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Liar, Liar

CHAPTER 1

October 1979. I am three years old. I sit beside my mother in the front seat of her silver Grand Prix, in the days long before child-seat laws, as we drive home from preschool. She is asking about my day, asking me to explain the crayon drawing I made of a turkey with rainbow feathers. I cannot answer her, though, because I am distracted by the way my legs squish themselves out wide as I sit back on the passenger seat, my black-and-white saddle shoes dangling ten inches above the floor mat, and the way the zipper of my pink windbreaker billows away from my body and makes me look like I have a baby in my belly.

And suddenly, it occurs to me that I am fat. Photos of me at age three show a snub-nosed, pigtailed, blonde toddler wearing green bell-bottoms and a wide silly grin, always with a baby doll tucked protectively under the arm. These photos also prove I was anything but fat. The terrible irony is that I have never actually *been* fat, and yet I cannot recall a time when I did not *feel* fat.

Perception is not objective. What actually *is* real takes a back seat to what we *experience* as being real. I've never been a fat girl. But I have lived life as one for thirty-something years now.

It strikes me as odd that I, at three, believed being fat was a very negative thing. Three-year-olds have simple jobs. They must learn the difference between red, yellow, and blue, and what sound a kitty makes—and a puppy, and a frog. They must learn their shapes and basic opposites, such as hot and cold, light and dark, little and big. At age three, I was particularly concerned with the difference between fat and thin.

My sister, Erica, six years older than I, was slightly overweight, but incredibly beautiful nonetheless, with wavy chestnut hair and distinctive almond-shaped green eyes. Erica and I share a father only, her mother having been our dad's first wife. As my half-sister, Erica only lived with me on weekends and during the summer. I adored her and eagerly counted down the days until her visits. I can remember craning my neck to see out the car window every week as we drove the twenty-five miles to pick her up from her mother's house, asking every five minutes, "Are we almost there?"

I loved everything about Erica. I loved her with an unconditional, irrational, tag-along little sister type of love, the kind that sees no evil. The kind that sees no fat, in fact, and is confused when it overhears discussions about said fat in hushed, conspiratorial tones. I quickly understood that being fat, or chubby or stocky or thick or pudgy, was undesirable, and perhaps even sinful. Bless me Father, for I have sinned: I've outgrown my jeans and made You worry.

So yes, I believed at age three that being fat was bad. And when I saw how that stupid pink jacket made my belly look, I decided then and there it would have to go. When we got home from preschool, I ran up to my room and nearly ripped the jacket in my haste to get it off. I threw it under my bed and hid myself under my Holly Hobby bedspread, pinching the skin of my belly until I left stinging red welts in the shape of toddler fingers.

From that day on, I was at war with myself. I had been listening closely, as children are apt to do, and I knew food had something to do with fatness. Too much food equaled extra fat on one's body, and I would have no extra fat. Not for all the butter cookies in the world.

In preschool, snack time was an event. Thirty sticky-fingered children sat in miniature chairs at round, miniature tables, awaiting our ration of butter cookies and orange juice. The boys like piranhas, ate them whole, making loud crunching noises and opening their mouths to reveal partially chewed cookies, thereby grossing out the girls, who ate theirs delicately with one raised pinky. If you were a girl, you placed the donut-shaped cookie on your finger like a cookie ring, and nibbled the edges ever so gingerly, in competition to see which girl could make her cookie last the longest.

I was painfully aware, at three, that I was not particularly girly. I wanted to be like my twin friends, Kerri and Kristine. Their hair was always straight and sleek and shiny, and their pigtails hung down perfectly on either side of their heads. My hair was cut in layers, and my pigtails never matched. One side was always higher, slightly forward, and sticking out of the elastic like a tuft of chicken feather. Kerri and Kristine wore perfect matching ensembles, with ribbons and headbands to match. Kerri and Kristine were gentle and feminine and quiet, and giggled shyly when the boys said bad words. Kerri and Kristine were small and dainty in my perception, and I was anything but, with my muscular legs and blonde hairy arms and chicken feather pigtails.

I look at class photos from those early years, and I look no different from my friends. But at age three, and at every age that followed, there was no convincing me of that fact. I was different. I was awkward. And there was entirely too much of me.

I didn't know much about God as a young child. My mother had been raised in the Catholic Church, and it was all she knew, and neither of us particularly cared for church when we went on the obligatory holidays like Christmas and Easter. Church was long and dull and uninspiring, sort of like a routine trip to the dentist. Sometimes we went regularly for weeks on end, when Mom got a bug up her skirt and decided we needed some religion. Then she would grow as bored as I was, and we would stop going as abruptly as we had started.

When we did go, I would sit beside Mom in the hard wooden pew, trying to pay attention for the first twenty minutes, like a good little girl. Finally, the boredom would get to me and I would begin to bite my fingernails for lack of any better pastime. Then Mom would pull out an empty bank deposit envelope from her purse, discreetly unfold it to create a blank canvas, and hand me a pen. "You can draw," she would whisper, "but only if you draw something about God." So I would sit quietly for several minutes, because I didn't know anything about God. Neither did Mom, yet we both felt we *should* know something about God. After all, we were Catholic, by virtue of the fact that we lived in Joliet, Illinois, a very Catholic town. I would draw a cross, sometimes with the little man on it, sometimes without. Then I would shove the bank envelope back into mom's purse and bite my nails for the remaining forty-five minutes.

After church, we would go to Dunkin' Donuts for soup, which seems odd now, but at the time, they had some pretty decent chicken noodle soup that my mother and I would crave. We sat at the counter, facing racks of multicolored donuts on display. I watched what Mom ate. Mom was skinny, so if she ate soup, I figured it was okay for me to eat soup. There was one horrible Sunday, though, when my grandma, known to us all as Mimi, came along. I finished my soup and asked for a pink-frosted donut with sprinkles. I have no idea what could

have possessed me, perhaps the fact that I was a five-year-old on a growth spurt. I had no sooner asked my mother for the donut than Mimi put her crooked, arthritic hand over mine on the pink laminate counter and said, “Oh, nooooo, honey. You’ll get fat!” Mom assured me it was fine for me to have a donut if I was still hungry, but Mimi’s words echoed in my brain and made my face sting with sudden, blazing heat. There would be no donut for me. Not for many years, in fact.

In truth, I was a little girl of average build and stature. I was not thin or wiry—nor was I prone to chunkiness. I was medium. Regular-sized. My jeans were neither “husky” nor “slim”—and this caused me great distress once I knew there was such a distinction. “Slim” seemed like something little girls *should* be. I was certain Kerri and Kristine wore “slim” jeans.

I learned early, as all kids must, that life isn’t fair. The fact that I could not have a younger sibling seemed a great injustice. I was too young to understand why Daddy’s vasectomy should be such a roadblock to achieving this goal. I was also in too much denial to admit that Mommy and Daddy were having terrible fights all the time, with Mommy yelling and crying and Daddy throwing things, and that maybe we all wouldn’t be living together much longer.

The inevitable divorce happened during my sixth year. Events of that time swirl like black-and-white images in my memory, like an old silent film. There are a few vivid moments, like the day I got off the school bus and found Daddy home instead of Mommy because Mommy had been admitted into a special hospital for sad people; the day I had to choose whose house I wanted to sleep in (the old house with Daddy or the new rental house with Mommy); and the day Daddy came over to the new house where Mommy and I were living and got very angry and hit Mommy, and then became angry at himself and

punched himself in the face until he bled out of his nose. Those I remember, in technicolor—with lots and lots of red.

I'm sure it was difficult, maybe even traumatic, but the soul of a child is profoundly resilient, and life just seemed to go on. I still had friends, I still got straight A's, I still made popsicle-stick crafts and went sledding and danced in my bedroom. I saw Daddy on weekends and listened to him say mean things about Mommy, and then I went home and listened to Mommy say mean things about Daddy.

Somehow I learned to tune it out. I don't remember feeling all that sad about our broken home. In fact, I remember feeling guilty about *not* feeling sad. I don't remember being angry at Mom and Dad. I remember being angry at myself. Not for causing their divorce, as several therapists have suggested. Not for not being sad enough. No. I was angry at myself for being fat.

Being fat seemed an efficient catch-all. I needed to be mad at myself, because I couldn't be mad at anyone else. Early on, I came to equate being angry with being mean and believed only mean people got angry. And since I needed a reason to be mad at myself, my self-imposed handicap of imaginary fatness seemed very convenient.

I'd like to say being angry about being fat served its purpose in time, and I got over it. I did not. It got worse. When you begin to tell yourself a lie, day in and day out, two inevitable things occur. One: you become very good at lying. Two: you begin to believe your own lies to the extent that they become your own inarguable truth. Oops.

And so, off we go on a roller-coaster ride of self-loathing, through grade school and middle school and puberty, and round and round we go, and where we'll stop, God only knows.

A Defective Model

CHAPTER 2

I arrived at puberty the way I arrive at most conclusions: without really meaning to. Each year at Grand Prairie Elementary School, the fifth-grade students were taken on a much-dreaded field trip to the Robert Crown Center in Chicago. On this outing, the girls and the boys were separated so they could learn about the magic of puberty and sexual development. It might as well have been called “What to Expect When Your Body Matures More Quickly than Your Emotions.” The girls were sent off to watch filmstrips about getting their periods, growing breasts, and not becoming a mother before high school graduation. The boys were sent off to learn the deep mysteries of manhood, and I suspect, sadly, that nowadays they leave with condoms in the pockets of their jeans. I am sure it was educational. I am kind of sad that I missed out on it, really.

In the middle of fifth grade, I gracefully dismounted from the pommel horse in gym class, landed with my right foot pointing behind me, and heard a loud snap. I spent the next several months in a full-leg cast, scooting everywhere on my backside because I was, for some inexplicable reason, humiliated at the thought of using crutches and felt that crab-walking

around the house was far more dignified. I was unable to attend school and instead studied at home with a private tutor. And because Sex Ed is not a subject typically taught one-on-one, I missed out on the lessons my classmates enjoyed on that field trip, while I convalesced at home.

It is interesting to recall how self-conscious I was about my body in those months while I was laid up. My mom warned me that I could “get chubby” if we weren’t careful, due to my decreased level of physical activity. Those words somehow came out like blasts of fire from her mouth, and their heat stayed with me, flushing my face each time I replayed them in memory. As the weeks ticked by, I was not concerned about my leg not setting properly or loss of muscle tone or whether I would heal properly and walk upright again. I was concerned only not to get chubby.

I decided that a person who does not walk on two feet does not require solid food, and I reasoned that mainlining orange juice exclusively should be sufficient for my nutrition. I remember counting the days I managed to ingest only orange juice, to the exclusion of all food. I made it to three. I suppose Mom figured it was good I was listening to my body, which was apparently craving calcium-fortified juice; I can’t blame her for not noticing my fast. Until that point, I had not given her much reason to worry about my food intake. But at the end of day three, my little game was ruined.

Mom had remarried when I was in third grade to a man named Bill whom she did not love, as an act of financial and emotional desperation. That night, Bill brought home buckets of fried chicken and biscuits. I tried to fight against temptation, but the salty, savory smell filled the room as he entered, armed with paper plates and plastic sporks. I ate a chicken leg and half a biscuit, sitting on the carpet in the family room, watching *Star Search* on television. A little girl sang and danced on the show,

kicking spindly toothpick legs all about. I looked at my own legs, one curled under me, one stretched out in white graffitied plaster, a smudge of chicken grease on the knee. *Chubby . . . chubby . . . chubby . . .*

And then it occurred to me: if I can put food in, I can take food out. I remembered Mom telling me how she used to shove her fingers down her throat as a teenager to rid herself of that horrible feeling of fullness. I do not believe my mother was bulimic in the clinical sense; she had been an extremely thin girl and was self-conscious about her bony body. She did, however, inherit her father's "nervous stomach" and sought relief in self-induced vomiting, as her father had for years. I scooted across the family room into the bathroom, pulled myself to a wobbly stand at the sink, bent over, and reached down my throat with the first two fingers of my right hand. I gagged. My eyes watered, and my face flushed. Nothing. I tried again, this time shoving them further down and promising myself I would not retract them until I threw up, no matter how strong the urge to pull my fingers out. Nothing. I cried, feeling like a fat failure who couldn't even throw up right. I decided I would never eat again. Never.

Of course, my will power at age eleven had not yet developed into the potentially dangerous bullheadedness it would later become, and I resumed eating as usual within a week. I remained paranoid of becoming chubby. I designed elaborate calisthenics routines, which I would perform each night on my makeshift bed on the family room floor after my mother and stepfather had gone upstairs to bed. It must have worked, because despite my inactivity during the months I wore the cast, I did not gain a pound. But the relief would not last long.

We all seem to move from trauma to trauma, or maybe just from drama to drama, when we are in adolescence. Everything that happens is extreme; we're extremely sad or extremely

excited or extremely confused. Blame it on raging hormones. Take the raging hormones and combine them with a rather extreme personality—terribly sensitive, given to fits of inexplicable tears, obsessive, precocious, perfectionist—and you have a recipe for disaster. Something brewed just under the surface in me at age eleven—something menacing. Something like an eating disorder, but dormant—a sleeping monster waiting to be awakened to his opportunity to pounce.

It's too bad I missed that field trip to the Crown Center, or I might have been better prepared for the no good, awful, horrible, terrible Tuesday in spring 1987 when I stopped playing on my jungle gym for a quick trip to the bathroom, pulled up my bib overall shorts after using the toilet, tossed my braid over my shoulder, and noticed a few drops of red in the toilet. I knew what it was; Mom had always been open about this sort of thing. By age six, I knew that each month a mommy's body gets rid of the "baby house" it would have needed if God had chosen to begin growing a baby in her belly. What I didn't understand is why God would ever dream that an eleven-year-old would need such a house. I wasn't a mommy. I was a child.

I felt betrayed by my body. How dare it grow up faster than I wanted it to? I wasn't ready for this hassle. And I was somehow fully and painfully aware that I was the first of my friends to get my period.

I took this opportunity, standing over the toilet in horror and disbelief, to pray. "Oh dear God, please make this go away!" I hoped against hope I had somehow injured myself and was bleeding internally, but I knew better. My tummy felt funny—soft, spongy, and sore. So I amended my prayer to "Oh dear God, please don't let this make me fat." Odd. I don't know what caused me to fear that the one thing might automatically trigger the other. I only know the fear of imminent weight gain

gripped me that afternoon, something fierce.

I was moving swiftly into womanhood, and I wanted no part of it. I wanted to be a child—androgynous, untethered, carefree. I wanted to climb trees and ride my bike and play Barbies. It seemed absurd that a person who still wanted to play Barbies would be a person who could have a baby. The way I saw it, maxi pads and a hot pink teddy bear lunch box did not belong in the same backpack.

I was caught between worlds: I was not yet an adult and apparently no longer a child. The problem was, I hadn't yet gotten around to *being* a child, and now I felt I had missed my opportunity altogether.

By age eleven, I had grown into a convenient role in my familial system, which therapists would later refer to as the Symptom Bearer. Everyone in my family was chaotic. My world was swirling around me, tornado-like, and I was caught in its cold, roaring eye. I needed guidance, and my parents did the best they could. I was a mess, didn't know why, and had too few words to express what was going on inside my head. All I knew, by eleven, was that I hated my body with a vile hatred so intense it frightens me now to recall it. And so, at the start of sixth grade, the inevitable happened: my emotional dam broke, and I became a basket case.

Sixth grade was the start of junior high school, which meant changing classrooms, multiple teachers, pre-algebra, study hall in lieu of recess, home ec and wood shop and drug awareness and health class. It also meant students were suddenly required to change clothes and shower for gym, now that we were old enough to sweat and to stink.

I cannot begin to express the terror this induced. I was a freak, remember—a freak with sore nubs of new breasts, an oily t-zone, and hips, the first promise of an hourglass figure I

would always despise. And as if all of these deformities weren't enough, I hemorrhaged once a month. I could think of nothing more freakish than that.

I agonized over the gym class scenario for the entire summer before sixth grade. I plotted, I schemed, I racked my brain to come up with an out. I even tried to re-break my ankle by jumping off of the top bar of my jungle gym, the top of the stairs at home, the tallest slide at the playground. Nothing.

My class schedule had the major academics in the morning during the first four periods—reading, language arts, math, science—with gym to follow during fifth period, three days a week. So, three days a week, I became suddenly ill—headaches, dizziness, nausea, toothache, hangnail, whatever it took to escape fifth period. I would end up in the nurse's office, or in the main office with an ice pack, or just hiding out in a bathroom stall, my feet pulled up onto the toilet seat. Or, when I could pull it off, I played hooky and stayed home altogether. My report card from sixth grade shows I was absent a total of forty-three days.

Eventually, I was found out. Someone came looking for me, and I was escorted to gym class. Luckily, everyone had already changed clothes and was warming up, running laps around the gym. I changed quickly in the locker room, by myself, and fell into a brisk jog beside my friends. Being with my friends usually calmed me. I liked to make people laugh and was pretty good at it. My fear was that I would be laughed *at*—which is why, when the gym teacher blew the whistle for us to head to the showers, I freaked. I couldn't breathe. My muscles felt they had turned to concrete. I clenched my fists into white-knuckled balls of anxiety. And I bolted.

I ran out of the gym to the bathroom down the hall and

locked myself in a stall. Mrs. Klint, my sweet gym teacher, followed and stood at the other side of the stall door, talking me down. “Are you sick?” she asked.

“I think so,” I replied, lamely.

“Let’s get your clothes changed, and then I’ll give you a pass to go visit the nurse.”

I knew I needed more time, to be sure that everyone else had showered and changed. “I need a few minutes, please!”

This scenario played out once more before I was finally sent to speak with Mrs. Packer, the school social worker. I didn’t know what a social worker was, or why I needed one, but I knew her office felt like the safest room in the school. It was smallish, like an oversized closet, and the cinder block walls had been painted lavender and adorned with posters promoting self-esteem and assertiveness. There were boxes of tissue everywhere, and I quickly learned that this was a crying room.

Mrs. Packer seemed like a safe person in whom to confide—her eyes were kind and she leaned in when I spoke, and she cooed with compassion in all the right places. I eventually spilled everything. I told her I was a fat, clumsy, bleeding, gushing freak of nature. I told her that my mom and my stepdad fought constantly and that he hated me. And I told her, in no uncertain terms, that I could not, would not, change my clothes or shower in front of my friends. She took her cue from that assertion and probed a bit on the body topic. I told her I hated mine and would like to cut it up. Evidently, that’s not something to say casually to a social worker.

Mrs. Packer probably knew then what I know now: that there is a greater risk for eating disorders and emotional problems for girls who undergo early puberty, when the pressures experienced by all adolescents are intensified by

experiencing, seemingly alone, these early physical changes, including normal increased body fat.

Within two days I had an appointment with a child psychiatrist. I was prescribed Xanax for anxiety and declared “emotionally unstable.” I wasn’t sure exactly what that meant, although the connotation was clear: I was bonkers. I didn’t care. It meant I had a doctor’s note that allowed me to be picked up from school every day after my first four classes and taken home. My only other academic class, social studies, was taken as a home study course.

And so, in the twelfth year of my life, I got to be a crazy person. I got to be sick, sad, confused, troubled, a head case, a mess of symptoms. It’s a role nearly everyone tries on at least once in her life, to see if it fits. I found out, by the end of the school year, that I didn’t care to play the part. I grew tired of being checked out and looked into and charted about.

A fantastically convenient thing happened over the following summer: my friends grew breasts and got their periods. At the time, I decided that was really all I needed to happen—that, and for my mom to divorce my stepdad, which she did, that same summer. I told my mother I didn’t need the Xanax anymore. I refused to go talk to Doctor Whoever-He-Was ever again. Mom agreed on one condition: I had to attend seventh grade all day long, no tutors, no unexcused absences, no calls home from the social worker warning my mother of my borderline suicidal ideation.

I thought that was fair enough.