

SWEETMEATS

CHAD SHAYOTOVICH

Orange, warm and burnt,
hangs low between the hollow monoliths,
dipping its rind into the sea.
My assaulter is made of bile and salt.
His fish-bone blade fillets my shell.
I wipe the layers of my arm away to find individually wrapped
chocolates.
My bones are tinfoil wrapped delicacies.
Acrid acidity tingles on my tongue—
Chocolates steeped in blood
Is all I have to pair
with this tangerine sun.

APRIL'S FOOL

OPHELIA TUNG

April 1, 1993

"So, what's your name?" asked Brian to the girl as he sat next to her in the school cafeteria. He was pretty sure she was new here, for he had never seen an Asian at school. Her black hair flowed to her waist, long and sleek like a waterfall. She was wearing a purple headband that matched her pink polka-dot dress. Her slender fingers cradled a photo as her thumb gently circled it. She smiled.

Everything about her was so calm, so quiet. Serene as a swan. Static as a statue.

Beautiful.

She had been looking at the photo for ten minutes, the same amount of time that Brian stood behind her until he finally mustered something clever to say.

The new girl turned her head to Brian with a gasp. The beautiful slight arc of her lips immediately diminished to a flat line, cold and unwelcoming. Her hand tightly clutched the photo she had been looking at.

"Mine's Brian Miller," he said, offering his trembling hand.

Brian's cheeks burned with nervousness as her wide, brown eyes pierced his.

An eternity had passed when she finally caught his dangling hand. Electricity brushed his fingertips.

"April," she muttered. "My name is April." She immediately withdrew her hand and pressed it on the hem of her dress, scratching away the warmth of Brian's palm. Her other hand gave the photo a protective squeeze. Her icy glare had melted into a neutral emotionlessness.

Still not smiling, Brian silently decided. *But it's an improvement.*

"Last name?" He asked, pressing his luck.

"Does it matter?" snapped April as the deathly stare returned.

"Well, I told you mine," said Brian with a shrug. "It's..."

"Miller. Brian Miller. I know English," interrupted April.

Brian grinned as he sipped his soda. She remembered his name. Score.

"Fu. My last name is Fu." April quietly offered.

He spit and choked.

She glared and snorted.

"Are you saying your full name is April Fu?" asked Brian. His jaw dropped. Soda dripped from his lower lip.

"My English name is April and my last name is Fu," clarified April, as if there was a difference.

"Haha. Very funny. Of course, it's April 1 today. April Fu, April Fool. Nice one. You've got me, miss," laughed Brian, wiping his mouth. "So what's your real name?"

April raised her eyebrows. Brian didn't notice.

"Are you making fun of my name?" hissed April, her voice rising. She turned her body to Brian, her arms and legs crossing. "Do you think I am playing an April Fool's joke on you?"

The crimson returned to Brian's face.

"God, I am so sorry" started Brian. Wrong move, Miller. Idiot

He stood up, expecting April to tell him off.

"Whatever," said April, shrugging. She eyed at Brian, then the recently empty seat, signaling him to sit down.

Brian was more than happy to comply.

"You are not the first person in the States who laughs at my name," sighed April, taking her notebook out from her backpack. "Why would I expect anyone to have ever heard of a Chinese last name?"

"Do you mean that no one ever teases you about your name back at... well...home?"

"No," said April, who had picked up her pen and started writing. "And my home is Hong Kong. In case you are wondering. My family moved to New York last week."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Another eternity painfully passed when Brian finally decided the peculiar combination of April's name was a less offensive topic than her hometown.

"So, back to your name! April Fu," blurted Brian. He suppressed a big grin, as he watched April frowning and turning back at him. Full attention received. Awesome.

"Have you ever considered using your middle name instead of April?" suggested Brian. "I have a friend, Jessica. She is a good friend, but just a friend," Brian stopped, looking for a change in April's expression.

There wasn't.

"Anyway," he continued. "Jessica hated being called Jessica, so she asked everyone to call her Nicole, her middle name. Well it is still Jessica on legal papers and stuff but we all call her Nicole..."

"I don't have a middle name," interrupted April. "Most Chinese don't."

"What?" gasped Brian, puzzled.

"And April is not official anyway," added April. Her lips formed a lopsided smirk when she saw Brian's jaw dropped. "I mean, I use it all the time. But it is not on any legal document. Fu Wing Chi is my legal name."

Brian scratched his head, wanting to shake off an answer to his confusion.

"So Fu is both your last name and your first name?"

"God, no!" exclaimed April, rolling her eyes. For a moment, Brian believed her eyes would pop out and hit his face because of his foolishness.

"Chinese people put their last names before their first names," explained April.

"So... Wing Chi is your first name," said Brian slowly, quietly. April nodded.

Brian grinned. He was finally getting something right.

"Yes, both of them are," said April. "Apparently Americans think everyone has to have a middle name, so they automatically omit Chi as they assume it is my middle name. I am Wing Fu in all school documents, whose pronunciation sounds exactly like swim trunks in Cantonese. I would rather be an April Fool's joke than swim trunks." She chuckled, looking at Brian.

It was the first time that April smiled at Brian. He blushed. Her grin grew wider.

"So what about April?" asked Brian, his eyes escaping from the illuminating eyes to cool off the heat from his face. "Where does it come from?"

"My mother chose it for me when I needed an English name for school. Obviously she found April Fu a wonderful joke," said April. The warm smile returned, almost as sweet as the one she gave to the photo that she was still holding. "If I can choose my own English name, it would definitely be Monica."

"Wow," exclaimed Brian. "Your name. English names for Chinese..."

"English names for Hong Kongers."

"It's very confusing."

"I know," chirped April. "You look much less foolish when you are confused."

April 1, 2003

"Name of the patient?" asked the nurse. Her voice was hoarse from crying.

"April..." Brian paused as he corrected himself. "No. Fu Wing Chi," Last names first for Chinese. Still couldn't get it after living in Hong Kong for six years.

Brian had tried to persuade April to change her last name to his for multiple times since they got married six years ago. Yet her reply had remained the same every time.

"No one does that in Hong Kong, at least not legally," protested April.

"But we are not in Hong Kong."

"We are not in Hong Kong now, but we will be soon."

"I don't understand. Why not stay in New York?" persuaded Brian. "Hong Kong doesn't have Broadway and Serendipity..."

"But New York doesn't have egg tarts and milk tea and stinky tofu and sa-tay beef noodles and of course, Leslie," rebutted April as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "And most importantly, New York doesn't have me."

Brian sighed. He would miss cronuts and pretzels and food trucks so much.

"If you don't mind being teased as a literal April Fool's joke," muttered Brian.

"I don't mind being your April Fool's joke, but I guess I end up being your April Fool's gift," pouted April. "I am so excited to go home at last!"

Brian smiled. He could never say no to those piercing eyes.

"And you are going home with me," said April, who tiptoed and pressed her lips on Brian's forehead.

Now Brian wished he had insisted on staying in America, especially when his wife was lying beneath the white sheets of the isolation ward.

The hospital was never a quiet place, not even late at night. The corridor was always stuffy and crowded with hundreds of trolleys. Doctors and nurses rushed here and there, fighting against their exhaustion with the pungent scent of bleach. People who loved and lost—husbands, wives, parents, children, they screamed and sobbed and shrieked.

But not tonight.

There were still a lot of people at the hospital, even more crowded than usual. But the place was solemnly silent tonight. People glued their red, swollen eyes to the television screen. Their white lips trembled behind the masks.

"A 76-year-old man passed away at 10am at Tuen Mun Hospital, adding to total number of deaths to 16," announced the anchor. "The World Health Organization has yet to make a comment."

This piece of information would have triggered gasps and sighs from the crowd if it were any other day. Just like the way people freaked out when someone spread the news on the Internet this morning, that the World Health Organization had announced Hong Kong an epidemic area. Canned food from supermarkets disappeared within an hour, then the entire epidemic announcement turned out to be a stupid April Fool's joke.

Brian, just like any other Hong Konger, was outraged. Jokes were the last thing that Hong Kong needed now.

"Please, it can't be him," prayed Brian, his eyes tightly shut. "Maybe it is also another April Fool's joke,"

It wasn't.

"Thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks, Monica!" an alluring voice sang, piercing the air.

It was his voice. Sultry and magnetic. It was really him.

Then the hospital broke into hysterical sobs. Some cried out his name. Some had tears dropping from their blank eyes.

Brian sighed and turned around, entering the isolation ward.

He washed his hands with extra soap and changed into the blue, heavy protective gear. He could not stop thinking about the news, how unbelievable it was when the unique voice appeared at the news for the worst reason, how much April loved this voice, how ridiculous the whole thing was.

Why him? Why now?

He put on the H95 respirator, a tiny, tight, white mask that was only used by workers in foul, polluted construction sites before everything went down. He couldn't breathe.

But he had to.

Brian forced his best smile despite the fabric that pressed tightly against his nose and mouth. April could not see it. But she knew.

"Hey Mrs. Miller," whispered Brian as he sat next to April's bed. Her thin hair scattered on her almost bare skull. A white gown concealed her small frame, trembling in pain due to weeks of diarrhea and fever. Her bony arm dangled in the air, a yellowish skeleton yearning for touch. Although a mask covered her nose and lips, Brian knew she was smiling. There was a glint in her tired eyes, piercing him.

Beautiful.

"Hey yourself," April breathed. "I'm not Mrs. Miller," she coughed, gasping for air.

"I'm Mrs. Cheung. Leslie and I are...are having an affair," she continued, her fingers pointing at the floor. Brian's eyes followed her sight and landed on a photo.

Brian bit his lips as he picked up the photo.

He couldn't let her know. At least not now. Maybe never.

He placed it in April's dangling hand and put it on her lap. She shuddered as the coldness of the photo brushed her fingertips. She circled it with her thumb, contentment in her eyes. "Happy anniversary," she breathed, slowly turning her head to him.

"Happy April Fool's Day to you too," mumbled Brian.

"Did everything go alright today?" asked April.

"They just took off. My parents will pick them up at JFK."

"I still think you should go back with them."

"You don't need to worry about the kids. My sister is flying with them and their grandparents will take good care of them."

"But they need their father to explain to them if...when it happens to...to me."

"It's just a really bad flu. Pneumonia tops," started Brian. "You will be fine..."

"You are being a fool for not accepting it," argued April. "The news said another person just died today..."

Brian's eyes widened in horror.

"Did you watch the news today?" asked Brian, his throat tightened.

"I watch the news every day," answered April, her eyes narrowed. "The nurse..."

"What time did you watch it?"

"At noon, as usual. The nurse turns on the radio for news at noon every day."

His frowning eyebrows finally relaxed. She still hadn't known.

But it was April's turn to scowl.

"Why are you so paranoid?" asked April. "Are the kids okay?"

"Yes. Monica just misses her mom."

"And Leslie?"

"Which Leslie?" asked Brian, his frown returned. "Our Leslie or..."

"Of course I'm asking about our Leslie, our son," April scoffed, which sounded more like a feeble moan. She looked at the photo in her hands, with so much tenderness in her tired eyes.

"As if you would know what happened to my Leslie today."

Brian swallowed the tears behind his wry smile.

April 1, 1993

April bit her lip, turning her face away. She took out the photo she had been holding and swooned with so much contentment and tenderness.

Brian peeked at the photo.

It was the headshot of an Asian man (Chinese, or Hong Konger, Brian assumed). Brian could tell the man was already in his thirties, but his gracile, round eyes granted him with a unique vital calmness. His high and straight nose set between his luxuriant eyebrows, while his thin lips pressed together in a gentle yet seductive smile.

"He is good-looking," Brian breathed. "Very good-looking."

"He is perfect," said April. She swooned, gently caressing the man's face.

"Is he your boyfriend?" asked Brian. He bet on all his luck and his fingers crossed.

"I wish he was," chuckled April. "His name is Leslie Cheung, my favorite singer and actor from Hong Kong. He is the winner of numerous music and acting awards. He sings, he dances, he acts, he is clever and hard-working and so nice to everyone and we all love him. He is a living legend and the love of my life."

April shoved Leslie's photo in front of Brian's face, giving him a closer look.

"And needless to say, he has the most gorgeous face in the universe," said April, smirking again. "I take the flush on your face as you agreeing with me."

Brian gasped and quickly covered his face with his hands.

"Now you are really flushing," laughed April. "Gotcha. Happy April Fool's Day."

"You...I..." stuttered Brian as he watched April twirl her hair, grinning.

"You don't have to feel embarrassed for liking Leslie. Everyone likes him," April's voice faltered, sighing. "Or, everyone who knows who Leslie is does."

"Well, thanks to your brief yet informative introduction, I'm pretty sure that I know who Leslie is," said Brian, whose green eyes met with the twinkling brown of April.

"Wanna hear my favorite song of Leslie?" asked April as she handed Brian a side of her earphones.

"Are you sure?" stammered Brian. "I don't know your language..."

"It doesn't matter," stated April as she inserted a CD into her Walkman. "It's Leslie."

"The name of the song is Monica," continued April, putting her side of earphones on. "It's about a guy professing his guilt, gratitude and love for his ex-girlfriend, Monica."

"Is that the reason why you want to call yourself Monica?"

"That's the reason why every girl in Hong Kong wants to call herself Monica."

Music blasted through Brian's ears.

April's hands tapped on the table along with the upbeat rhythm of electric guitar and drums, as her shoulders did the shimmy dance.

Then Leslie started to sing.

His voice matched his charming face—it was sultry as silk embedded with a fiery, magnetic spark. Brian had no idea of what Leslie was singing, but the chills on his arms extended to his fingers, as he tapped them on the table with April.

"Wow," breathed Brian, looking at Leslie's picture. April's Prince Charming was an unbelievably handsome superstar who could sing, dance and act, a dangerous triple threat.

"At least you can speak better English than he does," Brian said to himself.

Then it hit him

"Thanks, thanks, thanks, thanks, Monica!" Leslie alluringly sang in perfectly pronounced English.

"He...he is singing in English!" exclaimed Brian, his eyes widened.

He had officially lost the last streak.

"Your face is priceless," laughed April. "This is the only English lyric in the song though. But Leslie does know and speak English. He grew up in England. In fact, he sang an English song in a singing competition that got him in the industry."

Leslie Cheung was not only Prince Charming. He was Superman. Dang it.

"So this Leslie Cheung person is like our Elvis, right?" suggested Brian when he had recovered from the shock of the multi-talent of Leslie. "Dashing, accomplished heartthrobs with an army of screaming fan-girls..."

"C'mon, Leslie is way better than Elvis," snorted April. "He is from Hong Kong!"

Of course Mr. Superman had to come from April's dear, irreplaceable Hong Kong.

"I guess Leslie is totally your type then?" asked Brian, forcing a wry smile.

"I love him, but no."

Brian's head tilted with a jolt.

"He's too perfect. And I don't want to get bloody with other fan-girls," explained April. "I would never be safe and happy with a guy like him."

Brian beamed.

"Although he does make me feel safe and happy in the other way— his songs," said April, picking up Leslie's photo and holding it close to her chest.

"I used to listen to the radio every day, waiting for a new Leslie song to debut or singing along when his hits came up again. But now when I turn on the radio, it's just Whitney and Mariah. They sound wrong, so wrong."

"But your English is wonderful. I'm sure you can understand them."

"Thank you. I know, and I certainly can," said April. "But they are not Leslie."

Silence interrupted Brian and April as Leslie sang the last note in Monica. April plucked the earphone from Brian. "Well, I hope I didn't bore you," she said.

"No, no you didn't," said Brian immediately. "I like him. You are right. He's good."

"He's really one of a kind," whispered April, looking at Leslie's photo again, her eyes softened. "I will be singing and dancing to his Monica till the day we both die."

"You know, if you want to buy Leslie's new album, I have a friend who can help," offered Brian. "His father goes to business trips in Asia a lot..."

"There won't be a new album," April cut him off. "Leslie retired four years ago. He lives in Vancouver now."

"What?" said Brian in confusion. "Retired? Vancouver? He doesn't look that old!"

"He is not old at all. He is only 36. He decided to exit at the height of his career, that's what he told the media," said April. "And about Vancouver, it is a more popular choice for Hong Kong immigrants than New York. My uncle's family is also in Vancouver while my cousin is living with her husband in Melbourne. Some people even applied to immigrate to Cape Verde."

"Cape Verde! Really?"

"I guess we'd rather be rootless immigrants in an obscure country than Chinese."

"But I thought you were Chinese", blurted Brian.

"Biologically and culturally, yes," said April, a grim look surfaced. "But politically, not in another four years. I'm not very excited to be an official Chinese, anyway."

"But Hong Kong is a part of China."

"Geographically and historically for now. But not yet. Don't let the Brits hear you."

"So you are a Chinese who used to live in Hong Kong, a British colony for four more years till returning to China, and you are now a new immigrant of America."

"I usually introduce myself as a fan of Leslie Cheung when people ask about my loyalty," said April. Her chin tilted with pride. "It is an honest and much simpler answer."

Brian nodded as he tried to digest the overloading information that April shared since he landed eyes on her one hour ago. Last names first for Chinese. Leslie Cheung. People actually immigrated to Cape Verde.

"So, you are technically American now?" Brian mustered his best conclusion.

"Yes," said April. "But it won't be forever."

"Why?"

"Because Leslie is coming home."

"How do you know? You just said he has retired..."

"We all know, Brian. We all know we will return. Probably after 1997, but we will," said April. She placed Leslie's photo to her lips and closed her eyes.

"The world is wonderful, but Hong Kong is home."

April 1, 2003

"You are a...a fool, you know, for always being so...so nervous, so paranoid," exhaled April, her fingers cradled the photo, the photo that she had always cherished.

"I have been a fool since I first landed my eyes on the Asian girl with a purple headband and pink..."

"Polka-dot dress. God, it...it...I looked hideous," giggled April. "Why would I...I wear something like that?"

"I thought you looked great, and I still do," said Brian, caressing April's thin hair.

"Your opinions were...were unreliable. You also said El...Elvis and Whitney and Mariah sounded...great."

"They do..."

"They do...do sound great, but they...they are not..."

“Leslie,” Brian completed the sentence, forcing a grin. “Of course.”

“Now...now you are getting it,” said April, smug in her frail voice. “I...I have finally turned you into a Leslie fan after ten...ten years...”

“Ten years, wow,” exclaimed Brian after a long pause.

“Things...things are not much...much different than it was ten years ago, right?” suggested April. “You...you are still my...my adorable fool who...who thinks that I’m hot...hot when I...I am obviously not. You...you sit next to...to me and we still...talk about Leslie and...and he is still a living legend.”

Brian quickly wiped a tear when April’s eyes closed for a moment.

Leslie’s face would be on the headlines of every newspaper tomorrow. They would play Monica everywhere till everyone was too exhausted from crying to an upbeat song.

“I can...can still remember you making all the foolish re...remarks about my...my name and... said it’s an April Fool’s joke.”

“I am not very fond of April Fool’s jokes anymore,” said Brian, hoping April couldn’t hear his sniff.

“No...no,” began April. “Jokes are good. Jokes are good for Hong...Hong Kong. It...has been a tough...tough few weeks and...we...Hong Kongers need to be happy.”

“April...”

“I am not...not worried about Hong Kong,” she continued as her eyes slowly opened. “We...we are going to get...get through this. We always do. We overcame 1997 and...and all the crap that happened after that. SARS is...is not going to beat us.”

She held up her trembling hand. Brian caught it and placed it next to his cheek.

“I was right, Brian,” said April. “Everyone came...came back. I did, we did. Leslie did. We...we are home, and...and everything will be...be fine.”

“Leslie came home,” said Brian with a lump in his throat. “But he will never have a new album...”

“It...it is okay. We...we will always have Monica,” said April, her eyes fixed on Brian. “And our Monica.”

Brian could only nod.

“Do...do you remember what...what Leslie had said before?” breathed April. “He...he asked us... not to cry and...and...he will be happy again...”

“Please, April. Don’t,” said Brian, looking away.

Leslie had been very unhappy. He didn’t have a fever or diarrhea. He was so unhappy that he couldn’t breathe so he went up to the 24th floor...

“It was Leslie’s first basketball game...game and he broke his ankle,” said April, almost inaudible. “He was only three.”

Brian’s head tilted. Leslie. Their Leslie.

“But...he was...was right, wasn’t he?” continued April. “He...he got through it and became happy again. He is a...a Miller. We...we Millers will always make it through. You know that.”

Then Brian buried his face on April’s body and let his emotions pour. They soaked the photo that April loved, that April had been holding since she was admitted to the hospital.

It was a photo of April cradling a newborn Leslie with Monica by her side. Both children were sleeping in their mother’s embrace, as April looked at Brian who was holding the camera, contentment and tenderness in her eyes.

It was taken on April Fool’s Day.

Notes:

1. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a viral respiratory disease between November 2002 and July 2003. An outbreak of SARS in southern China caused an eventual 8,096 cases and 774 deaths reported in multiple countries with the majority of cases in Hong Kong.

2. Leslie Kwok-wing Cheung (12 September 1956 – 1 April 2003) was a Hong Kong singer-songwriter, actor, film director, record producer, and screenwriter. He is considered as one of the founding fathers of Cantopop by combining a hugely successful film and music career. Cheung committed suicide on 1 April 2003 at 6:43 pm. He leapt from the 24th floor of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. He left a suicide note saying that he had been suffering from depression. He was 46 years old.

BITE-SIZED

MOLLY RUPP

Three fourths cup shortening into a bowl. Add some flour. Cut in some water. Mix. Not too much, now. Be mindful.

White handprints adorn a yellow apron, the soft powder shedding slightly with each step. Breathing.

A bowl of peeled apples, sliced thinly. Around six cups. A tablespoon of cinnamon. Dabs of butter. A heavy hand with sugar.

Flushed face. A stolen taste.

Dough, rolled out. Two pieces—top and bottom, trapping warmth for the apple bits to soften, release juices, become hot. Sanctuary.

“You’ve never made a pie before?”

No.

But, the history.

We are country folk, homestead farmers. We are fat food, fatter bodies, comfort in calories, family in feasting. Our food tastes better because we fill it with love, each bite speaks of tears and joy and peace and folly and safety. It is celebration; it is mourning.

When death haunts our doorsteps and whispers through our windows, we dually offer and are offered casseroles, hot dishes, cookies, sympathy with each ingredient added, each turn around the bowl and each minute in the oven.

When rings circle fingers intertwining in promise, there are wine, cakes, decorated with compassion and joy, flowers petaled with affection, vines curving with best wishes and hopeful futures.

You never return a food container empty.

This is how we communicate. Apologies in the form of apfelstrudel, condolences in the form of casseroles. Words are difficult, mixed messages across hazy telephone lines and rough accents, but food is easy, food is universal, and food is how we grew.

From great grandmother to grandmother to mother to daughter, pie is a passage, signaling love of self and love of others in equal measure; nothing holds comfort quite like a slice of pie carefully served onto a plate. Pristine glass or chipped ceramic, the plate in hand conveys the universal message. “You are loved and you are love and you deserve love.”

Even when my grandmother went on a raw foods diet, Thanksgiving still held the uncooked approximation of a fruit pie. The message was the same.

When my mother’s mother could no longer afford the effort, my mother spent a day rolling out pastry after pastry, peeling peach after peach. Pie after pie placed in the freezer for the days the message needed to be felt.

The week after my first year of college I asked my mother for advice on how to make pie crust. Transition is difficult but pie filled the lonely gaps in my body.

Two weeks of solitude led to my first apple pie, with the wrong kind of apples and too much cinnamon, but each bite I told myself that I deserved to be loved. I ate the whole thing.

Lift, carefully. Spread fingers under the soft skin of dough. Try to keep it one whole sheet.

It’s okay if it breaks, though.

Line the pan. Eight inches, a comforting circle. Layer in the filling. It should mound a little. That's alright. Let it mound.

Dough, repeat. Lift, place, fix the holes. Poke top with fork. Make a fun design, if you want. A smiley face, a flower, Starry Night, if you feel ambitious. Pinch the edges shut, trim the excess. Save these pieces. Always.

400°. 50 minutes. Check after 40. Juices should bubble, appear thick. Crust should be turning golden.

You should be able to smell it. It smells of home, the greying hands of your grandmother, small town diners late at night, Christmases filled with laughter and warmth.

Remove from oven, place on rack to cool. Let it sit.

Patience.

It's hard, I know. But it's enough time for you to read a few chapters of the book sitting next to your bed, to sip a perfectly brewed cup of tea, to count all the people who've written their names on the walls of your heart.

And then, it's ready.

Go ahead, take a slice.

Let the steam rise as you cut a wedge, lift it from the pan. Apples will slide out. Careful, it's hot. Have a plate at the ready. Pie to plate.

Hand it to someone who needs it—be it yourself or another.

Eat.

Open a webpage of your choosing—Pinterest, Tumblr, Google. Type “thin-spo,” “proana,” “skinny” into the search bar. Press enter, and hundreds of results flood in. Pictures of people, girls in majority, fill the screen. Stomachs are prevalent. The infamous thigh gap. Ribcages. Hip bones. Collarbones. Everything looks so sharp.

Stay strong, they say. Don't give in, they say.

Don't.

Do.

It.

We're surrounded by messages of body positivity, recognizing the beauty of every body type instead of subscribing to a single definition. “You can't love another until you love yourself,” they tell you while tallying calories and evaluating your clothing choices. Too big. Too small. Exercise too frequently. Exercise not enough. Eat too much. Eat too little. No longer just a glass ceiling, this is a glass box and it surrounds us all, getting smaller and smaller with greater pressure exerted on it with each up-down glance.

The cracks are starting to form.

Anorexia Nervosa. Starvation. Intense dieting. Malnourishment. Constant fear of gaining weight. Forbidding food, or allowing small portions of certain foods.

Shame.

Bulimia Nervosa. Binge and purge. Secretive consumption of large quantities of food. Rejection of food from body, typically through vomiting and laxative abuse. Guilt. Obsession with food.

Shame.

Binge Eating Disorder. Intense binges, without the purge. Unable to stop eating. Results in feelings of disgust. Marked loss of control. Often eats alone.

Shame.

Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS). Those who don't meet criteria for other eating disorders. Significant concerns over body image. Often displays same behaviors as Anorexia and Bulimia, but does not meet physical requirements. Within normal weight range. Outside normal eating behaviors.

Shame.

Ages 12-13, the average age for the onset of an eating disorder.

81% of ten year olds feel fat.

At age eight I found myself thinking I was lucky that there was a girl bigger than me in my class. I distinctly remember the day I learned her weight and spent recess practicing my mental math, calculating how much more she weighed than I. Valuing each pound. At least I'm not that. At least I'm less. At least.

She chewed with her mouth open, I remember that. I remember we would hide behind our lunchboxes to avoid looking at the food in her mouth. I felt guilty.

I still feel guilty. It could've been me. She got the brunt of ridicule from our peers. The laughs when she ran.

I remember that I didn't laugh. I didn't laugh because I knew how it felt, jiggles with every step and forced breath that gives you away.

I hated the mile run in P.E. For four years I was always second to last, for four more I was last. The teacher made the rest of the class wait for everyone to finish. Two times a year, I had to feel their restless judgment as I came panting up. They'd been waiting for too long, in a child's measurement of time. They didn't want to see my red face, my haggard breaths, my eyes filled with shame and embarrassment.

My friends would never catch my glance. I always knew they were embarrassed for me. Their eyes flicked away with uncomfortable pity, filling their mouth with a bitter taste and a quiet ineptitude—how were they supposed to know how to deal with what I was?

I'm sorry.

I don't know what happened to her. I changed schools, we lost track of each other. I don't even remember her last name. But I won't forget how, even at that age, I tried to distance myself from her, tried to show that there was a difference between her and me. I'm not as bad as her, I'm not as big as her, I'm not as fat as her. As long as I was less, I felt a brief sense of safety.

A definition:

Chubby Chaser: A guy who hooks up with fat bitches; a chick who hooks up with fat bastards; one who for whatever reason gets it on with the obese.
OMG! What a chubby chaser. Just the thought of that is disgusting.

Another definition:

Fetish: *Psychol.* An object, a non-sexual part of the body, or a particular action which abnormally serves as the stimulus to, or the end in itself of, sexual desire.

A realization:

Loving me, the way I am, is considered a fetish.

There is something inherently frightening in the moment you recognize that unless you change your body shape drastically, any amount of romantic love shown towards you is classified as “abnormal.” That the person from whom these intentions stem must be gutsy enough to deal with the label of “chubby chaser,” slurs against their affections. One who pursues the undesirable.

It weighs on you.

It takes a very particular individual to like me, to find me to their taste, so to speak. So much so that there is a whole new term coined to define them. To define who can love me.

A Small Fact

There are thirty three separate definitions for the term “chubby chaser.” None of them are positive.

Love expressed towards me can only be categorized in unnatural, abnormal, strange.

You shudder at the very sound of the word “fetish,” bringing to mind disturbing images, strange habits, hidden abnormalities.

By that same coin, you should then shudder at the thought at loving me.

Loving me should not be a fetish. Loving chubby people, loving fat people, loving obese people should not be condemned, pushed into dark alleys, out of sight.

A Brief Quotation

“A person's a person, no matter how small.”

-Dr. Seuss, Horton Hears a Who!

A person's a person, no matter how big.

There are many things you can do in three days.

Watch 5 seasons of Doctor Who.

Crochet 12 hats (assuming 2 hours per hat for 8 hours a day) and donate them to a nearby shelter.

Fly to New York, see a show on Broadway, and fly back .

Paint a mural of the Secret Garden on your wall.

Go on a cruise to Baha, Mexico, departing from Los Angeles.

Start writing a novel.

Actually write an entire novel, with enough caffeine and determination.

The thing I did in three days, or, more accurately, the thing I did not do for three days:

Eat.

That's traditionally nine meals missed: three breakfasts, three lunches, three suppers. 6,000 calories that I denied my body. Or rather, 4,380, because according to MyFitnessPal, that's the maximum number of calories I should consume in said time span, based on height, weight, and goal, for optimal weight loss.

I then proceeded to write about pie. About food. About how food demonstrates love.

Three days is the longest I've managed to go. Water becomes your friend. Skinny girls binge on water, after all. I've found that I listen to a lot of heavy metal to distract myself from the deprived depths of my stomach attempting to attract my attention. Maybe I'm trying to drown it out.

It's very difficult to imagine how it was when I could eat a meal—a full meal—without giving it much thought. Even on good days, when I have lunch, or I have supper, both mind and body tear me apart, a quivering desire to empty my stomach completely, then and there.

I haven't, though. I've stood, shaking, over the toilet, but I never actually done it.

It's something I'm proud of, in a sick sort of way.

I'm not alone, I know, in how much food preys on my mind. More friends than I care to acknowledge enter everything they eat in their food tracking app, worry over how many calories that bowl of soup had, tear themselves down for having that second cookie, stand in front of a mirror and pinch bits of their skin, on the verge of tears.

It's a strange paradox, see, the way we view food. More often than not, humans use food as a method of celebration, seen across cultures, countries, continents. Weddings. Graduations. Dates. Holidays. Even in religion—"this is my body, broken for you. Eat of it in remembrance of me." In preparing, serving, and consuming food we are joining together in a sign of joy, happiness, comfort. Food is comforting; we all have those special items that make us feel better on sad, rainy days, or the dishes we request for birthday supper.

Over 18 million copies of the iconic *Joy of Cooking* have been sold since it was first published in 1936. Celebrating the joy one finds in cooking and eating, it is one of the most well known cookbooks in existence, chock full with recipes that are very rarely healthy but are the ultimate communicator of care.

Yet, food too often is equated with shame. "Are you sure you should be eating that?" is a question heard far too frequently, and has forced much of our consumption of food into secret. "You're too skinny, go eat a cheeseburger or five" is a phrase as similarly damaging, communicating to the person their food consumption and body type are unsatisfactory, despite the fact that the two are not necessarily mutually inclusive.

No matter who you are or what you're eating, you can't take a bite without also ingesting judgment.

The college dining hall is a nightmare. No matter what's on my plate—sandwich, fries, a salad—I can feel the bruises forming on my body from the looks I swear I'm getting. Every head swivels my direction. The looks from me to my plate, and the ridicule resulting. I leave from the meal black and blue and crying.

Cooking is still something I love to do, though.

Cookies are stress relief. The neat lines, the sturdy knowledge that when I add butter and sugar and flour and eggs and spices together in the same bowl, it will turn into dough. I give them away, though. I bundle them up and tie a bow around the stacks and hand them over by the dozen to the people I love.

I only eat them for myself when I'm alone in the kitchen, before anyone can count how many there are.

