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# The Language of Love (Memoir Fiction)

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## THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

SARAH JUSTINE SKRILOFF

"MOMMY'S HOME!" I cried, as I bounded down the stairs to the front door while my parents quickly shuffled into the house from a date night. "Hi Sweetie!" my mother cried, scooping me up into her arms. Her dark coat smelled like deep autumn in New York, and her red lipstick left a faint mark on my cheek. In that moment, I remember thinking that she was the most beautiful mother in the world. I envied her skin, so much darker than mine, and her freckled face, a sky of constellations waiting to be plotted. She was passionate, vivacious, and her every smile was warm and authentic. Her figure was pleasantly plump, and fit her Caribbean upbringing—full hips, full bust, full lips.

But as I grew older, it became apparent to me that my beautiful mother sometimes didn't think that she was beautiful. And with time, this had an effect on how I came to see my own body—a body that grew to look just like hers. I remember once, I overheard her comments as she chatted with a group of women at a local mommy meet-up. While talking, my mom suggested a dieting tip, then quickly retracted it and declared, "But I'm fat, so what do I know." The women laughed, and one of them slapped her arm playfully and said, "Oh Beth\*, stop it!" while they continued to giggle. Even though it was in passing, my mom had said it: FAT. My mom was fat. And as an insecure 10-year old, I wondered if my developing body would also receive the "FAT" title one day. With time, I became afraid of my growing chest and felt ashamed of each new development of what I believed to be an increasingly "fat" body.

My mom worked hard to stay involved in the local farmers' markets (something she never had access to while growing up in low-income housing). One time at the market, Mom left our puppy in the car with the AC on while she picked up vegetables. She chatted with other growers about the brussels sprouts crop and her favorite new string bean recipe. While I was helping my mom bag some tomatoes, throughout the market rang a husky, urgent voice, "There's a dog in the car! What idiot left their dog in the car?!" To my horror, I realized the owner of the voice, a stout older man with a trim white beard, was banging on our car windows. Sheer disgust intensified on his face as he walked back to the market to loudly recruit help to "rescue" the dog. Within seconds, my mom jumped to her feet and tried to explain that the dog was fine, but the man would have none of it. He continually screamed, yelled, and told my mom that she was incredibly stupid for leaving a dog in a car that he believed to be deathly hot.

My mom, mortified, snatched her veggies and rushed my sisters and me into

the gray minivan. Before we could leave the dusty lot, her tears started to flow and her internal monologue was thrust into the physical world: "They probably think I hate animals. I can't believe it... AND I'M THE FATTEST ONE HERE!" After she said that, her tears didn't stop until we got home. The car, full of her daughters, was silent except for the sound of sniffles. We never went back.

These comments affected me greatly. From a medical perspective, I was a very healthy young woman. Yet, in numerous family photos, my uncomfortable smile hints at the fact that I'm trying to hide my body from the camera—whether by partially hiding behind furniture or another person, or by holding my arms across my stomach. I attempted to cover any potential imperfections: the ones my mom might comment on if I wore my Sunday dress. Or if I ran to meet her and my bosom bounced. Or if I wanted more pizza. I feared being considered "fat"—at first by her, but gradually by others, as if being fat meant life would be somehow worse, and that my quality of life would be lowered, as my mother so thoroughly believed hers was.

As I entered BYU, I wore form-fitting outfits so that no one would mistake baggy shirts for any additional weight. I would constantly fidget with my clothes and suck in my gut when I walked. I felt constantly visible, constantly criticized, even though no verbal harassments were spoken to me on campus. My insecurity only started to crack when my newly-found art student friends asked to sketch me for figure studies, saying that they never got the chance to chronicle such beautiful curves in their drawing classes. Others began to comment on my clothes, not because of how they fit my body, but because of how they beautifully represented my detail-focused and sharp personality. These positive comments, in addition to time away from home, helped me realize that my body fit me. This body reflected my heritage, and when I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw not just my mother, but my grandmother and my great-grandmother; I saw myself as the latest edition in a line of beautiful, full-bodied, strong women. I began to highlight my curves with cinched-waist dresses and full skirts, and I learned to better accept compliments and create a positive internal dialogue. While there were still daily struggles and multiple outfit changes most mornings, I began to feel genuinely comfortable in the shapely, freckled body that I owned. Yet, when I returned home for Christmas, my mom would question my eating habits and my thighs were analyzed and put on display for public debate.

I tried hard to brush off my mom's comments and to be the healthier, happier self that I was growing to love. One morning during my sophomore

year, I video called my mom to show her my new apartment. As soon as the camera turned on, I heard, "Wow, you've really filled out!" Something in me cracked. I launched into a tirade of comments: she should keep her thoughts to herself...I know I'm getting fat...I don't need her to point it out...I think I look fine. My face turned bright red and felt hot with anger. My mom took a moment to compose herself before she spoke, and we glared at each other, through tears, 2,500 miles apart. She carefully explained that she started getting fat when she was my age, and no one in her family "loved her" enough to tell her to watch herself and take control of her body. And now here she was: 55, "fat" for her entire adult life, and trying to "help" me avoid her fate. I told her that I was aware of myself and that I never wanted to ever hear her discussing my body again. I hung up.

The next day, she called to apologize. We talked it through. I told her that her comments about my body affected me and that I was painfully aware of every pound I gained. My mom was trying to show me love by protect me, but the way in which she did it was one that I perceived as judgmental and critical; It hurt me more than it helped. We agreed that I'd be in charge of commentary on my body from then on, and she hasn't commented on any imaginary imperfections with my body ever since.

Today, we talk about New Year's resolutions. We help each other with our websites and resumes. We spend hours on the phone talking about current events and amazing baking recipes. She was proud of me when I made a perfect Texas Sheet Cake, and I was proud of her when she stopped dying her hair and let it turn an ethereal shade of silver. We talk about the life we live in our bodies, not about our bodies themselves. Through this, we've learned to show our love through language—but this time, that language is healthy and helpful to both of us.

\*Names have been changed





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