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A black and white photograph of a woman's bare torso. Her hands are placed on her breasts, one on the left and one on the right. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of her body. The text 'BREASTS' and 'A LOVE STORY' is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif font at the bottom of the image.

# BREASTS

## A LOVE STORY

Or two, or three. A special section on the world's most discussed, displayed, and desired body part—in sickness, in health, and in the imagination

# PROUD OWNERS

Big or small, utilitarian or decorative, scarred or unblemished, it's about embracing what you've got. Herewith, five stories of breasts by the people who know them best

## ① I Look Better Naked

Never a sound sleeper and prone to overheating, I often wake in the morning to find that I've stripped myself bare overnight. There's a full-length mirror across from my bed, and on summer days I'll sit up, catch my reflection, and pause. In this barely conscious state, my gaze is noncritical, my body sleep-warm, and Renoir's *Nude in the Sunlight* crosses my mind.

If you haven't guessed, it's my breasts I'm admiring; they're large and round and, rightly or wrongly, capture some kind of cultural ideal. The adjectives employed by the guys who've come into contact with them au naturel are "great" and "amazing," voiced almost reverently. And as though my breasts appreciate the compliments, they're highly receptive, like the mimosa plants I used to play with on trips to Hawaii, their sensitive leaves crinkling at a breath or a touch.

Now comes the inevitable downside. Can a woman be completely sanguine about her body? Short answer: No. (I'm truth-telling here, not propagandizing.) The ratio of my rib cage (small) to my breasts (large) cuts the kind of figure that I find difficult to outfit. In structured or formfitting dresses and tops—most work clothes—I resemble Joan in *Mad Men* or, worse, Joan's older sister. I don't like the overtly sexual (or matronly) look. It could just be that my sensibilities were formed in the company of the lithe wisps of the San Francisco Ballet—my mother played flute in the orchestra. But it's more than that. I don't like how I think others perceive me when my curves are showcased: as a sexpot, as more body than brains. To avoid that, I've honed a minimizing professional uniform, which basically consists of crewneck shirts and loose dresses. It's my own personal game of hide-the-boob, and I've gotten pretty good. At brunch recently with a girlfriend, the conversation turned to a new medication

she was taking, a side effect of which was fuller breasts; she was now a C. Buzzing off two Bloody Marys, I demanded that she guess my size, before gleefully whispering it: "32DDD!" "I don't believe you," she said. "It's true," I replied, grinning with the same kind of satisfaction you get when you reveal that a fawned-over dress is from H&M.

You might think I should learn to flaunt my form, stereotypers be damned. But it's hard to get dressed in the morning without remembering the viral study of female college students' reaction to another young woman—chosen by researchers because she was "attractive from an evolutionary perspective" (small waist, big boobs)—depending on what she wore. When the Darwinian ideal "interrupted" a meeting clad in jeans and a T-shirt, the coeds took the incident in stride; when she was dressed in a low-cut blouse and short skirt, however, they rolled their eyes and acted hostile in her presence, with one speculating after she left that she probably wanted to sleep with her professor.

I'm fortunate enough to work at a job surrounded by supportive, sex-positive women I trust and admire. The few times I've worn a top that clings or dips, I'm met with "Keziah!" I know what this means. It's the you-go-girl, feminist-friendly version of a catcall. And yet, I'm young, with worth left to prove, and serious women do not present their bosoms on a platter. Is America ready for a president who shows off what nature gave her? Not yet. Like thigh-highs, ample cleavage feels lewd in a way private nakedness doesn't.

One morning last year, I woke up alone in a man's bed; he'd left hours earlier for a flight. It was the first time I'd been in his apartment without him, and I lingered, taking a long shower and walking out of the bathroom naked, and then making his bed in the buff. As I reached for my clothes I caught sight of myself—he had a mirror, too, right by his bedroom door. Large breasts may make their bearers into walking Rorschach tests, eliciting others' desire, anger, jealousy, even (female) solidarity. But that morning in the mirror, the breasts I saw in the reflection, the breasts he'd exalted just hours earlier, belonged only to me. —*Keziah Weir*

## ② What Pleasures They've Afforded!

The first word that comes to mind when I think of my breasts is...trustworthy. They're small, 34A, so they stick close by. For years I ran up and down basket-

ball courts with them braless, without a twinge of pain, without having to think of them at all.

When I started to mess around with boys, I noticed that my breasts were dependably responsive to touch. "Start up here," I've been known to mumble, or sometimes just silently pick up and transfer a male hand that is moving too quickly for my tastes. What pleasures they've afforded me! So much so that I recently bought a dress whose price was beyond my means mostly because I could imagine being touched through the sublimely silky fabric. (My breasts and I are divorced from their previous tender, and I've only once managed to put the dress to its proper use. We persevere, however; the money will not go to waste.)

When I'm walking down the street, my breasts do not call out to men as do the appendages of the more generously endowed, which is not to suggest that I've lacked for male attention. I'm a package deal as far as my appearance—nice hair and face, tall and thin—and plenty of men have greeted my body enthusiastically, in and out of bed. That really shouldn't be a surprise, but in our pornified, surgically enhanced culture, it can be hard to remember that some men (and women) actually prefer a streamlined aesthetic, and most of us couldn't care less about size as long as our partners throw themselves into the proceedings.

As for my own eye, I've been impressed with my breasts' loveliness. They look fetching in a lacy bra, and sometimes I like to watch them as much as I like to watch the body of the man I'm with; the male body still can be slightly frightening to me (though that adds its own frisson). My breasts in the right lingerie make me smile—is it pride?—and they turn me on. If that is not effectively co-opting the male gaze, I don't know what is. —*Laurie Abraham*

## ③ The Normcore of Boobs

The following logic might seem perverse or nonsensical, in only the way a woman's thoughts about her own body can be, but here it goes: While I think my slim legs, blue eyes, and delicate wrists are especially fine, the thing I love about my breasts is that there's not much to love about them. Or to hate about them. The normcore of boobs, if you will. (If my breasts had their own favorite drink, I imagine it would be a pumpkin spice latte.) A B cup, give or take, they're small-



ish in size but not dramatically so. (The left one is slightly larger than the right but only inasmuch as the human body is never perfectly symmetrical—heck, their idiosyncrasies aren't even that idiosyncratic.) Their pertness, average; their shape, more oval than round, I guess? I actually haven't given my breasts much thought in the 16 years since I got them. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

To be clear, this isn't some effort to damn with faint praise or to rationalize my situation. When it comes to much of my body, I feel overwhelmed, caught in a lifelong struggle to tone things down. For starters, I'm 5'10" in stocking feet—which often leaves me the tallest woman in the room and at least once a month inspires a complete stranger to come up and ask if I played volleyball in high school. (I didn't.) Though I've learned to embrace my height over the years, there are still times when I wish I could remove five inches and just blend in for a day. Then there's my hair—so thick and voluminous that if I take a shower and let it air-dry, it will still be damp 12 hours later. This is all in stark contrast to my personality (or perhaps a reaction to it?), which is mostly reserved until you get to know me. Ditto my clothes, which are minimalist, quiet, plain. I'm sincere when I say I don't think I could manage to walk down the street if I had a remarkable rack.

Which is, in its own twisted way, the ultimate in body acceptance—appreciating things exactly as they are.

—Amanda FitzSimons

④

## My Breasts Need A Tropical Vacation

"So they're definitely large," the lactation consultant declared. She was jostling my four-day-old son in one arm while studying my breasts. "But with a smallish nipple." I was sitting on my couch with my husband to my left, my mother to my right, and the consultant front and center. Everybody was inspecting my faulty equipment—its plump, naked expanse propped up on a nursing pillow like a cigarette girl's wares—to figure out why, having lain dormant for 37 years, these breasts of mine were struggling to rise to the challenge of sustaining human life.

Five months later, my son safely out of harm's way, I can see the humor in the situation: big boobs, small nipples? Yep, that's me. These days it seems almost disloyal that I ever doubted my trusty former Ds—they may have been



frustratingly slow to get into the breast-feeding game, but now they are the hardworking MVPs of motherhood. As such, they suffer many of its humiliations. Overtouched, underpampered, and ballooned to a cup size I don't even bother to measure, they spend some 23 hours a day hoisted into the kind of bras you hope no one else ever has to see, apparatuses sized merely "large" and "extra large." Subjected daily to a high-powered, hospital-grade breast pump, and, as of a few weeks ago, a pair of precocious, razor-sharp little incisors, they are, sadly, strictly off limits to even the most tender romantic advance. This temporary injunction seems unfair, even unkind, to my husband, the man who has the temerity to desire them (and me) even at my deepest postpartum low. But look, I tell him frequently, these breasts of mine deserve a break—and maybe a raise, a promotion, and a first-class ticket to a tropical vacation.

For look at what they can do: At night, in the shadows of my bedroom, my son absently skims a dimpled, long-fingered

hand—an uncanny miniaturized version of my own—back and forth, back and forth across my right breast as he eats, and I am flooded with gratitude. Not just because this creature, so frighteningly (to me) bird-like at birth, has speedily morphed into a sturdy cherub whose every gained ounce gives me a little ripple of pride and relief. But also because at the end of every day that I spend at work and my son spends with his nanny—a kind, capable woman whom we're lucky to have found and who is, inevitably, the one present for most of his waking hours and many of his milestones—it is my breasts that give us this sweet, sleepy, peaceful intimacy, this 20 minutes of absolute connectedness. In this circle that is ours alone, he is mine and I am his. —Maggie Bullock

⑤

## My Empathic Left Breast

My husband would be pissed at me for writing about my breasts. But he's not here to keep me from doing it. So here goes.

He loved my breasts (he was a T-man,



even if I did have a very good A), and his attention to them was almost always the gateway to our sexual encounters. In fact, most of the guys who saw them over the years approved. They're tiny by the standards of the billboards in Times Square, but they apparently had a certain *je ne sais quoi*. A college boyfriend clamped a champagne glass over one of them while we were in bed (it did fit perfectly) and said, "That is a f-king ideal, Lisa." I only wish I'd had the presence of mind to reply, "That is a f-king cliché, Roger."

My husband was not a man who dealt in clichés or hyperbole. For this and other reasons, I loved him. He once asked me how I rated our sex life. I gave it a B+, A-, and it delighted him, because it was true.

You may have deduced that something went awry in our story, and that would also be true. My husband died of lymphoma a year and a half ago. Two years ago, in the middle of his ordeal, my left breast became empathic (or was it competitive?) and developed a cancer of its own. So in a panic—both a husband and a wife with cancer? Both a father and a mother with cancer?—I subjected my ideal breast to surgery and radiation without any thought of aesthetics. Anyway, "radiation makes your breast perky," said one of the perky technicians who beamed 180 cGy of radiation into my breast every day for six weeks. I just wanted the tumor *out*. So I did it expediently. Pressing my surgeon and oncologist and radiologist and all my other *-ists* about how it would look afterward seemed...shallow, in the grand scheme. My husband and I would get through our cancer crap and return happily to our B+, A- sex life. He'd love my incised breast, precisely because of all that it, and we, had been through together.

But that is not how it went. He's not here to love my left breast, which has an undeniable two-inch scar puckering one side, even if the MRI technicians admire the surgeon's work: "So little scar tissue!"

Now I wonder, what will happen the first time I'm in a position to unbutton my blouse in front of a man? He'll see the scar, the loss of volume where the surgeon carved out the cancer and then went back again to carve out some more flesh in the pursuit of "good margins," and we'll have to have the talk. Will the guy then write a narrative based on my breast that says, "Danger! Compromised systems! Abort! Abort!"

Will I even let myself find out?

—Lisa Chase

# BREAST HEALTH: MYTHS/TRUTHS

When to get a mammogram, what not to worry about, and why Isaac Newton could've consulted for Victoria's Secret

WITHOUT A BRA, YOU'RE DOOMED TO FALL **TRU-ISH**

Changes in skin, connective tissue called Cooper's ligaments (akin to an internal bra), or the actual soft tissue in the breast can cause drooping, says Manhattan plastic surgeon Adam Kolker, MD. The support of a bra helps somewhat, but genetics can trump Playtex. "Is sagging inevitable?" Kolker says. "It may well be."

EXERCISE IS THE ENEMY OF PERKY BREASTS **ONLY IN EXTREME CASES**

"If someone marathons with no bra, there is a gravitational effect," Kolker says. Plus, when the body mass index of hard-core athletes—or any woman, for that matter—drops below 20, the fat in their glands dissipates, deflating the breast's "stuffing."

IF YOUR DAUGHTER SCREAMS, "YOU'RE RUINING MY LIFE!" CAN YOU SCREAM BACK, "YOU RUINED MY BOOBS!"? **YES, IF YOU WANT TO ACT LIKE A TEENAGER**

"The longer the milk-producing elements stay swollen, the more the skin stretches," Kolker says. To make matters worse, when women stop breastfeeding, their

breasts usually shrink slightly from their pre-baby size—with sag being the result.

ONLY THE FOOL-HARDY DON'T GET YEARLY MAMMOGRAMS AFTER 40 **DEPENDS ON WHOM YOU ASK**

Because of the small benefit to screening mammograms for women in their forties (2,970 women must be screened for one life to be saved) and the potential harms (false-positive results that trigger repeated unnecessary testing, radiation exposure, and overtreatment for disease that would never become life-threatening), the United States Preventive Services Task Force recommends the test for women from 50 to 74, and only once every two years. Other medical groups, however, continue to advise annual mammograms for all women 40 and over. The upshot is that mammograms aren't considered the preventive miracle they once were, and women are encouraged to talk with their doctors about their own circumstances. Those who have a significant family history of the disease or have BRCA gene mutations, for example, should almost certainly follow a more regular screening schedule.

USING ANTIPERSPIRANT CAUSES BREAST CANCER **NO, NO, NO** Antiperspirant does not clog the sweat glands and cause toxins to build up,

says Elisa Port, MD, chief of breast surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

ALCOHOL INCREASES THE ODDS OF GETTING BREAST CANCER **SOMEWHAT**

Drinking more than two alcoholic beverages (defined as a 5-ounce glass of wine or a 12-ounce bottle of beer) a day hikes risk by about 20 percent. To put this into perspective, 12.5 out of 100 women will get breast cancer sometime during their lifetimes (though only about 3 out of 100 women will ever die from it). Increasing that by 20 percent means 15 out of 100 more-than-two-a-day drinkers will get the disease.

THE LARGER YOUR BREASTS, THE HIGHER YOUR CANCER RISK **DEBATABLE**

According to a 2013 study that followed almost 80,000 women for 11 years, those with a C cup were four times more likely to die of breast cancer than those with an A, but other research hasn't turned up a correlation. Part of what clouds the issue is the complicated role obesity plays in breast cancer risk: Two studies found that having larger breasts increases risk in thin women, but not in those who are more heavysset. One potential reason for the link between weight and disease? Some of the genes that determine breast size are also associated with breast cancer, investigators reported in 2012. —Sunny Choo