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The Curvy Girls

Written by Michele Gorman

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MICHELE GORMAN

The Curvy Girls Club

AVON

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For all women of every shape and size. There's so much more to us than meets the eye.

CHAPTER ONE

Pixie rejoined our little group, muttering as she shot dirty looks at Pam, our Slimming Zone consultant and weekly bearer of bad news.

'I've had it,' she said. 'Do you know how much weight I've lost in the last four years? Do you? I worked it out over Christmas. Seventy-six pounds. That's two hundred and sixty *thousand* calories I haven't enjoyed,' she continued, saving us calculating that depressing equation. 'And do you know how much weight I've gained back?' Her hazel eyes glinted.

Glances bounced between Ellie and Jane and me. I wouldn't answer that question if water-boarded.

'All but seven pounds. It's taken me years to lose what I could have flushed down the loo with a minor bout of dysentery. I'd have been better off drinking the water on holiday in Morocco.'

'You've just hit a wall, that's all,' said Ellie. 'It happens to everyone. You'll feel better next week.'

'It feels like the Great Wall of China, love.' She shook her head. 'Why should next week be any better, or the week after that?'

Ellie was flummoxed by such blasphemy. 'It just will be. You've got to stick with it. Pam says—'

'I know what Pam says, Ellie. I've been coming here for four years. Four years. I've lost seven pounds. I'm sick of it. Why do we keep doing this to ourselves?' She gestured around the room, to the crowd of new faces. Post-Christmas optimists. By Easter they'd be as bitter as Pixie.

'Because we love each other and get to see each other every week here,' said Ellie. 'You're my best friends. Katie and I wouldn't have met you if it wasn't for Slimming Zone.'

We'd joined not long after Pixie did, and I couldn't have been more grateful to have Ellie at my side. I'd looked forward to that first meeting about as much as my family's annual visit to Great Aunt Bernardine, who smelled of cats and liked to explain to me why I was single.

We'd entered the church hall fearing the worst. Would they announce our weight in booming voices tinged with judgement? Would everyone laugh? Was the rest of the group only there to lose those stubborn last five pounds, making us the elephants in the room?

We needn't have worried. Everyone was friendly and supportive. Nobody announced pounds gained, only pounds lost. And as Ellie just pointed out, that's how we met Jane and Pixie. They were already friends, Jane having joined about a year before Pixie. They might seem like opposites but Slimming Zone had brought them together, as it had us all.

I scanned the packed hall, thinking about Pixie's question. 'We *could* be anywhere together,' I said.

'But we have fun here,' Ellie said.

'No we don't,' Pixie scoffed. 'We have fun at dinner after we leave here.'

'I like these meetings,' Jane said, staring at the growing pile of knitting in her lap. 'I feel like they help me. And we're . . . amongst friends here.'

'I'm with Jane,' Ellie said. 'I feel better for coming.'

'And it has worked for you, Ellie.' As her flatmate, work colleague and best friend I knew how hard she tried. She was only twenty-five, with all the lovely elasticity that brings, so hers was puppy fat rather than the established fat of us older dogs. She'd lost a fair amount of weight but still saw no beauty in her size sixteen frame.

'I love you girls,' I said. 'But Pixie's right. Our friendship is built mostly around how many Maltesers we've eaten.'

Being overweight does tend to preoccupy one. Like having a hangnail, it's always there to irritate you. Sometimes it's painful but usually it's just tedious.

'I think we need more than this.'

'I gained a pound,' said Jane at the next meeting. 'And I've eaten nothing but Special K for a week.' She glared at her thighs. 'My wee stinks of wheat.'

Jane was no stranger to unpleasant side effects. When she was on the cabbage soup diet none of us could be in the car with her unless the windows were down.

'That's not healthy, Jane,' I said.

'Neither is being two stone overweight,' she snapped back. 'I don't know what I'm doing wrong.'

Ellie bounded over to Jane for a hug. She reminded me of a half-grown sheepdog when she moved, with her blondish-brown flyaway curls that always found their way over her eyes. She was just as friendly and gawky and I often had the urge to pet her.

'How much Special K are you eating?' she gently enquired.

Jane shrugged her off. 'So shoot me, I get hungry! Those serving sizes are for children.' Tears sprang to her eyes.

'Oh Jane, I didn't mean to upset you. I only asked. Maybe something a bit more well-balanced than cereal might work better?'

'It's just till I get started,' she said. She always said that.

Dieting was an extreme sport for Jane – the more outrageous, the bigger the potential payoff. There wasn't a fad, plan, pill or potion that she hadn't tried since having her children, but nothing shifted the baby weight. Those babies were now nine and seven. Her house was full of photos of her pre-child days, when she wore wispy dresses and wasn't afraid of shorts. Her friendly, heart-shaped face beamed at the camera, wide blue eyes sparkling and long, thick blonde hair cascading over her shoulders. She didn't pose for the camera any more.

'But those adverts!' she said as she pressed her double chin with the back of her hand. She hated that chin. Last year she spent hours making kissy fish faces in a bid to tone it. Pixie threatened to demonstrate her Kegel exercises if she didn't stop doing it with us in public. 'They couldn't run the adverts if they weren't true. Trading Standards wouldn't let them. Would they?'

Our expressions answered her.

'I knew it. Poxy adverts.'

'It's not the adverts,' Pixie said. 'It's just human nature. If we stuck to exactly what they told us to eat we'd lose weight. We'd also lose the will to live.' She shook her head. 'A woman can't live on no-fat, no-fun food alone . . . which is why I've made a decision. Ladies, this is my last meeting.'

'No!' Jane and Ellie said together.

'You can't quit!' Jane said.

Pixie shrugged. 'Of course I can. I'm sick to death of letting my entire life revolve around every calorie I put into my gob. I told you last week it wasn't worth it for me.' She crossed her arms. There was no budging her when she did that. 'I say bollocks to weekly weigh-ins.'

'But what about us?' Ellie's voice hitched in her throat.

'You could always quit too. Then we can do something fun together instead.'

'I'm not ready to quit,' said Jane.

'Me neither,' Ellie said.

Was I ready to quit? As veteran slimmers on the scale of World War soldiers, we'd all seen several tours of duty. Heads of state should lay wreaths before the scales each November to honour our bravery in fighting the 100 Pounds War. I was battle-hardened.

But as I thought about what Pixie had said I realised I was finally ready to resign my commission.

'She's right,' I said. 'I'd rather spend the evening with you doing something fun than be judged by the calories I've eaten. But there's no reason you couldn't do both for a while if that makes you feel better. Let's plan something in addition to Slimming Zone.'

'I'm in!' Jane said, her hands flying over her knitting. 'What shall we do?'

In London, the options were endless. Film, theatre, comedy, music? A night stuffing fivers down male strippers' G-strings? No, none of us was rich. They'd have to settle for pound coins.

'I've been dying to see *Thriller Live*,' Ellie finally said.

'I thought you were going with Thomas?' I asked.

She reddened. 'I thought he was going to surprise me with tickets a few weeks ago, but he hasn't yet.' She smiled, no doubt thinking about lovely Thomas. They'd snogged at our company Christmas party and, unusually, didn't spend the next month avoiding each other in the kitchen.

'I wouldn't wait around for him,' Pixie said. 'Why don't you book them?'

'Well, if we want to go together,' she said, 'then let's book tickets for us.'

Pixie grinned. 'We'll have a girls' night out. Jane, could Andy watch my two on the night as well?'

'Of course, I'm sure he won't mind.'

‘Thanks, love. It’s bad enough that Trevor’s got to mind them tonight.’

Ellie, Jane and I bounced our usual looks between us. Trevor was a waste of space. Unfortunately he was wasting space in Pixie’s house, as the father of her children.

‘Are things any better at home?’ Ellie asked as we collected our coats and bags.

Pixie nodded at first, then shook her head. ‘Darts have started again so he’s out after tea most nights.’ She sighed. ‘A point to the temple is probably too much to hope for.’ We smiled at her lame joke, recognising the honesty in it. ‘At least by the time he gets home, the children and I are in bed.’

They’d had separate bedrooms for years on account of Pixie’s sleep apnoea. Trevor claimed to need a good night’s sleep since he worked. Given how sporadic that work was, he should have been okay with sporadic sleep as well.

Pixie had a new plan to leave him at least twice a year. Her list of reasons was endless, and totally justified. Not that he physically abused her. She’d knock his teeth out if he laid a finger on her or the children. But his constant complaints and insults were a slow form of torture.

The problem was, since she hadn’t worked in years, she was a bit stuck. So she stayed with him, hoping things would get better. As her friends, we added our hopes to hers.

CHAPTER TWO

Ellie and I splurged on takeaway sushi on our way home from the meeting. Eating tiny bits of fish and rice made us feel virtuous on a par with the Buddha. Which justified the ice cream we bought for dessert. Life was a balancing act, after all.

Ellie got the good wine glasses from the kitchen and threw herself beside me on the ancient sofa. Mum and Dad had brought it from home when I bought the flat. Lucky for me, as I was so skint by the end of the process that even Ikea was out of my reach.

I loved our sofa. It was old and worn but its scarlet velvet cushions held countless memories. It was where I was sitting when Mum announced she'd been appointed headmistress of her school. I threw myself on it when opening my university acceptance letter. And it was where I first had sex . . . a detail I'd skipped when reminiscing with my parents on moving day.

How I'd loved Rory McAdams, ever since Year Nine when he offered to help me with maths. He wasn't the most popular boy, or the sportiest or smartest or funniest. He was a bit on the short side, and failed to grow the peach fuzz that our classmates managed. But he was incredibly nice, and he became one of my only friends at school.

It would be generous to say that I went through an awkward phase at school. It was more like a pariah phase. I slowly outgrew it at uni, away from the bullies who'd tormented me, but it was a slow process and I never did gain a big group of friends. Since meeting Ellie, Jane and Pixie, I hadn't felt I needed any more.

But Rory wasn't put off by my leper-like status at school. We became such good mates that our parents started referring to us in the plural. We were Katie-and-Rory. Naturally this convinced me that we were as good as going out, in a non-kissing, non-hand-holding, one-sided way.

But while I pined for my friend, he pined for a tall girl on the hockey team who didn't know he was alive. Sometimes I wondered if anyone got to go out with the person they liked.

One night, just before leaving sixth form, we went to the pub. We'd both had too much cider and before I knew what was happening, Rory kissed me. Or I kissed him. The details were fuzzy but the fact was, we kissed. I was snogging the boy I loved. We left the pub holding hands, and he kissed me again when we got to my door.

Mum and Dad didn't usually leave me alone overnight but as I was now eighteen (I reminded them of this every chance I got), they'd taken a rare trip without me to visit my cat-wee auntie. When I invited Rory inside I knew exactly what I was doing and wasn't at all nervous about having sex for the first time. I was, however, self-conscious, aware that my body wasn't slim like the girls in the magazines. I was probably around the same size as Ellie is now, with the same puppy fat coating my five-foot-five frame. Rory switched the light on. I switched it off. He laughed and said I was being silly, but left us in the dark.

The sex mostly involved fumbling with the condom he optimistically carried in his wallet for Miss Jolly Hockeysticks. We both tried to hide our surprise that he was using it with

me. The velvet cushions weren't great for traction and we slid to the floor more than once.

My head was too full of our new relationship to sleep after kissing Rory good-bye. By morning my imagination had us nearly engaged. Unfortunately Rory's sleep hadn't been disturbed by similar fantasies, and when he said he wanted to talk the next day, I knew he wouldn't be proposing. I managed to hide my dismay when he apologised for taking advantage of me, and he managed to hide most of his awkwardness. I was his best girl mate, he said, and a right laugh, and he didn't want to lose me as a friend. I pretended not to mind and we did stay friends as we went off to university. I saw him in London a few years ago and finally told him of the torch I'd carried all those years. He swore he'd had no idea of my feelings. He was, of course, just being kind. He'd have had to be blind not to notice. Infatuation isn't a subtle emotion.

Now, at thirty, I wasn't yet consigned to spinsterhood, despite Great Aunt Bernardine's theories. But I had to be realistic as I looked in the mirror. Sure, my face was okay. A teacher once even likened me to Elizabeth Taylor (presumably in her early years), probably because we had the same colour eyes and dark wavy hair. My nose and lips were about the right size and I wasn't too spotty. But not everyone wanted to go out with a woman who carried the equivalent of a seven-year-old under her dress.

'I feel ill,' Ellie said, chucking the spoon into her empty bowl with satisfaction. 'I can't believe we ate the whole thing.'

'It was light ice cream,' I pointed out, patting my own tummy. 'And we did only have sushi.'

'We should definitely go for a walk.'

'Are you sure? It's kind of cold out there.'

'Shivering burns calories.' She went for her trainers. 'Come on. Get off your arse.'

I made a face, which she ignored. Ellie was one of those annoying women who enjoyed exercise. She had a gym membership that she actually used, whereas I spent thirty quid a month to feel guilty that my gym shoes sat in the wardrobe most of the time.

Ellie's phone rang just as I locked our front door. 'It's Thomas,' she said. 'Hi, Thomas. I'm fine, thank you. Katie and I are just going for a walk. Can I call you back in about an hour?'

'An hour?' I mouthed. She nodded sadistically as she hung up.

'Will lovely Thomas survive that long without you?'

'He'll manage.' She scrunched her face up in a smile.

'He really is lovely, isn't he?'

'I think he is. I know it's early days—'

'Not such early days, Ell, when you consider that you've known him, non-biblically, for years. You'd have a pretty good idea by now if he was a knob.'

'Who'd have thought I'd get together with someone from work?' she said. 'At the Christmas party no less?'

'You're a walking cliché.' I stuck my arm over her shoulder and hugged. 'In the best possible way. I really am so happy for you.' Ellie was the kind of woman you wanted nice things to happen to.

'Mmm, I suppose,' she said, glancing sideways.

'Ellie, I've warned you. Don't overthink things. You know how he feels about you. He's told you. And he shows it all the time. You've got to forget about her.'

'That's easy for you to say. Your boyfriend doesn't have a crush on his colleague.'

'Christ, Ellie, he never should have told you. It was a crush. *Was*. All the way back when they were in school together. You've got nothing to worry about. It's not a big deal but you're going to make it one if you keep dwelling.' I stopped, and made her stop too. 'You know I'm right. You've got to relax about this. Don't make problems where there aren't any.'

She nodded. 'I know, but I can't help how I feel. I hate her.'

'You can't hate someone who's never done anything to you. That's silly. She doesn't even know that he liked her, does she? They're just mates.'

'No, but what if she finds out about his feelings and decides she likes him too? Then what'll happen?'

'Well, let's see. Maybe he'll shag her on the desk during his lunch break. And while we're in the world of "maybes", maybe the Queen will abdicate in favour of Prince Charles, and the bee population will recover and Wayne Rooney will grow an afro. All of those things are possible, but are you really going to worry about the possibility that they might happen at some point in the future?'

'I'm not going out with Prince Charles or Wayne Rooney, and I'm allergic to bees.'

'You're being purposely obtuse. Honeybun, lovely Thomas is nuts about you. He's going out with you and you're happy together. If you don't dial up the crazy, that'll continue to be the case. Believe me, I know about crazy.'

'You don't still blame yourself for Alex, do you? Anybody would have misunderstood the situation. That was totally not your fault.'

Maybe not, but my face burned just thinking about the Christmas party.

Everyone had looked forward to it. Our company, Nutritious, always put on a fantastic party whether it was a record year or a terrible one. Ostensibly it started after work at the pub on the corner, but most of us went out for a very long lunch beforehand. By the time I saw Alex sitting alone at the table, it was latish and the room was a bit spinny.

He looked amazing. But then he always looked amazing to me. An unbiased observer might have noted that his shirt was untucked and he was wearing that fixed smile he got when trying to look sober. I'd seen it enough over the years.

It never put me off. He'd have to soil himself unrepentantly to fall in my estimation. And even then I'm sure I'd find an excuse to love him again.

I'd had Rory-like feelings for Alex for years. They started nearly the first time we spoke, a few weeks after Nutritious hired me. When he asked me out to lunch I could barely eat (proof of my feelings if ever there was any). But I sussed pretty quickly that it wasn't a date. As the company's finance director, he was also on the board of directors. They took it in turns to welcome the new recruits with lunch. It was simply the luck of the draw that I got Alex instead of our balding middle-aged CEO.

Alex wasn't balding or middle aged. He was thirty-six (birthday November 4th), from a middle-class family in Surrey (only child), and had a two-bedroom flat in Pimlico where he lived alone (the address of which I knew by heart). To me he was perfection on legs. Tall, but not too tall, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His strong jawline suited the stubble he usually wore. He had swoon-making thick dark eyelashes that framed his vivid blue eyes. His skin was sun-kissed even in February thanks to his skiing obsession, and his big straight teeth were practically American. I fantasised about getting my hands into his thick, straight, flaxen hair. I'd never tire of looking at him.

So when I noticed him sitting in that booth, alone as the rest of our colleagues danced and drank, naturally I went over to say hello.

He smiled when he saw me, and patted the bench beside him. 'Katie. Katie Katie Katie. Happy Christmas,' he slurred. 'It's not been a bad year, eh, considering? Still a lot of work to do though, tough nuts to crack and all that.'

I laughed, thinking of my problem client, Jenny. 'I *will* get Philips Pharmacy on board next year,' I declared. 'In fact I called Jenny before lunch.' I didn't need to tell him who Jenny was. She was a company legend.

'Hoping for some last-minute Christmas cheer?' he said.

'False hope. She told me not to stuff my face full of mince pies because the extra pounds would be hard to shift come January.' In other words, a typical conversation with Jenny.

'Ouch. Still, at least you know it's not personal. She's never met any of us.' He leaned forward. 'So all you want for Christmas is a deal with Jenny. I wonder what else Father Christmas will put in your stocking this year, eh? Have you been a good girl?'

Was he actually flirting with me? I could barely breathe. Maybe my support pants were too tight. We sat awkwardly facing each other in the booth.

'I've been pretty good,' I said, leaving room for interpretation.

'Oh? Have you been a little bit bad, too?' He leaned closer.

I wasn't sure where he was going with his line of questioning, but tonight, I was going to find out. I took a deep breath and raised the stakes. 'I'm so bad that I'm sometimes very good.'

He smiled. It was a filthy smile, full of the kind of promises I dreamed about. He leaned still closer. He closed his eyes. I closed mine too, leaning in to meet him. Our lips met. His were warm, soft and as perfect as I imagined. We stayed like that for a second, two, three . . . five, six . . . ten. He didn't move. I peeked. His eyes were still closed. Slowly I broke our kiss. He remained motionless. Then, slowly, he leaned forward until his head rested on the edge of the table.

Frantically I looked around to see if anyone had spotted us. But they were too drunk. As was Alex, apparently. He slept peacefully on the table. With humiliation flaming my cheeks, I fled the party. I could only hope he really had been too drunk to remember anything.