weighing in

In a lifelong struggle with her shape that spans relationships, career changes, and now a move halfway around the world, **Min Jin Lee** charts the seismic shifts in her life by the numbers on the scale.

STEPPING OUT THE AUTHOR IN HER NEW YORK CITY LOFT IN 2006.

I moved to Tokyo in August, and my alter ego has come along.

Ever since I was fifteen, I have struggled with my body and shape. This November, I turn 40, and I have come to treat this 25-year-old matter that appears and disappears like an illusive family member with patient regard. My given name is Min Jin, and friends call me Min for short. Privately, I refer to my problem—at once critic, gauge, and GPS—as Minus. Minus induces me to order a cheese course with my dessert when I dine with people I dislike, tells me to eat chocolate bars when I'm supposed to be writing, and orders me to row for an hour when my jeans are snug. In my new expatriate home, Minus harps that I am too big, too hungry, too much.

She knows that I didn't want to come to Tokyo. My husband was offered a better job, and since I can scribble fiction on any kitchen table, we said yes. The son of a former American diplomat and a Japanese aristocrat, Christopher was born in Kobe and grew up everywhere. I am a Korean immigrant, and except for college and law school, my life has been New York–based. For amusement, Christopher goes on 100-mile bike rides called centuries. I read forgotten books and make soup. We have been married for almost fifteen years with predictable sine curves. I still find him attractive, and he has been a smart and loyal friend. We have a ten-year-old boy, Sam, who is funny and bright. Though I had no wish to live in Japan, I cannot imagine being married to anyone else. Sometimes you have to look at hard decisions like that, I think.

It was also a lousy time to move because, after twelve difficult years, my first novel was published—three months prior to our departure. I felt like I was leaving a child behind. Yet I agreed to exchange our drafty loft near Chinatown for a wall-to-wall beige-carpeted rental in a luxurious Tokyo neighborhood filled with expatriates. I became a trailing spouse. When I got pinkeye in August, Christopher had to take off from work because I couldn't talk to the doctor. At the pharmacy, unable to read the labels, I broke down in tears. Here I am illiterate.

Beneath my litany of small discomforts was the larger issue of being Korean in a country that has historically oppressed the nation of my birth as well as its immigrants. This happens a few times a week: I pay a bill with a credit card; the cashier checks my name and learns my ethnic identity. Her face alters, and I know from her darkened expression that she knows. Here I am Asian, but not the right kind.

There are compensations. Christopher is happy with his job; Sammy loves his new school; and I am *up front >134*

RICHARD CORMAN

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researching my second novel, which is set in Tokyo. My friends ask how life is in Japan, and I usually say the same thing: The food is excellent. Tokyo is a metropolis of foodies with more Michelin-starred eateries than Paris. Every other storefront, it seems, is a bakery, chocolate shop, or restaurant. The breads are delicious, and I am tucking in. As I said, Minus is back.

Which leads me to my shape: I am five feet eight with a size 9 shoe. I weigh 138 pounds, and in college I was 183, and when pregnant, I topped out at 217. I have been fat, and I have been slender. The experience of having lived at varying weights in different places is in my mind almost like the experience of having been different women. I could pretty much tell you my weight at any point in my life, and it would be a reliable guide in terms of what I was doing, where I lived, whom I was sleeping with, and how I felt about it all. In Tokyo I feel bad about how I look, and—wouldn't you know it?—I am focusing on my weight. I'm not without hope, however, because for years, Minus has effectively taught me that knowing why I weigh what I do is more instructive than what I weigh. This struggle in body, shape, and self has been going on for a very long time.

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When I was a sophomore at the Bronx High School of Science, I weighed 135 pounds, and I didn't think there was anything good or bad about my face or figure. In my biology class there was a boy who liked me, and I liked him. As a serious young reader, I knew that literary heroines, with the exception of Jane Eyre, were beautiful, yet that kind of marked beauty was as inalienable as voice or eye color. Also, stories routinely punished beauty and vanity. Like Jane, I was plain. But like Jane, I was spirited and moral. If it was shameful to be concerned with one's physical envelope, I reached for the standard of enough. I wanted to be pretty enough for one boy.

The boy and I became inseparable until graduation. I went away to Yale while he remained in New York. He met someone else. I was not enough. At 150 pounds, I began to diet.

Weight—a mere arrangement of digits—is fixed or variable. So is beauty. When I was an undergraduate, a beautiful girl was clear-skinned, slim, and had a coin-worthy profile. That girl was usually white. I was racially aware enough to know that it was wrong to jettison your ethnic features. After the breakup, I went to Seoul for the summer. There the Koreans remarked on my height and size, making me feel ungainly and unfeminine. Nevertheless, my small, shallow-set eyes and rounded nose were supposed to be normal in my birthplace. And in 1987, though double-eyelid surgery and nose jobs were prevalent in Seoul, I believed that my phenotypical features were fine enough. I could not or would not change my height, body frame, or face, but I could change my weight.

At Yale, no one I knew would admit to being on a diet. I was a history major who took women's-studies classes. I was surrounded by other book-smart girls, and didn't we know better? But there was the girl in the dining hall who made a meal of an apple and a glass of gray milk, the volleyball player who subsisted on lean proteins, and the silent, bespectacled girl who grew thinner with each passing semester, and one day, we didn't see her anymore on campus.

But I was no good at dieting. The young Minus ranted at full volume because I began to hear verboten foods calling out, and each time I answered, I hated myself more. I told no one about this. I had grown up in a blue-collar neighborhood with a family that clipped grocery coupons, and it seemed absurd to go to bed hungry. But when the scale said 150, Minus was strident. I was undisciplined. I was unlovable. I lived on popcorn and oranges and reached 145.

In the fall of my junior year, I did my schoolwork at Naples Pizza on Wall Street in New Haven. I didn't fit in at school, and I no longer bothered trying. One afternoon a handsome graduate student toting books under his arm stopped at my table. He was European. He asked if I would like to have dinner.

On our third date, he said I would be beautiful if I lost fifteen pounds. I broke up with him; then later, when he apologized, I took him back—setting our two-year relationship pattern. That fall, I gained eighteen pounds. One day I was in his car with a friend who'd gotten thinner, and the graduate student asked her, "Why don't you tell Min how to lose weight?" I made him stop the car, and I left. He phoned, and I saw him again. It was like bingeing and purging a person. The graduate student was a brilliant artist getting a doctorate, and he believed that I was a talented writer before anyone ever said so. Giving that up was more painful than taking his insults, and, inwardly, I thought he was right. One evening he said, "I have no desire for you." I was 183 pounds. I didn't leave him; instead, I began to throw up my meals.

Later that spring, I noticed a flyer for a body-image seminar for local residents stapled to a telephone post. In my first off-campus class, I met a librarian, a retiree, a nurse, and a bartender, among others from 30 to 60 years old. In one session, the leader—a pretty young woman with an M.S.W.—handed us oranges. We peeled them, smelled them, separated a segment, and gazed at it. There were many questions. How do you eat when you are alone? I told them how I'd buy $20 worth of ice-cream sundaes, baguettes slathered with butter, and bags of cookies and swallow them in my room, then sneak down to the washroom in the basement of my dormitory and retch until my throat hurt. What kind of body did your mother have? Size 10. Describe a thin woman: Was she ambitious? Was she good? Did she have friends? If you thought she was self-centered, and you disliked her, then how was it possible to be her? Was it possible?

After eight weeks of the seminar, I swore that I wouldn't have this problem when I was old—like 40. I studied the handouts with the seriousness of a final exam, and I read both volumes of *Fat Is a Feminist Issue,* and I stopped my purging, because my body did not deserve this, and I lived in this body, and I did not deserve this. By senior year, I returned to 145.

After college, I went to Georgetown for law school because I lacked the nerve to be a writer. From Washington, D.C., I phoned the graduate student, who was back *up front >136*

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in Europe, and broke up with him. I was 142 pounds. A year later, I went to a party and asked a cute guy to dance. Christopher was 25, and I was 22. An inch and a half taller than I was, Christopher weighed ten pounds more, and he said I had a nice body. We moved into our first apartment in Manhattan in 1993, and on our wedding day, I was still 142 pounds.

In 1997, two years after I quit lawyering to write fiction, I miscarried; then, a few months later, I got pregnant again. With each additional pound, Minus nagged, but miscarriage had chastened me. Loss had taught me that pregnancy was a gift. At 39 weeks, bedridden with preeclampsia, I weighed 217. Sam was born healthy, but for years after, I had backaches, bilateral carpal tunnel syndrome, and tendinitis, which all turned out to be symptoms from my inflamed liver. I had known about my hepatitis B chronic-carrier status since high school, when I donated blood, but like most carriers, I had been asymptomatic. But now I was ill. The doctor warned that I could develop liver cancer.

A biopsy in 2001 revealed liver cirrhosis. Sam was three, and I began six months of interferon treatments. I lost half my hair, and after a dozen years of not purging, I was involuntarily vomiting daily and had such severe diarrhea that I could not leave my home. Months after the treatment ended, improbably, I developed antibodies to hepatitis B. I was no longer a chronic carrier. My body had responded to the medication and healed itself. I was 157 pounds, and I was grateful to inhabit this body that helped me to live.

I'd been delivered from a serious illness with a pristine bill of health. Even the doctors were incredulous. But now and then, I found myself focusing on the wiry white hair that had sprouted, the brown patches below my eyelids, and the arms that sagged. You pick and pick, even though you have survived bad relationships, a career switch, a miscarriage, and liver cirrhosis. Last Sunday, waiting in line for the ladies' room at Omotesando Hills mall, I saw my mirror reflection towering over half a dozen petite Japanese women. With my platform boots, I was a foot and a half taller than these ladies. My left arm appeared to be twice the thickness of theirs. In comparison, my hands resembled a man's. I turned away from the mirror, closed my eyes, and took a breath. Minus recited all that I had for lunch. Her voice shrill: Why can't you put down your chopsticks when you are satisfied?

In Japan, I am often hungry. The average woman here is five foot two and has a 25-inch waist. I've been told that it is anathema for a Japanese woman to be more than 50 kilograms (110 pounds). The average woman in America is five feet four and weighs 164 pounds. In Tokyo the largest size is often a European 38 (U.S. size 4 or 8, depending) and the largest shoe is 8. American women feel like Amazons here, but not like Wonder Woman. The portions in Tokyo are smaller, and at restaurants, I have ordered two entrées. When I was a girl, my mother told me I had too much *yokshim.* This word literally means "greed," but the word is shaded by appetite and ambition, too. This was criticism as well as a knowing appraisal of who I am, because I have always wanted a great deal. And like a woman who orders two entrées, I've wanted more than one life, more than one choice. And I want satisfaction.

BRAVE NEW WORLD LEE IN THE HARAJUKU SECTION OF TOKYO, HER ADOPTED CITY, FEBRUARY 2008.

Like a woman who orders two entrées, I've wanted more than one life, more than one choice. And I want satisfaction

Minus chides me: I am unladylike for having another roll and for eating the remains of my husband's cake. She is relentlessly critical about everything I love to eat: rice, mochi, udon noodles, and sweets. Occasionally I feel envious of the thin women of Tokyo who seem to nosh with abandon, and then I recall that every woman tends to her own patch of problems, so this envy is irrational. At the pharmacy, a friend points to a wide aisle dedicated to diet products, so there you go: Japanese women do get fat. When my ice-cream spoon hits the bottom of the cardboard container, Minus calls me names, but the GPS also says to take a look around. I'm no longer the doubtful girl she met in college. Seoul, Queens, the Bronx, New Haven, Washington, D.C., Manhattan—each stop was made in order to get here.

Again, I am a stranger in a new land, so I take heed of my discomfort. My jeans are tight, but so is my heart. I miss my life in America. Chocolate bread is not a tranquilizer for when you are afraid of change, I remind myself; it is a confection and merely that. The shape of my life has transformed again, and I can follow its signals. □

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