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AP Literature and Composition

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**Pulling Out the Pretty**

I was two years old when I started pulling out my hair.

At first glance, it seemed like I was simply twirling the thin wisps through my chubby fingers--a seemingly innocent action. That’s what my parents thought, too, as I lay on my back in a white onesie, eyelids fluttering to a close and repetitively playing with my hair. They said that’s how they knew I was tired: I would glide my fingers through the baby tresses. It wasn’t until those dark, short hairs began to gather on my pale clothes that a feeling of dread ate at their stomachs.

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 I developed a bald spot when I was four.

 My parents had begun to plead with me to stop. They coddled me. Warned me. Threatened me. Bribed me. I eventually let the behavior dwindle--I could sense the fear in my parent’s voices and it scared me into stopping. But I didn’t stop completely. I stifled the behavior with other acceptable ones. Ones that seemed normal, like running my hair through my fingers. Ones that I could hide, like picking out the straight, dark hairs and poking them into the inner corner of my eye. I channeled the urges into those repetitive behaviors, but it only subdued the desires. The urge was always there: to stack my middle and ring finger on top of each other. Place a strand of hair between the nails and let it slide across until it caught on a kink. Until it popped out of my scalp and fell to the floor.

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 Seven years old and I’m standing in front of my TV watching a Disney movie. My legs are spread apart and my arms hang limp at my sides.

 Until.

 Until my hand climbs up my body. Until I’m filled with a strong desire--a compulsion to reach into my nose and rip out the hairs.

 I don’t think as I do it. It just happens, even though I’ve never done it before. I can’t stop. I want to pull out every last one, but my nose hurts and my nails keep digging into my fingertips. And the next day, as I sit in school, my fingers hurt as I write.

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The leather cushions squished beneath me, as I slid into the booth. My mother, with her fiery crimson curls swishing, slid into the seat next to me. We all picked up the Bob Evan’s menu, scanned the plastic covered pages, mouths watering.

 I could feel pulsing in my eye. It itched. So, I rubbed it. Jammed my fingers onto the eyelids and moved it across my cornea in circles. Of course, being a young and stupid child, I didn’t realize that this would not, in fact, help the problem. It only worsened. Became more irritated.

 As the waitress scratched our orders onto a pad of paper and chirped that she would be back, I felt my eye swelling.

 “Your eye looks gross,” Dalton remarked in his young voice, his face screwed up in disgust.

 “Be nice to your sister,” my mom said.

 And then all eyes turned to mine.

 “Good God, what happened to your eye?” my dad asked.

 I turned to look at him, for his usual jocular voice was now filled with concern. I felt red dying my cheeks and penetrating my eye.

 “Is it really that bad?”

 Nods. Nods all across the table.

 My mom slid out of the booth.“Go look in the mirror, pookie--it’s really swollen.”

 I sighed. Got up. Went to the bathroom. And god, it was pretty bad. I could feel it bulging out of my socket, stretching my eyelids.

 When I returned, they continued to ask me what had happened. Did I get something in it? Did I rub it too much? Was it itching? How long had it been like this? And for Christ’s sake, let them have a look!

 I lied.

 I told them that something must’ve gotten into it--a speck of makeup, a piece of dirt . . . yet, I knew it wasn’t true. I had done it. I had had the urge to take a dark strand of hair and poke the end of it into the inner corner of my eye. I must’ve hit something, irritated my cornea and it was reacting. I couldn’t tell them that the same urge that made me want to pull out my hair also made me want to poke tresses into my eye. I couldn’t tell them that *I* had irritated it myself. That *my* hand had done the work. That *I* had made my eye swell.

 And this instilled the pattern for years.

 Lying.

 Secrecy.

 Never telling the tale of what my hands (and hair) made me do.

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 My parents had always thought I went a little overboard with the tweezers. Little did they know, it was my fingers all along. Those hands again.

It started happening in ninth grade--the year I was homeschooled. Pulling had nothing to do with the stress of schooling at home, though. I think it started to happen more frequently because I had time and wasn’t around people that often. I had become obsessed with my appearance. Acne had developed over my pallor skin, dotting my flesh with red spots that rendered my self-confidence inactive. I would pull up videos on Youtube that taught me the art of makeup and from them, learned that my slight unibrow was deemed “unattractive.”

 So, I began plucking. At first, it was only in the middle, but then I started to shave away the tops and bottoms--trying to shape them. I was infatuated with doing it and I couldn’t stop.

Then.

It happened.

 I was reading for my English homeschooling class, sitting amidst a billowing comforter and stack of pillows, when my arm levitated to my head and my fingers found my eyebrow. The nails were tweezers, gripping the dark hair between them. I pulled.

 *Pop!*

Out it came. And several more followed. Because pulling my hair is like a drug--I can’t stop after just one.

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 Every morning in eighth grade, before the bus pulled up to my driveway, I would cake my eyelashes in pounds of mascara. Revlon. Covergirl. Mary Kay. Some off-brand tube I had found on the floor of our bathroom. I would comb the gooey consistencies through my row of eyelashes, elongating them with each stroke.

 It was laborious work, but I was determined. Determined to make myself pretty. By the end of the day, however, I looked less like a Barbie doll and more like a rabid raccoon--makeup blotchy, hair in tangles, and dark circles of mascara around my eyes. But not just mascara.

 Eyelashes.

 Throughout the day, I had felt along my eye, noticed the clumps of black attached to my lashes. I hated the feel, loved the look. My temptation had been to great: I pulled off the mascara, feeling such an intense pleasure from it. And sometimes the black clumps were entwined with eyelashes, sticking out like tally marks.

 *One.*

 *Two.*

 *Five.*

 *Twenty.*

 They wouldn’t all be gone--I still had quite a few. That all changed my sophomore year of high school.

 Ah, high school. A time of raging hormones and religious periods of self-loathing. At least for me, anyway. This was only worsened by my then-constant pulling, which always made me angry and sensitive. Always submerged in envy of others. I was a mess.

 I had begun to wear false eyelashes. At first, it was because I liked them. They made me look somewhat pretty, and that was practically all I cared about. When I wore them, I felt more confident. I started to stop branding the word ‘UGLY’ across my forehead. It had faded a little--scarred over. But as time went on, I no longer wore the false eyelashes because I wanted to. I wore them because I had to.

 I remember I had been studying for a math test in geometry, sitting on the edge of my bed, scanning the text and reading problems. The sky had turned into a black quilt, stars poking holes in the crepuscule fabric and the moon, a lighthouse. My yellow lamp light reflected off the white pages of the textbook and the words began to blur.

 I was tired.

 So tired.

 Tired.

 *Tired.*

 *Tired . . .*

 My eyes had drifted to a close, along with my mind. But my body had not.

 I felt prickles of pain on my flesh. Slight pain.

And I jolted to consciousness.

 11:30 p.m.

 The clock read 11:30.

 I sat there, stunned, not fully registering what was going on. Why did my clock read 11:30? Hadn’t it just been 10:54? I was sure of it.

 I glanced down at my textbook, suddenly remembering the test I had to keep studying for, and that’s when I saw it.

The page.

It was littered with eyelashes. My eyelashes. And my eyebrows. So much so that the black hairs were distorting the inked equations on the page and filling the crack.

 I swept them off. Felt a huge surge of dread and anxiety flood my stomach. I wanted to vomit, but still got up, approached the mirror. I sank down to it--to look at myself--but my esteem was the only thing that really sunk.

 My lips trembled.

Then opened.

“F\*ck.”

 It was just a whisper, but it was louder than any scream. And god, I felt like screaming then.

 My eyelashes . . . gone.

My eyebrows?

Sparse.

Patchy.

Ugly.

 I felt salty dewdrops swallow my eyelids, no lashes to catch them. The tears burned the raw skin, the freshly plucked petals leaving painfully sensitive skin behind. And I began to sob. Thoughts of hatred, anxiety, fear, and disgust shot through my brain, ricocheting off the walls, and firing shrapnel at my lungs. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t see straight, even though no eyelashes were blocking my view. They were all dead on the floor.

I cried the entire night.

I cried the entire next night.

And every morning, I had to paste on eyelashes that weren’t mine. And every morning I had to pencil in thin eyebrows. And every day I had to worry that it would rain too hard and melt my face or that the glue wouldn’t stick so I’d have to redo my makeup in a bathroom stall (because I was too embarrassed to do it in front of anyone) or that someone at home would catch me without makeup or that someone would ask me why I had no lower lashes or if my eyelashes were even real.

This went on for months.

And I pulled out the regrowth five times.

I could no longer swim in public. I couldn’t chance anyone seeing me without makeup. Without eyelashes and eyebrows. I couldn’t go to sleepovers. I couldn’t take a shower at my house until everyone had fallen asleep and I could sneak in and out of the bathroom like a f\*cking intruder.

It was only when I started pulling out my hair in class during junior year, letting the long dark strands around my neck fall to the floor, that I realized my disorder was swallowing me whole. I had begun pulling out the hair in band, the brunnette tresses gathered so bluntly on the white tile, that it was almost impossible to hide. I had to get a Kleenex and act like I was picking a bug up off the floor when really I was trying to get rid of the clump of hair around my flute case. It was disgusting.

But I sought help.

I went to a therapist.

And even now, as I look back, I know I’m still tangled in my disorder. Therapy hasn’t solved the problem, but it has a been a huge help. A huge relief.

And for that, I’m grateful.

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Author’s Note:

I know this was very dark and personal, but I feel comfortable enough now to share some of my experiences dealing with this disorder. I have been struggling with it for so long and it has played such a huge role in my self-confidence and personal life. It has made me feel so many things and has put me through so many experiences. Some of them terrible and some of them good. This narrative illustrates only a small portion of what it is like to have trichotillomania (commonly called trich), or hair pulling disorder. I have kept many of my experiences out of this narrative because they are either too personal, too raw, or too complicated to describe in this paper. I hope that you, the reader, were still able to understand how emotionally damaging trich is and how it is practically uncontrollable. Though this only scratches the surface of what it’s like, I do want to make my point clear: it is destructive and it’s not always something you can control. And even though I did describe some pretty awful experiences, I have gotten help and it has definitely been a relief to divulge all of the struggles of this disorder which I have been dealing with for over a decade.

I am doing well now. Even so, the battle is not over. Trich can’t be cured. I believe it will be a lifelong challenge for me, but I am stronger now. And I feel that I will only get more robust as the years go on.

Thank you for reading this. It means a lot to finally be able to share part of my story, so thank you.