

*1. Belly: The protruding abdomen of a pregnant woman*

When I was five, I played the Pregnancy Game with the Hruby sisters, Jennifer and Stephanie. We used my Cabbage Patch Kid, Tallulah, a coveted Christmas present in 1986, but one that turned out to be a disappointment because she was so ugly. Tallulah's hair—short loops of yellow yarn that haloed her head—looked like a helmet made of a hook-rug. I hated her for that. Still, I played with her often enough that her soft limbs developed a patina of grime.

After dinner, while our parents sat around the table talking, we girls went to my bedroom to play. We fought over who got to stick Tallulah up her shirt, but I won because she was my doll.

"I'm going to have a baby!" I cried. Then as I had seen my mom do when she was pregnant with my little sister, I practiced Lamaze breathing—whooo, whooo, heeeeeee.

Stephanie, playing Nurse, had me lie down on the bed so she could stick my arm with a fake hypodermic—a retractable Bic pen. To us babies came from bellies. We knew nothing of birth canals or uteruses, so every delivery necessitated a C-section. Doctor Jennifer reached in under my shirt with the scalpel—improvised from a plastic picnic knife with serrated edge—and swiped across the flesh of my abdomen, grasped Tallulah by her ankle, pulled her from under my Care Bears sweatshirt, and dangled her, triumphantly, above my head.

"You have a healthy baby girl," she said.

Once born, Tallulah was never fed, diapered, or rocked. My desire for child rearing began and ended with the drama of birth. The game was about being the center of attention.

*2. Tummy: Slang for paunch*

I got my tummy in the third grade. It came from eating too much fast food at the Chanticleer Drive-in. That was the year Mom went back to work and stopped cooking, the year Dad lost the farm and we moved to a house in town. I was grieving my old home. As if by filling my tummy with French fries and hot fudge sundaes, I could fill a deeper emptiness.

Sometimes I sat naked on the toilet before bathing. I hunched over, grabbed the thick snake of fat that started at the side of my waist, pinched it away from my rib cage, and imagined ripping it off. When I reached the center of my abdomen, I had two handfuls of fatty flesh. My belly button disappeared into the fold. What remained looked like a giant, puckered mouth. I squeezed these blubber lips.

In the weeks leading up to my ninth birthday, I pored over Mom's Wilton-method cake decorating magazines, flipping through pictures of exquisite frosting designs. Pastel-green leaves unfurled over paper-smooth fondant from a cascade of buttercream frosting roses, the petals so delicate they looked like real flowers. The children pictured next to the birthday cakes fascinated me too.

They were thin and smiled freely. I, on the other hand, sucked in my tummy anytime I thought someone might be looking, especially the eye of a camera. In most photos I wore a tense, pained look on my face, more grimace than smile.

I settled on a chocolate sheet cake trimmed with a shell-frosting border, a cascade of pink-buttercream roses, and my name inscribed in pink frosting at the center. In the birthday snapshot, I wear a pink sweater stretched tight over my round tummy. I'm so caught up in the moment—seconds before I scoop one of those coveted roses off the cake and into my mouth—I forget to suck in my tummy. I smile, fat chipmunk cheeks framing my face. I look so happy knowing how the desired sugar will comfort me.

*3. Midriff: Middle part of the body between chest and waist, often revealed to incite sexual appeal*

The summer after third grade, my cousin Erin came to stay with my family. Having abandoned the Pregnancy Game, the Hruby girls and I taught Erin our new favorite: Dirty Dancing. Inspired by the 1987 film starring Patrick Swayze (which I watched on VHS until I could repeat every line), we took turns dancing to the soundtrack. Still years from puberty, we couldn't see what was "dirty" about gyrating hips, but we got the love story. By the end of the film, Jennifer Gray's character, Baby Housman, won the love of Johnny, the sexy dance instructor. It inspired us to emulate her every move.

For Christmas that year, my mother bought me the soundtrack, a vinyl LP. I played it on my Fisher-Price turntable. Using the song list on the album cover, we made elaborate dance lists, plotting out who was allowed to dance to each song.

My song was Eric Carmen's hit, "Hungry Eyes." In the scene at the dance studio, Baby wears a pink bra and matching pink shorts. Johnny dances in front of her, and Penny (the dancer Baby will sub for once she learns the routine), dances behind, her hands on Baby's back and waist, guiding. In this composition, Baby's midriff is the focal point, centered in the screen. Her chiseled abs undulate under the slight twisting movement each dance step triggers. Sweat glistens on her skin.

In classic 80s-style montage, the film cuts to a series of dance practices, all revealing that delicious midriff, while Carmen croons: "I've got this feeling that won't subside....Now I've got you in my sights with these hungry eyes." In the next cut, Baby wears a tight white crop-top. Then we see only her torso, the waist of black Jockey panties, and Johnny's hands at the side of her waist.

With the recent development of my own midriff, Baby's image was one to aspire to. Surely when I was older and had breasts, my torso would look like that. Baby gave me something to hope for while miserable at school and scared about how much my parents worried about money. Though I didn't feel sexual attraction yet at that age, the way Johnny held, hugged, and laughed with Baby in the movie filled me with a feeling that I couldn't describe.

*4. Jelly Belly: A gourmet jelly bean made in 51 flavors popular in America during the 1980s*

When I was in fifth grade, every time Grandma B took me to the mall, she bought me jelly beans. Grandma had roughly the same measurements as Buddha. She stood about five feet one, measured 45 inches at the waist, and possessed wide, child-bearing hips that allowed her to have nine babies. Even without all that childbirth, she

would have been bottom-heavy. All the women on that side of the family have inherited her shape.

I had tried on twenty pairs of jeans at J. C. Penney, but the only pair that fit around my belly had hideous front pleats and an ugly acid wash. Grandma insisted on buying not one, but two identical pairs of them since I couldn't get by with only one pair of school jeans. To my classmates, it'd look like I wore the same pair every day, making me seem even poorer than we were. As we stood at the Jelly Belly store counter, I tried to forget the shopping bag hanging from my wrist.

Though you could pick and choose separate flavors, I was too greedy, too worried about making the wrong choice and missing out. I loved the brilliant colors—cactus-pad green, stoplight red, buttery-yellow, blue-indigo, all luminous like sea glass. I wanted them all. So I ordered my usual—a  $\frac{1}{2}$  lb assorted. The cashier weighed the candy and shoveled it from bin to white paper bag with a silver-handled scoop.

When I clutched the bag, the beans clinked like pebbles, each a promise of pleasure. I cupped my eye over the opening so I saw a tunnel of white paper bag, and the end of it, a riot of bright-colored beans splendid as any kaleidoscope.

##### *5. Muffin Top: Fatty flesh that spills over the waistline of pants or skirts because of tight clothing and/or excess body fat*

When I was growing up, dressing up meant wearing No Nonsense Control-Top pantyhose, a modern replacement to the girdle, packaged in plastic orange envelopes. For church I wore dresses Mom had sewn from Simplicity patterns. On my body the finished garments never looked like the girls' on the pattern envelope. The bodices were too big, the waists too tight across my stomach.

"Control tops will fix that," Mom said when the fabric puckered unflatteringly over my gut.

She helped me pull the nylons up my legs, pinching my skin in an attempt to grasp the flimsy material. The waistband dug into my flesh, but as soon as I pulled my dress over my head, the waistband rolled down, making a sausage. I pressed hard on my lower belly. Swathed in tight elastic, it took on the tautness of a basketball while forming a crest of muffin-soft flesh above the waistband.

By the time I started college I'd stopped wearing control tops. They suffocated me. And I didn't need them anymore. The clothes off J.C. Penney's racks fit me fine. Though I wouldn't have described myself as thin, I kept my weight down by giving up junk food and by exercising.

I wore control top panty hose only once after leaving home, when my mom and I went to a cousin's wedding and shared a hotel room for the weekend. As we were dressing, I snagged a runner through my pantyhose.

"I have a brand-new pair you can have," Mom said. She rummaged through her luggage and handed me the orange package, unchanged over the years. As I shimmed the tight pantyhose up my legs, she kept up a steady commentary on my appearance.

"*That lipstick's awfully bright for your complexion,*" she noted as she fussed over her hair in the bathroom mirror. Her tone reminded me of Grandma B.

She nodded to my dress hanging from the towel rack and then to my Mary Jane flats. "Those shoes don't go with that hemline. Are they the only ones you brought?"

Standing there in my bra and pantyhose, I looked down at my belly. The pantyhose seam reminded me of a scar. I wanted to rip the nylons off my stomach. Instead I helped my mother zip her dress. Like wearing pantyhose, this wedding was something to be endured.

Since middle school, I had compared myself to the bride, Melissa, and always came up short. She was thinner, prettier, and richer than me. For years I'd wanted to shuck off the fat around my midsection, but standing in that hotel room, a new desire came over me. I wished I were the bride.

#### *6. Six-Pack: A set of well-developed rectus abdominis*

My junior year of college, I dated a soldier. He had come back from Iraq hard and chiseled. As we lay in bed, I traced his six-pack with my tongue, then lightly kissed the six rippled muscles running from his pubic crest to his ribs. He was tan, lean, and smiled like a super-model. My head told me, "He's sexy," but my body wasn't into it. I was so uncomfortable around him while naked, I could never climax. Once he ran his hands over my naked body, but stopped suddenly at my stomach.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You're just so—soft," he said. "Not fat, but soft. You've got to do some sit-ups or something." He grabbed at my belly and shook his hand like a dog wrestling a chew toy. I fought back tears when I thought about those hours of Pilates I had done when he was deployed, and still my body didn't make him—or me—happy.

When I got sick of faking orgasms, I broke up with the soldier. Even though I had done the dumping, I still felt like a failed husband-catcher.

#### *7. Solar Plexus: Nerves of the sympathetic system located at the pit of the stomach*

I found my solar plexus after breaking up with the soldier to date the man I would eventually marry. I had enrolled in a Hatha yoga class at the university fitness center.

Chakras, I learned, were the body's energy centers. The solar plexus chakra controlled my fear, anxiety, personal power, and transitions.

"Let your belly soften. On the inhale let it grow large. Grow round," the yogi instructed. To nurture calmness, he explained, you must breathe from the bottom of your belly.

We did Mountain Pose—or *Tadasana*—which didn't look like any yoga poses I'd imagined. We stood. Feet aligned parallel, hip width apart. Eyes closed. Arms hung with palms out. Energy floated through my body and tingled out my fingertips.

"You're like seaweed floating in the ocean," the yogi said. "Your bones can float around in your body." He told me to place my hand on my belly.

"Your belly is an air pillow," the yogi said. "You know when you order something from Amazon, and it comes with those little plastic pillows full of air?" I chuckled. He was right. Just like an air pillow, the flesh cupped in my hand was somehow firm and soft at the same time. I imagined a radiating yellow ball of energy revolving just under my solar plexus. My belly didn't feel fat. It was strong. Whole.

When the session was over, I stood as tall as a mountain, proud of my rugged crags and jagged outcroppings.

#### *8. Pot Belly (1): A swollen or protuberant stomach*

While dating the man I married, we took in midnight showings of cult-classic films in Midtown Omaha at the Dundee, a historic theater, the interior of which resembled a red velvet cake. Until I saw Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction* there, I never thought a pot belly could be sexy. Fabienne (played by Maria de Medeiros) obsesses over blueberry pie and pot bellies. Her lover,

Butch Coolidge—the boxer played by Bruce Willis—comes to her on the lam after killing his opponent in the ring.

She lolls on the bed of their dive-hotel room wearing a baggy T-shirt and a pair of cotton panties and says in a sexy French accent, “I’ve been *theenk*ing about pot bellies. How I wish I had one.”

“You should be happy, ‘cause you do,” Butch tells her.

She bristles, explaining that having a bit of tummy is not the same thing as a pot belly. Butch is perplexed and agitated, but she goes on.

“Pot bellies make a man look either oafish or like a gorilla. But on a woman a pot belly is very sexy. The rest of you is normal. Normal face, normal legs, normal hips, normal ass, but with a big, perfectly round pot belly. If I had one, I’d wear a T-shirt two sizes too small to accentuate it.”

“You think guys would find that attractive?” he asks.

“I don’t give a damn what men find attractive. It’s unfortunate what we find pleasing to the touch and pleasing to the eye is seldom the same.”

#### *Pot Belly (2): Having a round, protruding shape*

If you Google the words “pot belly,” one of the hits will take you to photographs of the Guatemalan pot belly sculptures. Hundreds of them dot the Pacific slope and highlands. Human figures portrayed as crude spheres with large, jutting guts. As if holding a ball, they cup their hands to their bellies. Some look fierce. Others tilt their heads back and stare into the sky with hollow, sunken eyes.

When I look at the Guatemalan pot belly sculptures in grainy black and white photos from archeological

magazines, I imagine what it would be like to visit the sculptures, to walk along the wind-whipped coastal paradise, and to feel dwarfed by its twelve-ton body. Carved from basalt, a volcanic rock amalgam of large and small minerals, the sculptures’ surfaces can be at once harsh and crude, smooth and fine. I want to run my hands over the rough velvet because it’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve seen.

At first my attraction to these crude lumps puzzles me, until it dawns on me that until now my standards of beauty have had three sources: glossy magazines, the movies, and my mother. To all three I owe my shame at having a pronounced gut. For as long as I could remember, two contradictory and paradoxical desires—the wish for a flat midriff and the wish to be a mother—had tugged at me. I never questioned them, let alone their sources. Now I wondered if those urges were genuinely mine.

The pot belly statues were beautiful precisely because they shocked, and in doing so, broadened my sense of what is “acceptable.” They’re beautiful the way a Picasso painting is beautiful because it challenges staid notions of “beauty.”

#### *9. Baby Bump: The protruding abdomen of a visibly pregnant woman*

After I turned thirty and had been married for five years, photos of pregnant bellies started crowding my Facebook. One by one, women I’d lost touch with over the years—the Hruby sisters, my cousins—appeared on my page, their bellies bloated by pregnancy. They pressed bellies up to sinks for bathroom mirror selfie shots. In professional portraits, they cupped their hands under their bellies and gazed lovingly down at their round protrusion.

When my younger sister got pregnant last year, it was the first time she ever beat me to a milestone. Putting careers first, my husband and I have delayed starting our own family. The intense jealousy I felt over my sister's pregnancy—when I wasn't even trying to get pregnant—startled me. The latent longing for a baby suddenly sprang to life. It was like wanting Baby Housman's midriff all over again or envying Melissa when she was a bride (who, by the way, had just birthed her third beautiful baby).

The Christmas before my sister gave birth, she hired a photographer. She wanted to document her baby bump as it strained the elastic of her maternity jeans, and she wanted a family portrait too. One sunny day in early December I found myself with my mom and sister in a field with a photographer, who prompted us into posing.

"Put your hands on her belly," she told us. My mom and I followed instructions. I'd never touched a pregnant belly before. I was shocked by how hard her bump felt, smooth as a wind-polished boulder, yet under that stony hardness a delicate fetus curled, floating in amniotic fluid—a future member of the family already beloved by my sister and her husband.

*10. Rectus Abdominis: A long, flat, narrow muscle originating from the pubis to the seventh rib, forming part of the anterior abdominal wall*

I was a year into a daily swimming and yoga regimen before I realized I had developed visible ab muscles. One evening I was packing for a business trip while my husband drank a beer and lounged on the bed watching me, hoping we'd have sex before I left. I tried on a new blouse, something slinky and tighter than anything else in my wardrobe.

"Does this blouse show too much belly?" I asked.

"You don't have belly to show."

I swiveled my hips in front of the mirror. He was right. For the first time in my life I didn't look like I had a fat belly. After years fighting my flabby stomach with exercise, I had won. It took me a while to realize this because I had long ago stopped exercising to shrink my waist measurement. Somewhere along the line it became its own pleasurable routine, satisfying and satiating.

I took the blouse off, folded and packed it in my suitcase. I grabbed my husband's beer off the nightstand and stole a swig. My beer drinking days are numbered. I hope to get pregnant soon, and my relationship with my belly will change again. The women who posted Facebook photos of their baby bumps now tell me all about their tiger stripes.

*11. Tiger Stripes: Stretch marks and scarring patterns remaining on a belly after pregnancy*

My cousin, Erin, was the first of my generation to have babies. She started when she was 20, and now, almost 15-years later, I still haven't tried to get pregnant, and she's still saving up for plastic surgery on her pregnancy-wrecked belly.

"Want to see something gross?" Erin said the last time I saw her. She lifted her shirt, revealing squishy, loose folds of skin that hung from her thin, petite frame between ribs and hips. The skin rippled with white scars.

My friend, Jodi, sees her tiger stripes differently. She told me about her four-year-old daughter's curiosity. "When Elizabeth asked me what those marks were on my belly, I said, those are my tiger stripes. They're special because I got them when you were in my belly. You'll get tiger stripes too someday after you have a baby." Jodi

smiles when she tells me how excited Elizabeth is to get stretch marks someday. I wonder if Elizabeth plays The Pregnancy Game with her dolls.

I try to project into the future. Will I conceive? And if I do, how will pregnancy change my body and my re-

lationship with it? Wanting is different than having. I won't know until I have them if tiger stripes will make me feel inferior or fierce. Still, naming what I want must count for something. I want someone, someday, to call me Mom. 