Lovereading.co.uk

Eating Myself

Candida Crewe

Published by Bloomsbury

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Eating Myself

First published 2006

Copyright © 2006 by Candida Crewe

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
36 Soho Square
London W1D 3QY

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7475 7755 3
ISBN 13 9780747577553

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The paper this book is printed on is certified by the © 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C. (FSC). It is ancient-forest friendly. The printer holds FSC chain of custody SGS-COC-2061



Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources

Cert no. SGS-COC-2061
www.fsc.org
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

Alarm Clock

I am five-foot five and three quarters. My weight over the years has been as follows:

From the age of eighteen to twenty-three, a steady 10 stone 5 lbs.

Following eleven-week starvation diet aged twenty three, 7 stone 13 lbs.

The bulimia years, aged twenty-three to twenty-eight or twenty-nine, 9 stone 2 lbs to 11 stone 3 lbs (my heaviest ever).

My wedding, 4th January 1997, aged thirty-two, 9 stone 4 lbs.

Q Trust dinner, 2nd February 2004, aged thirty-nine, 8 stone 10 lbs.

Current average, aged forty, between 8 stone 12 lbs and 9 stone 4 lbs.

Following pneumonia, Christmas 2005, 8 stone 7 lbs.

Yesterday, 8 February 2005, 8 stone 12 lbs.

Today, 9 February 2005, 8 stone 13 lbs.

Tomorrow?

Breakfast

For three days, I tasted peanut-butter pizza, peanut-butter omelette, peanut-butter pie, peanut-butter punch and peanut-butter ice cream. In fact, just about every unreasonable manifestation of peanut butter you can imagine.

I was in Orlando, Florida, staying at a big, modern hotel, marble interior, foyer as glazed and soft as a tinned peach. The centenary convention of the Adults Only Peanut Butter Lovers' Fan Club was being held there. I was not a member. I was writing about it. I quite like crunchy peanut butter and have been known to dig into a jar for a clot of it so as to gulp it off the end of my finger. I'm not one averse to that slight gag on the roof of the mouth, of fine mud granules in carpet pile. But I'm not like committed member Jeanie Character, who had to have her stomach stapled in Gainesville because she and peanut butter were like *that*.

When it was all over and I was on the plane to New York, I was wearing a beloved viscose skirt because, if I felt full, it flowed freely. It had an elastic waistband which created a fleshy frieze round me of conceptual etchings in pink, but was not so tight that it challenged my breathing. It was loose round my thighs and, on balance, afforded an impression of security. I hadn't overeaten but hadn't exactly been the paragon of restraint either; I'd tried plenty of those cloying

recipes. The majority of – mostly American – peanut butter fans, some who had driven 3,000 miles so as not to miss the convention, were eye-poppingly fat. It was as if only their eyes were holding them up inside this outsize costume, their feet dangling out of view somewhere round the knees. I wanted to step up on a stool, look into their mouths, hold my hand out to them. I knew it was dark in there.

These people made me like and respect them. Publicly, at least, they were not bowed. I realised there is my kind of fat, and fat. Their size was of a different order. It had the advantage of allowing me to put a spoonful of food into my mouth, to sample some of the peanut butter offerings, without the usual need to flinch from dumb eyes judging. I was grateful to them for that.

My shoulder was pressed against the panel beside the cardboard door of the aeroplane lavatory. The wallpaper, surface texture of porridge, was cream with faint grey pictures of spitfires and clouds. I was troubling them with my forefinger. And glancing every few seconds at the little light-up red man, but he was obstinate in his occupied slot.

'I apologise, Madam, have you been waiting long?' Concerned voice.

The air hostess, with her firm blue uniform, mannered bun and compulsory figure, looked at my stomach.

It is faces that have histories, or so they say. People talk of old ladies made beautiful by laughter lines, a rather sentimental misconception but a compelling one nonetheless. We like to think it is the face, window to the soul and all that, which tells the story, and though the story's rarely laughter, it comforts us to think so. But it's not necessarily even heartbreak and regret that fashions the face. That is a romantic notion. It is years of moaning and coffee, paperwork and sun,

reading in poor light and spilt milk. My face certainly has more prosaic tell-tales than crinkles created of heady hilarity, grand passions untimely ripped and spiritual enlightenment. Above my lip there is a faint, faint scar, from a fall through a floorboard aged three. There is another one, equally undramatic, beside my right eye: a car crash on the way back from a dancing lesson when I was four. A pale pink blemish on my left cheek: shadow of a spot I picked as a teenager, less forgiving than all the rest, the one which chose to serve me right. So what? No, I don't think my face has much to tell. My stomach on the other hand . . . My stomach's the place to look for my history. And though it has never seen the light of day – I don't want people to look at it even as it is, perennially covered in capacious layers – it is the thing which shaped me.

I traced the journey of the air hostess's eyes, and when they landed, flies on shit, I tensed.

Then her punch-line. 'Are you pregnant?'

A year or so ago, when my third and last child was nine months old, I took my middle son to tea with a little boy he had met in the park. His mother had also invited some of her friends and their children to join us. One, with a toddler and a neat bump, told me she was a writer. She wanted to impress upon me how good she was, but tedious restraints of social convention dictated she could not. So instead she bloomed at me. Her bloom was with the pride and pleasure of being a writer and being six months pregnant. But, even more, it was the bloom of being six months pregnant and only looking three.

She took in my stomach. Then, breezy voice: 'Are you having another?'

* * *

A few weeks ago my cousin told me about a foolish man. He was called David. She had met him at the house of some colleagues. Another guest was a woman in her thirties who was there with her husband. David congratulated her on her news.

'You haven't found out the sex, have you?' he asked eagerly.

The woman frowned.

'I'm telling you, it's a boy,' he enthused, 'and, what's more, I'm always right. A boy it is. How exciting! No, don't look so surprised. You thought it was a girl, didn't you? Look, we'll do the test.'

Without further ado he slipped off his wedding ring, tied it on a piece of string and dangled it over the woman's stomach. It swung the boy way.

'You see! I was right. It *is* a boy.' Pause. 'But you don't look too pleased. You wanted a girl? Don't worry, I've got two boys, and they're great. Anyway, next time . . .'

'I'm not pregnant.'

When my cousin told me that story, I quivered with that woman's humiliation, for it might as well have been my own. I have never forgotten the post-peanut butter incident on the aeroplane, although it took place fifteen years ago; and since that children's tea, I have not been able to bring myself to invite back, even ring, the amiable mother who hosted it because I don't want to be reminded of her blooming friend. I expect there are some – not many – women who can shrug and laugh when they are mistaken for pregnant. My hat goes off. I am not one of them.

My fear of being fat is no longer morbid, but it is dogged enough that the man or woman who comments on my size,

erroneously takes my swollen belly for happy fecundity, is neither forgotten nor forgiven.

In my early twenties I spun away into the realms of a gruesome eating disorder and my daydreams glinted with images of blades slicing away flesh from my stomach and hips and thighs. The knives have since been put away, and my dysfunction around food is now normal in as much as, while it may have a more extreme history, it doesn't wildly differ from that of every woman I have known or have ever met.

My survey would not impress the men from Mori; it is an inexact science, bred of serious, casual and overheard conversations, of the heightened observation of a figure obsessed by her subject. I am constantly on the alert, ears ever pricked for the signs. I see them all the time; it is like learning a new word and hearing it for ever after. I don't think I'm particularly peculiar but these signs are all about me. I do not claim to have known or met an inordinate amount of people, to have travelled to the ends of the earth and exhaustively interviewed women of different ages and cultures on the subject. But I read newspapers and books, go to the cinema, watch television, listen to the radio, and everywhere I do go – be it to the local supermarket checkout, a social gathering, the school steps, a bar, an airport in a far-off land, an unknown city in a foreign country, up a mountain, anywhere – I am listening to women who speak of diets, feeling fat, loathing their very flesh; who voice consummate anxiety at not being thin, even if they are. It is a female language which, from my heightened perspective, is seemingly spoken by every woman, from a fish-finger factory worker in Grimsby to an au pair brought up in a remote village of the Czech Republic, to a grandmother from Grenada. Some speak it more fluently than others, but I have never come across a

woman who hasn't understood it to some degree, and had at least some grasp of its basic structure and vocabulary. Even those few who don't have much use for it – in forty years, I have met just a handful – if they have any girlfriends at all, or enjoy the company of other women, they hear it all the time so are able to understand it. It is the continuous female soundtrack, silent as well as spoken, of guilt and anxiety. Voiced, it turns into a kind of sisterly shorthand, one which by its very nature is appealing for collusion, acknowledgement, recognition, reassurance, solace and support. 'I mustn't.' 'Oh, go on then.' 'I will if you will.' 'Will someone share it with me?' 'I'll be good, starting tomorrow.' It is a given that any food more evolved than a leaf is pushing it; any food with a whiff of fat or sugar about it a kind of insanity. Giving into it simply cannot be done with the all-male silent gusto with which a man sets about a king-size Mars bar, a tabloid of chips or a sticky toffee pudding. Women will not do it without some kind of nod to the greed of it. It must always be justified. It's a one-off madness, a rare loss of control with a symbiotic excuse: 'I haven't stopped or sat down all day, I think I deserve a treat.' 'It's Sally's birthday.' 'It's Christmas next week.' 'My cat just died.' This language even has a signing version. Tapping a stomach with a flattened palm means, thanks, no more, got to be careful. Forefinger pointing downwards into the cake mixture says, I mean to have this much, just tasting, and then stop. This is my native language. I've studied it with passion all along, and I'm saying the abnormal is normal and the extremes – namely anorexia, bulimia and compulsive overeating – no longer really extremes, just a variant of that all-too normal.

* * *