

## **Under my skin: eating disorder and daughterhood scars**

*My mum and I sat down among the fresh spring wildflowers to talk about motherhood, fatphobia, and forgiveness*

Words: Flor Nieuwenhuys

It's the summer holidays, and the temperatures are scorching. Children begged their parents to fight the windless heat in the water park's over-chlorinated swimming pools, 8-year-old me included. Kids' acute screams and loud water splashes can be heard from the outside. My bikini has decorative seashells in a five-petal-flower shape. Still, despite my excitement to show it off to my friends, I can only think about sucking my belly in and running to hide in the water as quickly as possible — before someone calls me the 'chubby girl.' As far as I can remember, my thick legs and rounded body have stimulated my parents' discussions and relatives' weight-based teasing. Hence my constant body dissatisfaction and dedication to change it at all costs at such a young age — even if it meant waking up at the crack of dawn to bike. Or craving my siblings' burgers but having orange juice instead. My mum would always congratulate me on my efforts, saying I already 'looked prettier and slimmer.'

Whether it is compliments or criticism, that kind of attention to body shape can leave strong impressions and insecurities behind. Research by the American Academy of Pediatrics shows that family attitudes and critical comments on weight can be linked to mental health issues and eating disorders (EDs). Furthermore, women are disproportionately affected: approximately 90% of the UK's hospital admissions from 2012 to 2013 for EDs were females, the eating disorders charity BEAT estimates. Several studies analysed how a mother's unhealthy relationship with food can impact her children, particularly daughters. When it comes to parental influence on body image, the mother-daughter relationship is at the same time delicate and dangerous for risk-

triggering harmful body attitudes. One study followed sixth-grade girls and found that a mother's dieting and weight concerns influenced a daughter's struggles with body dissatisfaction. EDs can prosper through unhealed cycles of body shaming that travel from mother to daughter, feeding this bond with frustration and resentment instead of love and acceptance.

### **Unrequested comments, everlasting impacts**

A long time has passed since that afternoon in the water park, and instead of childish noises, the room is engulfed in one of the most promising hits for 2022's Brazilian carnival: *No Chão Novinha* (Portuguese for 'on the floor, young girl'). As the ass-shaking lyrics take over the nightclub, my friend Ingrid Barros, 23, is on her way to a third *caipirinha* (Brazil's lime and sugar cane alcohol signature cocktail). She dances as if nothing else mattered. I had never seen her so breezy and lively. It is the first time we meet after her bariatric surgery (an operation on the stomach and/or intestines done to help patients with severe obesity to lose weight) - in which she lost 40kgs in 2020, alongside disciplined dieting and physical activity. "[Bariatric surgery] was the only option to the overriding problem in my life, which was always very exalted, punctuated, and enforced: I was fat," she opens up to me when I ask her why she went through such a drastic procedure. It all began when Ingrid was 5 years old: Her mother took her to a specialist so she could start her very first diet. The dietitian warned primary-school Ingrid that she would need to lose weight if she ever wanted to have a boyfriend. "That's when she looked at my face and said, 'girl you are so beautiful, why don't you lose weight?' And I have never forgotten that day, that sentence, that moment," she says.

Food restriction and weight-related bullying became Ingrid's mom's tools to prevent her daughter from such a lonely future. One sugary-filled biscuit a month, and a soda once a weekend was the only cheat day allowance Ingrid could crave for. That's the beginning of countless failed diet attempts that reigned her life until her early twenties.

And, little by little, body image negativity builds up from the cumulative effect of experiences lived in those early days. Not only did Ingrid develop obsessive compulsive disorder with a focus on binge-eating (described as eating large portions of food until you feel uncomfortably full), but who could imagine that all the preoccupation with dieting and weight would take such a toll on Ingrid's relationship with her mom?

"I avoided looking at myself in the mirror. I even went so far as to avoid leaving the house. My weight really limited how I lived my whole life. And these comments, as surprising as it may seem, last until today: I have changed, my body has changed, but my family remains the same," says Ingrid letting out a deep sigh. According to the American Psychological Association's study on *Maternal influences on daughters' restrained eating behavior* mothers who encourage their daughters to lose weight put them at risk for bulimia and other eating disorders. The American Academy of Pediatrics explains that diet is a major trigger for the development of EDs.

### **Disneyland versus Army base camp**

The portrait of a relaxed and fun father versus an uptight and 24/7-preoccupied mother: Typical, yet daunting cliché. Something familiar to many of us, if not in real life, at least in the media's display of parenting. The series *This Is Us* highlights these differences: when dealing with their daughter's overweight issue as a kid, the Pearsons were not on the same page. The same was true for Kate's (Chrissy Metz) feelings for her parents. While Kate loved Jack's (Milo Ventimiglia) easygoingness about her appearance and perceived him as a hero and perfect loving dad, she grew furious at her mother's, Rebecca (Mandy Moore), negative comments about food as it related to her weight. After years of food restriction imposed by her mom, teen and adult Kate developed an unhealthy relationship with her body based on binge-eating, self-deprecation, and shame. Being singled out by low-calorie eating while her brothers had junk food did not help either. During an explosive fight in season two episode two, Kate bursts at Rebecca: "You still

make me feel like a stupid, fat little kid”. What follows is Kate telling how she never felt good enough for her mother’s standards.

For some, being in a single-parent family makes the difference even more apparent. Lea Wollmann compares how her “dad was Disneyland and mum was an army base camp” when it came to eating attitudes. Grocery shopping illustrates this quite well: while going out with her dad felt like a “hype” because she could put anything she wanted in the shopping cart, with her mum was more like ‘Isn’t good for you? Then no!’ kind of approach. “He just wanted us to have a good time,” Lea explains that her dad wasn’t very present, so playing the role of the fun parent suited him. Meanwhile, Lea’s mother took the burdens of solo parenting, and, like many women, she knew how judgmental society was about the female body. Therefore, acting as an “army base camp” became necessary to ensure that her daughter fitted beauty standards. “I was always compensating for my dad not being there, and she was always compensating for him not being there,” the 23-year-old PR consultant acknowledges that her mother felt guilty for Lea finding comfort in food to fill the gaps in their lives. “Moreover, we learn that it is the mother who is held accountable for her children's health, the clothes they wear, their behaviour at school, their intelligence and general development...she and no one else bears the guilt in the eyes of society,” claims Judith Pildes, Women’s Studies writer and academic, on her journal article Mothers and Daughters: Understanding the Roles.

For Katy Rodwell, who dealt with Anorexia Nervosa (AN) for over a decade (an eating and mental disorder characterized by trying to control your weight by not eating enough food, exercising too much, or doing both), being more of “mummy's girl”, in terms of food and role model, was probably one of the main reasons why she developed an eating disorder and her twin sister didn’t — who’s a “daddy’s girl” in Katy’s words. “In our childhood growing up, she [mother] would do things like skip meals, be quite regimented with exercise, make comments about her body like she ‘always had to be a size six, always had to be the smallest size’”. In

contrast, their father wouldn't restrict at all. He encouraged them to fuel up with food and be active, the 24-year-old yoga instructor smiles drawing back from childhood memories. She emphasizes that: "He would never make any unhelpful comments or comment on our body or food or anything".

## **Unbroken cycles**

What Katy didn't know was that her mother was also with an eating disorder for 10 years. During Katy's second hospitalization for AN, her mother disclosed to the doctors her history of bulimia that started in her adolescence. A mixture of shock, anger, and confusion followed right after the revelation. "Why didn't you tell me that?" was the only thing Katy could think of. After a deserved mother-daughter's Q&A session, "everything kind of made sense in my head. I was like, well, this is why she's had such bad eating behaviours throughout our childhood." Although no isolated cause of EDs can be pointed out as decisive, genetic studies confirm the hereditary character of AN, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder. The chances of a child to develop an ED increase if their parents and relatives already had one, as explained in the *Psychiatric Clinic: The major psychiatric syndromes Volume 2* book. It goes on to explain how personality traits (commonly inherited from environmental influence), like perfectionism, rigidity, self-criticism, low self-esteem, anxiety, and impulsiveness, are also psychological risks for certain EDs. Pakistani Mina Shahi battled with bulimia and tells how her mother's, who suffered with AN for over a decade, issues with appearance affected her: "She often spoke about how she felt unattractive because of her weight and needed to change it, and it rubbed off on me. To me, she looked just fine, but hearing her always talk negatively about her body made me question my own."

Nowadays, EDs are better understood as a mental phenomenon rather than just physical, facilitating the diagnosis and treatment. Whereas back when Katy's and Mina's mothers were teenagers, talking about this subject was rooted in taboos and misconceptions, impacting them even to this day. Both Mina and Katy acknowledge that their mothers never outgrew their own

EDs, despite them saying otherwise. “That was an ongoing argument for the whole time I was ill,” says Katy, “I always kind of used her eating as an excuse not to do what I was meant to do. I was like, 'Oh, well, why should I do it? If you're not eating?'” Mothers often serve as a primary role-model regarding body image and eating attitudes for their daughters. However, what we tend to forget is that every mother was also someone’s daughter, and their body-related insecurities have probably been passed down on them as well. Yet, this is not about generations of mothers and daughters, but the beauty ideal that has been imposed on them. As Mina’s mother used to tell her when she put up on weight: “Nobody cares what's in your heart. People don't see your heart; they see your weight, and nobody is going to love you when you look like that.”

### **From a place of love**

I would not have been able to write this piece without dealing with my own demons in the first place. Four years after my most intense bulimic period, I finally dared to talk to the person I most unconsciously (read unfairly) blamed for my body image issues and eating disorder: my mother. On a rare sunny day in Belgium, my mum and I sat down among the fresh spring wildflowers after a plentiful Easter lunch to talk about motherhood, fatphobia, and forgiveness. First, I wanted to hear her childhood story and relationship with my grandma. They never had the chance to talk about my mom's bulimia because she was afraid her mother would be ashamed of her. Mamita (grandma's nickname) was a devout Catholic dedicated to philanthropy, who was mainly involved with NGOs fighting hunger and educating children. So, disclosing binge eating and throwing up habits felt deeply embarrassing for my mother.

Mamita would only eat French fries, except for special occasions. She avoided desserts. Plain food and no greasy sauces were her mottoes. "Her eating habits were perfect," my mum emphasized. My mother, on the other hand, has always been a foodie. Food for her became a way to compensate for emotions, a reward, and a shoulder to cry on. A familiar feeling that I can relate to. As a daughter, she did her best to hide her body-related insecurities; as a mother, she

did her best to prevent me from inheriting them. "I didn't want my daughters to be called fat. I didn't want them to go through terrible and degrading moments," she tells me. Nevertheless, being constantly taken to nutritionists as a child and dieting my way through adolescence had the opposite effect. "I never had the occasion to ask you what you thought provoked bulimia in you. I wish I could talk to you," my mum confessed after a moment of silence. It was hard for me to admit that her care-intentioned parenting was incidentally part of it. After listening to my childhood story, she says: "I was not aware of the effects I provoked by commenting on your body. But now, when I realize that, I'd like to ask you for forgiveness for everything I said even though they were not intended to hurt you."