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Small Sips, Small Bites

Courtney Smith

“Small sips, small bites.”

This was my childhood mantra, echoing and rebounding in the recesses of my mind after I had repeated it to myself so often. I could only take small sips of drink and small bites of food because anything more would send my stomach reeling and my hands reaching for the bowl beside my bed. I would be left with an empty stomach, burning throat, and shaking hands.

As a young child with cyclic vomiting syndrome—a condition characterized by random, uncontrollable, incessant vomiting—I was much acquainted with nausea; we were like old friends. It demanded my attention without warning, disturbing my dreams, shaking me awake in the middle of the night, and striking at the most inconvenient times. I’ve thrown up in Walmart, Target, and Giant, at the beach and in the car, at a myriad of parks, rest stops, and friends’ houses, even at the Philadelphia Academy of Music all over their elegant carpeting.

On second thought, perhaps my real friend was the bowl beside my bed, always there to save my guts—quite literally. That’s why we repeat “small sips, small bites.” Then you don’t need someone to save your guts; your guts stay with you, as they should.

Often, however, the nausea would get worse, and even small sips and small bites could not save me. In the middle of the night, I would wake up crying in pitch darkness, head pounding, nausea building, and I would stumble into my parents’ bed, throwing up all over their clean white blankets. They would awake startled and then jump into action mode, stroking back my hair, wiping my face, and ripping off the blankets to clean them. A piece of spearmint gum would take away the awful taste of acid, and I would lie back onto my parents’ cool pillows.

The coolness never lasted. It quickly turned hot, a restless, heavy hot, and I would whip up, nausea already at level ten. My parents, prepared this time, would have the bowl ready. And the cycle would repeat itself. Every few minutes, my stomach would wrench and the acid would return. Nothing helped. I could not keep anything down. I would grow increasingly, dangerously dehydrated until my parents would have no choice but to rush me to the hospital.

The hospital was also like an old friend, albeit a kinder one. I was there often, though sometimes just for tests. Before I was diagnosed with cyclic vomiting syndrome, my symptoms confounded the doctors, and I underwent nearly every test in the book while they tried to figure it out. I vividly remember the abdominal ultrasounds that coated my stomach in a clear gel (jelly on my belly, as my mama always joked), and the big, scary machines that tilted me up and down and made me drink a disgustingly fruity mixture disguised as hot chocolate. The doctors, however, still could not figure out what was wrong, and for a time, there were frightening whispers of leukemia.

I was about five. How does a five-year-old process that she might be dying? Nobody ever outright told me that, of course--the pediatric nurses were all smiles--but I knew enough about hospitals at the time to assume that I was there because I was dying. I didn’t really understand death, but most of what I had known in my short five years was nausea and pain, so death could not be that bad, could it? So sometimes, at five years old, I wished I was dead. People did not throw up and go to hospitals in heaven, did they?

Small sips, small bites, darling.

In the end, though, the tests came back negative, and they diagnosed me with cyclic vomiting syndrome, a diagnosis which was pretty much a “I don’t know what’s wrong, you don’t

seem to be dying, we've ruled out everything else, I give up" kind of diagnosis. But the nausea never ceased, and I kept going to the hospital because I needed to be stuck with an IV until my bodily fluid levels returned to normal. In one particularly horrible episode, they could not get the IV in my arm—they tried injecting the needle five times before they succeeded. Vision blurring with tears and agony knifing up my arm, I remember begging mama to take me home, to take me anywhere, to just make it stop, stop, stop.

Afterward, I leaned back against the rough white sheets of my hospital bed, my arm restricted by the IV tubes, barely moving as I watched countless movies on an old TV. In one of the movies, a group of orphan girls was being served milk and porridge for lunch, and they were complaining about how awful it tasted. An empty sort of longing stirred deep within me. They could eat and drink by themselves. They could gobble up their food without it making a reappearance in a few minutes. They did not have to take small sips and small bites. I would have given anything to trade places.

The longing and jealousy turned to fear when night fell. Outside the window, the dark shadowy branches morphed into monsters against the moon's eerie light. Too ill and nauseous to sleep, I would shift restlessly, sweating under heavy sheets, trying not to look out the window, trying to reach my mama's hand as she slept in a makeshift bed beside mine. I could never reach her hand though; the IV tubes around my arm prevented me. A few tears would slip, their saltiness stinging my thirsty lips which had not known water in a while. They said the IV did that for me, but I did not understand. I wished I was an orphan girl eating porridge and drinking milk.

Small sips, small bites.

When I read or hear about others with such illnesses, the story always seems to talk about the series of small deaths that occur--the patient slowly deteriorates, losing one small part of his or her life at a time, and each loss is like a small death. I know this to be true. I experienced many, many small deaths--the most obvious being the inability to eat and drink without vomiting. When the sickness grew worse, I struggled to walk, to use the bathroom by myself, to go to school, to hang out with friends, to see my siblings, to do anything but cry or lie down listlessly.

However, rarely do we talk about those who steal these deaths back from the grave—the survivor who slowly brings each one back, rediscovering the wonder of everyday life. And it is truly stunning how incredible everyday life appears when you are recovering. Blessedly, cyclic vomiting syndrome is usually a childhood illness that you grow out of over time, and so as I got older, my hospital visits slowly lessened, and I began to rediscover normalcy. When my last hospital visit was over, a nurse asked whether I wanted to walk or be pushed in a wheelchair. I adamantly denied the wheelchair, and later my siblings were all over me, asking, "Why did you say no? You could have ridden in a wheelchair! That would have been so cool! You missed out!"

How could I tell them that a wheelchair was not half as exciting as being able to walk? As being able to climb out of bed and not pass out from exhaustion? How can you make someone understand the wonder of walking when it's a privilege they have always had? There's a joy and wonder that can only be experienced by rediscovering something we have always taken for granted. How thrilling to walk when you lived so much in bed and how delicious and utterly wonderful to down a full glass of water when you are so used to small sips and small bites.

I desired it so much that even back when my sickness was raging, I would sometimes rebel. I would tell mama I was okay, and I would run outside to play with my siblings. When the nausea started building, I would fight it, demanding that I be like my siblings who could run and

run without once needing to sit down. When mama and the doctors were not looking, I sometimes gulped down my juice, relishing the taste against my parched throat. In zero point five seconds I would undoubtedly pay for it, but the moment, the now, was what mattered to me. The brief sweetness was worth the pain.

One of the first things that I did when I was well again was run to the kitchen and fill a whole huge glass of icy sweet water. Greedily, I lifted it to my mouth, and I drank. I drank and gulped and drank, uncaring of how some dribbled down my chin and soaked my shirt's collar, uncaring of anything but how it felt to have something so wonderful in such excess. It cooled my burning throat and erased all traces of acid. I kept drinking and drinking, and somewhere along the way, I realized I no longer wished for death because I now knew this kind of joy existed.

Maybe I'm part zombie, having stitched myself back together, even the parts thought long dead—at least it makes the pain sound cooler. I'm not sure my five-year old self would have liked that description though. Not that she ever wanted to be a princess--her greatest aspirations were to be an orphan with milk and porridge, one who could eat and eat. She wasn't very picky, but maybe she should have been. After all, she was much too used to small sips and small bites.