

Foreword by HELEN CLARK
former Prime Minister of New Zealand

Sushi and Tapas

*Bite-size personal stories
from women around the world*



Edited by PEPUKAYE BARDOUILLE and NEO GIM HUAY

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FOREWORD BY HELEN CLARK

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EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books

www.epigrambooks.sg

Cover design by Stefany

National Library Board,
Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Sushi and tapas : bite-size personal stories from women around
the world / edited by Pepukaye Bardouille and Neo Gim Huay;
foreword by Helen Clark. – Singapore : Epigram Books, 2012.

p. cm.

ISBN : 978-981-07-2818-2 (pbk.)

1. Women – Biography. I. Bardouille, Pepukaye.
- II. Neo, Gim Huay.

HQ1155

920.72 -- dc23 OCN796975431

This is a re-publication of a work of the same title originally
self-published by Pepukaye Bardouille and Neo Gim Huay in 2011.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Raj, my mother, teacher, agitator and empath

PB

To my nieces, Sze Min and Yi Teng,
our next generation

NGH

*There is only one true form of wealth,
that of human contact.*

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

CONTENTS

Foreword xiii
by Helen Clark

Introduction xv
by Pepukaye Bardouille and Neo Gim Huay

Little Ghost of Change 1
by Marije Nederveen

On the Road to Oman 11
by Sarah de Freitas

I'm Fat 17
by Chè Monique Young

The Tea Lady in the Boardroom 27
by Zipho Sikhakhane

Precious 39
by Suzie Walker

Suddenly, Without a Map 53
by Winnie M. Li

Random Musings 81
by Bava Wadhwa

- To Be or Not to Be 87
by Isabel Hagbrink
- Leadership Reflections 99
by Swaady Martin-Leke
- Living Love, Loving Life 111
by Caroline Barrow
- Distant Rainbow 125
by Deepa Hazrati
- Searching for Faith 137
by Huang Jing
- Trilogy of Thoughts 149
by Selina Ho
- Transitions 155
by Aida Axelsson-Bakri
- Work-Life? Balance. 167
by Elizabeth Burden
- Three Women in My Life 179
by Maya Horii
- Finds on a Beach 189
by Lena Brahme
- The World is Perfect 199
by Xiao Yu
- Girl Powerful 209
by Louise Croneborg
- Unexpected 217
by Elena Chong
- Two Lives, One Choice 223
by Agga Jonak
- Breaking Out of the Mould 233
by Melissa Morris
- A Delicate Freedom 239
by Aletta Jones
- On My Own Terms 249
by Towani Clarke
- The Choice to be Grateful 261
by Zeryn Mackwani Sarpangal

Foreword

It is a basic human right for women to enjoy full legal equality and equality of opportunity. Our societies are poorer if we fail to tap the full potential of half our populations. I advocate for the empowerment of women and the advancement of women in leadership around the world in my role as Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme. I bring to that advocacy my personal experience as Prime Minister of New Zealand for nine years, Leader of the Opposition for six years before that, Leader of the New Zealand Labour Party for fifteen years, and Member of Parliament in New Zealand for twenty-seven years. I am well-acquainted with the challenges women face when living and working in male-dominated arenas. What has kept me going is my determination to make a contribution to public life and

to building more equal and just societies. I am fortunate indeed to have been able to pursue the career of my choice, and now to be able to work for better lives for women, men and children around the world. The twenty-five stories in this book draw from the experiences of women in many countries. They range from Sweden to South Africa, Japan to the United States, and Britain to China. Across diverse contexts, women are seen to share many experiences. In this way, this book builds bonds between us all. It is transformative in encouraging us to support the empowerment of women everywhere.

Helen Clark

Administrator, United Nations Development Programme,
Chair, United Nations Development Group and
former Prime Minister of New Zealand 1999-2008

Introduction

It would be fair to say that we were going through challenging times when “the book project” was embarked upon. For a start, we were both relocating—literally and figuratively: Gim moved east from New York to Lagos, while Pep headed west from London to Washington D.C. And the rest is fairly complicated.

The project was conceived by Gim one warm April afternoon in 2010, and shared with Pep over a crackling phone line a few weeks later and a continent away. We’d met some months before while working in Nigeria and apparently both needed to channel the mix of emotions that accompany “major change” into something at once focused, creative and bigger than ourselves.

In browsing bookshelves, we had felt a dearth of literature that spoke of the experiences of young women,

and believed that it could be heartening, interesting and perhaps even inspiring to offer a glimpse into how some in our generation have thought, felt and dealt with life's "inevitables": men, children, parents, career, self image, faith, dreams.

Knowing that others had likely been there (wherever "that difficult place" might be) gave us, at the time, an inexplicable semblance of reprieve. Thus, we felt that sharing the stories of those around us could provide lessons about the essence of the human condition for others too.

The idea was to bring together women from around the world in their twenties to forties to share parts of their personal journeys. Our premise was simple: while we are unique beings, there are common denominators in the lives of people everywhere—be they on the surface or hidden underneath—which we can take comfort in and draw inspiration from.

Upon starting this (ad)venture, we told everyone we knew about it. That commits you to the project in the public domain so there'll be no backtracking and no procrastination, we were advised. How very true! From conception to fruition, this baby has taken more than a year to deliver. It would probably have taken us longer if friends and colleagues had not prodded us gently along

the way, asking, "How's the book coming along?" every now and then. For that, we are indebted!

This book has been a blessing on many fronts. Working on it kept us busy during tough times, but also provided an important source of energy, inspiration and renewal. The project pushed us to juggle schedules and deadlines. It was a reason to be in touch with one another and our authors across continents and time zones. Editing the stories put us for a moment in other women's shoes. Along the way, we've healed.

Our lessons? That life is as random as it is beautiful! That there is much to learn from the people in our midst. And, as many have witnessed, that the spirit is resilient.

Some of the contributors are friends, former classmates and colleagues. Others are friends of friends or people whose paths we have crossed in the course of an ordinary day. In many cases, we have only met "virtually", interacting briefly over the phone, exchanging ideas and edits by email. The fact that more than two dozen women came together to create this, we believe, is part design, part destiny. To the women who put pen to paper, we are deeply grateful for your belief in this project and for your immense trust and generosity in sharing your stories.

We hope that this book will encourage the reader to take heart in others' experiences and to take pride in who

you are, regardless of what life is throwing your way at this point in time. When times are trying, take comfort in knowing that you are far from alone—that someone has been there and has come out stronger. And on brighter days, Laugh! Celebrate! Enjoy! We probably don't do it enough.

A final note: We have pledged proceeds from the sale of this book to charitable causes that help women and youth. Thank you for your support.

Pepukaye Bardouille

Neo Gim Huay

SUSHI AND TAPAS

EDITORS' NOTE

Little Ghost of Change

Marije is a traveller. For her, every journey is a chance to change, an opportunity to learn and experience a new country. As a human rights activist, she dedicates her time to mobilise, motivate and empower.

Marije's ghost of change was inspired by a drawing on a sidewalk during one of her journeys. She wrote this story at a difficult transition point in her life. Drawing from her childhood and a dose of healthy imagination, she builds perspective on how far she has travelled and more importantly, she harnesses strength for what is to come.

Little Ghost of Change

by Marije Nederveen



She stares back at you or maybe she looks slightly away. Is it a stern, serious or shy look? I'm still not sure. A bow in her hair, a dress which falls to her knees, and shoes like I always wanted, because they make you look like a dancer. A small bag dangles from her left arm. Is she also carrying a small hat?

I found this drawing of a little girl on the side of a pavement in Belgrade, also known as the White City, along the confluence of the Danube and the Sava rivers. I was on my way to a museum, but the guard told me in French that I would need to return the next day; it was closing time.

I never made it back, but the trip was worth it: I ran into her. She looked about four, maybe five years old. Like her, I was taught to look up, something I had trouble with when I was her age. I was shy, preferring to bow my eyes

and promptly blush whenever anyone addressed me. But, I was most certainly not such a perfect dresser. My mum tried her very best—it did not work. I wore similar dresses especially made for me, bows tied in my braided hair and socks pulled up in the morning. All ready for the day.

Somehow, though, the outfit seldom remained in the same shape as evening approached. Socks cheekily slipped down, bows somehow got lost and dresses mysteriously bunched up around my waist, leaving underwear exposed as I stomped my feet through mud and grass. Probably one of the reasons why I was never given those pretty, preppy shoes.

I'm a far cry from that little girl now, but also different from the woman who ran into this image on the pavement just a few months ago.

I was in the White City to take a break, to think and to enjoy a love interest that seemed promising at the time. It started off quite well, but somewhere in the middle we managed to get into an argument. As it goes, I cried, he frowned, then we made up and by the end, contemplated that it could have been different if we had lived closer together, but for now, our story has ended. All in six days.

Still I enjoyed my stay. The beautiful spring weather, the buzz of the city and the random strangers who would talk to me from time to time, one being a man close to his seventies. He said he knew who killed Kennedy and offered himself as the next presidential candidate who would subsequently ensure the replacement of Serbia's cherished republic with a monarchy. Much more fascinating than what I really needed to think about and a fabulous reason to practise my rusty French.

Just before my trip, I had heard that the organisation I was working for was closing down, and then my landlord told me he wanted to sell the apartment I loved. When it rains, it pours. Change had announced itself without my consent, and I wasn't quite sure how to begin dealing with it. Like many women around me, I identified with my job. I really enjoyed the work I did and this one had great benefits—travelling to various countries to meet inspiring people, an opportunity to constantly develop

my skills and knowledge, and contribute to something I deeply cared about. It was the job I had been dreaming about since I was a little girl. Maybe not as a five-year-old, but certainly as a fifteen-year-old who desperately wanted to leave the village where she had been exposing her underwear, much to the embarrassment of her mum. The question was, did I take with me any other dreams from that village? Perhaps, when I left the White City, I was little further from where I had begun—I had met the little girl. That was a start.

Back home I posted the picture of the little girl on my social networking page. She drew attention. A friend from Georgia asked where she came from and another lady in Fiji decided to use her as her own profile picture. They simply thought it was moving.

Looking at her again, the text beneath the drawing also fascinates me. Maybe it's the name of the artist that drew her, but the letters aren't really clear. Modern technology doesn't provide any answers: the digit followed by one hundred zeroes gives no Google search hits on the name, the possible date or the numbers—discounting the hits for window shade sizes of course. Seventy-two could be her height, but then what does the other number mean? So whatever the artist's intention, he or she already doesn't want to be credited for it.

And does she represent a real girl? It's like looking at a little ghost. I wondered about it every now and then, but had to leave her again for a while—for one of my travels.

This time to Indonesia. On my day off I found myself on the back of a friend's motorbike. Taking in fumes, sounds and an incredibly diverse group of people humming by on the perpetually congested streets of the vast capital, Jakarta. We were singing African songs I had picked up long ago and he chanted some of his favourite tunes. My friend has no home of his own. He prefers to live in seven different places, combines Sufi wisdom with prayer at a Catholic church and has energy like no other. We had fun hanging out and went to the old part of the city, both enjoying our favourite pastimes: me taking pictures, him making people smile and both of us talking to anyone who would listen. We ended up drinking a coke to face the scorching heat, while a guard of the governor's house we had visited shared a ghost story. A white woman had been murdered over a century ago. I have forgotten the details of her death due to the heat, but the guards reported seeing her at night sometimes. They even laughed as they said she looked like me. I gave them an even bigger grin back as it reminded me of my own little ghost.

Lightning didn't strike then, but a thought did enter my mind: what a wonderful thing it would be to write a story

about this woman, or even better, about the little ghost. What a great adventure it would be to find out where she came from, who gave her those watchful eyes that looked straight into the dream I had forgotten about: to write, or better still, to make up stories and share them.

She looked up from under the table. She had been playing there for a while now—waiting to go out, but it was taking more time than she wanted. So long. And it was already one of those very long Sundays. They had been talking first about the weather, then about Papa's work and now about something she didn't understand as they spoke in hushed tones. She looked at the ant that was making its way along the table cloth. It was probably aiming for the sugar that had been spilled when it was added to Aunt Sylvie's tea. Mama was quiet most of the time, but now all of them were silent. She saw how her mother was fumbling with her hands and Papa was tapping his foot. The cat was lying on Aunt Sylvie's lap, being petted feverishly. So much so that he decided to jump off and walk his lazy body out of the kitchen towards the living room.

Freed from the cat, Aunt Sylvie stood up and asked her to come out from under the table. "Shall we go out? I promised you an ice cream right?" She stood up, but

felt a bit unsteady on her feet. Her legs had fallen asleep since she had been sitting in the same position for so long. “Are you OK?” Aunt Sylvie asked. She nodded. “We will go to the ice cream parlour and buy you a treat,” Aunt Sylvie said.

This awkward conversation seemed directed more towards Mama than to her, she thought. Her mother’s face was a bit strange when she smiled at her and said: “Be careful of your dress.” “She’s a big girl, she will be fine Anna,” her aunt replied on her behalf, giving a comforting glance.

The parlour was only a few blocks away and she ran ahead enjoying the fresh air after the some-what stuffy kitchen. Her new shoes didn’t run that easily, but she felt like a dancer wearing them. She held her bag and hat tight, afraid that she might lose them. The parlour was busy and much as craned her neck, she could not see the different kinds of milky delights on offer until it was their turn. Her aunt ordered her favourites—chocolate, vanilla and strawberry. Normally she wouldn’t get three scoops, but Aunt Sylvie said it was a day for a little extra.

After the ice cream, they walked to the playground, but she only played on the swings. The slide might make her dress dirty and Mama would be really upset. On a usual day, she would have wanted to stay longer, but

now she just wanted to go back home. She asked Aunt Sylvie, who looked at her watch and sighed, “Yes, I think we can go back now.”

She entered the kitchen. Her mother was at the same position at the table. “Mama, where’s Papa?” Aunt Sylvie spoke before her mother did. “Your father will stay with your uncle and me for a while until he finds a new home. Don’t worry though, you will see him soon.” She dropped her hat and bag. Her mother started to cry.

There’s a picture of me, also in black and white, that I found again when I was moving into my new home. I’m about four years old, holding the hand of a friend. One sock is up, the other down, my braids are lit up by the sunlight from behind and my bangs all over the place. I’m wearing an overcoat which grazes my knees and look quite happily into the camera. That little girl told stories, made up stories, and would share them with anyone that would listen.

I hope there are many more to come.

• • •

Marije Nederveen is a sociologist with a passion for human rights. Through her work she has had the opportunity to travel extensively in Asia and Africa. After working for a while for a sustainable

development organisation in South Africa, she is back in her home country, the Netherlands, focusing on human rights issues. Marije enjoys meeting and working with people who dedicate their time to mobilising, motivating and empowering others, and captures her experiences in short stories, poetry, performances and pictures.

EDITORS' NOTE

On the Road to Oman

This is a story about a friendship and a romantic encounter. In the randomness of events, two persons' paths cross and later separate, leaving only memories to be relished as the years pass. However, just because separations can be painful does not mean we should shy away from a union in the first place. Similarly, just because loving or being loved can be empowering does not mean we should cling on and never let go. Indeed, it is the unexpected complexity of human interactions that makes life exciting and brings out the best of us.

Sarah's story reminds us to let life flow—to experience the moment as is and to allow memories, be they wonderful or sad, to simply coalesce because they are what make us who we are.

On the Road to Oman

by Sarah de Freitas

It was yet another road trip with my good friend... a good friend who always pops up at the “introns” or spaghetti-tangled moments of my life, such as when I went searching for my dad at age nineteen. Looking back, my friend has always been there, missing only the moments that have been edited out as unimportant on the cutting room floor of my memory.

I like my friend so much that even the thought of him makes me smile. Years ago he told me he was learning to fly. I hate flying and during turbulence would close my eyes and imagine that he was sitting in the cockpit with a big grin on his face, steering the plane. Even after he told me he'd given up flying because he wasn't any good at it, I still used that image of him to derive comfort.

I was on the road trip escaping some of my own

turbulence after a three year relationship had crashed unexpectedly. The unexpected bit included a curt email and the man in question running off to the ends of the earth (on a trip to the Amazon), with his mother as a replacement companion (hmm).

Looking back, I was worn down because life had not been easy for a while. A year of feeling the relationship slip away, despite my efforts, had taken its toll. I was a believer in the philosophy of “working harder” so this break-up left me devastated. Wise clichés such as “it just wasn't meant to be” and “when one door closes, another opens” are difficult to swallow when in free fall.

A broken heart is an extraordinary thing and I was baffled by how destroyed I felt. How could this be worse than the loss of a loved relative? Fortunately I had switched from a high pressure medical job to a less demanding research job and, for a time, could be dispassionate at work without it being detrimental or even noticeable. “Time out” for emotional flailing about prevented the stain of bitterness and lost optimism from becoming permanent. “Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break” (Shakespeare).

In a jeep heading from Dubai to Oman with my friend, I was very much in the emotional flailing about stage. I

was giving sorrow far too much air time, and my poor friend ended up listening to this and that about my ex for seven days. He told me many times as we bumped along that dusty road what a great guy my ex sounded like, which I found really irritating, though obviously I'd liked my ex for a reason!

To be fair, my ex had never done anything bad, apart from allowing me to think that we would be together forever, even after he'd stopped feeling it, thus wasting my time (fertility) but not his own. My female friends were compassionate but much of that compassion followed a "men are mean" format, which had its place in the grief cycle (anger) but at some point I needed to leave that loop, recalibrate and tune it all out.

I still had one foot in the men-are-mean camp on this trip, which my friend approached with amusement. Let me give you an example of one of our many "women think men are mean but men think women are even meaner" conversations. In this instance we were talking about why some husbands cheat on their wives soon after the birth of a first child:

Me: *It's terrible... and just because that woman is not so sexy and starts pampering the baby instead of her brat of a husband he runs off with someone who's got time to*

dress up and flatters his ego more.

Friend: *But hang on a minute what if that woman never really loved the guy and just married him for the money, baby and security (cheque book with sperm scenario). What if once the baby's born she turns mean and lets herself go as she's already got all that she ever wanted from the relationship and he realises the whole thing was a sham...*

Makes you think, I suppose.

My friend and I drove around for about a week. The stars by the sea at night in Oman are bright enough to lift the heaviest of hearts. It was deeply nourishing to break from normal worldly ties to talk about sadness but also about life.

We went back to Dubai for a couple of days, and on the day of my flight to London he announced feelings for me. Given my droning on about my ex during the week, it took me by surprise. I had been too preoccupied to observe my attentive listener. I had not even reached the "first cut is the deepest" stage (Cat Stevens) when one can just about give scraps of one's heart to someone new. Despite a wrong turn on the road to the airport, I made the flight. I'm sorry to say it but I really needed to make that flight. I could not give what was deserved.

I thought intensely on the plane, looking back at everything we'd talked about. It sounded different knowing how it must have made the listener feel and also trying to figure out what the future now held. I landed feeling more optimistic and it was not long before I was on a plane again to see him, perhaps still a bit before the bandages should have come off. We did not work out. Not in a bad way. The strength of the friendship barely flickered and we are always able to be happy for each other.

Thinking about my friend still makes me smile but I'm in love with somebody new and so is he.

• • •

Sarah de Freitas' heritage is Portuguese, but she was born and raised in England. She is a doctor, and lives in London.

EDITORS' NOTE

I'm Fat

Some time ago, I asked the husband-to-be of a good friend, "What do you love most about her?" He replied unequivocally, "Her confidence." This was my first revelation that self-assuredness in a woman could be beautiful and a powerful source of attraction to men.

How often do we allow advertisements to bombard us with lofty promises of beauty enhancing treatments? How many hours do we spend in front of the mirror wistfully thinking of all the changes we want to make to our bodies?

Chè's story flies in the face of these "image destroyers" and "soul depleters". It is a tale of coming of age—the winding road of becoming comfortable with who we are, and learning to love ourselves. We are reminded that, in whatever shape or form, we are part of nature. There is beauty in nature. And there is beauty in being natural.

I'm Fat

by Chè Monique Young

I'm fat. I have been for as long as I can remember. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Fat is a very loaded word and fat is what I am. Fat is not like ugly. Fat is not an annoying voice. Fat isn't ditzzy or being a bitch. Those things, while people may not like them, are accepted as permanent characteristics of a person. Being fat, however, comes with the expectation that you are unhappy and trying hard to get rid of it. But I'm tired of being unhappy with half of my physical self and wishing it away.

Perhaps to make sense of how this all began, I treat the story of my fat like it's folklore or a fairy tale.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful girl name Donna. She was tall, skinny and athletic. She went to

a private school and preferred to wear boys' blazers because her limbs were so long. She finished high school when afros were fashionable and a huge round 'fro haloed her head in her senior year photo. Donna went off to college and met a dangerous and exciting man named Tim. Donna and Tim wed in 1980. They had a spectacular ceremony—people still talk about it thirty years later.

Five years after they married, Donna became pregnant. Everyone was excited. This baby was to be the first grandchild on both sides of the family. In fact, so many people were eagerly anticipating the new arrival that Donna was given at least four baby showers.

At last the baby was born, Chè Robyn-Monique Young. Chè was a small baby even by 1980s standards, weighing in at six pounds ten ounces. She was too small for the homecoming outfit that Donna had carefully picked out. Stockings hung off her legs making her look like a tiny bird.

Donna was so concerned about how little her baby was that she weighed Chè daily on a kitchen scale. She also prayed that the baby would become plump. Miracle of miracles, Chè packed on the pounds. In fact, by the time she was a toddler, her father had taken to calling her "bruiser".

Poor Donna was still not happy. While she longed for a chubby baby, she did not want a fat child, especially not a fat daughter. There was nothing Donna could do; she had prayed for her baby to gain weight and that's precisely what had happened. Donna tried everything to undo her prayer so that this girl, who by now was no longer so little, could be as beautiful and skinny as her mother. While Chè was in elementary school, Donna put her on numerous diets including the "Cabbage Soup Diet" and "Fit For Life". Donna would send Chè to school with lunch boxes packed with breadless sandwiches: lettuce wrapped around lunch meat, and a pickle. On occasion, lunch would consist entirely of a quarter of a watermelon. The kids at school found Chè's meals quite peculiar. While other kids were busy with extracurricular activities, Chè was at home following the routine of an aerobics video. Over time, Donna partook in these slimming plans as well. Donna was never particularly fat, but she was not happy with the way her body was changing; a once tiny waistline was starting to succumb to several pregnancies and, frankly, to life itself. She was now trying to drop between five and thirty pounds at any given point. When Donna was pregnant with her third child, nine-year-old Chè weighed more than she did. After Donna gave birth, she and Chè joined Weight Watchers together.

As Chè got older, Donna resorted to bribery, promising her beautiful leather and fur coats if she could just drop the pounds. But that didn't work. She then told Chè that boys and, later, men would be more interested in her if she were thin. But Chè never slimmed. Her weight would always be the elephant in the room for those two. They couldn't break bread, go shopping or plan a family activity without the weight issue coming up.

I wish I could tell the story of my fat, of my weight, of my insecurities without discussing my mother. She isn't fat. She isn't me. It is true that, somehow very early in my life, possibly from the very day I was born, when she decided I was too small and something had to be done about that, my mother rooted herself deeply in the prospect of creating the perfect physique for me. Yet, there's more to my fat than my mother and that's what I would like to talk about.

I've always been a little odd. Smart, assertive and independent, I never quite fit in anywhere, not at any time in my life. I generally attributed this to being fat, rather than to my, shall we call it, quirky personality. I was slower in speed than other kids, bad at sports and boys didn't like me.

Not being a fashionista herself, my mother dressed me

in men's pants that were too small and put me in oversized men's T-shirts. Through elementary and middle school I would have to lie flat on my back to squeeze into a pair of jeans, and then sit uncomfortably through class all day with my legs sandwiched like a couple of sardines in that "one-size-too-small" outfit. If ever there were a special event and I needed to dress up for it, invariably I'd end up resembling a grandma.

By middle school, I'd accepted that boys would never like me. I was fat, black and ugly. I was the fat friend. In fact, throughout middle school, high school and college, if I were attending a co-ed event, I understood clearly that the boys would be interested in all my friends, but never in me.

In gym class in the seventh grade, Steven teased me for having hairy legs so I decided to exclusively wear trousers. Later that summer, Alex, an older boy on whom I had a major crush, joked about the fat lumps on my upper arms that looked like muscles. From then on I never wore tank tops. I endured one or two very hot summers of long jeans and big shirts before I had my first epiphany. You can't hide fat. It wouldn't matter if I wore a burqa or a bikini, I would still look fat.

Naked Chè was born. I started wearing clothes that were less oppressive. I found that the fewer clothes I

wore, the more comfortable I was. I was making quite a bit of money babysitting at this point and spent the overwhelming majority of it on clothing and Frappacinos. From ages fourteen to twenty-three, I dressed like a bit of a skank. I wasn't fond of wearing bras, despite having size 40DD breasts, because they weren't comfortable. Comfort and cuteness were now the driving factors in my choice of attire. Because I was always flitting about in a state of partial nudity, people assumed that I was really comfortable in my own skin. The truth is, like everyone else, sometimes I was, and sometimes I just wasn't.

What really helped me to become comfortable in my own skin was the mirror. Through high school I, like many adolescents, would spend hours staring at myself. I was constantly evaluating and reevaluating the image that stared back at me. In the process I became desensitised to my size and began to see beyond it.

The more I looked at "the fat", the less it disgusted me. The more innocuous it became. I realised it wasn't ugly.

I also began to take note of the fact that fat feels good. It is soft and warm. The kids I babysat loved for me to hold and hug them. I guess that meant that fat could be comforting.

Through looking at myself, touching myself and realising that self-hatred is not productive, I began to love who I am.

This was not a magical development. Nobody sneakily sprinkled fairy dust while I slept, allowing me to somehow awake as the spokeswoman for happy, fat girls. Instead, it was a process of sorts. Over time, I began to develop certain core beliefs about myself and the world. One is that it's OK to be fat and if someone has a problem with fat, that's their problem not mine. Another is that I'm incredibly sexy. Sexy, I've learned over the years, is quite a super power.

When I was about sixteen or seventeen, I read about Big Burlesque in San Francisco—an entire troupe of fat ladies who were sexy as hell and embraced it. These women strutted their stuff half-naked but in surprisingly tasteful outfits, like Parisien damsels in feathers and ruffles at the Moulin Rouge in days gone by. They used their body not just to entertain men, but to tell a story for which the opening line was: “You come here to look at me because I am the essence of woman; because I am beautiful.”

I dreamed of running away and joining them, but when I was twenty-one, I realised I didn't have to go very far. I discovered the DC Gurly Show, a local burlesque troupe made up of women of all body types, age, sexual orientation and gender identity. I decided that I liked this inclusivity even more than I liked the idea of Big Burlesque. Where Big Burlesque says that fat women are sexy, the DC Gurly

Show says that all people are sexy. There's no othering or qualifying involved.

I joined the troupe in 2007 and loved having an outlet to be openly sexual and overtly sensual without anyone expecting me to first apologise for being fat. And the funny thing is that people do not only see past the weight, they love it.

Right now, I am one of the more confident people I know. I want to just say “I'm fat, so what”? And, in many ways, that's what I do. I don't let being fat hold me back or stop me from living life to the fullest. But fat, like I said earlier, is still complicated.

While I can accept my fat from a beauty and self esteem perspective, a lot of the world doesn't. Being fat limits my dating options, clothing options, job options. It affects my fertility and chances of having a healthy pregnancy, and living a long life. It also increases my risks of developing heart disease, diabetes, cancer and other major illnesses. So, to say that it's OK to be fat or that I'm not going to make any effort to lose weight seems like I'm giving up on myself.

How can I intelligently accept that?

I've been on and off diets my whole life and I'm tired of it. I can't look you in the eye and promise to start eating healthier and exercising for my wellbeing. See, when I do

those things, I'm not thinking about lower blood pressure or higher energy levels. I'm really thinking about smaller pants sizes and more men finding me attractive.

In fact, I'm currently trying to convince myself to lose eighty pounds by Halloween so I can dress up as Beyoncé.

But, hopefully as I continue to mature I'll find a contented place and make decisions driven more by what makes me healthy. Who knows what the future holds. Right now I'm fat. I'm confident. I'm sexy. I'm conflicted. I'm imperfect. I'm at risk for all sorts of problems. I'm happy. I'm human.

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Chè Monique Young was raised and resides in Virginia, USA. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Women's Studies from Temple University and is a massage therapist, belly dancer and burlesque performer. Chè is currently planning workshops to help women tap into their own "sexy" and let go of unnecessary baggage related to body image.

EDITORS' NOTE

The Tea Lady in the Boardroom

It is not often that one is so inspired by a young colleague. When it does happen, one pauses to reflect upon the beauty of life, then doubles up on pace to make up for time lost in experiencing its richness.

Zipho's life reads like an opera—growing up in the new nation of South Africa, in an environment of poverty and sickness, in a world where both her skin colour and gender have been and, in some instances, still are being discriminated against. She has faced more challenges than some women twice her age, yet Zipho has triumphed over them. She reminds me of fresh buds in spring, bursting with hope, resilience and energy after a savage winter. She is the future that the end of apartheid had hoped for and a fountain of strength from which we can all draw.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Pepukaye Bardouille was born in Dominica, but spent her formative years in Zambia and England. She studied engineering in America and France, and earned a doctorate in Energy and Environmental Systems Studies from Lund University in Sweden. Giving in to wanderlust, Pep has worked in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East as both a management consultant and with international development agencies on corporate strategy, energy and sustainable development issues. Her interests are eclectic, but perhaps more than anything, she is happiest simply connecting with people, ideally while collecting random adventures from places near and far with her trusted camera in tow.

Neo Gim Huay was born and raised in Singapore. She studied engineering in Cambridge University and completed her MBA in Stanford University, spending close to a decade in public service before becoming an international management consultant. Gim Huay spent the last three years in Lagos, where she was both challenged and enriched by the dynamism and complexities of Nigeria living—with never a dull moment. Gim Huay now resides in Singapore. Eternally grateful for the opportunities that life has given her, the number one item on her bucket list is to give back to life multiple times more than what life has given her.

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ISBN 978-981-07-2618-2



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