

The worst memory I have of a piece of clothing is of a cream-coloured collared shirt that I was always forced to wear on special occasions. The material was horrible, with a lace front and back, and it was far too tight for me to comfortably wear. Whenever I wore it, I felt like I was hobbling around in clothes that made me feel like my body had disappointed me and everyone around me. The discomfort I felt so deeply in my body, that lived within me for years, was from the way anything that fit me snugly made me feel exposed and grotesque. My mother bought this shirt for me when I was around eleven or twelve.

I am heavier now than I was then. Maybe not at my heaviest, but certainly closer to it than I am to what I weighed at twelve, or thirteen, or fourteen. I'm trying to remember what exactly those numbers were, but it's too hazy. My clothing sizes have soared and fallen slightly since then, and to this day every time I try something on at a store my heart clenches itself out of a fear that it'll be too tight for me. Even when it's in my size. The clothing I was forced into as a child only ever reminded me of how I was too much, a body that was constantly spilling over. There is no sense of shame stronger than what I've felt every time my buttons wouldn't close or I'd get stuck in a piece of clothing, looking at myself in the mirror under the harsh white light of a trying room, only feeling disgust at my body distorted inside a shirt that was crushing my chest.

I didn't understand what body dysmorphia was until I had spent several years healing from how I viewed myself and started breaking away from the eating patterns that had hurt me in so many ways. But I also know it probably started well before that, at an age where I couldn't really understand what was wrong with me but I knew that it needed to be fixed. In the third grade, at the start of the second term, our class teacher asked us in class to think of our New Year's resolutions. At the age of eight, I said that I wanted to lose weight that year. I believed that it was a serious thing to aspire to, without quite understanding why, but I knew my parents would probably like it and that seemed like enough.

Growing up, there was always an insistence that my fatness cannot be part of who I am, and only something ugly to be removed from the surface. I instinctively clench my jaw every time I've had to hear talk of how losing weight will allow the rest of the world to see the "real" me. When you grow up hearing this, it distorts your own understanding of yourself so drastically that it blurs reality. I think of years where I could barely look at myself and how it took an active effort on my part to force myself to get comfortable with any pictures that show my full body. I have lost year after year of knowing myself and being able to see myself as who I truly am, and it frightens me that a hatred of my own self could have ever overpowered me like that.

In many ways, it's shaped how I still present myself and all the deepest fears about myself that I carry with me. I've grown up with a strict idea of how I'm supposed to dress, because you know that as a fat person you have to work harder to be seen as someone who is not lazy. I hate being asked my weight, because my instinctive reaction is always that of intense guilt and shame. When a male friend of mine mentions his weight in passing, I can't help but feel sick to only be an odd ten or fifteen kilograms lighter than him. I feel an intense discomfort every time I hear anyone crack a fat joke, or use language such as the patronising and hence somehow worse "healthy" to describe a fat person. For the longest time, I would always feel uncomfortable finishing food before anyone else, to the point

where I only let myself eat at the pace that I do when I'm at home. Every day I fear that the people in my life constantly see my fatness as a personal failing that indicates a bunch of other flaws. Like being lazy, sloppy, greedy, unlovable. I fear that the people who told me, explicitly or not, that I'd never truly find happiness if I remained fat, were right. And there was a time where I spent so much of my time trying to desperately prove that they weren't. That desire to prove my worth, my attractiveness, my intelligence – it's never entirely left, in spite of all the growth I've experienced.

A lot of it is just a reminder that at the end of the day you are a woman. I know that my loved ones will insist that their concern for me is concern for my health, concern for me borne out of their belief that my body can only be a sign of unhappiness, of something eating me up deeply from inside. And maybe part of it is that. But I do know that if my desire to hurt myself came from overregulating the way I ate and dressed and moved through the world, it would be received differently. As a woman, it is better to discipline yourself too harshly rather than not enough. It is a greater sin to 'let go' of yourself than it is to hold on tightly enough to turn your knuckles white.

Much of it is about power, as all things are in the lives of women.

I'd like to believe that the appeal to my health is earnest. But it's not easy when both of my parents can hardly stop themselves from bringing up how I will be getting married soon enough, with every passing year feeling like a noose tightening around my neck. The rules are that if I'm not pretty enough, I won't find someone who is willing to marry me. In a society where honour is so tightly tied to my existence as a woman, I understand the fear. Try and imagine the shame you would feel as the otherwise upstanding member of society whose daughter is unable to attain a suitable and honourable enough match, who struggles to get married because she's too fat. Try and imagine being the mother who feels like she didn't raise her daughter correctly because she doesn't care about the things that are supposed to make her a woman. Your daughter who is otherwise smart enough and a decent daughter, but so badly dressed, so unkempt, so *fat*. For my parents, I know that it's the one thing that they wish I could get right so I can finally be the good daughter they have always hoped for. And I can understand it most days, I really can. The problem is that it doesn't stop hurting, even when I can.

Being a fat woman and trying to be respected is a constant battle during which even close friends will betray you. I have also made peace with the fact that there are many people I know and interact with and love who *do* think I'm grotesque, and it isn't okay but it also doesn't matter much, because who *doesn't*. Some of them will deny it, many will try to soften the blow, but it will always be a wall between us that can't be bridged by a repeated insistence that they only care about weight when it's about them. There are times in my life that I'd rather they just let out the truth about how much they despise fatness, so we could stop talking around it. And then there are times where I appreciate that they at least try to be civil in a world where people simply don't believe you deserve decency. Try being the fat girl next to your pretty friends at a party, the fat girl that needs a larger size at the store, the fat girl hanging out with a skinnier guy. You are either rendered invisible or you're reminded of how the scrutiny never ends.

You also hate to talk about it. In a country like Pakistan, where women are killed for a lot less than not being conventionally attractive, it feels like navel-gazing at best. The voice in my head continuously asks me, *is this really the worst thing you could be dealing with? Is this not the most upper-class Sunni woman concern for you to have?* And on another level, it's just not cool to acknowledge your pain unless it can be turned into a sardonic Tweet. Unless you can laugh at the ridiculousness of the way the world treats you in an unaffected way, it just sounds like *randi rona* to write two thousand words that could easily have been a diary entry. Being vulnerable is passé, and only really seen as mining parts of your personality for something interesting enough to win a writing prize.

*Is this really the worst thing you could be dealing with? Is this not the most upper-class Sunni woman concern for you to have?*

I also don't talk about my body a lot because I'm supposed to accept it at all times, or else I risk giving ammunition to everyone who thinks my fatness is what makes me unhappy, and that this alone should discredit the entire body-positivity movement. If I admit to my struggle with food, I give ammunition to these people, and they will use it to attack other men and women, many of whom are fat for a myriad of reasons that are not mine, that no one else has any right to. Fatness forces you to show the world that you're always strong – and if you're not, it's only because you're fat.

In some ways, I know it was about protecting myself and hurting myself at the same time. There was an immeasurable amount of pain that I had carried with me through much of my adolescence. It took me years to realise how much of my relationship with food was formed around an attempt to feel safe. I associated food with comfort from an age where I was too young to even begin to understand what trauma is and what it does to your brain. It turned into an expression of my own self-hatred as I grew older. The only thing that an entire lifetime of being told that my body is fundamentally flawed achieved was make me want to wreck it in whatever way that I could. There were times in my life where I kept eating only because to feel physical discomfort and guilt was better than to feel nothing. I did not feel like caring for myself mattered when I was so deeply depressed that I didn't see a future for myself. It was only when I began to work on my mental health that I learned to examine how much of my relationship with food was created out of the many issues that I had never dealt with before. That sort of work never matters though, unless it's immediately visible in how I look.

In some ways, it was also just normal to have unstable eating patterns. Learning the difference between my mother's voice and my own took me a long time to understand, an even longer time to internalise. Through the years, I've seen my mother fixate on her own weight. Every weekend that I see her has always started with her asking me if she's lost weight, and no weekend can end without her commenting on whether I have or not. I see the pattern a lot in many of the women I know, both within my family and outside of it. I watch them direct the hatred that they feel for themselves and every fear of not being enough at bodies that have done nothing but be. I have seen how trauma and grief has coursed through the women I know, and how our bodies move through time holding onto it, dreading any other way of making ourselves feel safe. And sometimes, we direct it all at anyone else in our line of vision. My mother still scrutinises every female body that she sees,

constantly categorising women as either thin and ideal or ‘dumpy’ and grotesque. Some days I argue when I feel so sure that I can bring about a breakthrough, but mostly I don’t bother.

Discomfort with my body is always going to be framed in the language of care. But what about all the ways in which I care for myself that lie outside of what is considered the ‘correct’ way to? When I think about the ways I care for myself, I think about the food from home that I learned to cook while thousands of miles away from Lahore on days that I missed my life in Pakistan. I think about how I learned to create my own space and take care of it far away from home, in an environment that was so foreign and intimidating. I think about the emotional resilience I’ve learned over time, and all the ways in which my body and my mind have tried to protect me when my mental health has been at its most fragile. I think about how I’ve worked to resist the urge to gorge when I feel pain and the shift that has created in how I understand myself, even if I haven’t lost enough weight to show it.

And how do you even heal from the anger that comes from healing itself? I first realised that I probably had experienced body dysmorphia as a child when my aunt sent me a picture of myself from when I was twelve. All I could feel was confusion when after so many years, I realised that I was not half as fat as I thought I really was, or had been made to think. How do you deal with the frustration that comes with knowing so much could’ve been different, had you been allowed to inhabit your body as it was? What do you do when mourning doesn’t feel like enough, but neither does fighting?

The reality is though, that most of your life is spent doing both at the same time, balancing both ends of the scale while trying to hold onto whoever you were before all of these realities entered your life. I write this knowing it won’t change how anyone feels, that I might just anger everyone who earnestly believes that they’ve been misrepresented and everyone who earnestly believes that they’re looking out for me.

Instead, I write this as a testament to all the versions of myself that could not bear the thought of ever loving themselves. I write it to acknowledge all the pain that I have never wanted to talk about because of how deeply it hurt. I write it in honour of every long distance that my legs have carried me when I was exploring the foreign city I moved to for college, every piece of writing that I’ve created, every time I’ve burnt my hands while cooking, and every time I’ve put someone’s arm around my shoulder and helped them walk. I write it for every fat version of myself – there have only been fat versions – and I hope that something in this gives them comfort. I used to hate the word *fat* so much. It stung every single time I heard it, whether it was used to describe me or someone else. *Moti, saand* – words that were always in the air, that I watched people hit me with sometimes as an instinct, and sometimes because they knew they would wound me more deeply than anything else. To be able to take apart everything that I associated with it, to look at a word as it is: that is how I learned to look at myself as I am.

And I write this because of the strength I have gained from every woman who has listened to me talk about my body even when it deeply upset us both, every woman who’s defended me against Internet trolls who have told me I’m ugly, every conversation I’ve had with other women where we’ve found comfort in laughing about our unruly bodies, every random

woman who has earnestly told me that I look beautiful as I am. The only response to a deeply unfair world is through community, and mine is one that consists of the feminists who I've read and who I've met, who taught me that my anger should not be directed at myself. It needs to be directed at the world outside of me. Maybe everything isn't okay, but community reminds us that it can be. I am reminded of all the women I've met who give me strength and who have made spaces for me to begin the hard work of caring for myself. To collectively love ourselves and care for each other is the most powerful thing that we can do.