

Weeks ago, the woman who lives below me complained to management about the sound of my toddler playing on the kitchen floor. Now, when I see her in the parking lot, I avoid her gaze. Partly out of shame, but mostly out of spite.

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A void, if you are not careful, will hollow you out. You must hold the line. Feel the flesh of your face. You are full. Keep it that way.

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From time to time, I hear a baby crying in the apartment below and I feel a sort of glee. In a year, she'll be the one with a loud toddler. Does she think she can do better?

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Nose, my son says, and points to his nose.

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In another time, another place, a girl says, "Can I ask you something?" I'm fifteen, and we are walking into the high school. "Do you really weigh one hundred forty pounds?"

I am confused. "Why?" I ask.

"Because that's what your mom told my mom."

This does not answer my question.

"You just don't look like you weigh that much."

I remember weighing forty-five pounds. Even then, my mother told me to suck my tummy in.

"Not that one hundred forty pounds is a lot. It's just more than I thought you'd weigh." I haven't said a thing. I wonder what she weighs but have the good sense not to ask.

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Avoid meat, carbs, and sugary drinks.

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It's not unusual for me to hear the downstairs neighbors screaming and slamming doors in the early morning or evening. From below me rise bellows of "Fuck you."

Eyes, my son says, and points to his eyes.

I do not complain to management.

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For Christmas, I buy my son a play kitchen. This helps keep him off the hard floor of our real kitchen. He learns what it means when I tell him to play on the carpet. We are good, quiet neighbors.

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My sophomore year of college, I drive eight hours home to stay over an extended weekend, and my mother spends the first day asking in regular intervals if I'm doing anything about my skin and weight. Each time she asks, I feel uglier. When she offers to pay for Weight Watchers, I go to my room and pack up my things.

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A void, if you are not careful, can consume you. What else would it do?

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Avoid white bread, most fruit juices, and pizza.

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In high school, I rode my bike every night after dinner. I went fast. I went far. I was skinnier then.

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What do you know about a void?
Something, probably.

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My son stirs an empty pot and brings the spoon to his lips. *Yum*, he tells me.

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My therapist once suggested I spend some time actively embracing my flaws: “What if you looked in the mirror and told yourself those things were beautiful?”

I can’t bring myself to do it, and thus, still can’t answer that question.

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In the apartment below, I hear a baby wailing. The woman yells *stop it, stop it, stop it*. I wonder if I should call management, but then remember the time that I once bellowed *I don’t know what you want* at my own infant son when he would not eat or sleep.

Instead of calling management, I play the piano. I play the gentlest song I know and hope that it might calm them.

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I could tell you that when I look at photos of myself from my sophomore year of college, I see now that I was beautiful. But what does it matter?

After I’ve finished packing my bags, my mother follows me to the back door and begs me to stay the rest of the weekend. I tell her I didn’t come so that she could berate me like this. “I’m just trying to take care of you,” she says, and I believe her.

My mother’s mother was the kind of warm, judgmental woman who could raise a woman like my mother.

She’s nearly in tears.

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Eyes, my son says and points to his ears. I laugh and don’t correct him.

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“I’m just trying to take care of you,” my mother says.

“Well, you don’t have to be such a bitch about it!” I yell the words. I had never before, and have never since, called my mother a bitch. I expect a reprimand but get an apology. I tell her it’s okay, but I still have to go.

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When I say *void*, think of a black hole or a vacuum. Think of someplace you’ve never been.

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Since that afternoon when I drove away, my mother has said little to nothing about my skin and weight. Sometimes things change.

Now I’m the one who brings it up. When I find a face cream or diet I like, I tell her about it and want her to be proud.

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Avoid eating before noon. Breakfast is for chumps.

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On a Sunday morning, my family rushes to the parking lot. We see our downstairs neighbors doing the same. It seems that they, like us, are headed to church. I give a halfhearted smile and tell myself that we could all use a little grace.

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Avoid weighing yourself, my therapist says. I take his advice and find that I like not knowing. At the doctor’s office, when they ask me to step on the scale, I avert my eyes.

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“Where’s your belly?” I ask my son, and he lifts his shirt with gusto and laughs. I kiss his soft, round tummy. He smells of lavender soap. He is so proud and delicate.

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Unavoidable: in the center of everything, there you are—belly and all.