

My eating disorder – an excerpt from my memoir 'My Alien Self: My Journey Back to Me'

When I was fifteen I looked in the mirror and saw someone else.

I was growing up. It was Dad who had to explain about periods and buy me my first sanitary towels. Imagine that?

But it wasn't just that.

In the mirror, it wasn't those changes I saw. And I didn't see my skinny frame or my strained face, just the bulge in my tummy.

I resolved I had to do something about it and made a plan that would hopefully obliterate it forever. It had to be flat, end of.

I had been working quite hard on the project over the previous few months, but had found nothing that fixed the tummy issue. I'd lay on my bed with my knees propped up in my little private pink room, surrounded by posters of the Bros boys, Nick Kamen, James Dean and fluffy kittens, avidly revising the calorie counts of every type of food or drink that I might consume at some point or another. I had my head in all kinds of diet plans and books, and wrote down in a little pocket book everything that passed my lips. I stared at the list, dissatisfied. Always one too many boiled sweets or a banana, which was a whopping ninety calories.

I weighed myself a few times a day and the decrease in pounds of my bodyweight pleased me.

I had read somewhere that laxatives were good because they pushed the food through quicker and the calories and fat were less absorbed, leading to weight loss. Great idea! Off to the chemist, I bought Ex-Lax laxatives off the counter – in the form of little chocolate pieces in a cardboard packet, got home and shoved some in my mouth. Those little miracle pieces of chocolate worked a treat when I was having my 'one day of eating'. If food entered my body, it had to exit as fast as possible, so I had an answer for everything.

Sitting on the toilet a few hours later, emptying the contents of my bowel in fast succession was such a relief – I loved diarrhoea. I'd also found Limmits lunch bars by then – a low calorie 'meal in a bar' – and would just eat those apart from an occasional dinner. But soon it interfered with school.

Usually I would meet my friends for lunch. We'd eat our packed lunch and either hang out in the school grounds, bantering about something, or we'd rush over the school field to the public playground, where all the boys went. They loved to excite us by spinning us round fast on the merry-go-round. We'd laugh our heads off, until we thought we'd fly off it. Boys could be bad, of course.

But, I'd go home instead as part of my new routine. Each trip was nearly a mile, so I'd walk nearly four miles a day, just going to and from school and spent more time on my own with my new diet obsession.

Before long, I found myself running most nights after school. I felt free as I ran round the back roads of my town to the fields beyond. My trainers pounding the track, I taught myself how to deal with a stitch in my side – breathe all the time methodically and slowly as I ran, and the air didn't get caught. Every step freedom, every step my body felt better, every step I pounded out the thoughts in my head – memories, events, boys, shit! All shit! Get it out. Writing my diary every day helped to erase the day, but running really pushed it all away into the recesses of my mind.

Midway through the three-mile jog, I had half a cigarette – rationed exactly. The other half would be put back in my box for another time. I enjoyed it. Being in full control of my actions, to overcome my

grumbling belly and hunger, was an achievement. After two days of eating nothing, the hunger subsided, my stomach felt empty and I was full of energy to exercise even more. What a wonderful feeling, feeling so light, and to see that flat tummy in the mirror – it was worth all the effort. It was about taking control. If I couldn't control others, I could control myself.

But rain stopped me jogging.

If a downpour came, typically British climate, I'd put some music on in my room and do star jumps, running on the spot or dancing, watching how every bit of my body moved intently in the mirror on my chest of drawers. I particularly liked Diana Ross' Upside down and I loved dancing – it made me feel free. I couldn't do much as I had around four foot by two foot floor space, but I managed a sweat and I just had to do it for longer to achieve results, then straight in the shower.

My friend at the time, a skinny, pretty girl called Marcia was thinner than me. I felt fat. When it came to boys, she got most of the attention. Eventually, I had a strict routine going, which entailed no food for three days, except for three boiled sweets.

We didn't have regular meals being cooked in my house, so I was able to keep my little diet to myself. Following the three day period of starvation, I would binge, stuffing sausage rolls, cream cakes and other naughty foods in my mouth, always waiting until the house was empty. When out shopping with Dad every Friday, I would choose all these treats myself so they would be waiting in the fridge for the right moment. Standing at the end of our narrow kitchen, by the bin, I would munch my way through packets of food ravenously. I would then do one of two things. I might chew the food, spit it out into the kitchen sink and dispose of it down the plug hole so it didn't enter my stomach. Or, if I felt like a treat, I would scoff them as fast as I could, go upstairs and stick my fingers down my throat and puke the whole lot up, repeatedly purging until there was nothing left in my gut to come up or the retching and acids caused too much pain in my stomach or throat.

Next, I would eat as normally as possible for two days, everything calorie counted and logged, using ExLax to push it through, then back to starving – starting the six day process all over again.

I remember continuously bashing my hip bone on everything and I loved to see the bones on my chest and ribs poking through my skin. I was never, thank God, at death's door. This six stone person was fantastic at covering her body, keeping the puking a secret, and dodging all possibilities of getting caught or stopped and it lasted for several months. Although I have to confess, I still had issues with food for years afterwards.

At school, I began taking the cross country and long distance running seriously in P.E, and in our last Sports day I came second in the 1500 metre race, coming second only to a competitor for our county – a professional. Finally, the need to succeed overcame my self consciousness.

Looking at the numerous photos of myself taken a couple of years after this period, I can see that it worked and I did have a flat tummy, but there are no photos of the time of my 'diet' – an unusual gap in my life history of photos.

Dieting for days on end, bingeing and throwing up, and exercising for hours a day, took its toll and my body started giving up and my periods stopped by the summertime. I reckoned this was great, but my friends did not. I hated periods – the pain, the blood, bad, erratic moods – everything about them. I got them pretty bad. I didn't want them anymore, so this was another achievement. I suffered lots of stomach cramps two years later, which turned into severe IBS when I tried eating properly again, for which I self prescribed hot chocolate and smoking weed. It was a three-day stay in hospital that led to my diagnosis for my chronic pain, constipation and diarrhoea.

My parents knew nothing about my diet and my secret routines. By the time I was thirty-two, I had had three teeth extracted and lots of root canal treatment and I think it was connected to this early abuse of my body – acids rot teeth and upset the gut, and lack of nutrition make teeth weak .

It was 1990; the start of a new decade. Maybe what I needed after what happened with Vinnie and then the saddest Christmas I could remember.

But it wasn't the best of starts.

My close friends had become increasingly worried about me losing my periods for what was now five months, so Jane had offered to come with me. Sitting in the waiting room, my nerves were frayed, my thoughts filled with horror, and I got more and more restless as each minute passed. I was just short of bursting into tears when the doctor called me in. I told Doctor Griffiths everything, five months, I've had no periods. He gave me a form to send to the local hospital for a referral.

Finally the hospital appointment came. I had the day off school to go and managed to get Mum to go with me, although she didn't like hospitals. The letter the specialist sent to my GP said...

This lady has secondary amenorrhoea, I am sure because she lost two stone in weight in three months last year and though she has gained some weight she is still only 7st 4lbs clothed at a height of 5ft 3 ins. She actually knew the reason and has spent some time dissuading some of her friends from dieting this year. I have told her that she has to be well over 7 ½ stone and I think she will probably achieve this. I don't think she is in a particularly anorectoid state. I have arranged to see her again.

A great start to the year that was. I was always good at dealing with these things with my happy, positive 'persona'. I temporarily didn't care about how I looked anymore and had my hair cut into a crop – back to my natural dark mousy blonde colour. I didn't want to look pretty anymore or attract any boys or men, although I did have a boyfriend of sorts, but I didn't really like him. I wanted to end that Amanda Green; take all her armour away. I didn't care. I felt shit. I wanted to be a child again and couldn't stop crying. I was an emotional wreck; nervous, inward, lacking confidence, dressing down in baggy clothes and had a real need for drink... So, it was no surprise when I went on my skiing trip in February that I had a few problems...