

GABOUREY
SIDIBE

“I Love My Body Now”

IN A NEW MEMOIR THE EMPIRE STAR OPENS UP ABOUT HER PATH TO SELF-ACCEPTANCE—AND HER WEIGHT-LOSS SURGERY

By JEFF NELSON

Last May, Gabourey Sidibe had an epiphany. In the space of a week, the Empire star had turned 33, bought a house in L.A., signed on to direct a short film—and had weight-loss surgery, a move she'd considered for more than a decade while struggling to slim down naturally. “I was like, ‘I’m really an adult,’” she says.

Not to mention an Oscar nominee (for 2009’s *Precious*) and, now, an author. In her memoir *This Is Just My Face: Try Not to Stare*, excerpted below, Sidibe shares her incredible journey from troubled kid (“I’ve suffered from panic attacks my entire life,” she says) to bona fide star. Born in New York City, the daughter of a subway singer (Mom) and a cabdriver (Dad) had depression and bulimia as a teen. After college, she got a job at a phone-sex company—and kept it for three years, until she landed the lead in *Precious*. “My acting school was on the phone,” she says, “pretending to be some college girl named Melody!”

Teased about her weight since child-



Story of Her Life

“It’s almost like my diary,” Sidibe says of *This Is Just My Face*, out in May. “I’m just yelling into the void and getting things off my chest.”



hood, she says she was “conditioned to believe I was ugly.” But it wasn’t until she and her brother Ahmed, 34, were both diagnosed with type 2 diabetes that she opted for laparoscopic bariatric surgery. She won’t talk numbers—“My starting weight and goal weight are personal”—but she now works with a trainer and a nutritionist, her diabetes is under control, and she’s confident surgery was the right choice. “I was in a war with my body,” she says. “If I’d started treating it better sooner, I wouldn’t have spent so many years hating myself. But I love my body now. There’s nothing ugly about me.”

I guess I was around six when I started to notice that I was a fat kid. People said things about me that they didn’t say about other kids. I didn’t get why other kids called me fatso or elephant, or why they felt they could talk about my body at all. My mom was fat. Most of her family was as well. I thought I looked like my family, and that seemed fine.

Eventually, my own family started to talk about my weight. I used to do this thing when I was in kindergarten. At the end of school, I would see my mom and run and plow into her for a hug. She would hug me back, and say, “Ugh! Gabu! You’re like a football player. You’re gonna knock me over.” I took this as a challenge, and every day I would try to plow into her harder because I thought it was a fun ritual we had. One day she told me that I was hurting her because I was too big.

I still didn’t really notice there was a problem until my father started suggesting I lose weight so he could show everyone what a pretty princess he had. It had never occurred to me that I looked bad in a way that would make my father not want his friends to know he had a daughter.

When my parents separated in 1991, my mom started giving me diet pills. But I’d learned that you can actually eat when you’re not hungry. If someone hurt my feelings by calling me fat, an excellent way to stop feeling hurt was to eat ice cream! If I had nothing fun to do, like do you even know how fun BBQ Pringles can be? Fun enough to stomp out the boredom! Eating had nothing to do with appetite, so those pills didn’t work.

Upset by her parents’ split and unhappy at school, she started having panic attacks and crying jags.

Not only do junior high kids not give a f--- about your feelings, they actually want to hurt you. The boys I had crushes on would call me a cheeseburger. It was like a knife to the heart.

I learned that if I couldn’t stop the jokes I could make them first. If we were in phys ed, I’d make a big deal of how crazy it was that anyone would believe I

‘I didn’t just find confidence one day. I have to put it on as much as I have to put on lipstick.’

—GABOUREY SIDIBE



Growing Up Gabby
“I love the f--- out of my mom,” Sidibe says of mom Alice (top, with brother Ahmed).



Her Breakthrough Moment

“I found a way to financially take care of myself and help my family,” says Sidibe (in *Precious*, above), “and it allowed me to become an artist.”

could “drag my fat ass around a gym.” My classmates would laugh. This way, at least my fellow junior high psychopaths wanted to be around me.

High school wasn’t much different except there were even more cute boys who pretended to like me only to laugh in my face when I looked hopeful. I was always trying diets. Those never lasted because McDonald’s and soda felt better and the most consistent food in our house was takeout.

In an effort to tame her anxieties, she began making herself throw up.

The bulimia stuck around for about three years. It took a lot of therapy to figure out why I was doing it and then how to stop. Throwing up made me feel high. I felt a release around my head like a halo that made me feel lighter psychically and emotionally.

At 22, she looked into weight-loss surgery but was told her eating disorder made it risky.

The therapist suggested I give it a year or two before having another evaluation.

I had screwed myself out of the surgery. I started throwing up again that night; quitting is for quitters. Luckily, I was able to break the habit.

When I got my first film role, no one was more surprised than I was. I wouldn’t have gotten the role if I was skinny. Precious was a role for fat girls only! What a weird world we live in, huh?

Director Lee Daniels encouraged her to get healthier by exercising and eating right, and she lost 60 lbs. during filming. But afterward she regained most of it.

I sometimes get so mad at myself. Mad at my body. My body sometimes feels like a tragedy. But I’m trying hard to change my mind about that. For all the ways my body has failed me, it’s come through for me a million times more.

In 2016, concerned about her health, she decided she was ready for surgery, and this time doctors agreed. Without telling anyone but her close friend Kia, she checked into UCLA Medical Center.

After eleven years of saying, “Surgery will be the last resort,” I was finally here. At my last resort.

My surgeon said they’d cut my stomach in half. This would limit my hunger and capacity to eat. My brain chemistry would change and I’d want to eat healthier. I’ll take it! My lifelong relationship with food had to change.

At the hospital I reminded the doctors that I needed to make it out. “Do everything you can to keep me alive. Even if you have to kill someone else, do it. I have to survive!” My surgeon chuckled and said I’d be fine. Soon I was in the operating room. After



‘For the most part I’m living my best life, but I would love to be dating. I am ready to receive a gentleman caller.’

—GABOUREY SIDIBE



One of the Girls
“They fit me for every episode now,” says Sidibe (in FOX’s *Empire* with costars Taraji P. Henson and Serayah), “because I keep shrinking out of the clothes.”

what seemed like even sooner, I was in recovery.

The first thing I said to Kia while lying in the recovery room was “Do I look skinny? It’s me! Gabby! You recognize me?”

A couple of weeks after surgery I had to go to an *Empire* screening. I could already feel the difference in my weight. I usually sweat on red carpets because of nervousness and wearing heels. I stayed completely dry. I was still spaced-out because of my [postsurgical] liquid diet, but I had much more red carpet endurance than I usually would. Everyone said that I was glowing.

I slipped into the bathroom to check my makeup. I hadn’t seen it before but now I could. My face was thinner. My eyes seemed bigger. I was scared. Really scared. What would I look like in the next month? In the next year?

It has taken me years to realize that what I was born with is all beautiful. I did not get this surgery to be beautiful. I did it so I can walk around comfortably in heels. I want to do a cartwheel. I want not to be in pain every time I walk up a flight of stairs. I want to stop worrying about losing my toes.

I know I’m beautiful in my current face and my current body. What I don’t know about is the next body. The next face. I admit, I hope to God I don’t get skinny. If I could lose enough to just be a little chubby, I’ll be over the moon! Will I still be beautiful then? S---. Probably. My beauty doesn’t come from a mirror. Never has and never will. ●

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