



A 20-year obsession with staying slim kept *Alix O'Neill* trapped in a cycle of deprivation and reward. But pregnancy shook up her perception of perfection – and her sense of self

I was expecting tears of elation. This was the moment I'd spent the best part of a year waiting for, but as I gaped at the pregnancy test in my hand, the happiness I felt was diluted by other emotions. There was panic I'd unwittingly harmed the baby after a boozy weekend, doubt I was cut out for such an enormous responsibility, and an element of fear – fear of losing myself and my body to motherhood.

Thinness has been my thing for much of my adult life. I wore skinny like a favourite pair of jeans. Tiny breasts and a well-defined clavicle were comfortable, a second skin. Growing up, my looks didn't come into the equation. A spirited kid with big dreams, I was going to be a playwright, an author, an FBI agent (lack of American citizenship wasn't going to stand in my way). But as I entered my teenage years, everything seemed less certain. Humility was the ethos at my convent secondary school. Sure, you could have ambition – within reason. When I demonstrated an aptitude for French, I was rebuked for showing off, while my English teacher smirked when I told her I planned to be a writer.

Puberty did little to help my plummeting confidence. Braces, thick-rimmed NHS glasses and skin lubricated with an immutable layer of oil – I was the poster girl for awkward adolescence. My friends embraced the changes in their bodies, they knew how to work the extra layer of flesh on their hips. Me? I was all boobs and bum, self-consciously concealing the latter behind a denim Hard Rock Cafe jacket welded to my waist. I had an uncle I adored, a playboy with a

Porsche and a perm. He dated leggy, immaculately groomed women who looked like Julia Roberts post-makeover in *Pretty Woman* and carried expensive leather organisers in their expensive leather handbags. I imagined those diaries filled with important meetings in cities far more cosmopolitan than my hometown of Belfast. Lighting up a cigarette on his treadmill one evening, my uncle told me I'd be pretty if I lost the weight. I was a size 12. It was a throwaway comment, but it struck a chord, because I honestly believed that if I was thin, all that self-doubt would dissipate. I'd be sophisticated and successful, just like the latest glamazon on my uncle's arm.

So I did lose weight. Lots of it. It wasn't even that intentional. I left home for university and was too busy partying to cook. The pounds fell off and, for the first time, I felt attractive. I dyed my hair blonde and ditched the glasses for contacts. Boys suddenly paid attention. They were rarely interested in a relationship, but I convinced myself that being physically desirable was enough. I was surrounded by talent and self-assuredness – students who had taken gap years, quoted Chomsky and mastered the art of the roll-up. I wasn't worldly or particularly academic, so I made a decision. I'd be the joker of the group, the good-time girl. Because that's how it works when you're a woman, right? From birth, you're tacitly assigned your place in the world, reduced to a label. I was never going to excel in my degree, so I'd be the skinny girl with a GSOH. ►

Throughout my twenties, I hoarded compliments on my appearance, cherishing every new acquisition. Even after I met my husband – a man who found me both intelligent and attractive, never assuming these qualities were mutually exclusive – I was fixated on thinness. It didn't feel like an obsession at the time. I've always loved food and never dieted but, looking back, I see just how much my need to stay slim consumed my thoughts. At supermarket checkouts, I'd silently compare the contents of my shopping basket with the person in front, seeking reassurance in my healthier choices. I was a stickler for natural foods long before Deliciously Ella arrived on the scene. Porridge replaced breakfast cereals with their evil hidden sugars, bread was strictly for weekends and I drank green tea by the gallon. And when I fell off the clean-eating wagon, which was often, I'd spend the next week atoning for my dietary sins with a draconian juicing regime. I rarely weighed myself, but every time I passed a mirror I'd scrutinise my size 8 frame.

It was no longer admiration from men I sought, but other women. Friends reacted in different ways. Some told me I looked amazing; others scolded me for being too thin before lamenting the size of their thighs. Full disclosure? I welcomed their insecurities. I have wonderful friends – smart, talented women who inspire me every single day – but it can be difficult celebrating the people you love when you feel you don't measure up. In my less charitable moments, I would savour their envious glances when I showed up to a party in my tightest Paige jeans.

We know skinny isn't everything. It doesn't make you smarter or more loveable. Skinny doesn't have the answers. So why does the perfect body remain the holy grail? We express outrage at body-shaming ads, but still want to look good in a bikini. We're scornful of the pressure piled on new mums to snap back into shape after giving birth, but praise our pregnant friends for having neat bumps. We tell brides how beautiful they look on their wedding day and slap the groom on the back for his speech-making abilities. We know dress size says nothing about who you are or what you're capable of, but we silently revere those who keep their weight in check. We're conditioned to associate slenderness with success. Almost as much has been written about Michelle Obama's toned arms as her achievements as the former First Lady. One article claimed her sculpted biceps were a 'physical reminder of her ability to roll up her sleeves and get things done'.

Skinny Girl is the one kicking ass in the boardroom in immaculate tailoring; she's the senior exec who gets up at 5am for a barre workout before the school run; she's the woman my uncle used to date (I later found out only a handful of his girlfriends were financially independent). Skinny Girl has her shit together. But if this is true, why did former *Desperate Housewife* Marcia Cross admit that not



'I SAW THIS TINY FORM WRIGGLING ON THE SCREEN AND FINALLY I GOT IT. IT'S NOT ABOUT ME ANY MORE'

eating to stay in shape for work was a 'living hell'?

I was thin for most of my adult life. My weight was the only area where I felt I had any control. Even when my career started going well, I continued to perpetuate the Skinny Girl myth. When I discovered I was pregnant, I was determined not to let myself go, but severe morning sickness in my first trimester led me to take comfort in starchy white foods – pasta, bread and childhood favourites like creamed rice. Disappointment ran through me as the midwife checked my weight – I had put on almost 11lb in three months. All those years of focus gone in just 12 weeks.

But after my first scan, everything changed. I saw this tiny form wriggling on the screen and finally I got it. It's not about me any more. With or without my help, my body was going to give this baby a chance. It's hard not to admire that kind of determination. So

I decided to give myself a break. I haven't had the energy to exercise as often as I'd like and my diet is more relaxed these days. I was away over the weekend and tucked into things I rarely eat – fry-ups, chocolate bars and fizzy drinks. Instead of fasting next week, I'm going to try to make healthier choices – and if I slip up again, so what? I'll put on a little weight, but it's hardly a crisis.

I'm now seven months into my pregnancy and have filled out all over. I don't see bones when I look in the mirror, I see strength. I'm no longer the Skinny Girl, and that's OK. My husband and friends tell me they've never seen me so happy. And it's true. I've realised my weight doesn't define me. I'm a good listener and an excellent timekeeper. I'm also infuriatingly bossy and appalling at maths. I am all things. And if I have a daughter, that's what I hope to pass on to her. Because real success is making peace with your imperfections, not the size of the gap between your thighs. ■



Clockwise from top: Alix poolside last year; at four months pregnant; with her sister at five months, feeling comfortable in her own skin

