

A Battle between Life and Death: Exploring the Horrors of Anorexia in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*

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Anorexia nervosa, a severe eating disorder characterized by extreme food restriction and an intense fear of gaining weight, often acts as a silent serial killer, claiming countless young lives every year. Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Wintergirls* serves as a poignant exploration of this disorder, providing a narrative lens into the physical deterioration, psychological torment, and emotional devastation caused by anorexia. This article examines how the novel exposes the insidious nature of anorexia as it traps young girls in a cycle of self-destruction, ultimately claiming its victims both mentally and physically. Through the story of Lia, the protagonist, the study delves into the profound impact of anorexia, her grief over her best friend Cassie's death, and the hallucinations that blur her grip on reality. The study also explores the coping mechanisms Lia adopts to navigate her psychological trauma. By analysing Lia's psychological trauma, this study highlights her progression from denial to eventual acceptance, offering insights into the stages of her internal conflict and journey toward healing. The present study underscores how Anderson's work not only depicts the struggles of living with an eating disorder but also illuminates the resilience required to confront its deadly grip and achieve recovery.

Keywords: A anorexia nervosa, eating disorder, trauma, grief, hallucination, psychological impact, self-realization.

1. Introduction

The prevalence of psychological disorders has markedly increased globally in recent years. The World Health Organisation (2021) states that one in four individuals may experience mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lifetime. Multiple factors are contributing to the global increase in psychological disorders. A psychological disorder, commonly referred to as a mental condition, is a behavioral or mental pattern that significantly hinders personal functioning or induces distress. Psychological disorders and multiple aspects

of human behavior can manifest in numerous classifications, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders, etc. One such life-threatening disorder is eating disorder. Eating disorders are a type of psychological disorders characterized by disruptions in eating behavior and body perception marked by an intense fixation on weight, body shape, and dietary consumption, potentially leading to severe physical and mental health issues. Eating disorders can profoundly affect physical health, leading to malnutrition, electrolyte imbalances, and gastrointestinal complications. These disorders may also lead to considerable mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and social isolation. Among these disorders, one particularly deadly condition is “Anorexia nervosa”. In the 2022, American Psychiatry Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5 TR), it is given that individuals with eating disorders may face an elevated risk of suicidal ideation, and approximately 9% - 25% of individuals with anorexia have attempted suicide.

Anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder, is a serious mental illness that impacts many individuals who suffer from it. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) study reports conducted in U.S, the lifetime prevalence of anorexia ranges from 0.60% to 0.80% in women and in men it ranges from 0.12% to 0.3% these kinds of eating disorders. The study concludes that Women are more succumbed and affected by eating disorder than men. Anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder characterized by significant weight loss. Regardless of their origin point, eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa, are some of the deadliest mental illnesses one could face. Anorexics frequently restrict their caloric intake and the types of food they eat. Certain patients with the condition may engage in compulsive exercise, induce vomiting and utilize laxatives for purging, and partake in binge eating. Individuals with anorexia nervosa often exhibit concurrent psychological disorders. The cause of anorexia cannot be properly identified but it may occur due to peer pressure, an obsession with body image, identity conflicts, dysfunctional family, and the hazardous path of weight loss contribute to the multifaceted challenges that afflict individuals with anorexia disorder. Another type of eating disorder is “Bulimia”. Bulimia is an eating disorder characterized by frequent episodes of overeating large quantities of food (bingeing), during which the individual feels unable to control their eating. After intaking the food, they may resort to behaviors like vomiting or using laxatives (purging) in an attempt to avoid gaining weight.

The occurrence of eating disorders has significantly increased among young girls, particularly toward the end of the twentieth century. During this period, society placed a heightened emphasis on thinness as a central aspect of an idealized feminine image. Women, especially, were under immense social pressure to maintain a slim body, as this was widely seen as a symbol of femininity, beauty, and social status. Deborah Michel and Susan in their book *When Dieting Becomes Dangerous*, explains that “there is evidence of an increasing prevalence of eating disorders, especially in countries that are more ‘Westernized’ or ‘Americanized’ in terms of cultural ideas of beauty and societal pressures to be thin.” (Michel and Willard 1) The portrayal of slender, attractive women in the media has led many young girls and women to compare themselves to celebrities creating a widespread drive to achieve similar physiques becomes a major contribution for development of eating disorders in modern society.

Laurie Halse Anderson’s dedication to writing the novel *Wintergirls* (2009) emerged, in part, from her conviction that, while society educates adolescents on the dangers of drugs and alcohol, it largely neglects to address the equally fatal risks of eating disorders. She states, that

“dealing with eating disorders can be harder than dealing with drug addiction because the message that thin equals good is everywhere.” (Goodnow) she also says that *Wintergirls* was the hardest book she has written, “emotionally, by a long stretch” and immersed herself so completely into Lia’s calorie-obsessed character, that she herself lost ten to fifteen pounds while writing the manuscript.

The novel follows, Lia Overbrook, an eighteen-year-old who suffers from severe anorexia and self-harming. She despises her body, her family, and her very existence. All of Lia’s loathing emotions are heightened when her best friend Cassie, who suffers from bulimia dies alone in a motel room after a long episode of bingeing and purging. Lia is overwhelmed by guilt for failing to answer Cassie’s 33 phone calls the night she died. Cassie’s death turns Lia’s life upside down; Lia is burdened with guilt over her inability to save her friend, which leads to a relapse in Lia’s caloric restriction and suicidal thoughts. Lia’s intense guilt is intensified by the haunting hallucination of her deceased friend, Cassie’s ghost. As the narrative goes by, Lia reveals her innermost thoughts and dangerous negative coping mechanisms. Despite having been in rehab twice prior to the start of the book, Lia still wants to lose weight because she believes that being thinner makes her stronger. The book goes into tremendous length in picturing the horrors of anorexia and its impact.

Anderson is an expert at projecting her characters’ struggles and pains, which have a profound effect on the readers’ mind, leading them to believe that the struggles are their own. Her style and experimentation with writing techniques in this novel make it a landmark in Young Adult Problem Fiction. Each chapter in the novel is denoted by a three-digit number, a decimal, and two more digits, such as “001.00” and “002.00”, which represent how weight is displayed on a weighing scale. The preference to begin each section serves as a constant reminder to the readers of Lia’s deplorable state of addiction to losing weight, and the repetition of numbers represents Lia’s obsession with the numbers she sees on her weighing scale.

In *Wintergirls*, Anderson employs the technique of strikethrough words, marking certain words, phrases, or entire lines with a line through the centre. These crossed-out words reveal what Lia believes to be the real truth, yet they are details she keeps hidden from others. Strikethrough words also appear to convey her hunger and her suppressed longing to enjoy food again. The author uses the technique to denote Lia’s innermost conscience, which is deliberately avoided by Lia. The words that are crossed through are the ones which Lia believes to be the actual truth, but she hides it within her mind. Lia compels herself to the extent of not even drinking a cup of orange juice. Anderson portrays the conflict of Anorexic patients mind through Lia, “My throat wants it my brain wants it my blood wants it my hand does not want this mouth does not want this.” (20)

Lia compels herself to avoid eating, the struggle that she encounters is deeply expressed in, “My traitor fingers want the fudge. No, they don’t. They want a seven-layer bar and some weird muffins and those pretzels. No, they do not. They want to squish the marshmallows and stuff them into my mouth. They will not. (202) Lia restricts herself from eating those foods, thinking they would raise her pounds. The thought of consuming food is Lia’s weakness so she deliberately refuses to let them linger in her mind. When she thinks about food, she mentally constructs a barrier to suppress her desire to eat. She convinces herself that being empty symbolizes strength and purity, as reflected in her thoughts: “I am shiny and pink inside,

clean. Empty is good. Empty is strong” (7) This mantra sustains her belief that emptiness signifies control and power, enabling her to justify and maintain her disordered eating patterns. Lia has experienced a range of mental illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and anorexia. Lia is nearly fully recovered following her second hospitalisation; however, upon hearing the news of Cassie’s demise, her mental condition begins to fall apart, resulting in a loss of control over her life.

People who are affected from anorexia use to count calories whenever they eat, Lia too, is obsessed with the calories of the food. Lia’s obsession with her food consumption and counting calories forces her to throw herself in the throes of horror. Lia brutally suffers from obsessive-compulsive eating disorder which includes, “constant calculation of calories and fat grams, frequent weighing, and compulsive exercising.” (Michel and Willard 7) She withdraws from family, and friends as her symptoms increase. Every time she consumes food, she calculates the calories; this indicates her obsessive nature of anorexia. Food provides her neither nourishment nor satisfaction but merely calories. To her, food is nothing but a numerical value of calories: “diet soda (0) + lettuce (15) + 8 table-spoons salsa (40) + hard-boiled egg white (16) = lunch (71).” (76)

Lia goes to the extent of deceiving her stepmother, Jennifer, into believing that she is eating. She scatters food all over the floor and even dabs ketchup at the corners of her mouth. These meticulous acts are part of her deceiving to create the illusion of using the kitchen and eating. As Szatanik observes, when it comes to pretending, “Lia is an ambitious director of a monodrama in which she simultaneously stars — pretending she ate something”. (Szatanik 183) Lia knows that faking her food habits and hiding her real weight is a sin, but still she continues to do that despite her guilt.

Lia often reflects on her past with the wistful phrase, “When I was a real girl” This expression signifies a time when her life felt whole and stable— “When I was a real girl, with two parents and one house and no blades flashing, breakfast was granola topped with fresh strawberries... No. I can’t go there. I won’t think. I won’t look.” (7) It represents a period of happiness and normalcy, before the emotional upheaval caused by her parent’s divorce. This traumatic event becomes a critical turning point in Lia’s life, triggering her descent into anorexia. The fragmentation of her family leaves her feeling powerless and disconnected, driving her to seek control through her eating disorder.

As Lia determines to live out this rejection of the food of “real girls,” her battle between her true thoughts and anorexic thoughts heightens up. Anderson uses the unique technique of crossed-out words to reveal the conflicted thoughts of Lia:

I’m hungry I need to eat.

I hate eating.

I need to eat.

I hate eating.

I need to eat.

I love not-eating. (145)

Lia's anorexic behaviours are evident not only in her restrictive eating patterns but also in her intense fixation on foods and calorie counts. Her mind is continuously absorbed with thoughts about what she should avoid or allow herself to eat, calculating the caloric value of each food she intakes. This fixation dominates her thoughts throughout the day, making it challenging for her to focus on anything around her, "Because I can't let myself want them because I don't need a muffin (410), I don't want an orange (75) or toast (87), and waffles (180) make me gag." (5) Though she was obsessed with restrictive eating habits, she has eating cravings, she wants to eat a small cupcake, but even for that she manipulates her mind with negative self-talk from avoiding herself from eating a small cake,

I could eat half a cupcake (150), or a quarter (75). I could scrape off the frosting and just nibble at the cake. I shouldn't. I can't. I don't deserve it. I'm a fat load and I disgust myself. I take up too much space already. I am an ugly, nasty hypocrite. I am trouble. I am a waste. I want to go to sleep and not wake up, but I don't want to die. I want to eat like a normal person eats, but I need to see my bones or I will hate myself even more and I might cut out my heart or take every pill that was ever made. (202-203)

Lia realizes she is on a destructive path, fully aware that if she continues, it could lead to her death. Her inner voice urges her, convincing her that she doesn't want to die, prompting her to eat like a normal person. However, her external mind remains in conflict, battling these thoughts as she succumbs to the obsessive, anorexic urges to see her bones. After coming back from rehabilitation twice, Lia feels as though she may be close to breaking free of anorexia trauma but the death of Cassie triggers her and the guilt of inability to respond to her friend's phone call on the night of her death makes her to bring back the memories of Cassie as a ghost through hallucination. At this point, Lia was once again trapped by the trauma of grief along with her anorexia trauma and constantly tormented by the hallucination of Cassie's ghost. It is Cassie's spirit which forces Lia to remain within the horrors of sickness. Lia is often preoccupied with the memories of Cassie's death and asks a series of questions to herself, "What was Lia doing there? What was she thinking? Did it hurt?" (14) Lia's thoughts indicate that she is troubled by her isolation from her friend, traumatic stress and grief.

Lia's grief manifests vividly through sensory hallucinations, where she perceives Cassie's presence in unsettling, visceral ways. One of the first instances occurs as Lia lies in bed, sensing "the smell of ginger and cloves and burnt sugar drifts over my bed" (43), scents she associates with Cassie's body wash, shampoo, and perfume. Lia believes Cassie is "coming, any minute now" (43), reflecting her desperate yearning to reconnect with her deceased friend, despite knowing she is gone. This olfactory hallucination (relating to the sense of smell) symbolizes Lia's inability to let go of her, as if Cassie's spirit still lingers. Through these sensory experiences, Lia's mind is dying to have a connection with Cassie, delaying her ability to process grief and move forward.

Lia's hallucinations grow more complex as she visualizes Cassie's ghost in grotesque, otherworldly forms. She describes "thorn-covered vines creep across the floor, cracking like a bonfire" as Cassie emerges, "briars twining up her legs and around her body" (43). This thorny image of Cassie embodies Lia's guilt and unresolved emotions, with the thorns symbolizing her entanglement in shame and regret. Cassie's haunting form reflects the psychological torment Lia endures, acting as a reminder of her perceived failure to save her friend. These

hallucinations trap Lia in a cycle of blame and self-punishment.

In addition to sensory experiences, Lia suffers intense auditory hallucinations, hearing Cassie's voice echo in her mind. Phrases like "Her voice is in my head...Come with me... Please" (43) become relentless. Cassie's voice transforms into a critical, haunting presence, fuelling Lia's self-destructive tendencies and symbolizing her unresolved grief and inner conflict. This auditory torment underscores Lia's struggle between her guilt and the need for self-preservation.

This hallucination encapsulates the ways in which Cassie's death has deeply affected Lia, blurring the boundaries between Lia's own anguish and her perception of Cassie's influence over her. Cassie's words represent not only a reminder of their connection but also the emotional and psychological burdens Lia carries, particularly her sense of guilt for surviving and her feelings of responsibility for Cassie's death. Lia perceives Cassie's voice as an invitation to join her in death, symbolizing her conflicted feelings about her own existence and the desire for escape from her mental suffering. Hearing Cassie's plea, "come with me" signifies Lia's profound struggle with survivor's guilt. This perceived invitation into death not only reflects her own desire to reunite with Cassie but also underscores her compulsion toward anorexia as a way of self-destruction. By externalizing her inner suffering through Cassie's voice, Lia's subconscious constructs a compelling and destructive force that continually prevents her from recovery.

When Lia's stepmother is about to weigh her, she sews up some quarters in her robe, so that it increases her weight when she is standing on the weighing machine. She says "For the first couple of months, she measured my sins every morning and called in the results to my doctor once a week. The ugly numbers made me cry...I step on the scales. 107.00 fake pounds." (46-47) Because of the fake weight, she is 107. In the true weighing scale, she is just 99.00 pounds, she saw her true body weight when she is alone, she confesses to herself "I open my eyes. 0.99.00 pounds [44.906 kg]. I am officially standing in on Goal Number One. If my docs knew they'd bodyslam me back into treatment. There would be consequences, and repercussions because (once again) I broke the rules about the perfect-sized Lia... Goal number Two is 095.00...At 095.00, I will be pure. (52-53)

Anderson explicitly writes the desire of anorexic patients through the character Lia, "If I got down to 070.00 pounds [31 kg], I'd want 065.00 pounds [29 kg]. If I weighed 010.00 [4 kg], I wouldn't be happy until I got down to 005.00 (2 kg). The only number that would ever be enough is 0. Zero pounds, zero life, size zero, double -zero, Zero point." (220) Lia has developed a lunatic obsession on having a zero size, she continually repeats this like a mad person, her obsessive nature to lose weight to the lowest is the deadly nature of anorexia trauma. Lia's desire to get zero size is the desire to die. As Susan Bordo pointed out in her preface to *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, in the world of teenagers, there is a size zero, and it's a status symbol... Their world is one in which the anorexics swap starvation diet tips on the Internet, participate in group fasts, offer advice on how to hide your "ana" from family members, and share inspirational photos of emaciated models... the real epidemic is among the girls with seemingly healthy eating habits, seemingly healthy bodies, who vomit or work their butts off as a regular form of anti-fat maintenance. These girls not only look "normal" but consider themselves normal. (Bordo xxvii)

When Lia's imaginations get hard she knows that something bad is going to happen so she gathers up the courage to face her hallucination, "You're a figment of my imagination, or hallucination caused by my meds or that damn cookie. You do not exist." (195) But Lia imagines that Cassie's ghost telling her "You're almost there, buddy. Stay strong... I know how bad you feel. Trapped." She says." (195)

In the novel, Lia demonstrates several symptoms that align with Major-Depressive Disorder. The symptoms include:

- 1) guilt about things other than actions taken or not taken by the survivor at the time of death; 2) thoughts of death other than the survivor feeling that he or she would be better off dead or should have died with the deceased person; 3) morbid preoccupation with worthlessness; 4) marked psychomotor retardation; 5) prolonged or marked functional impairment; and 6) hallucinatory experiences other than thinking that he or she hears the voice of, or transiently sees the image of, the deceased person. (Cohen, et al. 16)

Lia experiences overwhelming guilt about Cassie's death, believing she should have done more to help or prevent it. Her inner monologue reveals repeated thoughts such as, "She called thirty-three times. You didn't answer... You left her alone. should should should have done anything everything. You killed her." (97) Lia's thoughts of death go beyond mourning Cassie; she becomes consumed with self-destructive ideation. Her obsession with becoming "a size zero" and engaging in extreme anorexic practices reflect her desire to die. Lia's reflections and hallucinations about Cassie often include feelings of being "caught between the living and the dead" and a sense of inevitability about joining Cassie, indicating a preoccupation with death. There are instances where Lia struggles to act physically due to mental and emotional exhaustion. For instance, her movements are slow and laboured, as seen when she describes the effort it takes to get up, dress, or eat. She often refers to her limbs feeling weighed down and her inability to engage in normal daily routines. "The climb upstairs takes longer than usual." (10) Lia struggles with everyday tasks, including eating, attending school, and maintaining relationships. Her perception of herself is deeply impaired, as seen in her obsessive thoughts about food and her sense of failure in roles like daughter and sister. These examples strongly suggest that Lia's experiences in the novel align with the diagnostic criteria for Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). MDD is a mental health condition characterized by a consistently depressed mood and a prolonged inability to find joy or interest in life.

Whenever Lia feels hopeless, she starts knitting. Knitting is one of the few hobbies Lia still engages in, and she often uses it as a means to symbolically address the struggles in her life. As she describes, "I knit the afternoon away... I knit apologies for Emma [Lia's Stepsister]. I knit angry knots and slipped stitches for every mistake that I ever made, and I knit wet, swollen stitches that look awful. I knit the sun down." (263) Initially, she sets out to create a simple scarf, but as her condition deteriorates, she keeps crocheting without a clear end in sight. Lia's knitting becomes an important coping mechanism during her psychological struggles, providing some sense of relief when her life feels overwhelmingly hopeless. The act of knitting helps her to distract from the challenges she faces, including her eating restrictions and

disturbing hallucinations. With each stitch, Lia finds a way to balance her emotions and maintain a little sense of control in her chaotic life.

Anderson uses the word “Wintergirls” to represent the destructive nature of eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Winter symbolizes frozenness and coldness. Coldness alludes to illness and pain. Those who suffers from eating disorders become frozen due to their unbreakable starvation, they are stuck between being alive and being dead due to their destroyed self. After undertaking ruthless starvation, Lia thought that she slowly lost the feeling of being alive. Lia imagines that Cassie’s spirit says to her, “You’re not dead, but you’re not alive, either. You are a wintergirl, Lia-Lia, caught in between the worlds. You’re a ghost with a beating heart. Soon you’ll cross the border and be with me. I’m so stocked. I miss you wicked” (195-196) The term “Wintergirl” encapsulates Lia’s emotional and physical state: she is frozen, neither fully alive nor dead, caught in a liminal space of numbness, detachment, and self-destruction. This metaphor of being a “Wintergirl” symbolizes Lia’s stagnation and inability to move forward in life. Like the barren, frozen landscapes of winter, she is devoid of warmth, growth, or vitality.

Anderson presents a lucid picture of Lia’s alienation from humankind. She loses the connection from the real world and sinks her mind in the world of hallucination and delusion. Her peers in her school mention her as, “Dead girl walking” Anderson clearly portrays the dreadful effects of Anorexia through Lia. As Lia’s weight falls lower and lower, she grows weaker and weaker, but her determination is steadfast. Lia is stubborn in achieving her goal of reaching zero size, which is equal to death and she wants to attain it by any means. In order to cope with her stress and trauma she forces herself to suffer the physical pain by making deep cuts her body. Lia believes her self-destructiveness act as a coping mechanism for her trauma and guilt. She totally lost her real self and becomes the “Living dead girl”.

Lia feels deeply ashamed of her perceived failures, including self-harm, disordered eating, and strained relationships: “I failed eating, failed drinking, failed not cutting myself into shreds. Failed friendship. Failed sisterhood and daughterhood. Failed mirrors and scales and phone calls.” (227). She regrets on constantly failing at life, and fails at being a real girl. When Cassie’s hallucination pushes her further— “Use a bigger knife next time. Cut deeper. Get it over with.” (243) Eventually Lia realizes the danger and acknowledges, “I don’t think I want to die.” (243) This turning point motivates her to seek recovery. She volunteers herself to visit her therapist, where she shares her experiences of being haunted by Cassie’s voice which urges her to die, the self-destructive behaviors it provoked, and her efforts to block out the pain, marking the start of her healing journey.

Lia’s therapist helps her gain clear insight into her perception of ghosts, explaining, “I believe that you’ve created a metaphorical universe in which you can express your darkest fears. In one aspect, yes, I believe in ghosts, but we create them. We haunt ourselves and we lose track of reality.” (250) These words help Lia to realize that she has constructed an imaginary world to cope with her “darkest fears,” seeing and hearing Cassie during moments of weakness and vulnerability. Judith Herman emphasizes that “sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world.” (Herman 70) Lia comes to understand that avoiding or suppressing her trauma does not resolve her struggles, instead, it intensifies her stress and deepens the feelings of depression she experiences. Consequently,

she decides to open up to her therapist, confronting her internal turmoil to get away from the trauma.

Lia struggles between her subconscious desire for a peaceful life and the haunting pull of Cassie's hallucination toward death. Caught in this conflict, she begins to follow Cassie's autocratic voice pushes her closer to self-destruction. Though Lia longs to recover and abandon her anorexic behaviours, her weakened and exhausted state makes healing seem unattainable. Lia visits the motel where Cassie died and takes an excessive amount of sleeping pills to subdue Cassie's haunting image and voice. As she drifts in and out of consciousness, she imagines a conversation with Cassie, "Finally! she [Cassie] shouts. Why are you always late? You got lost again, right?" (269) Cassie, as a manifestation of Lia's inner turmoil and guilt, acts as a voice urging surrender. She coldly informs Lia of her impending death, embodying the destructive pull of Lia's anorexia and despair: "You're dying... This is your fate." (269) Cassie's tone is both detached and persuasive, symbolizing Lia's internalized hopelessness and her perceived inevitability of death.

However, Lia resists, albeit weakly at first, as seen in her refusal, "I don't want to play," (269) and her plea, "I want to go home." (269) This reflects the flicker of her will to live, even amid her disoriented state. Her mention of Lia's step-sister, Emma, "I have to teach Emma how to knit. I promised" (269) reflects Lia's desire for connection and responsibility, anchoring her to the world of the living. The hallucinated conversation between Lia and Cassie at the end of *Wintergirls* represents Lia's internal battle between life and death. Cassie's ghost embodies Lia's guilt and self-destructive tendencies, urging her to surrender to death. Lia's resistance, though faint at first, emerges through her desire to fulfil promises and maintain connections, such as teaching her step-sister Emma to knit. This moment marks a turning point where Lia begins to reject the pull of despair and choose life, symbolizing her struggle to reclaim control and move toward recovery.

Lia realizes that seeking forgiveness and letting go of guilt are the catalysts to freeing herself from Cassie's hold. In this moment of reconciliation, she apologizes for not being there during Cassie's darkest times, marking a pivotal step in recovery. In the final moments, they both apologize to each other, Lia's imagined reconciliation with Cassie reflects the deep emotional healing Lia begins to experience. Lia apologizes for not answering Cassie's calls before her death, a burden of guilt that has haunted her throughout the novel. Cassie, in turn, expresses regret for not reaching out sooner. As Judith Herman explains, "Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery" (Herman 197). By confronting her regret and reconnecting through this imagined dialogue, Lia begins to heal. This moment of forgiveness allows Lia to let go of the hallucinated version of Cassie.

Through forgiving Cassie and accepting her apology, Lia takes an essential step toward self-compassion and recovery, freeing herself from the cycle of guilt and regret. This exchange emphasizes the elements of healing through acceptance, reconnection, and letting go of the past. Lia's moment of self-realization is depicted through her recognition that her survival is a choice only she can make. After ten days of treatment, Lia awakens from her unconscious state and embraces life after battling anorexia and mental illness. She overcomes her hesitation towards food, realizing its vital role in sustaining life, and accepts that extreme thinness is not

an achievement. She accepts the fact that “food is life” (275) and begins to savor food again, rediscovering its aromas and flavors after years of avoidance. She finds comfort in her progress, affirming, “You’re talking. You’re eating. You’re blooming. That’s all that matters.” (276) Forgiveness from Cassie further helps Lia heal from her grief.

The novel *Wintergirls* portrays the internal and external struggles of its characters, particularly Lia, who battles an eating disorder. It also illustrates self-realization as a transformative and deeply personal process, essential for breaking free from cycles of pain and rediscovering one’s sense of identity. Anderson provides an unflinching and realistic depiction of eating disorders, highlighting their devastating effects without glamorizing or promoting them. Through vivid and poignant storytelling, the novel illustrates the destructive power of eating disorders, which can cause havoc in a person’s life, even leading to fatal outcomes. Lia’s painful journey offers insight into the overwhelming challenges faced by those battling with such conditions. The novel embodies themes of hope, healing, and transformation, as Anderson delves into the fractured psyche of Lia, capturing her vulnerability and the psychological torment of being torn between choosing life or succumbing to death.

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