

CHAPTER 1

Measuring Up and Fitting In



I never had a girl tribe. You know the kind of friends that strut down the center of the hallway at school and just own who they are. Like in *Mean Girls*, but not so mean. I always wanted to be part of a group like that but really struggled to make friends. Always too loud or too excited, I was impatient and made brash decisions like cutting my hair in the fourth grade so I didn't have to deal with a ponytail during basketball practice. Unfortunately, my mother took me to the same Greek barber as my six brothers, and I ended up looking like Brad Pitt in *A River Runs through It*. What worked for Brad did not work for me.

I stumbled through junior high and high school joining this club and that, always searching for a safe place to land. Then I met and married my husband, and we began the great adventure of being a Navy family. I thought I had finally found my tribe. These women came from all walks

of life, with so many different backgrounds and experiences, but were now sharing a common focus of keeping the home fires burning while our husbands served our country.

As I settled into base housing in New England, I made friends with two of my neighbors, Becky and Miss J. They were smart, capable women, new moms like me, and we were all in this life together. We spent playdates together, took walks, shopped, and babysat each other's children for date nights and quick commissary trips. Becky was low-key and always so kind and accepting of everyone. Her door was always open, and you knew you were welcome in her home, laundry on the couch or not. Miss J was a bit more driven and single-minded.

Getting Ahead

In those days women sometimes wore their husband's rank to establish their place in the very large pool of humanity. Both Miss J and I fell into that trap, but I was the low woman on the totem pole. She and Becky were both well-educated professional women before choosing to stay home with their young children. I was not. They were both confident and comfortable with who they were. I was not. Their homes were neatly organized with newish furniture and beautifully appointed knickknacks. Mine was a Goodwill/Salvation Army mash-up with a splash of college dorm life for color. I wanted to be like them, self-possessed and keen. Instead I felt small and unseen. So I decided to do something to change that.

I have never been known for my patience or discernment skills. I rarely took the time to sit with God and ask

him to weigh in or guide me. I'm a bit of a steamroller, known for leaping without being too concerned about where I will land, and I also don't do anything in half measure. So when I decided to make some changes, I went all in. It was *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, Mary style.

I successfully ran for the position of Squadron Wives Club president, started volunteering at the little Catholic church in town, and finally joined the local YMCA to begin transforming my mom bod. More than anything, I wanted to be able to stand confidently beside these fabulous women at any given social event and not feel "less than."

Because I couldn't get past the comparisons I was sure everyone else was making, I began chasing the image of someone I wished I was without asking for directions or input from the One who made me who I am. In that moment, I was telling God that he had made a few mistakes with the circumstances of my life and that I was more than happy to fix it for him.

So helpful, don't you think? Mary telling the God of the Universe that she could make life better than he could? My lack of humility still stuns me.

Now I can feel y'all shaking your heads in a collective *Desperate much, Mary?* Yes. Very much so. I had spent my whole life being "Joe Green's daughter" or the sister of <insert-random-sibling's-name-here>, or my favorite: "She's a Green." Never Mary, Mary Beth; I was just an add-on, attached to seven other siblings and two parents who were known by everyone and their brother. The only time I was seen for just being me was when I was given detention for something I had done in order to, you guessed it, be seen.

So like Eve in the garden of Eden who decided she knew better than God, I grasped for any apple I saw hanging from the tree of social acceptance. I strived for the image of perfection that would lead to recognition by others on base. When someone complimented me in some way, I simply blazed the trail to future downfall with false humility and pride and said, “Oh, it’s nothing.”

Determined to do whatever it took to be accepted, I learned how to make jam to compete in a local farmers market contest with a cash prize so I could purchase new fabric to make a dress for an upcoming Dining In event. I didn’t win, but I did end up selling my jam to my fellow wives and neighbors, which did earn the money I needed for that new dress. I upped my primitive baking game and bartered my famous apple crumble pie for instruction in how to quilt and make decorative sofa pillows, since I couldn’t afford the Pottery Barn ones I lusted after. I believed that if I could present everything just so, there would be no room for rejection.

Gossip Girl

Over time, what started out as a lovely friendship with Miss J became a major competition. I’m not sure when the tide turned. Maybe it was when my son bit her son on the playground in a toddler tussle over a toy fire truck. Maybe it was when I announced a squadron fundraising idea, and then two weeks later she and her squadron wives decided to do the same thing. Instead of taking that as a compliment, I was offended that she had stolen my awesome idea. (Forget that I got the idea from another squadron who had done it the year before.) Maybe it was when she and several

of our neighbors went to the zoo one day and decided not to invite me or Jonathan. It was a double rejection of both me and my toddler son. That sucked me into a swirling vortex of fear and self-loathing.

One Thursday afternoon, Miss J and I were going to watch a pay-per-view concert of the Judd's together. We were both huge country-music fans, and the Judd's were giving their farewell concert. She had cable; I did not. Our husbands were out on training missions, so we had planned to put the kids to bed and watch the concert together.

Before I went to Miss J's house for the concert, however, I took a call from a mutual friend. As we talked about who was doing what, I discovered that Miss J had been recognized for a charity project, and I had not. In the span of a breath, I was consumed by jealousy and anger. Mary's *ugly* showed up, and I spoke against Miss J and her character.

My envy of Miss J erupted, and the words of gossip and jealousy that flowed out of my mouth in that moment still make me want to vomit. When Mary goes dark, it's straight to the pits of hell, friend.

When I hung up I felt vindicated for all of the thirty seconds it took before the realization of what I had actually said landed on me. I had given into my own pride and neediness. This wasn't who God called me to be, not by a long shot.

Remember how Adam and Eve hid after they ate the apple and saw that they were naked? I tried to hide as well. Unfortunately for me, this mutual friend cherished her friendship with Miss J and called to tell her every horrible word I had said. Later, when I showed up at Miss J's house to watch the concert, not knowing that she'd already

spoken to our other friend, I was greeted with righteous anger and tears of betrayal—the kind portrayed brilliantly on *The Real Housewives of Orange County* or by the Kardashians. I stood there trying desperately to dig out of the hellish hole I had dug for myself, failing miserably. Respect was lost, trust was broken, and a friendship was destroyed. She even slammed the door in my face.

All because I couldn't stop comparing myself to other people. Not even friends.

Instead of just doing my best to be a good friend, I listened to the lie that Satan had been whispering into my heart for months: in order to be seen, I had to be better than everyone else. I had given into my own lack of appreciation for the gifts and talents God had given me and had tried to outdo the gifts God had given to others.

I immediately went to Becky's and poured out every horrible vile lie I had spoken and asked her what to do. She allowed me to cry on her sofa and bemoan my idiocy without ever judging me herself, and she simply said, "You have to make it right, Mary. You'll figure it out." Wiser words were never spoken. I went back home and cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up with a crying hangover, still unsure of how I was going to make things right with Miss J. I started to fold the laundry, and as I picked up a pair of Jerry's sweat socks, I was transported in time to another tragic tale of Mary grasping for acceptance and recognition.

Yes, I'd been in this horrible, humiliating spot before.

Tumbling Sweat Socks

Middle school is hard. That's just a fact of life. The hormones, the growth spurts, and the increase in pressure to perform academically are a lot to handle. I know it may come as a shock to you, but I did not handle it well. Not well at all. I was five feet eight in the sixth grade and taller than all but three people in my class. I was a giraffe named *Awkward*. But that didn't make me any less desperate for attention.

The Catholic school I attended had a football team with no cheerleaders. When I was in sixth grade, that all changed. The upcoming cheerleading tryouts were *the* topic of conversation, and all I remember thinking about was how unathletic I actually was. I could run, maybe even jump decently. But splits, backflips, or toe touches? Nope. Still, I was determined. I wanted a tribe, and I just knew that this was my way in. I went to the library, got a book on cheerleading, and practiced in my backyard every day after school.

It was not pretty, and my brothers thought it was hysterical. They kept telling me I looked like a circus clown. They weren't wrong. I fell more times than I could count and barely made it six inches off the ground. But I kept trying. I watched every college football game for weeks just to see what the cheerleaders were doing. One thing about me, good or bad, is that when I commit to something, I am all in.

Tryout day arrived, and I couldn't eat my lunch at school because I was so nervous. I wanted to make that team more than anything. I knew that once that happened,

I was going to be somebody. They would know my name. Not my brothers' or my father's. *Mine*.

As the girls lined up to do the practice cheer and tumbling run, I noticed two things. First, everyone wore graphic cap-sleeved T-shirts and Adidas shorts circa 1978. I wore one of my brother's hand-me-down solid-white T-shirts and Kmart shorts. That second thing? Every girl there had a chest. Every. Single. One. I was as flat as a cardboard box. Somehow my mind twisted that realization into the thought that in order to be a cheerleader, I needed a chest. I had to conform to everyone else around me. Like immediately—steamroller Mary style.

I dug around my gym bag and found a pair of my brother's sweat socks. I ran to the lady's room and reemerged as Dolly Parton Junior in less than two minutes flat. Get it? I tried to smooth out the lumps a bit, but it was quite obvious that I had stuffed my bra. Remember, I do nothing by half measures. Good or bad, I was committed to making that cheer squad.

When I returned to the field, I kept my arms crossed and waited. I watched as one classmate after another tumbled and jumped and cheered her heart out. Then it was my turn. I uncrossed my arms and ignored the wide-eyed looks of the coach and my fellow recruits. I cheered, I jumped, but as I arched my back to do the backflip, my right sweat sock wriggled out of place and crept its way out of my sleeve. By the time I did my simple tumble run, I was one sweat sock short of a pair. The coach said nothing, but my classmates were chuckling and whispering. My face was as red as a tomato, and my whole body was shaking, but pride would not allow me to acknowledge that stupid sweat sock on the ground. Needless to say, I

hadn't conformed, and I did not make the team. The next day, some jokester left that sweat sock sitting on my desk at school, and I died a little.

That incident sealed my fate as a loser of the highest order. I had tried to conform, to be something I wasn't just so I'd be noticed, and I ended up spending the next several months making myself nearly invisible at school just to survive. I cried myself to sleep for weeks. Finally, my dad asked what was wrong. I had not given him or my mother the details of my failure. When I did, he started laughing so hard he almost fell off the sofa. I wanted to kill him in that moment. He finally took a breath and said, "That was a gutsy move kid. You committed to it and saw it through. I gotta give you that. But here's the thing—how about next time you just be you, do your best, and let God figure out the rest?" I informed him there would be no next time, and he simply said, "My daughter doesn't quit. I look forward to watching you cheer next fall." Dad walked out of the room leaving me sitting in a pile of self-pity and the horror that I might actually have to try out again.

When spring tryouts came, I was nervous but determined to redeem myself. I showed up, sans sweat socks, and cheered my heart out. The coaches actually cheered at the end of my audition. They *cheered!* My ability to hold two different people on my shoulders at the same time was the clincher. I made the squad for my seventh-grade year.

Ironically, all the things I hated about myself—my height, my freakish upper body strength, and my sturdy shoulders—were exactly what were needed on the team. No sweat socks required. Funny how God works. In order to be seen, all I had to do was be me.

Who knew?

Now here I was folding a different pair of sweat socks, trying to figure out how to fix an epic blunder that was so much worse than stuffing my bra in the sixth grade. I had hurt a friend deeply. I knew I had to ask for Miss J's forgiveness and at least try to make things better. So, the next day, I made muffins, wrote a letter of apology, and left them on her front steps. By midafternoon they reappeared on my front-porch steps, with the note torn in two and not one muffin eaten. It was over.

The funny thing about forgiveness is that you can ask for it, but the decision to grant it is up to the person who was hurt. Miss J and I never spoke again. That lesson has been etched deeply onto my heart, and I have never treated anyone in such a manner since then.

Comparison and Conformity

So how do these two incidents relate to each other? In both of them my desperation to be noticed led to disastrous outcomes. In both cases, I was humiliated as a result of my own choices. Feeling "less than" led me to conclude that I would be accepted only if I found a way to be "more than," no matter who I had to take down to do so. But what I really became was someone other than my true self, not at all the person God made me to be. These two events were catalysts for the change that made me able to accept God's unconditional love.

Did you see that? In order to accept God's love, I had to stop comparing myself to others, grasping for what I thought was needed, and truly receive what I had already been given. I had to let go of all the fear that drove me to conform and lean in to the truth of me.

What God Sees

God created each one of us in his image and likeness, but we often try to be someone other than who he made us to be. It's as if we see who we are and say to God, "Ummm actually, I'd like that gift or that talent. I want to be like Susie or Jane." God loves us all the time and just as we are. But we allow our self-perception to be based on how others see us or treat us. We don't experience the truth we read in Jeremiah 31:3: "With age-old love I have loved you."

Why are we so quick to listen to the whispers of despair and derision? Why is it so easy to give in to the lies the Deceiver whispers into our hearts? I think it's easier to believe all the negative things the world tells us about ourselves than it is to believe that God will love us no matter what. Our internal self-portrait is all askew and needs a serious readjustment. Most of us spend years looking at ourselves in a carnival funhouse mirror. (No, you really *don't* look like that!)

So how do we see the truth? It all begins with the relationship we have with the Father and the daily conversation known as prayer. I cannot know who I am unless I am listening directly to the Source. When we forget who we are, who God made us to be, we forget that he sees us with the eyes of a loving Father. We forget that when he looks at us, he sees not only what we are, but all we can be. He sees his beautiful, strong, talented child, made to do great things.

So stop thinking that you don't measure up, and don't listen to the lie that you need to be someone else in order to have a life filled with beauty and joy. Trust me, you don't need sweat socks. Instead, see your reflection in God's eyes,