

W O M E N : T R A C Y Y O U N G

A Few (More) Words About Breasts



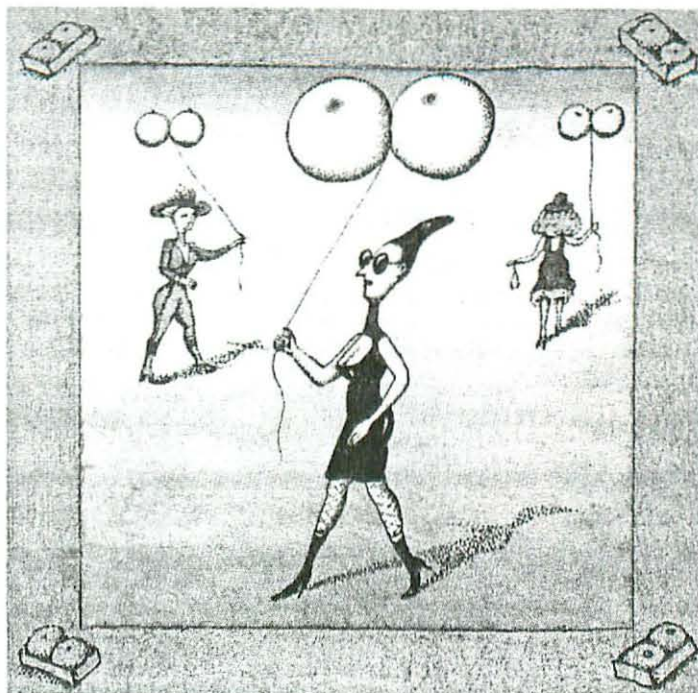
TWENTY YEARS AGO, *Esquire* published an article by Nora Ephron called "A Few Words About Breasts," which caused a sensation, in part because it stuck out like a sore thumb—a women's magazine piece in a men's magazine—and in part because Ephron had positioned herself squarely at odds with the culture: a smart, successful woman—a feminist of sorts—confessing that her small breasts are her biggest hang-up and that her life would have been totally different had she been otherwise endowed. Clever girl, that Nora.

If you read the piece today, what strikes you is how well it works both as a nostalgic artifact and as an uncanny prediction of where we've ended up: In 1992, a smart, successful, flat-chested feminist of sorts feels exactly the way Ephron did twenty years ago—only by now she's had implants. Clever girl, that Jane Fonda.

Given this conflation of technology and politics, what's different between then and now? When you purchase new parts, does the body become a personal statement—or a fashion statement, with breasts an accessory after the fact? Breasts are only part of the story.

In *The New York Times* last winter, there was an article about the gender certification of female athletes, a practice that originated twenty-five years ago, purportedly to weed out impostors. (Rumors to the contrary, at that time only one man had ever admitted to passing: Hermann Artjen, who said the Nazis forced him to enter the 1936 Olympic high jump for women, where he placed fourth.) But even more disturbing than poor sportsmanship was the possibility of a superior female athlete—so much so that both sports directors and the athletes themselves felt compelled to prove that the latter were "real women."

And what exactly determined a real woman? In 1965, female athletes paraded nude past a panel of doctors in some black-comedy version of a beauty pageant; by the end of the decade, many athletic federations, including the International Olympic Committee, had begun using the XX chromosome test. Since then, at every Olympic competition two or three women have failed the test, and



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scores of other athletes have been hamstrung by laboratory errors. Recently, and this was the occasion of the *Times* piece, a medical committee of the International Athletic Federation recommended that officials abandon the genetic tests and simply look at the athletes' genitals! A recommendation, the *Times* noted without irony, that touches on "the essence of human identity, asserting that gender is more a matter of *external appearance* than a matter of genes or chromosomes."

Have we come back to the future, to Ephron's forensic Fifties, when gender was circumscribed by a rigid set of rules? When anyone could tell who was male and who was female by how they threw a ball or looked at the soles of their shoes or—and this will date you for sure—how they held a cigarette. When genitals were the deciding factor, but unspeakable. At the very least, invisible. In polite company, a girl had breasts.

Me—I had hair. Long, fine, strawberry-blond hair—like the Breck-shampoo girl. Usually cut in a medium

bob, parted and fastened to one side, well off the face, with a bobby pin. For summer, my hair was permed. By my mother. In the backyard. Here's a snapshot: I sit, like a convict on death row, on a high kitchen stool, my head a Hydra of rollers, my neck dripping with something that stinks of ammonia, ready to bolt. My mother, smiling like Torquemada, holds aloft the Toni home-permanent box in a kind of toast. But why am I spending so much time on hair, as opposed to, say, breasts? Foreplay.

Around the time of the permanents, I had a hobbyhorse that I kept hitched up in the basement and a cowboy suit with guns and a holster and a big hat with a stampede string. For hours on end I rode this thing, gazing at my shadow on the cement floor, fantasizing that I was Roy Rogers—better yet, the Cisco Kid. I had an active imagination, but still I was unable to get past my hunch that the Cisco Kid did not have a pageboy flopping around under the brim of his cowboy hat. Nosir. And so early one spring morning I crept downstairs, took my mother's pinkish shears from her sewing kit, and, standing in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door, held my breath and lopped off all my hair.

Not long afterward, I am visiting my grandparents' beach club and on my way from the pool into the ladies' bathhouse. I am wearing madras trunks, an Elvis ID bracelet, and my slick, new haircut, and the attendant stops me at the door, shaking her head from behind her fortress of freshly laundered towels. "Hey, you can't come in here, little boy."

"I'm not a little boy," I protest, in flames. "I'm Tracy Young."

I was similarly outraged a few years later when I tried out for Little League and was rejected simply because I was a girl. Being Tracy Young, I thought, dumbly, was more important than whether I was a boy or a girl. Clearly either gender had severe limitations that made hair immaterial. And breasts? The only girls I spent much time with were Dr. Theobald the minister's daughters, who lived across the street and threw tea parties where they served carrots with ketchup. They may very well have longed for breasts. I wanted a paper route.

Nor were breasts part of my sexual arsenal. Long before my mother convinced

me, in her matter-of-fact way, that a training bra might offer more support than an undershirt, if only for tennis lessons, I was given for Christmas an elaborate set of Lionel trains that I used to lure reluctant young boys into the basement, where I would push them onto a pile of my father's old sail bags, pin their arms, and kiss them. Even earlier, during some long, languorous summer when

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my young pals and I would play doctor in the woods at the foot of our street, I confiscated an enema bag from the medicine chest—and a nearly full jar of Lustre Creme shampoo, for which I invented all sorts of interesting applications. Breasts? Feh. Primo sex toys were more alluring than secondary sex characteristics. When I finally did develop, the young turks who dared approach my modest tits attacked each in its turn, as if it were a stuck lid on a peanut butter jar. I had only one tender boyfriend, who wrote me letters and gave me his sweater to sleep with and stayed away from my breasts out of respect for my virtue. (Me, the enema freak!) When we broke up, he dated an older woman.

AT THE TIME Nora Ephron's piece was published, I was twenty-four years old, skinny as a snake, and... Here's a snapshot: I am standing in the outfield, waiting for the next batter, looking, even with long hair, not unlike a brooding teenage boy. I have on a pair of tight jeans, Top-Sider sneakers, and a Village Voice undershirt. Nice-looking arms. In twenty years, *The New York Times* will announce that arms like these are the body part of the moment. Meanwhile, I have no breasts to speak of. And couldn't care less.

Maybe it was a generational thing. I did have a friend, Ephron's age, who once joked that she'd become a lesbian because she figured that women would accept the breasts she convinced herself were too small to pass muster with men. (Boy, was she surprised. Two Fifties lesbians talking about tits would make Dan Greenburg blush.) But the predominant culture at the time, it seemed to me, reflected my own androgynous ethos.

By 1972, sex was more politically charged than prurient, and big breasts—whether you were contemplating the creamy abundance of Marilyn Monroe or the camp

excess of Carol Doda—seemed, well, satirical. "Real women" were like drag queens. Not that breasts weren't part of the picture; they were. Exposed, daringly, in fashion magazines and films, at concerts and X-rated off-Broadway venues. They were, however, small breasts, the neat, singing spheres of adolescence, whether they belonged to thoroughly modern Peggy Moffitt, who stared brazenly out of the pages of *Women's Wear Daily* in Rudi Gernreich's topless swimsuit. Or Twiggy. Or Vanessa Redgrave in *Blow-Up*. Or Shelley Plimpton in *Hair*. Sometimes they actually were the beestings of pre-pubescent, like those of the red-haired nymph on the Blind Faith album cover.

The sexual ideal then was a kind of minimalism—men as well as women aspired to the Giacometti lines of Patti Smith. And sex itself was more than an affirmation of the pleasure principle, it was also a way of saying no. Make love, not war. Ban the nuclear family. For sex of this nature, breasts were beside the point. (Remember "Anything over a mouthful is wasted"?) With a streamlined body built for speed (and created by coke), a woman could go braless without looking like a farm animal. Only breeders had breasts; and in those hot days before Ronald Reagan and *thirtysomething*, even heterosexuals were loath to reproduce.

"I'd like to dedicate my sexy new body to my dad in heaven," Gilda Radner told me in 1977, praying she'd never be chubby again. She didn't care about being flat. Breasts were not sexy because fat was not sexy, and the two were inextricably bound.

A few words about fat.

The female breast, that velvety glove for a handful of glands, is made up in large measure of fatty tissue, which means that its size is frequently relative to the amount of body fat on its owner and that fluctuations in breast size occur as a woman gains or loses weight. Moreover, for most women weight loss is usually noticed first in the bust—as opposed to somewhere helpful like hips, thighs, or abdomen. Weight gain occurs in the reverse order. And so attempting to increase the size of one's breasts simply by gaining weight, one runs the risk of adding excess baggage at every local stop along the way. There is no God.

But all this was news to me the first time I got breasts. It is 1966, and I have just returned from my freshman year at UCLA. My hair is down to my belt loops, which somewhat obscures my moon face, and I've got on a turtleneck and a pair of baggy cords. But when I step off the plane, my entire fam-

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W O M E N

ily bursts into hysterical laughter. I have gained forty pounds. I am not quite in touch with this fact, however. All year long I have lived with my self-image frozen in time, buying bigger and bigger jeans.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I suit up for my summer job as a camp counselor and my stomach spills over the bottom of last year's bikini. And what's this pooching out over the top half of my suit? Two deliquescent orbs that remind me, not surprisingly, of Baskin-Robbins's double-scoop vanilla. I have breasts. Breasts—I have cleavage! The whole deal. Gross.

Now imagine my surprise, nearly twenty years later: I have recovered from my late-adolescent fat attack, and I am proceeding to live the rest of my adult life as a slender, straight-up-and-down person. Then my body changes. For good. From a rather delicate, girlish configuration of hard bone, minimal muscle, and soft skin to something... well, denser. More curved. Fleshier hips. A bolder ass. A stomach that just won't lay flat like it did, effortlessly, when I was twenty-five and doing stupid quantities of drugs instead of sit-ups. Oh. And breasts.

Granted, mine are not enormous breasts. Not by any stretch. But neither are they the breasts I've grown up with. Something's happening, and I don't know what it is. All I do know is that if there's anything scarier than getting fatter, it's getting older. One can always, I reckon, take comfort in the conventional wisdom that states that after a certain age a woman has to choose between her ass and her face. (A dilemma Gerardo Rivera resolved famously by having the fat from his buttocks injected into his facial furrows.) Mainly, I find it ironic that I am acquiring the zaftig trappings of a "real woman" just as I am approaching the age when it would be foolhardy to procreate. And just as the zeitgeist is shifting direction.

IN 1982, when then-Details editor Annie Flanders put Diane Brill on the cover, breasts had not yet gone mainstream, and Brill's thirty-nine-inch boobs, like Dolly Parton's, were real C&W hooters. The difference was, they were hip—breasts in quotation marks—providing an interesting visual counterpoint to the ambiguous charms of, say, Annie Lennox. As the decade wore on, and the recession deepened, the physical ideal inflated. No longer were the bone-thin and blondined rock stars considered to be starved to near perfection; the youth of America pumped itself up to with-

stand the rigors of insider trading, the ruination of disease, or just the ravages of time. It was a kind of voodoo, bound to catch on among the no-longer youthful. And when self-determination didn't cut it, "aesthetic" surgery did—a 61 percent increase over the past decade, according to the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons.

Then somehow, by the beginning of the Nineties, and in one of those cultural sleights of hand, the gender-affirming breast of the Fifties—the hip Brill breast—had been wedded to the hard body of the Eighties to produce a kind of physical elite. Welcome to the New Boobocracy! We've got political bimbos and souped-up starlets, \$2,500-an-hour supermodels, flush from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, and socialite soldiers in the battle of the sexes. All hail Ivana Trump, a *Pygmalion* for our times: Subtract the pig and you're left with *Vogue's* idea of a survivor.

And just get a load of these magazines. Any magazine—they all looked like *Cosmo* in the Seventies, even *GQ*. Check out the model there in the bathing-suit spread, the one whose breasts are, quite literally, the size and shape and apparent firmness of grapefruit. In a word: fakes. Pressed into an embrace with a male of the similar species with slick hair, nice pecs, sinewy arms, and a downturned mouth like Calvin Klein's, her breasts seem less an overt signifier of gender than a code, like a male homosexual's pert butt, telegraphing fantasies of youth and perfection. Fantasies about what money can buy. Commerce in lieu of copulation. As showy and overdesigned as a late-Sixties T-bird, these are technobreasts—and can be considered sexy only the way a car is sexy. Just don't squeeze the lemons.

UNTIL RECENTLY I have found this whole obsession with large breasts ridiculous. Then one night I am at a launch party for a new beauty magazine that has just given me a mandate to make snappy remarks about things like breast fetishism. I am standing in the middle of a huge, vaulted loft, when I notice this young woman whom I recognize, with some prompting, as Rachel Williams, the model who hiked up her silver mini in the Absolut vodka ads. Towering above us scribbling minions, with an unruly mane of dirty-blond hair that looks as if she cut it with a Swiss Army knife, a profile that suggests the carved stones on Easter Island, long, long, long legs in tattered jeans—is she barefoot, or is my mind playing tricks?—and

simply glorious breasts, she doesn't look like a model, she looks like the impassive ruler of her own primitive kingdom. "Rachel is my lesbian fantasy," whispers a young woman who suddenly appears at my elbow—a young woman whose taste generally runs to Keith Richards or Axl Rose.

No kidding. This is the first time I have ever seriously wanted breasts in my life—maybe because Rachel Williams has gorgeous breasts and is still thin. Maybe because Rachel Williams has gorgeous breasts and is six feet tall. And maybe because I finally get it that these new artificial breasts—the breasts of the Nineties as opposed to the boobs of the Fifties—are not about passivity, they are about power.

Perhaps breasts were always about power. What, after all, is the difference between boobs launched heavenward in nuclear-warhead brassieres and breasts gone ballistic with silicone gel? (One is a bomb that explodes, the other a time bomb that implodes?)

More to the point, though, breasts carry a moral charge. In a 1980 study, college students who rated subjects on aspects of personality generally judged big-breasted women to be not only less competent and intelligent but also less ethical and modest. (It is no coincidence that in *Thelma & Louise* bralessness is tantamount to lawlessness. Or that Hollywood's female power brokers dress in the sackcloth of Armani.) As for implants, the FDA sends a mixed message by making it virtually impossible to get them, while telling women who have already had implants that they needn't take surgical risks and have them removed if they haven't experienced problems.

But there is a subtext to the story: The tut-tut brigade would have us believe that the medical side effects of breast augmentation are women's just desserts. Like getting knocked up was in the Fifties. What is less clear is whether or not women are being called on the carpet for catering to male fantasies or for attempting to call their bodies their own. Breasts without fat are like sex without pregnancy. And in the American tradition of fleshly mortification, there is no place for pleasure without dire consequence.

In 1992, this creature with a boy's slim hips and narrow thighs and the full breasts of a woman is the apotheosis of beauty, but she

is also a kind of androgyne, who, like those superior female athletes, threatens the social order. And it is women more often than not who are asking, "What is a real woman?"

What, indeed. Every era embraces its gender stereotypes, whether it's the Stepford wife of the Fifties or the empathic earth mother of current sex-role debate—stereotypes that serve primarily to limit access to one another's turf. In 1974, when Harcourt Brace Jovanovich published a book called *Conundrum*, in which James Morris described his journey to become Jan, Nora Ephron took the author to task for assuming such a dowdy persona, and in so doing she managed to betray her contempt for any man who would choose to be a woman. Or maybe just a woman unlike herself.

A similar contempt runs through contemporary feminism, whose bossier exponents are academics who've created a cottage industry out of dissing the beauty business. At a conference last spring at Hunter College, Ephron told the audience that she felt "Jane Fonda let us down. She bought into this move of plastic surgery, and she is not your average Middle American. She is an intelligent woman."

What Ephron and the others have failed to grasp is that the woman who once was driven to document her life—in 1972 everyone you knew was writing a book—is now compelled to re-create herself. And that a feminist who would deny her this option is no more a sister than Cardinal O'Connor. After all, is plastic surgery really any sillier than Erica Jong's novels? Should it go the way of abortion?

If we have, as the *Times* article on female athletes suggests, returned to a moment when external appearance can represent the essence of identity, then a woman who refuses to accept that anatomy is destiny—or that gender is beholden to the politically correct—has assumed authorship of her life. Big breasts. Small breasts. Natural breasts. Fakes. What matters is choice, because, ultimately, the body is more potent than a fashion statement; it is a social metaphor.

The new breast, then, is a dick for women, metaphorically speaking (which Madonna acknowledges by wearing Gaultier cones). And anyone who says size doesn't matter—I think they are full of shit. ■

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