

Light as a Feather by Carmen Murray

I've been consumed with the image of my body since I've known what it is to be jealous. I don't mean the fickle emotion that ebbs and flows out of you like a forty-eight hour flu; true jealousy is laced with a loathing that is difficult to detach yourself from. It's not making the volleyball or cheerleading team no matter how hard you try. It's having to sit through rehearsals and take notes for a role you'll never get to play. It's the self-comparison to every girl you come into contact with in the fluorescent lit hallways. You're not a Lilly, or an Emma, or even an Anna. It's the dichotomy of being happy for your best friend getting a boyfriend and hating her at the same time for abandoning you in the pathetic trenches of adolescence.

Jealousy chips away at you until pieces flake off like old nail polish. It is an out of body experience that leaves no room for perspective. You are entrenched in your own misfortune, accepting no blame, only pity or retribution. Then you don't realize you're a prisoner in your own cave, looking up at shadows you thought you knew. Truth arrives eventually, mine always seems to be in the form of a hospital.

The first time I can remember being in a hospital, outside of coming into this world, it involved my grandmother. Misfortunate events, and a round of roughhousing with my cousins, led to me falling into a glass table at her house. Events get jumbled in all of the chaos, but there is an image stitched into my mind of being held down while doctors stapled my head back together. I've never liked hospitals.

During our next introduction, I was much older and not at all wiser. My grandfather was sick. I remember hearing through the familial grapevine that he darted out of the house in the middle of the night, his mind laced with the haze of confusion. I was too chicken to ask my father for any real details. My visit was quick. He looked so small on the bed, and the smell of

the hospital was pervasive. It smelled like the end. It wasn't the end of him. Who knew my authoritative, tea party throwing grandmother would go first?

Then it was my turn. I was in a hospital, seeing a specialist because of jealousy. I despised my body, and I yearned to look like an actress from the Teen Vogues in the dresser drawer of my childhood bedroom. This led to a mental exhaustion, which created an apathy towards myself that was difficult to escape. I was the heaviest I had ever been, I felt awful, and now I was staring down at this orange drink the nurse handed to me. It would tell me if I had broken my body beyond repair, if jealousy truly was the end of me. It looked like Koolaid, but it held the truth. I made a bargain with God before I took that first sip. God and I were reverse fair weather friends. He could always count on me to dial that almighty telephone number when in a crisis. I promised the typical suspects, to be a better daughter, sister, and friend. Also, I promised to make my body the temple it was meant to be, instead of a dumping ground. Then I drank the orange Koolaid.

Fear can be a fantastic motivator, just as it can be a cruel deterrent from living a full life. She is a cousin of jealousy, the two sitting side by side and giggling in cahoots on how to control your life. My decision to lose weight, which evolved into a lifestyle that led with health, was initiated by fear. I was scared by doctor's visit after visit trying to decipher the issues of my body. The fatigue, the pins and needles sensation in my hands and feet, and the lack of motivation kept me glued to my room. Alone and unwell, I was forced to come to terms with my involvement in my downfall.

The fear didn't begin and end with my body, it transferred to the regret I was scared of developing. When my grandmother was near the end of her life, I would come over and sit with her, the TV playing Lenise Ligon on the local news or HGTV. She whispered to me in the

shadows of her bedroom things I never knew. As a child, the adults in your life aren't actual people. They're characters, something you read about or watch on TV. They aren't lorded over by real world circumstances. As an emerging adult I was able to recognize this woman as not just my grandmother, but as Juanita, a woman with some regrets. Then I thought of my own deathbed and the insurmountable regrets I would have if I didn't make a change, if I didn't start taking care of myself.

During this period, I lived at home and often found myself on Kent Road visiting my grandparents. Before the cancer completely ravaged my grandmother's body, it was my papa who needed looking after. I was glad my grandmother was feeling and looking normal after graduating from my university. She knew how to make the trifle I liked. It was a requirement that she stayed on this Earth as long as possible. I sat with my grandfather while she ran errands. Sitting with my grandfather meant watching vintage television shows in the living room and feeding him oatmeal until she returned. We didn't talk because there was nothing to be said between two introverts during an episode of Perry Mason.

The cooler weather came in from the coast, and it ushered in the sickness. My grandmother's health declined. When the people in your life are dying you learn an encyclopedia's worth of information. You learn what happens when they can't get out of bed without assistance, the effect this impending death has on family members and their relationships, and you learn so much about the person dying when they're loopy on the good drugs. Anxiety settled into my bones, and my fingers and toes constantly felt like illegal firecrackers going off in the suburbs.

My grandmother died on the first floor of my parent's house. I was upstairs, once again, glued to my bed and fearful of the crypt that had developed downstairs. For weeks, I had dodged

the scene of her still and getting the rest she deserved. It took every ounce of unselfishness in my heart to sit on the sofa next to her bed and exist in the atmosphere of her sleeping form.

After her death, I yearned for more control in my life. Unable to make her stay, I needed to mold something into fruition for purely selfish reasons. Food had been a constant in my life, but our relationship had been toxic for years. We desperately needed boundaries. Thus, my health journey commenced, and the real work began.

I've read that gluttony is a sin. Greed is something I've struggled with throughout my quarter of a century on this planet. I was greedy for my parents' attention when I made the transition from only child to older sister. Greed melted into my bones in terms of what gifts I could milk out of my parents on birthdays and at Christmastime. It escalated during my years at university. When it came time to leave the nest, I was excited at the amount of decisions that were now mine to make. I could eat whatever I could grab two to three times a day from my university's cafeteria. My pit stops were frequented by snack plates piled with average brownies and partially stale cookies. Their pizzas gave striking impersonations of the pies you could get at a Chuck-E-Cheese birthday party. There was also a salad bar, but when surrounded by an amount of junk that made Willy Wonka's factory look subpar, who takes a second glance at a salad bar? I never walked out of those doors without crumbs around my mouth and a couple of cookies in my hand for the road.

I was aware of my atrocious eating habits long before my parents left me to fend for myself that August afternoon in 2017. There were moments where my synapses were clearly on the fritz. Slices of white bread were eaten directly out of the package. For an occasional snack, I mixed sugar and cinnamon in a ceramic mug and ate it with a spoon. I could demolish a large package of Twizzlers and gleamed in the aftermath, a hint of sugar rush in my eye. My inflamed

body was filled with childish glee at having no stomach ache afterwards; my body knew to not work against me.

During my four years as a theatre major, I studied the inner workings of a play. There were certain aspects that every good scene needed. The setting: my parent's two story brick abode, where we had resided for the second half of my adolescence. The time: late afternoon during my high school years. My father is at the office, and my mother escapes to the grocery store before the sun dims on her world. Once the lock snicks closed on the latch and the alarm arms itself, my brain signals to my stomach that it is time to gorge myself. If I'm feeling particularly rebellious, a swig of Jack Daniels is on the itinerary. God forbid if my parents have any of those hundred calorie snack packs stocked on the premises. On my mad dash back to my room, five of those are clutched in my fist. Sometimes I might make a concoction if we are in an ingredients only household that week. A large plate of tortilla chips dripping in a microwave melted cheddar cheese is quick and easy to make. The evidence is quietly placed in the sink after everyone has gone to bed. I could eat the entirety of the fridge and cupboard, littered with items that expired before I went into puberty, and it still wouldn't be enough.

Self-awareness is a pain to develop after years of heedlessly floating through life. Eventually there is a feeling that pulls you out of the mist. I felt pins and needles in my hands and feet. It was as if my limbs had been asleep for ages, and they were finally waking up from their coma. Doctor's visits produced little besides anxiety and a dent in my credit card from copays. I knew something was wrong, so I was forced to peel back the layers of my skin and analyze the issues I didn't want to see.

Food was my best friend. It numbed me to my emotions, and it was more loyal than any partner would ever be. It was also a two-faced Gemini, dragging me into the depths when I felt at

my lowest. To counteract, I began to track every morsel that went into my mouth. This process can be exhausting in its initial state, and it is not the method to a completely healthy partnership with food. However, it's an important start to the end of greed.

My relationship with exercise wasn't any better. It was an unworthy hassle when television and my bed were waiting for me at home. Movement began with walks around the neighborhood and exercise videos on YouTube. Calories burned were at the forefront of my mind, but eventually other qualifiers took up precedence. I can now make it through a thirty minute video without stopping. I can now lift twenty pound dumbbells. I can now run a mile. My competitive heart leapt at the chance to best myself. There is no need to let jealousy overtake my soul because I am more capable than I give myself credit for.

What keeps me moving my body is the amount of dopamine deposited during and after. As a girl who walked the mile in grade school out of mere self preservation, now I run because sometimes pure exhaustion is the best drug on the market. My limbs stretch and lift and support me more than they ever have, as I steadily approach my silver jubilee on this planet. I stare my eating habits in the face, able to foreshadow my oncoming spirals and react accordingly. I am by no means a perfect specimen. My weeks are scattered with short periods of indulgence. Occasionally, I fall backwards into the pit and wake up with cheese dusted fingers and surrounded by empty peanut M&M's packages. My newfound strength, both internal and physical, helps me pull my delicate soul out of the well. I don't have to be fearful of food or what it can do to me, I am the controlling partner in this relationship.

My thoughts at the beginning of this journey were dominated by changing my body, and by association my personality. I white knuckled an idea of happiness through calorie counting and at-home workouts. My clothes began to fit correctly, my body no longer straining under

cotton and denim. I looked up and six months had been struck from the calendar, then they didn't fit at all. Then I walked my first half marathon, sprinting to the finish line. Then a week ago I ran my first 5k, one that I had been anticipating with queasiness for months. The beginning of my training for this race was draining. My genetically bad knees ached, and I couldn't run for longer than a few minutes. With consistency and a dash of hardheadedness, I could run a little longer, puffing the entire time. I ran my first 5k without stopping, two weeks later I ran a little longer. Over time I began to understand why people smile when they run around their neighborhoods or in the park. Some strides feel like pure hell, but there are moments when my shirt catches on the wind and it's almost like flying. I feel light as a feather and my potential is securely in my fist.