

Skin, Weight, Cigarettes © Susan Hodara

Skin, weight, cigarettes. Skin, weight, cigarettes. In my 20s, I'd repeat those words silently each morning, a mantra of sorts, a checklist to monitor the extent of my flaws and how I should feel about myself.

Cigarettes was the least problematic of the three because I wasn't a regular smoker; I bummed from friends at parties, and when I did buy a pack, I smoked at most half of it in a day. Smoking was the ideal adjunct to the time I spent working on a book I'd been asked to write about animation. I'd made short animated films during college, and I continued when I came to New York to earn a master's degree in film at Columbia. After I graduated, I landed a job as a producer of animated television commercials. At home after work, I'd set my pack of Merits on the linoleum-topped kitchen table next to the word processor I was using on my Atari computer. I thought the cigarettes I puffed on as I typed helped me think. But when I woke up to that residual rawness in my throat and the ashy smell in my apartment, I felt repentant. I felt compromised. I felt that if I hadn't smoked, I would have started the day a better person.

Weight was more—well—weighty. Feeling fat triggered various iterations of self-hatred: ugly, mediocre, weak, repulsive. Feeling fat meant my jeans clung too tightly to my thighs. It meant my waistband dug too deeply into my belly. It made me sluggish. It made me ashamed. So when I opened my eyes and recited my mantra, I took an inventory: How much had I eaten the day before? Was pizza involved? Was I bloated because of my period or just plain bloated? Was I entitled to have a good day, or did I need to deprive myself as punishment, as enticement to becoming a lighter, worthier me?

This attitude wasn't new; in high school, I'd toyed with anorexia. I discovered the satisfaction of over-dieting after limiting myself to 800 calories a day: an egg and orange juice for breakfast; a slice of Kraft American cheese and an apple for lunch, and whatever my mother cooked for dinner, except an hour earlier than the rest of my family sat down to eat because I was so hungry by 5 o'clock. I was often tired, but I delighted in the looseness of my clothes. I believed I looked the way I was meant to look, and when, after a few months, I resumed eating more normally, I immediately felt fat.

"You know," my then-boyfriend told me, "nobody notices two pounds added to your body." We were standing at the top of the stairway that led to my front door. I was about to go inside. He thought he was reassuring me after I declared that I'd eaten a few chocolate chip cookies, but all I heard was "two pounds," and I started to cry.

On any given day, weight vied for influence with skin: whichever I deemed worse took precedence. If I had indulged and was feeling particularly fleshy, the blemishes on my face mattered less. But if my body met with my approval, my complexion moved front and center, every imperfection a condemnation.

I didn't have acne as an adolescent, which may explain why I was traumatized by any hint of the condition in my 20s. Pimples, zits—I couldn't even say those words. I barely noticed them on other faces, but when they appeared on mine,

nothing else mattered. I felt queasy, obsessed. They had to be dealt with immediately. And so despite all advice to the contrary, I squeezed and I squeezed, loathing myself as I did.

Sometimes I'd tally the number of blights until I could regain my self-esteem, and when it was down to one or two, I'd feel relieved, more optimistic, almost buoyant. But as soon as I sensed a new one gestating, I'd plummet.

One summer I invested days sunbathing so my whole face would be uniformly red. I achieved the same—though more temporary—camouflage by spending a little too long in the sauna at the gym at Columbia. My roommate then was Margie; we shared an apartment on 114th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, across from the campus. She had lived there with her husband, who had recently left after she'd complied with his sudden demand that she terminate her already-five-months-along pregnancy. My room was what would have been the baby's. So Margie knew about angst, and we became friends as we talked late into the night, smoking our cigarettes and drinking Amaretto.

Margie, with her jaw-length brown hair and clear blue eyes and a giant smile like an embrace. Maybe that's why I let her examine my mess of a face one afternoon when I'd counted six or seven sickening spots, and when she found me sitting on the side of my bed, crying. I'd been staring at the full-length mirror I'd hung on the opposite wall, suffused with disgust and despair.

When Margie asked me what was wrong, I pointed to my chin, the release that accompanied my confession overcoming my humiliation. "Susan," she said, the word like the flow of laughter. I don't remember what else she said—maybe "Oh, I didn't even notice," or, "What are you talking about?" I do remember that she suggested a remedy: a small Band-Aid with a dab of Bacitracin applied over each affliction overnight. I tried it that night, and it made a difference. What made a bigger difference was the tangible hope she offered. What made the biggest difference was being heard.

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Seven years later, I was pregnant with my first daughter. I think now that that was what freed me from my mantra. My husband, Paul, and I had both stopped smoking in preparation for a healthy conception. And pregnancy removed any need to worry about being fat and cleared up my skin. I loved every month of it.

I never smoked again, but today, decades later, weight and skin remain intermittent sources of torment. I prefer my clothes baggier so as not to confront the distress connected to the pinch of a waistband. As for my face, I spend long stretches before bedtime peering into a 12X magnifying mirror. Now that I'm 65 years old, there are all sorts of slights: flaky flecks in random places, unacceptable stray hairs, blotches of discoloration and, still, occasionally, those nasty bumps. Each one demands its own form of attention: a cream, a tweeze, a masque, a pop. Each one is a disheartening affront.

I stand before the medicine cabinet, mirrored inside and out, balancing my circular 12X on one of the shelves. There's good light in our bathroom. Very good light.