

## Jessica's Story: A Battle with the Twisted Lie of the Perfect Body

CW: eating disorders, suicide, body dysmorphia, beauty standards, body image

My sister paved the way before me. At 17, she showed my family the effects of a society, 12 years before today, that fed young girls the unmatched standards of a perfect body. While her body was already perfect, regardless of its shape, Jessica was small; she had an hourglass figure—a body many older women would spend months dieting and working out for. Before her battle with the twisted lie of society, she was already underweight, but this was just the beginning.

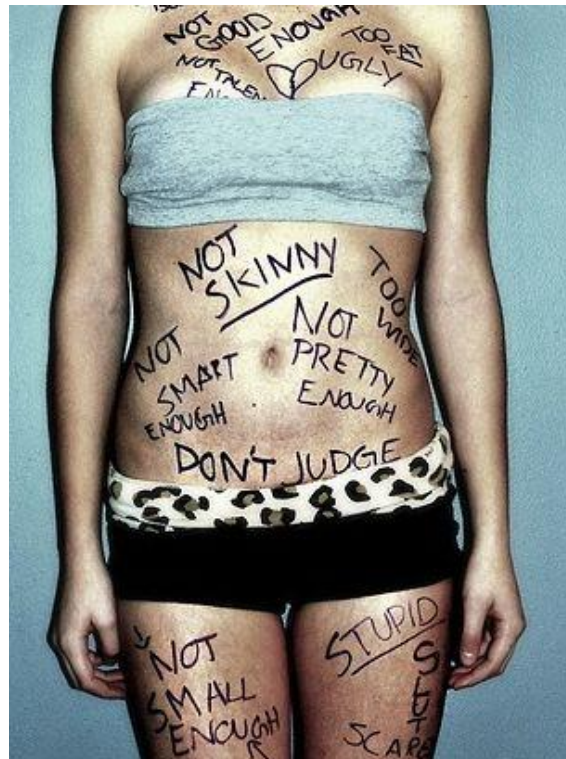
It was 2005. A time before Instagram and Snapchat, but there was a different form of media my sister was consumed by. Magazine and TV ads selling bras and underwear modeled women with waists small enough to hide behind a sheet of paper, held up by perfectly tanned legs that otherwise would be too fragile to support any larger of a body. Almost ironically, their breasts were the only fat they had—mismatching their visible clavicle bones framing them. The bones were begging to take up space, as if reminding us that women are meant to take up space. But only some of us are lucky enough to see this reality.



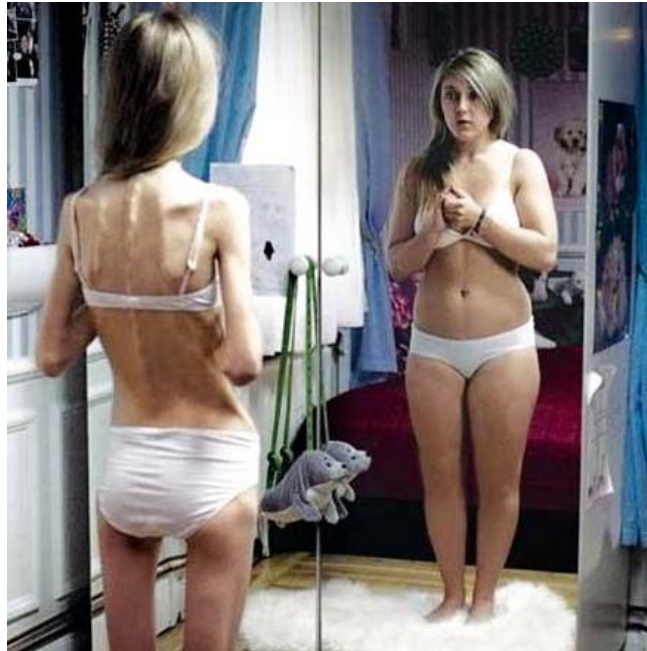
Although these models represented a body type only achievable by the minority, in my sister's young mind, ads like this set the standard of the perfect body—the definition of beauty. “A body for every body”—the only body. My sister fell victim to this lie.

Fad diets and a passion for fitness, hid her attempt to achieve the ideal body at first. With every long run, my parents just thought she was practicing for the next cross-country season. When she stopped eating meat, they believed her argument of new-found activism. But her drive to achieve the body was far too strong; her self-control was unlike any other—she had it in her to meet her goals. But my parents hadn't realized this yet.

With every look in the mirror, every check of her progress, she saw a different person looking back at her. Her fragile body accepted the lie of her reflection and absorbed it as fuel to push her harder, to limit herself more.



With everything in her, she wanted her own body, every cell of fat, to disappear. Every curve on her body, told her she was not beautiful; she wasn't like the girls in the magazine. She began to hate her own existence, the body that gave her life.



She paired these routine check-ups with the harsh feedback of the scale.

120

*It's time for a change.*

118

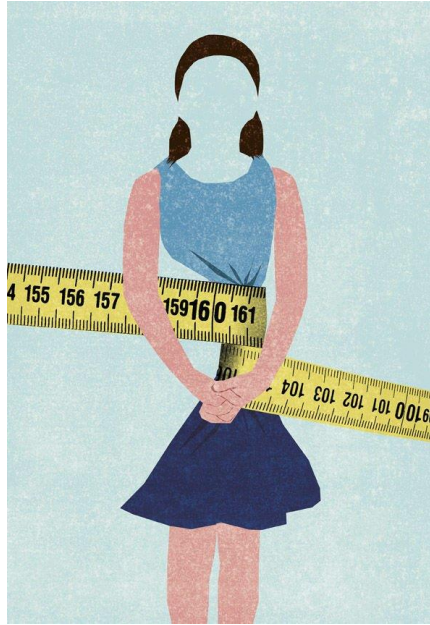
*Push harder. 4 more miles tomorrow.*

112

*Not enough.*

101

*Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels. Keep trying.*



She only made it so far before my parent's concern grew too strong. She couldn't trick them with an active lifestyle anymore. She was pushing herself too hard with her running—they said this as she iced another leg injury. This new diet was making her weaker—they said this as her waist got smaller and smaller. Her cheeks were sunken in, and her chest began to show every bone, begging to take up space. Her body was urging her to stop, but her brain was set on getting the perfect body.

They caught her just in time before she met her goal of fading out of existence.

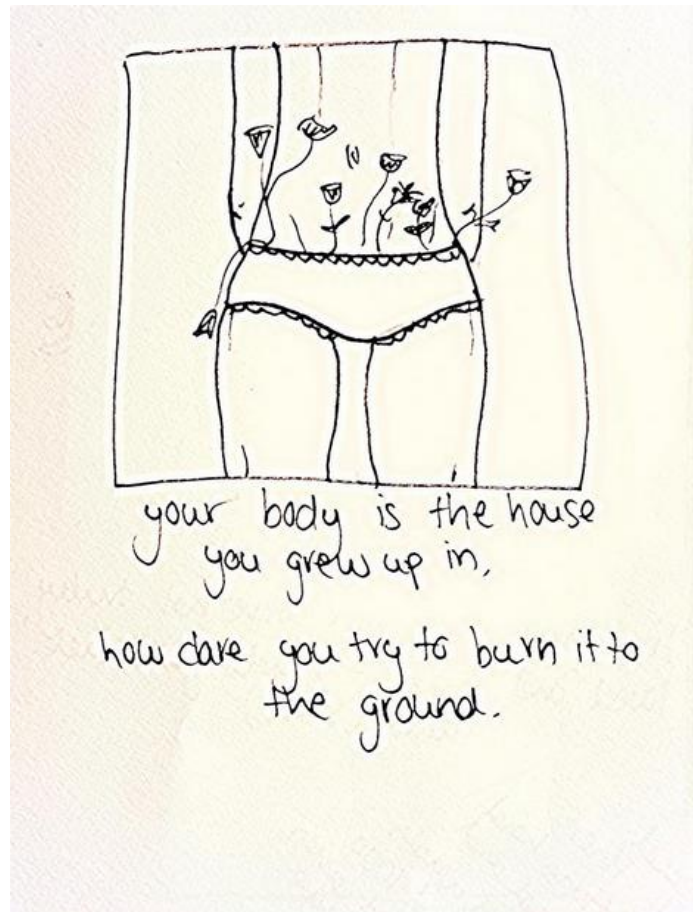
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With time, she traded her counting of calories for counting hours in a hospital room, curing the effects of a twisted society with isolation. By starving herself of the lies she had been fed about the sick standards of beauty, she was able to find room for the food she so desperately needed. The hospital room became her protection from the lies of society. The hours of arts and crafts replaced her long runs. The counseling was the antidote for the poison that had filled her brain with the lies of the perfect body.





With time, she recovered—she found love for her own body. She found beauty in the body she had once wanted so badly to destroy, to disappear. She learned that it was okay to take up space.



Jessica is not alone in these struggles, yet her story was hidden away, kept secret from the world. As if reminding her that she is an outlier, and that her difference is yet again a problem—her own fault. Far too many girls face a similar story, hiding it away, as they too accept the lies of our society as fact. Worse, some of these girls don't get the help and saving they need, they achieve their goal, only gaining the attention they need when it's already too late—after they fade out of existence.

As time has passed though, our society has become more active at snuffing out the burn of these lies by showing the acceptance of every body through the beauty of our differences.



But there is still be work to be done. “Loving your body” is the simple fix that society offers, but there is a bigger problem at hand. Our society has become seemingly more accepting of the curves of women’s bodies, but it only exchanged this with new standards to be met. Today’s “skinny”, is the perfect hourglass figure with an abnormally large butt paired with a non-existent waist. Woman’s body standards have been turned into the object of sex-appeal. Trading one set of unrealistic standards for the next in the attempt to please an audience, who hasn’t faced the harsh reality of beauty standards. These standards yet again feed young minds unrealistic definitions of beauty.



Growing up in the aftermath of my sister's story, my eyes have been opened to this evil, and I have learned how important it is to disregard the ideals women are constantly being fed by society. Although I was too young to understand this as my sister faced this battle, I began to see this truth as I got older and faced a new set of standards. In the age of social media, the ads with perfectly toned celebrities repping magical drinks for a "flat tummy" and workout plans that guarantee a "tiny waist and round butt" or to "lose the muffin top" are almost inescapable. Workout videos market body types over strength or health, telling girls this is a healthy way to approach fitness. In 2020, fitness culture has become just another way for society to feed young girls toxic beauty standards.

Over a decade since Jessica's recovery, this societal problem has only shifted forms, and girls continue to face this in hiding. While her survival and growth through her sickness serves as a reminder for me that there is hope, its secrecy is a reminder that society tells girls they have to change to be beautiful but hide the struggles and shame of their disorder when they've gone too far. A truly sickening reality.

The only way to fight these standards is to instill in young girls that external beauty does not warrant our place in society. The number of a jean size or the shape of a body should not change one's self worth. We live in a society that tells women that we need to hide our bodies, or whittle them away, or refuse to take up space—that our body is the problem. This is the twisted lie of society, but truly, I tell you, society, itself, is the problem. As women living in a twisted society we must do everything we can to protect each other from the negative side effects of the lies we face. Our bodies are not the problem.

