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Unabashedly Imperfect

A
THESIS

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Unabashedly Imperfect

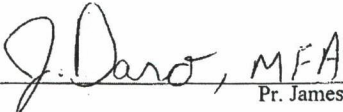
A THESIS

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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As a child, I have no distinct memories of feeling too fat, too large, or unlovable. Though I grew up in a poor, single-parent family, my mother devoted her life to keeping me from knowing we were poor, teaching me to make better choices in life than she had, and doing all she could to raise a happy, healthy, well-adjusted child. Every life has its troubles, though.

After two years of sexual molestation, from age nine to eleven, several years of teasing at a variety of different schools, and the onset of depression during my mid-teens, I learned to hate my body. I blamed my shape and size for all the problems I faced, hid behind various preformed personalities, and told myself that if I could just be skinny, I would be happy.

Life did not work that way. The more I attempted to blame my unhappiness on the way I looked, the worse my depression became, which led to cutting, binge eating, bulimic tendencies, and a several broken relationships.

It would be in my mid-twenties, after entering graduate school and agreeing to my first polyamorous relationship, that I would discover the depth of my self-hatred and begin the long, arduous process of learning self-love. None of my bad habits would be broken easily, though, and it would take several years of working with a therapist, talking with my family about past hurts, and the support of some very good friends, for me learn that

the person I am, inside and out, deserves love, from others and, most importantly, from myself.

Unabashedly Imperfect

The Model Mold

Five feet and eleven inches tall, for a woman, is a glorious height. It suggests speed and agility on basketball courts; elegance and grace on fashion catwalks.¹ Upon entering a room, a woman who stands five-eleven cannot be ignored. The stature commands attention and respect. Five-eleven and a size eight would, theoretically, incite envy in women and lust in men.

Five-eleven and size eighteen, not so much.

The worst part of being a bigger girl and bigger woman, in my case, is that I carry all my weight in my middle. While other big girls have balanced bodies, with equal amounts of weight in the chest, midsection, hips, and butt, my chest and hip area stay the same size no matter how big or small I am. Only my middle fluctuates, which leads to me being asked whether I'm pregnant more often than the media tell Miley Cyrus to put her tongue back in her mouth. The first time it happened, my mom and I were at the hospital with my great-grandmother, after she suffered a fall. The nurse taking care of her turned to look at me, as we wheeled Grandma to her room.

¹ Plus, you never have to ask for someone to reach things on the top shelf. In fact, because I'm now three inches taller than my mom, one of her nicknames for me is "Hey you, Tall One. Come reach this."

“Okay, I have to ask just to be sure, but are you pregnant?² I mean, do we need to worry about upsetting you, or you fainting?”

I gaped at her. I couldn't answer. I knew I was overweight, even fat, but I didn't think I was *that* fat.

My mom jumped in, saying “She's only sixteen,³” far more insulted at the thought of raising an immoral teenager than an overweight one.

The nurse immediately apologized. “We just have to be careful, so I have to ask.”

However, though my mother and I were both overweight, and though she was obviously the adult to my teenage position, the nurse only asked me about potential pregnancy. Perhaps my mother's larger bust hid her weight more than my average one did. Perhaps the nurse was unintentionally insulting my mother by assuming she was too old to be pregnant. Perhaps, I just stood oddly that night, holding my lower back and making my stomach jut out. Not matter what, it hurt.

This has happened several times since then. Some days, I respond with sass and confidence and state that “I'm not pregnant; I'm just fat.” Other days, I sit in the bathroom and cry for a while.

My height also leads others to make assumptions about me. Every time I changed schools growing up, the coaches always acted the same. They assessed my height and all but bounced up and down grinning and asking, “Do you play basketball?”

I don't. I mean, I can. Dribble the ball. Run up and down the court. Shoot the ball. The basics are fairly easy; a five-year-old can *play* basketball. I just suck. I can dribble and

² Just as a heads up, never, ever ask a woman this unless she's holding ultrasound pictures or wearing a shirt that says, I'm not Fat, I'm just Knocked Up.

³ And no, the hilarity of this comment in today's society is not lost on me.

pass just fine. I even know the difference between a chest, a bounce, and an overhead pass.⁴ It's the whole shooting aspect that screws me up. Lay-ups and jump-shoots are no problem, but if I'm farther than two feet from the goal, forget it.

Let's not even get started on the running part. I'm not a fit size eighteen who can jog until her feet fall off. I'm more of a chubby size eighteen who hopes the adrenaline rush will give me the oomph I need to survive a zombie apocalypse.⁵

Just to be clear, I don't dislike sports or physical activity. I love sports, especially sports where people bleed. Turn on a hockey game and hand me a hot wing, and I'm happy. I don't even have to know who's playing to be interested. I'll pick a team and bet you a candy bar they'll win.

I do exercise. I go horseback and four-wheeler riding whenever I'm at my parents'. I enjoy being outdoors; hiking, camping, swimming, I love it all. I'm just not super coordinated. Curbs tend to outmaneuver me, and that doesn't bode well when it comes to competitive games. I prefer to play sports with friends who won't make me feel like a fat-ass giantess who can't make a free throw.

And therein lays the problem with being so large. No one dreamt of telling me to stop growing as a child. To an eight-year-old, the statement, "you're getting so big" feels like a compliment. No one, however, has a problem telling me that I am now too big. Advertisements are filled with slender women. Popular styles in women's clothing keep getting smaller. Quite often, the few XXL shirts I do find will not fit over my head, let alone my shoulders.

⁴ Much thanks to sixth grade P.E.

⁵ With all the genetic modifications Monsanto has made to our food lately, the apocalypse is coming people. Stock up on ammo and prepare.

Because I grew up taller and larger and living in a society that appears to only appreciate certain sizes, I always felt that the short girls were the ones who received all the attention. They are the ones in the front of every group photo; men are uncomfortable dating a woman than them; the delicately framed are doted upon and protected by others, desired by men and seen as deserving of affection. To me, culture in the United States seems to say that we big girls should take care of ourselves. On multiple occasions I've had a man let the door close in my face after holding it for the two skinny girls in front of me. Please, watch me be a badass and open the door all by my damn self. I do not need your kindness or your chivalry.

This is not to say that waifish and thing are the only acceptable body types portrayed in the media. Modern media have expanded ever so slightly to include curvaceous women in the category of attractive; the slogan "Real Women have Curves" permeates contemporary American culture due to celebrities like Jennifer Lopez, Kim Kardashian, Beyoncé, and Scarlett Johansson, and there's even a movie titled *Real Women have Curves* that portrays a young girl dealing with body issues. But even there, I fall flat.

I possess broad shoulders and narrow hips, and I carry my excess weight in my middle, and yes, I possess my fair share of excess weight. Not enough to be compared to a baby beluga whale, as I have often called myself, but enough to keep me from seeing my toes when I look down. I believe I am what would be called an inverted triangle or an apple shape, which sucks as apples are probably one of my least favorite fruits.⁶ The

⁶ Although bananas are my favorite fruit, the physical connotations that go along with them would do nothing to make me feel more womanly, either.

point is that most pop media demand that women should be shaped like a ruler (Cameron Diaz), an hourglass (Penelope Cruz), or a pear (Shakira).⁷

So now, not only have the media told me that I'm too large to be attractive, but I'm also no longer a *real* woman, whatever that means, because I'm not curvy. What the hell am I?⁸ I know what I considered myself: a deformed monstrosity, and not a good one, like a werewolf,⁹ but a bad one, like Medusa, turning men to stone if they so much as look at me.¹⁰

That word deformed has fallen from my lips and floated through my mind so often and for so many years, that the first time I said "I'm not deformed," my mouth tasted as if I'd been sucking on pennies. I could place my hand on a Bible, look my mom straight in the eyes, and lie and feel more comfortable. For years, I covered mirrors or averted my eyes when getting in and out of the shower. Since I could never have the body I so desired, I would never really be pretty, never be worth loving, never have any real worth. I was the platypus of the human race. Everyone loves to come see me and giggle at me, but no one wants to take me home.

There's nothing I can do about my height and very little I can do about my size. Even with the strictest diet and utmost attention to exercise, I will always wear at least a sixteen due to the width of my shoulders and my proportions. I suppose I could pray that I wake up tomorrow in a different body, that God will admit He made a monstrosity and

⁷ Does anyone else notice the need to objectify women as inanimate object that people don't mind using and discarding?

⁸ Say apple, and I'll hunt you down and sit on you.

⁹ Others might not agree that these are *good* monsters, but they've always been my favorite, so bite me.

¹⁰ Looking back, that may be a more sexual and thus potentially positive statement than originally intended....

snap a shrink ray into existence to fix His horrendous mistake. After the third or fourth time I passed out, however, I quit holding my breath for that to happen.

A far more plausible approach is just to get over it. I didn't get my way when I threw temper tantrums as a two-year-old, and I doubt I will now. My shape and height won't change, so I need to focus on what I can change, my fat to muscle ratio. And that doesn't mean I should go on a crash diet. First, nothing with the word crash in it can ever be pleasant, and second, you can't spell diet without the word die. I know enough to realize that starvation techniques and short-term changes to get rid of water weight won't help me accomplish anything. I need some long-term, life-term if you will, goals for eating better and adding exercise. Most important, I need to change my insides. No amount fat loss or muscle gain will do any good if I still consider myself a monstrosity because I don't look like a Barbie doll, or a supermodel.

That's not to say that Barbie, Disney movies, and magazine clothing ads made me hate myself. All three did play a part in my thinking that the only way to be beautiful was to fit some standard created by the media. Barbie, Jasmine, Belle, they all possess tiny waists and curvaceous figures and are admired for evoking thoughts of real bodies that inspire real lust. Anyone's who's ever stood in line at a grocery store has seen magazine cover after cover bashing stars for being too thin or too fat or not getting rid of the baby weight or possibly having plastic surgery.

Growing up, everywhere I looked, I saw women's importance being reduced to their looks. Barbie was definitely not a scholar. Magazine covers rarely focus on what a great job an actress did in a movie. It's all about the figure, the look, the clothes, and this teaches little girls to focus on their figures, their looks, their clothes. That's only one part

of my story, though. Many factors taught me consider being fat to mean being ugly and to consider myself fat and thus ugly.

Judith Moore, in her novel *Fat Girl*, states that she mistrusts “real-life stories that conclude on a triumphant note. Rockettes [should] not arrive on the final page and kick up their high heels and show petticoats.” I agree with her. There will be no Rockettes in my story because I can never be a Rockette, and bringing them in at the end I would only be dragging myself back down the path of self-torture and self-hatred for being large enough to make two or three Rockettes.¹¹

Life isn't like that. No one, neither Rockette nor family member nor anyone else, shows up at the end of a long personal journey to do a happy dance for you. If you want dancing, you better kick up your own heels and dance, and if friends or family come happy dance with you, more power to you and them. The hardest journeys we traverse, though, we travel alone, so we have to dance alone.

That may just be the hardest part of my journey, the learning to dance naked, alone in my own living room, and being happy that way, and if you, dear reader, decide to dance around with me, either naked or clothed, feel free. It's not a requirement; as I said, this is my personal journey, but I'm always happy to have a dancing partner.

When it comes to talking about my weight, I like to think I'm more of a Jen Lancaster, author of *Such a Pretty Fat*. Jen—I love that I can call her that, like we're friends who grab drinks on the weekend instead of complete strangers—Jen is upfront, honest, and in your face. She lays herself out there. The good, the bad, the flabby, the stuck-up ex-sorority girl who lied to a homeless man for a suitcase when she lived in a “Dot-Com

¹¹ My legs are nice enough to inspire envy in a Rockette or two, though, so that makes me happy.

Palace,” it’s all right there on the page for people to love, hate, or love to hate. And she does it with such ease and humor that it’s almost impossible not to love her.

Trust me; no one is more shocked than I, the chick with tattoos, piercings, and ever-changing hair that I would love to have drinks with someone who considers herself the Queen of Preppy. I cringe when I bouncy blondes in sorority shirts ask me to come to some bubble bash. Not that I don’t want to go to the bubble-bash. I love bubbles. I love to dance. I love hanging out and making new friends. I would love to be there. I just assume they’re all stuck up and are going to hate me for being fat and covered in tattoos that don’t wash off. So I snarl and glare and avoid them. Great strategy, right? Totally makes me seem like a friendly, outgoing person.

While I lack Jen’s confidence and feelings of beauty even at her biggest, I liked her sass, her style of writing. I wanted to write like her, to put myself on the page and let people love me and my prejudice against sorority pledges or hate me.

Okay, to be honest, I really wanted to put myself out there in the hopes that people would love me because I desperately crave attention, affection, and acceptance, but anyway.

So here it is, my flaws and my faults; let’s get those out of the way now so that my consequent actions or inactions don’t surprise you. Then, we can focus on what really matters: the fact that I’m fat.

Or at least, I think I’m fat.

I can’t fit into single-digit clothes, which means that I’m fat.

Someone once called me fat, so I must be fat.

I must be fat. There's really no getting around it.

I sat alone at lunch, my only friend was the girl who picked her nose, and Jerkface¹² and his friends put kick me signs on my back. Why would kids have teased me for my weight, if I weren't fat?

I never had a date in high school, not even to prom, didn't get my first kiss until the summer before I turned twenty, and my first serious boyfriend cheated on me. Has to be because I'm fat, right?

Why am I self-conscious any time I go out in public if I'm not fat? It's not like I'm imagining all the dirty looks from others. I'm not projecting my own insecurities onto those around me. I'm not sullen and standoffish in crowds, hiding in the corner and putting off an angry, uptight vibe that would cause guys and girls alike to avoid me because they think I'm bitchy instead of realizing I'm just shy and self-conscious.

Nope. It has to be that I'm fat.

Wasn't I supposed to be saying something about my flaws and why you should hate yourself for loving me? Oh, well. We'll get to that later. First things first, though. Every good story starts at the beginning.

¹² Not his real name, but it definitely lets you know how I felt and still feel about him.

When Dreams Turned to Nightmares

I don't remember feeling fat as a child. Looking through pictures of myself at ages three, five, seven, I had a pudgy belly and chubby cheeks, but no more than most other children. I never remember feeling self-conscious about my size. I acted just like every other kid, riding my bike, swimming at the local pool, building playhouses in the field next to my house.

I loved dressing up. Putting on frilly dresses and having a tea party with Mr. T. Edward Bear.¹³ Dressing the dog up in a baby doll hat and pushing him around in a stroller.¹⁴ Wearing a long, flowing skirt and twirling around the house in my socks like a ballerina or ice skater.

Every picture my mom has of me as a child, I'm in a dress or a skirt, usually with flowers, lace, or flounces, anything super girly that would flare out as I spun. My favorite outfit, as a recall, was a long, tiered, dark purple skirt and a long-sleeved, light purple shirt with roses embroidered around the collar. I distinctly remember, or at least have been told so many times that I've created a memory, that my mother tried to

¹³ Today, his fur is missing in places, he's flatter and threadbare, and my mom has had to stitch him up repeatedly, even making him a felt, ninja Band-Aid. He now holds a special place on the top of my bookshelf so he will stay safe and intact.

¹⁴ R.I.P. Bo, such a wonderful little dog and good friend.

convince me that the skirt and shirt did not match because they were two different purples.

“But they’re both purple.”

A child’s logic is infallible.

As an adult, my bra and panties must always match, not just in color but also in shade, and I often feel twitchy if the color of the undergarment set does not match both my outfit and my socks.¹⁵ Even my workout clothes have to match each other and the socks, and the fact that my current running shoes¹⁶ are red makes me twitch because I did not buy all my workout clothes to match red shoes.

As a child, however, all I cared about was feeling girly. Lady bug buttons, striped jumpers, shirts with scalloped collars, I was happy. And never, not once, do I remember anyone picking on me for wearing too much pink, having skirts with too many flounces, or wearing a homemade dress, hat, and purse made out of the same floral material.¹⁷

At age seven, my mom offered me the chance to join a gymnastics class, with my best friend, Lily. I loved dancing, spinning around the backyard, and pretending to be a ballerina. I watched figure skating with my great-grandmother and loved the grace and elegance of the skaters. And I wanted to learn gymnastics, imagined myself jumping and flipping across the floor.

¹⁵ Yes, my socks. I find wearing lime-green socks with blood-red underthings and a light pink shirt an atrocity. I won’t do it, will not leave the house that way.

¹⁶ Also known as power-walking shoes, as this fat girl does not run unless being chased by zombies, and Monsanto has not yet created those.

¹⁷ Leave the house in a rainbow-dragon print, homemade, flouncy skirt as an adult and expect some major stares and rude comments, though. And yes, I did ask my mom to make me a rainbow-dragon skirt, and she did because she’s amazing.

Lily jumped at the opportunity to take classes, running off to pick out a leotard and practice the splits. I refused.

As much as I wanted to be a gymnast, a dancer, a skater, some graceful creature in the spotlight, the idea of getting up in front of all those people and looking like a fool, of not knowing what I was doing, terrified me. I couldn't make myself step forward and offer myself up for judgment like that. That fear stayed with me through most of my life.

The videos of my preschool graduation show me hiding in the background, lips pressed into a thin line. My mom still loves to show pictures of me as a toddler, yanking my floor-length, white-lace dress over my head to hide from the cameraman. In school, I hated giving book reports or speeches where the entire class focused on me. It wouldn't be until high school that my love of performing and my desire to present my own writing would outweigh my fear of being stared at.

When I think back to my refusal to take gymnastics lessons, part of me remembers not wanting to look fat in a leotard, but I honestly can't be sure whether that's the real reason. Maybe stage fright is all that stopped me, and the fear of the leotard is something my adult self feels and projects backwards.

I know no one ever teased me for my weight in California, my home for the first seven years of my life. Though my mother and I moved almost every year, I always lived in the middle of town and had lots of friends. I spent most of my time outdoors, exploring the world and scraping my knees, than I did sitting in front of the television. I built clubhouses in the field next to the house, spent summers at the school pool, and rode my bike everywhere. I stayed outside until my hair bleached blonde and my skin tanned to a rich brown that made my Choctaw grandpa proud.

When my family moved to Arkansas, the summer before I turned eight, that all changed. We lived on the outskirts of town with no kids nearby. I started spending more time with the television and junk food than outdoors. I watched Scooby Doo, the Power Rangers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, I loved shows where animals solved crimes and chicks in pink kicked ass, but I no longer acted stories out with friends. Instead, I used those stories to create a fantasy world in my head.

I've always had an active imagination, and I learned to read at age four, so growing up, I designed houses, schools, and farms on notebook paper and would make my Littlest Pet Shop toys act out scenes from my favorite books. I looked to this more and more as I got older, turning to the Babysitter's Club and Nancy Drew for new ideas and adventures for my toys.

I would also pretend that my favorite characters were real. I'd hold full conversations with them, as if we'd known each other for years, as I ran around the backyard solving mysteries with the Boxcar Children or riding horses with the Saddle Club. I even went so far as to set up hurdles in my backyard and ride my pretend horse around, leaping higher and higher obstacles to win the blue ribbon.¹⁸

I created a world in my head where I had friends, confidence, and stability. I never looked like myself in this world, though. I always gave myself a body and face like I wanted, like the people I saw on TV. I magically became thin and beautiful, a real-life heroine from my favorite novels. It was in that world of make-believe, of slender, pretend midriffs and saving the world, that I felt comfortable.

¹⁸ Were anyone to copy this act, please remember that if you don't make it over a hurdle on your pretend pony, you will end up with a bloodied and broken toe, so make sure your horse is sufficiently athletic enough for the jumps you create.

The Monster Next to the Bed

The year I turned nine, my mother, great-grandmother, and I moved to trailer park, and my mom met Voldie.¹⁹ When they first started dating, he seemed like a great guy. He didn't put my mom down for being a single parent or ignore me. He let me follow him around and ask him tons of questions. Having never had a male influence in my life before, I doted on Voldie, following him everywhere and emulating his every move.

Nothing gold can stay, though.

Once, when a friend and I wanted to go walking through the woods behind the trailer park, Voldie offered to go with us. A short way into the walk, though, he suddenly disappeared, leaving two nine-year-old kids to wander through the woods until we could find our way back to the trailer park. We eventually did, only for Voldie to pop out from behind a tree and claim to have been following us the whole time, so we were *never in any real danger*.

Soon after, Voldie and my mom moved in together, and my great-grandmother no longer lived with us. Then, my mom switched to working overnights. Suddenly, he and I were spending eight to ten hours a day alone.

¹⁹ Total nod to Harry Potter because as I cannot come up with something polite to call this person. He Who Shall Not Be Named seemed like an appropriate stand in.

One night, Voldie came into the living room, where my bed was since our trailer was a one-bedroom, and crawled into bed with me, asking to cuddle. I don't remember much of the night clearly. What were we wearing? What was on the television? I want to remember snow on the TV screen, but was it even on? I just remember the feeling of wrong. The hurtful, too-tight-skin, can't-breathe feeling that I still get today when I look back on that night. I remember holding very, very still in the hopes that if I didn't move, didn't breathe, it would all be over soon.²⁰ Though nothing other than cuddling happened that night, the inappropriate behavior continued.

I didn't understand the molestation at first, had no clue what he was doing or why it felt wrong. I just knew that it made afraid to be too close to Voldie, though any time I shied away from brushing up against him in the hallway, he'd use his body to pin me to the wall and tell me to quit hiding from him.

Even as the molestation progressed, I didn't start to hate Voldie. In my eyes, he was my dad. I'd never had a dad before, and the novelty of having one took a while to wear off. Plus, when my mom went to work, he didn't enforce the rules. I could stay up late, eat what I wanted, and smoke cigarettes with him.²¹

I became more attached to Voldie after my little brother, Donald James, was born. I'd been an only child for a long time, and though my mom worked a lot, the largest portion of her time and attention away from work went to me. With a newborn in the house, that changed. She also worked two jobs, one overnight and one on the weekends, so my time

²⁰ Even as I write this, I feel my shoulders stiffening, my back straightening, and my lower anatomy clenching and trying to lift away from the chair that I no longer want pressed against me. Bile rises in my throat. My extremities vibrate and go numb. The more detailed my recounting of these events is, the longer and more heinous my nightmares will be.

²¹ For anyone keeping track, the nine/ten-year-old child was given cigarettes.

with her was even more limited. Since Voldie lacked the paternal ability to understand the needs of a newborn, he was happy to leave Donald James asleep in the bedroom and spend time with me.²²

One night, I decided that I wanted to play the baby and get all the attention, like Donald James normally did, so I sat on the couch and pretended that I couldn't speak or do anything for myself.

I meant it innocently. I hadn't meant to entice anyone, hadn't tried to act sexy, I'd just wanted to feel important again.

But somehow, pretending to be a baby led to Voldie needing to check and see if I was wet.

"But I'm not. I can tell you that I'm not." I tried to inch away from him on the couch, but I was pressed up against the arm and had nowhere to go.

He moved closer and reached for me. "Yeah, but if you were a baby, you couldn't." He slid his hand into the front of my pajama shorts and underwear, feeling to see if I was damp.

There's a blank in my memory here, a place where my vivid memories suddenly stop. At one point, I can see the black, faux-leather couch that sat up against the wall, catty-corner and to the left of the television, can smell the stale cigarette smoke, and picture the brown-red bristles of his beard, as he sat next to me; then, I see nothing. It's as if

²² As time progressed and Donald James grew older, I stepped up and took care of him whenever my mom was at work, even missing school on the days she had to stay late and Voldie wouldn't get up and take over caring for a toddler in time for me to make it to the bus stop.

someone ripped the plastic tape out of my mind's VHS,²³ and after the tape was wound back up, that section still jumped, stayed blurry, skipped to a safer part.

I'm sure I could remember what happened, that I could easily prod my mind, force myself to focus on the events, remember just how much of a touch happened, but do I really want to? What good would it do? If I remember a finger sliding inside me versus a hand on the outside of my body, am I more broken? Do I have more of a right to continue hurting this many years after the fact? Or is it all just bad, and knowing the details would do nothing more than help my mind to better develop my nightmares? Am I okay with the protective censorship my subconscious has performed?²⁴

After he removed his hand, he stood. "Now, it's my turn to be the baby. You have to see if I'm wet."

"I don't want to play anymore." Leaving the couch, I moved across the living room and sat in a chair with my legs curled up underneath me, staring at whatever was on television. I think it was a late night talk show, but as with the first time he touched me, I can't be sure of what was on, just that I remember staring at the TV, at the person walking and talking on screen, hoping that if I blocked Voldie out of my line of vision, he'd somehow quit being a threat.

"It's my turn to be the baby, so you have to check if I'm wet." He stood and walked over to my chair, undoing the button and zipper on his jeans.

I yanked the crocheted afghan off the back of the chair over my head.

²³ Anyone too young to remember these, go ask Google.

²⁴ A few years later, my first attempt with tampons would rip my hymen, letting me know that whatever my memory blacked out to protect me, rape is not one of them. This offers at least some sense of comfort.

He laughed. "That's got holes in it, so you can still see. You know you want to see."

He shoved his jeans and underwear down, and I looked.

Why I looked, I don't know, though I do know that I hate myself for having done so, hate myself with a burning passion that makes me want to vomit and mutilate my skin until my sin has been cleansed. The urge to cut, to slice chunks of flesh from my arm as if I could somehow cut out the memory, cut out the disgusting little girl who should have closed her eyes, cut out the dirty child who I resent having been is so intense that I can feel sections of my arms go numb, as if readying themselves for excision.

It would do no good, though. I would just be a disfigured lump of shame.

I was a ten-year-old child, so sheltered from the world that I knew nothing of sex other than a few comments the less naïve kids in the trailer park made and the few minutes of porn a teenage girl who lived across the park from me had shown me one day. My fear of Voldie was matched only by my curiosity about body differences that I didn't fully understand. Does that make a bad person, a whore through to the center of my being, even though it would be another twelve years before I would lose my virginity? Or does that just make me a child? I don't know. I know I would never degrade my nieces in a similar situation. I would love, protect, and defend them until my dying breath. But I also know that until my dying breath, I will feel like a whore, like trash worth nothing more than the spit and disdain of others.

I looked, though. As an adult, I realize that he was fully aroused, but as a child, I only knew fear and that all-too-familiar feeling of wrong. That's when I decided that I'd had enough. The game was no longer fun. Making excuses, I went to bed. I slept on a bunk bed, where the bottom was full sized and the top was a twin. Though I usually slept on

the bottom with all my stuffed animals, that night, I crawled onto the top bunk where it was harder for Voldie to reach me.

He followed, though he'd pulled his pants back up. He stepped onto the edge of the bottom bunk so he could pull himself up to eye level with me as I sat in bed. "You didn't kiss me goodnight."

I leaned in and pecked his cheek.

"That's not how you kiss your daddy goodnight. This is how you kiss your daddy goodnight." He leaned in and pressed his lips to mine, forcing his tongue into my mouth.

I sat perfectly still until he pulled away and stepped off the bottom bunk. "Goodnight."

It would take another year for me to fully understand what was happening, that Voldie was working his way up to raping me. Several times, I awoke at night to find Voldie standing in the doorway to my room or on his hands and knees next to my bed watching me sleep. To this day, I can picture his face, cast in blue shadows from the hall light, peering over the edge of my bed.

The final straw would come one night after we dropped my little brother off at our great-grandmother's house. I don't remember why Donald James was going to visit grandma if I wasn't. Normally we would have both gone, but I distinctly remember the ride back to our house. The trip from grandma's house to ours was a straight shot down the old highway. Only instead of driving straight, Voldie turned right down a dirt road and away from the comfort of the streetlights. As we drove farther and farther into the darkness, I panicked. Pressing myself up against the passenger side door, I looked back and forth from the square of night sky that I could see to Voldie's profile.

“What are you doing? Why aren’t we going home?”

“We are. I’m just taking a different route.” He turned to look at me, and I could see the furrows between his brows getting deeper. “Calm down.”

“I don’t want to calm down. I want to go home. Take me home.” He listened that night, and the next time I went to school, I asked to be excused from class to go speak to the school counselor. I told her everything, and a few days later, DHS took my brother and me to stay with our great-grandmother until the case could be sorted out.

When my mom took me to see the detective in charge of my case, she wasn’t permitted to come into his office with me because she was family. Thus, I ended up alone in a small, plain-colored room with a male detective as big around as he was tall. Though he probably wasn’t much taller than Voldie, in my memory, he looks enormous.

I sat across from him at his desk, staring at the pictures of his family.

“Well, Miss Evans, if what you say is true, we need to get Mr. Foreman away from you quickly.”

If? Just if? Didn’t he believe me?

“So, I’m going to give Mr. Foreman a lie detector test, and if it proves that you’re telling the truth, I’m going put him in jail. But if the test proves that you’re lying, I’m coming after you.”

I’m coming after you....

To this day, that is one memory that I has never faded and I have never doubted. Those words echo in my head. In my mind, there was no way an adult would believe a

child over another adult. Voldie would walk free, and I would go to jail, taken away from my mom forever.

So I recanted, signed papers that claimed I'd made everything up. I'd already told my story to multiple people: the school counselor, DHS, a therapist, but the only time I remember crying is when I signed those papers saying none of it was true.

The Problem with Lying

My mom left Voldie anyway. She borrowed \$1,000 from her step-mother in California to afford the down payment on a new place to live, and one day, while Voldie was at work, she, my aunt Jackie, her three step-kids, and I packed up everything we and my great-grandmother owned and moved the four of us to Beebe, an hour away from the house in Plainview.

It would take almost three years for her to believe that I'd actually been molested and hadn't just made everything up. During those three years, the molestation and its effects were never discussed. On the outside, I lived as though nothing had ever happened.

On the inside, I waited for Voldie or someone like him to show back up. I had trouble sleeping, often had nightmares, and became afraid to walk through the house alone at night. A short time after we moved to Beebe, I got in the car with my mom and noticed that the dashboard was broken. When I asked what happened, she confessed that Voldie had showed up at the house, tried to force his way inside, and she'd left with him to get him away from Donald James and me. When she refused to let him move back in with us, he broke the dash.

At one point, I woke in the middle of the night, needing to pee. In our new house, with all the bedroom doors open, I could run in a circle, moving from left to right: foyer, living room, Grandma's room, the kitchen, pantry, bathroom, mom's bedroom, my room, and back to the foyer. Donald James' room was tucked in the back across from the bathroom. Since Mom still worked nights, I would walk through her room to the bathroom, so as not to wake Grandma.

I'd made the walk in the dark before, but for some reason, the thought of stepping out into that darkness, terrified me. My mind conjured all sorts of monsters under the bed or lurking in the shadows, but all my monsters were human. Unlike other children, who worried about boogeymen, I worried about real men with bad intentions breaking into the house and lurking in corners, waiting for some unsuspecting person to walk past. The closed door between my mom's room and mine might as well have been the Great Wall in China, holding back the Mongols. I didn't know where, but I knew that somewhere on the other side of that closed door were horrors that I didn't want to behold.

That night, and several nights after, I peed in a pencil case in my closet so that I wouldn't have to leave my room in the dark and dumped the liquid out in the morning.

During the day, I would often hide in my bedroom closet with my little brother. I worried that when, not if but when, someone broke in, Donald James would be too little to understand that he needed to hide quietly. I never wanted him to be hurt like I had been; I wanted him to be safe. It was up to me to protect my brother; it had always been my job to take care of him.

We couldn't hide under the bed. I'd seen cop shows. Bad guys always looked under the bed. We needed somewhere else, somewhere less obvious, so I kept a pile of blankets and clothes in the floor of my closet for us to hide under. No one would look in a pile of clothes; they'd think it was just a mess in the floor of a child's closet.

I ran into the living room, where Donald James was playing, and grabbed his hand.

"There are bad guys coming to get us. We've got to be quiet and hide."

He grinned, revealing little gaps between each of his teeth, took my hand, and tottered into the bedroom after me, thinking it was all just a fun game with his big sister. We sat in the floor of the closet with the door cracked just enough for us to see out. I placed my finger to my lips and whispered shhh. He copied the action, still smiling at me, before leaning against my side. I wrapped my arm around him, and we sat, quietly, until I decide it was safe to leave.

At age twenty-seven, I live in a two-bedroom apartment a few blocks from where I go to school, and I leave my bedroom door open at night. If it's closed, my hand hesitates, just for a split second, before closing around the door knob.

I carry mace on my keys and a stun gun in my purse. There's a knife on one side of my bed and a baseball bat on the other. I keep a knife in the console of my car, and have pepper spray hanging next to my front door.

I live on the second floor, far preferable to the first as it's not likely someone is going to climb a ladder to break in, but if they do, I have a fire escape ladder to get away. I always check my peep hole before opening the door. I hate leaving my porch light on

because it advertises that I'm not home, and I check the reflection in the door knob as I unlock it to see if anyone is behind me.

I still have nightmares of being chased, ones where I'm running but not getting anywhere, and part of the reason I started jogging was to ensure I could outrun an attacker. I want to take up martial arts in order to improve my chances of escape, and I recently found an article for anti-rape wear, underwear that cannot be cut or yanked down. I've added it to my Christmas list.

Around age ten, the midpoint of the abuse, I quit wearing skirts and dresses and started wearing jeans and t-shirts or stretchy leggings and baggy shirts. While all the pictures of me before were in frills and lace, all the pictures of me after are in pants. If I ever wore a skirt or dress, it was for Halloween or special occasion. I didn't wear a skirt just to wear one until my sophomore year in college, an almost ten year gap.

Now, I own five skirts for every one pair of jeans in my closet, but I still worry when I go out alone at night. During the day or in a group, I feel okay, but if I'm alone, walking to my car after a night class or taking the trash to the dumpster after dark, it bothers me to be in a skirt. How easy is it to shove a skirt up out of the way as opposed to trying to undo and yank down jeans?

The Truth about Teasing

The molestation started around the same time I began getting teased at school, though at first, I was not teased about my weight. Looking back, I realize that every new kid gets teased. It's like an initiation process. The more the new kid can roll with the punches, laugh at him- or herself, and tease back, the more likely he or she is to end up fitting in and making friends.

I am a great person to tease. Not because I have a great sense of humor, my sense of humor sucks when it comes to teasing, but because I get upset. My face turns bright red, and it almost always ends in me screaming at the teasers or crying. In short, those who tease me get a reaction, and every bully wants a visible reaction.

In fifth grade, it became the *in* thing for all the guys to ask me out as a joke. I'm not sure how a guy asking me out turned into a joke and led to me to breaking down and bawling, but it did. Maybe there was some psychosomatic process behind it all, and the unwanted touches from Voldie turned into a fear of any guy coming near me. Maybe the teasing started as something else and morphed into asking me out, and I just can't remember how it started. No matter what, I hated going to school in fifth grade.²⁵

²⁵ To this day, I resent Jerkface. I take comfort in the fact he's the same height today that he was in fifth grade, so he probably ended up the butt of a few jokes himself. Maybe he's learned something and become a nicer person. One can only hope.

My weight did go up, though. The more Voldie touched me, the more confused I became, and the more I used food to silence myself. I would open my mouth to scream, and then stuff it full of cookies to shut myself up. Besides, it's not like I knew what to say once I started screaming.

It wasn't until sixth grade, a year into the molestation, that my weight became the focal point of the teasing. I had kick me signs put on my back. The boys in class called me fat on a regular basis, even though some of them were bigger than me.

The day of our sixth grade graduation, we stood in two long lines, one for boys and one for girls, and were told to walk out into the gymnasium in pairs where we would pause under an archway for our parents to take pictures before continuing to our seats for the ceremony. I ended standing next to the boy I'd secretly had a crush on the entire year. I chewed my lip and played with the bottom of my bright yellow shirt, twisting it around my fingers out of excitement. I was getting to walk next to the boy I'd been too afraid to go near all year, and I'd get a picture with him.

Then, I heard my crush talking to Jerkface. "I don't want to walk next to her; she's fat."

My excitement drained, and instead of fidgeting with the bottom hem of my shirt, I pulled it away from my stomach before crossing my arms over my chest to hide my belly.

The next year, after my mom left Voldie, I started junior high at Beebe. I went to the doctor, for what I don't remember, but as all doctors are prone to do, mine required me to

stand on a scale. At twelve, I already stood about five-five and had a larger build.²⁶ I also weighed 150 pounds, giving me a BMI of 25.0. A BMI of 24.9 is normal; one of 25.0 is overweight.

I was chubby. A few years of inactivity and filling up on sugary snacks as I headed toward the start of puberty had added more than a little baby fat to my middle, but when I saw the number on the scale, I thought I was fat cow.

The BMI doesn't take body shape into account, though. It doesn't look at the width of someone's shoulders or size of their ribcage. All it reflects are height and weight. Two numbers to come up with a third number, none of which accurately measure someone's health or happiness.

Sixth grade had made it clear that my weight was a target for others, though, so having a doctor inform me I was overweight and most girls my age did not weigh 150 pounds put a mental spotlight on my belly. From then on, all I saw was my stomach and how it compared to my peers'.

I refused to get on another scale for three years. I'm pretty sure I could have been dying and would have refused to go to the hospital if it meant standing on a scale, and that avid avoidance fed my obsession with my weight and the size of my stomach. My entire self-worth, or lack thereof, centered around what that one scale had said, months, even years after I'd stood on it. The idea of being fat, of weighing too much, consumed me, my thoughts, and my wardrobe. Clothes became a way to hide, to blend in with the skinny, pretty people, instead of a form of self-expression.

²⁶ I do not mean that I'm big-boned. That's an excuse. I'm not big boned; bones are bones. I'm wide boned; my shoulders will never fit into a size two, no matter how much Spandex and grease are used.

As I got older, my weight hid me just as much as I tried to hide it. Even though I hated being fat and never feeling comfortable in clothes, I never had to step outside my comfort zone. As a result of being teased, I feared people, social situations, and putting myself out there for people to judge. Being fat, I never had to get over those fears. I could hide in the corners, and everyone let me, especially since I was always the new kid at school. And males, the root of my darkest fears, either ignored me completely or continued picking on me. While neither of those experiences made me happy, I felt safe. Hatred, both from myself and others, became home, and every layer of fat, every rude comment and dirty look, every lunch period spent alone, added new floors, decorations, and security systems to my home.

I also became obsessed with checking myself out in every reflective surface possible. Even now, I slow as I walk past storefront windows. Do these jeans make me look fat? What about my butt? Is my butt perky enough? Maybe if I bought a smaller size in pants, they would smash my fat in more and make me look thinner.²⁷

Cell phone faces, computer screens, calculator screens, clean windows, metal decorations on purses, anything remotely reflective attract me like a moth to light, and though I know I'm flying into sudden death, know the sharp sting that will follow my gravitation toward the shiny surface ahead, I constantly find myself looking at my reflection to see how I measure up, and I never do.

²⁷ For anyone else thinking that, no, it will not. What it does is cut into your body and leave permanent indentations that later require bazillions of squats and leg lifts and crunches to try smooth and tone. I swear, if someone could have convinced twelve, fifteen, and eighteen-year-old me that those too-tight, low-rise jeans would eventually produce divots where my hips were supposed to be, it would have saved twenty-seven-year-old me a lot of sweat and tears.

Does my shirt look good from the front *and* from the side? The rousing helps mask my belly when I stand face forward, but as I turn, does it make it look worse? These shorts show off my legs, but from behind, do I have cellulite ripples on my upper thighs? What about when I sit down? Do they cut into my fat as my thighs spread out?

And my face, dear God, let's just put a bag over it. It's broken out today, and no amount of make-up will cover that giant zit on my nose or the bundle of pimples on my forehead that are so big they have their own gravitational force. What about my hair? Is it frizzy? Poufy? Do I have wings on the side of my head? Maybe I should cut it. Or dye it. Or both.

Over the years, I have colored my hair every shade from bleach blonde to blue-black, from pink to green to aquamarine, fire-engine red and cotton-candy blue. It's reached my waist, been cut into a faux-hawk, shoulder length, layered, with bangs of every kind; maybe I should try a perm next? All these changes were attempts to look in the mirror one day and feel beautiful, to see my cheekbones, high and sharp and proudly flaunting my American Indian heritage, instead of my sagging jowls and too-close-together eyes.

And I have great hair. It's thick enough for two people, has a bit of a natural wave, and when it's long, I can wash it, sleep on it wet, brush it in the morning, and have it look sexy and windblown. My hair inspires envy, so I have been told, but I keep thinking that if I could somehow change it, cut it in just the right style, that my face would fall in line and look equally desirable.

I read *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy, and she kept saying that if she just looked normal, like everyone else, she wouldn't whine and moan about she wished her nose were straight or anything else so trivial. She'd appreciate her nice, normal face.

I tell myself that if I could just be a little skinnier or a little curvier, if I were a voluptuous size eighteen, I wouldn't bitch about having big hips or a big butt. I'd appreciate having such a nice, womanly figure. I would not, under any circumstances, merely move my hateful thoughts onto another part of my body, find something else wrong with myself, some other reason to justify my self-hatred.

My Secret Hatred

That self-hatred, malleable and malignant, eventually turned outward.

I hate fat people.

I don't mean that I hate all people who are a little bit overweight or even that I hate all obese people. I'm capable of meeting someone, liking his or her personality, and overlooking his or her size, but there is a part of me that resents anyone who is large enough that his/her weight makes it difficult to function in society or anyone who is a little overweight and refuses to dress in appropriately sized clothing.

You weigh three hundred pounds and wear mu-mus from Omar the tent-maker?²⁸ Hate you. Ten pounds overweight but wearing a shirt two sizes too small? Yeah, hate you, too. The woman who has turn sideways to go through doors? Hate her. The man so large he's riding in a motorized cart through Wal-Mart? Hate him. The entire Honey Boo-Boo family? Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate.

And no, the irony of someone who's been made fun of and shunned for being overweight hating other fat people is not lost on me. I get that my anger toward others who have the same weight problems I have makes about as much sense as a second-generation Chinese-American trying to only be American-pretty. I'm snubbing a part of my culture, my upbringing, and myself, but I do so because I hate myself.

²⁸ This is my mom's favorite expression for describing her baggy dresses.

That idea, that fat is part of my culture, sometimes confuses people. I don't mean that Americans as a society are all fat, though we are a fairly hefty country, and I'm not trying to say that my family is overweight, so I'm going to be overweight, though we are a fairly hefty group of people. When I say that being fat is part of my culture, I mean the culture of a child in a poor, single-parent family.

Growing up, my mom used to make two meals all the time: brown-sugar rice and a fireman's breakfast. Brown-sugar rice is just what it says, brown sugar, butter, and rice. A fireman's breakfast is scrambled eggs, cheese, diced hotdogs, and diced potatoes. Both are yummy; neither has any real health benefit other than being food.

My mom remarried when I was sixteen, however, and my family quit eating these so much.

Standing in the kitchen, a year or two after her marriage to my step-dad, I watched her making biscuits and gravy for breakfast. "How come you never make brown-sugar rice, anymore? I love that stuff."

My mom looked over at me, then away. She set down her whisk and turned to face me, arms crossed. "Honestly? Because we have more money, now. I made that stuff because it was cheap. Since we have enough money to afford a real breakfast, I don't cook that other stuff, anymore."²⁹

I'm sure there are other meals that she's quit making or changed her recipes for now that we're able to afford different ingredients.

²⁹ Since I asked this question, she's made brown-sugar rice every time I visited.

Since my mom worked a lot when I was young, I often fended for myself when it came to food. As a child, I wanted to eat what tasted good and what I saw on commercials; I didn't worry about fat content or nutrition. Pop-Tarts, cereal, pizza pockets, microwavable chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, these things are quick, easy, and yummy, and there's not a fruit or vegetable to found in any of them.

When you have a limited amount of money, you buy things that fit into your budget, which sometimes means if it's not on sale or you don't have a coupon, you don't buy it. And most often, or at least from what I've seen, coupons and buy-two-get-one-free deals are not for healthy foods. I've never been able to buy two apples and get a third for free or received a coupon for fresh veggies. You get coupons for macaroni or ramen noodles; you get deals on buying microwave dinners.

When buying for a child, kids don't want the dinners filled with veggies. They want the blue box with the penguin on the front that has chicken nuggets and a brownie. They might eat oatmeal, but they want brown sugar and cinnamon, not apples and berries. Growing up, when left to my own devices, I didn't reach for fresh fruit as a snack, I wanted fruit snacks, but they're made with real fruit, so they count, right?³⁰

Oh, and fast food. Kids love fast food. Parents love fast and food that kids will actually eat. Put breaded sections of chicken breast in front of a kid and face a fight; label it a nugget and attach a cool toy, and hallelujah, the kid eats.

I learned to eat what I wanted, what was cheap, what could cook in under five minutes at the mere push of a button, what had the best toys that week, what didn't require any

³⁰ This is so wrong, most *real fruit* fruit snacks, drinks, etc. actually have far more sugar and artificial coloring than actual fruit.

thought and could easily be thrown together during commercial breaks. Not the best start to healthy living.

Today, I look at the overweight people driving through McDonalds to order three big macs, two large fries, a chocolate shake, and a Diet Coke,³¹ and I see what I could be. I see double chins and sagging jawlines; I see bellies that hang below the hems of shirts; I see bodies that jiggle and sway with every step, and I want to puke because that could be me if I'm not careful. If I continue shoving my pain and my past to the side and using food to shut up my demons, I will possibly one day be a beluga whale, wearing a gaudy mu-mu and waddling down the street.

I fight against that future by staying active and attempting to find healthy substitutes for my sugar tooth, which actually makes my hatred of fat people worse because I don't understand why other overweight people can't do the same. If they are too big to walk through Wal-Mart, they do not need to fill their motorized cart with frozen pizza, hot dogs, and sodas. Buy some damn lettuce and make a salad. And I don't mean a cheese, crouton, bacon bit, and ranch dressing laden bowl of bad for you. Put some rabbit food in a bowl and look out for Elmer Fudd.³²

I don't understand why would anyone willingly continue eating his- or herself into such a disgusting state?

³¹ Diet soda contain aspartame, which actually increases your chance of obesity rather than helping you lose weight, but you won't see that on a Coca-Cola or Pepsi commercial.

³² Anyone who considers buying *healthy* microwave dinners a better choice than taking the time to eat real fruits and veggies should look up information on Monsanto and GMOs. I can't pronounce half of the ingredients in those meals. I've got two writing degrees, so if I can't pronounce something, that's scary. Just eat some real food, as in food that looks like food and comes from the ground and not a genetically altered source. Otherwise, you may one day turn into a mind-controlled zombie due to cordyceps, but that's a much longer rant.

Then, I get into a car accident and end up juggling work, school, doctor appointments, and housework. I exist on nothing but frozen pizza and cereal because anything else requires too much time and too many dishes, and I have a thesis to write, dammit, so where are my jelly beans, and then the doctor puts me on a scale, and I weigh 243 pounds, and my once-snug jeans are now cutting off circulation.

Pride goeth before a fall.

Genetics are often brought up when discussing size and why overweight people stay overweight. I know that genetics do play a role in the way someone looks. Having two parents who are short and stocky does not make it okay for you to live on cheese whiz and baked potatoes until you're over 300 pounds, but it may mean that you're never going to fit into a single-digit dress. Hell, I won't either, so let's grab a drink and hate on the skinny bitches together.

People using genetics as an excuse not to bother trying to lose weight or be healthy disgusts me, though. My mom is overweight. My biological father is overweight. Most of my family is overweight. Even my step-family is mostly overweight. But I don't want to be overweight, so I'm working on it. It's that simple. Is it always fun? Hell, no. I hate sweating my ass off just to be told that I don't get any cake unless it's a rice cake.³³ But is it worth it to be healthy and be able to look in a mirror without gagging? Yeah.

Maybe.

We'll see when I get there.

³³ Most rice cakes are actually super yummy. Their lack of frosting makes me sad, though. I suppose I could add frosting, but I'm fairly certain that defeats the purpose of healthy living.

The point is, maybe it's not completely the overweight person's fault that he or she is overweight, since there are so many factors at play when it comes to weight, size, shape, etc.

I still hate fat people. And I still hate myself. But I suppose I'll share my cheesecake.³⁴

³⁴ It's homemade, too, because that's the way I do things.

Too Tall to be an Angel

Being overweight isn't the only way to have atypical body, though. Due to similar issues: a lack of role models, inability to find clothing that fits well, teasing, being underweight, top- or bottom-heavy, lanky instead of curvaceous, too tall or short all have the potential to lead to a feeling of alienation and wrongness. A very thin female hears that she's too skinny, looks anorexic, and offers nothing for a man to hold on to, just like an overweight one hears that she would be so pretty if she just lost weight. Similarly, a short male is treated just as harshly as a tall female. Each of these body issues poses their own set of challenges and insecurities.

Growing up tall, you get used to being a backdrop. In every class picture from kindergarten on, I'm in the back row, and I'm usually the only girl in the back. All the other girls, in frilly dresses and shiny shoes, stand in the front, where they and their bright outfits are not covered by a sea of heads. At class graduations, where the students all line up and sing songs, I stood in the back row. When I joined choir, I once again found myself tucked in the back and singing alto, the harmonies rather than the bright, high soprano notes that everyone loves to hear and applaud.

To this day, I tend to feel uncomfortable front and center on a stage or in a picture. I automatically slide to the back corners, where I've been relegated all my life and feel at home.

In high school, all that changed, though. I joined Drama, and for the first time, I not only found myself standing in a spot light, but also wanting to stand there, feeling happy there. Acting, taking on the persona of whichever character I was given, allowed me to shed the shyness and discomfort that held me back in other areas. Underneath those bright spotlights, I thrived.

My first semester in high school Drama, we put on a musical. I can sing all I'd like, as I said, I spent a few years in choir, but if I ever start sounding good when I sing, I'll know I've died and joined the angel band. I didn't expect to get a big part in a musical, and I didn't. Oh well.³⁵

For the first play, I learned every line to every part in the entire play. I ran lines with others in between rehearsals and cued people for when to enter the stage. I helped build props, paint backdrops, and set up the stage. I never missed a rehearsal, a cue to enter stage left, or a line. I background danced until my feet hurt and said my handful of lines with gusto. So long as I stood in that theater holding a script, I was happy.

When the spring semester rolled around, though, we started try-outs for a second play, not a musical. I finally had a chance to turn all my previous hard work into payout and get a lead role, or at least one with more than five minutes of stage time.

³⁵ Or at least I say "oh well." I'd really like to stomp my feet and throw a fit until my voice cooperates and I can sing beautifully and thus play the lead in every play ever made, but we've already discussed how temper tantrums get me nowhere.

At auditions, the group of Drama kids met in one of the classrooms across from the auditorium. We set all the desks up in a circle, and our director, Mrs. A, passed out the scripts for the next play, *The Baddest Angel Band*.

She gave us a moment to read over the script about three angel girls, Cherry, Spir, and Angelina, who are about to be kicked out of angel school for misbehaving. In order to stay in school, they have to discover something worth saving on Earth. The girls end up saving a small-town at Christmas.³⁶ The three angels were the main roles, and there were about ten other smaller roles. Once we'd look over the script, Mrs. A asked each of us which role we'd like to play.

When she got to me, I answered without hesitation. "One of the angels."

I knew I had the ability and dedication to be a lead. I just needed the opportunity.

Mrs. A then assigned everyone a part to read to try-out. At one point I read the part of Ms. Lamb and Sharon read Ms. Burrow, two of the townspeople and two of the roles with the most lines, outside of the angel band.

I read through my lines before we started the tryout, so I had an idea of what to say and when. During my reading, I focused on using inflection and speaking clearly. Sharon stumbled over many of the words.

Finally, it came time for Mrs. A to announce the parts. I sat in my desk, picking at my nail polish and bouncing my feet.

"The three angels will be played by Emily, Amelia, and Kelsey."

³⁶ The fact that this is a Christmas play makes me think it was actually put on during the first semester of my junior year, not the second semester of my sophomore year, but I distinctly remember this being the second play we did, so I'm not sure.

My feet quit bouncing, but I knew she still needed to assign other good roles. *I read for Ms. Lamb. She's got a lot of lines and stage time.*

“Sharon will play Ms. Lamb, and Tina will play Ms. Burrow.”

I only half-listened as she assigned rolls of ‘Townsperson 1’ and ‘Angel Teacher’ to those of us left. In the end, I had a total of three lines in an hour long play.

I don't get what I did wrong. I did everything I was asked and more. Why didn't I get a good part?

I collected my backpack to head outside and wait on my mom to pick me up. Mrs. A stopped me on my way out the door.

“I know you wanted a bigger role, and I’m sorry, but you’re just too tall to be an angel.”

Two years later, after more rounds of auditions, box stepping as a background dancer, and helping others remember their lines, another musical rolled around, but this one only had a few people who sang, while the rest of the cast ran around performing stereotypical slap-stick comedy. I’d finally received a main role in the previous play, so I expected the same to happen this time. Once again, however, I found myself as background.

I dropped back in my seat, tossing the script down on the desk. “I don’t get it. There are a lot of roles that don’t have to sing. Why couldn’t I be one of those?”

Emily, a girl who I’d considered my friend up until the start of our senior year, when she suddenly quit talking to me and avoided sitting near me, looked up and gave me a ‘duh’ look, one with her lip and nose wrinkled and eyes rolled back. “Those roles all get paired up with a guy, and you’re, like, a foot taller than all the guys.”

Emily stood five-foot-nothing and weighted a hundred pounds, maybe one-oh-five. Emily could sing soprano and got a lead role in every play. Emily also threw a hissy fit when she didn't get picked for all-region choir and screamed at anyone who tried to calm her down. I hated Emily, for both her seeming perfection and her self-centered bitchiness.

In all honesty, she's probably a much nicer person than I remember, and I'm sure my own self-hated clouds my judgment of her, but I doubt I will ever look her up for coffee when I'm visiting my hometown. Memories of her throwing choir folders across the room because the teacher spent too much time helping other students and not enough time with her keep me from wanting to rekindle any sort of a friendship.

No one had a problem with Emily, though. Even when she threw notebooks and shrieked about not making All Region, no one chastised her or quit speaking to her. Why? If I'd thrown a hissy fit and chunked a book across the room, I'd have been sent to the office and told to quit behaving like a child.

In high school, I considered such a difference in treatment a bad thing, blamed it on my size in comparison to hers or the fact that I was a new kid and she'd lived there her whole life. Looking back, though, I wonder if it's that no one expected any better from her. If she had been throwing fits from kindergarten on, everyone in school from students to teachers would have been used to her temper tantrums. If nothing had changed in her ten or so years in school, why would anyone think teenage-Emily would be any better behaved than child-Emily?

I didn't grow up getting to throw tantrums. My mom whipped my butt³⁷ and grounded me when I behaved like a spoiled brat or a hoodlum, so I behaved with the same level of decorum and politeness at school that I did at home.³⁸ The teachers' treatment of Emily may not have been favoritism but merely overlooking a spoiled, childish brat, and their treatment of me may have been based on the knowledge that I was capable of better behavior and thus it was expected of me. That's not fair, but its unfairness is due to something completely separate from looks or size.

³⁷ She did not beat me, but she did paddle me, and I am extremely grateful for it because I am a better person for having been raised with consequences and discipline. But that's another rant. I apparently have a lot of those.

³⁸ I may or may not have been as decorous and polite as I want to remember. I probably was not the theoretical angel that I want to consider myself. Just because I got good grades and was never sent to the principal's office does not actually mean that I was a joy to have in class or anyone's favorite student, as much as I hate to admit that, and I truly, truly hate to admit that.

Fat Girl Anatomy: Brains, Books, and a Dash of Sugar

Drama was not the only place my height and/or size proved a disadvantage, though. Growing up tall yet too chubby and uncoordinated to excel at sports meant I was the last kid picked in P.E. Some people get picked on and turn that shame into fuel to get bigger, better, faster, stronger, but I am not one of those people. My lack of athletic ability combined with my absolute inability to take criticism meant that the more kids teased me for my weight, the more I shut down and quit trying.

“Wow, you’re the slowest kid in class.”

“Oh my God, she’s so fat. I can’t believe she’s walking faster than me.”

“I don’t talk to fat people.”

Well, fine, then. Ms. Fatty McFatFat will just sit over here in the corner with her candy bar and her book and not walk faster than you or attempt to start a conversation.

Books and the characters residing in their pages became my salvation. To this day, when I’m lonely, I imagine myself as part of the worlds in my favorite books and wonder what it would be like to be the kind of woman: beautiful, confident, and outgoing, with whom heroes fall in love.

By reading so much, I built an extensive vocabulary, allowing me to wield words in wondrous ways, shocking and awing my tormenters and making them learn their lesson.

Yeah, I wish. That only happens in books.

The second I'm put on the spot, my mind goes hazy, and the best, or worst, comeback I can think of is: "Shut up, Brace Face."³⁹

My vocabulary, ability to retain almost all information given to me, and love of learning earned me the distinction of being labeled *the smart kid* on top of *the fat kid* and oftentimes *the new kid*. My smarts gave me an *in*.

Honestly, I think fat kids, especially fat girls, often become very smart and very sweet, as if their overabundance of knowledge and niceness will make up for their equal overabundance of flesh. Sort of like the way many fat boys become funny, though their jokes are often self-deprecating. It's a way to force their flabby flesh to fit into one of the accepted, ready-made molds found in school yards, night clubs, and work places.

I was the smart girl. Though no one wanted me on their team at recess and no one would ever think of asking me on a date, when it came time to do a school project or study for a test, everyone was my best friend. And everyone assumed I would willingly let them copy my homework or my test. After all, we were friends, right? Wasn't I going to help out a friend?

My senior year of high school, I almost failed English, which was ironic as I had already enrolled in college at the University of Central Arkansas as a writing major and part of their honors program, with full ride scholarships for my excellence in academics. This almost-failure was not due to my inability to perform in class or my unwillingness to do the assigned work, though, nor did I not set fire to my copy of *The Scarlett Letter* as some students did.⁴⁰ No, I almost failed for cheating. Well, to be precise, for letting

³⁹ Calling someone brace face will actually get *you* laughed at, not the bully.

⁴⁰ Stupid me, I looked forward to the reading and related projects. The idea of a six-week long, super challenging, writing-intensive project about a classic novel seemed like an awesome idea.

others cheat. Okay, for helping others cheat. *Letting* sounds as if I deserved no fault in the process, when I obviously did.

Twice during my last semester of high school, my English teacher caught me giving answers to someone else. The first time, I let one of the pretty, popular girls who stood almost as tall as me but could actually play basketball, borrow my homework. It wasn't anything difficult or worth a lot of points, just answering a handful of questions about some story we'd read, but she hadn't done it, and I had, and I wanted her to like me, so I handed over my work. She proceeded to copy it word-for-word then give her copy to someone else who also copied it word-for-word and he or she gave his or hers to someone else. Notice the pattern? By the time Mrs. B received our homework, there were at least four perfect copies of my assignment.⁴¹

The second instance happened not long after the first.⁴² Lena was one of the *bad girls*. I don't think she was necessarily a bad person; she just had a bad reputation around school. Yes, she'd earned that reputation. She partied a lot, didn't pay attention in class like she should, and had a daughter at age fifteen. But she was also funny, did well when she applied herself, and treated me a lot better than several of the *good girls*. Lena talked to me in class and hung out with me outside of school, even though I was a *goody-two-shoes* and nowhere near *cool*. For her kindness, I am forever grateful because she could have very easily overlooked or belittled me.

Lena missed almost a week of school late in our senior year because she and her daughter were sick. During that time, she missed a test in English, and Mrs. B told her

⁴¹ Oh, and none of the people who copied my work so perfectly were any more chummy with me after copying my work than they had been before.

⁴² Yeah, you'd think for such a *smart girl* I would have learned the first time, but no, outside of class, I have to make mistakes multiple times.

she needed to make the test up the day after she returned. Lena and I had several classes together, and the day of her make-up test, she talked to me during Chemistry, our second period class, about how worried she was about making up all her work and being able to graduate. I'd seen her make a pointed effort over the last couple months to try harder in class and pay more attention, so when we got to seventh period English, I understood why she pulled a cheat sheet to try and pass the test.

I didn't want her to cheat, though. Cheating is wrong. As childish and simplistic as that sounds, it's true. I took the paper away from her in an attempt to stop her from cheating. She misunderstood my taking her paper, though, and thought I was offering to help her cheat. She looked so hopeful, and I have so much trouble saying no to people, and I wanted to be liked so much.

I gave her the answers, and we got caught, meaning we both received a zero.

Mrs. B called me to her desk after she caught us. "I'm really disappointed in you. You know better than this."

And I did, but knowing better and wanting acceptance is kind of like knowing fruit is sweet but wanting a candy bar anyways.

I'm a lot stronger now when it comes to cheating. Due to that chewing out from Mrs. B, I now baby-step others through finishing a project, revising a paper, or studying for a test instead of doing the work for them. The core motivation behind my willingness to help remains the same, though. I just want to be liked and accepted.

Some people walk around with their hearts held out in front of them. Well, I hold my heart in one hand and my brain in the other.

Here, pick one, just love me. Please?

Cutting out the Bullshit

During the second half of my junior year in high school, I began to have severe mood swings. I cried all the time, picked fights with my friends, and couldn't sleep through the night

After six months, my mom said, "We can't live with you anymore. You're going to see a counselor about medication."

I saw a counselor a few times, discussed my mood swings and my past, and was then sent to a psychiatrist.

Dr. R⁴³ was a chubby, middle-eastern name with an accent so thick he was sometimes hard to understand. He had a ready smile and round, friendly brown eyes in his equally round face.

He sat behind a large, dark-wood desk, looking through my paperwork, while my mom and I sat in matching, hard-backed chairs across from him, repeating what we'd told the counselor.

"So, you have a lot of mood swings, Miss Evans? On a daily basis?"

He'd asked me, but my mom answered. "Yes, we never know what to expect from her. One minute, she'll be happy, and the next, she's upset and yelling."

⁴³ His full name escapes me but I know it started with an R.

“And you have trouble sleeping?”

I nodded. “I either can’t fall asleep, or I can’t stay asleep.”

He shuffled through the papers. “I see that you went through some abuse as a child.”

“I was sexually molested for two years.” I couldn’t look at my mom, as I said this. To this day, sixteen years after the abuse ended, I have trouble bringing up the abuse around her because I know she blames herself, even though I don’t.

Dr. R set the papers aside. “It seems to me that you have Bipolar Disorder, which would explain the mood swings, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which can cause the nightmares and sleep issues, and Social Anxiety Disorder. I’m going to prescribe you Effexor for the Bipolar and a sleeping pill to help you rest at night.”

For my last year of high school and first year of college, the medicine worked well. I slept better and my moods were controlled enough that I managed to make and keep friendships, instead of fighting with everyone around me. At the end of my freshman year of college, though, I lost ARKids, medical insurance for children in Arkansas who live below the poverty line, and could no longer afford my medication.

Within six months of quitting taking the pills, I started cutting. At first, I used scissors, made small, shallow lines, more scratches than cuts, but that wasn’t enough. It didn’t help enough; I didn’t bleed enough. I popped the blades out of my shaving razors, unscrewed the blade in eyeliner sharpeners, stole a box cutter from work, anything to make the lines deeper, the blood flow more freely.

When I cut my wrists and lower arms, I used my clothing to hide the marks, long sleeved shirts, bandanas wrapped around my wrists, multiple jelly bracelets,⁴⁴ but I often grew frustrated with having to keep my arms covered. I hate long sleeves, and I tend to fidget with my jewelry.⁴⁵

This led me to cut in various other places that were easier to hide. I scared my upper arms, stomach, hips, any place that clothing covered easily and without attracting too much attention. The marks made neat stacks of lines that turned to rows of stacks, as I ran out of space. They formed messy tic-tac-toe boards. It all depended upon my mood.

Along with the returned depression came panic attacks. I never knew when to expect them. They'd come out of nowhere, while I was alone in my room, sitting in class, driving. I'd be fine one minute and unable to breathe the next. My whole body shook; I rocked back and forth; I sought out small spaces, where I could feel safe; I cut to give my mind something tangible to focus upon.

I lay in the floor of my dorm floor, the scratchy brown carpeting imprinting cellulite-like marks on my body that would take hours to completely fade. However, though I could feel the press of the carpet into my skin, it didn't itch. I propped my feet on the wall, my black converse tapping to a tune in my head and making the bottoms of my boot-cut jeans to sway. I held my left arm above me, turning and twisting my arm so the blood trails made curving rivulets as they trickled toward my elbow. As with the carpet, I felt everything as if in a dream state. If I focused, I could count the number of cuts in my

⁴⁴ Yes, those were in style at the time.

⁴⁵ And my hair. My clothes. My piercings. My cellphone. I pretty much fidget with anything I can get my hands on. Can we say nervous disorder?

arms without having to look at them, but I felt no pain. Only mute fascination at the patterns the blood made.

Suddenly, the room felt too big. I felt too exposed. My vision blurred and dimmed until I could only see a fraction of the space in front of me. I heard my blood roaring in my ears, felt my veins contract, leaving my skin cold and feeling disconnected from my body.

I needed out of my skin, needed away from the cage holding all the rage and pain I felt trapped inside. I needed to scream, to cry, to throw things, turn myself inside out and let the putrid hatred and vulgarity I contained explode across the walls in sprays of dark red, purple, and black.

I couldn't do any of that. What good would screaming do? Who would hear me? Who would help? Crying would only lead to a stuffy nose and swollen eyes. I'd have to clean up anything I broke. There was nothing I could do to vent. No way to get the

I rolled to my hands and knees and crawled across the floor to my closet. Curling inside, I closed the door behind me and rocked back and forth in the darkness, scrubbing the heel of my hand over the cuts to keep the blood flowing longer. I stayed in the closet until I quit hyperventilating and my sobs turned to small gasps and hiccups, followed by jerky shivers.

My attacks left me exhausted and with horrible headaches that pain medicine didn't help, so I often crawled from wherever I hid during the attack straight to bed, hoping that I'd feel better after a nap, even at night, I never slept more than a few hours at a time.

The day after an attack, I'd take extra care with my appearance, apply my make-up carefully and put on extra accessories. Perfect on the outside hides fucked up on the inside.

Clothes Make the Man

For the majority of my life, I used clothes to mask both physical and internal wounds. By the time I started school at Bradford, the beginning of tenth grade, I had changed school nine times and moved close to twenty, so for the majority of my life, I had played guessing games about who to be and how to act to fit in with the next new group of people. Instead of becoming outgoing and developing my own distinct sense of self, I turned inward and merely copied others, trying to force myself to match what I saw, even if I didn't feel comfortable doing so.

I viewed clothes as way to both hide and judge others, or at least judge whether they'd accept me or not. School-aged cliques are vibrantly and violently defined by their outfits. Just as cheerleaders or football players put on a certain uniform for the big game, they put on specific uniforms for each day at school. Certain colors, styles, and brands make their wearers importance and status known without their ever having to open their mouths. The same goes for other cliques. The Goth kids, the geek kids, the stoner kids, the skateboarders, each group has its own brand: Abercrombie and Fitch, Tripp, Converse, Vans, Urban Outfitters, Chanel, Prada. Brand is everything.

Apparently, Wal-Mart is not a brand. Neither is home-made. And neither will get you accepted. I learned to categorize people based on their outfits in order to discern which groups would actually talk to me and which would merely laugh in my face and call me a fat-ass, at least until test time.

In larger schools, there are a lot of different cliques to choose from, and while that occasionally means there are a lot of people to ignore you, there are more students to choose from, more extracurricular activities to immerse yourself in and find a group to which to belong.

Small schools suck because everyone has known each other from kindergarten; they already have their groups; you are an outsider who does not, will not, and cannot belong. When you walk into a class of twenty-eight kids, and that's the entire grade full of students, and they've all known each other for the last ten years, you feel like a leper.

That leprosy can be disguised by the right outfit, but my family couldn't afford the brand names that others wore. We barely made it from one month to the next. My mom worked two jobs for the majority of my life, and we still lived from paycheck to paycheck, just trying to keep the electricity on and food on the table. Then, shortly after tenth grade began, my mom had to quit working in order to have part of her back fused due to degenerative back disease. If clothes didn't come from Wal-Mart or a thrift shop, I didn't get to wear them.

I attempted to pick and choose items that resembled those others wore. I mean, jeans are jeans, right? Everyone's cool if they were jeans, especially sparkly ones.

Wrong.

Way wrong.

While not everyone looks down on others for what they wear, in high school, your social status is affected by your clothing choices, and mine affected my social status negatively. I kept trying, though, hoping that this next sparkly t-shirt proclaiming that I was *perfect* or a *hottie*, hoping this next pair of bedazzled jeans would make me fit in, garner me acceptance. In the end, I just wound up with a bunch of stupid looking shirts and sitting by myself at lunch.

Then, Good Charlotte released “The Anthem,” and I fell in love with the song, the band, the music, and the style. At sixteen, I told my mom, “I want my lip pierced and blue streaks in my hair.”

Her response? “Hell, no. Not while you live in my house.”

I waited to do those things until I moved into my first college dorm, but by the time I finished my freshman year at the University of Central Arkansas, I had my labret and my belly button pierced, my first tattoo, and teal streaks in my hair.

The next few years saw a drastic change in my wardrobe. Out went the t-shirts with sparkly sayings; in came the band t-shirts in various shades of black. Out went the bedazzled jeans; in came the banders, black Tripp pants with changes and straps hanging off them. I started wearing Converse shoes, fishnet, and a lot of black eyeliner.⁴⁶ And I loved it. For the first time, I actually felt comfortable in my own skin and as if I had a place in the world. While not all of my friends dressed the way I did, I became more comfortable with making new friends because I no longer hid myself behind masks of their making. I had created my own mask.

⁴⁶ Way, way, way too much black eyeliner.

It was still a mask, still a way to try to pre-form a personality instead of doing the hard work of deciding who I wanted to be, but it was a far more comfortable mask, and it allowed me to take the first step toward finding my own style and feeling comfortable in my own skin.

The biggest issue I faced as I forayed deeper into the punk rock culture wasn't criticism for wearing all black and having facial piercings but for doing so at eighteen.

Brittany, my freshman roommate, hated my clothes. "You know this is just a phase, right? I did this, when I was thirteen. It's just a way to rebel and try to be cool. You'll grow out of it." Her scorn and her continued statements that I'd grow out of this phase continued throughout college and for several years afterwards. In fact, I'm pretty sure my twenty-seven-year-old self could show up on her doorstep tomorrow in ripped jeans and a band hoodie, and she'd roll her eyes and ask when I'm going to get over it and take out my lip rings.⁴⁷

She and so many others had tried various styles of clothing, fallen on their faces a few times, and figured out what they wanted to wear and how they wanted to present themselves during their early to mid-teen years. In my teens, though, due to moving so much and spending so much of my life trying to hide from others, I tried to blend into the walls rather than attract attention and thus abuse or scorn from my peers. I also focused on making good grades in order to afford college and helping care for my little brother, not clothes and developing my own personality. I didn't take the time to figure myself out until my late teens and early twenties. In my roommate's eyes, and the eyes of so many

⁴⁷ The answer is never, by the way. Ne-eh-eh-ver. I love my snake bites and feel naked without them.

others, I was already supposed to have my personality determined, not still to be trying on masks.

But that's what I was doing. I was looking for a style to follow, a mask to wear, in order to find acceptance. I still wanted my clique, even though in college, most of those cliques went out the window. That was my defense mechanism, though. That was how I judged whether a situation was safe. That was how I kept anyone from getting too close to me. That was how I kept from getting too close to myself. I didn't want to look too hard at the inner workings of my mind or heart, didn't want to analyze the world or people around me. I'd locked myself into a small section of my brain and had left just enough space to process what I saw and heard around me, and run on a half a cylinder.

Girls in sorority shirts were dumb, slutty, and would hate me for being fat. Cute guys would never give me the time of day. The smart kids would think I was too stupid. The stupid kids would only want to be friends in order to get answers to homework. And my real friends were only my friends so long as I did what they wanted and stayed forefront in their minds. If I ever slacked on being the best of best friends to each of them, they'd forget about me. And I, well, I was just sort of there. My job was to fake happiness and fake loving whatever trend I was currently following to find acceptance.

If I could just be perfect, just find exactly the right balance among being smart, loving video games, wearing too much eye liner, being girlie, being one of the guys, being independent, being a slut, being a prude, going to church, going to coffee shops, smoking cigarettes, refusing drugs, taking care of my family and my friends, working out, going to parties, joining clubs, doing exactly what everyone expected of me before they had time even to expect it, then I would be loved, I would be cool, I would find my place. I just

needed to wear the right clothes, get the best grades, and pretend to love heavy metal, which I really kind of hate since I can never understand the words.

Needless to say, this failed horribly.

While I started college by throwing away every article of clothing I owned that was not black, two years later, I realized that I liked color, that I missed some of those clothes that I'd thrown away, that wearing baggy band shirts and men's shorts did not make me feel beautiful and didn't make me happy, and that I really, really hate music I can't understand.⁴⁸

Little by little, I started buying clothes with more color: pink plaid miniskirts and long sleeved red shirts with thumb holes. Not a big move away from my punk-rock menswear but a step. I still rebelled against wearing anything too *in*, and I swear, khaki gives me hives, but I did start trying to balance the punk rock look that I loved so much and the feminine streak that I'd hidden since Voldie but still wanted to embody. I knew I would never be able to find a job wearing fishnet and chains, or at least not a respectable job that I could report on my taxes, but I wanted to find a way to wear clothes that made me comfortable and reflected my personality, without making it seem like I was a loser.

The more I worked to find a balance with my clothing that expressed both who I was and who I wanted to be, the more confident I became with other people. Instead of always hiding in the shadows, I started talking to others, trying to make friends, even trying to flirt with boys.

⁴⁸ Like, super seriously *haaaaaaaaaate* it.

Werewolves, Vampires, and Sex with Fat Girls: Myths about the Dark

There are a lot of myths, stereotypes, and prejudice about fat girls, many of which deal with sex, so I feel that before I start my confessions about the opposite sex, my mistakes where men are concerned, and my experience, or extreme lack of experience, with them would be a good time to discuss some of those myths.

I've heard several myths about big girls and sex: that all fat girls are easy; that all fat girls give good head; that fat girls only have sex with the lights off.

None of these are true. I know some girls, both skinny and not-so-skinny, who have waited until marriage to lose their virginity. And I know some skinny girls who bed hop more than an episode of *Sex and the City*. The truth of matter is this, easy girls are easy. It doesn't matter what casing you put on it. True, many fat girls are insecure. And true, a lot of insecure girls try to find security and self-confidence through being considered attractive. And true, this can lead those girls to jump into bed with anyone who smiles at them. But that doesn't have to do with their weight. It has to do with their self-image. They don't feel beautiful. They're too fat, too skinny, too flat-chested, too curvy, too curly-haired, too pale, too freckly, too awkward, too stocky, too whatever. Women are masters at nit-picking our looks. We can find flaws in the least flawed parts of our bodies.

One side of my mouth, for instance, is fuller than the other. Do most people notice this? No. Do I notice this? Hell yes. Every fucking time I look in the mirror. Also, my

nose looks different from different angles. From the left, the tip seems to curve up slightly and it has a narrower appearance. From the right, it's straight, but it seems wider, which is why all my selfies are taken from the left. Again, does anyone notice anything about my nose other than that it has freckles and that thank God I took out the septum ring?⁴⁹ No. But I notice. And I hate myself a little more every time I do. If I could just fix my nose, have my mom's nice, straight nose instead of inheriting this bulbous atrocity, which is actually perfectly nice all noses considered, I'd be pretty.

Of course, if I'm going to fix my nose, I might as well fix that misshapen mouth and get rid of my second chin. Maybe a facial to get rid of the last couple of acne spots that I will never grow out of.⁵⁰

If I could just fix my nose, my mouth, my chin, my acne, and maybe make my eyes a bit bigger⁵¹ and a bit farther apart, I would finally be able to consider myself pretty. From the neck up. With my hair covered. I'd have a pretty face, and at least that's somewhere to start.

But I digress. Being fat does not make someone easy. I'm not easy. Yes, I like sex,⁵² and yes, I've slept with three different men.⁵³ I dated all three, though, and I knew each

⁴⁹ Still not sure if I'm glad I did this or not, as I loved my septum ring. I just got tired of looking like I had a perpetual silver booger hanging out of my nose. I may one day find a ring that will fix this problem and reinsert the piercing.

⁵⁰ And to everyone who ever told me I'd grow out of acne, please feel free to kiss the fattest part of hind-end, to quote the delightful Ms. Lancaster. Whoever said that lied; I'm twenty-seven, and my nose is still covered in blackheads.

⁵¹ Guys like big eyes, right? Barbie and all the Disney princesses have big eyes, though I very sincerely doubt any self-respecting man had masturbated to thoughts of Belle or Aurora. Maybe Ariel, but only because gingers are cool this season.

⁵² Due to my extremely conservative family, part of me still wants to whisper that or type it in itty-bitty font because sex is sinful, and the fact that I like it makes me a wanton woman.

⁵³ The *American Pie* rule for multiplying that by three to find my real number is a bunch of bull. When I say I've slept with three guys, I mean three.

one for years before dating or sleeping with him.⁵⁴ Even if I hadn't, though, even if I did bed hop, it wouldn't be due to my size, but due to my insecurities.

Have I come close to sleeping with other guys just to feel wanted and beautiful? Once. One guy was the perfect combination of broken, badass, and taller than me, and I almost let myself believe his lies, which I knew were lies whether I wanted to admit it or not, and I almost let things go farther than I was comfortable with. Not because I'm easy, but because I'm stupid. Big difference.

Being easy is like being confident; it all depends on the inside. Not the outside.

And the lights once again relate to the inside. Insecure girls want the lights off. Secure ones don't care whether the lights are on, off, dimmed, or candles. Do fat girls give good head? Sure, some do. And I'm sure some learned to give good head and be good in bed in order to make up for being so big, just like a lot of fat girls are smart and sweet. But one does not automatically equate to the other.

When it comes to the question of how fat women have sex, we approach it the same way we do food, with vigor and full appreciation, savoring every morsel as it comes.

⁵⁴ Please notice how I feel the need to justify my sexual actions and make it seem less sinful that I've been intimate with more than one man. I'm not a slut. I'm not a whore. I'm just human, and humans make mistakes. Not that sex is a mistake because then it seems like something bad and dirty that should be hidden rather than being a beautiful way to show affection for another person. It's only pre-marital sex that is sinful and thus dirty and should be hidden. Right? Maybe? Depending on which church you go to? Again, extremely conservative family, a lot of backlash for the way I dressed and acted, and a lot of negativity for stepping out of bounds. This will come a lot more later.

The Underground Pt. 1: I Don't Date Tall Girls

I spent all my free time during the summer after my sophomore year at a coffee shop in Searcy called The Underground, where the freak-not-so-chic kids hung out to listen to music and talk. It hadn't been open long, and the unfinished concrete floors and unpainted walls made it the perfect place for misfits like me to spend time with each other. It was the first place since moving to Arkansas where I felt accepted. In that coffee shop, I met the first guy I'd kiss,⁵⁵ the first guy I'd fool around with, and the first guy who would break my heart. Even with all these negative associations, it drew me in the way a bright light draws a moth, making me wonder whether moths realize they're headed for danger or just hope that this light is the bright light at the end of the long tunnel of darkness that everyone talks about.

I first started hanging out at The Underground with a girl I met soon after I started work at Wal-Mart, but after my first few visits garnered me positive attention from the boys there, I continued going on my own or with other friends.

One of the first times I hung out there, I followed one of my best friends, Licious, into the back room of The Underground. In the back, four guys were sitting around, two

⁵⁵ And the second. And the third. This place was like a breeding ground for lips and losers.

holding guitars, one playing drums on his knees, and the fourth one sitting off to the side, texting.

Licious pointed to each one. “That’s Trace, Sam, and Mark. I don’t know the fourth guy.”

Sam jerked his head in the direction of the dark-haired, cubby guy sitting quietly in the corner. “That’s Freak.”

The other three were tall, thin, and cute in their own way. Mark had long, straight hair and an easy smile, one that quirked up higher on the left side than right and made him look both shy and suave at the same time. Beneath a Carrot Top head of hair, Sam looked sort of like someone had hit him in the face with a tree branch: angular jaw, sharp cheek bones, crooked nose, but somehow, all his features fit together to be attractive. I gravitated toward Trace, the drummer, though.

At six-five, he was all gangly legs and sharp elbows, folded up on a couch with his knees near his chin. His wide smile revealed incisors that stuck out a farther than the rest of his teeth, something he openly hated but willingly joked around with friends about. I no longer remember the color of his eyes, though I know he had to shake shaggy, light brown hair out of them to see me, but I do remember that when he did, there was no derision or disgust in his gaze. He just grinned and said hi, like I was someone he’d known all his life instead of some overweight stranger.

For the next couple hours, Licious and I drank milkshakes, chatted about work and clothes and music, and listened to Sam and Mark play Avenged Sevenfold songs and

sing, while Trace drummed on his legs, the couch, the coffee table, anything within reach.⁵⁶

Around eleven, I looked over at Licious. “It’s getting late; we probably need to head out. I’ve gotta be at work early in the morning.”

As we walked out, Licious elbowed me. “You were totally flirting with Trace.”

I dug through my bag for my keys, attempting to hide my face, which I knew would give me away. “I was not.”

“Were, too. I could ask him what he thought of you.”

I paused in the act of unlocking my car. “Would you really do that?”

She nodded, already pulling her phone out to call him.

She turned her back and walked a few feet away, and I unlocked the car and stood, shifting from one foot to the other and playing with my hair, while they spoke, trying not to let my imagination get the best of me or to plan any happy endings in my head.

“Uh huh. Okay. Bye.” She turned back, keeping her eyes on her phone as she closed it.

I knew, as soon as she refused to look at me, that he had not said anything good. I still had to ask, though. “Well?”

She bit her lip and scrunched up her shoulders. “He said he doesn’t date tall girls.”

⁵⁶ In case anyone is wondering why Freak has pretty much disappeared from this chapter, it’s because other than nodding when we were told his name, he didn’t participate in that night’s interactions. I only mention him because he’s important later in my life.

The Underground Pt. 2: Freak

Later that summer, about a month before my twentieth birthday, I ended up sitting outside The Underground and smoking menthol cigarettes with Freak.

A few inches shorter than me and quite a bit heavier, he had the prettiest eyes, a captivating combination of blue, green, and brown. The wide concrete sidewalk featured a couple small tables with chairs, and I sat across from him, listening to Allyn sing “Touch, Peel, and Stand,” while playing acoustic guitar. He sat, leaned back in his chair, tilting his head until he appeared to be howling at the moon, and often scrunched his face up, as he sang. The only love affairs that began at the Underground and continued were my love for that song and for Allyn’s singing.

A couple different guys hit on me that summer. They called me hot and acted impressed by the fact that I went to college, held down a job, and didn’t sleep around. In reality, they only cared about my ability to buy them cigarettes and the possibility that they might get my virginity. I was the ultimate notch in a bedpost, with a paying job. Of course, I never realized that at the time. I only cared about how nice it felt to be wanted, feel beautiful instead of deformed.

That night, even though he hadn’t appeared interested in me before as a friend or otherwise, Freak and I ended up hanging out together because the friend he lived with had thrown him out.

“My dad used to beat me all the time, but when Mark’s mom found out, she made me come live with them. Drove up to my house one day and told me to get my stuff and get in the car.”

I didn’t really know how to handle that sort of situation. Before that night, though I had friends who had been abused, none had talked about it apart from vague comments and even vaguer poetry. So I just nodded and made upset sounds, hoping that was enough.

“Then, she freaked out on me tonight and threw me out. None of my friends will answer their phones, and I can’t go back to my dad’s unless I want to get hit, so now I’ve got nowhere to go.” He took a drag off his cigarette and looked at the ground. “I guess I could just go sleep at Wal-Mart.”

“You can’t sleep at Wal-Mart.”

He looked up, briefly, with a half-smirk, half-smile, before returning his gaze to the ground. “I’ve done it before.”

Looking back, I don’t know how much of his story was true and how much he fabricated for attention. I later learned that a lot of what he said that night was lies, especially anything having to do with his girlfriend and the state of their relationship. I learned that he lied about why he was living with his friend and why he’d been kicked out. At that point in time, however, he had my sympathy.

I reached out and took his hand, making him look back up at me. “I’m not letting you sleep at Wal-Mart. I’ve got tomorrow off, so we’ll hang out all night if that’s what it takes, but I’m not just leaving you alone.”

As the night progressed, we discussed his lack of parental support or attention. I confided about my nightmares from being molested as a child, about how I fought with my parents all the time over the way I dressed, and about how nothing I did, no amount of good grades or work ethic helped, so I moved in with my great-grandmother to get some peace.

“I totally get that. My mom was abused as a kid. I used to sit and hold her all night when she woke up screaming from nightmares.”

I felt connected to him because of that comment, but it also made me angry that he didn't give me and my hurt his full attention. It would take years for me to understand that I didn't have to be the center of someone's attention for them to care about me, and even longer for me to figure out how much inattention should be considered acceptable.

I'm not sure how we got around to the subject, most likely me bragging to get attention, but I found myself saying. “I'm a virgin. In fact, I've never even had my hand held.”

His eyes went wide, and he did an exaggerated double take. “What? Are you serious?”

I suddenly had the attention of every cell in his body, even the cells attached to body parts I didn't know what to do with, and it felt good. I felt powerful, the rush sweeter than anything I'd experienced before, even better than the rush when I cut after waking up from my nightmares.

He reached out and took my hand, interlacing his fingers with mine. I latched onto his hand, just as I latched onto my newfound feelings of power. I ignored the fact that he had a girlfriend, telling myself that it didn't matter because he said he wanted to leave her; I

ignored that I didn't really like him and was pretty sure that he didn't really me; I ignored that he only wanted to brag that he was my *first* kiss instead of caring the he was *my* first kiss.

Nothing happened right away, but a little later in the night, while we sat in the back room of the coffee shop, talking and listening to muffled strains of music that came through the wall separating us from the main room, he stood. "Okay, I've got to do this."

I knew what *this* would be before he even walked toward me, and I knew it was wrong, but I wanted to be kissed, wanted to continue feeling that this guy, any guy, really liked me, wanted to be wanted.

I sat still as he walked over, tilted my head back as he leaned down, and closed my eyes as he kissed me. Not quite a chaste kiss, it was sweet and just long enough to let me know that I liked kissing and liked kissing him. We spent the rest of the night together, making out, and any time his girlfriend came up in conversation, I told myself that since she made him unhappy, our kissing was okay. To silence my conscience and let myself feel happy at another girl's expense, I stuffed its mouth full of his lies.

Years later, after my own relationship failed and I was left questioning if my boyfriend had cheated, I wondered whether he told some other girl that he wanted to break up with me in order to make her ignore how much her actions would hurt me. I imagined Karma as a mocha-skinned, hippie woman giving me a sympathetic look and patting my back, and I wondered whether I should call up Freak's old girlfriend to apologize for my youthful need for attention.

I burned my ex's picture instead.

Daddy Issues

It was during the time in my life that I first began to test my gossamer-thin wings of sexuality, that my fights with my step-dad started. My mom and step-dad met the summer before I turned fifteen and married when I was sixteen. Since he knew about my past abuse, though, he'd sat down with me before the wedding and asked if I was okay with their marriage and our subsequent move into his house. He didn't want to make me feel uncomfortable and said that he and Mom were willing to wait until I went to college if I it would make me feel better. He'd never done anything to make me fear him, so I gave them my blessing. As I moved away from the veneer of perfection and deeper into the punk-rock crowd, though, the people I hung out with, the way I dressed, my piercings and tattoos and became fodder for his anger.

Dad wrinkled his nose and sneered at me. "You are such an embarrassment, you know that?"

I looked from him to my mom, who stood on the other side of the room, crying, then back to him. "I don't understand how I embarrass you."

"Look in the mirror." He waved an inch-thick wooden paddle in my face. "All those piercings and that weird hair. We're always having to defend the way you dress to everyone, calling and asking if we know what color or daughter's hair is."

“Is that all you care about? The way I dress?” My shoulders slumped a bit. “What about the fact that I’m going to college or go to church every week or am a nice person?”

I looked back at mom, praying she’d step up and say something in my favor.

“Honey, he’s right. People talk.”

“So talk back.” My voice lost some of its fervor, though. “Tell them all the good stuff.”

“No, you shut up and listen.” Dad cut in. “What good stuff? You’re lazy, a bad influence on your little brother, and I’m sick of having to defend you clothing choices all the time.” When I started to speak, he lifted the paddle, effectively cutting me off. “I said shut up. You need to get over whatever fad this is and start shaping up and thinking of someone other than yourself. You don’t care about anyone except for you.”

I continued to stare at mom, still waiting for her to defend me. She didn’t, and my spine curved even more. “That’s not true, though. I help out around here and—“

“You do not. You don’t do anything unless it’s to help yourself.”

I dropped my arms to my side and turned my gaze to the ground, thoughts of how many chores I did and how often I took care of my younger brother and my grandmother falling from my brain to clog my throat. “I try.”

“Well, try harder. And quit talking back any time someone speaks to you. If you’d do what you were told once in a while, you might not have so many problems.”

Or be such a problem.

“Yes, Sir.”

The way I dressed seemed to come up more often than anything else. Who I was, the way I acted, all seemed to fade into the background when compared to choice in outfit. When I decided to dress more punk rock than southern bell, the fights started. My piercings, tattoos, and black attire drove them both crazy. However, it was when I started trying to be more feminine that my step-dad really threw a fit.

When I decided that wearing punk rock attire did not necessarily have to be synonymous with wearing men's clothes, which is something I rebelled over anyways, I wanted to feel like a girl again, feel attractive. However, while deciding I wanted to feel more feminine while retaining my punk-rock style was easy, figuring out how to do that was hard. I had no experience with feeling feminine or attractive. I was fat and an outcast. I couldn't go to my mom. She'd worked manual labor for most of my life, which required jeans and grungy shirts, and by the time she found work at a place that allowed for or required more feminine clothes, she wore long skirts and higher-necked shirts, going for conservative instead of come-hither.

Instead, I looked to fashion magazines and videos of my favorite musicians. Short skirts, cut off shorts, low cut tops, corsets, ripped fishnets, skulls, fangs, tutus, bondage straps, spikes, I wanted it all. However, I could only wear about a third of it because of my weight. I boycotted anything clingy due to carrying all my weight in my middle, and I refused to wear a dress of any kind, for the same reason. Miniskirts and super short shorts were wide open, though. As Momma always said, the women in my family have great legs.

For the next couple years, the shorter my skirts could get the better. If the hem of my shorts came anywhere near my knee, it was only acceptable for work. My butt cheeks

spent more time hanging out than I did, and while this posed a problem for my parents, I saw no issues. After all, even though my butt was hanging out, my boobs were covered. I read somewhere that Beyoncé made sure to only showcase one body part at a time in order to maintain some class, and if it worked for her, it should work for me. Besides, at nineteen, I was still a virgin. In fact, I didn't get my first kiss until two months before my twentieth birthday, and it would take another two years before I lost my virginity. So it's not like I was letting everything hang out for everyone to touch. I just let one thing hang out for only the boy I liked to touch, and while that boy occasionally changed, I wasn't having orgies in the back of the Wal-Mart parking lot. Perfectly acceptable behavior, if you would have asked me.

They did ask, though. They merely stated their opinions about my attire in a loud voice that left no room for argument, though I still tried to argue.

I straightened my black and white striped arm warmers as I walked out of my bedroom. Grabbing my black messenger bag style purse, I head for the front door.

"I'll be in Little Rock at Juanita's. A couple of guys at work are in a band, and they have a gig there tonight, so we're all going on to watch them play. I don't know where the club is, so I'm riding with Matt, but I've got my phone, and it's charged, so call if you need me. I'll be back before curfew." I made sure both my parents could hear me because any time I stayed with them, I had a strict curfew and was required to tell them where I go.

My dad looked up as I walked into the living room. "You're going out in that?"

I looked down at my black and red, skull-covered shirt, denim mini skirt, and knee high combat-style boots then back at my dad. “Yeah, what’s wrong with it?”

“You look like a hooker, that’s all.” He waved his hand at the door. “Go ahead, go hang out with a bunch of guys, dressed like a slut, and let the world think you’re a whore.”

This was not the first time we’d had this fight, not the first time he told me I dressed and/or acted like a slut and/or whore, though it had very clearly been stated that he was not actually calling me these things, merely pointing out what the world thought of me. Somehow, that made more sense in his and my mom’s heads than mine. “First off, I’m a virgin at twenty-one, so there is no slut or whore or anything else associated with me. And second, this is tame compared to what most girls wear. At least I covered up my boobs instead of letting them hang out along with my ass.”

“You foul mouthed little....” His voice trailed off. He jerked the foot rest of his light-brown Lay-Z-Boy closed and leaned toward me. “You know what’s wrong with you. You don’t think of anyone but yourself. All you care about is what you want and what makes you happy. What about your poor mother in there slaving away over a hot stove, huh? Do you ever think about what she might want or need?”

“Yes, I do. I cleaned the kitchen for her after breakfast and helped with laundry.” This was also not the first time I’d been yelled at for not doing my fair share or helping out around the house. Yes, I could have done more. I could always do more. But unlike certain other members of my family who shall remain nameless for the sake of peace, I actually attempted to help out around the house. I also spent time with my great-

grandmother, helped clean her house, and watched my little brother any time I was asked. Though, again, what they thought and what I thought will probably never quite match up.

“Oh, well, you did some dishes and a load of laundry. The world should just bow at your feet, huh?”

I dropped my weight to one hip and chewed on my lip ring. “No, I just meant that I’d helped out instead of just running off. And I asked her last week about going out today.”

He leaned back in his chair and gestured toward the door. “So go ahead, take off, stay out until all hours for the third time this week.”

I threw my hands in the air and turned in a small circle. “What do you want from me? I’m going to school on scholarship, I keep my room clean and pay rent while I’m here, I work forty hours a week and never miss a day, and I’m home before your curfew or I call before ten pm to let you know where I’ll be staying. Most kids my age would just say fuck it and do what they wanted.”

“Most kids don’t live under my roof, and I’ll tear your ass up if you don’t treat me and your mother with some respect.”

“And I do. Is it so bad that I go hang out with my friends when I get the chance?”

“No, you go hang out with those boys and portray yourself as whatever you want. Who cares what it does to me and your mother.”

“I’m not a whore, Dad. Wearing a short skirt doesn’t make me a slut.”

“No, it just advertises it to everyone who wants to see it.” He spread his legs wide. “Here you go, fellas, take a gander at what you want but can’t have. When you get yourself raped, remember that I told you so.”

I attempted to keep my expression perfectly blank so he could see no anger or hurt. I didn't want to be yelled at for looking pissed off or like I was about to cry. "I promise to call someone else, if I get raped."

"Why you nasty little...go on and get the fuck out of my house."

I headed for the door.

Looking back, I realize that his words came from a good place, that he meant to warn me about the dangers of dressing too provocatively and the hardships having tattoos in the workplace would bring, but his execution, attacking me in anger instead of speaking to me calmly and keeping all negativity focused on the action instead of myself caused problems.

Any time I forgo applying for a promotion at work or avoid flirting with a guy who looks *normal*, it is Dad's voice in my head, telling me that I'm not good enough and it will never happen.

A few years ago, when a guy pushed me to have to sex before I was ready, when he prodded and badgered and guilted me, I didn't say no until it was too late, didn't know how, didn't know I was allowed. After all, I'd agreed to hang out with him. I agreed to do so in a one-on-one setting. I wore a cute outfit, hoping he'd think I was attractive. I'd asked for it.

We Don't Serve Your Kind

As much as clothing was a point of contention between Dad and me, and between me and the mirror, I loved clothes. I loved shopping, trying on new things, putting together new outfits, seeing that one item that screamed personality from half a store away, and finding that it fit. On one hand, fashion and clothing were still my way to try and fit in and feel good about myself. If I could just buy the right thing, wear the right outfit, I'd be beautiful and confident, and happy. I hid my insecurities behind price tags and overstuffed clearance racks. On the other hand, shopping, choosing clothing that I felt happy about and felt spoke to my true personality was one of the few places where I felt totally comfortable being myself.

I held onto my friend Licious's hand and dragged her across the mall. Her purple Converse with the Cheshire cat shoelaces slapped against the floor with every step.

I loved shopping with Licious. We both worked at Wal-Mart, and after each payday, we'd head down to Little Rock and spend the day at the mall and Books-A-Million, touching everything at Hot Topic, and trying on tons of clothes. The best part about shopping with her, though, is we both felt fat.

That sounds a lot meaner than I intend, so let me repeat it, slowly and in giant letters so no one misunderstands. We both FELT fat. Key word there: *felt*.

We both had weight we needed to lose, and still do, but neither of us was as big as we considered ourselves. Our mutual lack of self-esteem, however, combined with our love of similar styles of clothing made us great shopping buddies. Neither of us was willing to let the other buy something unflattering, as we knew how it felt to wear clothes that didn't look right, but we also saw how beautiful the other girl was underneath the layers of cellulite and self-consciousness. She hated her legs, but I saw how pretty she looked in skirts. I hated my stomach, but she saw that some form-fitting shirts did more to hide than show off my belly.

More important than an honest answer about whether an article of clothing made us look fat, we understood each other. We didn't laugh at or condescend to one another for trying on an outfit that didn't work. We blamed the outfit. "That waistline is too low" or "the way the top is cut doesn't work with your shoulders." We were not the problem. The outfit was. And any time one of us took a chance, tried on a size or a cut that she wasn't sure would look right, and found that she somehow looked amazing, we shared in the utter joy and thrill of how pretty and how happy the other girl felt. I could gain another fifty pounds and still happily shop my way across America with Licious because I know she'd shop her ass off to find me a shirt that made me feel beautiful.

This day, I was taking a chance that neither of us, in our tattooed and pierced, wanna-be rebel glory, had ever dreamed of taking before.

"Come on, Licious. I know you don't want to go in Hollister. Hell, I don't really want to go in Hollister. It's creepy, and the normies give me hives." I chewed on my lip ring and dodged through a crowd of preppy girls taking up the entire walkway. "But they have the ripped jeans I've been looking for. I saw the exact pair I've been dying to find on

some chick yesterday, and she said she got them here.” We came to a halt outside the store, and I turned to look at her. “Just come in here with me long enough to get these jeans and then we can go to Hot Topic. Please?”

She crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side, her curly brown hair falling across one eye.

“I’ll buy you a frozen coffee when we go to Books-A-Million?”

The right side of her mouth quirked upward, and she looked at the ground then back up at me. “Okay, but you better be glad I love you.”

I squealed and hugged her. “I am, and I love you so, so much for this. Just five minutes. I promise.”

Looking back at the storefront, I studied it for a minute. Unlike Rue 21 and Forever 21⁵⁷ this store didn’t have bright lights and colors. The black store walls and surfboard in the storefront window made it look more like a place Licious and I would like instead of fear. Every time I walked past it, I wanted to splash red paint all over the walls and turn it into a zombie luau.

“Here goes nothing.” Taking a deep breath, I headed inside. As soon as we entered, we froze, looking at the jean-lined walls and tables piled with bright colored shirts. “You go left, and I’ll go right?”

She nodded and headed to the far wall. I had to suck in my stomach and walk sideways, wobbling like a penguin, in order to get through the tightly-packed tables. I bumped a life-sized Malibu Barbie as I turned to face the wall and grabbed the back of her hoodie to keep her from falling over.

⁵⁷ Chick stores apparently are obsessed with the idea of being 21.

After digging through jeans for several minutes, I heard Licious call my name.

“I haven’t found anything over a size ten.”

I nodded. “I found the jeans, but only up to a size eight.” Looking around, I spotted a cashier in the back and motioned toward her. “Let’s go ask.”

We Webble-Wobbled our way to the cash register, where a tiny brunette in a black blazer stood.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for a certain pair of ripped jeans, but we’re only finding smaller sizes. Where would we look for a 16 or 18?”

She smiled, but her eyes didn’t crinkle. “We only carry up to a size 12.”

My jaw went slack, and I crossed my arms over my stomach. “You do realize the average woman is twelve, right? So there are a lot of girls in bigger sizes.”

She shrugged. “We only carry a 12.”

That was the first time I faced an entire store full of clothes that would not fit me. I’d always struggled to find clothes; the majority of stores that carried brands and outfits I liked catered to smaller sizes. Hot Topic and Spencers rarely carried anything in their women’s sections that I could wear. Most of their shirts for women were way too small, with XXLs skin tight on me, and unless their pants and skirts were low rise and could fit around my hips instead of my waist, I couldn’t get them on. I would usually start out my shopping trip happy and excited to get new clothes and end feeling fat and depressed.

Even though Licious and I attempted to bolster each other when we struggled with clothing, I still believed that it was my fault that I couldn’t fit into those clothes, that I was too big or too fat; I needed to be smaller; my numbers were the problem, not theirs.

That trip to Hollister revealed that I wasn't necessarily too big but that the clothes being made only fit certain sizes that cut out the majority of women. I have very few friends who fit into anything smaller than a twelve. Among the five women whom I consider close friends, only two are smaller than a size twelve. There are two size eighteens, a twelve, a ten, and an eight, and none of those women are obese or severely out of shape, no matter what size they wear or what their BMI says.

Living in rural Arkansas, there were a limited number of stores for me to choose from. Near my hometown, only two stores carried clothes in my size, and I only liked the clothes offered in one of them. Otherwise, I either had to stuff myself into sizes too small, or drive an hour to the mall to find more options. Even at the mall, only a few stores carried bigger sizes, and their selections were limited.

Other stores occasionally carried a wider range of sizes or that carried t-shirts in bigger sizes, but for the most part, Licious and I would walk around the mall looking at clothes we wished we could fit into or compromising on the clothes we actually bought. Maybe an item of clothing didn't look exactly like we wanted or maybe we didn't totally love it, but it fit and looked as mostly okay.

The number of shops that carried clothes for smaller sizes vastly outweighed the options for larger women.⁵⁸ And the one shop specifically for larger women either didn't cater to the younger generation or it only catered to the mainstream. Those of us whose tastes differed from the norm could rarely find clothing we liked that actually fit.

Quite often, in order to find clothing that matched our tastes and still fit, Licious and I turned to men's clothing, which did nothing for our self-confidence. It's hard to consider

⁵⁸ Pun intended.

yourself pretty or feel womanly, when you're dressed in a man's t-shirt and cargo shorts.

Of course, when your only other option is stretchy pants and a flowing mu-mu, you're not apt to feel sexy then, either.

America's Next Top Fatty

My love of fashion extends to more than bi-weekly shopping trips with friends. Other than a dancing, ice-skating gymnast, I also wanted to be a singer when I was little, until my mom and my Aunt Jackie howled at my singing and told me not to quit my day job. They weren't trying to be mean, just honest. I can't sing any better than my momma, and her high school choir teacher told her, "You couldn't carry a tune in a bucket with a lid on it." After that, I wanted to be an actress, and I thought I was pretty good at it. But Emily very nicely pointed out that I'm taller and larger than most men and thus would never receive good roles.

My next *outlandish* dream, the one I keep hidden in the back corners of my soul out of fear of total and complete rejection, is to be a model. I keep this dream hidden because though my height fits the model standard,⁵⁹ my size will never be accepted. Plus size, in the modeling world, consists of size eights and tens. Smash those two together and me walking down a runway would probably be equivalent to Godzilla taking a stroll through the Harijuku district of Tokyo.

My secret dream manifests itself in my watching every episode of *America's Next Top Model*, even the seasons I don't like, repeatedly. I practice my catwalk as I walk down the sidewalks of my college or the aisles at a store. I pose in the mirror, trying to find a

⁵⁹ Five-eleven is at the top of that standard but still acceptable.

way to catch the light just right to keep my heavy eyelids from casting shadows over my eyes while I hide my double chin. So far, I just have a lot of Emo-looking selfies where the camera is above my head, and I look more angry than sultry and please come buy this outfit. I receive a lot of compliments on my walk, though, so I've got something going for me if anyone ever hits Tyra over the head with a two-by-four, and she starts recruiting overweight descendants of Amazons for season twenty-two.

I lay sprawled across my bed at my great-grandmother's house the summer after my freshman year in college, watching a rerun marathon of ANTM Season four. During episode nine, one of the contestants, Keenya, had to pose as an elephant to sell lotion. During judging, the panel criticized Keenya for her weight gain.

Tyra pointed out that although Keenya would be considered thin in the real world, the extremes of the modeling world would not accept her weight.

I lifted my shirt and grabbed handfuls of my own stomach, shaking it back and forth to watch the cellulite jiggle and flap. Bile rose in my throat. *God, I hate myself. I'd rather die than have to be fat forever.*

I sat up as I continued listening to them chastise her, a size four, for being too big. I stared down at my own belly, much larger than hers. Then, I looked at the bag of potato chips and handful of cookies sitting within easy reach on my bed. Standing, I snapped off the TV and took the chips and cookies back to the kitchen, deciding something needed to change.

Once back in my room, I took out the scissors I kept hidden in one of my drawers and carved the words fat and ugly into my stomach. For a while after that, I stood on the

bathroom scale every day, sometimes two and three times a day, and cut depending on my weight. If I'd lost weight from one day to the next, I didn't cut. If I hadn't lost any weight, I put two or three cuts in my arm. If I'd gained weight, I cut until I felt better.

I also started cutting out everything I enjoyed eating: no candy or cookies or ice cream, no chips or fried foods, no snacks between meals. I piled my plate with vegetables instead of meats or carbs and started drinking water instead of sweet tea.⁶⁰ This crash course in miserable meant the change in my eating habits lasted about as long as my self-mutilation binge.

I toyed with anorexia and bulimia after that, though neither became much more than a half-formed thought in my head. Both required a self-control that I lacked and a dedication to suffering, a willingness to hurt in order to be skinny. But I ate *because* I hurt. I ate out of loneliness and boredom. I ate due to stress or depression. I ate to occupy my hands and mouth. I ate to fill voids shaped like my father, like the guys I'd had crushes on who shunned me for my weight and size, like the musical notes that would never sound as pretty coming out of my mouth as they did in my head, like the petite figure I would never have. These voids would not disappear, even if the pounds did, and I knew this on some primitive, subconscious level, so I continued to eat.

More and more, I grew secure in the invisibility that comes with being overweight and felt safe knowing that people were not going to start a casual conversation with me or invite me out. I never had to learn to make small talk or interact with new people; I never had to expect more than teasing or dirty looks from boys; I never had to expect more

⁶⁰ For anyone not from Bradford, Arkansas, the water there is disgusting. It sometimes turns pink, and we're under a boil ban because they pumped too many harmful chemicals into the water trying to kill the harmful bacteria that was already there. It's some nasty stuff.

from myself than silence. With each spoonful of ice cream and handful of potato chips, I quieted both the social butterfly and the wounded child within myself. My fat became my security blanket and my maximum security jail cell, and although I never became happy, I did become comfortable.

Unicorns, Pots of Gold, and Stinky Sopranos: Fat Girl Myths Cont.

Since I brought up clothes once again, let me debunk a couple of other myths that I've heard about fat women, this time in relation to their looks:

Myth: Fat Girls Don't Care about how They Look

Please excuse me while I fall on the floor laughing. We don't care? Seriously? You think just because we're big we don't care? Hell-to-the-N-O. We probably care more than most women because we have to compensate for being fat in a world that hates fatties. Skinny girls can wear sweats and a tank top and look cute. Fat girls cannot. Well, not all fat girls can.⁶¹

You see the girl walking through Wal-Mart in stained, ripped pants, a baggy t-shirt, and no make-up, with her greasy hair pulled back into a side ponytail?⁶² *That* girl doesn't care about how she looks. The fat girl who took the time to fix her hair, apply her make-up, and wear an outfit that flatters her figure, however robust it may be, gives a pretty big damn about her appearance.

⁶¹ I don't know whether I can or not, as I refuse to wear sweats. Why? I'm not sure. Maybe because I think it makes me look lazy or bulky or like I don't care about my appearance. I haven't dug too deeply into that particular aspect of my personality, yet.

⁶² One more fashion atrocity to send back to the Eighties.

Being overweight does not mean a woman doesn't care about her appearance; it just means that she is overweight. Maybe she has a thyroid problem. Maybe she's happy being big. Maybe she's using her weight to cover up the fact that someone shattered her trust as a little girl, and food became her only source of comfort and a way to hide from dealing with the real issues that plague her and make her hate herself. Who knows? The point is that if a woman takes the time to bathe, dress nicely, and do something with her hair, she cares about her appearance. Weight is not an indicator of that concern, but that segues quite nicely into the next myth.

Myth: All Fat Girls Smell Bad

Whoever said this needs his or her head stuffed into my armpit. I shower every day, twice a day if it's hot and I'm outside a lot. I use shampoo and conditioner every time I shower. I keep my legs, armpits, and other less-mentionable girlie parts shaved, waxed, or trimmed. I use lotion to keep my legs feeling smooth, and I make sure that my lotion matches my body wash, so the scents don't compete. I also know that you spritz and step through the perfume rather than spraying the scent directly on yourself. Otherwise, you risk overpowering the room. You also spritz on your scent while your skin is still damp. This way you don't damage your clothes, and your body can absorb the scent as you dry, making it last longer.⁶³

Just as in the case of appearance, the only girls who stink are the ones who don't care, and that has nothing to do with size. Skinny girls all over this Earth need a refresher course in freshening up. Just because they look good while they're on the dance floor

⁶³ Oh, yeah. I went there. This fat girl reads *Cosmo*; I know how to apply my fragrance.

twerking does not mean they smell good. Some of them only cross their legs to hold in the stench, not because they're being lady-like.

If a fat girl stinks, it's not because she's fat. It's because she's not taking care of herself. Maybe she doesn't know how, in which case, she does not need someone making fun of her or accusing her of not caring about herself. She needs someone to hand her whichever issue of *Cosmo* deals with smelling fresh in humid weather. Maybe she just doesn't care. Either way, you telling her she stinks is liable to get you smacked upside the head with a purse. And on *that* note.

Myth: All Fat Girls are Sassy

No. No we're not. As sassy as I may sound on these pages, my insides are a quivering ball of insecurities. The depth of my confidence can be measured in centimeters most days, and that's only I'm having a good day and can be convinced to bring my confidence out into the open. I can laugh and joke all day about how, if someone ever told me I stink because I'm fat, I'd ask them why they had a problem with bacon grease. Some days that's true, but most days, I'd just glare, probably say fuck off, and go cry.

I wear billowy skirts or baggy cardigans over my shirts so I can disguise my weight. If I ever wear a more form-fitting outfit, I cross my arms over my stomach or pull at my shirt all day, trying to create more room around my belly.

Are all fat girls like me? No. Though some of them are more like me than they want to admit but use humor to play it off so no one knows. We all have our insecurities, and we can lose all the weight we want, but those insecurities will still plague us, as will our fears that we'll one day gain the weight back and that our friends only like us because

we're skinny. Fat becomes a hangman's noose around our middles, no matter how small those middles get.

As for the million other myths out there, we cannot all sing; we cannot all cook; we are not all loveable; we do not all have self-control issues where food is concerned.

All stereotypes start out with some sort of truth. Yes, some big women sing beautifully: Adele, Queen Latifah, Aretha Franklin. They all possess great voices and curvaceous bodies. Some of us can cook. I can, but you better do the dishes. Some of have self-control issues. Mine is more shopping than food.

A stereotype, even one based in truth, is still a generalization that won't apply to everyone who fits into the category. Not all Southerners say ya'll and go huntin' and fishin' before eating a mess of greens fer supper. But we all have a cousin or an uncle somewhere who asks if we want some of the deer they just shot. Bubba Joe, or Cousin Jimmy Don, in my family, is not always some backwoods idgit who can't tell his head from a hole in the ground. And not every fat girl is an opera-singing cook with bad hygiene habits.

That is not to say that you should never judge a book by its cover, though. No, not every book with Fabio on the cover is going to be a cheesy romance. Some are going to be really well-written romance novels. You can probably guarantee that a book with two people locked in a passionate embrace is most likely going to a romance novel, though.

Not every short, fat, pothead you meet is going to be a loser who can't hold down a job, but you might want to keep his bad habits in mind before you decide to bring him home and keep him.

The Underground Pt. 3: Meeting The Ex

I sat at The Underground in a black tank top, pink mini skirt, and black, calf-high biker boots.⁶⁴ I propped my feet up on the scuffed wooden coffee table and leaned back into the scratch green plaid couch, letting the sounds of loud rock music wash over me, as my head bobbed along to screaming guitars and thumping bass lines.

Suddenly, someone appeared next to me, as if out of thin air. I turned to see a short, slightly chubby guy with a dark, scruffy beard and bright green eyes. Had he not been some strange guy sitting at my elbow and grinning, I might have considered him cute. However, guys only talked to me if they were friends with someone I knew, and I'd never seen this guy before in my life, or if they wanted to make fun of me.

“Hi.” He bounced as he spoke.

I leaned slightly away, feeling my lip curl out of nervousness at his close attention.

“Uh, hi?”

“I know this is weird because you've never met me, but you have the greatest quads I've ever seen. Hi, my name is The Ex.”

I didn't put much faith in The Ex at first. Honestly, I considered him a weirdo, and he constantly had bloodshot eyes from smoking too much pot. But every time he saw me at

⁶⁴ At the time, I considered this an appropriate outfit, as my boobs were covered. Looking back, I may have been a tad trashier than I intended.

The Underground, he'd quit what he was doing to come hang out with me. One night, six months into our knowing each other, we ended up discussing why I cut, issues with my family and having never dealt with being molested, and why he smoked so much pot, cheating on his ex-girlfriend and her subsequent break-up with him.

After that, we were best friends, talking on the phone until two in the morning almost every night. Soon after, his flirting, which I had considered innocent and teasing, became serious. However, any time he'd bring up dating, I'd say no. As much as I loved him as a person and as my friend, I didn't think we'd work as anything more than that. There was a three year age difference in my favor, and due to our birthdays, mine in September and his in December, I graduated college the same year he finished high school. We were in too different places in life. It would never work.

As time went by, though, our friendship grew stronger, I saw more and more signs of why we shouldn't date. I held down a steady job, albeit at Wal-Mart. He was fired from every place he worked. In fact, McDonalds fired him for playing air drums and breaking the screen to the drive-through cash register when he hit the cymbal. And he was fired by the same manager of the same department of the same small-town grocery store three times for lateness.⁶⁵

It was during these years in my early twenties that my fights with my step-dad led to me moving out of my parents' house and living out of my car and on friends' couches. The Ex stood by me and attempted to protect me from the worst of the pain.

⁶⁵ You'd think *one* of them would have learned after the second go round.

One night, I called The Ex up about ten-thirty at night.

He answered quickly, sounding light-hearted and happy that I'd called. "Hello, Lovely."

"I'm scared I'm going to accidentally kill myself."

"What?" I could imagine him sitting forward on the couch, one arm braced on his knee, the other pressing the phone closer to his ear. "Why? What happened?"

"They jumped my case for staying out with friends after work so much. Said that I don't care about anyone but myself and that I'm a bad influence on my little brother because all I do is hang out with my hoodlum friends instead of coming home right away. I'm nineteen years old. What's so wrong with me wanting to hang out with friends? I meet their stupid curfew. I don't miss work. I've kept my scholarships in college. I just want to relax for a little bit and hang out somewhere besides the middle of po-dunk fucking nowhere where no one likes me because I have piercings and don't dress like everyone else and...."

"Calm down." His sharp voice cut through the hysteria that had started to cause my vision to go hazy. "You just need to breathe. Otherwise, you'll end up cutting again."

"I already have. Dad just stood there yelling and yelling and yelling, and mom was in the corner crying, and I hate making my mom cry, and he said they were disappointed in me, and she nodded, and as soon as they left my room, I started cutting, and I've got marks up and down my arms, and I don't even feel it, and that's why I'm scared. I just need someone to talk to."

"Come here. You don't need to be there if it's this bad. Come spend the night at my house."

“Aren't your parents out of town?”

“Yeah, but I'll deal with them yelling at me for having someone over without asking. I think they'll understand that this is more important. Just get in your car and come here.”

I knew my parents would be angry when I told them I was leaving, but I didn't want to die. “Okay, I'll be there in about forty-five minutes.”

I threw some clothes and a toothbrush into a bag and set it on the couch before knocking on my parents' bedroom door.

“Come in,” Dad said. I could still hear the frustration in his voice.

I pushed open the door and hovered in the doorway, hoping the bit of space that separated me from them would somehow protect me from their words. “I'm going to spend the night at a friend's house.”

Dad huffed and shook his head. “Yeah, I figured you'd run off. You know, you need to decide what your priorities are, girl. When was the last time you went and saw your grandma? Do you even think about her while you're out gallivanting around with those punks you call friends?”

“I saw her a few days ago, and they're not punks. Just because you don't like the way we dress, doesn't make us bad people. We don't do drugs. We all work.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've heard what you guys are like. People talk, little girl, and you might not pay attention to it, but we do. Every week, somebody says something about our kid having funny hair colors or wearing all black. It's embarrassing to have to constantly defend you wanting to be a freak.”

“I'm not a freak. And if they're going to judge me for the way I look, I don't want to know them anyways.”

“Well, we have to live around them. You're going back to college in a month or two, but we have to stay here. Why can't you think of us once in a while, instead of always thinking about yourself?”

I took a deep breath and held up a hand. “I'm going to a friend's. I'll be in Searcy, and I have my phone. Okay?”

“Fine. Just go.”

I grabbed my bag and walked out the front door, careful not to slam it, lest it lead to more yelling, then jogged to my car. I drove slowly down out long driveway, but hit the gas as soon as I was far enough away it wouldn't cause dad to call and scream at me not to kill someone while throwing a temper tantrum.

For the entire twenty-minute trip from my parents' to The Ex's, I cut, dragging a pocket knife over my already mutilated arm. I already had a row of horizontal cuts along my inner arm, and I added many more to the thin skin of my wrist, repeatedly pulling the blade over the skin until I could no longer see flesh, just ribbons of ripped skin and blood.

The Ex opened the front door as soon as I pulled in the drive. I walked up and handed him the pocket knife. “I think I need to give this to you.”

He slid the knife into his back pocket and gripped my wrists to twist my arms around and look at the damage. Pulling me inside, he kicked the door shut and led me over to the couch. I saw peroxide, cotton balls, anti-biotic ointment, and Band-Aids all laid out on the coffee table. He doctored my arms in silence.

“I'm sorry.”

He looked up from cleaning up the mess of Band-Aid packages. “For?”

“Being a fucked-up mess and standing on your doorstep in the middle of the night covered in tears, snot, and blood.”

He smiled and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. “I’m just glad I can be here to help you.” I stared silently for a moment. “Smile.” I kept staring. “A cucumber, a pickle, and penis were sitting on a log, talking.” I giggled, and he smiled back. “I knew that would work.” He kissed my forehead and walked over to the television. “Horror movies and popcorn?”

I curled up on the couch, tucking my feet under me. “Yeah.”

He slid the newest *Saw* film in and walked back over to sit next to me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me close.

Time and closeness led to love, and though a part of me always knew we’d never last, I couldn’t imagine losing the bond that I had with him. “I’m afraid we’ll mess up our friendship” turned into “I’m afraid you dating someone else would mean you couldn’t be my friend anymore.” I didn’t want to lose him, lose what we had, so I agreed to date him.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ It only took four years of him flirting and trying and one freak out break up a month into the relationship for me to get over my fears. I realize that all of my flip-flopping caused him more misery than I ever meant to, and for that, I am deeply sorry. In no way do I feel I was perfect or blameless in the subsequent fall out.

The Fallout (Not to be Confused with the Video Game)

We rented an apartment together near his parents and about a half-hour from mine. When we first moved in, I had several hundred dollars saved up but would be without work for a while, since I was moving from Little Rock to Searcy. He had a full-time job at a local factory, though, so we had enough money to cover the bills while I job hunted. Since I did not work, I made it my job to keep the house clean, the laundry done, and hot food on the table when he walked in after work.

Then, about a month into our new life, he ended up fired.⁶⁷ We both found work at a local grocery store within a week, he at full-time and I at part. Money would still be tight, but as long as we budgeted, we'd be fine. I, also, had a credit card, so we were covered in case of an emergency. Then, he was fired again, within two weeks of being hired.⁶⁸

I managed to find a full-time job working overnights as a truck stop cook, but one job was nowhere near enough to pull in the kind of money we needed. Needless to say, my credit card bills grew. He'd find a job, though, and we'd be okay. All he had to do was find work.

Just put down the video game controller and go get applications.

⁶⁷ Oddly enough, I was surprised, at the time.

⁶⁸ And there you have the emergency.

His best friend was collecting applications, too, so he even had someone to go with.

He just needed to get up and go get those applications.

Okay, applications finally picked up,⁶⁹ so now, to fill them out.

Legibly.

Like, they need to be able to read the name and phone number.

Okay, how about I fill them out.

Just turn them in.

Any day now.

At least pick them up off the filthy cabinet so that they quit getting water damage and stained. Oh, and maybe clean the counter, while you're at it, since you're who made the mess, and I have to go to work.

Or not.

Two months. For two months, he sat in front of a video game and played Grand Theft Auto and every racing game known to man. And that was it.

No laundry.

No cleaning.

Very little cooking, unless he needed to eat, and frozen pizza was quick.

⁶⁹ He only picked them up because his friend forced him to.

Did I mention, I worked forty hours a week? Five nights in a row, from 10:00 pm to 6:00 am, cooking, cleaning, doing dishes, taking out trash, smiling at customers who complained that my grits were too dry.⁷⁰

And then, I'd come home. And find two of his best friends asleep in the living room; cups, plates, and silverware piled on the coffee table; dirty dishes stacked around the kitchen sink; laundry piled up in the bedroom floor; and that same damn stack of applications getting dirtier and dirtier.

After dancing around job hunting, he finally found a job as a telemarketer. A few weeks into the job, they started sending him home halfway through the day due to not meeting quota, which meant I'd wake up to a messy house and three *grown men* yelling at a video game, clean the house and do the laundry, leave for work, and come home to a mess again.

Then, he said, "I want to go back to school. Not a year from now, after we both work and save up money, not a semester from now after our lease is legally up, but now. Like, next month⁷¹."

We were using one car, in his name, and our mutual jobs didn't make ends meet. If I stayed and he left, I couldn't get back and forth to work and would have no way to pay bills. So we packed our stuff, found someone to take over the lease, and drove an hour and half away to the college he wanted to go to only to find out, after we'd moved in with

⁷⁰ I still don't know what a fucking grit is, but I'm fairly certain they're disgusting, even when damp.

⁷¹ I may be condensing several days' worth of arguments into one statement, but you get the general idea.

his friend, that his parents wouldn't agree to sign off on his loans for that school.⁷² So we drove back to Searcy.

I'd moved out of my parents' home a year earlier after a huge fight over The Ex leaving hickeys on my neck. My mom had told me I would never be allowed back into their house without apologizing to Dad, and I didn't feel the need to apologize for standing up for myself and expecting to be treated like an adult. Needless to say, I couldn't go home.

Shortly after we returned to Searcy, The Ex moved into a dorm. I didn't have anywhere to live, any way to get back and forth to a job, or any money, which put more than a little strain on my already heavily strained mental state.

After a few weeks of discussion, his parents agreed let me stay, so he went to college, and I went back to work at Wal-Mart. That's when the real trouble with our relationship started.⁷³

His car broke down on our way back to Searcy to move in with his parents, so for the first couple of months that I worked, I borrowed his mom's car, while saving up money to fix his, which set me back another \$600. After I fixed his car, he took it to school, and I continued borrowing his mom's. I tried to drive down and visit him at least every other weekend, but because he did not have a job, he never visited me.

While we'd talked for hours at a time, every night, during my time at college, he never called, and his texts became less and less frequent. Any time I did visit him on campus,

⁷² They didn't think he'd really commit, surprise, surprise, and that school cost a lot more than a community college.

⁷³ Yes, most people would think the trouble began when he refused to be a man and hold down a job or help out around the house, but he still connected with me emotionally.

instead of spending time with me, he wanted to continue hanging out with his friends. It was nice to be included with all the new people he met, but I wanted one-on-one time.

I knew that his success in school was the most important thing, though. I wanted him to achieve his dreams, to feel the same pride in his abilities that I did at my graduation. I knew that he had so much potential to do so many great things with his life, so long as he applied himself.

So I worked, put in applications to graduate school, and tried to pay down the debt we'd built up on my credit card. He focused on school.

Until he failed.

Both semesters.

How he could fail all his classes when he lived on campus, didn't work, and never called or visited me, I don't know, but he did.⁷⁴

His parents moved shortly after he failed his first/only year in college, so we moved in with his best friend's mom. I kept working forty-hour weeks, paying all our bills, and washing all our laundry. He bought his friend's World of Warcraft account with his last paycheck from his school job. We went around and around and around about filling out and turning in another set of applications.

Then, I found out about the parties.

⁷⁴ To be fair, the second semester he at least had a job, but washing dishes part time at the school cafeteria doesn't seem so stressful and time-consuming that it would lead to failure.

Contact Highs and Lows

One day, after returning from work, I asked The Ex whether he wanted to play a video game together. He said sure, but we'd have to go get the controllers from his friend's house, where he'd left them.

I'd only met Steven a couple times, so I didn't know much about him, other than that The Ex and he hung out every once in a while. I dressed up and did my make-up to go pick up the controllers.⁷⁵

When we arrived, The Ex disappeared upstairs with Steven, leaving me alone in a room full of people I didn't know. I suck at small talk. I'm an introvert, not an extrovert, and I honestly couldn't come up with a single thing to say to any of these people. These were The Ex's people, not mine. They were a group of high school or college drop-outs; I had just been accepted to graduate school. They spent most of their time drinking, doing drugs, and sleeping around. I rarely drank, had tried pot once in my entire life, and The Ex was the first guy I'd slept with. I didn't belong there. I had nothing in common with these people. Or at least, that's what I thought as I scanned the room.

⁷⁵ Stupid, I know, but a few of The Ex's friends had picked on him for dating a man due to my height and size, and I wanted these friends to see that he was actually dating a girl, maybe even think he was dating a cute girl.

Looking back, it sounds stuck-up and stereotypical. Most likely, had I said hello and chatted with people, I would have found someone with similar interests and had a good time making a new friend. At the time, though, I just felt angry and uncomfortable. I didn't want to be surrounded by drunken people whom I'd never met. I just wanted to chill at home and have a relaxing night with my boyfriend. Before I'd even walked in the door, I was ready to leave.

After a few moments of standing in the corner, perfecting the art of being a wallflower, I went in search of The Ex. I found him upstairs, sitting in a circle of guys who were passing a joint around.

I was pissed. When I met The Ex, he was barely passing his high school because of being stoned all the time. I spent six months blowing him off because I didn't trust him and his bloodshot eyes. One of the only reasons we really clicked and started dating was that he became a more responsible and mature person after he quit smoking pot. And now, he was at it again.⁷⁶

“Are you ready to leave yet?”

He grabbed the controllers and followed me out to the car. “Why are you so upset?”

“You're smoking pot again. I thought you'd quit that?”

He shook his head and squinted at me. “You seriously don't trust me, do you? I didn't lie to you. I'm not smoking pot. Okay, so I'll sit with the guys when they smoke it, but I don't.”

⁷⁶ Don't get me wrong. I know people who smoke pot on occasion and are still productive, active members of society. For them, pot is a recreational activity, not an escape from life and responsibilities. The Ex is not one of those people.

“Because there’s no such thing as a contact high, is there? You know that shit’s going to be in your system if a job drug tests you. No one’s going to hire a pothead.”

“I’m not a fucking pothead. And most places don’t care about pot anyways; they only drug test you to look for the bigger stuff.”

“Sure. Whatever. Let’s just go home.”

I hadn’t felt connected to The Ex in months, and ever since we’d moved in with his friend’s mom, I’d contemplated leaving him. No one else would love me, though. No one else had stood by during the fights with my parents. No real man would ever love me. He was the best I could do, and if I left him, I’d be alone forever. As much as I loved him when we started dating, he’d given up on us, and I now hated him.

I didn’t want to give up, though. I wanted to push through our issues and to reconnect, to find that spark we used to have. He was supposed to be my forever. I just needed to try harder, just trust him a little, just give it one more chance.

So I overlooked the parties, trusted him when he said he wasn’t actually smoking pot. I overlooked the fact that he never texted me while he was out with his friends, that he choose to hang out with them every night instead of spending time with me after I got off work. I overlooked the fact that I never knew where he went or who he was with.

I didn’t want to be alone.

Eventually, Wal-Mart hired him. I don’t know why. I really don’t. I wouldn’t have, but Wal-Mart saw something worthwhile and paid him to stock shelves overnights. Two weeks into it, they threatened to fire him for not stocking fast enough.

“I don’t want to go to work. I’ve been told I definitely have a job at a smaller grocery store, so can I just quit?”

I stared at him, as he pouted and refused to look me in the eye. “I know you hate it, so do I. Wal-Mart fucking sucks. But can’t you just work until you know for sure you have the second job?”

His lower lip jutted out farther, and he turned to face the wall. “They keep threatening to fire me. I don’t want to go back. She said I have the job. Just let me quit.”

I didn’t trust this “she” who’d promised him a job, not until there was something in writing. “She” could always change her mind. “Please. It’s just a couple more days.”

“I hate it. I don’t want to go back.”

I started to cry and slid off the bed and onto the floor. “Fine. Quit. Go ahead. Leave it all up to me to keep trying to pay all the bills with no help. Play your fucking video games and quit.”

He dropped down beside me. “Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.” I cried harder, and he heaved a sigh and drew his knees up to his chest. “Fine. I’ll go to work tonight.”

I looked over at him, his petulant expression and chin resting on his knees. He didn’t want to go to work, and he didn’t care that his lack of desire to go bothered me. He just wanted me to quit crying, quit nagging him, quit making him feel guilty. My pain, my worries, my stress were not an issue for him. “No. You go ahead and quit.”

He quit pouting and looked at me. “Really?”

“Yeah. Sure. Go ahead.”

He cheered and hugged me. “I love you so much, baby; thank you, thank you, thank you.”

He immediately called and quit.

He didn't get that other job. He kept going to parties, hiding things from me, and choosing video games over me. He hung out with other girls while I was at work and masturbated to porn instead of being physically intimate with me.

Finally, after a year and half of dating, at least half of which I'd been contemplating leaving, I decided being alone would hurt less than being with someone who made me feel worthless.

I moved back in with my parents a few weeks after he quit Wal-Mart. My mom didn't actually make me apologize, but when your daughter calls in tears, with several thousand dollars in credit card debt, a boyfriend who spends more time with other girls than with her, and an acceptance letter to graduate school, it's probably a little easier to forgive a hickey.

Body Image Biohazard

For the year and a half after The Ex and I broke up, I wobbled between getting my life back on track and screwing it up completely. I moved to Oklahoma and began serious graduate studies, and I rebounded into a short-lived relationship with a guy who cheated on me and expected me to pay for everything. I made new friends and continued rebuilding the broken relationship with my parents, and I maxed out my credit card, more than once. I got back on medication for my depression, and I went right back off it. I started cutting again, and I stopped.⁷⁷

Needless to say, my crazy showed, just a bit.

Then, I met Brittany, another student in my program, and she introduced me to Nick and Makenna, who lived together in an open relationship. They became my family in Oklahoma and pushed me to see myself in a better light, to consider myself worthy, and to cut ties with the poisonous relationships of the past. It took six months of their love and encouragement for me to quit speaking to the rebound guy, and another eight months after that for me to cut ties with The Ex. No more “let’s be friends who fight for hours and both end up in tears” or “I can explain away my lies, this time, I promise” or “I just

⁷⁷ The merry-go-round of cutting/not cutting/being healthy/being depressed/not wanting to hurt my family/wanting to feel better continues spinning without ever actually getting me anywhere.

need to hurt you as bad as you hurt me, then we can be friends.” Just silence and moving in a better direction.

But they did more than push me to cut ties with outside sources of negativity. They also pushed me to cut ties with my internal negativity.

Nick especially refused to allow me to continue putting myself down. Any time I said something negative about myself, made a joke at my own expense, claimed I couldn't wear something due to my body shape, he called me on it. Told me shut up, to get over what I'd heard in the past and focus on what was being said in the present. Squirted me with a water bottle.⁷⁸

He refused to let me put myself down and constantly complimented me, both on my looks and my personality, in order to build my confidence up.

Makenna and Brittany did as well, but it meant more coming from him because he was male. As clichéd as it sounds, I wanted approval from a man. My biological father had walked out on me; my little brother's father molested me; my step-father hated the way I dressed and my more lenient views on Christianity; I was picked on for being too tall and manly looking; the first serious relationship I'd had ended with lying, fighting, and cheating.⁷⁹

I wanted to be good enough for a man. And I wanted a man to see me as a woman, to find me attractive. I'd searched for that acceptance in so many wrong places.⁸⁰ Dressing trashy got me attention. Letting people use me for rides or cigarettes made me feel included. Putting up with being mistreated kept me from being lonely.

⁷⁸ Yes, he trained the Katt the same way people train their cats.

⁷⁹ The Ex can deny cheating on me all he wants, but I'll never believe it.

⁸⁰ E.g. my entire wasted time at The Underground.

Nick offered me what no one else had. I didn't have to look or act like a slut for him to notice me. I didn't have to let him use me in order to have a friend. I could be myself, and he was still happy to spend time with me.⁸¹

His time, patience, and occasional yelling fits helped me start to see myself as real person, as someone with worth, and I started to realize what my bad habits were and how much I needed to change.

Changing is like a cha-cha, though. It's two steps forward and one step back, and there are a lot of times you want to quit the dance because it feels a little too much like a merry-go-round.

Shortly after we became friends, I went to spend the weekend with Brittany and Nick, while Makenna was visiting her parents. Brittany had started a set of workout videos a couple weeks back, so while I was there, I worked out with her. I huffed and puffed and sweated through a hour of warm up, workout, and cool down, using five-pound weights or no weight at all, while she used tens and fifteens. After we finished, she weighed herself and had Nick take her measurements to see how much progress she'd made in the month of working out. The scale said she'd gained weight; the tape said she'd lost inches.

"Muscle weighs less than fat,"⁸² Nick said, "You can lose inches and still be gaining weight because you're gaining muscle." He looked at me. "Want me to measure you, too?"

I made a face, not wanting to know how big I really was and damn sure not wanting anyone else to know. But I did want to get skinnier, and to do that, I needed to know what my starting point was. "All right."

⁸¹ Despite squirting me with water when I acted like a Negative Nancy.

⁸² Okay, major teeth-grinding pet peeve moment here. See next chapter to understand why.

He took my measurements, bust, upper waist, lower waists, and hips, and Brittany wrote them down for me. To my surprise, my waists was only a couple inches larger than Brittany's, and even more shocking, there were only three inches of difference between my shoulders and my hips.

“See.” He smacked my arm with the back of his hand. “You're always complaining that your hips and butt are too small, but you could get really close to an hour glass figure. Maybe not perfect, but close. Just do cardio and exercises to build the muscle in those areas. And get rid of the damn scale. It's just a number. What really matters is how you feel and how your clothes fit.”

I fingered the edge of the paper with my measurements. I was big, each number in the mid- to upper forties and my stomach coming in the highest at 49 and a half inches. But I wasn't as disproportionate as I'd thought. Maybe he was right.

“What kind of exercises?”

“Donkey kicks, leg lifts, squats. A lot of what you were doing today.”

I nodded and cemented all of that in my memory. Over the next few weeks, I started carving out a little time to do a few of the exercises he'd said. Not very often at first; in fact, it would take another six months of complaining about my size before I finally got the push I needed to actually do something.

Nick and Brittany have an open relationship, which I knew from the beginning of knowing Brittany. It was something I struggled with at first, and my strict Christian family would have been appalled, made rude comments about heathen orgies, and potentially refused to allow “those people in this house,” but as I got to know everyone,

the situation took a backseat to the people involved and their interactions with each and me.

A year and half into knowing everyone, I ended up living in a less-than-desirable apartment situation where I was called fat and a freak and fat by those with whom I lived. Though it took some finagling to get me into the house, Nick, Brittany, and Makenna extended the offer to let me come live with them and become part of the relationship.

I struggled with it for a while. Were Makenna and Brittany really okay with this? Would it cause problems in our friendships? Lead to fights and me being thrown out? Make me lose the people I was currently closest to due to hurt feelings?

And me, could I reconcile what I'd been taught about Christianity and the potential threat to my immortal soul with this group ideal? Did the need for human affection and comfort outweigh the potential to live in a golden mansion after I died? Was Nick right that it was not cheating or adultery if everyone involved was aware and accepting? Did my desire to feel wanted and attracted matter more than any of that?

In the end, we all lied, to ourselves and others. We pretended we were far more okay with the situation than we really were, pretended we could accept each other as equals more than we actually could.

When the relationship first began, I realized that I had a target audience, that there was someone outside of myself for whom to work toward my fitness goals. While I had not been able to care enough for my own well-being to get fit, I did care enough about Nick's perception of me to want to look better.

Thus, workouts that had been once maybe twice a week turned to three to five times a week. I was doing donkey kicks and leg lifts, squats, push-ups, walking a couple miles,

and stretching until I was flexible enough to bend in half. And I wasn't taking my measurements or standing on a scale, though I did keep track of how my clothes fit. Instead, I looked for approval in his eyes as he saw me push myself to start jogging instead of just walking. That made me feel better than a once-tight shirt becoming loose.

However, as I saw his approval, saw my clothes begin to fit more loosely or better, and realized I'd moved down a size in shirts, while gaining extra curve and firmness in my butt, I realized that the way I looked at myself had also changed.

You Weigh Wrong

Pet Peeves. Everyone has them. Everyone at some point or another has both pissed off another person by committing one of their pet peeves, either inadvertently or purposefully, and been pissed off by one of their own pet peeves. What does this have to do with weight loss and body image? Simple. One of my major pet peeves, and I mean major to the point of grimacing and correcting other people loudly, is the comment, muscle weighs more than fat.

No, it does not.

A pound of muscle weighs the exact same as a pound of fat. Know why? They're both a pound! It's not rocket science. Gaining ten pounds, be it of fat or of muscle, is still gaining ten pounds. The difference is not in the number of pounds but the number of inches.

A pound of muscle is denser than a pound a fat; it takes up less space. A pound of muscle is firm and dense, whereas a pound of fat is a jiggly, gelatinous mass of yellow, bubbly-looking yuck.

Oh, and side note number two, I hate the word gelatinous. And the word gelatin. And Jell-O in all its forms, flavors, and colors. Bill Cosby can keep that wiggly, flavorless chunk of gross. And Jell-O molds with little pieces of fruit in them freak me out. It's like someone created a still life of the fruity Titanic, and for all eternity, which is about how

long most family gatherings seem to last, I'm stuck watching poor Mrs. Apple and her half-dozen babies drown. While that image does appeal to my morbid side, I still refuse to eat Jell-O or any of the off-brands. I swear, if I'm ever stuck in the hospital and forced to survive on Jell-O, I'm going to starve to death. But, I may die skinnier, so at least it will be a happy and less gelatinous death.

Back to my original rant, though. The point is, if you gain ten pounds of muscle rather than ten pounds of fat, you gain less volume. Which also translates to, if you lose five pounds of fat and gain ten pounds of muscle, even though you've gained a total of five pounds, you may drop a pants size due to having lost volume. Thus, when you start working out, you may end up gaining weight instead of losing it. However, at the same time, you'll start to notice that your pants are falling off.

For people who are trying to get healthier and slimmer, not just dump a few extra pounds, standing on a scale will do no good at all. Scales are for dieters, people who are denying themselves certain foods in order to alter one number that really doesn't mean much of anything. Standing on a scale will only depress you, and cutting out foods that you like will only make you crave them more.

Getting healthy, losing fat and getting fit, and feeling better is more about circumference, not a number on a scale. The best way to figure out whether you're reaching a health goal is to take your measurements with a tape measure, avoid the scale, or use a certain pair of jeans that fit too tightly. As you work out and eat better, which means eating your favorite foods in moderation and eating smaller portions, not cutting out all fats, carbs, red meats, or whatever your new-fangled, fad-to-get-rid-of-fat,

probably-going-to-be-disproved-by-the-next-fad diet says, you'll notice that the numbers of the measuring tape go down and those too-tight jeans start to fit better.

Depriving yourself of foods you enjoy leads to being angry and grouchy, resenting those who get to eat the foods you now deem "evil," turning food into the enemy instead of a life-source, and giving into temptation and hating yourself.

I, for instance, have a horrible sweet tooth. Honestly, I'm willing to bet more of my teeth and taste buds like sugar than anything else. I crave it in all its forms: fruity, chocolaty, chewy, gummy, baked, frozen, caffeinated; if it tastes sweet, I want it. And for years, I would deprive myself of sweet stuff in an effort to lose weight. No more sodas. Only one sugary snack a day. The only dessert I can have is strawberries, which for the record, are more bitter than sweet. I'd cut out what I liked because it was "bad" for. I demonized sugar. That white, gritty substance that scrubs your skin so smooth it feels like a baby's bottom and makes strawberries edible. What can possibly be demonic about that?

Our bodies run on sugar. They need sugar. Not in mass amounts; eating an entire box of double-stuff Oreos and bawling on my best friend's shoulder when The Ex cheated on me did nothing to help our relationship or my waistline. But moderate amounts of sugar are okay. Eating a couple Oreos is okay. Having a glass of soda with lunch won't destroy anything but your teeth.

By telling myself certain foods were bad, I also told myself that I was bad if I gave in and ate them. So any little cheat, another word with a negative connotation, became something I needed to hide, to sneak when no one was looking. And it made me defensive if anyone noticed my cheating. An innocent question like "are you having a

cookie?” turned into an attack. I immediately went on the defensive and lashed out that yes I was having a damn cookie, and I might even have two, not that it’s any of your business, and who are you to judge, and it’s just a cookie.

And that’s where the tirade needed to stop.

It’s just a cookie. There is nothing bad, demonic, or heinous about it. Eating a cookie, even eating a couple of cookies, is fine. Birthday cake at a party. Ice cream on a hot summer evening. A glass of tea so sweet it might as well be syrup. These are all fine. Just not every day or every meal. Have ONE slice of birthday cake, and don’t go back and sneak all the extra frosting off the cake plate.⁸³ Have ONE bowl of ice cream. A cereal bowl, not a butter bowl. Drink water intermittently between glasses of syrup tea. Have your cake and eat it, too. Just be sure to share and to take the stairs at work tomorrow.

The same goes for chips, pizza, cotton candy, chili cheese fries, whatever you want. Go ahead and eat it, sometimes. That doesn’t mean eat pizza on Monday, chili cheese fries on Tuesday, birthday cake on Wednesday. But if your friend has a birthday, indulge in some cake. Just make sure you don’t pick up fast food on the way home from the party. If the fair is in town, snack on some funnel cake, but bypass the cotton candy and giant turkey legs. If you’ve had a busy day and just don’t feel up to cooking, grab a pizza, but skip the extra cheese, garlic sauce, and triple pepperoni.

Learn to moderate the foods that aren’t as healthy so that neither you nor they become an enemy to tear down.

⁸³ Even though the frost is totally the best part of the birthday cake.

And workout. The key to getting fit, which is far more important than being skinny, is to be active. The more you sit on your butt, the flatter that butt will be, but it's going to be the only flat thing on your body.

I have a friend who went on Weight Watchers before her wedding. She counted points and lost tons of weight, but she didn't work out at all. On her wedding day, she fit into a size 2, but she still had cottage cheese for thighs and a butt. Her words, not mine.

She learned to moderate her food choices, but she still wanted the lights out on her honeymoon. Forget that. What's the fun in being a size 2 if you still hide yourself in your clothes? I'd rather be a size 18 who's happy to run around naked because the only thing bouncing is my hair, which is thick and luxurious and you know you're envious of that, too.

Adding some activity, even just twenty minutes three times a week, will not only help you tone up and lose the extra inches, but it will make you feel better because it releases happy endorphins and gets your blood flowing and your muscles warmed up so that your body feels alive and functioning and vibrant instead of sedentary. You know what's sedentary? Dead people are sedentary. And no one cares about the size of their ass or whether they got a report in on time. No one's boss ever gave a eulogy praising how well someone met deadlines, and if they have, may God bless their poor hearts. The boss and the dead person.

Working out, whether it's once every few days or a few hours every day, makes you feel better. And that's not me quoting some statistic from some research project, that's my own truth, drawn from what I've experienced. I'm happier when I make myself get

up and move, even just taking a walk around the neighborhood a few days a week, because I'm reminding my body and myself that we're alive and we still work.

Does one walk around the block mean I can pig out on ice cream? No. But pigging out on ice cream doesn't mean I need to run around the block an extra fifteen times. Doing so would demonize both ice cream and exercise, as one is now a punishment for the other.

So I ate too much ice cream. Big deal. I'll continue with my regular exercise, order a salad with my dinner instead of a loaded baked potato, and remind myself that ice cream does not fix my problems.

Chocolate is not a Band-Aid, though everyone feels happier on a sugar rush.

I have significantly digressed from my original point, though. The point is that a pound is a pound is a pound, and pounds don't mean anything. Using a scale to judge your health won't work. How many inches is your waist? How well do your clothes fit? Are those pounds dense muscle instead of wiggling cellulite? The number, on the scale or on the tag in your clothes, does not represent your health or well-being. It's just a number. I truly believe that no one will love you more for being a smaller size. They may claim to, but they're just shallow, lying jerks who don't really care about you.

And if you think you'll love yourself more by being a smaller size, you're wrong there, too. Love is about the insides, and you have to love your insides if you ever want to improve your outsides long-term.

Don't let people *console* you about your weight by saying that muscle weighs more than fat. Tell them they need to go back to science class because that statement is ignorant and insulting because it assumes you need to be comforted about your size. Or

just brag about your clothes fitting better and leave the numbers and comments about science class out of it.

We are not Fat-ASSES

Living with Nick, Brittany, and Makenna, I steadily toned up my body and lost inches. The more I lost, the looser my clothing fit, and I loved it, until I realized that some of my favorite stuff no longer fit, and I couldn't afford to buy new clothes. So I did what any self-sufficient young woman would do and called my mom.

I spun in a circle on the stool in my mom's sewing room, watching as she carefully threaded her sewing machine with pink thread in order to take up one of my skirts.⁸⁴ I was visiting for Christmas break and had brought home several items to be mended. "I'm sorry I'm being a butt and making you fix a bunch of my clothes."

She waved one hand at me and wet the thread in her mouth before sliding it through the eye of the needle. "It's no big deal, baby. I don't get to see you very often, so I'm more than happy to take up some stuff for you."

Sitting back carefully in her chair, one with just enough padding to offer both comfort and support so she was able to sit for longer periods before her back and hip hurt too badly, she adjusted the material and began the first seam.

⁸⁴ And yes, even in my mid-twenties, I still love spinning in circles on the stool in my mom's sewing room.

I sat up straighter and wiggled my shoulders back and forth. “At least I’ve lost weight. That’s good, since I’ve been working out like crazy the last few months to not be fat-ass anymore.”

Mom paused in her sewing to glare at me. Shaking her index finger at me, she said, “Listen here, hussy. We are not fat-asses. We don’t have any ass. Or hips. That’s why I don’t even bother shopping for women’s jeans.”

“Okay, I’m working out like crazy to quit being a fat belly.”

She laughed, leaning forward to brace her arms on her sewing table. “Smart-ass.”

I grinned and went back to spinning on the stool. “My ass is a genius, how about yours?”

I look just like my momma, except for our noses. We have the same hair and eye color, the same dimple in the left side of our face, and the same tiny cleft in our chin. We also have the same broad shoulders and narrow hips, propensity for carrying our weight in our middles, and set of amazing legs, no matter how big the rest of us gets. Most of my life, my mom has repeated a few key phrases that have stuck in my head, including, “we have no hips and no ass, but we’ve got great legs.”

I know she meant to build confidence in me by highlighting the positive aspects of our bodies, but this was also her reasoning for shopping in the men’s section instead of the women’s, “They never carry anything that fits me.” That lack of curve became a major issue in my mind, especially since my mom has a double D chest, automatically making her appear womanly, while I barely fill up a C.

By the time I finished high school and realized that I would never have a voluptuous figure, I combined my mom pushing me to shop in the men's section, the statement that real women have curves, and my lack of curve into the belief that I looked like a man instead of a woman.

I wore men's clothes quite often during my freshman and sophomore years of college because they offered me a way to dress more punk rock and break from the mainstream look I'd attempted, and failed, to follow for so many years. Once I decided I wanted to appear more feminine, I refused to wear anything labeled men's. I gave all my men's clothes to Goodwill and went back to buying only women's clothing. My jeans were often too small and extremely low cut because in order to find pants that fit my smaller butt and hips, they had to sit below my waist, which is a full size larger than the rest of me. I then had to buy shirts that were a size or two too big in order to mask the fact that my too small jeans created a muffin top.

I did this for so long that I actually created an indentation in my hips, where my body began to reform itself around the low-rise jeans I wore.⁸⁵

During the time I lived with Nick, Brittany, and Makenna, the detrimental effects of my clothing became clear to me. Before then, I blamed my body structure instead of looking at how my clothing choices effected the way my body looked.

Nick, Brittany, and Makenna complimented me when my clothing accented my body and pointed out when it did not.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Yeah, apparently, your ass crack showing is not the worst thing that could happen when wearing low-rise jeans.

⁸⁶ Makenna and Brittany were much nicer about pointing out the negative sides of my outfits. I love Nick, and I'm glad he's honest, but sometimes, he has the tact of rampaging bull.

Over time, wearing clothes that fit me, combined with regular workouts, began to fill in the dip I'd created in my hips.

Stretching out across my bed, I tapped the touch screen of my phone as I played a hunt-and-find game. Nick walked in and put a knee on the bed to lean forward and stretch out on top of me, as he did often.

This time, though, he stopped and stood back. Before I could ask why, he shoved my skirt up around my waist and grabbed my hips, tugging until my back arched just a little bit.

“Now that is an internet-worthy ass.”

I laughed, both shocked and delighted, and looked back at him. “Seriously?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I would totally download that picture.”

I handed him my phone, and his eyes lit up, as he grinned even bigger, showing all his teeth and making his laugh lines curve halfway down his cheeks. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. If you want a pic of it, take a pic.”

He cackled and shoved my shoulder so that I turned back around and he could make sure my butt was still positioned correctly. After snapping the picture, he giggled and danced around like a little kid. “Yay. You're going to send me that, right? I want to put that on my phone.”

I nodded and took the phone, rolling to my back as I sent him the picture via text message.

Disproportioned Mental Proportions

As the relationship with Nick continued, and I began to look at myself through his eyes, I quit hiding from the mirror after my showers, averting my eyes to keep from seeing my flabby flesh reflected back at me. Instead, I took the time to examine my body. Yes, my hips were narrow, especially with the dents that had formed due to wearing too tight jeans, but my butt actually had a curve to it, a bubble. I could build on that. And my waist definitely needed to be trimmed down and toned up, but I had a natural curve, and I could see how continuing to work out would help accentuate it. Turning to the side, I examined the curves in my back. I had extra weight up around my shoulders, but I didn't have back cleavage or at least not enough to require its own training bra. As for my stomach, it didn't seem to pooch out as far as it used to. In fact, I was pretty close to having my chest stick out farther than my belly. Maybe it wasn't the best body, maybe I wouldn't be waifish or voluptuous, but I didn't have to feel like a monstrosity.

I'm not deformed.

Yes, I had some weight too lose, mostly in my middle. Yes, my shoulders were a bit broader than my hips. But I wasn't the hideous monstrosity that I'd attempted to keep myself from seeing all those years.

I felt myself start to smile, but kept my gaze on my body and not my face. “I’m not deformed.” The words tasted slightly bitter, and I whispered them, the same way you would the admission of a lie. They felt right, though, and as I straightened my shoulders to stand taller and really see myself, I found I could breathe more easily, both figuratively and literally, as I no longer hunched my body forward and dropped my head to hide, which allowed my windpipe to straighten and lungs to fully expand. Taking a deep breath and lifting my gaze in the mirror so I looked myself in the eyes.

“I’m not deformed.”

The first time I said the words, I whispered them, unsure if my throat would even allow such a blasphemous statement to be uttered. It did. And the second time, my voice was stronger, and shock replaced fear in my eyes. God wasn’t going to strike me down for lying. I’d rejected the belief I’d held for years, and I still stood.

“I am not deformed.”

I laughed and then clamped my hands over my mouth, not wanting to have to explain to my roommates why I was giggling at myself in the bathroom.

In *Fat is the New Happy* by Valerie Frankel, she discovers she had body dysmorphic disorder. Her description of it sounded quite close to my own struggles, so I decided to do some research of my own. According to the Mayo Clinic’s website, Body Dysmorphic Disorder is “a chronic mental illness in which you can’t stop thinking about a flaw in your appearance—a flaw that is either minor or imagined.”

It’s not just thinking, “Wow, my nose is huge” or “I could stand to lose a few pounds.” This disorder means you either constantly examine yourself in the mirror or never look in

them. It's the belief that some abnormality or defect in the way you look makes you ugly, and you assume that others see your appearance as negative, try to cover up your "flaw" with a beard, make-up, or excessive clothing, and avoid social situations due to your appearance. You compare yourself to others, avoid pictures, groom yourself excessively, seek reassurance from others, have multiple cosmetic procedures, and frequently change your hair or style of dress.

And not every once in a while. Constantly. Your every waking thought is consumed by the "flaws" in your appearance and ways to fix them. A nose job, lip injections, working out six hours a day, plucking every excess hair, picking at every blemish, layering on make-up to cover a blotchy complexion, hiding in clothes three sizes too big so no one can see your weight, just one more thing to fix or hide the "flaw," to make you presentable.

If you could just be skinnier, just be a little more proportional, if your butt was a little bigger, if you weren't a hideously deformed monster, someone could love you instead of always lying, cheating, putting you down, making you feel worthless. You'd be worth something if you weren't so disgusting to look at.

This disorder is not a teenage girl wishing she had bigger boobs or less acne. It consumes a life and leads to self-destructive behavior. Celebrities spending thousands on plastic surgery and still wanting just one more, just one more, surgery. Coloring your hair every week until it's so damaged that it breaks or starts to fall out. Piercing or tattooing everything in sight. Cutting daily because you haven't lost weight. Standing on a scale two and three times a day to see if the number has gone down.

The flaw is not external, though. People with this disorder cannot lose enough weight, tattoo enough of their body, change their hair enough, or have enough cosmetic surgeries. There's always one more thing that needs to be "fixed." One more problem standing in the way of feeling beautiful.

I would never be able to lose enough weight or tone up enough to make myself happy. In my mind, my shoulders were those of a linebacker, and my hips and butt were nonexistent. I compared myself to an ice cream cone and refused to wear pencil skirts, dresses, or skinny jeans because they'd just draw attention to my misshapen form. It wasn't until Nick took my measurements that I had definitive proof that my body was actually fairly proportional. No, I wasn't an hourglass and probably never would be, but I wasn't an ice cream cone, either. Even then, it took another year of daily positive feedback, physically taking care of myself instead of just hiding from mirrors and complaining about my body, and actively trying to alter my perception of myself for my mindset to start to change.

And it didn't just flip to the other side and stay there. I continued to struggle with self-image even after deciding I was not deformed. I still had bad days, still insulted myself, and still avoided certain outfits whenever my self-confidence dipped.

I still struggle to feel confident in my overall appearance. Okay, so I'm not deformed, body-wise. My eyes are still too close together, my lips are still too thin and too small, and my cheeks are too fat; I could go on for days. The dysmorphic disorder still exists in my head, and I struggle with it daily, fighting to keep myself from backsliding or covering mirrors. I don't own a scale because I'd stand on it at least once an hour, and my self-esteem would depend on that number, even though I know it doesn't accurately

reveal my health. I can't count calories because unless I stay under my "target number," I start taking laxatives or cutting meals in order to meet the goal.

I judge my internal worth based on what I see externally. If I cannot be perfect on the outside, have the perfect make-up and eat the perfect number of calories, I'm worthless. Maybe one day, I will look in the mirror and see me instead of just the fleshy container in which I am housed, but it's going to take a lot of work. Not workouts, but work. As in me working on the insides, me changing how I think about myself, my changing how I speak about myself.

I can't keep comparing myself to other women or inanimate objects.⁸⁷ I have to learn to see the person, to judge myself and other based on the person, not the persona.

⁸⁷ I may not be Marilyn Monroe, but I'm not an ice cream cone or an apple, either, dammit!

You've got a Great Personality

A lot more went into changing my mindset than just altering the way I viewed my body. Yes, the majority of my self-esteem issues stemmed from considering myself too big, too fat, and shaped more like a man than a woman. But those insecurities caused a lot of other issues, such as how I dressed to try and get attention from men and what sort of attention I expected.

During the summers after my freshman and sophomore years of college, I worked pushing carts for Wal-Mart. I started out as a cashier, but I can only deal with so many people in a day before I start wanting to choke someone, and the seventy-fifth person who walked up to me while I wore a blue vest, with a WM nametag, and stood behind a lit-up cash register to ask if I was working, tended to look like a good person to choke. I moved outside pretty quickly. The only female on the lot, I made friends with most of the guys I worked with, and for the first time in my life, I had male friends.

Summers in Arkansas are brutal, hot and humid. We'd be sweating buckets by the time we walked from the front of the store to the first cart corral. By midday, the heat index reached over one hundred in the shade, and the heat reflected up from the blacktop melted the bottoms of our shoes.

I guided a line of carts up to the bay for Alex, one of my good friends at the time. Working together meant we cleared our rows a lot faster and had more time to stand in the shade drinking water or Gatorade. After guiding them into the bay, we ducked inside the bay and sat down so no one passing would see us and yell about us sitting down on the job. We figured that as long as our rows were kept clear, we'd earned a chance to relax. A few minutes later, Daniel, or Dan for short since we had three Matts on the lot, pushed a line into the bay and walked over next to us.

Dan nudged my arm. "Did you see the truck on the back of row seven?"

I shook my head and looked up at Dan, holding up a hand to shield my eyes from the glare of the midday summer sun off the metal carts.

"Dude, it was sweet. It was lowered and shaved and—" He quit speaking and looked out at the lot, his eyes going wide as his head rotated to the right.

Confused, I stood and looked out over the lot to see a tiny blonde in a tight purple shirt walking toward the store. Once she'd disappeared into the air condition doors marked Grocery, Dan's head snapped back around to me. "—and had checkered flags and flames painted down the side."

I curled my lip and shook my head, reaching out to whack Alex in the arm. "Help me hit my rows." I stomped toward the back of the lot before he could stand.

Jogging to catch up with me, he looked at me with his forehead wrinkled. "Are you okay?"

"No. I'm not." I jerked my head back toward Dan. "Does he have to do that? I mean, I know I'm not skinny with giant boobs, but can he not focus for five minutes to finish a conversation that *he* started?"

Alex wrapped one hand around the back of his neck and leaned his head to the side, clearing his throat.

I yanked on my ponytail, tightening it. “I don’t expect him to like me. I don’t want him to like me. I just want him to focus.”

Alex’ face flushed darker, making his freckles disappear completely. “I know you don’t look like the girls we normally hit on, but you have a great personality, and that more than makes up for it.”

As I sat telling this story to Nick five years later, he laughed and shook his head at me.

I laughed along with him. “I’m still not sure if I want to hug or hit Alex for his comment. Probably a bit of both.”

Nick nodded. “Wow, okay, first off, personality aside, you are pretty. Maybe not stick skinny, itty bitty tiny, I gotta be afraid to get rough in bed because I’ll break you kind of way, but you’re still pretty. And honestly, a lot of guys like a girl who’s a little bigger, not bigger as in fat, but just bigger, because it’s more to hold on to. I like to touch, and there’s a lot of you to touch.”

I laughed and looked at the ground, as I tucked my hair behind my ears and scrunched my right shoulder up toward my ear. As much as I enjoyed his compliments, I didn’t know how to take them.

He continued, either not noticing or choosing to ignore my lack of response. “He’s got a point, though. Personality is a lot more important than looks in the long run. Those girls in skimpy outfits and too much make-up get all the attention at first because it’s obvious they’re only good for one thing. You may take those girls home for a night, but you don’t

take them to meet mom. It's the nice girls, the ones who can make you laugh and that you enjoy hanging out with that you keep around forever. And yeah, it sucks to be overlooked because you don't let your body hang out, but the fact that you respect yourself is what will get a guy to look past all the other girls and focus on you."

I looked back up at him. Now that the conversation had moved away from my looks, I didn't feel so awkward. "But all guys talk about is how big a girl's boobs are or how short her skirt is."

He shook his head. "Guys are visual. We see boobs, we stare, we get turned on, and we have to rearrange our junk. It's pretty basic. That's why guys like porn. We see boobs, we stare, we get turned on, and we play with our junk. It's an instinctual thing, an animalistic want to mate and keep our genes going. Women are more in their heads. Men are programmed to look for someone with the physical qualities needed to produce babies, but women are programmed to look for men who can provide for those babies. It all goes back to caveman days. There's no wrong or right; it's just how it is."

He leaned over and bumped my shoulder with his, pursing his lips and wrinkling his forehead in a *don't be dumb* way. "Just because guys notice looks and want sex doesn't make them all assholes, though. We notice girls like you, too. I mean, have you seen your legs? Damn, and I mean damn! But like your friend said, it's your personality that means more than anything. Guys may look at the girls who let it all hang out, but that's why those girls dress like they do, to make guys look. That doesn't mean they don't look at the girls who keep it all covered up. We've got imaginations, too. We don't mind having to think a little bit. Besides, looks might grab attention, but who you are is what keeps a guy's attention. And men, real men, don't keep girls that let it all hang out for everyone

to see. They keep the girls who are smart and funny and have hella good legs that they only let him see.” He grinned again and winked at me.

I understood what he meant, but it was still really hard to process it all through the various lessons that I’d taught myself over the years. “If guys are actually more interested in girls with brains and morals, why make such a fuss over the slutty ones? I mean, that just makes the nice girls dress slutty.”

He nodded. “It does, and that sucks because women shouldn’t have to feel that need to expose their bodies to get attention, but if you’re willing to show it off, I’m going to look. Only an asshole who actually treats women like their only worth is their body, though. I mean, I’m going stare at some chick in short shorts or a short skirt, but I’m not going to go strike up an in-depth conversation with her. I’m just going to grin and wave if she catches me looking and see if she smiles back and flashes me her panties or if she glares and flips me off.” He cocked his head to the side. “Most of the girls in those itty bitty skirts will flip up the back and show you their panties.”

I felt myself start to blush; the very idea of purposefully flashing my rear end at a strange man horrifying me.

“I also look at you, when you’re in shorts or a little skirt that shows off your legs. And I look at lot more at you because you’ve got some meat to you, you’ve got curve and muscle and shape instead of the weird gap between your thighs.”

“The gap is kind of creepy.”

“The gap is fucking scary, and it usually means a woman is starving herself instead of working out. Starvation is bad. Eat your damn cheeseburger, just go run later on. Get up and move your ass to tone your ass. The point is, I like to look at those girls because they

put it all out there for me to look at. And guys who are only interested in sex are going to go talk to those girls instead of you because you actually cover up. But you don't want to talk to those guys anyways. Guys like me are going to come talk to girls like you, the ones who are sexy and covered and look like they'd be good for more than a night of fun."

Nick and I had various version of this conversation on multiple occasions over the first couple years of our friendship, and for those first couple years, I didn't understand. I pretended to, nodded along at the right places, but really, I just felt hurt. I still wanted that attention. I wanted to walk into a room and command admiration instead of just being gawked at. And as often as he said I did get a lot more positive attention than I thought, guys treated me differently from the girls in skimpy clothing because I presented myself differently and covered up my girlie bits.

If a man didn't drool over my breasts or make exaggerated eyebrow motions at me, I didn't see him as being attracted to me. I still saw sexual attraction as being blunt, bold, and exaggerated, so I attempted to appear sexual in the same ways. The more subtle signs of attraction, something as simple as a stranger holding a door or a cashier waving off the few cents I was short for my coffee, didn't register to me, so I never expected something as simple as slim-fitting pair of jeans or a hint of cleavage to draw more attention than skin-tight Spandex pants and a low-cut tank top.

My height also always came up in discussions about men, their attraction, and my perceived lack of physical attraction from men.

"Guys don't like to date taller girls. They want girls shorter than them."

He pursed his lips, a sure sign he was irritated. “I’m shorter and smaller than you, and I think you’re sexy as hell.” He kept going before I could interrupt. “You’re outgoing, you have piercings and tattoos, you have sassy walk, and you laugh loud. It’s intimidating. Men are looking at you, but they see this taller, bigger girl with all this personality and think they don’t stand a chance, so when you look back, they pretend not to have noticed.”

I felt like I was back in Hollister, my thought process shifting so suddenly that it felt like vertigo. Intimidation didn’t have to be bad. I wasn’t intimidating as in scary or off-putting, which is how my size and style of dress had always been described to me before, but I projected my presence to the point that who I was could not be ignored. While I thought desperation and low-self-confidence practically oozed out of my pores, others saw the piercings and tattoos, saw the bright hair and funky clothing and accessories, and saw confidence. They didn’t think, “Wow, this chick is a freak, and I don’t like it,” the way my step-dad did; they thought, “Wow, this chick is an independent individual, and I’m not sure she’d like me.”

Whodathunkit? Maybe I should tattoo the word perspective across my forehead so that when I look in the mirror, I will remember that the way I view a situation might just be backwards.

Question Number One

I returned to therapy during the fall semester of 2012. It was my third or fourth willing attempt to seek help for what ailed my mind. Okay, in all honesty, this foray into therapy was more to bitch about the emotional wringer my home life was putting me through. Three women, one man, and an inability and/or unwillingness on anyone's part to communicate with each other will cause major problems. As much as we all pretended we were okay with the situation, we were lying to ourselves and each other. We all hated the limitations placed upon us either by others or our own choices.

I met with my therapist, a pretty, blonde woman with a figure so perfect I would most likely hate her if I merely saw her walking down the street.

I sat in the chair across from her, throw pillow clutched to my stomach and legs crossed, physical representations of the mental barriers I already possessed, and began to talk.

"I was sexually molested for two years as I child, I moved every year growing up, I got teased for being fat, my ex treated me like shit and I still hate him for it, and I'm currently in a polyamorous-type relationship that I'm not allowed to call a relationship. I was diagnosed bipolar and having PTSD and social anxiety when I was seventeen, but

I've done research and think it's more bipolar II and PTSD with the social issues being part of the other two. You're the third or fourth counselor that I've seen because I tend to bounce in and out of wanting to get help. I spent seven years as a cutter and still fight the urge to cut now. And I know I need to talk about the molestation, but I'm not ready to."

Her eyes widened and she sat back in her chair. "Wow. Okay, I can tell you've done this before. What would you like to talk about?"

She posed a good question. The truth was, I didn't want to talk about anything, or at least not anything too personal, nothing that might make me cry. I just wanted a place to vent, someone to bitch about my problems to, someone to listen and nod and ask me how I felt. I wanted a safe place to be a victim.

A few years earlier, my friend Danny and I had had a conversation about how people get a victim mentality. They get told they're victims so much, get treated like victims so much, that they start to see themselves only as victims. Thus, they start to seek out ways to continue being victimized because that's all they know.

My great-grandmother had unintentionally instilled this mentality in me. In the process of trying to take care for me after the abuse from Voldie, she "poor babied" me into thinking I was nothing more than a victim.

My time with Nick and the others, though, started jarring me out of that idea. They refused to let me act like a victim or make myself into a victim, just as they refused to let me call myself a fatty all the time or refer to my body shape as deformed.

I'd attempted to break my victim mentality for years before, by being the smart kid or a punk rocker or an Emo kid. I tried on a variety of different masks to find one to replace

the mask of a victim, but I never looked too deeply into the core of my actual being. I was afraid that once I quit being a victim, once I cleared out all the pain, anger, and confusion that filled my middle, that I would just find a big hole.

Who was I, if not a victim? I needed to answer that first because without knowing there was something else, some other facet of my personality to fill up the space currently holding insecurities and self-hatred, I'd never really work through my issues. I'd continue to dance around them and pretend to be better.

That first go-round of therapy as a graduate student didn't last long. I went sporadically for a few months, but I wasn't putting forth the effort required to get better. I used my sessions to complain rather than figure out how to improve my mental state.

I would have to answer question number one on my own, before I could really apply myself to therapy and take advantage of its ability to help me.

In the course of my first year at the house with Nick, Makenna, and Brittany, they started chipping away at my core of victimization. And the more they chipped away at that core, and the more I took care of myself by eating better and working out, the more I filled up that space within me without even realizing it had emptied.

I learned that I liked to wear skirts and dresses instead of living in t-shirts and too-tight jeans cut so low that my butt crack hung out. I learned that even though I hated the overly-girlie connotations that went with it, pink was my favorite color. I learned that I was a lot more girlie than I once thought. I found that I enjoyed working out, cardio more than weight lifting, but both were okay. I also found that I enjoyed sewing, an act that I

used to consider too Southern. As a child, I'd adopted the persona of whichever other kids I was around in an attempt to fit in, and I'd continued to do so as an adult. I spent so much time trying on different masks for different personalities and refusing to try on other masks because of the stereotypes associated with them⁸⁸ that I never figured out who I actually was.

I lay on my bed one afternoon, staring at the ceiling and thinking about how my mentality had changed over the last few months and I'd stopped thinking of myself as deformed and just considered my too damn big and athletic⁸⁹ instead of curvy, when it suddenly hit me that I no longer thought of myself as a victim.

I walked into the living room where Nick sat at his computer. "I'm not a victim anymore."

He looked up from what he was working on, pushed back from his desk, and gestured to the couch so we could face each other and talk.

"I used to worry so much that if I quit being a victim, I would have nothing inside of me to make up a personality, but I don't feel like a victim anymore, and yet I don't feel empty inside." I gave a short laugh. "In fact, as weird as it sounds since I'm the only Christian in the house, I feel like the more I get rid of the victim feelings, the more I'm filled with love and wanting to help others."

He cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, to me, being Christian is the idea of being Christ-like, and I think Christ wanted everyone to love and take care of each other. The Bible isn't about setting rules

⁸⁸ Hence my refusal to sew and my dread of ever being told I had a Southern accent

⁸⁹ It still feels weird to consider myself athletic, even just in shape. I was the book nerd, not the athlete growing up.

for people and telling us how to judge each other and who to hate; it's about teaching us that we should all love each other the same way God loves each of us. And the more I quit being a victim and hating myself, the more I start to love others and want to do things to improve the lives of people around me."

He thought for a minute and nodded. "Makes sense."

I continue to struggle with the various masks of identity that I still cart around.

Yes, I'm willing to accept that I like wearing poufy pink skirts that billow around me when I spin, but the first time someone tries to tell me that I'm too girly to like something, such as catfish noodling, I get pissed off. I'm not too girly to wade through a river and try to catch a catfish with my bare hands. In fact, give me ten minutes to go put on a bathing suit and some ratty shoes, and we'll go catch us a catfish right damn now. Have I ever considered catching catfish bare-handed before? No. In fact, I hate fishing because I hate slimy things. But I do associate being considered girly with being considered weak, so I rebel against that label.

I still want to be considered a badass because being a badass is cool, so every once in a while I slip my septum ring back in, load up on black eyeliner, and put on my fishnet and chains. And I have yet to go through all my music to get rid of the bands that I never listen to but once downloaded⁹⁰ in order to fit in with the rest of the chain-and-eyeliner-loving badasses.

Most days, though, I'm better. I defend the fact that I love my piercings and tattoos because I do. However, I do not listen to All That Remains just to seem cool. If I can't

⁹⁰ Legally of course.

understand the words, I don't want to hear it. I do listen to Ozzy, who wouldn't, but I also listen to a lot more country music than I would have five, three, or even one year ago. I wear my pink, I always match my bra and panties, I prefer to wax certain areas so that they stay smooth and clean, but I will whoop and holler and place bets on any sport where people bleed. If there's no blood, it's not a real sport. Fans of golf and baseball can bite me.

Katt's "Quit Being a Fatty a.k.a. Become a Sexy Beast" Plan

For all my talk about learning moderation instead of depriving myself of what I like, deprivation was always my go-to when it came to losing weight. The spring of my third year in graduate school,⁹¹ I created the Katt's Quit Being a Fatty Plan. After some ranting and raving by my friends about how I wasn't a fatty, just a bit overweight, and I shouldn't be so negative about myself, the title changed to Katt's Become a Sexy Beast Plan.

This plan was all about deprivation and reward, though the rewards were clothing instead of food, so I felt I was making progress. First, I would cut out sodas, which hurt me badly because I love a good Vanilla Coke. Six months later, when I learned that Coca-Cola was owned by Monsanto and thus was death in a bottle, I almost sat down and cried. After a week of cutting out sodas, though, I got a reward, a new purse. After a month, I'd get a new cardigan that said tattooed lady and had sparrows across the back. Step two, I cut out fast food. Again after a week and after a month, I got a reward.

I was two weeks into no sodas and one week into no fast food when I went to the doctor, stood on a scale, and found out I weighed 230 pounds. I freaked. I'd weighed 215

⁹¹ The semester I was originally supposed to graduate, but that's a whole other book of me ranting because when you grew up the "smart kid" and are told you can't graduate, it fucks with your subconscious something fierce, and not Tyra fierce, but anyway.

a few months earlier. Or was it 220? Either way, I'd piled on a lot more weight than I wanted.

Step three and four were initiated that night in the midst of my self-hatred fueled freak out. I had to drink water and nothing but water, except for two drinks a day, and each drink could be no more than sixteen ounces. Then, I could have only one sweet snack a day. Just one. And one did not mean a pint of ice cream. It meant one serving of something sweet.

For most people, this probably doesn't seem too drastic. Hell, for most people even the idea of eating one sugar-filled conglomeration of cellulite-inducing goodness a day probably seems extreme, especially when on a diet. For me, it was sheer hell.

I crave sugar. I eat multiple sweet things a day: a couple cookies here, a bag of fruit snacks there, some ice cream, maybe a sucker or two. I go through candy the way other people go through air. So this limitation hurt. Physically.

I'd spend all day refusing snacks, no marshmallow treat on my way to my first job, no soda and candy bar to get my through class, no pigging out on jelly beans at my second job. And yes, you read that right, I worked two jobs and took graduate level courses, which might be part of why I was unable to graduate, but I digress. I'd forgo all those little snacks so I could go home and have a serving of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Munky ice cream or a large package of Scooby-Doo fruit snacks, and every bite would be heaven, a reprieve from the strawberry-laden diet I was on.⁹²

I'd savor my one sweet snack, usually while sipping on a Route 44 mint green tea from Sonic, and feel the tension and horror of the day melt away.

⁹² Did I mention that I sort of hate strawberries? Like, a lot? Because I do. Everyone says to eat them if you have a sweet tooth and want to be healthy, but they aren't sweet. They're bitter.

For a while, that worked, until I had all my presents and could no longer stand the sight of water or strawberries.⁹³ Then, I started to slip back into old habits. I'd have one soda a week, just one. Okay, maybe two, but I didn't sleep well last night and needed the caffeine to get me through my three-hour class. And suckers don't count as sugary sweets because they're suckers. They're totally different.

Notice a pattern? Yeah, I thought so.

Pretty soon, all the progress I had made slipped away. Poof. Just like that, my shirts were once again too tight, and my jeans cut off my circulation when I sat down.

Apparently, Katt's Become a Non-Fatty, Sexy Beast Plan needed a bit of tweaking. Or a lot of tweaking. And I will get to that as soon as I finish this giant project for class, get the schedule typed up for work, do my laundry, and read that book for my other class. You know what, I'm pretty busy today. I think I'll grab some cereal or a microwave pizza tonight and work on that new diet plan tomorrow.

That's one of the biggest problems of Katt's Anything to do with Losing Weight Plan. Katt stays pretty busy. Katt works and goes to school, and at times, that leads to ten-to-twelve hour days and living out of a backpack. Katt also has three pets and five plants and her own apartment to take care of. If Katt wants laundry done or dishes done or good food cooked, Katt has to do it. And after three hours in class and five hours at work, and God-knows-how-many hours doing homework, Katt doesn't want to do anything except eke out the homework due tomorrow and go to bed.⁹⁴

I've gone weeks without turning on the stove at my house because it's quicker and easier to live on cereal and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and you can eat a

⁹³ Hideous little seedy fruits that they are.

⁹⁴ Katt really should speak of herself in third person, either, because that's just weird.

sandwich with one hand while pouring cat food into a bowl or running a vacuum or hunt-and-peck typing with the other. I've also almost passed out before because I've spent three days not eating more than a few hundred calories a day due to being so busy. Neither of those habits bodes well for getting fit or feeling healthy and happy. In fact, they both tend to make you cranky and grouchy and feel like crap. Plus, there's some technical mumbo-jumbo about how not eating sending your body into starvation mode so it hordes fat instead of getting rid of it. We've all heard the same thing, and none of us listens to it.

In Men's, I'm Average

There was one really positive change that came out of my attempt to cut out all fast food, sodas, excess sugar, and any liquids besides water,⁹⁵ which was that I stopped caring so much about numbers in relation to my weight.

I clicked on the link to the dress I wanted. It was beautiful. Knee-length, almond-brown with a high, cinched waist and structure, bell-curve bottom. Best of all, it was covered in small, old-school tattoo designs. From afar, it merely looked like a pretty dress, one that any young, burgeoning professional might wear. Up close, it screamed personality. Most important, it screamed my personality; it combined my love of the alternative with my goal of building a long-term career, and I really, really wanted that dress.

I'd spent months working out three to five days a week in order to slim down and be healthy instead of losing my breath walking up stairs. The work showed, but not as much as I'd like, so I set food goals. Giving up soda. Giving up fast food. Cutting back to one sweet snack a day. For every month I stuck to one of my goals, I got to buy something new. That way, I not only learned to eat better, but also quit making food a reward. The next present to me was "the dress."

⁹⁵ Looking back, yes, these were good goals, but cutting them all out at once may have been a little too much for me to adjust to at once. Just maybe.

A few days before time to order the dress, I clicked back over to the website, terrified it would sell out before time for me to buy. I grinned and did a happy dance in my chair, when I saw the dress was still there. Then, I scrolled down to verify that the size chart still said it came in a 2X.

“I can’t get my dress.”

Nick, Brittany, and Makenna, my roommates, looked up.

“Why not?”

“A 2X has a 36 inch high waist. Mine’s 40, and while I’m still kind of heavy, there’s not four inches of waist for me to lose.”

Makenna walked over to where I sat, and I stood to let her wrap her hands around the natural curve in my waist, where I was smallest.

“That’s just rib.”

“Yeah, and I’m not going to lose four inches of rib without surgery, and I’m not quite that desperate yet.”

Nick leaned back in his chair, shaking his head and waving one hand to get my attention. “Wait, wait, wait. A 2X is a 36 inch waist.”

I twisted my upper body so I could face him. “According to this website, yes.”

He grabbed a tape measure off his desk and wrapped it around his waist. “I’ve got a 34 or 36 inch waist, so I’m a 2X.” He gestured toward himself: 5’9,” 140 pounds, men’s size medium.

I laughed. “In women’s clothing, yeah.” Looking back at my computer, I twisted my mouth to the side and stared at the dress, the one item I’d craved through months of no sodas, no chips, and limited amounts of ice cream, the item I’d set as the last thing to get

because it's what I wanted most. *Oh well, the goal was to get healthy, not get the dress. That was extra.* I shrugged and clicked the exit button.

Even though I did not keep up many of the other habits....okay, I failed miserably at keeping up *any* of the other habits that one moment did stick with me. I quit worrying so much about sizes in clothes. While I still wished to be a smaller size than I was and still worked to lose fat and build muscle, I realized that the sizes attached to what I wore did not accurately portray my body's shape. According the website selling the dress I wanted so badly, I needed a 4X. But at Old Navy, I could buy a XL, sometimes even a L.

The numbers and letters attached to the clothing defined where I would find them in the stack, not me or my body. Instead, I focused on shapes and styles of clothing that flattered my body and made me feel beautiful.

Parents, Punk Rock, and PhDs

Three years into graduate school,⁹⁶ my parents came to see me. It was the first time that they came to Oklahoma to see me,⁹⁷ and they only came then because I'd meant to graduate that May and my Grandma Donna had already bought her plane ticket and booked a hotel before I learned that I would have to return for one more semester.⁹⁸

They stayed for the weekend, and all forty-eight hours of our together was marked by a lack of arguing or fighting, even though I had pink hair at the time.

On the morning they were to head back to Arkansas, we all sat down in the hotel lobby for breakfast. My brother, a typical sixteen-year-old pain in the butt with a recently diagnosed case of Asperger's Disorder, refused to sit with us. Instead, he sat on a couch across from our table and complained about wanting a soda. Mom and Dad both offered him a variety of possible breakfast choices, but he stubbornly refused them all.

Finally, Dad nudged my arm. "I can fix this." He turned to Donald James. "If I give you a dollar for the soda machine, will you come sit with everyone and smile?" Donald

⁹⁶ Where I earned a 4.0, taught freshman composition, and worked the desk at the tutoring center, just to pat myself on the back a little bit and make sure no one thinks I was slacking while off on my own.

⁹⁷ My family is Choctaw, so my mom had been to Oklahoma a few times to see a doctor about her back, but the clinic was a five hour drive that took them two hours south of where I lived.

⁹⁸ Do I seem just a *leettle* bit upset over this? Because it may have hurt my feelings a tad that my family never came to see me. I mean, I get that money is tight for everyone, and it's hard on my mom to be in a car that long, which makes me feel like shit for complaining that they never came to see me. But it did.

James just glared, but dad pulled out a dollar and handed it to him, and within five minutes, Donald James and his Mountain Dew were at the table.

“Wow, seriously? Being sullen like that would have gotten me yelled at.”⁹⁹

Dad put his hand on my shoulder and gave me a mock serious look. “Well, what would it take for you not to be all sullen and pouty at the breakfast table?”

“You not to hold it against me that I’ve got piercings and tattoos.”

He threw his hands in the air and shook his head. “Nope. No can do.”

“Okay, then can I have a dollar for the soda machine?”

Everyone laughed, and that was the end of the conversation, but deep down, I know that as light-hearted as it all sounded, there was some truth to the matter. No amount of hard-earned A’s, acceptance letters to Ph.D programs, or climbed levels on the corporate ladder will ever completely wipe away the shame they feel over how I dress.

A few years previously, that would have severely upset me and sent me into a spiral of self-loathing and depression.

This time, it hurt because I wanted them to love me for me, not the way I looked, but I didn’t dwell on that hurt. I told my roommates about what was said, but it wasn’t a bitch fit. I didn’t rant for hours about the injustices being done to me. I merely presented the situation and asked whether my thoughts, that there was truth to every joke, made sense. They agreed; I shrugged and moved on.

I’m not willing to change how I dress or present myself, at least not much. While I have begun to understand that wearing short skirts may attract the wrong kind of

⁹⁹ Or taken to a shrink to be prescribed anti-depressants, but oh well. I suppose parents live and learn and try to do better on the second born.

attention, I refuse to conform to the mainstream style of dress merely to please others.

No, I do not wish to be seen a whore, or treated with no respect because my outfit portrays a lack of self-respect. I wouldn't be caught outside my house anymore in many of the outfits I used to wear.

I still love my piercings and tattoos, though, still love clothing with skulls and touches of fishnet, ripped jeans and band t-shirts. Do I wear all of that to work? No. But hanging out with friends, I see no reason not to wear what makes me feel comfortable, happy, and sexy.

The Truth About 240

After my failure to graduate within three years, I rented an apartment on my own in the summer of 2013 and faced the biggest challenge to my self-image yet. Several problems had developed between Brittany, Makenna, and myself, so my relationship with Nick changed and my friendships with the girls grew strained. What I had thought were supposed to be three one-on-one relationships with a group familial attitude, turned out to be something drastically different, which I am still unable to name. I still loved all three of them dearly, but I no longer felt included or wanted by the girls. And though I still cared for Nick and gave him the same devotion I would had I been allowed to call him my boyfriend, I could no longer turn to him for assurance. I had a few other close friends that I could talk to, but Morbid Daisy and Licious lived in Arkansas, Nani lived in Texas, and my shyness and insecurities kept me from venturing out much in Oklahoma to make more friends.

It was now up to me to give myself daily encouragement and live in a healthy way. I had to learn whether I could I continue eating well, working out, and feeling good about myself without daily compliments and encouragement from others.

At first, I did fairly well. Then, a sixteen-year-old on her cell phone rear-ended me, totaled my car and put me in physical therapy for over a month. For about three months,

the only working out I did was walking the four-block round trip to campus and back home.

Since I also juggled work, school, and thrice-weekly doctor's appointments during that time, I ended up away from home ten to twelve hours a day, four days a week and living on cereal instead of cooking real food.

By the end of August, my jeans cut off my circulation and my shirts stretched across my belly. While I had no scale to stand on, I knew I'd gained weight; I just didn't know how much. A quick trip to the doctor after a severe allergy attack fixed that problem.

Two-hundred and forty-three pounds and a few ounces.

I'd been upset about having gained any weight at all, but once I knew the number, it stuck in my head, buzzing and flickering in the back of mind like an old-fashioned neon sign.

Who the hell wants to weigh that much? Not me, that's for damn sure.

A few days later, I went to Nick's to help clean up after he built a new room. Once we'd vacuumed and set the bedframe up, we started moving the mattress and box springs. He grabbed the end of the mattress closest to the door.

"Shouldn't we take the box spring first?" I asked.

"This is in the way."

I wasn't sure I understood his logic, but I picked up the other end of the mattress and attempted to angle it and me through the door without knocking anything over or stepping on the box spring.

"You have to turn more if we're going to get this thing out of the back bedroom and down the hall."

I could tell he was smiling even though I couldn't see him anymore. "I know, but I'm trying not to step on the box spring."

We finally got the mattress down the hall and leaned it against the wall of the new bedroom before going back for the box spring, where he jumped onto the box springs, pulling his knees up to his chest with each bounce. "See. It's fine."

I glared at him, swallowing my pride and shame. "You weigh, what, one-forty? I'm a hundred pounds heavier than you."

He cocked his head to the side and raised an eyebrow, but I grabbed my end of the box springs and lifted. He grabbed his end and followed me down the hall.

"You're seriously two-forty?"

"I'm something like two-forty-three and four ounces or some shit like that."

"Wow."

I jerked my end of the box spring through the new bedroom door with more vigor than necessary. "Gee, thanks."

"See, there you go again. Taking it as a negative."

"How am I not supposed to take that as a negative?"

"Because if you're really that close to two-fifty, then you have a lot more muscle than you think because you don't look that heavy."

I'm closer to two-forty than two-fifty, thank you very much.

He motioned for me to push the mattress over so we could position it and looked me up and down. "Honestly, I think you could easily weigh two-fifty and just be muscled and stacked and damn."

I stepped around him, trying to hold on to my anger and hide my smile, but he grabbed me from my behind, pulled me into his chest, and hugged me.

“I already like touching you, but I’d want to even more. Seriously, with your height, size, and shape, two-forty is nothing.” He kissed my cheek, and I gave in, leaning into him and laughing.

And what was so wrong with the idea he presented? Nothing. There was nothing wrong with being a built two-fifty who had more muscles and curves than fat. The problem was that I was a chubby two-forty with my size eighteen jeans cutting into my waist, and my curves were in all the wrong places, at least in my mind. Nick said otherwise, always full of compliments for my body, my face, my mind, my personality when I wasn’t being an Emo bitch. I didn’t always believe him. Okay, more often than not I thought he was full of shit. But Nick’s not the type to lie, especially to get laid. So did I really look as bad as I thought, or was I once again putting my faith in a number and someone else’s perception of that number instead of looking to myself to decide how to feel about myself?

Would I ever be able to let go of the numbers and embrace my actual size?

And how many other women were just as caught up with numbers? I remember sitting in Family Planning in eleventh grade and hearing Tina complain that she weighed one-sixty. Tina stood around five nine, played every sport, and was beautiful without an ounce of extra fat on her, but she was seriously upset over that number. And my friend Makenna grew up with her family calling her fat because she wore a size ten. To this day,

she forces herself into her old size ten jeans instead of giving in and buying a size twelve because she doesn't want admit to now being a size larger than fat.¹⁰⁰

And I know plenty of girls with the opposite problem. They weigh one-ten and can't fill up an A-cup bra without extra padding and still hate the jerk who called them string-bean on the bus when they were thirteen.

Numbers are kind of like organized religion; they create division and offer reasons to hate yourself and others. The truth of the matter is that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes and with a whole slew of numbers attached that don't honestly give you any idea of what someone really looks like.

So, here's what two-forty, or at least one version of it, looks like. And I mixed in a few more of those numbers just to show how useless they are.

Two-forty hates itself for being two-forty and wants desperately to be a much, much smaller number. However, two-forty is always going to weigh more than it wants to because it's broad shouldered and built larger than a size two. And no, that is not me saying that my bones are bigger. They're the same damn size as other bones, just longer. My shoulders are too broad for me to every wear a shirt or dress smaller than a sixteen, unless there's a lot of Spandex involved.

Two-forty knows that Spandex is only your friend in Wonderland. Here in the real world it will forever be a mortal enemy. Kill that stretchy bitch for pretending to hide your cellulite only to start waving it around like a flag as soon as you walk out the front door.

¹⁰⁰ And she isn't fat either way. At 5'6" and with a curvy figure, either size looks perfectly fine. Her perception of herself and the stigmas attached to those sizes are the real problems.

Two-forty wears a size L to XXL or a 14-20 depending on how the clothing is made. And by the way, standardize sizing would be really nice because while it feels good to think I'm an eighteen only to find out I actually need a fourteen, having to go up to a size twenty in the next article of clothing sucks. Can I please just be an eighteen across the board? I mean, seriously, there should not be a four size variation in the clothing my closet when it all fits the same size body.

Two-forty had the following measurements: bust 49 inches; upper waist 43 inches; lower waist 48 inches; and hips 46 ½ inches, but two forty gets nauseous and light headed at the thought of anyone knowing those numbers and wants to burn the tape measure so it can never reveal its secrets.

Two-forty wonders how it got this big, how it could hate itself so much that it stopped paying attention to what it looked like, how clothes fit, how hard it was to walk up stairs, and how it felt.

Two-forty wonders whether anything tastes as good as self-love and self-confidence would feel.

Two-forty loathes standing on the scale, taking measurements, and looking in the mirror. It changes clothes four or five times looking for something to wear so it will feel sexy without looking like a sausage in Spandex.¹⁰¹

Two-forty often thinks it looks like sausage in Spandex.

Two-forty knows that Spanx, which sounds kind of like Spandex but is different, are only your friends until you try to breathe. Or sit down. Or do anything other than stand around looking a little slimmer than normal.

¹⁰¹ Which again, for anyone who forgot my earlier rant, is an enemy. Write that down. It's very important

Two-forty is self-conscious in clothing and assumes that any and every time people look at it, they're trying not to laugh or gag or run screaming in terror.

Two-forty does not have to be obese, disgusting, ugly, or unhealthy, and it should not feel that because it is two-forty it must be those things. Two-forty may just be chubby and overweight and need to trade fast food for fruits and veggies more often, but it can still be beautiful.

Two-forty should not hate itself or feel that it has buy love, affection, and forgiveness for being two-forty.

Two-forty cried while she wrote this.

Two-forty hopes to one day feel beautiful without caring what the numbers say.

I hate the idea of people knowing what I weigh, my measurements, or the size I wear because I know there are people out there who will judge me only for those numbers, just as I judge myself for them. But I also know there are people who don't care. They care more about who I am and how I present myself. If I'm nice and take care of my hygiene, that's all that matters.

Most important, I know there are people out there who need to know that I exist, who need to know that a woman can be two-forty and out of shape and hate herself and decide to change, not to fit a standard, not to make someone else happy, not because she's at risk for stroke or heart attack, but just because she's tired of hating herself and assuming everyone else will, too.

With that in mind, I started a blog because all of a sudden using the Web to share my journey to no longer be a fat, feel like a fat-ass, or call myself a fat-ass anymore seemed

like a good idea.¹⁰² I hoped that putting my own hurts and struggles onto social media that others who had the same issue with bad body image due to bad self-image or vice-versa would be able to relate and maybe find some inspiration to start their own journey to end the self-hatred.

Because I'm tired of hating myself. And I do. I hate me with a passion that should be reserved for cockroaches and brussel sprouts, which by the way, even Word does not recognize as a real word because they're so disgusting. And I think you hate me. And I will manipulate what you say to make you think you hate me, too. And I'm tired of it.

So I'm eating better and working out and taking the time to think about my body not in the sense of what it looks like or what other people may think of it but in the sense of how it feels and how well it works. Instead of worrying about the numbers and the scales and hateful thoughts in my head, I'm worrying about whether or not I'm treating my body right and giving it the nutrition and exercise it needs to function its best.

Yeah, I'm hoping to slim down and tone up, but more than that, I'm hoping that if I take the time to work out and eat healthier, to treat my body and myself like it matters and is deserving of feeling good and being healthy, that my insides will start to improve as well. Maybe if I quit filling my mouth with processed sugar while sitting around and feeling worthless, I'll realize that I'm worth a lot more than I've given myself credit for. And recognizing that I'm worth loving is the first step in figuring out how to love myself.

¹⁰² Whether this idea would serve me well or come to haunt probably depends on how well I manage to stick to the "lifestyle change that is not a diet" and how well I remember to keep up my blog. The first one is a better chance, and that's not saying much considering my track record.

The Breakdown

Living on my own brought more issues than just weight gain due to being busy. I was also left alone with my own thoughts. I no longer had roommates and television and activity to drown out the voice in my head, The Other, as I called her.¹⁰³

By myself, I had no way to block her out. There were only so many times I could clean my apartment, so many loads of laundry to do, so much homework. She constantly reminded me of my size and weight, my loneliness and insecurities, my failures. Her words formed a never-ending swirling marquee in my head.

Nick never really cared for you; he just wanted to get laid and liked the fact that you actually cleaned house instead of being happy living in filth. Otherwise, he'd visit you more often. And your friends, ha, notice how many of them have swung by to hang out or even texted. Your own mother can't even remember when she promises to call you, why should anyone else. And you're gaining weight, too. You're nothing but a big, fat loser, a failure who didn't graduate on time, a hipless size eighteen that no one will ever really

¹⁰³ I believe everyone has a voice in their head that repeats all the negativity they have ever heard. For me, it is The Other. The Other is everything I wish I could be. 5'5" with the perfect figure, so she fits into all the outfits I wish I could wear. Bleach blonde hair that always does what she wants and perfectly smudged eyeliner. Doll-faced and saucy, she's the perfect blend of adorable and independent. I hate her, and she knows it.

love. You're alone, and you're always going to be alone. Look at these walls, tubby bitch, because they're all you have.

My mood swings worsened, depressions deepened. I had acid reflux daily, went into frequent panic attacks, and my hands shook. Every broken plan proved that no one loved me. Every negative critique showed my lack of abilities as a writer. Every forgotten task was evidence of my inability to function as a real adult.

I finished reading *Three* by Ted Dekker and set the book down on my coffee table. I leaned back in my pink and black bowl chair and dropped my hands to my lap, careful not to hit Syn, one of my two cats and who had taken up residence there.

All Kevin, the protagonist of the book, had wanted was to be held, to be loved, to have someone care for him. And when he didn't get that out of life, he created a fantasy world in his head where he had the love and acceptance he longed for.

All he wanted was to be held.

All I wanted was to be held. I needed someone to hold me and tell me that it was okay that my dad didn't love me. It was okay that my little brother's dad molested me. It was okay that a part of my step-dad would forever resent me for having piercings, tattoos, and wild-colored hair. It was okay that my ex cheated. That I'd been teased. That I struggled with cutting and depression. The list could go on, but the message was the same.

I needed to know that it wasn't my fault. That there was not some defect in my DNA that made me unlovable and meant I would always be mistreated or abandoned by others. The defect lay with them, not me. I was fine just the way I was. I needed to feel accepted for who I was without having to meet some standard of perfection.

I didn't need straight A's and a perfectly polished house to be lovable. I didn't need rainbow streaks in my hair to be interesting. I didn't need to stay fat as a way to protect myself and give physical form to the feelings of defectiveness inside. And I didn't have to be skinny to be worth loving.

Tremors spread throughout my body, and I stared at the far wall, trying to will myself not to cry. I failed miserably. Swallowing hard, I forced myself to speak, though my words came out a whisper.

"It's not my fault. I'm not dirty. I'm not wrong. I'm not defective. It's not my fault."

The room didn't split apart, like a cold glass exploding when exposed to heat. Reality didn't burst into glimmering shards that then drifted away, leaving me suspended in black nothingness, floating in an everlasting night sky with all the stars turned off. The stars had not forsaken me for standing up for myself.

My gaze drifted to the window, where sunlight streamed into my living room, the rays cutting through the leaves of my plants and landing in my lap. I'd spent the morning in the pool, and my raft still lay in the kitchen floor so the remaining bits of water could dry, leaving the unmistakable scent of chlorine in the air. The room, warm and bright, reflected that it was the end of July in Oklahoma.

The world had not ended, and I couldn't deal with that.

I stood, depositing Syn in the floor next to Keegan, and closed the blinds and pulled the curtain over them. Picking up my phone, I texted Nick, asking him to call when he had a few minutes because I needed to talk.

He texted back that he couldn't.

Shrieking, I slammed the phone down and threw everything in my reach across the room before punching the wall and ripping my knuckle open. I needed him to tell me I was worth loving. He understood these feelings; he'd been through similar breakdowns. I needed him. No one else would do. No one else was him. I needed a guy to love me.

That thought sent me mentally spirally backwards through every guy that I'd leaned on to feel worthy and loved throughout my entire life, through all the negative relationships I'd stuck out for longer than I should have, through the lies I'd told to myself and others to try to make those relationships work, all for the love of a man to fill up the hole inside me. The one shaped like a father holding his daughter, telling her she was a princess, his princess, and that he'd never let anyone hurt her. Only my biological father had hurt me. He'd chosen his son and other daughter over me. She was his princess. I was his...I don't know, forgotten mistake. Then came the abuse from Voldie and the fights with my step-dad. I kept falling short. There was a gap within myself that craved a strong, positive male influence to tell me I had worth instead of lashing out when my life choices disagreed with his.

I started my computer, letting it boot up as I turned on lamps to create a dim glow and started iTunes, clicking on a random song.

Ignoring my want to revise, revise, revise, I just started typing, letting my thoughts take shape on the page with little thought as to how they would sound to anyone but me:

“We spend our whole lives asking unanswerable questions: Why couldn't my father love me? Why did Voldie molest me? When did my ex's love turn to resentment? Why did he cheat? Who was really at fault? Why am I so lonely? Where did I go wrong?”

When does the tunnel of darkness end? Where the hell is that bright light I'm supposed to be working toward?

“The problem with unanswerable questions is that we start creating answers, and very often, we create answers by finding problems in ourselves. We rationalize that for something so horrible to have happened to us, there must be something wrong with us, something innately screwed up in our DNA. If we could just be skinnier or smarter or more organized or wear the right clothes and know the right people, then all this stuff that's wrong, all the bad we've dealt with in our lives and cannot seem to reason through would make sense and we could move on. If we can be perfect enough, the breaks inside ourselves will suddenly mend because perfect people are not broken.

“But we are broken. And we can't starve the broken out. We can't cut deep enough to bleed out the broken. We can't stuff enough cookies in our mouths to shut up the voices in our heads. Cigarette smoke and liquor may choke and blur it for a while, but the pain and confusion still need a way out. We're still a terrified nine-year-old girl waiting for someone to explain it all away and hold her until the monsters are gone.

“The reality of the situation is that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Because light reveals everything, the truth about the past, the present, and the future. To have a light appear would be to understand the past and know the future before it happens. Life doesn't work that way. We don't know anything beyond the path we've walked in the darkness. Even then, we only know a tiny slice of that life, and that slice is still blurry and covered in shadows.

“We're all broken in one way or another, but the breaks are merely cracks because so long as we keep moving forward in life, we still function. And it's hard. And it hurts. And

sometimes it's really lonely because there's not someone there to hold your and tell you that you're loved and worthy and it will all be okay. Sometimes you have to tell yourself that you're worthy, duck your head, and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

“But we are worthy. We all have worth. We all have value. And we don't have to wear a certain type of clothing or do anything special. We just have to be. And that's good enough because we're good enough because we're all in the same tunnel, bumping into one another and telling each other about the various parts of tunnel that we've seen and comforting each other what little bit we can. Some people will say you're not worthy and will make you feel like crap because it makes them feel better. But at the end of the day, we're all in the same tunnel with the same breaks that others have caused in us and causing the same breaks in others that we carry in us, intentionally or not.

“So while the unanswerable questions remain unanswered for a while longer, we're not dirty or deformed or worthless or wrong and thus somehow deserving of our hurts. We all have worth. And we all deserve to be loved.”

I shut everything off, grabbed my wallet, and walked to the 7-11 next to my apartment complex to buy a soda and pack of cigarettes. I don't smoke; I stress smoke. The repetitive motion of bringing the ciggie to my lips and carrying it away, inhaling and exhaling, calmed me the same way pendulum swinging a blade over my arm did. I had to focus on something external, had to remember to breathe.

I hadn't touched a cigarette in over a year, but I needed one today. After returning from the store, I sat on the stairs to my apartment and chain smoked through about half of the pack. My downstairs neighbors were also outside smoking, so I chatted with them for

a few minutes, divulging a lot more of my life than they probably wanted to know, but in the process, I connected with the woman.

“I’ve got really bad depression, and I haven’t been on my medication recently because I just had the twins. My moods have been really bad lately, so I understand. That’s why my hair is short now. I got mad the other day and just took a pair of scissor and chop. Then, I bawled because I’d made a mess of it, so my mom gave me the money to go get it fixed.”

I grinned. “Yeah, I’ve hacked chunks out of my hair before, too. I understand.”

We talked for a few more minutes before she stood to go inside. I held out the pack of cigarettes. “Will you smoke these? I really don’t need them.”

“Sure.”

I finished my cigarette, thinking about how upset I’d been lately, how much my past was haunting me, and how much of that I was taking out on the people around me, especially Nick.

A lot.

And I could no longer tell how much of my pain he deserved and how much of it I was merely pushing off on him in order to have an outlet, in order to keep causing myself pain and prove that once again a man was unable to love me. He claimed he cared. He attempted to show he cared. And I didn’t believe him. I kept setting up new challenges for him, lifting the bar of what it took to prove he loved me just a bit more. Was that his fault or mine? Was I realizing more and more of what I needed in order to feel loved? Or was I just scared that one day I might feel loved and not know how to handle that?

Was I losing him, letting the potential for love and happiness slip through my fingers because I feared what holding something so precious would feel like?

Later that night, I lay back on my bean bag, Syn curled on one side of me and Keegan curled in the papasan chair I had my feet propped up in, and talked to my friend, Nani.

“I keep looking for acceptance from a man to fix what’s wrong. My dad didn’t love me, Donald James’ dad didn’t love, and my step-dad doesn’t totally love me. So I want some guy to love me in order to prove that I’m worth loving, that there’s not something wrong with me. And that’s led me to make some really stupid choices with men.” I sighed. “I need therapy, but I don’t understand what good it’s supposed to do. Like, I know that therapy will help, everyone always says therapy will help, but I don’t understand where I’m supposed to end up after going through therapy.”

Nani stayed quiet, sensing I had more to say.

“I’m scared I’m going to break.” My voice cracked, and I clenched my fist around my phone and shut my eyes, not wanting to cry about my past in front of someone, even via the phone. For as often as I cried and as much as I needed to bawl all over someone while someone held me and let me cry, I stubbornly refused to speak about my pain, the real root of my pain, out of fear of crying. Taking a deep breath, I continued. “I know that if I start talking about the past, start talking about Voldie and my pain, that I’m going to break down. And I don’t know if I can handle that. I don’t know if I trust anyone enough to believe that they’ll be there for me to help guide me through the break down, or if I’ll be alone. And I don’t know if I have the strength to get through that kind of a break down

alone.” My voice shook so badly that my body vibrated along with it, but I managed to finish my statement.

“Well, I love you, and I wish I lived closer so you didn’t have to be alone while going through all of this.”

I smiled and curled onto my side, holding the phone close as though I were cuddling a person instead of an object. “You help a lot by being my friend and listening to me vent.”

The next morning on my way to work, I stopped by the student counseling center and signed back up for therapy appointments with the therapist I’d been seeing a year earlier.

Question Number Two

I walked into the now familiar office and sat across from my therapist, once again hiding behind the throw pillow to hide behind.

She smiled as she sat down. “It’s good to see you again. It’s been a while.”

I nodded, my gaze drifting to look at the back of her chair instead of her face. “Yeah, I just, I know I need help, and everyone says that therapy helps, but I don’t know how it’s supposed to help. Like, what’s all this supposed to do?”

Her eyes widened, and she leaned back. “That’s a really good question, and it’s something we’d have to figure out together. What do you want to accomplish through coming here, and what do you need to discuss? We’d tailor our sessions to help you work through the issues you feel need help with, in whatever way helps you.”

I set up weekly sessions, and over the next few meetings, we began delving into the issues plaguing me the worst, my body and self-image. The first big issue that came up, however, seemed to stem more from stress and being out of control of life.

“I’m set to graduate in December, which means that come January, I’ll no longer be in school and thus no longer have my job, my lease for my apartment is up, and if getting a vehicle falls through, I’d have no way to find another job and be able to re-up my lease.

I'm basically looking at being jobless and homeless, and I can't do anything about any of it until I find out if I'm getting this Jeep, which won't happen until next week."

"I understand that causing you stress; it's definitely a situation that would cause anyone stress, but this sounds a lot like a situation you've been in before."

My forehead wrinkled, and I looked at the ground. "Yeah, I guess I have. When I moved out of my parent's house that last time, I had nothing. No job, no car, lived on couches."

"And you got through that, didn't you."

I looked back up at her and smiled. "Yeah, I did."

She cocked her head to the right. "So, while anyone would stress over this situation, you kind of have an advantage in that you know you can survive this because you have before."

I laughed once and leaned back in my chair. "Yeah, I suppose that would be a more positive way of looking at the situation, huh? And it would be a more positive way of looking at me and my abilities."

"Yeah." She nodded. "And while you're still going to worry, there's really nothing you can do to change anything, so maybe you just need to take a breath and see what happens with the Jeep before you worry too much about the rest of it all."

Many of the issues we ended up discussing dealt more with how I viewed myself rather than the actual situation. Instead of seeing myself as strong and capable, I continually viewed myself in the worst possible light, and thus, I always saw the situations around me as negative and leading to failure.

I started forcing myself to make eye contact with my therapist instead of staring at her hair or the back of her chair, and I sat up in my sessions instead of leaning back. I forced myself to be honest about my issues, how deep my body dysmorphic disorder ran and the fact that I was using laxatives to try and lose weight. Most important, I gave myself permission to cry. I allowed myself to be open and honest about what I really struggled with instead of pushing my emotions to the side.

The Epiphany

Writing this, I kept waiting for a turning point. Every story has a climax, and every creative nonfiction narrative has a turning point or point of culmination, and if I was going to turn my life into a novel, be the hero in my own story, if you will, I needed a turning point, an “aha!” moment.

Where the fuck was my “aha!” moment?

Was it when I realized that I wasn’t deformed? When I started thinking of myself as something other than a monstrosity? No. I still hated myself, still struggled with self-worth, still didn’t realize that my body image was tied to my self-image rather than it being the other way around.

What about when I started eating better and working out in an attempt to show myself that I deserved care and compassion? No. I was trying to prove that I had worth, not actually realizing that I did.

I could count the moment when I realized I didn’t understand why I was in therapy but did know that I needed therapy. Again, though, that was me trying to move toward understanding, toward being more confident and learning to love myself.

Those were all just stepping stones, so where in the bloody hell was this mystical “aha!” moment, when everything would magically fall into place, and I’d suddenly be moving up, up, up!

Well, I’ll tell you exactly where it was. In a novel or creative nonfiction essay or the last two lines of a Shakespearean sonnet, no one, while in the midst of their actual day-to-day life, realizes when they have that “aha!” moment. They realize they’re moving up over stepping stones, realize they occasionally backslide, and at times have those moments where lightning strikes in the brain and they suddenly figure out some vitally important fact.

But people don’t suddenly realize, “Oh, I have worth,” and become happy. It’s a day-to-day, moment-to-moment grind, an uphill walk where sometimes the rock you’re pushing rolls back over the top of you and you have to apply a few Band-Aids before you can get back up.

Someone once said that two steps forward and one step back isn’t a crisis, it’s a cha-cha. He was right. Life is a dance, and even if the Rockettes are not going to show up and two-step with you at the end of your journey, you can still dance. And even though it’s not always as graceful as a cha-cha, it’s still a dance. Some days you’re having a ball, and some days you’re shuffling your feet just trying to keep up with the music. You’ve got to pay the fiddler every day, though. Otherwise, he runs off with your kids.

The reason there’s a climactic moment in a novel is because the author puts it there. Especially in creative nonfiction, the author looks back over the story, over his or her life, and realizes where things changed. Waiting for a moment of change is not something you should hold your breath for.

Oddly enough, right after I realized that I shouldn't sit around and wait for an epiphany, I had one.

Nick hurt my feelings, completely unintentionally on his part, but one of the risks you take with being in a relationship-that-is-not-a-relationship is that at times one person may feel less important than another.¹⁰⁴ Well, I felt pretty damn unimportant one day. Unimportant enough to make me rethink everything I'd been working toward in my life and contemplate running away instead of being an adult and facing my problems.¹⁰⁵ Instead, I actually went running. Not very far, as my out-of-shape, shin-splinted self cannot run very far, but I got up off my butt and jogged down the street until I lost control of my breathing and had to slow to a walk. Then, I power-walked my un-happy self around the block back to my house.

It wasn't working. I was crying, almost hyperventilating, and all I could think about was destroying myself or my apartment or that fucking bitch who got to be skinnier and prettier and more lovable than me. How come *they* were worth loving, but I needed to just take care of myself? How come *they* deserved to be taken care of and I needed to take care of myself? How comes *they* got cuddled at night, held when they cried, supported and coddled, and I needed to suck it up and be an independent adult?

I had done anything wrong, hadn't tried to break up any relationship or take anyone's place. I tried to be friends with everyone, spend time with each person, and help everyone out. I did the majority of the housework, even though I went to school and worked two jobs. I helped take care of the cats, even though none of them were mine. I attempted to

¹⁰⁴ This is especially true when problems lead to one person being forced to move out and friendships unraveling.

¹⁰⁵ Due to the number of times I had moved during my life, I was actually really good at this.

stay out of the way and allow each of the others one-on-one time with Nick, though I did demand my fair share in return. Was that the problem? Was I not supposed to expect any attention or affection? How did that work? Did my friends, people who knew me, my personality, and my beliefs really expect to be a cheap fuck for someone? Or was Nick right when he said I did too much, that my ability to juggle school, work, cleaning, and animal care without throwing temper tantrums, failing, or missing work made me too perfect, led to jealousy? How was either of those scenarios fair¹⁰⁶?

I was hurt, and I was mad, and something was going to pay. I stomped my way up the stairs to my apartment, slammed the door as hard as I could, punched the wall, and kicked my shoes off and across the living room floor, paced the room a few times, and dropped into a chair to decide which of my dishes I was okay with throwing at the wall.

A few moments later, someone knocked on my door.

Great. Now, I've pissed someone off, and they're going to come bitch at me for making so much noise.

I opened the door to find my downstairs neighbor standing there.

“Are you okay? I didn't like how you slammed the door, and I know you've said hi and talked to me at times when I just really needed someone, so I wanted to come see how you were.”

No anger. No bitching. No madness. Just honest concern. And for the next half hour, she sat with me in my living room, petting my cats, and talking about how I needed to love myself.

¹⁰⁶ I know, life isn't fair, but that doesn't stop a person from wishing it could be.

“You’re a beautiful girl, and yeah, so you’ve had hard times in your past, but so what? And I don’t meant so what as in I don’t care, but you’ve got to let that go, move forward, find something better. And so this guy hurt your feelings, so maybe he doesn’t love you, if you don’t love yourself, you’ve got no right trying to love someone else. You’ve got to love you first.”

“I think I’m starting to, and that’s why I’ve been getting so mad when it feels like other people don’t.” I was speaking more to myself than to her.

For the first time, I realized that my anger, which had seemed to be pointed at others instead of at me, was for me. I was mad for myself, instead of at myself. I didn’t want to cut or punish myself for not being good enough; I wanted to punish others for not treating me the way I felt I deserved. The self-mutilation and freak outs felt the same because I hadn’t learned how to deal with being angry with others, but for the first time in my life, I was pointing the anger in the right direction. I was not too fat, too stupid, too crazy, too weird to love. I was just fucking fine. Yeah, I needed to lose weight; yeah, I required medication to function; yeah, I was an oddball who’d rather read or sew than watch *Futurama*. But I was still worth loving and being friends with, and people damn well needed to step up and realize that.

I’d made progress. I wasn’t done, nowhere close, but I’d cha-cha’d myself forward instead of moving backwards or sideways. Once my neighbor left, I started thinking through my anger. No, I didn’t need someone to “pay for my tattoos and buy me pretty things¹⁰⁷,” but even though I was physically able to take care of myself and working on

¹⁰⁷ Totally quoting Good Charlotte on that one, but mad-love to the Madden boys, as their music got me through a lot of really tough times.

being mentally and emotionally strong enough to care for myself, I still wanted someone to *want* to take care of me.

I've been taking care of myself for the majority of my life. From the age of nine, I had to live with secrets bigger than I was. At ten, I took on the adult responsibility of helping to raise my little brother. At eleven, I tried to find help, to find a way out of the nightmare I'd been living through, only for that to blow up in my face. And it took three years before my mom believed that I'd been hurt. I didn't get therapy, didn't get hugs and help, just had to continue stuffing down that fear and pain, and by the time my mom did believe, we didn't know how to reverse the years of silence. Instead, I was told, "get good grades, so you can get a scholarship and go to college and get a good job." I had the responsibility of my entire future placed upon my shoulders because I was the only person who'd be able to make something better of my life. Once again, it was up to me.

My family isn't the kind to hug all our issues out like we're a TV sitcom brought to life. We yell and scream and fight and ignore each other until we can sweep the bad feelings under the rug. Then, we pick ourselves up like nothing happened and move forward. We drown our pain in drugs and alcohol and shopping sprees or stay so busy that we don't have time to remember all that bad shit. We freak out, then suck it up and keep going.

So for my entire life, I've been sucking it up and keeping going. And when I couldn't fake happiness, I took anti-depressants, sliced my arm open, spent thousands upon thousands of dollars via credit card on clothes and books, had sex with a boyfriend that I knew didn't care about me because I just wanted someone to hold me for those few moments. I smeared make-up on my face until others could no longer see my natural skin

tone and dressed up in the costume of the year, put on my war paint and armor, and marched forward as though I were going to battle with the world, when I was really fighting my own need to break down.

And now, I was breaking. The cracks that had been developing in my mask and my defenses for the last decade were so big that it looked like a shattered piece of pottery being held together with bubble gum and My Little Pony Band-Aids.

There was something really beautiful, however, underneath that shattered piece of pottery. There was a real person, one who felt as if she carried two souls within her: an old soul that grew up too early, and a free-spirited, childlike soul that still loved My Little Pony and saw the good in everyone around her. I want to take care of the world, to mother and protect all those I care about, to make the world a better place and hold the hand of those not strong enough to cross the street on their own. I want to see the good in everyone, to trust without fear of manipulation, to love without fear of rejection, to pour myself whole-heartedly into each new endeavor and new friendship.

I'm not only a twenty-seven-year-old woman. I'm five and best friends with the little girl who lives next door, with no thought of color, religion, or gender; all that matters is we both love the Power Rangers and Alphabets cereal. I'm thirteen and just discovering my own sexuality and femininity and pretending to understand that sexuality doesn't have to mean being overly sexual. I'm eighteen and high from my first drag off a cigarette that I paid for and from my first taste of real adulthood. I'm thirty-five and realizing that my baby, the one whose diapers I just changed, is entering his senior year of high school and almost as tall as I am. I'm forty and realizing that a lot more life has passed me by than I thought and I'm nowhere near where I expected to be. I'm eighty and

so tired of struggling to get through each day and worrying about what others think of me.

I love things that sparkle and buy items in pink because they're pink and not because I need them. I eat way too much sugar and tend to live on cereal when I'm busy. I love my animals to the point I consider them my children and make people look at pictures of them on my phone. I would rather read a book than watch a movie. I love romance novels, but when I do watch movies, I want to see a horror movie, not some dumb rom-com bullshit. I think it's cool that I can change a car tire, thread a sewing machine, and play Left for Dead 2 with my eyes closed, especially the level in the mall where you collect gas cans. I hate my ex-boyfriend and still want to punch him in the face. I love my momma, even though she made mistakes. I miss my great-grandma, forgive her for all the times she insulted me behind my back, and hope she can forgive me for being young and dumb and not spending as much time with her as I should have.

I'm smart, funny, narcissistic, overly-emotional, overly anxious, determined, loyal, talk too much and too loud, sing off key, a hard ass with a cotton-candy center, covered in tattoos, own enough pink to befriend Elle Woods, and am a mixed-up mish-mash of personality and imperfections. I am, and I don't need a direct object to follow the copula. I just fucking am, and that is okay. In fact, that's probably just as it fucking should be. I'm just as I should be, and I am okay with me for being me, because I am.

A short while after realizing that much of my anger stemmed from my want to care about myself and feel cared about by others, I reevaluated several aspects of my life. I went through my closet and examined each article of clothing based up whether it was

something I wanted to wear and would feel confident in or if I'd merely bought it in order to fit into certain group. I threw out the majority of my make-up and went bare faced more days than not in order to allow myself to see what I really looked like and grow comfortable with my own looks. As it turns out, I may actually be learning to consider myself pretty. I still feel odd saying that, but I'm getting there.

I then searched the Web for healthy recipes that I could make quickly or make enough of to eat for a couple days and tailored my grocery lists to include the ingredients needed for those recipes. I downloaded an app for my phone that allowed me to keep track of my daily calories and exercise. I did not set up the app with a certain weight goal in mind, though, as I know that weight does not always accurately indicate health. Instead, I used the app to see what it would take to maintain my weight and focused on keeping track of how much I worked out and how often I splurged on sweets or junk food. Instead of giving myself the goal of eating only a certain number of calories, which has led to my abuse of laxatives in the past when I failed, I focused on a more positive goal.

I also branched out to make new friends. I lash out at my body when I feel neglected or stressed because it has always been my scape-goat for any negative feelings, so any time I felt bad about Brittany and Makenna not talking to me or Nick not being able to hang out, I turned to binge eating or cutting. Because I kept myself closed off from others, I rarely had anyone else to turn to when issues when them arose. By forcing myself to reconnect with other friends and talk to new people, I expanded my support group and was able to make plans more often instead of sitting at home alone.

My self-image did not magically improve and become positive 24/7. I will always have days where I hate looking in the mirror and nights where I eat far more ice cream

than I should, and I have yet to fully curb the want to cut or take laxatives as a punishment for not be perfect. Those negative impulses are less often, though, and I am learning more positive ways to deal with my lapses in confidence. I cha-cha, two steps toward confidence and one step back when I give in and grab a burger, but every life has rain. The challenge is learning to dance in it.

The Sum of These Parts

American media convey the message that unless women are waif thin, they're not beautiful. The statement, real women have curves, started as a reaction to that, a way to empower women with bigger butts and bigger boobs. The problem with that statement is that it only empowers curvy women, and it empowers them by tearing down slimmer ones, which destroys any real form of woman's empowerment.

If the media want to put body parts in the spotlight of what makes a woman a woman, how about real women have vaginas? Though, that cuts out transgendered women, so maybe real women have brains? Or hearts?

Instead of being told that they have to fit a certain body type, that they need to have curves or be slim, women of all sizes should feel beautiful. And as much as size matters, it shouldn't.

Real women are happy; that's empowerment. Real women eat a cheeseburger if they want. They go shopping with friends, walk a few extra laps around the mall, and call it exercise. Real women care whether they are healthy instead of whether they fit into a certain size jeans. Real women know that enjoying life, appreciating people, and loving oneself are what make a real woman.

I'm learning to love myself. No, I'm not skinny, not according to the media's standards and not according to how slim I can and one day will be through eating better and continuing to work out. Even at my thinnest, however, I will be athletic rather than curvy or waifish, which is something I have to learn to see as equally beautiful. I will get there. With each inch that I lose, I come a little closer to realizing just how beautiful that shape is and how beautiful I can be.

More than that, I'm learning to see my true beauty as distinct from my body shape. My weight and the size of my waist do not prove that I am good person or that I am funny or smart. Those aspects of my personality exist within myself no matter what size I wear or where I carry that weight, and as Alex said way back when, my personality more than makes up for any excess baggage around my middle or my lack of badonkadonk. Yes, my outward appearance does reflect my feelings about myself; if I am clean and neat and dress well, I show that I care about myself. On the inside, however, I am truly beautiful, and my body shape is not a reflection of that beauty.

I need to see myself, every pound, every inch, every flaw, as worthwhile and worth loving.