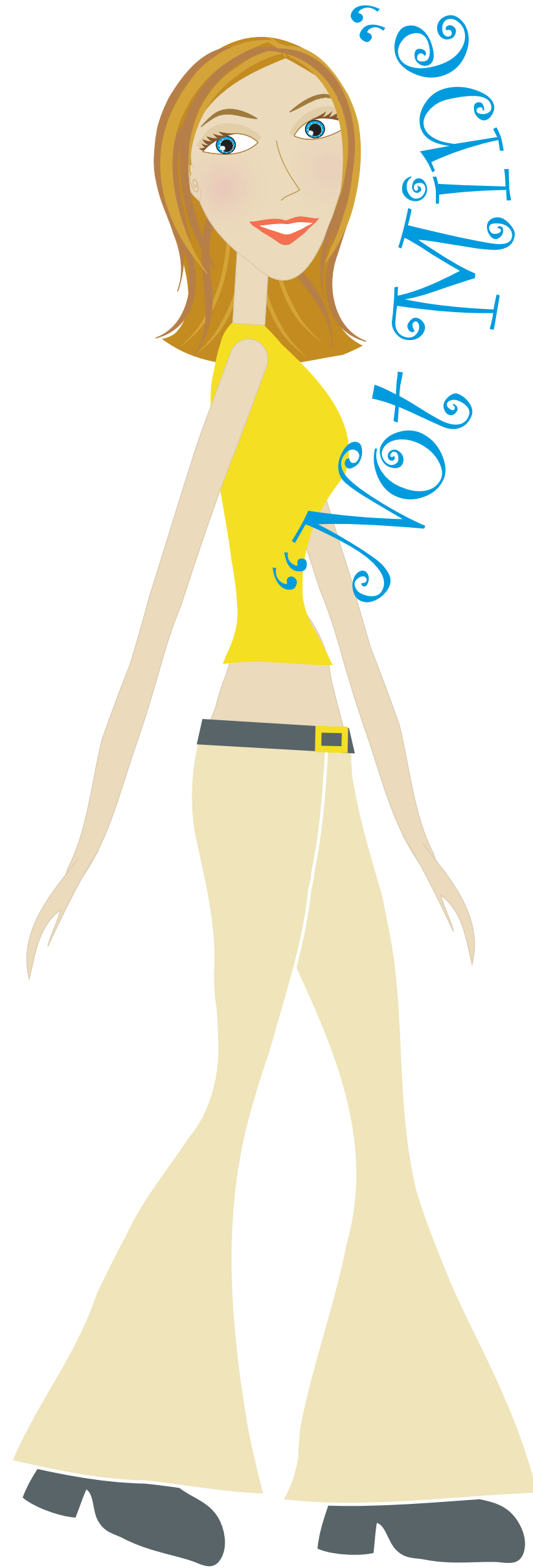


“I must, I must,
I must increase my bust.”



Amy Mercer

If only I could do what she'd done,
have what she now had. The Envy ran through my
blood. My shameful secret, I was bound by envy like a
straightjacket. Seeking release, I wanted to know
if her life was better now.

The plastic surgeon's waiting room was quiet and empty. A receptionist welcomed me, gesturing with a sweep of her hand to a selection of comfortable chairs where I was relieved of any burdensome insurance questions. In the subtle mauve- and beige-toned room, I was disappointed to find myself alone. Pamphlets on the walls advertised “Augmentations and Reductions,” foreign words that filled my mouth like braces. A nurse called to me in a quiet voice, as if I were entering a spa instead of a hospital, as if I was here for a massage instead of a physical transformation.

In middle school, my friends and I laughed at Margaret's attempts to transform herself in *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume. But in private and full of hope, I stood in the corner of my bedroom facing the mirror, and swung my arms back and forth (Margaret-style) chanting, “I must, I must, I must increase my bust.” By seventh grade my best friend Robin started holding her arms across her chest to cover her adult-sized breasts. Slumping my shoulders forward, I swatted her arm away.

“You should be happy,” I hissed, angry and envious. My younger sister needed a bra first. My breasts were “mosquito bites” to her “melons.” Over the years I've watched as my sister (in a v-neck shirt) leans down to pick something up off the floor, and every eye in the room, male *and* female, is on her chest.

Dr. X was one of the few local female plastic surgeons. Instead of a beautiful woman walking down the beach in a bikini, Dr. X's advertisement in the phone book was simple, with crisp, bold lines and professional, citing multiple certifications. Dr. X didn't promise to “enhance nature” or to “discover (my) outer beauty.” This woman would understand that I didn't want to do anything drastic. She would understand that I just wanted to look like everyone else.

I had a friend in college who got a boob job, and pulled me into the public bathroom of a smoky, crowded bar to proudly display her new breasts.

“Go on, touch!” She urged. Her new breasts looked air-brushed; perfectly round and full. I shook my head no. But following her out the bathroom door, mine weren't the only eyes that couldn't look away. Were they hard, like a ball, or soft like Play-Doh? For days I obsessed over my friend's transformation. If only I could do what she'd done, have what she now had. The Envy ran through my blood. My shameful secret, I was bound by envy like a straightjacket. Seeking release, I wanted to know if her life was better now.

As a newlywed my life was better, and now that I was married, I wondered how long we should wait before having babies. I wanted to get pregnant right away and listened, giddy with excitement to (already ample) friends who said they went up three cups sizes when they were expecting. *Finally*, I thought, *finally*. As the weeks went on, my stomach grew larger but my breasts didn't budge. Concave up top and balloon like on bottom, I was unbalanced in maternity clothes. In childbirth classes I struggled to ignore the other mothers who spilled out of their maternity sun dresses. When my son was born, I drew him to my chest and breathed him in. It was time to try and feed him, the nurses told me. I lifted up my nightgown as the lactation nurse came over to help.

“Oh, these are so tiny!” she said. Humiliated, I pinched and forced my breasts into Will's open mouth until frustrated, he turned away. I couldn't nurse. I was a failure. We struggled like this for days. I worried my breasts were too small for breastfeeding, I was a failure as a female. Will lost over a pound, and my husband and I had to stick a syringe filled with formula in his mouth, which he sucked down gratefully. Five long days later, I felt a pulsing, a hardening. Tentatively touching my chest, my hand came away wet. I shuddered with relief, my milk had come in.

My breastfeeding breasts gave me a reason to stand tall, to hold my shoulders back and walk with confidence. The envy drained from my veins, the straightjacket loosened its grip. I looked good. Like Cinderella at the ball, I knew my time was limited and I danced. Shopping, I bought revealing necklines, tight tank tops and for the first time in my life, a strapless dress. Sometimes I went without a bra. I noticed the glances at my chest instead of my face; I was all woman and I was proud. I could finally see behind OZ's curtain, and unlike the disappointing small man, having big boobs was better than I'd dreamed.

Will was weaned at 13 months and my boobs disappeared. I stared in the mirror in shock. I had finally discovered what it was like to have breasts, and now they were gone. I couldn't understand how it was possible for them to be so full, blue veins bulging through my creamy white, never exposed to the sun skin, and now they were empty, flat, smaller than before, and without purpose. (Reader, you may see me as being very self-absorbed and superficial. You may not even like me. You're not alone reader, I didn't like myself.) Mourning the loss of my breasts, I went back to my old padded bras and stopped wearing v-neck shirts. I was glad it was winter.

A thick envelope arrived in the mailbox from Dr. X's office. Glancing around, I tore into the letter, wiping my sweaty hands on my shorts. I spread the pages out onto the dining table. Reading the questionnaire, I chewed on my pen. *What type of procedure was I interested in? Did I have someone who could drive me home, care for me during the recovery period?* I thought of the hundreds of thousands of women getting breast implants every year, and was angry at my hesitation. I checked yes.

My second son was a breastfeeding champ from the start. At ten pounds eight ounces, he nursed all the time. For the second time in my life, I had fabulous boobs. Like the woman in the phone book ad, I walked proudly down the beach with a baby on my hip, my older son at my side, in a bikini. We nursed through bathing suit season and continued into Christmas. Miles began to lose interest and I panicked. I wasn't ready to be done. He cried for his “bobby” at night instead of me and just like the first time, my breasts shrank. I recognized my too small breasts in the bathroom mirror. Like loyal, long lost friends they reminded me they weren't going anywhere. And with every fiber in my body, I mourned my loss.

Dr. X came in, and I was relieved; she was tall, middle aged, attractive, and looked smart but also kind. Here was the end to my suffering. As she talked, I tapped my feet against my chair, moving forward on the seat. *Come on, come on, I wanted to get to the good stuff.* She brought out a box of sample implants and I reached for one, moving the cold, liquid gel between my fingers.

“We can go in through the nipple, under the breast or in this region, under the arm,” Dr.X said, pointing to a diagram, offering me a choice. Did I want to slice the nipple, my nipple that nursed my babies through the night under the covers of my bed and on the couch in the early morning sunlight before anyone else was awake?

“The body may respond to the implant with scar tissue, its way of saying, ‘these are not mine’ this is your body's natural response,” she said. *Not mine.* Sitting on the examining table in her office, I thought, *not mine.*

Standing alone in the room, a hospital gown in my hands, I stared out the window feeling drained. The excitement was gone. The words “not mine” flashed across the insides of my eyelids like a neon vacancy sign in a moonless sky. The words echoed through my head like an unrelenting Nick Jr. jingle. The words “not mine” felt like an adulterer's “A” stamped across my chest. *My chest. My breasts. My legs that carried me through a marathon. My arms that hung from the wing of a plane, preparing for my skydiving drop, my hands that wrote these stories, my hip that held the tattoo from a California cross country drive, my stomach, sliced into twice so my babies could be pulled from my body. My body, not yours, but mine. I thanked Dr. X and said goodbye.*