. Sometimes they are personal and other times they require dedication from others. I am required to fill a role this weekend that I would do over and over again, without a moment's hesitation, to support you. Please know I am with you in heart and soul...and...always will be!! Check your AP Biology class for the section on DNA if you need specifics. :)"

I carried this sentiment with me not only as I competed in my last Junior Olympic meet of my gymnastics career, but also as I moved 94.2 miles south to Providence, Rhode Island to continue my academic and athletic career at Brown.

Chapter 7:

Never Give Up

As it is for many, my move to college was filled with newness. Amidst all of the unfamiliarity, I hoped that gymnastics would continue to serve as my anchor. I knew that I would be joining a team of 12 women who had recently made (and survived) this life transition; additionally, I would be joined by four other first-years who were simultaneously making the transition. I wasn't alone.

On move-in day, my parents and I departed from little old Amherst at approximately 8:05 a.m. We arrived in Providence around 10 a.m. after a smooth trip south on route 128. Navigating the check-in process at my dorm, Morriss Hall, was a breeze, and we trekked up to the fourth floor to find a pleasant surprise on my door: a beautifully decorated index card with "Annie" written in block letters and "Brown Gymnastics" written in cursive. The placard was complete with layers of colored cardboard paper (black, red, and white) and small pearly beads as the frame. The name card was a warm welcome to an otherwise desolate, somewhat crummy dorm room.

This paper welcome was followed-up by an in-person visit to my dorm from a few of the upperclassmen who were already on campus. As my new teammates burst through my door with wide smiles and big hugs, I felt a weight lifted off my chest. There were already people here who knew and cared about me.

The support and guidance from my team also shone through a few days later during pre-registration. To me, this registration process felt like the first test of whether or not I would be able to "make it" at Brown (three and a half years later, and I realize

pre-registration means almost squat). The entire team gathered at the Ratty (the Sharpe Refectory Dining Hall) for a family-style group dinner before our first team meeting of the year, which was organized by our two captains. Since pre-registration for first-years was that night, the upperclassmen helped us wind our way through the clunky online registration process.

I pulled out my laptop and gingerly placed it on the sticky dining hall table. All of my courses were lined up in my cart, and I waited with bated breath for the clock to strike 7 p.m. so that I could secure my spots. I hit the "register" button, and the page crashed.

"Uhmm—" I started.

"Don't worry, that happens all the time; just keep reloading," one teammate piped up from behind me, glancing over my shoulder at the blank page.

I followed her advice, only to find the same error page again, and again, and again. Pretty soon, everyone was starting to walk over to the seniors' apartment for the meeting, including the other first-years who had mysteriously jumped over the failed registration hurdle. The same teammate who'd reassured me when the page had first failed told me I could also use my phone to try to register as we walked, sprinkling in "don't worries" every few words. I was concerned. She was not phased.

I asked whether I could keep trying to register throughout the meeting. The seniors nodded emphatically, so I broke out my laptop once we were all situated in a semi-circle in the living room of the seniors' the apartment. As the only one still trying to register for classes, I wasn't exactly fitting in, but at least I wasn't getting left in the dust.

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The following weeks saw my first time consistently doing my own laundry, sharing a bedroom, and wearing shower shoes. Unlike others, it was also my first time sitting in a classroom in a decade. While others felt overwhelmed by the wave of independence college brought, I was more struck by the rigidity.

A similar paradox of unfamiliarity followed me to practice. For the first time in several years, I was surrounded by gymnasts who mirrored and exceeded my skill level, which was a beautiful change of pace. Gymnastics is an inherently independent sport; we have one chance to prove ourselves. In college, the sport prioritizes team scores over individual scores, which shifts the dynamic from the individual to the collective. The chance to compete on a team was one of the biggest draws to college gymnastics. Although these positives were appealing, the gym no longer felt familiar; there were new standards, dynamics, and expectations.

A typical day during preseason, which was the entirety of the fall semester, started at 6:30 a.m. In record time, I would pull on the T-shirt and leggings that I had laid out the night before, brush my teeth, and sweep my hair into a ponytail. The walk from my dorm to the lift room took approximately seven minutes. After 45 minutes to an hour of lifting, the entire team would shuffle to the Verney-Woolley (VDub) Dining Hall for breakfast. The middle of my day consisted of homework, class, lunch, more class, and more homework. By 2:15 p.m., I would make my way back to the athletic complex, taking time before practice to visit the training room for rehabilitation exercises.

Practice lasted from 3:15 p.m. to 6:15 p.m., give or take. After practice, it was back to the training room for either the ice bath or to roll out sore muscles, and then back

to the VDub for dinner before a quick shower and more studying. Rinse and repeat (plus an hour-long spin class post-practice on Monday, and an extra hour or so of practice with the team at a gymnastics facility 20 minutes off campus on Fridays since Brown does not have a foam pit into which gymnasts can practice their more difficult skills). Gymnastics was a full-time job, as it always had been, except that it had never previously felt like a job.

Because of the demanding schedule, it was difficult to meet up with friends who weren't on the team. I was quickly dubbed "Grandma" by my hallmates, who lightheartedly teased me about my strict adherence to an early bedtime. Moreover, since we were expected to be cohesive as a team, and since many teammates chose to spend their free time hanging with each other, there was an unspoken agreement that bonding happened both during and outside of practice. Since athletes at Brown aren't separated into different living, eating, or study areas, I hoped that it would be possible to integrate more fully into the student body, and vice versa. Instead, it was all too easy to remain in the "athlete bubble" due to these internal and external social pressures. It was alienating and overwhelming.

At first, I told myself that I just needed to ride it out, a narrative that closely resembled the "grind" mentality that seemed to be spreading around campus. It seemed like every moment of every day was supposed to be "productive." Meanwhile, my legs were so sore that climbing the four flights of stairs up to my dorm room felt like a workout in and of itself. Upperclassmen on the team would reassure us that the pain of preseason would pay off during the competition season. As an exhausted, reserved first-year, most of my responses came in the form of subtle nods and soft smiles.

Moreover, as a private person, I was already acutely aware of the lack of solitude that first-years in college experience. I quickly learned that this communal aspect feels infinitely more invasive when it comes to crying. By mid-November, the top landing of the fourth floor in Morriss Hall, Blue State Coffee on Thayer Street, and the walkway outside of the entrance to the Pizzitola Sports Center all witnessed my tears.

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When I first came to Atlantic, there was a bulletin board near the vault runway with pictures, sayings, memorabilia, and a note that said, “This is a No Judgment Zone.” Even as a nine-year-old, the irony wasn’t lost on me. Gymnastics itself *is* inherently judgmental. How else would (im)perfection be measured?

There are manuals. There is a code of points. There is a national committee. There are rules, regulations, checks, balances, the whole nine yards. But does any of that matter when the interpretations end up being in the eye of the beholder?

Other sports rely on (mostly) objective measures—times measured by stopwatches, goals scored, bases run, and so on and so forth. But when it comes to gymnastics, there is sometimes no apparent rhyme or reason why one person receives first place and another fourth place.

Perhaps one gymnast smiled a bit bigger, or a bit longer, or a bit less in her floor routine. Perhaps the gymnast with more wobbles on beam did a better job covering them up with sassy choreography than did the gymnast with a more simplistic dance style. Or,

perhaps the judge was hungry during one gymnast's routine and had a cup of coffee before judging another gymnast's routine.

Order matters, too. Going first in the beginning of the competition, or even in the beginning of a rotation, is a disadvantage because judges typically score lower at first. They have to "set the bar."

My first year as a Division I gymnast opened my eyes to the amplified nature of subjectivity in college gymnastics. Coaches arranged lineups based on minute differences on which judges supposedly base their scores. The logic is that it is best to start with a solid, consistent competitor who will score high, but not the highest in the lineup. The next two or so competitors are slightly more up in the air—they might be less consistent or not score quite as high as the first. Since judges build on scores, the gymnast will score higher in this position than lineup than if they go first. Then, the caliber increases until the "best" gymnast goes last, where her score is inflated the most.

In a way, creating lineups is an art. Coaches who understand their gymnasts well are more likely to arrange a high-scoring lineup. Since gymnasts get injured, face mental blocks, and peak at different times, lineups can change from week to week, and it is important that coaches are tuned in to their gymnasts enough to recognize these patterns. As much as I tried to stave off line-up drama during my first year, I was inevitably caught up in at least one conversation about line-ups each week.

Appearance is another wildly subjective aspect of gymnastics. The sport is riddled with rules regarding how gymnasts present themselves, some of which have clear connections to the safety of athletes. Hair needs to be secure so that it doesn't impair

vision, and leotards need to be worn so that clothing isn't caught on equipment or doesn't impede a coach's ability to spot.

Other rules call into question just how controlling the sport is over appearance. In the Junior Olympic program, we weren't allowed to wear nail polish during competitions due to its "distracting" nature. I found this rule to be both kind of affirming and kind of confining. My nails were scratched from and kept short for practice, and I'd had no desire to make them look "prettier" for competition. On the other hand, nail polish is such a simple, yet empowering means of self-expression.

In college, rules and expectations surrounding nail polish, makeup, and demeanor changed. We were not only allowed to wear nail polish, but we were encouraged to do so. Wearing makeup and face tattoos was universal during competitions. Gymnastics shifts from prim and proper in Junior Olympic to borderline showy in college.

I had the utmost respect for those who had the time, energy, interest, and talent to do makeup, but I wasn't one of them. Seeing as gymnastics is an intensely physical sport, and I ended every practice coated in sweat and chalk and sporting a rat's nest hairstyle, I thought my lack of interest wouldn't matter.

Apparently, it did. It was a few hours before my first DI gymnastics competition in January 2017, and I was only armed with a hodgepodge of (mostly free) makeup I'd collected over a couple of years. Coincidentally, my mascara was from a kit that was given to me as a spectator of an elite competition. I guess they were prepping me.

"Guys, I don't really know how to do makeup," I started. After hesitating, I edited my original statement: "Actually, I really don't know how to do makeup."

"Oh, it's okay; I barely do," a fellow freshman said while pulling out what looked to me to be a heaping sack of powders and potions.

"Don't worry, I used to *never* wear makeup," another teammate, who was already halfway through exfoliating her face, chimed in.

I glanced between the two of them before taking in my inventory: I had mascara, some sparkly liquid stuff, an unused squishy beauty blender, and a little tube of concealer. I looked back up, and I think I saw my teammate who was exfoliating die a little on the inside while watching me juggle this meager collection.

"Hey, want me to do your makeup for ya?" she inquired generously.

"Oooh, yeah, please." I welcomed her offer, reassuring myself that even though I wouldn't normally wear much makeup, I was competing for the team, anyway. The line between catering to the performance side of the sport and staying true to myself as an athlete was getting blurred.

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Despite what I had heard about competition season from upperclassmen during preseason, it was not "worth it." Season, which began in mid-January and lasted until mid-April, blended together with the preseason. Although I was consistently contributing to line-ups on vault, beam, and floor, I felt increasingly less fulfilled as the weeks passed. After each competition, it felt like we were reprimanded for our mistakes, instead of instructed on how to improve. The emphasis on winning was overshadowing any gymnast's personal growth, including my own.

In between classes, before practice, and while lying in bed at night, I scoured the internet for evidence that this whole not-liking-college-athletics was allowed, for reassurance that I wasn't the only one. I wanted someone else to divulge their Division I gymnastics experience without sugar-coating their misery, without displacing their guilt, without ignoring the very real and very present external pressures to perform well.

I used an incognito window and dimmed my screen during these searches. I imagined the information spreading from my fingertips to my coach without my consent, as if my Google search bar was an email template and the enter key would send the text blurb straight to her in-box. Or, I imagined some random passerby glancing over my shoulder, as most nosy college students are prone to do, deciphering the search results, and informing the university of my potential betrayal. Thus, the incognito browser and dimmed screen-light were my safety blankets from reality.

The searches started rather innocently: "leaving your sport." Sometimes I'd submit the search, watch the result load, and then exit the tab, finding comfort in the sole fact that articles popped up, but not courageous enough to see what they said. Eventually, I had worked up the guts to search "when to stop athletics in college" and "should I quit DI gymnastics," as if there was a BuzzFeed quiz built for my particular life experience.

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Quit is a harsh word. It's sharp, unforgiving, and lasting. I've never been a fan of it, not that I know anyone who is. Before each gymnastics meet, while learning a new skill, after a particularly tough workout, I'd imagine my dad, with a tone of pure

determination, his face scrunching up with passion, a marked nod for emphasis, declaring "never give up."

By the end of my first competition season, however, I forced myself to reconsider my conceptualization of "quit." My naive google searches from way back in November became increasingly more explicit, and I began to talk to my close friends and my parents about stopping. I wrote the following thoughts before meeting with my coaches for our end-of-the-year check-in.

"April 24, 2017:

1. Don't know if I want to do it again next year
2. Lost joy in doing it
3. Restricted me from doing other things

The lack of fulfillment and satisfaction has pushed me to seriously consider why I am doing this and whether I should continue to do it. I used to find so much value and joy in practice, and it was fun to compete; now, for the first time, I've dreaded going to practice and felt anxious/lackluster about competitions. I love watching my teammates compete and I want the best for them, yet I have found it extremely difficult to find the fulfillment in competing when so much value is placed on winning rather than doing our best and having fun.

Also, I am used to a much more hands-on coaching style. I realize I have learned and grown in my independence this year, but that transition has also been challenging. While it has been great to have so many teammates to look up to during training, I have

also struggled with fitting in with the team dynamic this year. For being such a no drama type of person, the drama this year has sorta been out of hand in my opinion.

My plans for this summer are vague. I want to give myself some space to see how I feel toward the sport after stepping away from this environment where school and gymnastics were pretty tied up together in one big stressful knot. I will stay in shape one way or another" (this last sentence was a subtle, subconscious response to the assistant coach's remark that I "better stay in shape over the summer").

As much as I tried to explain my dissatisfaction, there were no words to describe the ugly realization that the sport had morphed from something so pure to something so rotten. Three months later, I entered the following excerpt into my notes:

"July 15, 2017,

Choosing to participate in an activity that I find fake and that is negatively impacting the way I live is the opposite of being authentic. And it certainly isn't fearless—it is cowardly. I'm 19 and I shouldn't feel tied to an activity that is becoming such a bad influence on me."

Even with all of the evidence of my dissatisfaction—and the fact that two of my classmates had decided to leave the team after our first year—I returned to the team for my sophomore year. "Just one more," I thought to myself when I returned to campus for my sophomore year, when I faced the grueling preseason workouts, and when I faced

another seemingly endless stream of competitions come mid-January 2018. Just one more.

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In mid-February 2018, the Brown University Women's Gymnastics Team flew to Maryland to compete at the University of Maryland with Rutgers and William & Mary. My fan base in the stands included my mom, my cousin, and his wife. My mom flew down to watch the competition and to visit my cousin and his wife. Both of them had graduated from the University of Maryland a handful of years before and were still living in the general vicinity. The three of them were mere blips in the stands above the sunken arena.

Despite having competed 18 times as a college gymnast, I felt a bit star-struck in the Xfinity Center at the University of Maryland. This was a proper arena, with raised seating that encircled the competition floor. The fluorescent lights were dimmed over the stands, adding a dramatic tone to the arena, and the scoreboard was a giant flashing boxed mass looming over the arena. At Brown, we had stands that pulled out from the wall, an even distribution of lighting, and scoreboards that hung flat against the walls of the auditorium. We clearly weren't in Providence anymore.

All of the teams competing that day were Division I, but there was a distinct difference between the caliber of the Brown gymnastics team and the Maryland gymnastics team. For perspective, Brown averaged a 191.87 team all-around score while Maryland averaged a 195.41 team all-around score during the 2018 competitive season.

Similarly, Rutgers averaged a 193.04, and William & Mary averaged a 193.21 during the 2018 season. Objectively, Brown was at the bottom of the pack.

I don't know why, but we wore our all-red competition leotards that day. The captains were generally in charge of choosing which of our competition leotards we wore during specific competitions. For example, we wore our black and pink leotards during the Breast Cancer Awareness meet, and we wore our newest leotards during the Eastern College Athletic Conference championships, ECACs. Today, we wore a leotard that just so happened to match the bright red carpet of the University of Maryland's floor exercise.

Maryland's school color is red, after all. Were we challenging them? Absolutely not. (See above regarding the team averages). In any case, the leotards were outdated, and I practically blended in with the carpet during one of the best floor routines of my gymnastics career. Not only that, but I went first, and the person responsible for video recording missed my routine, so I didn't even get to relive the glory during our post-meet film review.

After the competition, most of us took rushed showers in the guest locker room; we had already checked out of our hotel that morning due to the timing of our flight back to Providence. Shampoo and conditioner bottles were tossed to various shower stations while we scrambled to dissolve the gel and hairspray from our hair. This post-meet process was frenzied to say the least, but we managed to return our rental vans and lug ourselves through security with plenty of time to spare before our flight boarded.

At the airport, we watched film by crouching around the clustered seating area at our gate. As if competing under two hours before wasn't enough, we were immediately reminded of missteps and barely congratulated on successes. As soon as the "screening"

ended, I made a beeline away from the Brown Gym gaggle and straight to my mom's gate, which was several corridors away. I needed some space and a mom hug.

"I'm not doing this again next year" I blurted out moments after melting into my mom's outstretched arms. Although I had brought up the idea of stopping numerous times with her, this was the first time that I said it while *knowing* that it was true. I had begun the conversation by saying that another one of my classmates had divulged that she was no longer going to compete on the team. That meant that my class only had two active members. Our retention rate was plummeting each year, and I felt both guilty and validated by knowing I would be contributing to it when I quit. I blinked away tears and practiced smiling while walking back to the team. Even though I knew my decision, I owed it to my teammates to put my all into the rest of the season.

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Coincidentally, Texas marked the end of a significant aspect of my gymnastics career not once but twice. The first was competing in my last Junior Olympic gymnastics competition, and the second was competing in my last college gymnastics competition.

On many levels, the journey to my endpoint the second time around did not go as planned: for one, our plane to Texas was delayed, and, secondly, I never expected to find myself in the position where I actively wanted to walk away from the sport.

Per usual, the team was sprinkled throughout the gate area waiting to board the plane when an amiable flight attendant informed us "not to worry," but that JetBlue flight #1115 to Dallas/Fort Worth was "slightly delayed" due to "technological difficulties." It

took me a great deal of willpower to keep from bolting out of the Boston Logan International Airport and running all of the way back to campus at Brown. I am not a fan of flying, and I am not a fan of endings. Escaping from the airport sounded appealing, especially since I knew I was heading to the last competition of my gymnastics career.

Due to the delays, instead of arriving at 5:20 p.m., we taxied up to the jetway at the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport at 8:34 p.m. Our late arrival meant we were no longer able to follow through with our original dinner plans (we were required to fill out our meal orders in advance so that the whole eating-out with 20 people fiasco was *less* chaotic). Thus, I have no comprehensive review of my previously planned order, which had been for the "Mama's Tacos" from Mi Cocina. Instead, I settled for a subpar salad from the nondescript restaurant our coach chose. The restaurant offered us complimentary chocolate chip cookies. I passed on the offer. Old habits die hard, especially in environments that would build those habits from scratch anyway.

At long last, we arrived at the Embassy Suites in Denton, Texas. The lobby was extravagant—"Texas big," according to my dad, who was there with my mom to greet me as I walked through the automatic doors. I waddled over to them with my blue roller suitcase in one hand and my overstuffed, gray backpack sticking behind me like a turtle shell. After hugs and kisses from both of them, I heard our head coach announce our roommate assignments.

As my teammate and I unlocked our door, my jaw dropped. Our room was equipped with separate living and sleeping areas, one wall of floor-to-ceiling glass windows, and, last but certainly not least, Bluetooth speakers built into the bathroom

mirror. I was wowed. The student-athlete life was never this luxurious. At school, our team shared a cramped, outdated locker room with two other sports teams.

Aside from the many jam sessions we held with the Bluetooth mirrors, the day or two lead-up to Nationals was a blur. There was a practice session, sightseeing, and, of course, the Nationals Banquet, which mainly consisted of recognition of the seniors, student-athlete awards, and a buffet dinner.

When I attended Junior Olympic Nationals as a senior in high school, I opted out of the banquet, but in college gymnastics, I was required to go. I sat at a table surrounded by my teammates, who frequently glanced at their phones to either check or post on social media. As a joke, someone took a Snapchat of me staring into space. Yes, the bar for entertainment was this low.

Several hours later, we were released from banquet duty, and I needed fresh air. I returned to the room to strip off my dress, slide into my sweats, and then sneak back down to the lobby level, where I narrowly avoided coaches and parents still lingering near the elevators.

I swung open the glass door leading to the outdoor pool area. The sky burned with yellows, oranges, reds, purples, and blues. The boundless Texan land allowed the colors to stretch out in all directions from the horizon. The sweet, warm air filled my lungs so much that I felt like I could become a part of the breathtaking array. Pre-2016 Nationals, I entered this quote from *The Great Gatsby* into a journal entry: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.” As I stared at the fading, intertwining, robust display of hues across the sky, the Gatsby quote resonated with me again.

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A few weeks after we returned to campus from Texas, I called my parents individually to discuss my upcoming meeting with the coaches. It was time for another end-of-the-year check-in, and, once again, I was staring down the decision to quit.

I sat on concrete steps to some building on some street halfway down College Hill. I was 20 years old, but the same squirming that had led to my inability to sit through dinner as a child now made my knee bounce up and down while I talked on the phone. First, I had a validating call with my mom, during which she affirmed, "It sounds like you know what's best for you, hun. Trust yourself." I then expressed to my dad that I wanted to quit, that I was sure I needed to. My dad's voice reverberated through the phone, catching briefly. "I just want you to be happy, love," he said.

Tears streamed down my blotchy, beet-red face—the same face that had stood looking through the plexiglass into the gym nearly 18 years before. I had made it to the other side of the glass. I had made it to TOPs testing in Texas. I had made it to level 10. I had made it to Division I. And now I wanted nothing more than to make it out.

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A few months later, I sent the following in an email to my coach:

"I am deeply appreciative of the extra energy you put into helping me find a balance between gymnastics and other activities this past year. My decision to leave the team is not due to a difficulty in juggling my commitments, but rather in interest of supporting my health and happiness as a student at Brown.

I will always be grateful for having the opportunity to compete in DI gymnastics at a school as wonderful as Brown. Thank you for the opportunities you have given me and for the invaluable lessons you have taught me over these past two seasons."

I needed to experience the in-between, the gray area.

Epilogue

Since retiring from gymnastics, I've continued to search for ways to incorporate my favorite aspects of gymnastics into my life. I traded in my grips for climbing shoes while keeping the side of chalk. Tugging on my shoes and lacing them up feels vaguely similar to slipping on my wrist bands and strapping the leather around my wrists, and I enter the familiar "flow state" while climbing. Even still, I've been searching for closure ever since I hung up my leotard for the last time. I could have watched the four-minute video of my last competition, as I have done for every competition since I was six years old, to help close this chapter of my life. Instead, I dedicated countless hours to writing this thesis. Maybe this thesis encapsulates what it means to be a gymnast, for the beauty of gymnastics is also its demise: the pursuit of perfection. My gymnastics mantra of "Just One More" both broke and built me. It pushed me to come back from a potentially career-ending injury. It also pushed me to lose an unhealthy amount of weight. At the end of the day, the idea of "Just One More" pushed me to places that I never imagined I would be, like writing the last sentence of my thesis at an Ivy League Institution.

Acknowledgements

To the Department of English at Brown University: thank you for providing me with a space for my voice to be heard.

To Professor Catherine Imbriglio, Professor Jonathan Readey, and Professor Michael Stewart: thank you for your continuous encouragement, feedback, and support. It has been an honor to both work with and learn from you.

To my fellow Honors candidates: thank you for your vulnerability, curiosity, and courage, which pushed me to grow in ways I have only begun to recognize. Being surrounded by ambitious, creative people is humbling and motivating.

To my friends: thank you for navigating the fine line between asking me about my thesis either too much or too little with acuity and compassion. Whether I answered with a long rant or a short quip, knowing that you were invested meant more to me than words can express.

To Alli, Cori, Matt, and Tony: thank you for going above and beyond as coaches to help me reach my goals and then proving to me that I am capable of even more. I am endlessly grateful for your belief in me as both an athlete and a person.

To my parents: thank you for your constant support, selfless sacrifices, and unconditional love. These words are only a miniscule tribute to everything you have done for me. I love you to infinity!

To my sister, Kate: thank you for introducing me to a myriad of worlds and perspectives. As your younger sister, I quite literally would not be here without you. As someone who looks up to your resilience and heart of gold, I would not be either where I am or who I am without you.

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