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GOOD ENOUGH TO LOVE

EMMA CROFT

"If you speak up, no matter how awkward you feel, your confidence and spirit will grow right along with your body!" (Schaefer 1)

In rare moments, I recall the days of not caring.

Imagine: when your favorite shoes were white, Velcro-fastened Mary Janes, worn with lace-trimmed socks and pink, striped Oshkosh overalls. When your hair—a golden curly mess that stood on end each day as you jumped from your bed—never bothered you until your mother tried to fix it, pulling at knots as you wailed and wept.

"Your hair is so pretty!" the ladies told you at church.

"I know," you'd reply, aware of the sacrifice and unapologetic in your pride.

When swimsuits were simply what you wore while swimming, practical and freeing to your body that liked to be naked. When you loved that body for all it could do; its ability to think and feel in absolutes; to stick magnets together and balance them carefully on the bridge of your nose; to dump dirt on your head from your red-handled bucket while your parents weren't watching, for fun; to stroke a longsuffering cat, or to pick a dandelion gone to seed and blow despite your mother's warnings not to.

When your fat fingers didn't yet know they were fat. When they played computer games and lifted stray Cheerios from between couch cushions to your small crimson lips. When they threw balls without caring where they ended up, wrote poems that rhymed, sketched drawings of babies, flowers, clocks. When they picked out tunes on the piano with Beethoven Bear and Mozart Mouse bookending each side of the keyboard to teach you the difference between low notes and high.

My father returned from Costco one day with a large cardboard box containing a new toy: a bathroom scale. My brother Eric and I ripped into the package with greedy hands, leaving cardboard shreds strewn across the living room carpet. He placed the scale before me, and zeroed it out. I stepped on.

"You weigh eighty pounds?" Eric asked as I stood, clueless and beaming. I was six years old. He was eleven, and growing a bit chubby himself.

"Yes, I do!" I affirmed through gaps in my teeth. How could I have known such a number was far higher than average—that my weight and height each placed me in the ninety-ninth percentile for my age bracket? That my body, which I had so loved up to that point, carried with it a burden of incorrectness?

"That's so much," Eric said. "You're a fatso. Micah weighed eighty pounds when he was twelve!"

Micah, our eldest brother, remains spindly to this day. Fortunately for Eric, his extra weight came off in early high school. Mine stuck around through adulthood with impertinence. I remain fat. Big-boned. A woman of size. "Curvy."

I remember that later that summer, when I stepped on the scale again and the dial stopped at seventy-eight, I loved that new number; lower, better, closer to normal. I no longer carried the cursed mark of "eighty," but a morally superior, healthier figure.

"Mom! Guess what?" I shouted as I ran into the living room, hair in ringlets and cheeks still pink with childhood, "I lost weight! I only weigh seventy-eight pounds!"

"Very good!" she replied. "I'm proud of you."

"Eating disorders are serious illnesses that can destroy a girl's health and well-being and even threaten her life" (Schaefer 63).

I think my parents forgot to tell me about my sister's eating disorder.

Of course, I heard the hushed, one-sided phone conversations muffled by the wall of the room long after bedtime. I knew she had come home from college, hazy with depression, weighing at least eighty pounds less than she had the year before—an entire six-year-old me, gone to nothing. Perhaps it should have been obvious, but young minds excel at protective denial. If I didn't want it to be real, it wasn't.

When I turned eleven, during the worst of Kristen's struggle, she bought me a copy of American Girl's puberty bible, *The Care and Keeping of You: The Body Book for Girls*.

"How nice!" our mom said as I tore off the shiny polka-dot wrapping paper. "Kristen always wanted that book when she was growing up."

Communication with Kristen was fraught at the time; we irritated each other with our respective immaturities and her erratic behavior scared me. But in the gifting of this book, she spoke truth without words, sharing something valuable that she never had herself.

And what a book it was: illustrated with girls of all sizes, pioneering the idea of body positivity—empowering future women aching for knowledge rarely offered. I poured over the pastel pages and large print that offered advice on bras, oral hygiene, shaving, acne, and menstrual cycles, but I almost always skipped the section on eating disorders. Each time I read those words—*anorexia nervosa*, *bulimia*—I flushed with anxiety, flipping through the pages until I found something less troubling. Still, I was haunted by the accompanying illustration of the skinny girl weeping as she looked in the mirror and saw someone much larger.

I didn't learn the concrete details of Kristen's disordered eating until I was eighteen and she explained things to my roommate when we drove to campus together. Truth rushed in, uncomfortable but necessary: she struggled with bulimia as a teenager and then restricted food almost completely—the more “effective” method—once she got to college. She starved herself after throwing up didn't work. Until that night, I had never heard her tell her story. She probably thought I already knew.

After responding well to therapy and beginning the healing process—regaining weight, learning her own worth—Kristen lent me her skinny clothes.

“I want them back after I lose the weight again, healthily,” she said, handing me a white trash bag overflowing with dresses and graphic tees. As a kid with no fashion sense and frugal parents, a pile of free, stylish clothing came as a blessing, no matter how odd I felt wearing reminders of my sister's unnamable illness.

Soon after, my body changed, too; lack of control defined my girl-to-woman existence. I must have gained over fifty pounds in seventh grade as I overate to deal with new and complicated emotions. If I had been cute and chubby as a child, those in-between years pulled me into grotesque obesity. Not even *The Care and Keeping of You* could protect me from drowning in my own pubescent awkwardness. My face—once bright, happy, and clean—turned doughy and flecked with acne. My eyebrows, previously invisible, began darkening in all the wrong places. My legs, tight and sore from marching band practice, sprouted a layer of translucent fuzz all too noticeable during gym class. Though I was initially enthusiastic about periods—an attitude fostered, I'm sure, through *American Girl's* persistent optimism—reaching that milestone the day before a required meet for the school swim team felt less than ideal.

In due course, Kristen's clothes no longer fit. My body approached critical mass. Though it would take a few more years to reach full adult size and shape, I knew even then that I would never be thin. I couldn't have known that my face would turn out okay; that Kristen—a true champion of causes our mother didn't care much about—would buy me a pair of tweezers a few birthdays later to appease the eyebrow situation; that my mom would allow me to shave my legs after sufficient begging; that the acne would mostly subside; that menstruation happens to the best of us, and need not be embarrassing. But the fat? That stayed, and never lost its mark of shame. This piece of my body's physical maturity—not universal—has bothered me the longest, continuously reminding me that I am different, less than, bigger. Wrong.

“The shape of your body—your basic frame—is something you're born with, like the shape of your nose or the color of your eyes. Some girls are tall and lanky, while others are short and sturdy. Some girls are curvy, while others are more straight. Usually your body shape resembles the shape of others in your family. No one body type is better or worse than another. All can be fit, healthy, and beautiful” (Schaefer 54).

"Looks like you've lost some weight!" my grandpa told me just moments after I arrived at his house. I hadn't seen him for a few months.

"Huh. I guess I have," I said, just as surprised as he was.

Such a statement is always meant as a compliment. It takes other forms—for example, when someone tells me I'm "looking really good," it invariably means they've noticed recent weight loss. They never expect me to follow their reasoning to its logical conclusion, that weighing more makes me look bad, but it happens.

I should have told my Grandpa the true reason for my admirable metamorphosis: over the course of that semester, my roommate regularly threatened to kill herself, I was preparing to move halfway across the world for four months, and eating no longer felt particularly important. My genius weight-loss diet consisted mainly of skipped meals, granola bars, and Chick-fil-a. Occasionally, I ate cake for dinner. No nutritionist would encourage such nonsense. I was as out of shape as ever. Emotional overwhelm prevailed day-to-day. Yet here was Grandpa, commending me for dropping thirty pounds—because obviously, it indicated better health.

I know my weight isn't ideal by any measurable standard. BMI charts usually label me "morbidly obese," one-hundred pounds over my projected healthy weight. My blood pressure is great, my heart rate is normal, my hormones balanced as far as I know, but of course I worry about the effects obesity might have on my future health. So I eat kale willingly. I try limiting sugar. I drink enough water. I've counted calories before. I usually get my 10,000 steps in per day. I'm sure I need more exercise, and I adore chocolate, baked goods, and butter, but that doesn't explain why several of my peers with virtually identical lifestyles remain average, or thinner.

I believe the answer is genetics. I love my father, but he made his daughters fat. We sometimes say that my brothers "lucked out." Though we're essentially identical in eating and exercise habits, you'd never know it based on the way we look. Micah's blood pressure is far higher than mine, but ask anyone which of us is more objectively healthy, and all would point to him. He's skinny, after all.

The story goes that my father's family survived the Mormon migration. They had meat on their bones. The same slow metabolism that kept our ancestors alive on Utah's undeveloped icy tundra today keeps me fat and occasionally self-loathing. No one ever mentions obese pioneers from my mother's side of the family, where women are thin until childbearing, but they survived too. From them, I get freakishly large biceps without trying, thick Scandinavian ankles resistant to sprains, curls in my hair. Pioneer blood runs through my veins. Pioneer muscles lift heavy things. Pioneer fat accumulates and lingers, since I am not actually in danger of starvation.

My body, in existing, reflects the histories before it; I never had a choice. Inscribed in this flesh is survival. Reflected is discomfort.

“As your body is growing and changing, be kind to yourself. And remember to be kind to other girls, too. They want to feel good about themselves, just like you do” (Schaefer 13).

My mom and I split a cheeseburger at a diner in Spokane. Native American paraphernalia and kitsch decorated the wood-paneled walls, patrons filled the oversized dining room sipping milkshakes, dipping fries as the August sun blazed through the windows.

A woman waddled past, face puffy and sweating, hair pulled up in disarray. On her tray was an enormous triple cheeseburger, fries, large chocolate shake. She wasn't sharing.

“Good Lord,” I thought as I took a bite from my half-burger, “Does she eat like that every day?”

She looked like it. Barely squeezing into the chair, a cushion of fat hanging down from her abdomen to cover her monstrous jiggling thighs. She must have weighed nearly four-hundred pounds. She sat and ate her meal while I observed, guiltlessly, in disgust.

Even now the image stays with me. It is not her bloated complexion I recall at first, or the way her fat fingers gripped the ridiculous sandwich, but my own capacity for hatred. This woman's existence should not have disturbed me as it did. The only objectively disgusting behavior present in the interaction was my rash, uninformed judgment.

Perhaps I feared one day becoming her: morphing into a monster of a human, disturbing fellow customers with my gluttony. Maybe I worried that I too might become an outcast, again losing control of my body and having nowhere to turn but increasingly large piles of food.

I recalled the illustration in *The Care and Keeping of You*, the one I tried to avoid. This woman across the dining room, whose name I would never know, stood in for my fat girl in the mirror. Most of us have one, if not several, I think. Falling victim to this delusion is easy in the body-obsessed world we live in, rooted in comparison, competition, paranoia. We pit ourselves against other women we mark as inferior to raise ourselves up, to remind us that we are prettier than someone else. In truth, this only builds false confidence, liable to crumble the moment we see someone we view as more beautiful—more valuable.

We mustn't empower the destructive urge—deep-rooted hatred for the fatter, uglier versions of ourselves found all around us, and envy of those more conventionally attractive, whose beauty we may never attain. I strive to abandon my lurking insecurities and treat all

bodies—each projected reflection—with willful, unconditional love. To look in the mirror and tell the woman on display, whichever form she takes, that she matters. I'd like to view even the largest of bodies with enthusiasm, to abandon long-held stereotypes that align fat with laziness, filth, greed, and ill health. When the excess weight in the mirror loses its stigma, maybe that girl in my book can stop weeping, and realize finally that starving herself saves her from nothing; for our bodies, thick or thin, are miracles.

“Remember that your body is a work in progress. Try not to focus on what it looks like. Instead, think about all the great things your body can do” (Schaefer 9).

Late last Thanksgiving I held my cousin, Ollie, on our grandmother's couch. Ollie, four years old and snuggly in his airplane-print pajamas, stretched out comfortably onto the body I loved to hate.

“You are soooo comfy!” he told me drowsily, turning his brown-eyed face to meet mine, as if it were the most natural thing for one person to say to another.

“I'm comfy, huh?” I asked, patting his skinny little-boy thigh as his head fell onto my chest. He fell asleep seconds later.

Ollie will never know how much I needed his words—perhaps that's what makes them so beautiful. He didn't speak them in pity, and he didn't try complimenting me by denying my fatness, like many well-meaning friends have over the years. He very practically—very honestly—praised my body composition for providing him with comfort.

Each piece of clothing I couldn't find in my size, each fractal of shame I felt whenever I stepped on the scale, each high school classmate who called me “the fat girl” when they didn't think I was listening, did not matter then. What mattered was this little person, his body warm on my body, asleep and comforted not despite my wide-set, heavily padded frame, but because of it. My body at once became useful to this child, and I could love that without hesitation.

I wondered if I could find other ways to love my body.

The ways my hands can make music; covering holes on a pennywhistle, pressing keys on a saxophone, plunking out Schumann on the piano now that I've learned the difference between low notes and high; varying and necessary, much like our bodies. Those same hands knead dough on quiet Sunday afternoons, tap letters on a keyboard to form words, sentences, stories—my story. They pat bunnies and stroke cats and hug friends; hold books, adjust glasses, grip a German fountain pen; absentmindedly pick at grass as I lie, uninterrupted, in a park.

My voice, which for too long remained silent out of fear, escapes my lips—sometimes with conviction. Hours fall away as I talk with friends of memories, politics, aspirations. I sing in a choir, release energy from this body I have not always been able to love, and join in communion as we chant, *laudamus te, benedicimus te*, “We praise you, we bless you.” I can praise God with this body, this voice I have claimed as my own.

My eyes, which see both good and bad, but have lately been trying harder to see good. They scan the world for opportunities to learn, to process an image and transfer it through a terribly complex process to a place in my brain that can use it. These eyes have shown me art: Degas’ dancers, Turner’s landscapes, Van Gogh’s flowers, Seurat’s bathers. Each stroke, created with their bodies, painting bodies, to be loved and cherished over a hundred years later when my body walks through galleries, eyes absorbing each hypnotizing fleck of pigmentation.

My legs that have carried me up mountains, through forests, along beaches that extend for miles in every direction. They have brought me to trees splayed out for eternities, the strange and tireless action of busy urban streets, empty trails shared only with sheep and ruins. Legs that jump, twist, push, climb, and kick, propelling me through this world that will never run out of places to walk.

My tongue, which has tasted miracles: Kobe beef cooked medium rare, seasoned only with kosher salt because anything else would ruin its primal, marbled perfection. Mackerel tartare; raw fish smooth like butter, melting between my teeth with complementary bursts of grapefruit and sharp horseradish. An artisan chocolate sampled at Borough Market; spherical and the size of a penny, dusted with cocoa, encapsulating liquid caramel made with salt from an island south of France—I crack its shell, eyes widening in astonishment as I vow to never enjoy a Hershey bar again.

My ovaries, which carry potential for creation too sacred for me to fully comprehend. These parts of my body—tucked away, never seen, rarely talked about—hold the stuff of life, cells constructed in my mother’s womb, every piece of genetic code I could ever hope to pass on to continue the lineage of Eve. A human ovum, one among thousands, is precious and disposable, more likely to die unnoticed than to amount to anything—anybody—worthwhile; a living paradox hinting at secrets of the feminine divine, reminding me that my body, in existing, can know intimately both life and death, milk and blood.

My body—this fat, imperfect body—so often puts my soul in the way of beauty. It does not keep me from living, but drives me to live, to see what is new, feel emotions that replenish, taste food created to be savored, aspire to bear life. It comforts sleepy children, embraces friends in need and people I’ve longed for, frees me from the prison of my own cynicism time and time again. Who am I—a recipient of grandeur—to decide my body isn’t good enough to love?

“No book is a substitute for talking to your parents, your doctor, or other adults you trust—people whose job it is to take care of you . . . Remember, the grown-ups in your life were once your age, too, and have experience and wisdom to share with you” (Schaefer 8).

When our doctor told me, at twelve, that I would have to eat cornflakes for breakfast even though my thin friends could get away with eating Lucky Charms and Pop-Tarts, I stopped going to checkups. Each time a letter came asking my mom to make an appointment, I told her I wouldn't go. My body was not up for discussion.

I suppose there's a chance that my embarrassed stubbornness saved me. Perhaps I knew, instinctively, to self-preserve. I don't share Kristen's anxiety issues or destructive perfectionism that played a part in her eating disorder, but what if our mom had not learned to let my weight be—to treat my body less like a problem to be solved and more like the miracle that it is? If I had gone to the doctor and suffered through lecture after lecture on diet and exercise like Kristen did, I might have likewise found myself bingeing and purging, gagging into a toilet bowl in ashamed, broken secrecy.

I cannot know with certainty what might have happened. I can never know, because things worked out for me, in part due to Kristen's subtle, noted efforts to squeeze self-love right into me.

What I do know is this: if I someday have a daughter, she will never hear me utter a word about her weight, or my weight, or her father's weight, or her sister's weight. I'll feed her kale and peanut butter and pizza, and tell her daily how beautiful she is, how beautiful we are. We'll read important books, and will feel comfortable with our feminine bodily vulnerability—we will know it gives us strength. We will talk about our bodies in wonder and gratitude; shame will be saved for disciplining unkind thoughts and words about ourselves and those around us. When her brother calls her “fatso,” he will feel my wrath. When the doctor suggests appetite suppressants to any of my children, I'll find another doctor. If one of my daughters pukes or cuts to forget her life so marked with perceived inadequacy, I will hold her and tell her that we will find help. That things will turn out all right.

My mother did not know this protocol. The gospel of radical body acceptance escaped her, in part because it didn't yet exist, not visibly anyway. She did not have a bulimic sister, or a New York Times health section, or a someone to tell her it's okay to have an obese daughter on blood pressure medication. She did not grow up fat.

I cannot blame her now for the poor judgments of our doctor, or my sister's hidden illness. There's no sense in lingering on past mistakes, past inaction, past ignorance. We have—all of us—largely healed.

But when my one-day daughter steps on the scale and learns for the first time that she weighs eighty pounds, I will ask her if she wants to help me bake a cake to share with our friends. And if she runs to me excitedly a few weeks later, telling me she's lost weight, I will remind her it means nothing. That I'm proud of her for writing poems that rhyme and drawing babies, flowers, clocks. That her worth is not tied to a number. That no string, gold or otherwise, could ever measure her greatness. That a child might recline on her belly to remind her of the love she can inspire; that her chubby, useful fingers will someday move mountains; that a size twenty-two dress is beautiful as long as she's wearing it. That her body is good enough to love.

