

Not Otherwise Specified

written by Alaina Symanovich | June 14, 2018



Image: Gulf of Mexico during Hurricane Hermine

You should know that I was never bulimic. Not *bulimic*-bulimic.

You should also know that the first time I made myself throw up was Valentine's Day, a Friday night. Friday nights were always nights with Capriquarius, my best friend and first real love. The winter I was twenty, I spent Fridays—and Saturdays, and Wednesdays, and even the occasional Monday—in dank apartments drinking watery beer with the cosmic Capriquarius. I memorized everything about her: the way her eyes got wide and vulnerable during drunk conversations. The way she twirled a box of cigarettes in her right hand. The way she insulted her enemies so grossly I'd taste dirt in my mouth. She was sexy and she was powerful, and she kept me drunk on infatuation for months.

But it was Valentine's Day and Capriquarius was out of town, and Friday night was itself again—just a few hours on the clock passing by in languid ticks. No different than a Tuesday afternoon or a Thursday morning. It gnawed at me like hunger that *this was life without her*. I wanted her back.

There was a family-size bag of Sweetheart candies stuffed in my backpack, an offhand gift from a professor who'd forgotten to give the treats to her class. I'd always hated those cloying, chalklike candies, but I pulled the bag into the light and considered it. I could stomp it apart at the seams, pulverizing the hearts beneath my feet; I could rent it open and pour dish soap over the candies, as I did with any high-calorie treat I didn't want tempting me; I could hide it in an unused drawer, away from the light. I ran my hand over my inner thighs, checking that they still felt skinny. Capriquarius liked skinny.

For reasons I couldn't understand, I yanked the bag open. The tear made a lightning-bolt streak in the plastic and scattered dyed sugar across my apartment's carpet. Pastel dust mounded on my hands and my skinny jeans. I sat cross-legged in the sweet mess, plucked a yellow heart from the bag—banana, the worst flavor, probably fouler than that dehydrated food they

give astronauts, and *definitely not worth the empty calories*—and chewed it. The candy seemed to cement the gaps in my molars and leach the moisture from my mouth. I ate another. And I kept eating, one SOUL MATE after YOU SHINE after FOR EVER.

When my fingernails scraped the bottom of the bag, I thought of three things: Capriquarius' stomach when she danced in her sports bra at parties. Capriquarius' heat the night we fell asleep on the carpet—right there, right near my sugar stain—holding hands. And the weight of food in my stomach, opening up like a sinkhole, pulling me away from Capriquarius and my skinny thighs and all those sour-beer parties to which she, inconceivably, unbelievably, had invited *me*.

Purging sugar is a unique experience: it tastes gorgeous. (*Gorgeous* like the tattoo, Capriquarius' cursive, burnt into my right arm.) Purged candies maintain their color integrity; they make landscapes of the toilet. The pink petals kiss the purple blossoms, and the pretty green stems reach up to meet them, and the blue sky backdrops it all. It's so gorgeous, it's worth the tears and the sore throat and the haunting stiffness in your lower back afterward.

When I was empty of color, I stumbled to the sink, careful not to let strands of sugar spin from my hand to the floor. I washed carefully, making sure to scrape underneath my fingernails.

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As a little girl, I fantasized about being anorexic. The daydream would find me when I was buckled up in the car, the seatbelt burrowing between the folds of my stomach, or skipping across the playground, my thighs tra-la-la-ing to the beat. I envisioned anorexia as a spotless purity: no gobs of peanut butter fused to the roof of your mouth, no marinara sauce speckling your t-shirt, no onion breath stalking you after dinner. Just sleek teeth and breath as anonymous as the doctor's office AC.

The worst part about being hefty—besides the un-sleekness, the anything-but-anonymous life of The Fat Girl—was the distance it carved between me my older sister. From my beginning, I was meant to stick with Aries. I was introduced to the world, my parents' surprise late-in-life baby, by Aries' ninth birthday card: *Happy Birthday, Aries*, my dad had written in celebratory curlicue script. *I can't wait to meet you in August! Love, your little sister!* From my beginning, my parents imagined me as a carbon copy of Aries: towheaded, fairy-skinned, sparkling with energy. And from my beginning, I disappointed: I emerged in August espresso-haired and olive-complected, more reminiscent of Italian cuisine than of lovely Tinkerbell.

Aries was gifted in every way I wasn't: she could ace math and science classes, captain her Cross Country team, maintain a size two. Her boyfriend

was always draped around her like a good set of pearls, the classy accessory for any occasion. While Aries was on dates or out with her friends, I sat in my bedroom imagining whittling down to an anorexic waif, becoming the Tragic Little Sister instead of Aries' Fat Sister. I imagined people noticing *me*, the poor sick girl, taking me to the movies or the mall, complimenting *my* toned arms and delicate wrists.

I wanted to be Aries as much as I wanted to beat her—such is the paradox of all little sisters. My situation was worsened by the pull of Aries' and my sun signs: we're both fire signs, feisty and stubborn. An Aries child is a token firstborn, the head of the zodiac and of her siblings. Aries entices others to follow her and is self-oriented to a fault. Leos are different—headstrong, but less assertive, more perseverant. Dependable. Leos and Aries are both fixed signs, meaning we're unyielding and stagnant. We both adore competition.

The August before my tenth-grade year, my family sat around a cluttered restaurant table on our last night of vacation. In the morning, Aries and her husband would fly home to Texas, and my parents would drive me back to Pennsylvania for Cross Country season. Dessert clinked by in a symphony of spoon scrapes and coffee sips, and finally it was time for the check, and hugs goodbye, and walking back to our separate hotel rooms.

Aries' lips crinkled. "We've been so bad this vacation," she sighed, making poignant eye contact with both her husband, then me. "I swear we've eaten 3,000 calories a day."

Her husband shrugged, but I frowned. I was still a solid fifteen pounds heavier than Aries had been in high school; as she spoke, I could feel the chocolate cheesecake I'd just devoured undulating in my gut.

"I think we should give up dessert," Aries said, setting her fork down on her chocolate-smearred plate. "It's...what? 600 calories we don't need?"

"Okay," I nodded. It hit me that I'd need to run for over an hour to burn off that cheesecake. The guilt was as cloying as the chocolate clotted in my mouth. "Give it up for how long?"

Aries sucked her teeth, thinking. "Christmas?"

Aries' husband shook his head. "Not Christmas. Thanksgiving—I'll give you Thanksgiving."

Aries smiled and looked at me. "Great. We'll keep each other accountable, Sissy. Even when you're back home, it'll be like we're together."

So I returned to sophomore year sugar-free, giving up candy and gum too, because I could. When I realized how painless it was to cut out foods, I started subtracting everywhere I could: no orange juice at breakfast, no rice at dinner, no popcorn at the movies. The subtracting took my mind off the awkwardness of being clique-less in high school. I was still recovering from the ugly break-up of my former friend group, the four girls who'd gotten me through middle school. They'd all joined the tennis team in high school,

started going to parties and flirting with boys. We still talked, but our conversations were as stilted as those practice conversations in French class where you have to ask questions like *what nationality are you?* and *is Paul coming to the swimming pool?* while you're wondering if your partner thinks you're annoying.

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My middle-school clique: Cancer, Aries, Aries, and Aquarius. Water, fire, fire, air. The two Aries were stubborn like my sister, but as the babies of their families, they lacked that run-you-over-with-their-wills drive that my sister had mastered. Cancer was the most loyal among us, honest and funny, someone who made you feel safe. But it was Aquarius whom I favored. Maybe it was circumstance—we went to the middle school on the west side of town, the others went to the east side—but it was also her bawdy humor, her relentless energy, the fact that she was the greatest challenge of the group.

Throughout eighth grade, up until our final fight, Aquarius and I handed a notebook back and forth every day. It was a shared diary, a compilation of whom we were crushing on that week, which teachers we hated, what we should do on Friday night. We shuttled the book to one another in the hallways, before catching the bus, after church on Sundays; it became an ink tether holding us together.

We were walking to lunch when I finally told Aquarius what I hadn't been able to confess to the notebook: that Aries, according to my parents, had been anorexic during her high-school years. My parents had mentioned it at dinner the night before, tossed out the scrap of information as if it were nothing.

"You're kidding," Aquarius said. Cancer's older sister was rumored to be bulimic, so eating disorders had been on all our minds lately. "How bad was it?"

I shrugged. "My parents said it happened when she was running Cross Country. That she just stopped eating and they didn't really know what to do." I watched my feet cover the scuffed tile.

"Is she okay now?"

I nodded, vigorously. Violently. "Yeah, yeah, she's fine." Aries still used calorie trackers to record every morsel of food, including gum. "Her coach made her stop. Said, you know, she wouldn't be allowed to race if she was unhealthy."

Aquarius made a sympathetic sound.

"But it's made *me* think," I said, "that I won't ever get thin. I mean, unless I get sick. My parents' story was always that Aries ran Cross Country to get fit, and that I could do the same. And I guess I believed that."

Aquarius jumped to reassure me, saying I absolutely didn't have to have an eating disorder to lose weight, that I could just be healthy, that Aries' case was extreme. (But was it? I thought of Cancer's bulimic sister—the stories of her running the faucet when she used the bathroom for too long after meals. How fabulous she looked in her tighter-than-tight jeans.)

Aquarius told me to forget eating disorders, to forget even dieting. Just practice moderation, she said.

Shortly after, Aquarius confessed she'd secretly been on Weight Watchers for months.

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Capriquarius: born on the cusp of Capricorn and Aquarius, the Cusp of Mystery and Imagination. She was the perfect cusp baby, neither one thing nor the other: reserved but extroverted, independent but insecure. Craving attention but needing space.

"I think she's too much for you," one of Capriquarius' friends warned me, early in autumn. I had just turned twenty.

I sucked in my stomach. "I can handle it."

(How naïve I was. You don't handle Capriquarius—you survive her moods. The boundless excitement, the mania, the warm beer-fueled laughter—which collapses to a rock-bottom of anger and depression—which leaps back to ecstasy! about the beauty that *must* arise from so much pain.)

Capeiquarius was the kind of blurry-boundary friend who'd kiss me at a party, avoid eye contact the morning after, and take another girl out to dinner the next night. The kind of friend who'd moonbeam me with sympathetic eyes and apologize for leading me on, who'd confess "I guess I just like you when I'm drunk," and then two weeks later scream at me for being led on. ("Don't you see? I like a lot of girls *and none of them is you!* It'll never be you!") The kind of friend who'd let me buy her breakfast the morning after a screaming match.

In Capriquarius' defense, I adored being let into her life; to complain about her moods is like an on-location weatherman griping about hurricane conditions. All you can do is tsk-tsk at that silly rainbooted man screaming into the wind, and figure he should've listened to his father about going into finance.

(Once, Capriquarius asked me what kind of first impression she made. She grinned—a leering, step-carefully sort of grin that wrung my stomach—and said that I was good with descriptions. I bit my lip, leaned back against her couch. "Okay," I said. "Picture a palm tree. That's the person meeting you. And you're like a little rain storm, which isn't so bad, the palm tree

can take it, but you become a hurricane, and the tree's bending in the wind, and then all of a sudden you're Armageddon and there's fire and brimstone." Capriquarius loved that comparison so much, she made it her Facebook status.)

Was she a hurricane? A *storm with violent wind*, tropical, cyclonic, a *storm of the most intense severity*? Dictionary definitions fail her. She was as much a violent storm as she was daybreak as she was hazy afternoon heat as she was dusk. She was an almost-Aquarius, an almost-air sign, a have and a have-not. She was not that different from me, the most illegitimate Leo of the pride. Leos are supposed to love the spotlight; I crave the hermit life, bulky sweaters and shades-drawn privacy. Leos are supposed to be dignified and strong, natural leaders, outgoing, self-assured; I can't answer the phone without my heart racing and my voice careening to an unnaturally high octave. Leos are supposed to be magnetic, lassoing lovers and friends with ease; but, on the contrary: *I like a lot of girls* and none of them is you!

I'm not a pure Leo; my astrological chart is thrown off-kilter by a moon in Aquarius, in direct conflict to my sun. The Aquarius influence makes me introspective, unnaturally so for a Leo. It also makes me naïve and quiet and detached. I'm fire meets air, so what element is that? Does the air extinguish the fire? Carry the fire on its wind? Does the fire warm the air? Do all of these happen? Do none?

Maybe I got lost in Capriquarius because I thought she had the answers. Maybe all my love- and beer-drunken conversations were failed explorations into the unknown: who am I, Capriquarius? And who are you?

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"You'll just have to relax," Aquarius lectured me. Ninth grade was just weeks away, and she was still angry at me under the surface. We were at my house for a sleepover with our usual group, but nothing was as usual. I'd apologized and Aquarius had accepted, and yet the air between us was leaden, poisonous. Aquarius looked at her cell phone instead of me as she spoke.

"I am relaxed," I told the back of Aquarius' flip phone. "I'm just not much of a partier."

"Everyone in high school smokes pot and drinks," Aquarius said. "You'll see." Then she wandered over to Cancer, who was blushing over a text message. Some boy had been texting her for months, ever since their date at the movies when he'd asked for a hand job and she'd refused. Cancer had told us how he'd put her hand on the crotch of his jeans, which were bulging against the zipper. Just thinking about it made me shiver. But Cancer and Aquarius and the two Aries adored conversations about boys. One time, a boy asked a friend of ours to send a video of herself masturbating—it'd been priority gossip for weeks. Another friend had started sleeping with her boyfriend. And somehow I was the only one alarmed by all of this.

"Hey," one of the Aries called. She'd wandered into the unfinished room in my basement and was eyeing the Sam Adams my dad stored in the fridge. She pulled a bottle out and waggled it in the air. "You think your parents would mind if I took a swig?"

She was teasing me. And yet, my blood pressure exploded at the thought of my dad walking downstairs to check on us and seeing Aries with the beer. I'd watched enough dramatic television to know that parents always barged in at the worst possible moment.

"Put that away," I begged. I knew I didn't sound cool. I didn't care. "Seriously, Aries!"

Aquarius smirked and sauntered over to the open fridge, grabbing two bottles for herself. They clinked in her right hand. "I'm sure your parents won't mind."

I pleaded and pleaded, my anxiety spiking higher, and still my friends wouldn't put the drinks away. They lorded them over me, threatening every so often to crack one open. I'd never done anything to break my parents' trust and my friends knew it. What I hadn't realized was how much they resented it.

It was my last sleepover with my middle-school crew. When ninth grade began in earnest, I stopped hosting my own sleepovers and they stopped inviting me to theirs. I was relieved by the distance, though so conspicuously alone that first year of high school.

I never ended up smoking pot or drinking. I took my (lousy) running career seriously, and I thought of all the calories in beer, and the risk of overeating after smoking pot, and I stayed home. I called my sister sometimes, talked about running and my dessert-free life, and tried to pretend that we were still together and not 1300 miles apart.

I didn't speak to Aquarius again until one nondescript Fall day, sophomore year, when she ambled up to my locker. The sight of her made my palms itch; I shifted my weight from leg to leg as she looked me up and down, and my track pants swished from the fidgeting.

"Wo-ow," Aquarius smacked her bubble gum. "You're getting so thin." She rested one shoulder against the locker beside mine.

"Really?" I couldn't force myself to make eye contact.

Aquarius nodded, blew a bubble, bit it. "Must be all that running."

I looked at Aquarius's double-D cups and wondered if she could intuit that I'd stopped getting my period. She looked bored, and maybe—was I imagining it?—disappointed in me.

Weight Watchers never really worked for Aquarius. Not that she'd *needed* to lose weight, but she'd wanted to—just like me, she'd wanted to be bony and svelte. But she took after her mother, tall and busty, in a time before “thick” was considered a compliment.

As my own dieting intensified over the years, I wondered about Weight Watchers. Jennifer Hudson made it look so simple, all white-teeth smiles and shrinking sizes—but what I knew of weight loss was not simple. It was starvation, and exercising through blisters and tendonitis and stress fractures, and long hours spent criticizing your body in front of the mirror. Weight loss is nothing but the prolonged, torturous diet life. Yet, Weight Watchers markets itself aggressively as a non-diet. *Diets don't work!*, the company proclaims on its commercials. Instead of counting calories—the awful, *unhealthy, unsustainable* chore of the dieter—you count points. (But points are stand-ins for calories, so...? *No!* exclaim the Weight Watchers advocates; *it is not the same!*)

In college, Capriquarius taught me a better plan, a true non-diet: beer. More specifically, binge-drinking malt liquor. After years of copying Aries' calorie-counting plan (don't exceed x ! Burn at least y with exercise!), binge drinking was a marvelous relief. Capriquarius' method was simple: subsist on little during the day, a Clif bar or the occasional bagel. Every few nights, consume two 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor, preferably 8.1% ABV. Then spend the following day or two shuffling to the bathroom, enjoying the intermittent bloating, nausea, and diarrhea. Gladly refrain from eating. Repeat.

I lost ten pounds in a flash on her method. And in April, after I'd finally hit my goal (of being under-) weight, I lost Capriquarius.

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I lost Aquarius over a petty fight that wasn't even ours to begin with. It was eighth-grade drama of the most banal variety: Mary So-and-So said something to me, I repeated it, everyone ganged up on Mary. I hadn't known the bomb I'd detonate by repeating Mary's remark; I thought it was eye-widening worthy, not forcing-her-to-leave-school-in-tears worthy. It made me quietly relieved that *I*, at least, had the common sense not to talk trash about girls who could ruin me.

And then there was Aquarius, *my* best friend, *my* notebook confidante, huffing up to my locker and demanding that I apologize for “bullying” Mary. I let my backpack thud to the floor as Aquarius worked herself up into a tirade.

“How could you do that to her?” Aquarius demanded. My math textbook sat heavily on my big toe, but I stood frozen. “Do you have any idea what Mary's going through? What *your friends* have been saying about her?” Aquarius

crossed her arms.

"My friends aren't saying anything," I said. "Mary's the one who was saying stuff."

"You need to apologize," Aquarius said.

"No," I scooped up my backpack. "And, if you don't mind, I have to get to track practice."

"So, you're just going to hurt Mary like that and not care at all?" Aquarius shook her head—*Aquarius*, the girl who'd scribbled our notebook full of insults about every boy and girl we knew. I rolled my eyes and slammed my locker shut.

My friends on the track team supported me. They, too, saw the injustice in a best friend—a notebook buddy!—betraying you.

"Do you want to go home?" One of the track girls asked, tucking her hair behind her ear, genuinely concerned. "You shouldn't have to run laps right now."

I shook my head. "I want Aquarius to leave me alone," I said. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, hard, pulling and pinking the skin. "She's just a fat bitch on Weight Watchers. She can find a new best friend."

If the first rule of middle school is to not talk trash about girls who can ruin you, then the second is to never, ever talk trash about your friends.

Especially not in crowded locker rooms. Especially not when every nearby girl's cell phone perches under fingertips eager to type, to send her missives into the world like missiles.

Aquarius never confirmed what hurt more—my calling her a bitch or my announcing her Weight Watchers secret—but I've always assumed it was the latter. How could it not be?

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For most of high school and college, my weight yo-yoed. Not in the way of hapless dieters whose sizes shrink and bloom, but in the way of a mentally ill person whose eating disorder is cycling through stages of severity. Every few years, I'd land in a healthy weight range and feel as if I'd been re-zipped into a fat suit. Everywhere I'd go, I'd think of the swell of the stomach, the plume of my upper arms, and wonder if I was being judged, mocked. The words *fat bitch* would boomerang back to me, and deservedly so, I thought. Time and time again I shed that fat suit, and each relapse was worse than the one before, and always I ended up back in the doctor's office, fielding awkward questions.

At nineteen, my doctor gave a name for what I was—the mess of panicked energy, the slop-pile of poor decisions: EDNOS, Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. Then she scheduled me for a few rounds of blood work.

EDNOS felt like rebuke. EDNOS, with its heavy *no*, shouted that, no, size zero wasn't enough; I should've been a double zero, triple zero, kid's size—anything to warrant the clean crown *anorexic*. I wasn't the waiflike angel I'd daydreamed about; I wasn't the girl who could fuel herself on collarbone pride alone. I was the weak girl, eating little but not little enough, losing weight but never losing enough. If I had done enough, if I'd really become anorexic, then it would be written in my file; it would be permanently evidenced, recorded historically, a forever-testament to my success. It would have banished that popsicle-lipped girl from elementary school so her size-18 ass never eclipsed my memories again.

What, or who, was I? EDNOS promised: you are not good, you are not beautiful, you are not worthy. You are not anorexic, it whispered; you didn't even succeed at that.

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I lost Capriquarius. To put it that way seems to suggest that she was a spare set of keys or a favorite pen, a bland object, and not all the energy in the universe.

I shouldn't have regretted her leaving, but I did. On a gray morning in April, Capriquarius declared us no longer friends, and I said "okay" because there was nothing else to say. I thought of the January day she sat in my passenger seat, a bag of dirty laundry between her legs, and told me I was her best friend. How she laughed when I squawked "*really?*" and teased me for smiling the whole rest of the drive. I thought of the March night she stripped off my sweater and jeans, dressed me in her own clothes, and kissed me slowly. I thought of the time we went grocery shopping, how she bought strange items like pine nuts and dried banana chips and how I realized I wasn't afraid of food when it was in her hands.

An excerpt from her last text message to me: "Alaina: because I know myself to be more than you ever will be, I'll say: I think you deserve the worst the world can give you. I think you're crazy."

So there. Capriquarius defined me, after all.

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The DSM-IV eventually "rescued" me from the realm of Not Otherwise

Specified. The new term for people like me, the not-anorexics-not-bulimics-but-still-disordereds: Other Specified Feeding or Eating Disorder.

Should that have given me comfort? I was specified. I was OSFED: I was something tangible, identifiable. I existed. But all I saw was that word *fed*, the counterpoint to years of starving, purging, and exercising myself to near-obliteration. I still had “an eating disorder that does not meet the criteria for anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.”

But I was *fed*.

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This is how an eating disorder defines you: it starts with traits you already possess, introversion and perfectionism, risk-aversion and obsessiveness, sensitivity to criticism. Those traits predispose the disorder, which heightens the traits, which makes the disorder so ingrained it's no longer a part of you—it *is* you. Like an Aquarius moon disrupting a Leo sun, the traits you're supposed to have—the bravery, the confidence, the regal magnetism—get lost. And really lost, not like your trusty blue pen, but lost like a best friend who still ghosts your dreams years later, and who probably doesn't think of you anymore.

After Capriquarius I started feeding myself, becoming the *fed* girl that my medical record said I was. The hourglass that turned the night of Aries' no-dessert resolution had run out, and my days of starving were over. I started staying home every Friday night and ordering multiple entrees from the Chinese restaurant down the block, slurping lo mein and trying not to think. My friends said that I should move on, that a person could get addicted to sadness. I ignored them and started turning off my phone before a binge.

My life went on, one delivery order to the next: ice cream and cookies and bagels. My throat chafed from all the times I shoved my electric toothbrush down it. But I kept hunching over the toilet, toothbrush whirring, food spilling down my hand, ears perked. I was always listening: for the patter of Capriquarius' shoes down the hallway, for the rap on the door that would pull me to my feet and my senses. As long as I stayed on my knees, tears and vomit mixing on my chin, Capriquarius existed. She was still the girl in the pictures on the bookshelf; her cigarette lighter was still in my dresser; her salty boot prints still studded the mats in my car. My sickness proved that we had something real, something worth coming back for.

(Capriquarius never came back.)