

PARTRIME

What do we really think of our bodies? Over the following pages, we ask different women to look at themselves – their shape, their style and their defining features – from every possible angle. Portraits by David Bailey

confessions of a weight-control obsessive

For 20 years, Christa D'Souza has closely monitored every morsel that goes into her mouth. Has it made her any happier? She tries to escape the tyranny of the scales

Wednesday morning. Only half a day in. And oh, how hard it is. They say it takes 21 days to break a habit. But it is going to take a bit longer than that for me to break mine. One has to start somewhere, though, doesn't one? And so it is that I am sitting alone at a table at Carluccio's on Chiswick High Road and ordering my lunch. A rocket and parmesan salad, a plate of Parma ham – and a very large piece of focaccia, liberally smothered in olive oil. On the way out,

while paying the bill, I pick up a little parmigiano biscuit. At 5pm, while waiting for my elder son's karate class to finish, I buy myself an emulsifier- and E-numbers-laden hot chocolate from the vending machine in the cafeteria. Mmmm. Nice. Wonder what *proper* chocolate would taste like. Must explore.

Letting go. Escaping the tyranny of self-control. Just saying yes. If it all sounds a bit perverse, let me explain. I wasn't always the >

Kelly Brook Presenter, 29

Some people are born with distinguishing features. Others have their features thrust upon them. Kelly Brook was only made aware of her natural assets when, as a 13-year-old dancer, she found her balletic movements somewhat hindered by the arrival of a bosom so impressive, "I would see a crowd of teenage boys peering at me through the window during rehearsals". Despite an initial self-awareness, Brook took a very practical attitude towards her 32E-sized chest: "I just decided to strap 'em down and get on with it."

The television presenter is now used to the attention. "I'm aware of my shape, of course, and I really like it," she says. "But, if I'm honest, I never, ever think about my boobs. It seems everyone else is thinking about them for me." But while her cleavage may be a cultural phenomenon in its own right, Brook wears her implausible proportions with style. "I like to wear stretchy clothes that will fit my narrow back as well as accommodate my bust, and I prefer classic, structured shapes," she says. She also confesses to a fondness for vintage bras and dresses: "I love being able to control my waist and push up my boobs. When the structure is good, I don't need to wear underwear."

Hair, throughout: Johnnie Sapong. Make-up, throughout: Kelly Cornwell. **Fashion editor: Miranda Almond. Interviews: Jo Ellison**

shape and style

"I never, ever think about my boobs. It seems everyone else is thinking about them for me"

discipline freak around food that I am now. Being, by nature, a greedy person, and coming from essentially greedy stock (and therefore being the sort of person who'd take the bone on the carpet after Sunday lunch if left to her own devices), training myself to be a "restrictor" rather than a "permitter" has served me very, very well over the past 20-odd years. As Immanuel Kant once put it, "Man must be disciplined, because he is by nature raw and wild." He was right. If I ate what I wanted, I'd be the size of a house. I *was* the size of a house in my teens and early twenties (well, not quite, but certainly leaning towards the zaftig). Ugh. Those dark, furtive years of living in oversized pullies and leggings, of eating chocolate digestives in bed until one's tummy hurt... No way, no way, no way do I ever want to go back there.

And yet. There's a part of me that thinks, why not? Who knows if that's the way it would be now? And even if it was, would it, in the grand scheme of things, matter now that there is Spanx? This security blanket of self-control I've lived under for the past two decades, this treating of the bread basket as if it had an electric fence around it, this Chicken Little-like belief that the sky will fall in if I have the biscuit that goes with the coffee at the hairdresser's, or if I eat the crusts off the kids' toast – sometimes I wonder what, exactly, it is all in aid of. Am I a Hollywood actress preparing for her latest role? Does my other half actually like the look of ribs you can play a tune on? Would any of my friends even notice or care? Why not, in short, excite my tastebuds and *be* the nine-and-a-half-slash-10 stone that God meant me to be, as opposed to the seven-and-a-half-slash-eight I've so carefully, painstakingly maintained since having my last baby?

And so it is I embark on my latest guinea-pig

Little Boots

Singer, 25

Standing at a shade under 5ft, and with a shoe size of two-and-a-half, Victoria Hesketh's diminutive stature is one that she has to work hard to compensate for. "I've been wearing heels since the age of 13," she says. "My feet are probably ruined from a lifetime of stilettos. It's really hard to find shoes to fit – my feet are about the same size as most other people's hands – and I often have to buy children's shoes."

The Blackpool-born popette may share her moniker, Little Boots, with Caligula, but she shares none of the despotic Roman emperor's megalomania. "I like having a humble nickname," she explains. "I think my name suits my personality." Thankfully, Hesketh's alter ego more than makes up for her lack of gravitational pull. "Heels are a huge part of how I present myself on stage, or in the media. I always wear them while performing; it makes me feel more myself. It can be hard on your feet – right now, I could really do with a pedicure." *Little Boots's* album "Hands" is released June 8

stunt for *Vogue*. With not a little bit of fear. Because who knows how it's all going to end? Will I put on three stone in as many weeks? Will I have to throw away all my clothes? Will I, more importantly, still be me? That's my "thing" after all – being thin.

Am I the only person in the world who devotes such energy, such head space, such precious, precious time to the topic? Hardly. There are plenty of you out there – smart, sane, university-educated women – who do exactly the same thing. Women who inwardly flinch when they are told they look healthy or well; women whose sense of wellbeing and serenity pivots almost exclusively on the way their jeans fit that morning; women who, to put it bluntly, teeter on the edge of a serious food disorder. In theory, we can quite see the inanity, the boringness, the slight obscenity of it all. Of course we can. Us? Rexies? No way! In practice, it's a little trickier.

Dieting, reducing, restricting, improving – it's too much a part of our societal vernacular for anyone vaguely in the loop not to buy into. (Even my six-year-old knows what a BMI is, thanks to his Nintendo Wii.) That most of us aren't thin (13 million of us will supposedly be clinically obese by 2010) – you've got to figure that into it, too. The media can bang on and on about how curvy is the new black; Special K can conduct as many surveys as it wants claiming that women are at their happiest when they are size 14, and that men are turned off by the feel of hip bones, and so on and so forth. As long as there's this much food around in our lives, as long as our eating of it stays so divorced from its primary function of survival, as long as the path of most resistance is to weigh less rather than more, and the path of least resistance is to weigh more rather than less, thin is always going to be very much in.

For encouragement and inspiration on my little journey, I give the broadcaster Kirsty Young a call. For years, Young, 40, was on the diet treadmill, spending inordinate amounts of time, money and energy on trying to be thinner. Then, a few years ago, when her eldest daughter Freya was about two, Young went to see the hypnotist Paul McKenna, who, over a course of treatments, involving neuro-linguistic programming, positive-visualisation techniques and learning to see food as a friend rather than an enemy, helped her to "see the light". Ever since, she has eaten exactly what she wants, not least so that Freya won't think of her as being "one of those mummies who doesn't eat croissants".

The perverse and wonderful upshot of

completely letting go – of having the ice cream, of ordering what she felt like ordering as opposed to what she thought she ought to order, of seeing food as something to be enjoyed rather than feared – is that she not only lost weight, but she has kept it off ever since. Now she finds herself almost evangelical about the subject.

"People don't talk about this," she says, "but it's really kind of an epidemic how many smart, dominant, fabulous females I know who are ruled by food. Not that there aren't still moments when I think, 'Gosh, my jeans are tighter,' or that I've been eating more than usual and that I really ought to be thinner. It's hard not to when operating in a world where I know, ultimately, that's what people judge us on. But I work very hard at 'surfing' those feelings. I remind myself of how horrific it felt to be in the grip of a crash diet, and of the insanity

of the dieter's mind – which is thinking about food the entire time, except when you are actually eating it."

Buoyed by Young's words, I hop over to the local deli and order a salami baguette. (Say after me: "A baguette is a friend, not an enemy. A friend, not an enemy.") Later, on the way back from the school run, I get an urge for some hot chocolate and text my friend, a recovering chocoholic, to ask where the best, best place to get one is. She texts me back immediately: "Not telling!" And then seconds later: "R U OK? U sound bad. Do you need to talk about it?"

Not wanting to be persuaded off course, I don't reply, and persuade my elder son to let me make a detour to Hotel Chocolat on Kensington High Street for a 70 per cent hot-chocolate shot. My *God*. The pleasure of it. I'd better do this more often so it becomes less of a, well, treat. At around 8pm (usually the time of day that I'll have a large slug of wine to keep hunger pains at bay), I have a rootle around the "frag" drawer (as we call the cupboard in our kitchen where the teenagers' post-clubbing food is kept) and polish off a small packet of stale prawn-cocktail crisps. Supper, meanwhile, is a totally off-piste cheese and biscuits (all those carbs, all that fat, at this time of the day!), standing up. Then I think about what else, now that I'm allowed, I might fancy. Thus, instead of bolting to bed with the crossword the moment I've eaten (as I usually do to avoid temptation), I crack open a carton of vanilla Häagen-Dazs, scoop out a large bowlful, add some Skippy Peanut Butter and a sprinkling of Malden salt (try it – it's amazing), and plop down on the sofa in >

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front of the TV. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my boyfriend Nick staring at me with a mixture of bafflement and quiet hope. A girlfriend who tucks in? Is it his birthday or what?

Like anybody with a fat-phobic parent (courtesy of my dad, I did a lot of secret sweetie-eating in the loo when I was little), food, for me, has always been an issue. The lack of it. The surfeit of it. Just it. My teenage years were a long round of failed diets, of living on nothing but Limmits and PLJ juice, or Ayds, those weird little dietetic toffees – and then, after a day or so of white-knuckled hell, eating everything, but *everything*, in sight. The “epiphany”, if you like, came after I had my heart broken nearly 20 years ago and, as a sort of protest, lost loads of weight. I realised then that although there are many things in the world you can’t control, the one thing you can control is what you eat. And, aside from the two times I was pregnant, when I ate for Britain, and aside from the odd post-hangover binge, I’ve pretty much kept to my little system ever since. Which is to say no pudding, chocolate or ice cream, ever; no potatoes or rice; no butter on my toast in the morning; and strictly just Diet Coke at the movies. It’s not as joyless as it sounds. I eat tons of meat, tons of veg, tons of salad and fruit. I eat dressing. I eat chicken skin. I drink alcohol. And, even at my thinnest (around 7st 10lb, with a BMI of 18), I would not be clinically diagnosed as an anorexic.

Ten days in, and it’s scary just how easy it is for a living organism to eat more if it is fed more. In a way, I can’t help feeling like a laboratory rat, the way having chips with everything, a hot chocolate at 4pm and ice cream after supper have all so swiftly become part of my daily routine. After years and years of not needing those things, I suddenly feel physically deprived if I have to go without. All of which is fine, absolutely fine. I’m doing great, as long as I fully understand that if I continue on this trajectory, I will put on weight. It will be a physical impossibility not to. For now, I think I am OK about that. Just about.

Do I feel fatter? Not really. In fact, come to think of it, I feel pretty great. True, I haven’t got on the scales since I started, or looked at myself from behind in my closet mirror. (Actually, I can’t do that anyway, as the door that was used for this purpose for so long has finally fallen off its hinges.) True, I stand at the back of the room at yoga, as opposed to opposite the mirrors at the front. (Mirrors are quixotic, unpredictable things. I don’t want them to mess with my head right now.)

And true, too, that on a shopping trip to the Kildare Village outlet store in Ireland, my size in Levi’s, which used to be 25, now appears to be 29. But this must surely be an Irish sizing thing. Because weightwise, I don’t feel terribly different. Maybe, while concentrating on being such a control freak, I was actually eating more than I thought?

Quite possibly, says Dr Nicolette Ray, founder of Lovefoodlovelife.com, a counselling service that helps clients say no to diets, control and deprivation, and instead see food as “a fantastic source of pleasure”. According to Ray, 37 – a slim, cute blonde with a BMI of “about 20” – the constant eating of what you think you should have, rather than what you want, doesn’t always mean you’ll lost weight. Calorie for calorie, eating the bad stuff instead of the good stuff won’t necessarily make you fat.

“I’m not saying don’t be disciplined,” Dr Ray says from her office on Harley Street. “I’m saying be unwaveringly disciplined about what you really, really feel like at that particular moment in time. It’s about being present with your food, really. It’s the mindful, almost Buddhist approach.” There’s that mindfulness word again. It’s *sooo* in the mix.

Ha. Something to practise with... The nanny has just baked a bulk-order batch of her special chocolate ganache cupcakes. So that’s what I eat for my lunch: a chocolate cupcake, sliver by sliver, really treating it like the ambassador from the cosmos it is, and trying to explore how I feel with each chocolatey bite. A good two hours later (eating mindfully takes quite a long time), I suddenly feel wonderfully In The Zone. See, I knew it: one can eat anything one wants to eat, as long as one eats it in the right way.

To keep the momentum going, I meet up with Sahar Hashemi, co-founder of Coffee Republic and creator of the hip, healthy sweetie label Skinny Candy. Hashemi, 40, knows a thing or two about sacrificing everything to the temple of thinness. Her fighting weight, before she got married, was around seven-and-a-half stone. She maintained this low weight by cutting out carbs, of course, skipping the occasional dinner, and, like me, beating herself up hard if she ever let herself cheat. Then she fell in love with her husband.

“It’s pretty hard to maintain seven-and-a-half stone when you’re in a relationship,” she shrugs over a latte at the Berkeley.

“Something had to give, and what gave was my obsession with being thin.” Vindicating the Kirsty Principle, Hashemi looks as elegant and pencil-slim as ever, despite claiming to be “a few kilos heavier”. More important though than what the scales say is how she feels, and she feels pretty good – and appalled at how joyless life was back then, how narrow her world had become. But she is not 100 per cent committed quite yet: “It’s definitely a beautiful thing eating foie gras in bed with your lover, but I don’t know whether I really am a croissants-for-breakfast sort of person. It might be that, in truth, a boiled egg is much more my thing.” She says, too, that she misses that state of “wanting”, lusting after food in the way one does when one is genuinely, genuinely hungry, as opposed to being sated pretty much most of the time.

I know exactly what she means. Although it’s wonderful in one sense, this new-found freedom – not being bound by what one can and can’t eat – in another, it’s not. I miss that honest, caveman-style hungriness one gets when one is super-strict about not eating between meals. I hate being too full for a nice glass of wine. And I hate, hate, hate that way I snack throughout the day. I read recently that what gets Jeremy Paxman out of bed every morning is the thought of finding out new stuff. Well, what normally gets me out of bed is breakfast – especially if there’s fig jam from Carluccio’s in the house. Jam on toast, the only time I ever eat bread, is my one “treat” of the day. Now, though, fig jam, schmig jam. Who cares? As for the parmesan custard I used to make everyone order at Le Café Anglais without ever trying it myself, the sourdough breadsticks I never let myself

have at the Wolseley, the crème brûlée at Scott’s, even the chèvre-filled chocolates from Parisian chocolatier Jean-Paul Hévin, which I’ve been having on-and-off fantasies about for almost five years... Now, it all kind of tastes the same. But does that mean I can take it or leave it? Does it fuck. Put it in my path, and I’ll Hoover it up.

Meanwhile, that brief spate of body eumorphia, it’s gawn... When I look down at myself in the shower, all I can see is a well-fed belly. When I’m out at night, my Kiki de Montparnasse maitresse belt, which I wear with the oversized-top-and-leggings look (well, you’ve got to go in somewhere, haven’t you?) feels like it’s been in the wash. Most tellingly, I’ve become obsessed by shoes and handbags. The last time that happened was when I was pregnant. This is not a good sign at all. > 113

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shape and style



"My feet are about the same size as most other people's hands"

Shirt and trousers, both Dolce & Gabbana

DAVID BAILEY

On the way home from Knightsbridge one day, I find myself fantasising about a nice, safe, tasteless plate of organic salmon sashimi, followed by a “thinspirational” raspberry and cranberry Müller Light. The thing is, even if I wanted to break my “diet”, I don’t know if I’d be able to now. My tastebuds are so desperately, dreadfully, irrevocably over-stimulated by this point. Sashimi? Yuck. Fish biopsy more like. What did I ever see in its favour other than that it does not contain carbs?

I remain obdurate, therefore, and for the next two weeks, I’m fastidious about depriving myself of absolutely nothing. Eventually, surely, my regulating mechanism will kick in. Eventually, if I stick at it, I will morph into one of those rare women who can have a little bit of what they fancy, and never, ever find themselves thinking of supper straight after lunch. And they do exist, these curious creatures. There’s my mother-in-law. There’s the fashion stylist I know who can leave a packet of opened Smarties in her top drawer for weeks. Then there’s my friend Rebecca Frayn. An author, eco-activist, filmmaker, and mother of three, Frayn has never in her entire life “skipped a meal, counted a calorie, detoxed or indeed pursued a diet of any kind”.

Six weeks in now (with, I’ll admit, a couple of “lost” days on the Müller Light and chilled-rosé regime), and I know, without doubt, my body has changed. Not to the naked eye perhaps – I’ve still got skinny knees and ankles, and Peter Cushing cheekbones like I’ve always had, even when I was pregnant. But it’s that bulge under the bra straps, that apron of flesh above the waistband of one’s leggings, hidden so skilfully under a rotation of oversized pullies. The leggings, the pullies, the jelly belly and the sensation of being simultaneously full and hungry all contribute to making me feel like a bolshy, unhappy teenager. And, weirdly, a slightly dirty one, too.

Nobody has said anything. But, to be honest, that’s probably because I haven’t been going out quite as much as usual since the experiment started. And when I do go out, I’m always so artfully covered up. Nick certainly wouldn’t dream of bringing up the subject. He has been around me for enough time to know not to mention it if I’m getting dressed under the duvet. Indeed, the only person who has made any acknowledgment whatsoever of any change in my appearance is my six-year-old son Django. “Mummy,” he says innocently over lunch at the hamburger joint Byron. “Do you know you’re getting fat?”

By the following Thursday, 10lb heavier than when I started the experiment, I finally cave in. I book myself into the Mayr clinic, the famous detoxing spa in Austria, and lose, well, only 4lb, but at least it’s a step in the right direction.

So have I learnt anything from this little experiment? Have I taken anything positive away from it? Absolutely. Letting go is a great idea. But, I think, in order for the experiment to work, I need more time. Like maybe another 48 years. That plate-licking habit of mine, that impulse to eat beyond being hungry, it’s too primal, too deep to address in a matter of weeks. The point of the exercise was to see if by eating what I want, I’d obsess about it less. The fact of the matter was I obsessed about it a lot more. So, actually, while I want to remain relatively useful to society, I think I’ll do it my way, thanks. It makes me feel in control in a world where there is junk coming at you from every angle. It makes me feel thrifty, virtuous, more eco-aware, even, not treating my body like a dustbin, as I used to in my teens and university years.

There’s a part of me, too, that slightly resents the way that, just because I won’t even eat the sprinkle off a Krispy Kreme donut or put butter on my toast, it instantly means I must be a candidate for the Priory. Could one not look at it another way, and say that if one is the sort of person who is susceptible to temptation – a person who, when it comes to food, is more of a Labrador than a cat – it makes sense to create boundaries, to set up a plan?

Back, then it is, to treating the bread basket like it’s got an electric fence around it, back to everyone looking at me weirdly when I order smoked salmon for a first course and then smoked salmon for a main. Back, too, to being able to fit into my jeans (well, not quite, but after I’ve finished this killer course of TenPilates, maybe) and normal pants. Corrective hosiery is a marvellous thing, but it does make one feel so very middle-aged. Look, 10lb shouldn’t make that much difference to one’s psyche. But, then again, if you think of it as 20 packets of butter – most of it, in my case, round my middle – why on earth not?

Am I back to my fighting weight? No way. And it makes me a little sad to think that I may never get there again. Do I think Lindsay Lohan looks better thinner? Yes, yes, and yes. But in a sense, that is not the point. The point is that by being back in the zone, I feel like me again. I feel responsible and in control. And, in a way, that doesn’t have anything to do with what it says on the scales. ■

café au lait. You are the future of the race...”

There’s some disadvantage to being female in this, too. How often is a man described as “brunette”? (Brunet?) Women are defined as livestock are: “See the blonde, there, next to the brunette? Just behind, there’s a sort of foreign-looking white girl, quite exotic, nice legs.” The joyous relief at dropping out of that particular cattle market is almost fair recompense for the many blows to one’s vanity middle age deals out.

I turn away from this language of division more and more. So much of it seems a hangover from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century vocabulary of “tainting” and “diluting” the colour white. I hate the idea that whiteness, once “sullied” to some unspecified degree – perhaps simply to where it’s visible? – is then white no longer. It reeks of the fear of being “wiped out”, “overtaken”. It is insidious.

Bob Marley, that most famous Jamaican of all, had a white mother, but nobody would describe him as anything but black. Barack Obama, meanwhile, has his blackness defined, redefined and hijacked by all and sundry in an almost fetishistic preoccupation with labelling him. Even as I was profoundly moved by the sight of his inauguration – those many beautiful images that illustrated how far the world has come – I railed against the media, who seemed never once to mention *him* without mentioning *it*: “The first black president...” “A black man is in the White House.” My children were shocked: “Mummy, I thought everybody was the same!”

Obama also has a white mother, denied in the labelling of him, but, like the old joke about whether a zebra is white with black stripes, or black with white ones, perhaps this obsession with skin colour and race-definition is futile; it disappears when you examine it. These definitions come from a time when you might trace a person’s genealogy and come up with one country, one journey, one thread. There are fewer and fewer countries where you could do that now. In the happy situation of not having to find different station waiting rooms for us all, perhaps it’s time to stop trying. We have plenty of other divisions to play with – there’s no need to panic. We can label one another economically, psychologically, geographically and in all manner of ways. There’s no danger of the nightmare prospect of any actual *equality* to threaten our status. So it might be time to leave the question of colour behind for good. ■

“The Outcast” by Sadie Jones is published by Vintage at £8. Her new novel, “Small Wars” (Chatto & Windus, £13), is out in September