

PRAISE FOR WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

“This memoir is exactly what we need: a hilarious, heartwarming book that reminds us that life, with all its ups and downs, is still beautiful.”

—**BUNMI LADITAN**, bestselling author of *Confessions of a Domestic Failure* and humorist behind *The Honest Toddler*

“Anna Lind Thomas will make you laugh and cry and remember what it’s like to get the giggles. Her stories are full of humor and heart and remind you that you can laugh about some of the worst times in your life . . . eventually.”

—**CINDY CHUPACK**, *New York Times* bestselling author and Emmy-winning writer/producer of *Sex and the City*, *Modern Family*, *Otherhood*, and more

“Oh my gosh, I couldn’t put this down. Anna’s spectacular writing paints such a beautifully vivid picture that I felt like I was right there alongside her in these memories. I was laughing and nodding the whole time and couldn’t devour it quickly enough. This memoir reminded me that while life isn’t always perfect, we somehow always end up exactly where we are meant to be.”

—**TIFFANY JENKINS**, bestselling author of *High Achiever* and humorist behind *Juggling the Jenkins*

“When I first met Anna Lind Thomas, she was better at everything than me (social media, writing, being funny), but she didn’t act that way. She was kind and thoughtful, and I loved her instantly. So, if you only care about this book being hilarious and relatable, then guess what? You’re in luck. But if you (like me) want the writer to be someone you’d split a bowl of queso with? Then you couldn’t have made a better choice.”

—**MELISSA RADKE**, author of *Eat Cake. Be Brave.* and star of USA’s reality show *The Radkes*

“I knew I loved Anna’s writing when I read about the fart that was heard (and smelled) around the world. But Anna is more than just a fartiste—her writing sparkles with honesty, insight, and warmth. If you’re hungry for deep, bowel-loosening laughs along with a side dish of humanity and understanding, then get yourself a copy of this book. (And maybe pick up an air freshener too.)”

—**JOHANNA STEIN**, author of *How Not to Calm a Child on a Plane* and award-winning television writer and producer

**WE'LL LAUGH
ABOUT THIS**
someday

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ESSAYS ON TAKING LIFE
A *smidge* TOO SERIOUSLY

ANNA LIND THOMAS



NELSON
BOOKS

An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

We'll Laugh About This (Someday)

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ISBN 978-1-4002-2197-4 (eBook)

ISBN 978-1-4002-2196-7 (TP)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thomas, Anna Lind, author.

Title: We'll laugh about this (someday) : essays on taking life a smidge too seriously / Anna Lind Thomas.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee : Thomas Nelson, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "From popular humor writer and social media sensation Anna Lind Thomas comes an essay collection that is sure to make you laugh, cry, and cry from laughing as you discover how to take life a smidge less seriously"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021007006 (print) | LCCN 2021007007 (ebook) | ISBN 9781400221967 (paperback) | ISBN 9781400221974 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Conduct of life--Humor.

Classification: LCC PN6231.C6142 W46 2021 (print) | LCC PN6231.C6142 (ebook) | DDC 818/.602--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021007006>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021007007>

Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To my darling daughters, Lucy and Poppy—
the most hilarious little women I know.*

CONTENTS

<i>A Little Note</i>	XI
Chapter 1 Spring Fresh	1
Chapter 2 Chubby Kids Laugh Last and Eat First	13
Chapter 3 My Period, Merle, and Me	31
Chapter 4 You're Welcome, Lady Gaga	39
Chapter 5 We'll Laugh About This . . . Someday	53
Chapter 6 Whaddya Have to Lose?	69
Chapter 7 Couple's Massage	83
Chapter 8 Whole Foods Linda	99
Chapter 9 Frances with the Good Saline	109
Chapter 10 Steve Buscemi Eyes	123
Chapter 11 Unfollowed	137
Chapter 12 Baby Is Fine, but I'm Dead	153
Chapter 13 Fear Box	167
Chapter 14 Dance Cardio	181
Chapter 15 Almost Murdered	193
Chapter 16 Sheets for Curtains	201
Chapter 17 The Gingerbread Man	207
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	217
<i>Notes</i>	221
<i>About the Author</i>	223

A LITTLE NOTE

Rob and I were sitting outside a breakfast café, sharing a gigantic cinnamon roll, when I asked how he'd feel if I stopped working a full-time job to pursue writing. I still remember the way he casually gave me his blessing as if my idea weren't an enormous, if not catastrophic, financial risk. He had left the air force and was a full-time nursing student. I mean, honestly, *what* was he thinking? But that's the way he's always been: a partner who moves completely out of the way so I can try my hardest to become the woman I'd like to be.

I immediately got to work on a website I called HaHas for HooHas. My best friend, Jen, and I (you'll notice Jen makes a lot of guest appearances in this book) created as much funny content for women as we could handle. I tried to post one funny essay per week, but I had a hard time coming up with material. I wasn't a

A LITTLE NOTE

good enough writer to make something interesting out of the mundane, so I needed outrageous stories to see me through the early years—and didn't have a whole lot of outrageous experiences to share.

It all changed one night when my parents had Rob and me over for dinner. Somehow the conversation led me to recapping a funny story of when I had farted on one of our first dates. We all laughed and laughed, but eventually I needed to wrap things up and get home. I took one last bite of mostaccioli and said, "Well, we better skedaddle. I have an essay I need to publish tomorrow on HooHas, and I have no idea what I'm going to write about."

Head tilted, my mom said, "Um, how about the story you just told us?"

I had a late start the next morning and needed to get to a dentist appointment, but I'd made a commitment to post an essay every Thursday morning, so I wasn't letting myself off the hook. In about thirty minutes I wrote an essay titled "The Fart That (Almost) Altered My Destiny." We had very few followers at the time, so I thought maybe a handful of friends and family members would slap a Like on it and that would be that. I couldn't have imagined that a new friend I'd met at a conference, a popular influencer, would read my essay and share it with her large audience. By the time I got home, my website had crashed.

I must say, I'm constantly tempted to rewrite the fart story. To make it better, funnier, more well written—with fewer exclamation points. But it's so loved, just as it is, that I think it's best not to touch it. I share the story again in this book for all the fart story lovers. You know who you are!

A LITTLE NOTE

Really, when you think about it, the fart story is just some old-school potty humor. But it's more than that for me. I guess it's about a fart that didn't *almost* alter my destiny; it, in fact, altered my destiny *real good*. It helped me become a writer. And it also bailed Rob out of one of the worst financial decisions of his life.

Enjoy!

Anna

ONE

SPRING FRESH

Mom had missed her period, and there was only one person to blame: Aunt Cathy.

Aunt Cathy denies culpability, of course. It's not her fault Mom can't read a box. But I suppose it doesn't really matter now. I'm here, and there's no putting that cat back in the bag.

My story began in a freshly constructed home on an ordinary afternoon. Well, it *was* ordinary, right before the wallpaper man swung from the chandelier. My mother, Christine Lind, had two children at the time. Jenny was at kindergarten, and Christian had just finished nursing. Mom was walking him around the living room, gently thumping his back while his eyes

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

grew heavy. She couldn't stop eyeing the burly wallpaper man working atop a makeshift scaffold in the entryway.

In those days, my father, Dick Lind, was just hitting his stride as a home builder. This meant building a home, moving his young family in before it was finished, selling it quickly, then moving them into another before Mom had time to file divorce papers. She was raising her babies surrounded by dust, strange men splattered in paint, the shrilling sound of table saws, and wall-quivering thumps during nap time. For a young mother of two trying to build a nest, it was a stone-cold nightmare. Not that she wanted an *actual divorce*, per se; she loved my dad. But she did fantasize about it every now and then while stain treating the bright-yellow baby poop on her new white capris.

This home was their biggest, grandest abode yet, with a cute little turret to the north side and a tall, bright entryway where the new architectural designer was working through a color swatch. The house reeked of sharp, sickly sweet lacquer, and my mom, crunchy far before her time, suspected the fumes were cancerous. Or poisonous. Best case, everyone was going to get fatty tumors. Regardless, she wasn't taking any chances. She opened the windows, but the day was warm. Her furniture, the same furniture she had just dusted a few hours before, was covered in yet another thin layer of dust. My brother spit up into the crease of her neck, and it dribbled slowly into her cleavage. Sweat speckled her upper lip.

The house typically bubbled with activity, but not on that particular afternoon. It was eerily quiet as she eyed the wallpaper man. From her vantage point, she could only see parts

of the scaffolding and his big white Reeboks scuttling about freely like he wasn't high in the air on a wobbly piece of plywood. She laid my brother in his bassinet and was wiping her neck with a blanket when she saw the man's foot slip and the scaffold begin to collapse underneath him. She started toward him just as he grabbed the chandelier, his Reeboks swinging wildly. The designer was beneath him, clutching her swatches as the chandelier gave way. He dropped like an anvil, right on top of the designer. The wallpaper man grunted. The designer's back snapped. Mom screamed. And right then she made a decision. Christine Lind was done having children.



Over tuna casserole one night, Mom announced she was getting her tubes tied. It went over like a lead balloon. Dad sat across from her at the table, chewing slowly before saying gently, "Please don't; it's too rash." My dad would have had thirty kids if he could have gotten away with it, and I have to admit, he's a pretty great father. He's a doter—loving, attentive, and fun, and he can't for the life of him say no. Of course, this was back in the day of traditional gender roles, when dads weren't expected to participate in the day-to-day grind of parenting. Fatherhood's pretty easy if you've never dragged your limp, lifeless body out of bed to feed a screaming baby at three o'clock in the morning. Or suffered the indignities of a short-order cook while tiny idiots complain their grilled cheese is "too brown." The man didn't even discipline much; he just gave us whatever we wanted. The poor woman had

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

enough on her plate. She was busy making tuna casseroles for tiny people who snubbed tuna casseroles.

Still, she respected his wishes and decided to take a pause on invasive surgeries. Getting her tubes tied was permanent and, frankly, sounded a smidge barbaric—like a doctor casually suggesting he make a square knot out of your intestines. Perhaps there was an alternative that sounded less terrifying. She decided on spermicide, an over-the-counter product guaranteed to go on a murderous sperm rampage on the user's behalf.

Mom may have known she was done having children the day the wallpaper man broke the designer's back, but she didn't know that in less than two years, she'd endure long hospital stays and endless nights rocking my sweet-natured, curly-haired brother as she sat on top of the toilet. Christian had contracted whooping cough. The shower would run hot, Mom's hair frizzing up from the sweltering steam. She would hum gently, her body no longer her own, given as comfort to a wheezing little boy. The agonizing wait to hear him take a breath after every cough dampened the joy of motherhood. The uncertainty of it all left little room for much else. Eventually, though, he got better. And the day she knew he'd be fine, her first thought wasn't *Let's have another baby!* It was *I think I'll start a book club!*

As her twenties came to a close and her two children grew older, Mom leaned in hard to her growing independence. She was feeling quite pleased with herself. She was fit, her skin was taut, her hair full, and her possibilities endless. My dad's home-building business was growing, and while they still moved a lot, it became easier with older children. She took pride in homemaking,

enjoyed volunteering, and started to quilt with a bunch of old ladies because the world was her oyster. She worked diligently to prevent me, obviously, because her social life was in full bloom. Who wants to start over from scratch when you've just started sleeping through the night and your stitchwork is finally on point?

Then, sometime after Christmas, Aunt Cathy called. "Oh, Chris, you're not gonna believe this," she said breathlessly into the receiver. "There's a brand of spermicide that comes in disposable applicators now!"

Mom took in a sharp breath. "No!"

"Yes!" Aunt Cathy went on, painting a wondrous future in which neither woman had to store her applicators next to the toothpaste anymore. "Just put it right in the trash. Outta sight, outta mind!"

Mom leaned against the wall, full of wonder. Disposable applicators! What was next, phones without cords? This was the '80s, so things were bleak—women had to take aspirin for period cramps because ibuprofen wasn't available over the counter yet. They wore high-waisted, camel-toe jeans and sported bangs like tsunami tidal waves. Any progress for women and our feminine products was a giant leap for womankind.

Mom hung up the phone and looked at her Christmas tree, still festive but now dry and drooping. A few ornaments were holding on for dear life, while two had given up, released their grip, and landed on the tree skirt, hoping for the best. The tree, which had just a few days ago filled the whole house with holiday delight, was now nothing more than an inconvenient fire hazard. *New Year's Eve is in a few days*, she thought. *The perfect*

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

opportunity to buy the new spermicide and take it out for a spin. She made her way down to the storage room, lugging up empty Christmas boxes. Jenny and Christian were lying on their stomachs in front of the TV. Dad was dozing in and out on the couch. Mom began carefully wrapping each ornament and putting it away before losing steam. Her heart wasn't in it, and she needed a quick distraction. She remembered she was out of coffee and a few other pantry staples. She grabbed her keys, hopped into her Buick Regal, and headed across town to the grocery store.



Sometimes I wonder, *Does the young stock boy who was tasked with organizing all the douches realize he played a key role in my existence? And the butterfly effect this has caused?* Just yesterday I stopped a poor woman to let her know she had a surprisingly long train of toilet paper stuck to her shoe, and you should have seen her relief. I saved her from an entire day of humiliation. Can you imagine her lot had I not existed? Thankfully for her, decades prior, a stock boy displayed douches on the shelf just so, unwittingly drawing the eye of Christine Lind.

My mom pulled up next to him, her cart bearing a can of Folgers, a jar of cinnamon, and some moisturizer she didn't really need but had grabbed anyway, thinking, *Oh, what the hell.* She smiled at the stock boy as he took a step back to give her some space. He fidgeted and looked up toward the ceiling because watching a woman peruse feminine products made him feel all uncomfortable, like walking in on your grandma shaving her

armpits. He decided to take his fifteen-minute break early. Mom scanned a package, blocking out key words like *douche* or *spring fresh*, and zeroed in on *disposable applicators* in order to complete her mission. She grabbed that puppy off the shelf and tossed it in the cart, where it bounced off the can of Folgers.

Armed with a fresh box of “contraceptives” and a new zest for life, my mom ran home into the arms of my father. I can see it now: Mom scuttling off into the bathroom, box in hand, to prepare for their tête-à-tête. I envision her beaming with the confidence that she was in control of her destiny. Her period had just ended, so she knew she wasn’t ovulating, but she wanted to use protection anyway. One can never be too careful, amirite? And, if you recall the burly wallpaper man swinging from the chandelier, she’d made up her mind about future children. So, with the confidence of a village idiot, Mom took methodical measures to prevent me by douching herself right up while ovulating early.

Years later, as a teen, I asked her if the “fresh scent” while applying her “spermicide” had given her any pause, since that would be an odd thing to add to a spermicide. She told me she couldn’t really remember.

“But didn’t you see the word *douche* on the box?” I asked in distress.

“Apparently not,” she said, wiping down the counter with a dish towel.

“So, I exist because you spring-fresh douched yourself on New Year’s Eve before doing it with Dad? Oh, this is just . . .” I trailed off before getting up from the table. Although I was a teenager and old enough to know my parents had had sex at my

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

conception, the fact that she'd douched beforehand added a layer I wasn't willing to accept.



Several days passed, and Mom's anxiety began to build when something wasn't right. Had it been over a week? She had lost count now. Every few hours she'd run to the bathroom, thinking maybe she had finally felt a little something down there. But nothing. Her period never came.

Mom didn't deserve this. She had done her due diligence. She'd purchased the spermicide. You know, the new kind of spermicide that had the word *douche* on the box and smelled like freshly washed sheets dried in the springtime sun. She had done her part. *Now providence, do yours!*

But it was too late. I was happening.

And Mom was devastated.

She cried a lot and spent two weeks in bed. My dad wasn't feeling particularly compassionate. The weeping just went on and on, and he had stuff to do. In his defense, a baby was on its way, not the bubonic plague. But in her defense, a human life is kind of a big deal. In fact, the introduction of a baby to any family is life altering for everyone involved. That babe requires an immense amount of selflessness on everyone's part just to keep it alive. And sometimes after years and years of selflessness, a woman just wants to think about herself and enjoy her life, on her terms. Even if just for little moments as her children grow older and she fears their deaths less when they play in another room.

The loneliness and dread swallowed her whole. Like a game of Chutes and Ladders, she had made her way through and started to believe she'd soon get a win. Then she'd rolled the dice, one last time, and landed on the big, obnoxious slide that shoots you all the way down, back to square one.

She put Jenny and Christian to bed and crawled into her own. Mom felt the small round curve of her belly. Somewhere I was in there, being knitted together by this and that. My DNA doled out orders, making sure I had my grandpa Gustav's long, thin Swedish nose and my mom's Sicilian brown eyes. My DNA also ordered a metabolism that's sleepy and smacks its lips a lot, like an old, fat bulldog. I also lack pinky toenails, so there was probably some room for improvement in the process. But, whatever, the job's done now, so it's best we move on.

It was then, as my DNA knitted together weird pinky toes, that my mom felt something else besides doom. It took her by surprise, although it wasn't surprising.

Love. All-encompassing, will-totally-kill-somebody-if-I-have-to love.

"It'll be a girl, and I'll call her Anna," she whispered to herself. (Oh, so Mom can't tell the difference between contraceptives and a douche, but she can get spot-on premonitions? I see how she rolls.)

But there, lonely in bed, she started to fall in love with me. Maybe being pregnant wasn't so serious. Yes, it again felt like the worst thing that could have happened to her. But maybe I could be the best thing to happen to her too.

She got herself out of bed and found my dad in the kitchen.

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

“We’ll name her Anna,” she told him as she wrapped her arms around his waist. “But no more moving our children into unfinished homes. And no more wallpaper men swinging from our chandeliers.”

He agreed.

I don’t know what happened to the wallpaper man, but the new designer fully recovered from her broken back. And that weird accident was one of the first steps to my existence. The fall that broke the designer’s back was the straw that broke the camel’s back, so to speak—the catalyst to my mom’s spermi-cidal campaign against me. I’m sure that brings the designer little solace, as her back probably hurts like hell right before it rains. Of course, if Aunt Cathy hadn’t recommended a spermi-cide Mom swears didn’t exist (that Aunt Cathy insists *does* exist while claiming Mom needs to take responsibility for her own contraceptives) and the stock boy hadn’t intermingled spermi-cide and douches to lead her off the scent, well, you’d probably be enjoying some other book from some other author. Frankly, I get jealous just thinking about it.

I’ve read that the chances of me being me or you being you are one in four hundred quadrillion.¹ It’s a wonder any of us are even here at all.

I’m like a rare ruby in a gigantic pile of billions of rubies. Okay, fine. People are everywhere, and that can be real annoying, especially in traffic and while Christmas shopping. I guess with so many people milling about, none of us are really “special” per se. But at the same time, the odds we beat are too good for us to not have a precious, inherent worth. Even me, with my two freak

SPRING FRESH

toes. And a laugh that's so loud it scares people and then gradually annoys them.

If my haters got a problem with it, they can take it up with Aunt Cathy.

TWO

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

Mom was, and still is, a bit of a health freak—a real drag for a kid growing up in the '80s. During a time when dietitians were recommending a cup of Frosted Flakes each morning as a low-fat breakfast, Mom was grinding her own grain and churning butter like an Amish woman. She also replaced sugar with honey and bought plain, flavorless cereal that made you feel sad. In a world filled with Lucky Charms, my suffering knew no bounds.

Thankfully, I didn't suffer alone. My dad came to my rescue, often acting as my inside accomplice. Like a prisoner passing out small shampoo bottles filled with moonshine when the guard's

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

back was turned, Dad was known to slip a little handful of chocolate chips into the modest bowl of raisins Mom had given me as a snack. Or give me a glass of chocolate milk made with leftover chocolate syrup Mom had used for ice cream sundaes at my brother's birthday party. I'd be reading *A Bargain for Frances* on the stairs when he'd hand me a glass. Afraid of the warden, I'd whisper, "Where's Mom?" with my eyes shifting side to side.

"She's in her room," he'd say, also whispering. "Stop worrying so much. I'm the dad, and I'm the boss." We both knew that wasn't true, but I'd believe anything for a tall glass of chocolate milk.

One time Mom offered to buy me an ice cream sandwich as a special treat from a local health-food grocery called No Name Nutrition. It should have been called "Nothing in Here Tastes Great If We're Being Honest." The store was operated by a staff wearing completely useless aluminum-free deodorant long before it was in fashion. I was hopeful when I picked out the treat from the freezer section, but it didn't take long for truth to reveal itself. A clerk with pit stains the size of serving platters invited us to her open lane, and after Mom paid, I slipped off the wrapper and gave it a try. Disappointment slapped me in the face. The cookie part of the ice cream sandwich tasted like cardboard, and the carob chips posing as chocolate chips offended me gravely. I still remember the look on Mom's face when I wouldn't finish it. Understanding, but a little put out. "It's all right; just throw it away," she said, waving me off. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

What Mom failed to predict was how I would behave once I

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

stepped out from her watchful eye. Like an Amish kid embarking on a Rumspringa ripper, I hit the hard suburban streets looking for any neon-colored freeze pops I could get my hands on. The trick was to select the houses where the parents were always out of sight but kept stockpiles of junk food for their kids and kids' friends to have without needing permission. Boxes of Capri Sun stacked against the walls. Every variety of Little Debbie cakes, Pop-Tarts, and Fruit Roll-Ups in the cupboards. And a car-sized variety pack of potato chips. I don't remember the name of the girl whose house I would party at, but I do remember my cheeks flushed from sweat on a muggy July day after polishing off my third Little Debbie Oatmeal Creme Pie in her garage. Like a secret smoker spraying down with Febreze before walking back into the house, I brushed off crumbs from my shirt and checked my face for frosting before hopping on my bike as the streetlights buzzed and flickered on.

I should have known Mom was up to no good when she called me down for fresh donuts. Pastries were reserved for the most special of occasions, and even then, my dad was the one who decided to buy them and bring them home. Mom would sigh, hands on her hips, feigning displeasure as if Dad had just brought home an English mastiff.

How could I have not picked up on her tone? She was far too casual and pleased with herself. I was reading a Little Critter book in my wooden rocking chair when she hollered the news. Mom might as well have said Santa was downstairs, I was so jazzed. I threw my book across the room and ran down the stairs, gripping the railing hard, taking two steps at a time, slipping and

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

bouncing my butt off one or two. I finally emerged into a near-empty kitchen, huffing, looking around like a cop chasing a thief who had just slipped into the shadows.

“Yum, yum, yum!” Mom said, emerging from the darkness. “Whole grain donuts with a little honey drizzle. Have one!” She waved her arm like Vanna White, revealing a plate piled high with dark-brown mounds, shaped less like conventional donuts and more like the result of a child’s craft project.

My sister was standing to the side, eating one of the donuts heartily. “They’re not bad,” she said. Her voice was stuffed, like she had a hot pad stuck in her throat. Maybe I was being too sensitive, but I was pretty sure there was an extreme injustice unfolding before my eyes and everyone was acting normal about it. The Bible says, “What father among you, if his son asks for bread, would give him a stone, or if he asks for a fish, would give him a snake instead of the fish?” (Luke 11:11). But I would go further and say, “What mother would tell her child there were donuts, only to serve her honey-glazed insults?” Not a good one; I was sure of that much.

Jenny continued to chomp away, like she was actually enjoying herself, and I was disgusted. I relied on her, as my older sister, my ally, to speak up for the children. Of all people, she knew this wasn’t a donut. It was a mockery. And by the way—if these donuts were so delicious, where was my dad? Where was my brother? Somewhere in the house, not giving two craps about ancient-grain, honey-dipped donuts, that’s where.

After a long silence, I spoke. “But why are they so dark brown?”

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

“Because,” Mom said, picking up the plate, “I made them with fresh-ground whole grains. I fried them in olive oil and then drizzled honey all over them. This is what real donuts are supposed to look like, not that fake junk at the store. They are so good and so good for you, sweetheart. Go on.” She pushed the plate toward me. “Try one.”

These are what real donuts are supposed to look like? I thought. I might as well have been chatting with Tom Cruise as he defended Scientology. *I mean, do you even hear yourself?*

But I picked one up, sniffed it, and took a bite. At that point, it was simple charity for a mother who had just gone through an immense amount of work to treat her children with healthful foods. I chewed slowly. It wasn't gross, but it definitely wasn't anything close to a donut. It was the kind of thing people eat on the first week of their diet to try and convince themselves they're really gonna do it this time. “I don't feel deprived at all!” they say—the first clue they're either in denial or a liar.

Since her donut betrayal, a few decades have passed, and Mom's steely resolve for perfect health hasn't wavered. Her prairie-raised eggs taste like a piña colada gone wrong thanks to the huge dollop of unrefined coconut oil she sautés them in. But she's also softened her crunchy edges, enjoying foods of all kinds in their proper time and place.

Not too long ago, we were on our way to Whole Foods. I'd come to realize she wasn't a total health freak; she just had *freak tendencies*.

“Oh, I knew your father was slipping you treats,” she said casually. “All I wanted to do was build you a strong foundation.”

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

Mom rustled in her purse and opened up a piece of Wrigley's Juicy Fruit gum. "That way, if the house ever fell when you were an adult, you'd have something sturdy to rebuild on."

"Doesn't that have sugar in it?" I pointed out. As an adult, I began to adopt some of her health-freak tendencies and grew concerned the master no longer practiced what she preached.

"I'd rather have a little real sugar than that aspartame poison," she said, slipping it in her mouth. "And the gum you get at health stores tastes like flavorless rubber." I quietly agreed, recalling a time I burned through a twelve-dollar pack of health-food gum trying to chase that first hint of cinnamon before it slipped away like a wisp of smoke. Mom handed me a stick.

"This Juicy Fruit really is juicy," I said, almost disturbed by the amount of saliva collecting in my cheeks. Mom nodded in agreement. We both sat back and enjoyed a little sugar, smacking and smacking, all the way to Whole Foods to buy our eight-dollar prairie-raised eggs and coconut oil.



I could see my sixteen-year-old sister, sunbathing, glistening, shimmering, sparkling in the sun. Where she got the tanning oil and why she lathered herself in it, I couldn't tell you. She was at my swim lesson, not a Sandals resort.

"Oh, forget it," my mom said, rooting around in her purse. "The sun's too bright." On the way there, my sister had sat on Mom's sunglasses, breaking off the right arm. Mom eventually found what was left of her silver-rimmed shades, put them on,

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

and looked toward the pool with dignity, as if she didn't have a pair of busted sunglasses on her face.

My swim instructors were blond, bronzed, eighteen-year-old twin boys, and it didn't take long to figure out why my sister had hopped in the car with us. The twins taught swim lessons in their parents' backyard pool on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I assume they were certified lifeguards and swim instructors, but it was the '80s, so who really knows.

They are responsible for one of two vivid moments in my life when my biology first awakened in the presence of handsomeness. The first seedling of my budding femininity breaking through the soil was when one took my hand and helped me into the pool. I felt something within me stir, like when an old bulldog lifts his drowsy head. The second awakening was a year or two later when I was at a friend's house after school. Her mom had left VH1 on while doing laundry. George Michael's "Faith" music video played, and, frankly, it changed me. As he shook his butt and danced on-screen, something within me stirred, and that drowsy bulldog turned into a full-on marching band, complete with a high-stepping drum major.

Back at the pool, the twins told me and my wispy classmates with superior metabolisms to hold on to the edge of the pool and practice our kicking. I flapped my legs furiously, eager to impress, splashing water up to my face, up my nose, and down my throat, causing me to puke out spats of chlorine water.

You wouldn't know it by the strength of my paddles, but I was feeling disappointed. My Mickey Mouse bathing suit left a lot to be desired. It clung to my meatier parts, and I protested as

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

much, but no one in my family took me seriously. To them, I was their adorable “baby” in a Mickey Mouse swimsuit, and *fluffy, fluffy, fluffy* to boot!

Despite Mom’s efforts to feed us only the very best, I’ve always been at various stages of “fluffy” my whole life. It’s part genetic, part me being always down for a real good time. I don’t know what being truly thin feels like. I imagine it’s chilly and your bones are all knobby and vulnerable. I came close once, for about two weeks, in my early thirties. It was the thinnest I had ever been, and I recall my shock when I could no longer sleep on my side because of how much I hated feeling my knee bones rub. I bragged about it to my mom the following morning (who else can you truly brag to about weight loss?). “It’s the craziest thing!” I shouted into the receiver. “I have to sleep with a pillow in between my legs now!” Then I laughed and laughed while peeling the shell off a hard-boiled egg.

As a child, though, it’s very difficult to tell your family you feel a little self-conscious because when you’re the baby of the family, everyone looks at you like they want to put you in between two hoagie buns and gobble you up. I was a person, for heaven’s sake! With thoughts and ideas! Passions and pain! *Stop pinching my buns!* But they saw me as perfect, just as I was. And I was perfect. I was a healthy-sized little girl whom they loved. It’s strange, though, how I felt so imperfect, so inadequate, *so fat*. Where did I learn it, and why did I accept it? I guess my innocence was simply chipped away by the outside world, a death-by-a-thousand-paper-cuts sort of thing. And it was just the beginning.

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

That day at the pool, I practiced my kicks on a paddleboard, with disciplined form and stamina. I kept glancing at the twins, sure they were impressed, but soon discovered neither of them was giving my stride a passing glance. They were too busy checking out my sister. She had a freshness, a sensuality about her I hadn't noticed before. I couldn't place what was making the difference. Maybe it was the way she was shaking her hair, the slight purse of her lips, or the way she dumped half a bottle of tanning oil all over her legs and then looked around aimlessly for a towel after she'd gone too far. The signals were sent, and the signals were strong. How could a fluffy child compete with that?

As young girls, we often had a delightful optimism that perhaps, while screaming and crying and singing our hearts out as NSYNC performed onstage, maybe, somehow, Justin Timberlake would come down offstage, see us, and instantly fall in love. What we'd do with that love, we had no idea, because we still had to be in bed by nine. Then we'd see those photos of him with Britney Spears and think, *I really gotta do something about these braces.*

And so it was with my clingy Mickey Mouse swimsuit—it just wasn't cutting the mustard.

These were the very first moments I became aware of beauty and feared it. I was locked between my family's constant praise and adoration and my own inkling of doubt that perhaps they were a little biased. It didn't help that my fresh new Dorothy Hamill haircut at a JCPenney hair salon was extremely disappointing. The stylist cut my hair behind the ear, making it more of a "If Dorothy Hamill were an eleven-year-old boy" haircut. Really, does anyone escape childhood unscathed?

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

I made my way across the pool on a red kickboard. Jenny glistened, her eyes closed against the sun. Mom smiled at me and waved, her broken sunglasses tilted to the side. So proud and so dignified.



Taylor and I were bouncing about in her backyard, as third graders do, when we stopped to nibble on the cherry tomatoes growing in her family's small garden. She sighed and said, "My dad says I shouldn't eat too much or I'll get fat like you," casually, as if she were informing me one out of eleven adults suffers from type 2 diabetes.

Taylor lived on my street but didn't go to my elementary school, and I'm not even sure how we started playing together. My limited memory of her cuts like a ten-second movie preview, showcasing just the highlights. That particular highlight paved the road toward the dysfunctional Whitney and Bobby-esque love affair I now have with refined sugar. I still had a cherry tomato in my hand that I was just about to pop into my mouth when she whopped me with that comment. *What am I supposed to do with this tomato now?* I wondered.

I didn't have a lot of experience with sociopaths like Taylor, but a couple of years earlier (when I was quite normal sized, thank you very much), another little girl had thrown me similar shade. We lived right outside town in a beautiful country neighborhood. Although I don't recall specifics, I do remember Tia had black hair and she called me fat in her front yard. It

wasn't to be mean, I don't think; she was just stating facts. Her name was spelled t-i-a, and I was standing in her yard f-a-t. It was the kind of insult little kids say plainly, observationally, usually after they've been staring at an adult for a little while. "How come,"—*Oh crap*—"you have such a huge"—*here we go*—"butt?" they ask, usually when we're feeling really good in the new high-rise leggings we confidently wore without a sweat-shirt tied around our waist.

Regardless of Tia's intent, it was the first time anyone had ever insulted me, and I was aghast. I mean, I wasn't waify or lanky, and Mom never had to beg me to finish my lasagna. But I wasn't fat, and I knew it. My neighbor, Danielle, bore witness to the whole exchange and grew anxious under the tension. She was a year or two younger than me—a blonde, wispy little thing. She wanted to go home, so we walked back to her house quietly, both watching our step as we took the shortcut. I was chafed raw from the burrs but also from the false accusation. This couldn't stand. I had to clap back at my haters. So, with sweet little innocent Danielle in tow, I marched right back to Tia's house.

"Okay, so when we go up there," I said while Danielle and I high-stepped our way through tall grass, "pull on the back of my sweatshirt, nice and tight, so she can see I'm not fat." The plan was solid enough, and Danielle nodded in agreement, though we both sensed that being on my defense team was a bit out of her age range. But she was better than nothing, so we marched forward, renegades for justice. Tia was still in her front yard as we approached.

"Just so you know," I said, putting my hands on my hips, "I'm

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

not fat. I'm just wearing a loose shirt." I lifted my arms, my cue for Danielle to pull the back of my white Esprit sweatshirt as hard as she could, but she just stood there, blowing on a dandelion. I shot her several eye darts until she finally remembered her cue and pulled hard on the back of my sweatshirt. I sucked in my gut and tried to say "See?" to emphasize my point, but I mostly mouthed it because I didn't have enough air in my lungs to get the word out. Tia just shrugged, then picked up her scooter and tried to make a go of it in the bumpy grass of her ill-kempt front yard.

Danielle and I turned back down the road to her house. I hadn't felt any satisfaction after our little demonstration, but what else could I do? Other than go back with a scale and weigh myself on her front stoop—which wasn't that bad of an idea, come to think of it. Eventually, I got bored and went home in time for dinner.

A few years later, out of the country and back in the city, Taylor's insult was made of a different substance than Tia's. It was darker, deeper, truer. At that time, I had actually become a fat kid. Well, *chubby* is a better word. I won't deny it: I liked to sneak into the kitchen when no one was around and dunk potato chips into ketchup. But I wasn't completely unhinged.

I was just old enough to be aware of my chubbiness and somehow knew that, at least according to the world I lived in, I should be ashamed of it. When Taylor affirmed what I feared was true, it was another paper cut—sharp, subtle, stinging, and far worse than it looked.

But the injury wasn't so much that Taylor, a child, had said this to me—it was that her dad, a grown-up, had said it *to her*. Using me (me!) as an example of something disgusting and to be

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

avoided. *Wanna be a fatty like Anna?* I envisioned him asking a tiny Taylor, who then rigorously shook her head no. *Then stop asking for seconds.* Lava ran through my entire body, tingling up my neck, my chin, my ears. It was itchy, and I scratched at it like it was a rash. I don't remember what I did next. Did I go home? Act like it didn't happen and munch on more cherry tomatoes? Based on past experience, I can only assume I choked back tears and made up some excuse to go so I could let them out into my pillow.

Taylor's dad was a substitute teacher who stayed at home, and I don't remember what her mom did for a living. I only saw her a few times, and she was nice enough but not very warm. Her dad had a big, joyful, fun personality, but I detected a tinge of darkness in him. It was just a shadow, and I noticed it only because it was absent in my own father. For one reason or another—maybe it was the casual insults—I stopped hanging out with Taylor. Then one day I heard her dad's voice. He was substituting at my school and peeked in to say hello. "Anna Banana! You look good, kid!" he said with a wide smile. I really wanted to like him. I did. He was fun. And I wanted to believe he meant the compliment. But who was I kidding? I was just as chubby as ever. I stood there and waved back, my hand low, by my hip. In his defense, I bet he would have been horrified to know Taylor told me what he said. I couldn't help it, though. I hated him.



For the most part, I grew up in a family known to be fit and good-looking, a real drag for a late bloomer coming up behind the

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

pack. Sure, it's fair to say that by now each of my family members has gone through a phase where they played it fast and loose with processed carbs, but really, who hasn't?

There was my dad, a strong, fit Swede. And my mom, a stunning Sicilian woman (for us Sicilians, we can really go one of two ways: Sophia Loren or Big Mama Mia with a mustache). My brother, Christian, was a buff star athlete, and my sister, Jenny, was pretty much all anyone could ever talk about. I was lucky though; she adored me. Jenny doted on and cared for me as if I were her very own, and her love made her beauty something I grew up admiring rather than resenting. I was acutely aware of how the world interacted with her beauty. Children sense those vibes, and I found that most people don't know what to do with themselves around a beautiful person. Others, though, just did what they wanted. Cars packed with young men would follow us around, honking and hollering. At the mall, some people would stop to tell us all how beautiful she was as if it were their duty as good citizens to inform us. Some stared—dumbfounded, mute. Boys would slip her notes and smile. Girls looked up, starry eyed. Others, particularly middle-aged women, glared.

In elementary school, there was a special day where our parents were invited to have lunch with us. My parents couldn't make it, so Jenny left work at the Estée Lauder counter early to come in their place. All the boys who knew of her got giddy and high-fived as if Candace Cameron from *Full House* were doing a meet and greet. One boy I had a huge crush on asked if he could come hang at my house after school. I delightfully agreed, until I

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

realized it was a joke to get closer to my sister. *Like she'd be into some idiot who peed his pants last year*, I thought as my sweaty thighs streaked down the slide. *Give me a break!*

Does this kind of nonsense still happen to beautiful people, or have we finally gotten ahold of ourselves? I bet it still happens, just more subtly, since we're all supposed to pretend we don't care about physical beauty anymore. At least while writing our captions on Instagram.

It wasn't the people fumbling all over themselves that bothered me as much as the fact that they weren't fumbling all over themselves because of *me*. Were they blind? I wasn't just the baby in my family—I was the baby by a lot. My siblings were much older and at ages where they had the emotional freedom to adore, protect, and cuddle me rather than try to smother me in my sleep. My adorableness was declared, like a guard announcing the queen, every time I sauntered into the family room. Where in the world was my applause? Where were my honks, my secret notes? And more satisfying, my glares?

I'm not proud of it, but one day I got so bored I decided to throw Taylor a bone and invite her over to play. It had been months since I had cut her out of my life, and I figured I would do a bit of charity in the afternoon. I extended the invitation, then noticed a cavalier tone in her voice as she expressed that she didn't really want to play with me anymore. "Oh yeah?" I said directly into the receiver. "Bite me." I hung up and found my parents watching me. I had learned the phrase *bite me* from *The Simpsons*, a show I wasn't allowed to watch. I clinched my butt cheeks as I waited for a reaction.

WE'LL LAUGH ABOUT THIS (SOMEDAY)

“Our little Annie,” my mom said with a laugh. “A force to be reckoned with, I guess!”

Darn right, suckas. Something tingled within me. I wouldn't be made to feel invisible. Not by little girls, not by mean dads. Not by people who couldn't see past my sister's huge brown eyes. Not by the ladies who ever so gently suggested my mom grow my hair out and put me in more dresses, lest I become Rosie O'Donnell. Not by the vicious bullies I would later encounter in middle school or the men I loved in college who couldn't even remember my name.

This chubby girl would laugh last. I'd make sure of it.

But when would that be, exactly? I know this is a little depressing, but there are times I wonder if, at the end of my life, I will regret all the time I wasted hating my large, dimpled thighs, or if I will regret not knowing what life was like with thin ones. I hope I won't be thinking about my thighs at all, but with me you never know.

I'm almost forty now, and the chubby girl is still here. I hear it's your sixties when you really don't give a roaring rip about what other people think, but that seems so far away. The chubby girl seems to be frozen in time, a duplicate who never grew up. She's clipped my heels every step, every year. She doesn't always make herself known. She doesn't intrude. She takes vacations sometimes, or maybe stays in the lower level, out of my hair. But every once in a while, when my husband takes photos of precious moments between me and the girls and I later delete them with a “please tell me this isn't what I look like from the back”; or when my thighs swish together just so; or when someone ignores me, discards me, or tosses me aside—I feel her presence.

CHUBBY KIDS LAUGH LAST AND EAT FIRST

Through salty tears and a snotty nose, I look around for her hiding somewhere.

And I can usually spot her, peeking out behind a tree, a door, underneath my bed. She hides, but only because she wants to be found.

So I find her. I speak to her. I soothe her. *Oh no, no, no*, I assure her. *You aren't my shame; you are my most precious gift.* Without her, I surely would have focused on superficial things that appear beautiful one day but are thrown into the fire the next. I wouldn't have, instead, spent hundreds of hours reading and writing in my room. If beauty had been my hot ticket, I wouldn't have made laughter into a craft. I would have become colder, less compassionate, more flippant, and crueller if I didn't know the pain she endured. Her pain made me more whole.

So, I thank her, and this usually makes her feel better. Then I look away for just a moment—maybe I get a text or the timer on the oven goes off. And before I know it, she's gone, skipping away, still wearing her white Esprit sweatshirt, nice and loose. Just the way she likes it.

Bite me, Tia.