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Chicken Soup for the Soul

Taking Control of My Body Image

Life is far too rich, interesting and short
to waste on hating your body.
~Author Unknown

I'm thirty-one and looking at photos from a recent work function. "Look at my arms," I complain to my co-worker in an instant message. "They're so chubby. No matter what I do or how thin I get."

"Genetics," she types back.

"You know what's weird?" I write. "When I was a teenager, I didn't have these kinds of body issues."

"Don't start now," she warns.

Later that day, I realize that I lied to my friend and to myself. There were so many instances of body hatred in my past, starting even before I was a teenager, and continuing, and continuing, and continuing:

I'm twelve, on vacation on Eastern Long Island with my parents and my best friend at the time, Kristina. Even then I could see that she was and would always be prettier than me—thinner, too. We walk down a beautiful, wooded road to get to the beach, wearing bikini tops and shorts. I watch her back when she walks in front of me, and I hate my body as it compares to hers. It's only years later, when I look at pictures from that trip, that I see two beautiful girls.

I'm fifteen, standing in front of my full-length mirror, getting

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ready to walk to my friend Stephanie's house. I've just gotten back from sleep-away camp, and this will be the first time I've seen my friends in a month. I think (and hope) some boys will be there. I wear a pink shirt that brings out the rosiness of my cheeks. I've painted my nails a similar color. I stare at my forehead, willing it to shrink. I've decided it's too long, and bangs are not in, so I can't even hide it. I wonder whether, if I could magically make an inch of it disappear, would I, if it meant that I lost an inch of height? With only 5'2" on me—another thing I hate about myself—I can't really afford to get shorter. But this forehead!

I'm sixteen and I just ate two Twix bars. Two full candy bars, meaning four caramel and chocolate-covered cookies. I feel disgusting and disgusted. I go to the bathroom and put my fingers down my throat. Before I can get them far enough in to even gag, some reflex makes me pull my fingers out of my mouth. So much for bulimia, I think.

It's the summer that I turn nineteen and I've just had my heart broken. I pull away from my friends, learning for the first time how vulnerable love makes you. I don't want to give anyone the power to hurt me. I take control of the one thing that feels within my grasp—eating. Most days I allow myself only grapefruit and saltines. Occasionally I'll eat a real meal for dinner. I don't remember hoping for weight loss, but of course I lose the 15 pounds I gained my freshman year of college. I go back to college that fall and the heartbreaker says to me, "You look amazing. It's going to be hard not to want to get back together with you." I'm so shocked, I can't think of what to say. For weeks I wonder if he broke up with me because I was fat. And did I somehow know that? Is that why I ate grapefruit for a month?

I'm twenty-three, and sitting around with some girlfriends. The topic turns to eating disorders, and we all say we haven't had one, not exactly. I tell them about my grapefruit fast, though I can't bring myself to mention my failed attempt at bulimia. Each of them has a similar story. We talk about how much we have hated our bodies, how much we still do. I leave shocked and appalled that these

beautiful, smart women can feel this way about themselves. I don't necessarily include myself in that group.

I'm twenty-five and at my writers' group. "Again with the thighs," one of the guys in the group says when they're discussing an essay I wrote on a 150-mile bike ride I did from Quincy, Massachusetts, to the end of Cape Cod.

"What?" I ask, not understanding.

"You've written here about how the thighs that you always thought of as too fat powered you up hills and across the Bourne Bridge," he says.

"Yea, so?" I ask.

"In every essay you've submitted, you talk about your thighs."

"Really?" I ask, thinking back to the pieces I've written recently, one on gardening, another on kayaking on my birthday. I don't remember any of them having to do with my thighs. And I don't think I care enough about my thighs to write about them. But apparently I do.

"Yup," he says, and other members of the group nod their heads in agreement. Now my body hatred has gotten so ingrained I don't even notice it.

I'm thirty-one and waiting for pictures of myself to download on my computer. They are from the sprint triathlon I completed a few days earlier. My body is hard and strong. I'm in the best shape of my life. And I'm proud of myself, prouder than I have ever been, prouder than when I completed two master's degrees in writing, got promoted, got married. I'm prouder because completing a triathlon seemed out of my reach in a way those other things never did. I surprised myself. And it was easier than I imagined, which means I trained well. I wasn't even particularly sore the next day.

Then the pictures appear on my screen.

The organizers had photographers set out at various points throughout the course. I saw them, and thought I smiled for the cameras. When I see the photos, though, I don't look confident and happy, the way I felt that day. I look—and I hate to say it—fat. In the

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photos of me running, my hips look wide in my tight, black shorts. My arms, too, have that familiar chubby look.

Before I even get through all the photos, I'm pissed at myself. When I look at pictures from the most physically grueling task of my life, I think I look fat? Really? If I heard one of the friends I did the race with say that, I would want to smack her. I want to smack myself.

Instead, I spend the next few weeks talking to all my girlfriends about my utterly ridiculous reaction to the photos. Just like when I was twenty, many of these women have similar stories of absurd thoughts they've had about their bodies. But this time, when I shake my head at how hard these beautiful, smart women are on themselves, I don't exclude myself from the group. I'm finally happy enough and proud enough of my body to realize something I never have before: photographs don't necessarily reflect the absolute, undeniable Truth. They can be taken at bad angles, under bad lighting, on bad hair days. And those crazy thoughts that run through my mind when I see a bad photo or look at myself under fluorescent lights? Those aren't necessarily the capital-T Truth, either. They're just lowercase-t thoughts.

I'm still thirty-one, standing in the bathroom, naked, as I blow-dry my hair in front of a large mirror. I think my tummy is a little pouchy. Then I think it is probably just bloated from too much caffeine yesterday. And in any case, I have better things to think about.

~Christine Junge