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# ON HER LOOKS

## AND SHE STILL HATES HERSELF

Venetia Robinson, 38, has a condition which makes her convinced she's ugly. Her late mother gave her thousands of pounds for cosmetic surgery in the hope it would help. Here, Venetia reveals why she's battling for more of her mother's fortune to help her cope with this devastating illness

I enjoyed a very privileged childhood. Thanks to inherited money, my parents were extremely wealthy. My mother's great-grandfather had earned his fortune running paper mills in the US and we reaped the rewards. My earliest years were spent in a grand Regency house in Chelsea, London, with my brother Alexander, who was 11 years older than me. We didn't want for anything.

My parents were educated at Cambridge. My mother, Elisabeth Scott-Kilvert, was an artist whose work was exhibited at the prestigious Royal Academy of Arts in London. My father Ian was an academic who earned his living writing and translating philosophical works.

When I was five, we moved to Orchard House — a five-bedroom country house in Suffolk. With its swimming pool and large garden, it was an idyllic place to grow up. My parents enrolled me at a private school in the hope that a marvellous education would eventually win me a place at a top university like Cambridge. That was what they wanted.

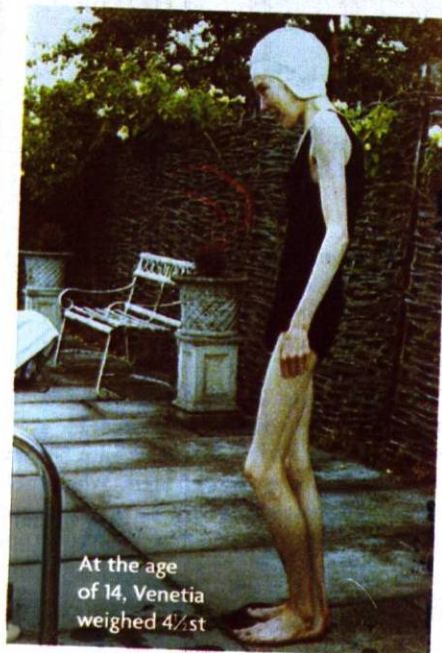
Life was carefree. My brother and I spent our days splashing about in the pool or racing each other on our bikes. And we had fabulous family holidays on luxury cruises to Italy and the Greek islands.

But, when I was six, my father left. To this day I've never understood why, although I often heard my parents arguing. I missed my father terribly and saw very little of him while I was growing up.

When I was 11, I was sent away to a boarding school during the week. It was a terrible shock — I was totally unprepared for living away from home. And although I told my mother I didn't like the school, she insisted that I stay.

### KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

When I was 12, my mother said casually, 'You look a little plump, dear.' Her throwaway comment had a huge effect on me. It was just puppy fat, but I



At the age of 14, Venetia weighed 4½st

looked at my podgy legs, then at my slim, chic mother. She was beautiful and glamorous, whereas I looked like a slightly chubby tomboy.

Appearances were rated highly in our household. My mother would often say, 'It's important you look good and wear nice clothes, Venetia.' That was the way she was raised. I felt as if I was letting her down and took her comments to heart. I began to wonder how I could lose weight. I figured if I could slim down, she would be pleased with me. A year or so later, when I was 13, I discovered how.

By this time, my mother had finally agreed to let me move back home and attend a nearby day school. But my new classmates were much more

competitive than the girls at my boarding school and I became terrified of failing the end-of-year exams. Suddenly I found I was no longer hungry. The stress of studying had killed my appetite and I stopped eating altogether.

The pounds fell off and I liked this new, lighter feeling. Within a year, my weight had dropped to just 6½st. The puppy fat had gone and my mother had stopped making comments — yet in my head I was still fat.

I stopped eating my school lunch. When my teachers told my mother, she started preparing me sandwiches and fruit, but I threw away the sandwiches and just nibbled at the fruit. I began to weigh myself several times a day and felt fantastic as the pounds melted away.

### LIVING ON NOTHING

For the first time since my parents split up, I felt I had some kind of control over my life. I invented all sorts of tricks to make it look as if I was eating. I'd nibble a tiny piece of toast for breakfast, throw away my packed lunch, then pick at my evening meal or pretend that I'd already eaten some supper at a friend's house.

My mother seemed concerned, but she didn't realise the extent of the problem. By the age of 14, I weighed just 4½st. I was surviving on toast crusts and an apple a day. To the outside world, I must have looked shocking. My cheeks were sunken and my ribs jutted out. Clothes hung off me and I felt constantly cold and exhausted.

I suffered agonising pain when I sat down. My bones were almost rubbing on the chair seat, with just a thin covering of flesh and skin to cushion them. I was so weak, even lowering myself into the bath was a major feat. My mother kept saying 'This can't go on', but I thought I looked good. Out of her depth, she finally called the doctor and I was ►



admitted to a specialist hospital unit for anorexics in Wimbledon, London.

The doctors told me that if I didn't feed myself, I would be tube-fed against my will. This was a frightening prospect, so I ate bread with high-calorie butter, soup and cheese — my idea of hell.

I had to eat every two hours if I wanted my parents or friends to visit me. I stayed in hospital for five months until I reached the target weight of 7st 12lb. I saw counsellors and psychiatrists, but their words simply drifted in one ear and out the other. I said what they wanted to hear — it was the only way to get out so I could start dieting again.

## DESPERATE FOR A CURE

As soon as I was discharged from the hospital, the anorexia took hold again and my weight quickly plummeted to just 6st. I went back to school but could only scrape C grades in O level English, French and Latin. My mother's dreams that I might go to Cambridge were shattered.

When I was 16, I discovered a dangerous new addiction — exercise. I was convinced my thighs and bottom were flabby, so I'd walk for two and a half hours every day after school, covering around seven miles. The exercise made me light-headed because I'd hardly eaten, but I felt exhilarated about the number of calories I was burning off.

Then I started buying huge quantities of laxatives and taking around 30 a day. They gave me terrible stomach cramps, but I felt as if they were another way of ridding my body of unwanted food.

My mother noticed the amount of time I was spending in the bathroom and soon realised what I was doing. Desperate for a cure, she had me admitted to several different hospitals.

But each time, it was the same pattern. I'd gain weight, then once I was discharged I'd stop eating and start exercising again. I was trapped in a vicious circle. By the age of 18, I'd been admitted to hospital

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on 11 separate occasions. Throughout this time, I only saw my father occasionally.

I wish I could recall more of my life during this difficult period, but I was so sick and weak, the days and months just passed by in a blur. I didn't realise it at the time but, not only was I anorexic, I was also in the grip of a crippling condition known as body dysmorphia — when a person obsessively believes they are hideously ugly.

I found it hard to concentrate. I taught music at home and had occasional jobs, but I could never hold them down. I worked in a chemist, but I didn't

## WHAT IS BODY DYSMORPHIC DISORDER?

This condition is a recognised psychiatric disorder, where sufferers are obsessed with their appearance and feel hideously ugly. They often fixate on particular body parts, such as their hair, eyes or thighs, and obsess about the changes they would like to make.

Many sufferers try to correct their perceived 'defects' with cosmetic surgery, dieting, exercise and beauty treatments. They find it hard to concentrate at school or at work and usually require medical help. The condition affects about two per cent of the population.

■ For advice on body dysmorphic disorder, call MIND (The Mental Health Charity) on 0845 766 0163 or visit [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk).

have enough energy to serve customers all day and had to leave after a month. It was a hazy, unhappy time. At this point, I was still living with my mother, who had resigned herself to my condition.

Then, when I was 24, I met Neil Robinson in a local pub. He worked as a labourer for a plastics company. I felt comfortable with him and he didn't judge me or my condition. When I told him I had anorexia and hated the way I looked, he reassured me it was something we would cope

with together. My father had died by now, but my mum could see that Neil made me very happy. We married in a register office and held our reception in a marquee in the garden at Orchard House.

## IN PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

You'd have thought married life would have helped me resolve my problems — and in some ways it did. I'm now a size 10 and weigh 8st 10lb. But I still have problems with food — I only eat a banana or some yogurt during the day and have one other meal at 11pm. I leave eating until the last possible

moment, because by then my hunger has faded.

But my body dysmorphia is still very much in evidence. Soon after I got married, I was flicking through a magazine when I spotted an article on plastic surgery. I felt a familiar prickle of excitement in the pit of my stomach — the same feeling I got when I discovered exercise and laxatives.

I realised I could change my appearance permanently. Six months later, I rang round various clinics in London to find out about liposuction for my bottom and thighs. Neil didn't try to dissuade me because he knew it was what I wanted. My mother even gave me some money to pay for it — I'd convinced her it would help me overcome the disgust I felt for my body.

Initially, I was euphoric about the results. It was great being able to wear tight jeans — but it wasn't enough for my critical eye. When I surveyed myself in the mirror, instead of seeing the good things I only noticed the bad points. Over the next few years, I had two further liposuction treatments, a facelift and wrinkle removal procedures.

By now, I'd spent about £10,000. I was only earning a small amount, so Mum subsidised a lot of







Venetia continues to battle with her condition. Although she has conquered the anorexia she suffered as a teenager, she is still dissatisfied with her body (above and right). Husband Neil (left) has been a constant support

## WHAT PRICE BEAUTY?

In court, Mr Justice Blackburne told Venetia she'd chosen a lifestyle, including thrice-weekly visits to the hairdresser and cosmetic procedures, which far exceeded her income.

'The claimant maintains an expensive lifestyle and has done so for years,' he said. 'She has undergone a large amount of plastic surgery, including liposuction, wrinkle-removal procedures and a facelift, at a cost of £16,000.

'She spends £400 per annum at one beauty salon where she has been a customer since 1997, and a further £2,000 a year at another salon where she has been a customer since 1994. She has visited a hairdresser three times a week at a cost of £13 per visit since 1989.

'She recently spent £750 on having her teeth laser-bleached and spends £200-300 on maintaining them. She has Perlane injections into her lips about every four months at a cost of £750 per annum.' Venetia also spends around £5,400 a year on clothes and shoes.

“Everyone has days when they hate their looks, but imagine living with that every moment — the self-hatred is so strong it cripples me

the surgery — she believed it would make me well.

With my body 'fixed', I now concentrated on my skin. Although I spent several hours each day cleansing and applying foundation, my skin still didn't look good enough. I wanted a smoother complexion and fewer wrinkles around my eyes. I booked in for a procedure called dermabrasion, which removed the top layers of skin on my face and left it looking brighter and younger. It cost me around £4,000 and I was pleased with the result.

But I didn't stop there. I felt dreadful without make-up, so I had semi-permanent eyeliner and lip liner to make sure I never had to be without it. This cost me a further £1,000 and I have it redone every year. Next, I decided to do something about my lips, which were revoltingly thin. I now have lip-plumping implants twice a year, at a cost of £1,000. My hair has always troubled me too, so I pay for hair extensions, which costs £300 every four months.

I never kept a detailed record of the amount I spent on surgery and beauty treatments over the years, but the total runs to thousands of pounds, mostly funded by my mother.

In April 2000, the unthinkable happened — my

mother died. I was 35. While she was alive, she'd given me Orchard House, which was worth around £200,000 in 1999. She had also bought a cottage for Neil and me when we married.

After her death, I learned she'd left me half of her £330,000 estate. My brother Alexander had died of a heart attack at the age of 42 in 1989, so the other half was held in trust for his son Duncan, 16. He will inherit the money when he's 25.

I continued having plastic surgery and beauty treatments, using the inheritance my mother had left me — but eventually I needed more money. And the more I thought about it, the more I felt I was entitled to a bigger cut of my mother's estate. I decided to go to court to try to get it.

### FIGHTING FOR MY FUTURE

I feel my mother's will didn't provide me with enough funds to pay for the treatments to cope with my condition. And because I'm unable to work full time, I need an income to support myself. When I first went to court, I was told I had a case, but before any money was awarded, another hearing was set for January this year at the High Court in

London. The judge there dismissed my claim. He said I had spent too much money on cosmetic surgery and had chosen a lifestyle which far exceeded my income.

This was outrageous and totally unfair — I was dependent on my mother and she didn't leave me adequate financial provision. The lawyers representing Duncan, who now lives in France, claimed I was vastly overspending. They tried to make me out to be a frivolous woman who was blowing her fortune on looking good. But I have a serious illness which means I need this money, so I intend to continue with my legal battle. My lawyers are currently preparing an appeal against the judgment.

The money I spend on myself isn't that much more than what a lot of other women pay out. I get through about £2,400 a year on beauty treatments, about £200 a month on having my hair blow-dried and £900 a year on maintaining my hair extensions. I know that because of my condition, my mother would have wanted me to continue like this. Body dysmorphism means that you are compelled to make yourself look better.

Having this condition has put my life in limbo, and surgery and beauty treatments are the only things that help. Everyone has days when they hate the way they look, but imagine living with that feeling every moment of your life. The self-hatred is so strong it cripples me. I'm desperate to live a normal existence and will carry on fighting for the money that will help me to do that. ■