



JENNY WARBURG

All Of Me

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I place a cup of green tea

carefully on the floor of my walk-in closet and click the door shut behind me. Almost sixty-two, I've been trying to get myself to look in the mirror naked, to look without critique. (A gigantic ass! Doughy rolls! Thighs like the chunky Victorian legs of the behemoth table Aunt Helen bequeathed to us!) This morning I will approach the mirror in my closet in meditation. Today I will forgive the body I've inhabited all these years, and I will not come out of this closet until I find the well of tenderness hidden in these swollen fat cells.

The fluorescent lights glare. I move closer to the mirror and smell the raw me: urine and lavender. My naked body bulges. Not even my elbows have definition. A flabby roll on my abdomen dwarfs the patch of sparse gray hairs below, once lush with juice. Deep craters of cellulose run up and down my thighs like gristle on a pot roast. Poland lurks in the spongy girth of my arms. I am an avocado, like my mother, not even a hint of a waist. I am the photos of my grandmother *after* she'd left Krakow and come to Chicago to live on a diet of chicken fat, white flour, and lard. My breasts sag; my skin chokes with inflammation; my hair, thin and dry, surrenders. My heart beats irregularly now. My pulse jumps, and my air gives out if I walk too fast. It's hard to hold my pee when I cough.

I haven't always been fat. Last year at this time, following

twelve months of Weight Watchers, I weighed 102 pounds, half of what I am now — not too shabby for someone who's five foot four. I didn't count points, or buy Weight Watchers products, or participate in their cheerleader revival meetings. I just wanted an accurate scale to confirm my personal worth weekly and an audience to witness my extraordinary gift for starvation. I stayed thin for a few weeks, enjoying the size-2 clothes I'd put in storage since my last starvation episode a few years before, when I'd shed a hundred pounds and won Body of the Millennium at the gym. Each time I lose half of me, I celebrate becoming killer perfect. Then, not wanting to die, I mourn and say what the hell and start to eat again.

How is it possible? Six decades of muddling through like everyone else — two husbands, four children (a boy and a girl with each husband). I'm a grandmother, a retired professor, a published author, but still I believe I don't deserve to live. No matter that this body has worked hard, flowed with milk for my babies, given up a kidney for my ailing son. Still I treat it like either a compost heap or a mausoleum, binge or starve.

I sit on the floor now, legs crossed, fleshy buttocks cushioning me like a *zafu*. Shirts, pants, and skirts in every size from zero to 2X surround me. Which of them will I toss this time? I'm not leaving this closet until I figure it out. The tea is warm and soothing and helps me imagine the gentle blessing I must

somehow grant this body before I can leave my closet. I hear my husband headed downstairs for breakfast: bagel, cheese, pickled herring, glazed doughnut. At seventy, he eats what he wants and hasn't gained or lost weight in his entire adult life. I can't look at my body without fearing food. A benign cracker or slice of cucumber is my enemy, my reward, my weapon of choice.

When my husband doesn't find me in the kitchen, he'll assume that I'm in the garden or the woods. My car, after all, is still in the driveway. Much later, when the sun goes down and he wants dinner, he'll come looking for me. He'll go through every room, slamming doors and calling my name. He may or may not look in my closet, and if he does, he'll want to know what I'm doing in here: Sorting clothes? Scrubbing the floor?

I'll say, "My body is so hungry."

He'll say, "This isn't rational."

When I was a kid grow-

ing up in Chicago, food was a mystery: abundant but scarce, there but not there. My mother would stuff my brothers and me with bread and margarine before we visited relatives or friends for a birthday party or game of pinochle, because she didn't allow us to accept other people's food. If our hosts offered snacks, we'd shake our heads, or else it was home to the strap. Fruit was a mirage. I colored ditto sheets of apples and bananas in kindergarten, but the only fruit I'd tasted was a strawberry at my cousin Adelaide's wedding. The produce cart rumbled down 24th Place every Friday, teetering with crates of watermelons and oranges. Once, when the produce man's horse caught his shoe on an old streetcar rail peeking through the asphalt, a small bunch of grapes fell to the ground, and I picked them up and mashed them into my mouth. My mother's strap, punishment for eating what didn't belong to me, removed all memory of their sweetness.

At Stella's Tavern on Blue Island Avenue I got to eat chips. The bar was black mahogany with ornate curves, padded round stools, and a spittoon. The adults — my mother, my father, Stella, Hank, and sometimes one or two others — played poker at a square table with an ashtray built into each corner. I was five, and my job was to keep their beers full. Climbing on a chair behind the bar, I filled one glass at a time from the Old Style tap ("Pure Brewed in God's Country"), tilting the glass to get a good head, scraping foam into the drip tray. One by one I carried their beers to the table, bringing Hank's last.

A beefy man with a belly like a pregnant goat, Hank wore a gray shirt that pulled at the buttons, suspenders, and a felt hat. When I positioned his beer carefully next to the ashtray, he put down his cigar and slipped his hand under my dress, fingers going where they didn't belong. He never took his eyes off his cards. I stood as if frozen through several hands of Seven-Card Stud or Jacks or Better — my mother and father sitting right there but deep into the game, quarters clinking into the pot, smoke swirling lazily to the ceiling — because it didn't occur to me that I could move away. When Hank was done touching me, he took his hand out of my underpants and bought me chips.

They played poker until dawn. I slept on two folding chairs in the rear of the bar, my baby brother in his stroller near me. I had a straight line of vision to the poker table, and I kept one eye open so I could jump up immediately and not keep the adults waiting when they'd finished playing. Stella's small black dog humped my leg, and I fed him my chips to make him stop.

When I was seven, I sat

in our dark kitchen before a plate of peas and mashed potatoes. Skinny and anemic looking, I needed fattening, my mother said: "You'll sit there until you eat everything on your plate." Seven o'clock, eight o'clock, and still I wouldn't take a bite. I won: the first act of my invincible self. That stubborn rod through my core served me well for the next half century: the power of *no!* Of course, I couldn't risk the belt by actually *saying* no. My resistance spoke for me. My parents had pushed food on me before — "Just a little bit, one bite" — and I'd always bitten grudgingly into a head-cheese sandwich or a *golabki*. But the standoff in the kitchen revealed my sinew. Nobody could make me eat! Cajole, beat me, leave me alone in the dark — it didn't matter. I was in control of me.

Stealing food was the flip side of my resistance. My mother measured everything: soda poured to a penciled line on the plastic cups; twelve chips each; three meatballs apiece. With a wooden yardstick she'd mete out inch-wide slices from a pint carton of Neapolitan ice cream for my brothers and me. It was all about equality and fairness. She'd say, "See, I love you all the same, not one more than the other." The ritual of calculations, as hushed and solemn as Mass, made me want to attack the carton and drive my spoon into the hard brick that was just beginning to melt around the edges.

My portion disappeared like a freak snow in June. My younger brother Chuck ate a spoonful or two of his, then put the rest of his perfectly measured sliver of ice cream in the freezer. My youngest brother, John, did the same: three or four bites, then the remainder stashed away to savor later. One time, when they opened the freezer the next day, the ice cream was gone. I'd returned to the icebox in the night for one small bite of cold, velvet bliss. They'd hardly notice one bite missing, I'd thought. But it hadn't been enough. I'd returned again for another lick, then another, until I'd eaten everything.

When John, only five, discovered his ice cream missing, he cried. Chuck was stoic, as if he'd expected privation. My mother lined us up for interrogation, black strap in hand: "Who ate the ice cream?"

My face as blank as stone, shoulders slumped, I whispered, "Not me."

Chuck: "I don't know anything about it." He sounded defensive.

Then John, loud, earnest, waving his arms: "I didn't do it. Not me. I'd never do that." He sounded guilty.

My father said, "Your sister wouldn't eat your ice cream. She has more smarts than the two of you hoodlums put together."

Frustrated by the lack of a confession, my mother swung the belt in all directions. My father pushed me out of harm's

way while my brothers took it on the back and arms. I was the good girl, the obedient child, the one who would never eat the ice cream.

On payday my parents went to the PO Piedmont Club for Italian beef sandwiches and a game of pool. They gave us each a quarter for the corner candy store: a luxurious feast of color and texture, sweetness and spice, everything a penny or two for a penny. We'd come home with brown paper bags full of wax lips and candy necklaces, Necco Wafers and Hot Tamales. We'd make a pot of greasy popcorn, divvy up a quart bottle of orange soda, and watch *I Love Lucy* on television. When my brothers weren't looking, I stole their Sugar Daddies, Double Bubble, Chocolate Babies, and wax sticks. I would've eaten the fingers from their hands if they'd been dipped in sugar.

During the summer and over holidays, when school was closed, my parents locked us in the house each day while they went to work: "Don't answer the telephone or open the door for anyone," they said. As the oldest, I was in charge until my father returned at 3:30 from washing windows. Standing over my brothers with the black strap, I made them sit still, hands folded in their laps, and do nothing for hours at a time. Wasn't that how you made children behave? If they stood up, I slapped them with the strap. If they moved: leather to the back of a hand. Fidgeted: another slap. Laughed or complained: another hit. When I couldn't control them anymore — they'd cry, scream, say they hated me — I'd boost them out the window of our basement apartment, and they'd climb the concrete steps and take off. They had to go to the alley, scavenge for bottles they could return for deposit, then use the money to buy me penny candy, or they couldn't come back in. Usually they found fifteen or twenty cents' worth of bottles. They'd hand my bag of loot through the window before I'd let them enter. When they begged for a piece of candy, I'd throw an Atomic Fireball or a candy button on the floor between them and watch them fight.

I stopped eating for the

first time when I was twelve. My mother returned one morning from the night shift at the bindery and woke me early. While my brothers slept, she made my breakfast: two eggs; two slices of bread slathered with margarine; and milk from the glass bottle on the porch, yellow cream floating on top. I stared at the food while she wrung her hands over coffee and whispered family secrets, stories she didn't even tell her own husband: how her father, who'd never learned English, lined up all his kids in the evening and beat them one by one for every bad thing they'd done that he hadn't seen; how one of the women in our family had been raped and had given birth to her attacker's child; how, if I wasn't careful, I'd be snatched off the street and sold into white slavery. I avoided her tears by focusing on a patch of gray brassiere that showed through her flowered housedress. When she wasn't looking, I slipped the eggs and toast into a piece of notebook paper and flushed them down the toilet. Then I went to school.

The Church made honing my discipline of starvation easy: Lent, fasts, the fund for pagan babies. Forgo one candy bar, and

I had five cents to put into the glass jar on Sister Virgilita's desk. Five dollars baptized a pagan baby in Africa and fed him or her for a year. If the girls raised five dollars before the boys, we could feed a girl baby and name her after a saint. For a while every penny I earned baby-sitting went to feed pagan children. I imagined little holy Bernadettes and Joan of Arcs and Rose of Limas trundling all over Africa. The more heathen babies I fed, the less I ate. A starving penitent, I'd wipe away the sins of the world and save every unbaptized child from Limbo.

Classified in the early Church as "weepers," "hearers," "kneelers," or "standers," penitents had special places assigned them at Eucharistic services. My talent was kneeling. I outknelt everyone else at the Stations of the Cross during Lent. Then I became a new sort of penitent: a starver, determined to hit bone. Some penitents were named after their garb: the black penitents, the red penitents. I would be the bone penitent, recognized by my hard and rigid core, a chalky honeycomb of calcium phosphate, the most enduring part of the body.

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