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Slim Thick

Shelby McCallister

I stepped on the scale, so hungry that I was praying I lost enough so I could eat three meals that day. Wrote down that number. Grabbed the blue measuring tape and wrapped it around my bust, waist, and hips squeezing as tight as I could. Wrote down those numbers. Numbers were my only measure of self-worth.

In the summer of 2018, I signed a three-year modeling contract with a local placement agency. I was ecstatic at first. But slowly and slowly, I started to think that maybe I had signed over the rights to my body. To this day, if someone asked me what my measurements are, I could list them off without hesitation. I would say: bust 34", waist 27", and hips 38". At first, this didn't bother me. It was just business. But as I started to go to more auditions and call backs, the first thing they would ask for was my measurements. Not only was it somewhat degrading for my value to be defined by numbers, but my numbers were never right. I was told to lose three inches on every measurement. *How the hell? They're going to give me a diet and workouts right?*

Over that summer, I managed to get my waist down to 26.5" before boot camp. Celebration time, right? Nope. Still not good enough. So here we go... the journey started. How fast could I get down to a 24" waist, a 31" bust, and a 35" hip? Let the race begin.

Step one to becoming a model: cut your calories down to the amount that a ten-year-old should eat. I went from eating a healthy and normal 2000 calories a day to eating 1350 calories a day. I had an app on my phone that I viewed as the holy grail at the time. *Seriously, when I opened it up, I think my eyes saw a bright, white light radiate from the screen.* I put everything I ate into it so that it could tell me if I was staying within my limits. If I went over my calories it turned red. Red equals failure. Any day that I stayed in the green was a good day. To put it in simple terms, I was hangry all the damn time. *Just ask my parents.*

Step two to becoming a supermodel: workout at least once a day, sometimes twice if you felt fat. I followed my workout routine religiously.

Every night at my local Planet Fitness I ran one mile, biked ten miles, and then ended with 'light but toning' weights. And if I worked hard enough and burned enough calories I could even go back home and eat a snack according to my app... one and a half carrots... yum! Some nights I would do a saran wrap around my stomach with vapor rub to enhance sweating while working out. Maybe then I could eat two full carrots!

"You need to get tested for mono", my family doctor told me.

Are you serious?

Yep, you heard it right, I had mono. On top of steps one and two previously mentioned and having mono, I had runway classes, acting lessons, test photoshoots and dance classes. Good Lord, I just wanted to take a nap and eat Panda Express. I eventually healed from mono but then I was sick for three months; not because of the 'kissing disease' but because I was malnourishing myself. For three months, I had common cold and flu symptoms because I wasn't taking care of my body.

Remember when I said I got down to a 26.5" waist over the summer? Well because of all my illnesses over the next couple of months, I gained my inches back plus a little more. I was at an unspeakable 27.5" waist. My agent started to write it down as she said it aloud and I remember praying that she would say it quiet enough so that no one else could hear it. In order to model outside of Indiana, specific measurements are required to get placed in an agency. I remember her saying that in Indiana they aren't as strict about measurements because we are known to be "slim thick", but to get out of Indiana we had to be not "slim thick". The numbers got so deep in my head because my ultimate goal was to get placed in Chicago, but I couldn't do so if my numbers weren't good enough. I was ashamed that I had gained back an inch. I felt so ugly. *Did I deserve to be there? Were the other models better than me because they had smaller bodies?*

I was starting to lose hope.

I remember going to our runway classes and we would all be lined up against the mirror in our matching black, skintight outfits and black heels. I knew that comparison was the thief of joy but how could I not compare myself to all the other girls when I was constantly being told my progress wasn't as good? Comparing myself to the other models was what destroyed me. I specifically remember one of the girls who was the same age as me at the time that we started modeling. We both signed the contract around the same time which meant we were in training together. Our bodies looked the same. Side by side, the width of our features looked the same. We started out with the same measurements but, somehow, she had already demolished two of our shared goals. And there I was, with zero.

"Five, six, seven, eight", the runway coach would enthusiastically say. Some rounds were 'bubbly and fun' rounds where we had to smile the whole time.

I remember looking at myself as I walked toward the mirror and thinking *how am I supposed to smile when I'm not happy?* I would leave class with blistered ankles, sore calves, and a drained spirit. I told myself to keep the end goal in sight and all the brutal parts would be worth it.

I prayed every night to be healthy and for strength to continue to progress but there was one night where I sat in my bed, so exhausted, my pillow was flooded with tears, and I prayed to God asking Him to give me a sign of what I should do.

The morning after.

I woke up the next morning to an article posted on my twitter feed by a fellow model. She had posted a plethora of stories from various models of our company coming out about our agent scamming them. Things from booking fake gigs for the models to placing the girls in a brothel house to save money when travel was needed for a shoot. I remember running my hands through my hair and closing my eyes. For the first time in a while, I could fully breathe and feel free. This was my way out.

Am I a failure for completing less than one third of my three-year contract?

I called my agent and explained to her that I needed to resign from my contract because I was no longer healthy or in the right mental state to continue. A few days later, I resigned my contract and I was free to eat whatever the hell I wanted.

Now, a year and a half later, I am healthier than I was then, despite still struggling. I get extreme anxiety when I eat full meals because I fear gaining weight. I compare myself to others, especially the models I worked with. I almost feel resentment towards them for getting farther than I did which I am ashamed to say. I get anxiety about taking pictures with friends because I might not look good. I still struggle with body image at times. Though most of the impacts were negative, I have gained mental strengths that have changed my life. Today as I sit here, I realize that no one's progress, or journey will ever be the same. I wish someone would have told me that. I was so consumed by looking like the other girls that I was losing sight of what was important: my mental and physical health. Just because I didn't accomplish what I wanted to at the same rate that the other models did, doesn't mean I am any less worthy. I wish someone would have told me that. Writing this today, I have learned that it is my journey, and only mine. I have learned that I should take more pictures even if I don't look good. This is life. I have good and bad days, but on my bad days I am no lesser of a person than on my good days. I wish someone would have told me that. So no, I did not accomplish my goal, but you better believe that I am amazed at who I have become and how strong I have become. So whether I get out of "slim thick" Indiana or not, I am damn proud of myself and no one will ever take that away from me again.