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Finding solace in a pear By Sweta Srivastava Vikram

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Every morning, without fail I check my reflection in our ingenuous, gigantic bedroom mirrors to make sure no extra weight sneaked up on me while I was asleep. On those rare days, when I wake up feeling relatively thin, I get a second peek at myself in the mirror next to the elevator in the hope that a few pounds might have disappeared in those thirty steps from the apartment to the elevator bank. If only.

If you are into people-watching, you realize that most women walking down the streets of New York, slyly but surely, catch a quick glimpse of themselves on any object that reflects. Members of the male species might think we follow the ritual to make sure our rear end exists; au contraire, every time a woman looks at herself in the mirror, more often than not, she wishes for that obstinate pound to have magically disappeared.

Funny story. The other day, my friend's husband went for his annual physical check up. Upon returning home, he said, "I can't believe I lost five pounds. I wonder how I will gain them back." When my friend shared this story with me, I screamed, "He complained? Only a man could be sad about unexpected weight loss!"

I don't recall being so weight-conscious when I lived in India. Of course I was younger then and more impressionable; I did not think before eating. Maybe I cogitated with my tongue. Oh, I was besotted with "vada pao"s and Indian Chinese food, though there was a clear monetary demarcation--the former was on my dime and the latter on my brother's since he was older and employed.

Greasy vada paos were a major component of my breakfast every single morning when I was in college. I remember rolling out of bed, brushing my teeth, and grabbing my buddies to stand in line for this sinful delicacy. I could even smell it on me, and I didn't care.

My obsession with chilli chicken was another story. I felt a compulsive desire to conquer it. Had there been a support group for chilli chicken addicts, I am sure I would have been made an honorary member. I love trying out different cuisines but when it comes to Indian Chinese food, I am like a stuck record—I need my sodium, corn flour, and MSG-laden sin.

On one occasion my brother took a bunch of us to Marine Plaza—a swanky restaurant on the water on Marine Drive in Mumbai. Stir-fired Chinese food was just being introduced to the Indian palate. I promptly said, "Bhaiya, I want hot & sour soup and chilli chicken." When my brother urged me to broaden my taste buds beyond the usual, I reluctantly agreed. I knew I could always go to the homely little Indian Chinese restaurant near our house that made scrumptious chilli chicken and hot and sour soup. Even in seething heat, I would eat myself silly.

The "Lucknowi salwar kameez," is a perfect disguise for the portliest of people. Looking back I wonder if the reason that I did not feel the least bit self-conscious about my size was that it embraced me so well. Even my jeans and skirts narrated a sweet story about my good

health. Or perhaps the difference was that my brain had not yet been exposed to the world of nutritional content labels and the deceptive world of "sugar free" and "fat free" foods. Indeed, even though my graduate degree is in nutrition, terms like "diet pills," and "low-carb diet" did not figure in my life.

Despite how it sounds now, I was not considered either a big eater or obese. I ate without the continual deliberation of "should I?" or "shouldn't I?" As everyone said, "I looked healthy and cute," and that was good enough for me.

With time and the move to the West, the words "healthy" and "cute" have taken on a derogatory meaning in my dictionary. To me, "healthy" is an insulting euphemism for obese. In fact, my friends and I are touchy even about being addressed as "cute". Babies, dogs, and cats are cute. It's not an appropriate adjective for a woman!

The other day my husband said to me, "You look thin in this outfit." The cynical New Yorker in me quickly retorted "Do you mean I don't look thin on other days?"

I now live in a world where Subway sandwiches are, as one friend put it, "a guilty pleasure" and consumption of immoderate amounts of sinful food is a rare treat rather than the norm. Almost everyone works out until a part of the body feels sore.

What amazes me is that I am so aware of my weight even though I weigh significantly less now than I did when I lived in India. I watch what I eat and how much I exercise, so why this obsession? My husband, like most other guys I know, is oblivious to the concept of "fattening foods." His philosophy is, "if it looks good, eat it."

Sometimes I wonder about this transformation in me. Why and when did chilli chicken get replaced with Greek salad and vada pao get perpetually eliminated from my life? Has the world become overly conscious over time? Or has age made me too aware and conscious? Maybe it is this time and this place that has altered my attitude. Or maybe it is that I think too much about my pear-shaped body.

Sweta Srivastava Vikram

List of Articles

Sweta Vikram was born in India and raised in India and abroad. She now lives in New York City with her husband. She has worked in the field of communications for over nine years and has a Masters degree in Strategic Communications from Columbia University in New York. Her newly published book of poems, Pabulum, is a journey through her emotions and reveals her opinions based on her experience. Vikram is also an avid blogger (<http://pandorastwocents.blogspot.com/>).

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