

mirror on the wall
mirror, mirror on the wall
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We all have a favorite place. That quaint cafe on the east side of town, the last church pew on the right, any beach in July.

My favorite place, in case you were wondering, is the bathroom. It's the only place I've found that will let me be me. All two hundred plus pounds of me! No questions, no complaints.

In the confines of the lavatory, la toilette, or "The Jane," I am absolutely beautiful. My thick, scraggly hair shines like silk, and my sagging, brown breasts are sexy. Even when I didn't have breasts, my bathroom mirror showed me what I wanted to see: a "brick house."

These days, I spend even more time in my tiny haven of happiness. No, not popping zits like in the good old days, but actually cleaning that porcelain pot and washing out soiled diaper covers and T-shirts. That's what happens when you're amorously taken by the drooling smile of a four-month-old. You would do anything to make his life happy, even if it wears you out. So when I get a rare moment

to myself, the time I used to spend gazing in the mirror is spent sitting comfortably on the toilet, reading a book and dreaming. I've learned to love my body, no matter how much society and fashion magazine editors have worked to convince me that I should stay in the bathroom obsessing over it.

I'm told I was a sweet baby and an agreeable child. Didn't talk much, but I was sweet. One reason I didn't babble on like the five- and six-year-olds who befriended me, I'm told, was because even though I was as big as they were, I was only two! My mother prayed my hair would grow so folks would stop making that "sweet little boy" comment. But what we both wanted to stop growing didn't—my legs. Oh, and my feet (since having my baby boy, Jean Christian, I'm close to an eleven medium). I don't remember any advantages to being the tallest girl in my class. When teachers would couple us off with the opposite sex for Christmas play routines and May Day dances, I always felt silly. The awkwardness of my body consumed every waking minute.

The self-consciousness I felt as a little girl would follow me through high school and beyond. As in the stories of so many other young girls, eating would make me feel better. Honey Buns were always my favorite. There was something special and secretive about gobbling up Little Debbie snack cakes and cookies while lying on my bed reading the latest Judy Blume novel. I could relate to the Deenies, the Margarets and, of course, the Lindas portrayed in the book *Blubber*.

I can't say I turned to food to get away from the reality of feeling and looking out of place because of my height. I ate, mostly sweets, because the taste and the quick fullness were rewarding. Every now and then, though, I would hear a relative whisper, "She's gaining a little weight there." Angrily, I'd wonder, Why doesn't she just print it in the paper? Tell the whole world! No one would talk to me about it,

though—just *around* me. So I kept looking forward to the Sunday desserts my mother would bake.

My family and friends never came right out and broadcast it on the six o'clock news, but I know they wanted to. Someone's lips could be mouthing "Good afternoon," but their eyes seemed to be saying, "You're fat." Seventh grade was when I weighed in for the first time in public, during gym class. The clunky scale put me at 156 pounds. I haven't weighed myself since. Sure, there were more physicals and plenty of visits to doctors over the years, but I have never volunteered to ruin my day.

"That's why your clothes come out of the women's department!" Thyra McMillan yelled at me one day. All I could say to her skinny ass was, "And your clothes come out of the children's department!" Since most of my wardrobe did indeed come out of the same section my mother shopped in, I let her do all of my shopping. Being caught carrying a dress bag marked "Added Dimensions" was as humiliating as the day Lamar Douglas caught me in the grocery store with a box of sanitary napkins in my cart. "I know what those are for," he said with a devilish grin. I made my father purchase my pads from then on. My fat, like women's bleeding, was the unspoken secret that everyone knew.

Even though I had two sisters, dozens of neighborhood girlfriends and tons of cousins, I never "talked fat" with them. My fat was between me and the bathroom mirror. Whenever I felt alone and upset because I was forced to attend a Weight Watchers meeting or try the latest miracle diet, that's where I would end up—in the Jane, talking it over with my reflection.

My parents didn't know what to do about the situation. And, yes, it was a situation. My mother also had a "weight problem," but it wasn't the same, she would say. "I gained all my weight after having three children," she'd warn me. "You'd better cool it." The

conversation never went any further. Whenever she would try to delve deeper, I would cry.

Once, on the advice of some co-workers, my mother drove me to an acupuncturist's office in a nearby town. He placed a small pin in my ear, which I was supposed to push whenever I got hungry. The subtle pinch would make my hunger pangs disappear. Right. Why wouldn't people just let me be? I cried, talked it over with my puffy-eyed reflection. The next day, I ripped the pin out of my ear and tossed it in the trash. All of a sudden, I felt twenty pounds lighter. Well I'll be darned, it worked!

By the time I turned seventeen, I was sick and tired of my subscription to *Seventeen* magazine. I was finally realizing that, no matter how long I gazed in my bathroom mirror, I wasn't going to suddenly look like the teen model Phoebe Cates. Oh, yes! Black girls in Tallahassee read *Seventeen* and dreamed just as much as the suburban girls who lived in Killearn, one of the pricey neighborhoods on the city's outskirts. The older I got, the more I realized how dangerous mass media can be. Being a triple minority—black, female and full-figured—can be tough.

Seeing daily reflections of who you are or who you could be is imperative for young girls of color. Without that, it's easy to lose perspective, to lose your place in the world and your sense of reality. Good or bad, I daydreamed constantly, just like I did as a preteen. Pretending I was somebody I wasn't was as easy and rewarding as eating a Honey Bun.

One of my favorite television shows while growing up was *Bewitched*. I was fascinated by how Samantha and Tabitha could wiggle their little noses and make the biggest problems disappear. Oh, how I dreamed that was me. "Wiggle, wiggle, wiggle—goodbye, fat-farm girl Leoneda. Hello, lean, long-haired Leoneda!" Who didn't want to look like all the girls and women who were portrayed on television

as goddesses? *Gimme a Break!* As much as I watched that program on the tube, I never wanted to look like Nell Carter. She was a talented black woman, but because of her size and skin color, they made her a loud-mouthed, nosy maid.

In helping to mold a more positive self-image, I credit my attending an historically black university. There's nothing like seeing people just like you, who are happy and smart, as you walk across campus. Conversations in front of my bathroom mirror, now in my college apartment, became shorter and happier. There was less of a need to convince myself that I was beautiful. I could now use the mirror to comb and curl my thick hair and to color my eyes, lips and cheeks.

My first week at Florida A&M University, I sat on the hill with new friends and listened to the marching band practice. I knew I was in the right place. No longer too tall or too fat. In fact, there were hundreds of me walking around. If I had attended a predominantly white university right out of high school, I don't think I would be the woman I am today, able to walk and talk freely among all people without feeling out of place.

As wonderful as it felt to bask in the Florida sunshine with my sun-kissed brothers and sisters, I could sense those bewildering junior and senior high days were about to creep back into my life, when, after several college internships, I dove into my career of choice, broadcast journalism.

I was and still am a "big girl," but I had been told that I was a very good broadcaster. I was also told that I was attractive and could make it on TV. But down south, no one was ready to hire an Oprah Winfrey type just yet. I decided to go the radio news route, and I've been there ever since. Back then, I thought I was "settling." Today, I know I made the right choice. Radio has taken me to heights by my present age I don't think I would have reached in television. Like

radio, television news anchors are voices of authority. But our world is not yet ready to receive the day's news via the tube from an intelligent, attractive, full-sized woman of color. Our success is still confined to the role of the maid, the mammy or maybe even the Oprah—the one who takes care of everyone's problems. But like many young journalists, I still had dreams. I wanted to be the first black woman correspondent on CBS's *60 Minutes*. Yep, dreams. But I don't have to toss this dream into the circular file just yet. Have you seen *60 Minutes* lately? I may still have a shot.

After years of trying to keep my weight down and learning to appreciate the woman I've become, my big belly finally became an attractive sight for me. And my mirror agreed. Being pregnant was a wonderful time. At last, it was okay to have rounded hips and a chubby face! I cherished my private moments in front of the hall mirror this time. Rubbing my stomach, breasts and arms with cocoa butter and vitamin E was a pleasurable ritual, for both me and my husband. I would just stand there in the nude and look in amazement. How beautiful.

Because I wanted to do everything right, I actually lost weight during my pregnancy. Doctors say that when you're with child, it's the wrong time to diet. But I wasn't dieting. I was eating and drinking the right amounts of fruits, grains, breads, vegetables, dairy, poultry and water each day. I loved my body, and it loved me back. Sweets? I craved chocolate cake for a while. But my biggest craving was for watermelon.

No morning sickness for me. I just woke up every morning happy to be carrying my gift from God. And because of my height, I carried him well. I was so comfortable being big and pregnant that I bought a fuschia swimsuit and floated in the most public of pools. A little black girl waded up to me one day and said, "You're about to have a baby, aren't you! Can I touch it?" Since I loved touching my tummy,

I didn't ...and others doing the same and granted her wish.

Funny, the bigger I got while pregnant, the more people smiled at me. Pregnancy is so universal. No matter what your color or culture, you're treated special because you're carrying a living, breathing thing. The only downside was that I retained a lot of fluid and my fingers grew too big for me to wear my beautiful wedding ring. And even though I knew I was married, there were days when I felt the world was judging me. I loved what I saw in one mirror, but I still had to face stereotypes. Remember, I report the news on a daily basis. I hear the backlash against unwed black mothers who need welfare to get by.

I support the rights of those women and will always do so, but I wanted to shatter the stereotypes as well. While pregnant and ringless, I found myself explaining my situation to people, sometimes to complete strangers. You see, my husband didn't live with me for the first half of my pregnancy. He was working in Wisconsin and I was in graduate school in Michigan. So not only was I a black woman with no wedding band, I didn't have the man who put me in this predicament to show either. "I hope my husband likes this," I would say while shopping for maternity wear. "Do you have the time? Boy, it feels so funny not being able to wear my watch, wedding rings or any jewelry these days." I just wanted to make sure that the image I had of myself wasn't being chipped away by others. You can't control how others think, but you can darn well shape it. My mother told me that, way back when, she and her friends would buy pieces of metal and mold them around their ring fingers when pregnancy took its toll. Sisters were made to feel self-conscious back then, too.

While Martin Luther King, Jr., waits in his grave for little black and white children to join hands and travel through a color-blind society, I can't wait until the day comes when I can walk down the street and not think I'm being judged by the color of my skin or the

size of my dress. But if that day never comes, I won't lose any sleep. I've decided to stop waiting anyway. Three decades have passed, and I want the next three decades to center on loving myself so it rubs off on my child. The image that reflects back to me today is an image of confidence and love. When I tote Jean Christian around the house, we stop and look in every mirror we pass. You know babies and mirrors. I smile hard and happy, and he does the same, drool dribbling down his chin. It's the most beautiful image of all.