

The Weight of It

By: Adrienne LaValley

The first time I panicked was in sixth grade. I knew my parents were miserable and home wasn't a sanctuary. It was a prison. There were guards walking up and down the hallway and inmates constantly looking over their shoulders for the right time to speak, the right time to flee, the right time to retreat to their cell and finally be themselves for the first time that day. Their cell being the only escape from prying eyes and harsh opinions. The panic was always lingering though. Always just under the surface. Always waiting for the perfect, most positively inopportune moment to rear it's ugly head. That's what happens when panic get ignored. It goes along with the stuffing, the sealing up, the saving for later until you're sure it's long gone. I didn't even know it was a thing until it took up residence in my chest and started pounding from the inside out. Ever so quietly. Ever so often. Gradually getting louder and more frequent until there wasn't any choice but to let it out. The hysteria. The fucking hysteria.

I was in gym class when me and panic first really met each other. We were in the locker rooms, changing for the start of handball or racquetball or dodgeball. Some game involving foam balls of some sort. It was a regular day. Wednesday seventh period gym class. Like any other day in middle school, nothing special. Today though, my heart started racing for the first time. Not from exercise or excitement like everyone else, but from dread. From fear. Today the room started spinning when I thought about stepping out onto the gym floor. I couldn't gather enough strength to get up off that locker room bench and walk out to the gym where all my peers were. My chest was pounding with this unstoppable driving weight. I shuffled around long past when Ms.Parker blew her whistle and yelled "Ladies, let's GO! You have thirty seconds to get out here. Warm ups start NOW!"

I sat wide eyed, motionless except for my beating chest. I was sure I was having a heart attack. Stephanie sat down next to me with her impossibly long eyelashes, staring at me with concern. Her huge green eyes demanding my honesty. "A, what's going on?" she asked. "Are you coming?" "I can't go out there", I said. My heart was officially not in my own body anymore. I was sweating and wringing my hands together and couldn't find anything to comfort myself. My comfort was chips and pasta and cookies and we had nothing like that here. I didn't know about deep breathing, or centering myself and I'd certainly never heard the word meditation before. All I knew was that going out into the gym would mean that everyone would see me. And everyone would see how different I was. Everyone being the same eighteen girls I started kindergarten with. The same girls who knew pretty much everything about me. The same girls who had both my parents for teachers and came over for birthday parties and rode their bicycles with me to the lake on summer days. I was different though, said my brain. And now they would know the truth. They would know what my dad had always told me I was. And he was the leader. So it had to be true. Leaders were honest, in my eleven years of experience.

I looked down at the comforting, non-judgmental brown speckled tiles on the floor and between each desperate breath cried; "I can't go out there because everyone will see how disgusting I am." Stephanie just stared at me for what seemed like an eternity. "What?" she asked. I took a few more panicked breaths and said it again. "I can't go out there because everyone will see how disgustingly fat I am." And then came the real pause. The long, deafening pause of disbelief I half expected because I knew the words coming out of my mouth

couldn't make sense to anyone except me and my dad. We were the only ones who knew the truth. We were the only ones who knew that big was bad. Fat was equivalent to giving up on life and I'd never get anywhere until I lost at least another twenty pounds. Probably more if I really wanted to be a dancer. That's just how the world worked. "Adrienne... you are not fat." "Yes I am!! Yes I am! I'm disgusting! I jiggle everywhere and my thighs touch and I'm so fucking gross!" And I knew it was true. I could feel it in my bones. I wished to death I was just trying to get attention or fishing for a compliment but I knew, in every fiber of my being that I was utterly repulsive. I was big. And there was nothing worse in life than being big. Absolutely nothing.

"No you're NOT!! What are you talking about? Why do you think that? It's just gym class, A! Do you want me to get Ms.Parker in here?" "Oh my God NO! Oh my god, oh my god, Steph No! Do not tell anyone please. Just. Oh my god. Just give me a minute. Tell Ms. Parker I don't feel good and I'll be right out. I'm coming, I just need a second. Just let me... calm down. I'll be out. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I am so stupid. Please don't tell anyone. Don't tell ANYONE!" Then I covered my face with my hands, and put my head between my knees. Something I'd do for the next twenty five years whenever I got too overwhelmed to look someone in the eyes. My hands are very comforting, I've discovered. They don't quite carry the power of five pounds of pasta, but they'll do in a pinch.

This scenario would replay itself over and over again well into my late twenties when I finally found a psychiatrist who could connect the dots and help me understand what body dysmorphia was. But before that could happen, I'd first have to jump head long into an adolescence and adulthood molded by the ideas that one; I was way too big for everything, two; big was the worst thing in the world and three; only small people do well in life. The irony is that when I look back at pictures of myself I can so clearly see now that I was the same size as everyone else. Maybe ten pounds heavier at times, but mostly... I was no different than Stephanie. No different than Angela. No different than Kristin.

My dad started separating me from the pack when I decided to dance. I'd been in gymnastics since I was four and although I loved jumping around with abandon on the trampoline it wasn't until I passed by the dance studio on the other side of the complex that I knew what I wanted to do with my life. That. I want to do that. With pointe shoes on. I was eight. I started on Tuesdays and Thursdays in jazz and ballet class and before long I was fitted for my very first pair of pointe shoes. Pride incarnate. Right off the bat though I could tell I was different. My feet and legs just didn't look as small and graceful as the other girls. Theirs looked elegant and long when they piqued across the floor. My legs looked like a cross between a turkey thigh and a ham hock, stuffed into a Jessica Rabbit heel galloping after everyone. But boy could I jump. When I jumped, I felt like I was invincible. No one could jump as high and as quickly as I could. My legs were built for jumping. Short and strong and never exhausted.

On our thirty minute car rides home from dance class my dad would praise how strong I was. "You're built like a brick shit house, I tell ya", he'd say over and over again. "You've got good, strong stock. My god those thighs of yours are rock solid. I tell you what, I wouldn't want to be at the receiving end of high kick from you! You're really something when you jump across that floor. Can you imagine how much higher you'd jump though if you just lost twenty pounds? Oh wow! You'd be unstoppable, A". He'd whistle his "Hoooy!" whistle and I'd believe him. I'd listen and believe him with wide eyed wonderment. Why wouldn't I? He was my dad. And he was the leader. And leaders were honest. We went back to the dance store in Syracuse, an

hour drive into the city to get a different pair of pointe shoes some weeks later. A stronger pair. Ones that could hold me up. Ones that could withstand the weight of my brick shit house legs. My mom would take me though. And she didn't know I was disgusting, so I felt bad making her buy another seventy five dollar pair of pointe shoes because secretly I knew that if I just lost twenty pounds the first pair would hold me up. I was nine. I should be small.

I'd weigh myself every single morning and every single night and sometimes my dad would look over my shoulder and say "There ya go! You're gettin there! Now you listen to me though, I don't want to hear about any funny business like diet pills or anorexia or anything like that. Do you know what anorexia is? When you stop eating so you get so small and frail your bones stick out? That's gross and not sexy at all. Men don't like that. You'll do it the right way or no way at all. But boy, if you do wanna dance for a living this is just the way it is. Now your mom and I spend a lot of time and money on dance for you, I won't tell you how much, but it's a lot so if this is't something you're going to stick with then you better tell us right now." Of course it is. I'm ten. This is what I want to do for a living.

On one ride home from class one day I proudly showed him the baggie of grapes I'd half eaten. "This is all I've had today, dad. Just these grapes. I promise". "Atta girl. I can't wait to see what you do when you're a little lighter. I bet you're just going to fly. Did you see Amy in class today? She's so thin and graceful. She'd better be careful though. I see her losing more and more weight. She's gotta keep that balance. Don't want to get too thin." No, I'd think. We can't get too thin. Just perfect. Just the perfect amount of thin. I know what that is. I'm twelve." Amy was about five feet tall and weighed eighty five pounds at the age of nineteen. She flew across the floor and when she danced with Joe in the Pas de Deus, I swear she just levitated out of his arms. She was perfection. Especially when her collar bones really started to stick out. Everything I aspired to be. I'd get there someday. Someday soon.

We'd stop at the mall on the way home sometimes and walk around. He'd get me an orange soda, which had zero fat so at the time it was practically a diet drink. Zero fat meant zero fat. Sugar wasn't even on the radar. One time he stopped dead in his tracks, scrunched up his face, pointed with his first two fingers at the biggest woman he could find and whispered; "See that whale right there? She's given up on life. You can do that too, you know. You have the genes to be enormous if you want to. Just let it all go, if you want. God, she's like a cow almost. I bet she has four stomachs like a cow. If you don't want to be like that you have to commit to it, ok? You can't let your guard down." Oh my god. Fat is coming to get me. It's like the freaking blob. It just comes and claims people who aren't constantly vigilant? Noted.

By this time anxiety had crept into every facet of my life. I was a straight A student and I was in band and jazz band and chorus and jazz chorus and musicals and plays and high honor roll and tennis and marching band and I was dancing five days a week. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 4-8 and all day on Saturdays. If I didn't want to do this for a living I'd better tell them now. They were spending so much money on me and we didn't have money. And I was still fucking big. What a disappointment. Now my boobs were growing in and they just never seemed to stop growing. They looked ridiculous in my leotards and only added to my eternal fear and loathing of the jiggle. Jiggle is for losers. Jiggle is for people who'd given up on life. I'll just eat these carrots today. And then a bowl of pasta when everyone's asleep, of course. It doesn't count if everyone's asleep. Also this Laffy Taffy from the candy store. No one saw me eat it, so it didn't really happen.

My eighth grade science teacher would separate me from everyone else and make me sit in the back to take tests because he thought everyone was cheating off me. Of course they were. Nick was the absolute hottest and if he wanted to cheat off me that meant he liked me, so obviously I'd move my paper to the corner of the desk so he could see better. It's only polite. Maybe he'd wink at me later in the halls or invite me and my friends to come over and smoke in his basement that weekend. I'd get my test back with a 92% on it and the heavy chest pounding would hit me like that brick shit house. 92%? How did that happen? I knew everything in that test! It's because I'm so disgustingly fat, I know it. If I was skinnier I know I'd do better. If I was skinnier Mr. Corben would inappropriately look at me and I'd score so much better on my tests. I'm so fucking disgusting. I won't eat today. And tomorrow I'll only have dinner and then I'll dance all day Saturday, so I'll burn that off. I can lose five pounds by Sunday for sure. Then I'd calmly walk into the bathroom, close the stall door behind me and hyperventilate about how being big was ruining my life. When I graduated eighth grade, I stopped by that science teacher's room to thank him and he said "Adrienne... just don't get fat, OK? All the girls seem to grow up and just... get fat." "Oh my god, you don't have to worry about that Mr. C. Not me. No way." "OK then. Good luck in high school."

High school went by in a flash of pot smoke, binge eating and purging and before I knew it I was dancing in college. I'd made it. I wore two sports bras under my leotard and looking at myself in the mirror was the equivalent of flagellating with a spiked hook, but here I was. Dancing with girls who were auditioning for real things. I was different than everyone though, so I knew better than to actually major in dance. Dance majors were skinny and I was still big, so I'd have to settle for a minor in dance and a major in theatre and pre-med studies. I'd be the dancing dentist, my mom would say. Like the tap dancing doctor on Star Trek the Next Generation. I've always done all the things, so taking a double major and a minor is absolutely something I can pull off. Of course I can. I met a group of friends who smoked as much pot as I did and danced as much I did and ate like I always wanted to. I auditioned for and booked my very first role in a university play where I'd meet my life long girls. We were back up singers, wearing tight fitting flowery dresses, and we were not to be confused with decorations. We had parts. And I couldn't have been prouder. A real director. He was famous in Poland, I heard.

My dad came to see the show and afterwards he giggled and hugged me and said "You were great." That's code for "holy shit I can't believe I pay money for you to do backup singing in the worst thing I've ever seen in my life". But whatever... I had my own life now. I lived with my friends. I didn't have to show them what I'd eaten that day or explain why I hadn't lost the last ten pounds I was supposed to. And if I laid on the couch all day they never called me a lazy asshole. We were just friends. I was different of course, because they were small and I was big, and I panicked on a daily basis that they'd see me for the disgusting behemoth I was and finally kick me to the curb, but for now it was the closest thing to freedom I'd ever felt.

A couple days later I travelled back home for the holidays and while we were all laughing and reminiscing and eating shortbread in the kitchen my dad asked if he could see me for a second. "Sure!" I said. I followed him out to the porch away from everyone else and he scrunched up his face and pointed his first two fingers at me and said "Pooh... I'm sorry... I just can't keep to this to myself. I have to tell you. That dress you wore in the play? You're too chubby to wear that dress. You look huge on stage. I'm so sorry, honey. You just can't wear dresses like that. Sam and Christine looked amazing, but you and that other girl?... it was just inappropriate."

I don't remember anything after that point except desperately wanting someone else to hear him then noticing his wife's concerned face when I walked back into the kitchen crying. But no one else did hear. He always made sure of that. I wonder if deep down he knew how fucked up it was. I like to think so. Honestly though, I think he thought he was doing me a favor. Being honest. Just telling it like it is. No bullshit here. No one asked why I was so upset. And if they had I wouldn't have told them anyway. I knew they already knew the truth. I knew they felt the same way. I knew it was completely monopolizing their minds. It's all anyone was thinking about tonight. How disgusting I was. No thank you, I don't need anymore shortbread. You're right. I'm fucking gross.

A couple years later I went away to the American Dance Festival with my friend who was the definition of perfect. Small, strong, graceful, wealthy and confident as hell. Everything I knew I'd be someday if I just lost that twenty pounds. I met my first real anorexic friend there and I'd never been so jealous in my life. She told us that her parents said if she lost even a single more pound while she was there that they'd immediately admit her to the hospital. Sounded like a challenge to me. I never saw Beth eat a morsel of food over the eight weeks we were there. And on the last day we never even got to say goodbye to her. She was out of control though. I was finding the perfect balance of thin. Not too thin, so boys didn't like me but definitely smaller than I was now. By that point I'd discovered Ephedrine though, so I didn't need to worry about it. The ephedrine took care of any cravings for nourishment plus gave me all the energy I needed to dance eight hours a day. My heart pounded like a race horse's until about 3am, but whatever I was becoming who I needed to be. My parents spent a lot of money on this summer program for me and I needed to show my dad I was serious. If I wasn't planning on doing this forever I sure as hell better tell him now. During the last week of classes a boy dancer came up to me and said "When I see you dancing I just want to toss your little body up in the air and partner with you." What? I'm sorry. It sounded like you said... I'm perfect? I thought I'd literally explode with pride right there in front of him. I'd done it. I'd arrived at myself. And myself was very small.

I'll never forget my sister's face when I walked in the door from the dance festival the next week. She didn't even recognize me. I remember her actually doing a double take and for the first time I felt a twinge of fear. I just assumed everyone would tell me how amazing I looked, but I was wearing clothes that were six sizes smaller than they were only eight weeks ago and that must have scared the absolute shit out of them. My dad immediately started asking me questions about how I'd done it. Had I broken our promise? Was I bulimic? We'd go out to dinner and I'd return from the bathroom to his concerned face. "Did you just throw up in the bathroom? I'm serious sweetheart, did you?" The rage that blazed up inside of me screamed ... "You said I had to be small!!! I'm fucking small now!!!!" But I never said that. I just looked at him incredulously and said "No dad I promise, ok? I PROMISE! I just danced eight hours a day in stifling heat for the entire summer! There was no way I couldn't lose weight there!" "Well ok then, he'd say. I can't believe how amazing you look. You're actually svelte, A. You're really an athlete!" Yes. Thank you.

I graduated college and moved to New York and managed to keep the weight off for the most part. I told myself I'd never go back to being that disgusting girl. I hated her. Who was she even? She was weak and had no direction at all. I was strong and motivated and knew I was finally attractive. I was finally me. And I was calm. I love this small, calm person. As time went on though I'd frequently stare at my stomach in the mirror, especially after a meal and I could feel the hysteria boiling up in my throat. Hysteria I knew I couldn't explain to anyone else.

There was nothing there to get hysterical about. There was nothing to grab at but skin and muscle, really. But pinching my skin between my fingers meant there was something else to lose. I could be smaller. And staying small is the most important thing. This was who I was now. That other girl was gone. And she needed to stay gone. Or I'd lose all my friends and my dad's support and probably my job, but certainly my boyfriend.

The chef at the restaurant I worked at told me how sexy I was on an hourly basis. He understood how important it was for me to be small. I'd get much bigger tips that way. He'd let me know the minute he felt like I'd gained any weight at all and remind me not to eat too many cheese breads because well, we know what could happen. The manager where I bartended also understood how important it was that I stay as small and sexy as possible. Our uniforms were tight black tube dresses with fishnet stockings and waist cinching belts. And I knew the less I ate that day, the bigger my tips would be. It was science. Hike my skirt up higher, so you can see the underside of my tight little butt? Of course! Boy, she really got it. The casting director I went to see stared at me like a piece of meat and scanned my body from bottom to top. He's measuring my thighs with his eyes. It's his job. Do you need me to lift my shirt up a little bit so you can see how small I am? I understand that's the most important thing here. When the wardrobe stylist yelled on set in front of twenty five people; "Sweet heart, don't move your arm that way the camera can see your back fat!!" I understood she was just doing her job. No human being could possibly stand to see an ounce of back fat. Their eyes may burn right out of their heads. And the owner of the company I booked my first commercial for loved to ask me if I'd gained any weight every single time I saw him. Then he'd slap me on the back, laugh and say "I'm only joking, you're the sexiest woman I know." It's important to him that his company be represented only by small people.

And when I did gain a few pounds back, the agent of the first big campaign of commercials I booked took me aside and said "You know... when I gain any weight, I like to just burn my old clothes." He never hired me again. The owner of the super exclusive, super rich people, super sexy gym I got hired to personal train at on the upper east side snuck up behind me at my interview with the manager and when I turned around he was pretending to hump me in the air. For the next year I worked there every few days I'd catch one of the head trainers pretending to hump me from behind while I stretched a client. Everyone just rolled their eyes at it and giggled. Guys are so funny that way. When I met a real famous director and he asked me to audition for him and then assaulted me in a hotel room, I knew it wouldn't matter to anyone because it wasn't really my body anyway. It's whatever you needed it to be. And whatever you needed it to look like. I knew I'd have to keep that secret forever because it was my fault. If I was smaller and more gorgeous he'd never have treated me that way. If I was perfect I'd have a big agent. And he'd protect me from people like that. He'd never let me end up in a position like that. But I'm not perfect. So I get it. I crawl inside a dark hole in my heart and can't come out for days when people treat me like that, but I do get it. It's just the way the world works. My dad said so.

The summer months are still hard for me. There's so much skin to show and uncovered skin leads to measuring uncovering skin in every single mirror you come across, even store windows which leads to panic pretty much every single day. Until I found a psychiatrist who helped me understand how fucked up my idea of what a body should look like was, I would still wake up every morning and check to see if my thighs touched. That was the measure of if I was small or not. I'd wake up, put my feet on the ground, slam my heels together and look in disgust at the nonexistent gap between my upper thighs, my dad's voice ringing loud and clear in my head; "I

don't remember your thighs touching like that before when you stand with your feet together. Have they always touched? Huh! That's weird, I thought you had a gap there. Hop on the scale for me."

My dad's been dead for two years now and I still have to remind myself that checking to see if there's a gap between my thighs every morning in the mirror is totally fucked up not to mention deeply unhealthy. I thought it was the epitome of happiness. Being small. I still have to coach myself through the holidays, saying over and over again that if I gain some weight it doesn't mean I've given up on life. It doesn't mean that I've hit the point of no return and won't ever fit into my clothes again. It doesn't mean that my friends and family won't like me anymore and it certainly doesn't mean I'll get fired from my job for being big. Although that one still feels like a lie. And I think it always will. The honest people did tell me I had to be small, after all.

My husband decided he wanted to get in shape and bought a scale for himself, unaware of what that device means to me. I never turn it on, but I do stare at it from time to time letting the panic slam into my chest like that brick shit house. There it is. Chanting over and over and over again; "Can you imagine who you'd be if you were just... smaller?"