

Short, Sweet and Sour

by Frances Melling

Julie wants to be thin for the summer, but doesn't know when to stop dieting. Hasan is convinced that the Martians in his comics are trying to reach planet Earth. And when Susan goes to stay with her grandmother in the country, her dreams tell her that there is a dark secret in her family which could put her life in danger ...

These are some of the characters in this collection of short stories about the darker and funnier sides of our imagination. What is real? What do we imagine? How do the things we imagine change us, and are the results good or bad?

A BEST READER LEVEL

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Best Readers are a series of graded reading books for students of English. Each book includes a range of activities that check understanding and develop students' language skills. Full teacher's notes are available for each title.

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Lighten Up

Before you read

In this story, Julie, a teenage girl, is trying to lose weight. But sometimes losing weight can be dangerous. How far will Julie go to be thin? In the end, only she can decide.

1. Why do you think some people want to lose weight? Is it always necessary?
2. Do you think that going on a diet is the best way to lose weight?
3. Look at some different dictionary meanings of the word *lighten*. Two of the meanings are used in the story. Which meanings do you think they are?

lighten *verb* **1** if a serious situation lightens, or if someone lightens it, it becomes less serious: *He told us a joke to lighten the atmosphere.* **2** to become brighter, or make something become brighter: *As the sun rose, the sky lightened.* **3** to become less heavy, or make something become less heavy: *She took out the bottles to lighten her bag.*

- **lighten up** *phrasal verb (informal)* if someone lightens up, they become more relaxed and less serious: *Lighten up! Things aren't that bad!*

'Lighten up,' they said.

If only she could! Julie stared into the mirror, noticing the veins in her neck. Ugly. Her mouth tasted terrible, too. She reached for a packet on her desk. Thank goodness breath fresheners had no calories. She smiled as she swallowed, and felt better.

A sudden knock at the bedroom door made her jump. 'Julie, phone! It's for you, if you're still alive in there.'

Stupid brother, thought Julie, unlocking the door. She went downstairs and picked up the phone. It was her friend Teresa.

'Hey, Julie, what's up?'

'Oh, nothing – the usual.'

'We're all going to the skating rink and having a pizza afterwards. Do you want to come?'

'Oh, Terry, I'd love to, but I'm a bit tired, really. I guess it's this diet. Maybe another time?'

'Come on, Julie. You never come out any more, and we miss you, you know. Can't you forget the diet – just for once?'

'Well ...' Julie tried to think of an excuse, but couldn't. Maybe it would be fun, and it was exercise, after all. She said goodbye to Teresa and went back upstairs to get her skating things.

The skating rink was packed, as usual. Julie was happy to discover that her short skating dress fitted better, and even thought she caught a couple of the boys looking at her – without laughing this time. That was nice. But the pizza restaurant afterwards was a nightmare. Julie was feeling so happy that she ate two large pizzas and fried potatoes, with a big Coke on the side. Of course there were comments. It had to be Carol.

'Crikey,' she said. 'I thought you were dieting, Julie. What's the diet for? A fat lady competition? You've got a long way to go, but

you're doing well.'

Julie looked down at her empty plate and clenched her teeth. Then she got up and ran upstairs to the toilet. Fortunately she got there in time, but there was that bad taste in her mouth again. Never mind: she'd brush her teeth later, she thought to herself.

When Julie got home she took a shower. The water was hot and soothing and the room filled with the smell of lavender soap – her favourite. Yes, that was better. In fact, she felt almost good. She stepped out of the shower and checked herself in the mirror. Of course there was a long way to go, she told herself, but the diet was working. She'd be able to wear those short skirts in the summer. Yes, just a few more months and she'd be looking great. She remembered the picture of the model she kept under her bed. A beautiful, thin face, a curved neck, and legs to die for. It was the hands that she liked the best, though: long, beautiful, slender hands with beautiful bones. Julie looked down at her own hands. They looked very different: fat and ugly, she thought. She remembered the pizza parlour. Yes, she had a long way to go. She had to be extra careful now: no more mistakes.

Questions:

- Is Julie losing weight? Why does she want to do this?
 - What was Julie's 'mistake' at the pizza parlour? What did she do immediately afterwards?
-

A voice brought Julie back to herself.

'Julie! Are you ever going to come out of the bathroom? Your dinner's ready.'

'Just a minute, Mum. But I'm not hungry, anyway. I ate pizza.'

'Pizza? I thought you were dieting. Come on, just a bit won't hurt.'

Julie thought for a minute. She really did feel full. Had the pizza been old? Perhaps she should take another of those pills.

'No, thanks, Mum. Really. I'm full.'

That night Julie slept badly and had strange dreams, but she felt better in the morning. Lighter, somehow. Good enough for breakfast, anyway.

'Mum, can you buy another shampoo today?' she asked as she was leaving for school. 'This one makes my hair look dull. See you later tonight. Bye!'

On the way to school she met Teresa.

'Hey, Julie, are you OK? You don't look too good,' said Teresa.

'I'm OK. I just didn't sleep well,' replied Julie.

'Ha, must be that diet,' said Teresa, smiling. 'Which one are you doing, anyway?'

'Oh, you know. Just healthy stuff. Salads and vegetables. I'll probably live until I'm 365 years old, I've eaten so much health food.'

Teresa giggled. 'Looks like it's working, though. Have you nearly finished?'

'Oh, no. I promised myself I'd keep going till the summer. Just a couple more months.'

'Wow, there'll be nothing left of you by that time!'

'Don't worry. I'm tons overweight. Just look at all this flab!'

Question:

- What does Teresa think about Julie's weight? What does Julie think?
-



Two weeks later, Julie was flicking through some magazines in her room when her mother's voice floated up the stairs.

'Julie! Your cousins are here. Your Aunt Sarah's brought us a lovely chocolate cake. Come on down and say hello, will you?'

Julie made her way downstairs, though she didn't really want to.

Her young cousins had already started on the chocolate cake. She sat and made polite conversation with her aunt, watching the children put chocolate all over the table and then over each other.

Her aunt cut her a big slice, but the idea of all that rich cream made her feel ill. 'Sorry, but I think I'll have a bit later. It's the diet, you know,' she said, trying to smile.

Fortunately, they didn't stay long. Julie watched some TV, then went upstairs to her room for an early night. Lying under the bedcovers, she listened carefully for the noises of the family as one by one they came upstairs to bed. Soon there was silence. Julie carefully opened her bedroom door and crept quietly downstairs. The cake was in the centre of the refrigerator. Like the star of the show, thought Julie. She took a piece. It tasted very good. The chocolate was rich and sweet, and felt wonderfully soft and cool in

her mouth. But even two slices weren't enough. Julie looked around the kitchen and opened a nearby cupboard. She selected things carefully from the shelves. Just a few, and not too much of anything. That way they wouldn't know. Closing the kitchen door quietly, Julie went back upstairs to bed.

Questions:

- When did Julie eat the cake? Why, do you think?
 - What do you think Julie took from the kitchen?
-

April came, then May. Time to choose a new swimsuit. Red, perhaps, thought Julie, as she lay on her bed. Or purple with yellow? Yuk, no, that one made even the model look fat, so what would it do for her? Black was better. Yes, black with silver. Great with red hair. Strange: that new shampoo wasn't much better. She'd have to buy a different one when she went to the chemist's tomorrow. Never mind. But that swimsuit ... Julie's hand pulled open her bottom desk drawer and selected a brightly-coloured chocolate bar from among some empty packets. Yes, that swimsuit would be great.

'Pooh, Julie, was that you in the bathroom? Are you ill or something?'

Julie jumped up as her brother burst into her bedroom. And she thought she'd locked the door ...

'Get out, Tom. Don't you know it's rude to come in without knocking?'

'Mum does it all the time, though, doesn't she?' Tom was looking round the room. His eyes opened wide when he saw the open drawer. 'Crikey, Julie! I thought you were on a diet. It's a pretty good diet if you're eating all that ...'

'Get out, Tom, or I'm calling Mum,' said Julie, trying not to listen.

'Wow, it's like a chocolate factory in here!' continued Tom.

'Where'd you get it all, anyway?'

'Tom! Look, take some if you want. but please just get out. And don't tell Mum, OK? Please, Tom, listen ... I'm not ill, I'm just -'

'Yes, you are. You're always ill these days. Ill and tired and skinny. Lighten up, will you?'

'Tom!'

Julie's mother was busy in the kitchen when the phone rang a few days later. The voice on the other end sounded strange.

'Mrs Johnson? I'm calling from Tesco's. We've got your daughter here: she wants to talk to you. Go on, Julie. Don't cry, now.'

'Mum? It's me. I'm at the supermarket. I - I'm in a bit of trouble ... I ...' Julie's voice was shaking. She just couldn't say it. She handed the phone back to the store detective.

'Mrs Johnson? Yes, it's your daughter. I'm afraid we've just found her with a lot of things that haven't been paid for in her bag.

Chocolate and deodorant, breath spray and laxative tablets ... Yes, quite a lot, really. She says you asked her to buy them, but she forgot the money ... No, we haven't called the police. She's crying so much, and so thin. Is she ill? ... Yes, of course we'll keep her here until you come ... Right now? Good, I'm sure we can sort this out. I'll see you then. Thank you.'

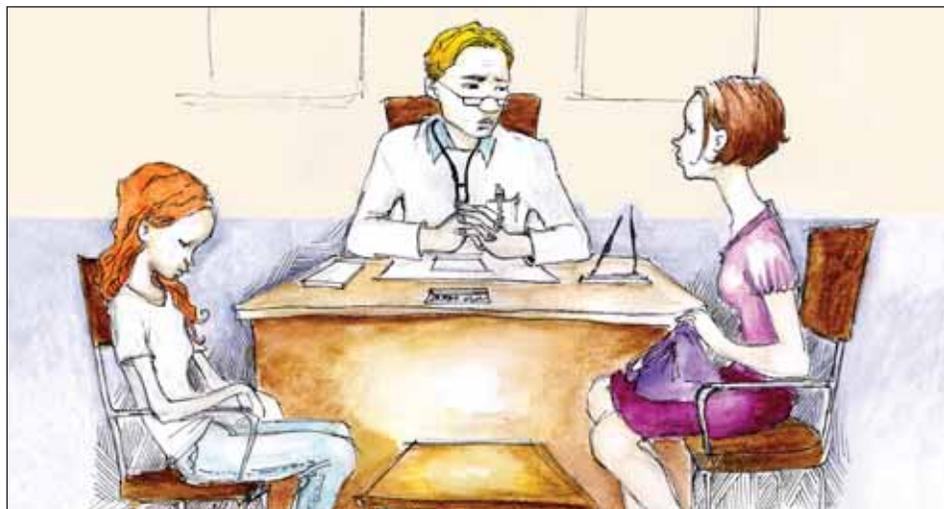
Questions:

- What did Tom see in Julie's room?
 - What did Julie tell the store detective? Do you think it was true?
 - Why was the store detective worried about Julie?
-

Fortunately things weren't so bad. There were arguments when Julie got home, but she thought her parents would soon forget it, and they did. They never really listened, anyway – just 'Sit here!', 'Do this!', 'Don't do that!' and 'Where are you going now? I never can understand you.' Julie knew all that, and knew they wouldn't stop her. And it wasn't long now: she really was doing well ...

'Mrs Johnson? Thank you for coming in. Please sit down. Don't cry now, Julie. Please listen to me, both of you. I want you to understand. This is an illness. It's called bulimia, and it's very dangerous, just as dangerous as cancer if we don't stop it. Mrs Johnson, we have to take Julie to the hospital now, and we have to keep feeding her, through a tube if necessary. Julie, do you understand me? If you carry on like this you'll die. Nurse, can you get Julie's things together? Mrs Johnson, I'm so sorry. She'll be safe in the hospital. Perhaps you can tell me how all this started? We'll be trying our best with her, but she will need to cooperate, of course. I hope she will.'

Julie looked down at her hands and waited.



Glossary

- breath freshener:** a spray or tablet that stops your breath smelling
- burst into:** if someone bursts into a room, they come in very quickly, without asking or knocking
- calorie:** a unit for measuring the amount of energy in food; people on a diet sometimes eat low-calorie foods
- carry on:** continue; behave in a particular way
- clench:** if you clench your teeth, you press them tightly together
- comment:** something you say or write to show what you think
- cooperate:** do what someone asks you to do, in order to achieve something
- Crikey:** something people say when they are surprised
- curved:** with a smooth shape that bends like part of a circle
- to die for:** (informal) if something is to die for, it is so good that you want it very much
- dull:** not bright or shiny
- excuse (n):** a reason you give for doing or not doing something
- flab:** (informal) fat on someone's body
- flick through:** if you flick through a book or magazine, you look through it by turning the pages quickly
- giggle:** laugh in a light or silly way
- had better ('d better):** should
- laxative:** something that helps solid waste leave your body when you use the toilet
- packed:** (informal) if a place is packed, it is full of people
- Pooh:** something people say when something smells bad
- right away:** immediately
- skating rink:** a place where people practise ice skating
- skinny:** (informal) very thin, in a way that is not attractive
- slender:** thin and beautiful
- soothing:** something that is soothing makes you feel more relaxed
- sort sth out:** if you sort a problem out, you solve it
- stuff:** (informal) things
- swallow:** make something go through your throat to your stomach
- tons overweight:** (informal) very overweight
- try your best:** try as hard as you can to do something
- vein:** one of the tubes in your body that carry blood

After you read

Check your understanding

- 1 Why was the pizza parlour 'a nightmare' for Julie?
- 2 Why did Julie need new shampoo?
- 3 Why did Julie jump when Tom came into her room?
- 4 What did Julie give to Tom? Why, do you think?
- 5 How did Julie try to get more chocolate?
- 6 What did Julie's parents do about Julie's problem at the supermarket?
- 7 Where were Julie and her mother at the end of the story?
- 8 Why was the doctor worried about Julie? What did Julie have to do?

What do you think?

- 1 In the story, Julie wanted to be like the women in magazines. Can you think of another reason why she might want to be thin?
- 2 In the story, the doctor said that he hoped Julie would cooperate. Do you think she will? What would you say to Julie to help her?
- 3 Do you think that Julie's parents tried to help Julie enough in the story? If not, what could they have done?
- 4 Some people think that 'thin is beautiful'. Do people usually think the same way in your country? What do you think?
- 5 Do you know anyone who has tried to lose weight recently? What was their reason for doing so? What did they do? How did they feel about the results?

Build your vocabulary

Informal language

The table at the top of page 27 shows some English words and phrases with their informal equivalents. Complete the table with the words in the box. Use the glossary on page 25 if you need help.

very crowded - ~~stuff~~ - very thin - flab - lighten up - packed

<i>informal English</i>		<i>standard English</i>
<u>stuff</u>	=	things
_____	=	fat (n)
skinny	=	_____
_____	=	don't be so serious
_____	=	_____

Writing

Either: Write the end of Julie's story. Did she cooperate with the doctors? Did she get better? Did her family help her, or did somebody else help her?

or: Write a review of *Lighten Up* for a teenage magazine. Include the following points:

- a what the story is about;
- b why you liked it / didn't like it;
- c whether you think other teenagers should read the story.

Project

Either: The story tells us that there were arguments between Julie and her parents when Julie got home from the supermarket. What do you think her parents said? How did Julie reply? How did the conversation end, do you think? Work with a partner or in groups of three to roleplay the conversation.

or: Find five pictures of different people in different magazines. Ask your family or friends which person they think is most beautiful / handsome, and why. What effect do things like clothes and hairstyle have on their choice? Compare your notes with the notes of other students in your class. Did other people have the same ideas? Make a poster of what you learn.