Summary

At first, Peter doesn’t think much of the constant rumbling in his stomach. He’s a growing boy, so he needs sustenance, and May’s always said his appetite seemed too big for his body, even before Spider-Man.

He quickly realizes though that the emptiness isn’t normal. That nearly passing out every time he stands up isn’t normal. That dropping weight when there’s not much to lose isn’t normal. So Peter starts eating more. Starts packing on calories. And May complains about empty fridges and Peter’s monster stomach, and life continues as is.

But then May sits Peter down on the couch, and very carefully explains that they don’t have that much extra money, and that she’s so so so sorry, but Peter needs to stop eating so damn much.

So Peter starts eating less, the hunger returns, and he doesn’t think much about it.

That's his first mistake.

Notes

Please take the tags into accounts. This story deals heavily with eating disorders, specifically the starve/binge/purge type, so please don't read this if you can't safely do so.

Another thing to keep in mind is that there's lots of irrational thinking on Peter's part because that's what eating disorders do.
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But then May sits Peter down on the couch, and very carefully explains that they don’t have that much extra money, and that she’s so so so sorry, but Peter needs to stop eating so damn much.

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School drags. Tony says that it’s because Peter’s too smart, but Tony’s also never truly experienced regular school life, so he doesn’t understand that school drags for most teenagers in the American education system.

Still, it never used to be this bad. The hours pass so slowly, the clocks move at a snail’s pace, and Peter feels like he’s wading through quicksand. He can’t concentrate. His stomach cramps, and he focuses on that, and on lunch, and on nothing else. When he’s asked a question in Physics (one of the only classes that doesn’t cause immediate suffering), Peter can barely answer. His brain is shutting down, and every time he blinks, he feels like his eyes will never open.

“Peter,” Ned nudges, the cafeteria loud and bright and terrible. “You good?” He pushes Peter’s lunch tray closer, and Peter nods, taking his fork and digging into his Teriyaki Chicken.

“Yeah, sorry. Just got distracted.”

Ned hums, pressing his leg against Peter’s to stop the trembling, and Peter squeezes Ned’s hand under the table.

Every bite of chicken tastes worse and worse, and Peter can’t believe how stupid he was to eat so much before. He should’ve known that May could never afford to feed him in such large amounts. She’s working double shifts nearly every day for a kid she never asked for, and all Peter does is waste her money. Waste her effort. Her food. He knows she didn’t pack a lunch today because today is grocery day, and they—once again—have no food left in the fridge. Probably because Peter got an extra serving a couple days ago.

He puts down his fork, still hungry (starving), but too tired and too angry at himself to eat. Toppling over, he leans his head against Ned’s shoulder and sighs.

“Wanna come over later?” Ned asks, and Peter nods.

“You got a new PS4, right?”

“You know it, dude.”

Maybe if he’s lucky, he can eat at Ned’s house, and May won’t have to worry about him tonight.

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The first time Peter realizes something is really wrong is when he’s at the compound getting dinner with Tony and Pepper.

The table is stacked with pizza, from pineapple to vegetarian to pepperoni to bbq chicken. And Peter’s so hungry, but he can’t bring himself to eat.

“Kid?” Tony asks, eyebrows furrowed at Peter’s untouched plate, and Peter realizes he’s been zoning out, so he grabs a slice of bbq chicken and takes a slow bite.

The cheese melts in his mouth, but it tastes like ashes. He already feels his stomach bloating, already feels the calories he knows May isn’t getting, so he shouldn’t be getting either. Already feels ill.

Pepper’s watching carefully, and sets a hand on Peter’s shoulder.

“Peter? Are you sick?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry, the Pizza’s really good. I think I’m just tired.”

Tony doesn’t look like he believes a single word out of Peter’s mouth, but he doesn’t call him out of it. Instead, he presses the back of his hand onto Peter’s head and frowns.

“You don’t feel warm.”

Peter shrugs. “Maybe I just ate too much for lunch.”

“Try to finish the slice,” Pepper suggests, and Peter doesn’t want to disappoint, so he takes another bite.

He doesn’t know why, but he feels like he wants to cry. He sets the slice down.

“Sorry, I can’t. I don’t feel that great.”

“Ok. That’s ok.” Tony scoots closer to Peter, trailing a hand through his hair. “Why don’t you go lie on the couch? Pepper and I will join you in a sec.”

“But I don’t want to ruin your dinner.”

“It’s okay, Pete. Nothing’s ruined. Go lie on the couch, aright kiddo?”

Peter nods, brain clogged, and stands up too quickly. Immediately, he blacks out for a second, swaying on his feet as the blood rushes away from his head.

“Woah!” Tony grabs him. “Steady, Pete.”

Peter finds his footing, face flushing, and gently detaches himself from Tony. “I’m okay. Just stood up too fast. I’m gonna,” he gestures to the couch, “go lie down now.”

He’s unsteady all the way to the couch, but eventually he makes it slouches down onto the cushions, shutting his eyes.

What’s happening to him?

In the middle of the night, he realizes that he’s on his bed in the compound, and that Tony and
Pepper are both sitting beside him, talking in hushed voices.

“Something’s wrong with the kid, Pep, I’m telling you. He never passes up on Pizza.”

Pepper sighs. “Normally, I would say Peter’s just not feeling great, but I actually think you’re right this time.”

A hand comes to a rest on Peter’s forehead, and Peter lets himself relax so he doesn’t twitch.

“Oh, kiddo,” Tony whispers, rustling the blankets. “What’s going on?”

He hears Tony and Pepper kiss, his bed shifting from the sudden change in weight, and the warm hand on his skin withdraws.

The moment they leave, Peter drifts off, his dreams filled with oozing cheese dripping into his mouth.

It gets worse (as it always does). Peter can’t eat. When he does, he feels terrible, and when he doesn’t, he feels terrible. It’s a lose-lose.

He’s so hungry that he’s not hungry anymore, and that’s the scariest part. His stomach no longer hurts, but he craves everything. He can salivate from looking at an apple, and then feels pathetic for doing so.

Peter doesn’t understand why he’s like this. He’s not trying to lose weight; it just keeps happening. And he would love to eat, but the guilt every time he spoons something into his mouth forces him to stop.

Really, he’s just tired of feeling bad. Or maybe he’s tired of feeling tired. At this point, it’s getting a little hard to tell.

Being Spider-Man is too difficult. His limbs won’t work like he wants them to. They aren’t swift enough anymore. He’s sluggish, slower. But he’s also smaller, which works in his favour.

But being smaller means nothing when he can’t function. He’s supposed to save lives, and he can hardly see straight.

(But May has no money)

(But May’s probably going hungry)

Peter can survive like this. It’s not fun, but it’s manageable, and and the end of the day, he’s still alive.

It’ll be alright.

(Who is he trying to convince?)

He begins to like the way he looks.
He shouldn’t, but he does.

He likes how thin his wrists are, likes how tiny his Spider-Man costume makes him look. Likes how his clothes are becoming too big. Food is something he can control. Money is not. But if he controls his food, in some ways, he controls May’s money.

He doesn’t need to eat that much anyway. He was just giving into gluttony. It’s better like this, healthier. Small people can dodge more things, can save more people, can get to places undetected. Maybe he’s more tired, maybe he’s slower, but if he works harder, he can be fast again.

He’s still not trying to lose weight (he’s not). It’s a side effect of a greater cause. For May. Anything for May.

(he feels like he’s dying)

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It starts and ends like this:

Peter’s walking to class with Ned, and Ned says, “I’m really pumped for tonight.”

And Peter says, “What’s going on tonight?” (Strike one)

“Oh...you come over every Friday night...”

It’s already Friday? (Strike two)

Peter halts, forcing Ned to stop with him, and he shakes his head. “I can’t go over tonight,” he says, hating how the smile on Ned’s face immediately falls.

“What? Why?”

“I’m...” he has no more excuses, so all that’s left is the truth. “I’m really not feeling great.” He’s so tired, his limbs are weights, he can barely walk. Even talking takes more willpower than he’d like to admit.

Concerned, Ned looks a bit too closely at Peter, doing a full body scan, before ushering him to a bench and forcing him to sit. “You don’t look good,” he says.

“I’ll just sleep a lot this weekend and be back to normal on Monday. No big deal.”

Ned shakes his head, eyes lingering on Peter’s collarbone peeking out of his baggy clothes. “Dude, you really really don’t look good. I think you should go home.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Oh my god, Ned. It’s fine.” He moves to stand up, but it’s too fast, too sudden, and everything falls away from his head.

He doesn’t even notice it happening. He stands, and the next thing he knows, he’s on the floor, blinking black dots out of his eyes.

“Oh my—fuck! Peter, hold still, no, don’t move—hey! Don’t move!” Ned presses against Peter’s shoulders, forcing him down, and by now a couple other students are seeing what’s wrong.

“Ohmygod ohmygod. What do I do?” Ned’s in panic mode, and Peter wants to reach out, to touch, to tell him to calm down, but he’s frozen. The world is whiting out, and his arms weigh ten tons each, and he feels like he’ll never move again.
“You need to breathe, you idiot,” MJ slides next to Ned “Breathe. Good. Someone’s getting the nurse so it’s gonna be fine. Look, Peter’s not even unconscious. He’s looking at you, and you’re freaking him out, so you have to calm down.”

Ned nods frantically, taking deep breaths, and Peter wants to say that he’s not freaked out, that he’s fine, but his mouth refuses to open.

He wants to roll over, get his hands and feet under him, and stand up, but he can’t. (Strike three)

It’s Tony who comes gets him. Not even Happy, but Tony Stark. He collects Peter from the nurse’s office, reassuring a fretting Ned and MJ (although she’d loathe to admit it).

“You need to breathe, you idiot,” MJ slides next to Ned “Breathe. Good. Someone’s getting the nurse so it’s gonna be fine. Look, Peter’s not even unconscious. He’s looking at you, and you’re freaking him out, so you have to calm down.”

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“Hey, Pete,” Tony says, quietly, once they’re outside of the school.

“Hey.”

“Wanna tell me what happened?”

Peter shrugs, getting into the passenger seat of the car after Tony opens the door.

“Yeah, not good enough. Wanna try again?”

Peter shakes his head, and Tony sighs.

“Petey, you gotta talk to me. C’mon.” The car engine is off, and Tony’s leaning over to Peter’s seat, clearly trying his best to be patient.

That’s not what does Peter in though. What does Peter in is Tony’s careful hand, coming to a rest on Peter’s back before pulling him into a tentative hug. “C’mon, Pete. You gotta tell me what’s wrong.”

Peter sniffles, burying his face into Tony’s suit jacket, and tries not to lose it. “I can’t help it,” he says. “May spends so much money on me, and all I do is waste it.”

“Hey, no,” Tony says, voice stern. “She’s your guardian. She loves you more than anything in the world.”

“I know,” Peter confesses, “but she never asked to have a kid! She didn’t even want one. And after the spider bite, I was eating her out of her own house. So I just…”

“So you just stopped eating?” Tony’s incredulous, but Peter only shrugs.

“I still eat.”

Tony looks at Peter up and down, exactly like how Ned did, and his face crumples in a way Peter’s never seen it do. “Right.”

“I do! I just eat less now because it’s not fair to her, to have to spend so much money on me when there’s none to spend!”

“So you just stopped eating?” Tony’s incredulous, but Peter only shrugs.

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“I do! I just eat less now because it’s not fair to her, to have to spend so much money on me when there’s none to spend!”

Okay, listen up, kid.” Tony pulls away from Peter, keeping a hand on his shoulder. “She doesn’t take care of you because it’s an obligation. She does it because she loves you to pieces, and she would absolutely hate to see you like this.” The I hate it too is left unsaid, but heard nonetheless.
“I know!” Tony doesn’t get it. Doesn’t get why Peter has to do this. Doesn’t get it because he’s rich, and was born rich, and will always be rich.

“Then why?”

“Because we don’t have the money! Food is expensive! We’re not like you, Mr. Stark. We don’t turn on our AC in the summer and we barely turn on our heater in the winter. Hot water runs out and we live paycheck to paycheck. Sometimes not even, and then May picks up some extra shifts until we make it while I’m studying at a special school with my special life and forcing her to spend all this money.” He takes a breath, but his lungs aren’t expanding. “You don’t get it!”

For once, Tony is quiet. When he does speak, it’s exactly what Peter doesn’t want to hear. “Let me help.”

“No.”

“If it’s a pride thing, it’s stupid. Let me help,” he says again, and Peter starts to cry. Because he’s right. It’s a pride thing, for him and May both. Letting someone help means that they can’t support themselves. Means that May can’t support her family.

It’s embarrassing. It shouldn’t be, but it is.

“We’ll talk to May. It’s okay.”

Peter shakes his head. “I can’t eat,” he chokes out. “I can’t. I won’t.”

“Why?” Tony’s so sincere, so concerned, that it makes Peter want to answer.

“Because it’s the only thing I have control over right now.”

“Okay.” Tony says, ruffling Peter’s hair before leaning back and starting the engine. “Okay. We’ll talk to May, and then we’ll do something. You’re not alone, Pete.”

This, Peter knows, is Tony cutting the conversation short because he no longer knows what to say. For once though, Peter’s grateful for it. He can hear the strain in Tony’s voice, can see it on his face.

“I’m cold.” Peter says, and Tony looks at the temperature displayed on the car, then back at Peter swaddled in an oversized sweater.

It’s seventy degrees outside, warmer in the car.

“I have a jacket in the backseat,” Tony says, turning back to the road.

Unbuckling his seat belt, Peter stretches until he reaches it, then returns to his seat and rebuckles himself. He wraps the coat around himself and sinks into it, wishing to teleport home. Wishing to disappear.

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“May doesn’t get back until nine on Fridays.”

“So we’ll wait.”

Peter closes his eyes. When he opens them, Tony has parked the car at Olive Garden, and Peter knows exactly what he’s doing.
“I can’t,” Peter says. “I’m not hungry.”

“Well, I am, so let’s go.”

“No. You can’t,” he gestures around for something, at nothing, “just do this. Control my life. I said I’m not hungry!”


“I will, I do. I’m just not hungry right now so just,” his fingers tangle into the fraying thread of his sweater, “stop telling me to eat.”

For a second, he sees Tony about to relent, but then he shakes his head and stares Peter head-on. “No. Kid, if you don’t eat enough, you’re gonna die, and I’m sure I’ve told you this before, but I can’t let that happen.”

“Mr. Stark,” Peter rolls his eyes. “It’s one meal, I’m not going to die.” He tries to make his voice softer, so he doesn’t sound as annoyed as he feels, but he’s always been bad at hiding his feelings and it shows.

Tony deflates, his head falling into his hands. “Kid, you’re killing me here.”

It was never Peter’s intention to hurt anyone, but Tony is clearly hurting. “Sorry,” he mutters, curling in on himself, but Tony shakes his head.

“I don’t want to hear anymore apologies from you. I’m not going to force you to eat right now, but you have to promise me you’ll eat later today. Capiche?”

Relief loosens Peter’s limbs, and he nods enthusiastically. “Of course, Mr. Stark! I promise.”

At the time, he meant it, but sitting with May and Tony at the dinner table in his small apartment, he can’t bring himself to. The food looks good, but Peter doesn’t want to touch any of it. Stir-fried veggies, toasted pita, lamb skewers, roasted butternut squash.

He wants to eat everything.

He wants to eat nothing.

“Honey, you’re not hungry?” May puts a piece of pita on his plate, but Peter takes it right off and moves it onto Tony’s plate.

“Pete,” Tony sighs, but Peter can’t look him in the eyes.

“Sorry.”

“No more apologies.”

Peter nods.

May looks back and forth between them before setting her fork down and pursing her lips. “Let’s go to the couch and try eating later when we’re all more up for it.”

Again, Peter’s fucked up. “No!” he tries, “you guys should eat. I’ll just sit over there and wait, and you guys can join me after dinner—”
“Nice try,” Tony cuts in. “But no.” The three of them stand and walk to the couch, Tony’s hand on his back being the only thing keeping Peter moving forwards.

They’ve barely sit down before Tony looks at May and says, “Peter’s not eating.”

“Hey!” It’s a sudden fury that takes all of them by surprise, but the anger is so spontaneous and intense that Peter can’t help it. “I’m eating! And even if I wasn’t, why do you think it’s okay to interfere?”

Tony’s baffled, staring at Peter with his mouth open. “Kid, you look like you’re dying. If I can do something to keep you alive, I’m going to do it, with or without your permission.”

The flinch is full-bodied, and Peter presses the heels of his palms into his eyes, trying to push the tears back. He groans, but really he wants to yell. This isn’t fair. It’s not fair. He’s only doing this to help and they’re punishing him for it.

“I’m trying my best,” Peter croaks, May’s hesitant hand fluttering on his shoulder.

“Peter?” she says. “You’re not eating?”

He shakes his head, wishing she could read his mind to understand. “It’s only to help. Not to lose weight or anything. I just need something to control.”

He looks up and immediately regrets it because May looks like she’s barely holding it together. She squeezes his shoulder a little too hard before her eyes linger on his wrists, his fingers, his purple nails. She holds his hand, and either she’s really warm or he’s ice cold.

“He thinks he’s helping you save money by not eating,” Tony says, and May looks at Peter with such sorrow that he can’t stand it.

“Why would you do that?” she asks, then covers her mouth, realization dawning. “It’s because I told you to. Oh my god.”

“No, May. It’s not your fault. You didn’t know about my enhanced metabolism. It’s fine.”

She looks horrified. “Oh my god. I told you to starve yourself.” She turns to Peter, touching his face.

“No, it’s fine. Stop, you didn’t know.”

She looks like she’s been struck, like she doesn’t know what to do.

“May, It’s okay,” Tony says, but May turns to him with a rare intensity that has even Peter drawing back.

“It’s not!” She snaps. “He’s never been this thin, Tony.”

“Look, we’ll get him some help, and it’ll be fine. I’ll pay for everything. No problem.”

“It’s not you paying for things that’s the biggest problem. It’s the fact that my kid thinks he’s worth less than my money.”

“I know, May. We’ll work through this, okay?”

“God! That’s all you know how to say! ‘We’ll work through this.’ How? When? You can’t just say things and expect them to come true —”
“I’m fine!” Peter cuts in. “Stop talking about me like I’m a problem!”

May freezes, taking deep breaths as if she’s reminding her body that it needs air, then slowly reaches her arms out, and Peter gladly crawls in, letting her hold him.

“It’s okay,” she says, kissing his forehead, her movements slow like she’s still recovering from yelling. “We’ll figure something out, but you need to eat, baby. I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Nooo,” he groans. “You don’t get it. The spider bite made my metabolism crazy. I can’t eat. If I eat, I’ll never stop.”

“And I said I would cover those costs,” Tony said, “So what’s your excuse now?”

Peter hates that they’re ganging up on him, that they’re trapping him, that they’re not even trying to see from his point of view. He hasn’t cried this much since Ben died, but suddenly the tears won’t stop. He leans closer into May’s chest and sobs.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he admits, trying to ignore May’s fingers tracing his spine, counting the vertebrae. If he looks up again, he knows he’ll see her heart breaking.

“Let us help, Pete,” Tony says, and Peter gives in, like he always does for his loved ones.

“Okay,” he says, feeling May’s body tremble, feeling Tony’s nails scratching his scalp.

He hates them (he doesn’t. He hates himself).

For some reason, he thought going back to normal would be easy.

It’s not. He doesn’t even feel hunger pangs anymore, but the moment he eats, the hunger comes back in full force and he can’t stop. He eats until May or Tony or Pepper take away his food. Until he’s bursting. Until he hates himself so much that he cries.

“No Spider-Man until you’re healthier,” Tony says, and Peter nods even though his heart is shriveling.

“How long is that?”

Tony catches the quiver in Peter’s voice, like he always does, and pulls him close. “It’s not a punishment, Pete. It’s to make sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

They make him see someone, and she’s nice, she gets it. She says, “you’re not alone,” and, “lots of teenagers go through this. If you work to get better, you will.” She reassures him that he’s doing great. She lets him doodle when he doesn’t want to talk. They don’t only talk about food, although their topic usually comes back to that.

“I deal with supers,” she says, “all the time. But with you, I’m dealing with a teenager with an enhanced metabolism, and that’s complicated.” But then she’ll let him talk and cry and sulk, and he’ll genuinely feel better.

Peter deals with it the best he can. Ned is there, May is there, Tony is there, Pepper is there, MJ is there.

“One day at a time,” May likes to say when he can’t eat, when he refuses to, or when he eats so much he feels like he’s going to explode.
And for a while, it works.
For a while, it’s good.
For a while, Peter lets himself relax, and forgets that it’s not that easy.

It’s not a relapse. He’s never done this before. But his stomach is heavy, he’s bloated, and he feels gross. He has his Spider-Man suit back, and he wants to patrol, but he can’t patrol if he feels like he’s going to throw up.

The reasoning makes sense—at least to Peter. He kneels by the toilet, wriggles two fingers down his throat, and throws up his dinner.

It’s easy. It doesn’t hurt. So it can’t be all that bad for him. Besides, he feels so much better afterwards, when he’s light and swinging through the air and free.

He doesn’t realize that he’s doing something bad again. When he overeats, he throws up because how else is he supposed to be Spider-Man? He gets dizzy again, but then he reminds himself to drink more water, and it’s okay.

He eats normally most days. It’s just that some days...he doesn’t, so he has to get rid of the evidence. It’s only a reset. He’s not doing anything bad. He’s doing his body a favour.

He comes home from school starving, his stomach clenching, so he heads to the fridge and rummages arounds. It’s fully stocked, thanks to Tony, so Peter has lots to choose from. He takes out a block of sharp cheddar and makes three grilled cheese sandwiches that he inhales on the the spot. May has chocolate covered pecans stashed in the cabinet, so he takes a handful of those too and eats them until he’s numb. Crackers and garlic hummus, leftover sushi.

He’s not even hungry anymore, but for some reason, he can’t stop eating. He looks for more food, more snacks, and before he knows it, his stomach hurts so badly that he can barely breathe.

Hating himself more with every passing second, he finds himself in front of the toilet again and jams three fingers down his throat. His nails scratch at his flesh, and chunks of undigested food come back out, spilling into the toilet. He throws up until there’s nothing left, flushing the toilet half-way through so he doesn’t clog it. Throws up until the aching fullness is replaced with an aching void.

Never again, he promises himself. He’ll never do that again.

But life doesn’t work that way, so it happens again, and he’s so embarrassed. He’s supposed to be a hero, and he can’t even help himself.

He keeps... eating. He can’t seem to stop. It’s either he eats everything or nothing at all. The only good thing about throwing up is that he doesn’t lose anymore weight, so his therapist doesn’t call him out.
Instead, he swings through the city with his ears ringing, his stomach clenching, so light-headed it feels like the wind might knock him out.

He flips through the air and barely catches himself, then slams down on a mugger too hard and hears a rib snap.

“Oh god,” Peter says as the man groans. “I’m so sorry.”

“Fuck you,” the man says, which is fair. Peter webs him up, calls the police, and walks the victim home because his guilt won’t let him swing away.

“Are you okay, Spidey?” the guy asks once they reach his house, and Peter laughs.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

The guy frowns, then pats Peter awkwardly on the shoulder. “Take it easy, Spidey. You gotta look out for yourself before you look out for us.”

Then he enters the building, and Peter’s left standing outside like an idiot, wondering why he never puts himself first anymore.

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It’s because every time he’s put himself first, someone else has gotten hurt.

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Spider-Man gets a lot of free food, and Peter indulges. He eats two hotdogs on the rooftops, then stops by a pizza place and inhales a extra large ham and pineapple pizza. Then he changes back into his civilian clothes, drops into a 7-Eleven washroom, and throws everything up.

To clean up the mess, he lazily wipes any drips with toilet paper, then splashes his face with cold water. His teeth have scraped his fingers, leaving a mess of red lines, but he can’t bring himself to care.

He heads home, and May greets him with a smile.

“Peter, how was patrol?”

“It was good. Nothing much happened. Stopped a guy trying to steal bread from the grocery store and bought him the bread instead. Brought a kid back to her mom. All in a day’s work.”

“That’s nice. You have time for dinner? Or are you gonna run off somewhere again?” She says it teasingly, but Peter can see how much she wants him to sit down for a meal.

He wants to tell her that he already ate. That he’s fine, but he doesn’t. He sits his ass down and has a meal with her, and if he throws it up later, well, she doesn’t have to know.

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“I’m so glad you’re doing well,” Pepper says, brushing Peter’s bangs from his face, and Peter grins.

“Thanks! I’m so glad I’m doing well too.”

“This kid just keeps bouncing back, doesn’t he?” Tony says, and Pepper laughs good-naturedly,
and Peter pretends like his stomach hasn’t tied itself into knots.

“How’s school, Pete?” Tony asks, and Peter shrugs.

“School is school. It’s fine.”

“Yeah?”

He nods.

“You’ve been…” Tony grows hesitant, and that’s how Peter knows they’re about to talk about touchier subjects. “You’ve been following your meal plan?”

“Yup!” Peter says. “May’s been keeping an eye out.” He’s not really lying. He’s just not telling the full truth, and what Tony doesn’t know can’t hurt him.

They head down to the labs after dinner, and Tony gives Peter no time to throw up, so Peter squirms and tinkers with his webshooters until he thinks he’ll really explode.

“I need to use the washroom,” he says, and Tony nods.

“Don’t take too long kid,” he says without looking up. “Or I’ll start the interesting stuff without you.”

Peter doesn’t take that long. In ten minutes, he’s back, his throat raw and his head spinning. But what Tony doesn’t know can’t hurt him, so Peter will keep this secret for as long as he can.

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As it turns out, he can’t keep it for that long after all.

There’s blood in his spit, his throat is torn, his voice is wrecked. Ned keeps asking if he’s okay, if he’s hungry, if he needs to call May or Mr. Stark or Ms. Potts.

“I’m fine, Ned.” Peter manages, trying to force himself to put his second lunch down. Trying to convince himself he’s had enough. That he doesn’t need anymore.

He keeps eating though.


Peter stuffs his face with fries.

Later on, after the bell has rung, Peter decides that being late to chemistry isn’t so bad and heads to the unisex toilet. It’s one room, one toilet, no chance of someone walking in. He locks the door and carefully, slowly, drains out his guilt. He’s only half-way through throwing up when there’s a heavy knock on the door.

“Peter.”

It’s Ned. Of course it’s Ned.

“Peter, I know you’re in there. Are you okay?”

Peter takes his fingers out of his throat and forces out a, “I’m fine.”
“You sound like you’re throwing up.”

“You just something I ate.”

But Ned keeps knocking and knocking and knocking. “Dude, you don’t sound good. I’m really worried. Please open up.”

And Peter’s tired. Maybe a part of him wants to be discovered. He opens the door and flushes the toilet as Ned watches, carefully scrubbing his hands clean.

Ned’s eyes are round as moons as he looks from Peter’s vomit-covered hands to the now-flushed toilet.

“I, uh, did some research,” Ned begins, “about eating disorders and such, and…”

He trails off, and Peter feels exhausted.

It’s a fucking loop. Heal from one thing, get hit with another.

“It’s okay, Ned.”

“You have to tell someone.”

So Peter nods. Because Ned’s right. Because he’s tired.

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He tells his therapist, who comforts him but tells Tony, who tells May.

They’re both shocked, like they can’t believe he’ll do something so horrible to himself, but after that there’s the guilt, which is really worse.

“God, Pete,” Tony keeps saying, as if that’ll change anything. “Why?”

And Peter doesn’t have an answer to give, but Tony keeps asking, and keeps asking, and Peter cracks right down the middle.

“What do you want me to say, Mr. Stark? That I’m stupid? An idiot for doing this to myself? Because thanks, I know. I can’t really control it anymore.” And Peter knows it’s ironic because this entire thing started because he wanted control.

“Is it addictive?” Tony asks. “Because I know a thing or two about that.”

And it is. It’s so addictive. The feeling of being empty, the throwing up, the light-headedness. It doesn’t feel good, but for some reason, Peter keeps chasing it.

Tony doesn’t give advice because he’s never had an eating disorder, but he understands addiction and somehow, his understanding is enough.

His therapist sometimes asks to talk to May or Tony or the both of them in private, and Peter will sit outside, wondering if it’s good news or bad news. He’s trying his best. It’s just not going as smoothly as he thought it would.

Sometimes, May hugs him so hard he feels like he’ll fall apart when she lets go, and Tony rubs his shoulder like he’s afraid Peter will disappear. They try to remind him how important he is, that he has to put himself first. But Peter will never put himself first. He doesn’t know how, and he’s not
about to start now, but he also knows that he can’t look out for others if he’s leaning on death’s
door.

He has an updated meal plan that he limps through on the good days and ignore completely on the
bad ones.

“You’re doing great, kid,” Tony says. Peter gives Tony the suit voluntarily this time, knowing he’ll
get it back because at this rate, he’ll hurt more people as Spider-Man than he’ll help. He can’t
control his strength when he’s hungry. One punch, and he might kill someone. Or maybe his punch
will be too weak, and he’ll end up getting himself killed.

May monitors his food intake carefully, attentive to his binges, making sure to distract him when
he wants to throw up.

“I need to puke,” Peter says. “I’m going to die.”

“You’re not. It’ll pass, Peter. It always does.” And May’s right—it’ll pass. But at the moment, it
feels like he’ll be full forever. That he’s destined to bloat until he explodes.

It’s not about his weight, it never was. It was always about control.

“You’re doing great,” Tony says every time Peter hangs out with him in his lab. “I know I don’t
say it often, but I’m so proud of you.”

Peter knows. He can tell by the softness in Tony’s eyes, by his head pats and shoulder rubs, by his
firm hugs. He can tell by the way the people around him say “I love you” without saying it.

“You’re incredible, Pete.”

One day, Peter will believe it.

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