

A shared burden

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Part 1

topic(s): BE

For Jillian, it had been an exciting time that was about to come to an end. The recent ten months as an exchange student in Wuhan, central China, had been so packed with new impressions, it certainly would take her a good while to digest the experience. It's not that she was new to the fast-paced life of a pulsating megacity, as she had spent her entire youth in London - but experiencing this in a completely new setting, getting to know a different culture, dealing with the language barrier, and at the same time trying to keep up with a somewhat regular college schedule was quite another cup of tea. At least her rudimentary knowledge of the Chinese language helped somewhat - but still, it was pretty apparent that it came from merely one-and-a-half years of infrequent duolingo-sessions rather than diligent learning. Luckily, Huifen was usually there to help. Huifen, who preferred to be called Janet (by westerners at least), was Jillian's host sister. They had been brought together by an exchange program aimed at students in multiple European and Asian countries. Janet's motivation to participate was a future career as a bank clerk in the UK. This had been her aim in life for quite some time already. In about two months, it would be her turn to leave her home country as she would stay at Jillian's place for their mutual last year of schooling. Her British acquaintance however was pretty much just in for the adventure. Jillian barely even remembered what exactly had driven her to volunteer for the exchange program in the first place, and was far from having a clear plan for her life after college. Now, she didn't have to commit to anything just yet though. Her dad, a Michelin-starred chef, owned the 'Fish & Beans', a renowned luxury restaurant in London's city centre, which basically guaranteed her a temporary job at the very least. In fact, he wanted Jillian to inherit the place one day, but she wasn't too sure if she was ready for that level of responsibility and diligence. And for now, different things occupied her mind anyways.

These final two weeks of Jillian's exchange year had been the busiest yet, as Abby, her best friend, had come to visit her. She also would accompany her on the flight back to London tomorrow. Jillian knew already that she would sleep through the entire plane ride - fourteen days of perpetual sightseeing and partying with your friends would take a toll on anybody, even a wired, energetic teenager. Today would be the last stage of this marathon, in the form of a shopping spree through pretty much every mall within walking distance of Janet's home. As is often the case with her, Jillian had already forgotten what had brought her to convince Janet and Abby to come along instead of just calmly getting ready for the departure and relaxing. Regardless - now they were here, with tired, aching legs, scouting the fifth (give or take) shopping centre for bargains. Albeit, Jillian was the only one that was still remarkably enthusiastic about it.

"Okay hang in there girls...", she chattered away, "I know you're exhausted... but I just- *hmm...* no, no, *yuck*, that's way too pink-

"What do you think about... *that* one", Janet suggested to Jillian, pointing towards a floral summer dress, "I think it would suit you".

"You think so?" Jillian responded incredulously and grinned, "or are you *maybe* just trying to get me to buy something so that we can go home."

"No, no, I mean it-

"-I agree with that-" Abby interjected, darting a glance at Janet that was worth a thousand words.

"-just joking... it does look pretty nice..."

Abby and Janet sighed in relief.

“I’d say...” Jillian continued with an impish tone, “that would fit *quite* nicely with my Spongebob socks. Just kidding.” She looked at the tag. “2500 Yuan. Jeesus *Christ*. It’s not even silk... Anyways, I’m actually gonna try that on, give me a minute or so!”

With that, Jillian strided in the direction of the changing booths, her friends tagging along behind her at a distance. Shelling out obscene amounts of money for pieces of clothing and jewellery wasn’t unusual for the young woman. In contrast, Abby was yet to spend her first pound today, as she simply couldn’t find an affordable, as well as appealing souvenir. She wasn’t too keen on it anyway, as the plane tickets and visa had been expensive enough already. Also, she wasn’t that much of a fashion queen, and would usually ‘circle though the same three outfits like a cartoon character’, as Jillian ribbed her sometimes.

As Jillian disappeared behind the fitting room’s curtain, Janet turned towards Abby.

“You think she’ll torture us much longer?”

Abby smirked.

“I’m gonna drag her out myself if necessary. My bones are killing me already.”

“Yeah, my feet are burning too. Incredible how she still has all this energy... was she like that in Britain, also?”

“She was like that from the day we first met... funny thing is, you won’t catch her showing the same level of energy when it comes to college or, let’s say, going to the gym... but when there’s a sale or something, she just turns into The Flash.”

“Well... she is a funny girl though”, Janet acknowledged.

“I second that.”

A pause ensued.

“I’m gonna head for the restroom, ok? I really need to go”, Janet announced.

“Sure.”

For the moment, Abby was now left alone. As her friend seemed to take her time, she slowly wandered off towards the sales area. Half-heartedly, she scanned the clothing racks for anything remotely appealing. Suddenly, she heard a male voice behind her back, apparently directed at her.

“對不起小姐！”

She turned around, finding a middle-aged guy with the widest, most unsettling grin on his face.

“Only English. No Chinese-” she tried to clarify. The man clearly didn’t understand. He kept his strange demeanour.

“你背著什麼？看起來很重”, he laughed.

Slightly irritated, Abby looked over to the restrooms, hoping to spot Janet. Who was this guy? She now tried a combination of speaking and sign language.

“Sir, *I - don’t - understand - you.*”

“你的背部一定很痛。我可以替你拿著嗎？”

Anxiously, Abby glanced over to the fitting rooms. But Jillian wasn’t in sight either. The path behind her was blocked by a stroller. Abby panicked.

“Please, leave me alone!”

In the meantime, Jillian began to undress in the changing cubicle. First, the wickedly expensive Hugo Boss platform shoes. Then she tossed her Levi's onto the little stool in the corner, followed by her Moschino crop top. She stopped to admire her almost nude self in the huge mirror mounted on one of the dividing walls. It was quite the sight - and she knew it. In fact, she knew she could easily start modelling for a big label of her choice at any time, given that over the years, at least two dozen slimy scouts had chatted her up in bars and on Instagram, slipped her their phone numbers or DMed her unbelievable salary offers. But she was still hesitant - albeit flattered. Jillian cracked a smile.



Life could hardly be any better. Sometimes I just can't help it and stare at the mirror, losing myself in my own reflection, marvelling at the way my life has played out so far. Now, these are thoughts that I'd never voice out loud for good reason - because obviously, all of this sounds incredibly narcissistic. I feel that I'm still pretty self-aware in that respect and try to avoid coming across as being completely full of myself - but I simply can't shake off the desire for occasional self-love as a guilty pleasure.

Jillian laid her hands on her hips and slowly slid them up along the silhouette of her waist.

I can't express how grateful I am for these proportions that I've been granted by motherfucking nature. Combined with my almost endless legs and a decent butt, this lower body on its own is the star prize a woman could win in the genetic lottery. And it could be perfected even further if I only found the motivation to work out... semi-regularly at least.

She slowly turned her body by 90 degrees and grabbed her right ass cheek with one hand. Her eyes fixated on the sweeping curves.

Maybe I should start with a few squats a day. Just to get some routine in and keep my procrastinating ass motivated by the initial results. Sometimes I even fantasise about how it would be if, one day, I couldn't fit into my pants anymore. If I had to throw out half my wardrobe simply because my ass and thighs were getting too juicy. Yes, it would be expensive. But also really fucking hot.

She shifted her attention towards her torso.

It's probably a weird way to describe it, but my ribcage has basically stopped keeping up with my body's growth as I hit puberty. And it's perfect that way. At a lower band size of just 26 inches, it displays a staggering contrast to my prominent hips and further contributes to the almost cartoony look of my silhouette. But unfortunately, there's a catch. Something is missing. Two crucial features to be precise, that I feel like, are way underdeveloped.

My tits. I am literally and utterly flat as a board. Considering my overall looks, maybe I shouldn't be too bugged about this - after all, very few people have everything they desire, right? Some people are billionaires, but have the looks of a wojak meme; some have actual talent, but die poor. And some have a dump truck ass, but are built like a coat hanger otherwise. But no matter how much I try to downplay it, I can't shake the desire to have at least a little bit to knead or bounce or put into somebody's mouth. I still remember the thrill of anticipation as I entered my teens, hoping for my bosom to finally start growing and possibly even reaching the iconic double-D-cup. Or whatever size was big enough to obscure my feet when looking straight down. Or at least big and heavy enough to get that sweet, subtle under-breast-crease. Or at the very least a-ny-thing. Every passing year, I lowered my expectations by one or two cup sizes, but as it seems, it was naive to have any in the first place. As it stands, I'll have to accept my fate of being part of the 0.5 % of women that get an error message in most bra size calculators for being too small. Granted, I don't really need bras for

comfort reasons, which - one could argue - has its upsides. But still: dirty-talking to a guy on tinder and having to explain that 26AAAA is in fact not three steps larger than A (it's the other way around) has never not been low-key depressing. Granted, there are benefits to being flat-chested - and I always recall them in order to console myself whenever I'm getting too worked up about this topic. For example, not having back pain. Being able to wear pretty much anything. Moreover, maybe even most importantly: not automatically being labelled as a slut by other women, either verbally or by a telling stare. In fact, my own generation in particular seems to push smaller breasts as the ideal body type more and more, at least amongst women in the western hemisphere. Breast reductions are at an all-time high in many industrialised countries, with waiting times for the surgery being reported as up to two years. Here in China however, bigger breasts have been in vogue over the last couple of years. Record-breaking numbers of young women are pumping up their tits with silicone, as well as their own fat. And I've thought about getting a boob job as well. I know mom wouldn't be happy, and I don't even know if I would be because I don't really like the look either. But what's the alternative? Acceptance?

“Are you in there? Can I come in?” Janet asked from behind the curtain. Jillian snapped back into reality.

“Give me a sec”, she hastily replied and grabbed the dress she originally wanted to try on. A few moments of hectic rustling passed.

“Okay, come in”.

Janet shuffled into the changing room.

“Woow, it looks great on you. What a beauty”, she exclaimed.

“You think so?”, Jillian asked overly modestly, while agreeing internally. She tugged at the fabric to smoothen the wrinkles on the skin tight cloth, further highlighting her unbelievably slender waistline. She sighed.

“I hope my suitcase won’t burst.”

“I can lend you a bigger one... -uh, have you seen Abby somewhere?” Janet asked.

“Don’t say you have lost her. Come on, did she fall into a bargain bin or something”, Jillian joked.

“Hey, I heard that”, a familiar voice interjected from outside, followed by Abby peeking into the changing room.

“I almost thought I lost you guys... I forgot which booth.”

“We almost agreed on leaving you behind”, Jillian bantered. “Did you find anyth- are you ok sweetie? Your face is super-red.”

Abby wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

“Umm well... I’ve just had the weirdest... experience in a while...”

As I already mentioned, Abby is my absolute best friend. We’ve known each other for about eight years, and basically do everything together - if we disregard the exchange year of course, but you get what I mean. She’s the only person I keep no secrets from, with very few exceptions. And I - I know she feels the same, not least because I’m the only person she hugs upright instead of at a 45-degree-angle. If this sounds odd, I probably have to explain something about Abby first. Abby, while not being an exceptionally outgoing girl, is, like most people, a person with many facets, talents, and also weaknesses. I know that, and everybody who can look past her initially slightly stiff and distant demeanour

knows that. But it is not her personality that people notice first when they meet her.

Three years earlier, Abby had been starting to experience what would later be diagnosed as a condition called 'virginal breast hypertrophy'. Her breasts, being pretty much average sized before, would balloon many times over in volume in just a matter of about one and a half years. To be perfectly clear - being busty is not a flaw to me, as I already lamented about my own complexes in that department for quite a bit. But I have to say that I fully understand her when she complains about how it is, well... Just. Too. Much. Way too much. She looks outrageous, even from a quarter mile away. And since she never had developed the confidence that is necessary with a body like this in an environment full of pubescent boys, jealous Stacys, as well as prude and ill-behaved Karens, Abby wears oversized hoodies, shirts, and jumpers whenever the thermometer doesn't exceed 25 °C. It doesn't help much with hiding anything, instead it possibly provokes the gazers to stare even more intensely, as they try to figure out what the hell would bulge out so aggressively on such a petite body. They would find out at the latest if they got to hug her in greeting, as Abby would rather awkwardly lean over as described earlier, trying to avoid smashing her entire chest into the person's torso.

*Luckily, open bullying in college hadn't been too much of a problem, as Abby led a more or less enemy-free life and also had me as the extroverted, networked protectress. Still, abusive neologisms like 'Boobiegail' or 'Abbycrombie and tits' had been put in circulation at one point; also, one can occasionally overhear people referring to her as '-you know, the short blonde with the *pretending to hold two baby capybaras in front of their chest*, you know who I mean-'. Still, most students would leave her alone instead of openly teasing her about needing two sports bras in PE and walking like an ice skater on eggshells to avoid excessive jiggling. But still, the stares continue, the whispering behind her back continues, and Abby remains being pretty self-conscious about her unusual physique.*

"The weirdest experience?" Jillian returned. Abby gave a worried smirk.

“Well, weird is probably an understatement... So, basically, I’m minding my own business and stuff, and as I was looking around, a guy randomly came up to me and just- *stared* at me. He was like two feet away. Age... 40-something I think. Then he said a bunch of stuff in Chinese. At first, I assumed that it was the usual shit - as he constantly looked down *here* - and I wanted to tell him to stop, but then- he *sneezed* right in my face and ran off. Sneeze-*farted*, actually.”

It went silent for a moment.

“What the fuck. What a fucking weirdo.” Jillian laughed with irritation.

“Right?! It’s like, I don’t even know how to feel about it.”

“That sounds so much like the incident with *Danny*”.

I’m referring to an unforgettable moment from two years ago when Danny, the weird kid we both only knew from our maths course, had gotten a bit too excited from gawking at Abby’s tits in class. She had been called to the blackboard, which, as she already had grown to impossible-to-hide proportions, was not her favourite thing to happen. But this time, it would be a little bit different. When her answers didn’t fully satisfy the teacher, he would call up Danny to help. Out of nowhere, we heard a deafening BANG, as his table had fallen over. His face contorted with pain, Danny would hold his crotch, his earlobes turning redder by the second. Turns out, his raging boner had crashed into the furniture while attempting to stand up. The kid even had to be hospitalised and missed an entire week of school. It obviously had been an absolutely awkward disaster for the guy - but for Abby, interestingly enough, it had been a rare confidence boost. Obviously, she low-key felt sorry for the poor lad, but she later told me how the incident had helped her with feeling a bit more comfortable with her new physique. But still - unsurprisingly, Abby continues to be a literal magnet for unwanted attention, as proven by this bizarre story she just told us. And whether moments like these would gradually make her stronger, or slowly break

her, is also dependent on the emotional support she gets. This is my responsibility. Nobody is going to hurt Abby. I will make sure of that.

“Next time get straight back to me, I’m gonna fuck him up. Nobody messes with Abby on my watch!” Jillian said. Abby smiled gratefully.

Janet remained serious. “Hopefully he wasn’t sick or something, better watch out for flu symptoms and stuff, you never know. It’s probably a homeless guy asking for money.”

“Could be. Should we report it maybe?” Jillian proposed.

Abby quickly shook her head.

“Let’s not spend too much time on this. I’m not even taking it that seriously, really. It’s not a *world-changing* moment or anything.”

“That’s fine by me”, Jillian said, “let’s forget this shit.”

“Oh, and by the way, you really should buy that dress”, Abby suggested, “you look hot as fuuck in that.”

Jillian switched back to her jokingly sarcastic demeanour.

“You think that, huh? What if I don’t like it anymore when we get back? Then I’m just- what? £300 pounds lighter-”

“You can give it to me”, Abby joked and demonstratively adjusted her oversized, and still slightly stretched hoodie.

She definitely kept her humour. She’s a strong girl after all.

“We’ll see about *that* , darling”, Jillian replied.

She then grabbed her phone.

“Alright, one quick snapshot and we can make off. I want to see your sexiest *or* dumbest faces!”

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