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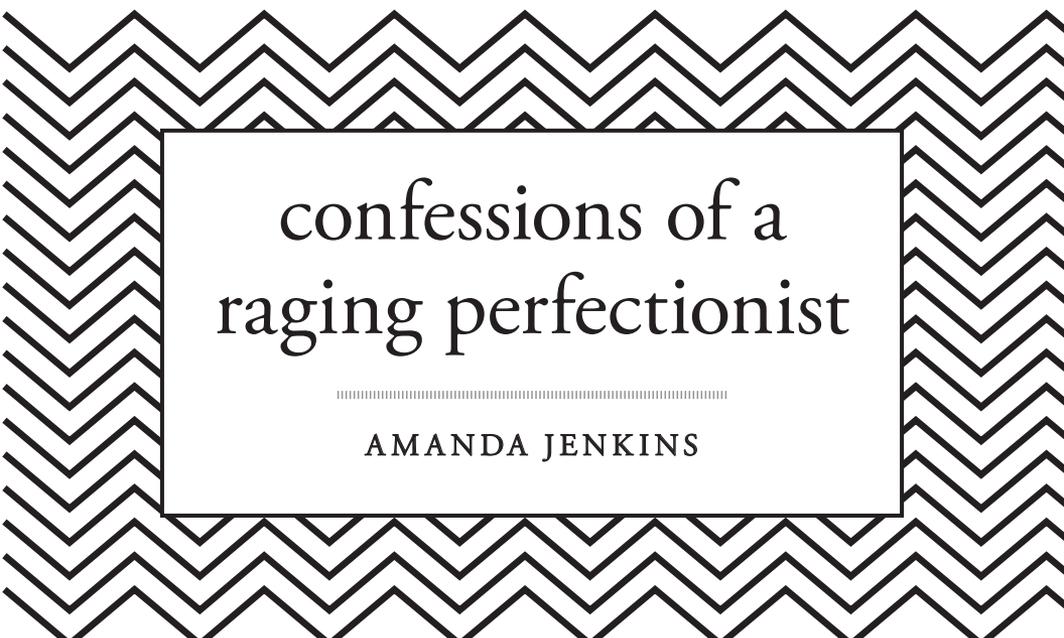
# confessions of a raging perfectionist

*(learning to be free)*

AMANDA JENKINS







confessions of a  
raging perfectionist

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AMANDA JENKINS



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*Confessions of a Raging Perfectionist*

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# introduction

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THIS IS NOT A BOOK. Well, *now* it's a book, but it didn't start out that way. It began as my journal—a way to keep track of all the yucky things God was showing me about myself and what I've come to know as my addiction to perfection.

And I *am* addicted. Like most perfectionists, I want everything in my life to be beautiful. I want my home to look fabulous, my car to sparkle, and my love handles to disappear. I want my closets to be organized, my children to be well behaved and happy (usually in that order), and my editor to find zero mistakes. I want people to think I have everything under control, and I want to actually have everything under control.

Safe to say, I have a number of unattainable goals. And what's worse—I constantly keep track of how I'm doing to reach those goals. Or not.

Maybe that's why I love the movie *Bridget Jones's Diary*. The plotline centers on Bridget's diary and the drama in her life that becomes its content. She begins each day's entry by listing her stats—pounds gained or lost, cigarettes smoked, men interested, books read, party invites received. She is, to put it mildly, a work in progress—someone who can't get life quite right, no matter

how hard she tries. And every success and failure is documented in her diary.

Aside from her British accent and chain-smoking, I'm a lot like Bridget Jones. I begin each day with a list—*keep the house picked up, limit myself to one Diet Coke, spend special time with each of my kids, work out, pray, avoid sugar, read a chapter in a book about something important*, and so on and so forth. And then I determine each day's worth by how many of those things I actually did. Like Bridget, pounds gained or lost, items checked off, stuff accomplished.

And I must say, my lists are good. The things I want to do lead to good health and better relationships. While not everything is necessary, a number of things on the list are. After all, bills have to be paid, clothes have to be cleaned, and kids need attention. So, generally speaking, my problem is not my list.

My problem, I've recently realized, is the significance I attach to the list—that if I lose five pounds and spend twenty minutes reading my Bible, I'll be a better, more spiritual, more loving, more *lovable* person. When I fail to live up to my own expectations, I feel inadequate. Or more specifically (and as my stats frequently read), overweight, lazy, disorganized, and unworthy of the approval I seek.

Thing is, I don't think I'm alone. And I don't think perfectionists are the only ones whose identities are wrapped up in impossible goals. Most of the women I know, from our high school babysitter to my precious grandma, base much of their self-worth on stuff that can be crossed off a list. For Christian women, that's a tragic irony—tragic because, like everyone else, we spend most of our time working toward unattainable goals; ironic because Christ died to free us from the notion that we must earn our worth.

So it begs the question: Why do we keep track of our stats? And if we experience time after time the frustration and failure

our personal expectations bring, why is it so hard to leave them behind? Is it possible to ever really be free?

Hard to imagine because, as I said, I'm a raging perfectionist, though this book isn't about perfectionism, *per se*. Instead, it's about how the pursuit of perfection has led me down a very wrong road—one that has produced and nurtured a dozen chapters' worth of strangleholds.

Because the things I've tried to make perfect have become my idols.

In the past few years, God has been working to change my heart and move me toward the only perfect we'll know in this life: Himself. And while that may sound pretty, I assure you it's been rough. Coming to terms with my addiction to perfection has been hard and sad and exhausting—and at times, embarrassing (case in point, this book). But I'm on board with what God is doing; I want freedom.

And so, in an effort to embrace my imperfect reality, every chapter of this book begins with my real stats. I'm hoping my transparency will pry me from the things that have become my idols, loosening their grip on my heart and mind.

And I pray God will use my journey to further yours.



CHAPTER I ■■■■■ Vanity

AUGUST 16

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*Weight: 142 pounds*

---

*Calories: 2,260*

---

*Pants that are too tight: 3*

---

*Wrinkles: 8 too many*

---

*Resolve to lose 7 pounds and double up on eye cream.*

**BEAUTY QUEEN**

Tara McClary's a good-lookin' woman—the quintessential Southern belle. Perfectly mannered and manicured, blonde hair and brown eyes, tall, thin, and tan. It's little surprise, then, that in 1990 she and her mom were crowned Mother/Daughter USA. She's a pageant success story, and in truth she's the kind of woman most of us love to hate. Problem is that once you get to know her, you'll have a hard time finding just cause.

I met Tara when I was a junior in college. My boyfriend, Dallas (now my husband), and his family had known the McClarys for years. And after reconnecting in their early twenties, Tara and Dallas came up with an idea for a book they wanted to cowrite. As a non-title-holding, average girl, I felt a bit unsettled when my boyfriend told me he was going to be working for hours on end with a beauty

queen. When I expressed my concern, he explained that he didn't think of her that way. She was a family friend, and besides, she wasn't his type; she was too perfect. He preferred the girl next door.

Hmm.

Much to Dal's surprise, I didn't feel better. That is, until I met her. Turns out she wasn't a threat—and not because she wasn't perfect; she kind of was. But she was beautiful without pretense. She was genuinely likable.

The three of us spent the weekend at Dal's parents' house (she to flesh out ideas for the book and me to stand guard), and we got to talking about pageant life. It seemed like a lot of pressure to me—so many beautiful women all competing for the same crown, their bodies and clothing being scrutinized by the judges and, no doubt, by each other. She laughed and agreed. She *had* felt the pressure. But after years of chasing perfection, she realized there would always be someone more beautiful. It made no difference how often she exercised or the number of beauty products she used—someone would always upstage her. So she abandoned the goal of attaining perfection and accepted her limitations and, in turn, herself.

It was simple enough. If Tara McClary had to come to terms with the fact that there would always be someone prettier, even with her beauty credentials, then it was certainly true for me, too. And it sounded great—embracing the idea would be like throwing insecurity to the wind. I'm me, and you're you. If you're prettier, good for you.

Poof. Pressure's off.

Because that's what we do, isn't it? We compare. She's skinnier, she's got bigger boobs, she has perfect hair—and there's no end to the madness. Whether it's a girl in line at the grocery store or celebrities in magazines, we find fault with ourselves based on a standard set by someone else. And dropping out of the race made sense to me.

Problem is that in spite of Tara's wisdom and the freedom it brought her, I haven't been able to stop comparing. Logically speaking, I know I'm running a race I can't win; someone will always out-pretty me. But even when I'm not comparing myself to someone else, I keep an ever-growing list of things I'd like to change. If only I could tighten up my abs and get rid of a few wrinkles, then I'd be content.

Yeah, right.

So if logic doesn't snap me out of my vain haze, how will I be able to accept myself, flaws and all? And since the pressure to be beautiful seems to come from both the inside and the outside, is it even possible to escape it? What's the trick to being happy just to be me?

#### DOWNHILL FROM HERE

A few weeks ago I had an appointment with a new dermatologist regarding a mole. Since I was already there, I thought I'd ask if something could be done to tame the wrinkles around my eyes. But when I stepped into the lobby, I knew I was in trouble. Turned out the dermatologist's office doubled as a spa, which in LA is code for all things cosmetic—from chemical peels to lip injections. I had a hunch a really good moisturizer wouldn't be the doctor's only recommendation.

And it wasn't. She told me I *did* have a lot of wrinkles, especially for someone so young, but not to worry—with a little Botox she could make me look eighteen again. Um, looking like a teenager hadn't been my initial goal. But somewhere between having my “before” pictures snapped without warning under the fluorescent lights and hearing what my face will look like in ten years without “intervention,” eighteen started to sound pretty good.

Truth is, we don't have the money for Botox. Dallas and I have three kids under ten, which means cosmetic intervention doesn't

exactly make the short list of things we can afford. And that's a good thing, because it's not just my face that's beginning to fail me. Since I had kids, the whole system seems to be breaking down.

Varicose veins have shown up on my thighs, and my armpits sweat

.....  
*Varicose veins have shown  
 up on my thighs; my  
 armpits sweat for no good  
 reason, sometimes one  
 without the other. And  
 when I laugh too hard,  
 a little pee comes out.*  
 .....

for no good reason—sometimes one without the other. I have stretch marks, some explained by pregnancy and others not, and yesterday I realized I'd buttoned some skin into my jeans and it didn't even hurt. Oh—and when I laugh too hard, a little pee comes out.

Yeah, if money weren't an issue, I imagine a lot of procedures would be tempting, which is why we see it time and again in the lives of the rich and famous—first a

lift, then a tuck, then an injection of some sort. Watching it play out in Hollywood is enough to prove the whole pursuit is futile or, at best, unending. There are websites devoted to outing celebrities for their surgeries. My favorite sites post the before and after pictures, which have to be updated every time they go under the knife, be it to fix what they had done and don't like or to tweak what they liked but now droops or to tackle a newly aging feature.

And yet we wonder what it would be like to fix that one thing.

Ha.

And it's not just cosmetic surgery—it's all the things we do to get pretty and stay pretty. After my third child was born, I was ready to buckle down and get back in shape. For a year and a half I exercised almost every day, watched my diet, and got more rest. I looked really great, too. The baby weight came off, and my friends praised me for being so disciplined. But eventually I got tired of the strict routine. I decided to take a short break, which turned into the past year and a half of infrequent exercise and a lot more sugar.

That's the problem. I don't just feel the pressure to look better, because even when I reach my goal, I have to somehow stay there. I have to maintain. And since maintaining in my thirties is a lot harder than it was in my twenties, it's clear each decade will bring a host of new problems. The pressure never lets up, and once again the race I find myself running is a no-win. I fixate on a flaw, compare myself to someone else, work hard to change, fail to reach my goal, fixate, compare, work hard, reach my goal, fail to maintain.

Sigh.

I'm a mouse on a wheel.

And in my exhaustion, I turn to God. Perhaps He should have been my starting place, but alas . . . I often think of Him as a last resort instead of my first line of defense.

#### WHEN BEAUTY FLEES

Embarrassed as I am to admit this, a few days ago I was folding laundry while watching TMZ. For some reason, the reporters (I use that term loosely) were showing clips of Janice Dickinson shopping on Melrose Avenue, and I became mesmerized by both her charisma and her ever-changing face. And a verse I'd read sometime before came to mind:

*People are like grass;  
their beauty is like a flower in the field.  
The grass withers and the flower fades.  
But the word of the Lord remains forever.*

I PETER 1:24-25, NLT

Janice's life seems to illustrate that verse. She rose to super-model status in the late seventies and was gorgeous to say the least—a huge success. But her career fizzled in the late eighties as

she battled addiction and substance abuse. Fast-forward to 2003, when she reemerged as a judge on the reality show *America's Next Top Model*. Four seasons later she left to start her own show, *The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency*, where she began to build and groom a stable of models she now represents.

It's a great story. A once-famous, now forgotten woman overcomes the odds, gets sober, reinvents herself, and barrels back onto the scene, becoming fabulous and famous once again. But there's a catch. If you look at Janice today, she only resembles the supermodel she once was. Never mind the inevitable aging of the past few decades; to date, she's had at least ten operations, which have left her looking more plastic than real. Ironically, and in spite of her extreme effort to stay beautiful, the closest she'll come to her former glory will be to *represent* younger, more beautiful models. Like the rest of us, she'll flourish for a time and then wither. Someone new will bloom, and she'll be forgotten.

It's simply the way of things.

*Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting.*

PROVERBS 31:30

Beauty doesn't drift quietly into the night. It flees.

*Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while,  
then it's gone.* JAMES 4:14, NLT

The only people remembered after they die are A-list celebrities and presidents—usually in that order. As for the rest of us? Not so much. Our lives are brief, and we'll be forgotten, no matter how pretty we were. On the other hand, there's a way to be beautiful that our appearance-crazed culture cares far less about.

*The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.* I SAMUEL 16:7

When I was twenty years old, I was a counselor at a camp for inner-city kids. My first week I was assigned to a group of kindergarten girls who were all adorable—except for Mervina. She was tall and lanky and looked dirty most of the time. Her clothes didn't fit, and her shoes had holes. She put a brown Vaseline-type substance in her hair every day that smelled terrible—probably because it was so old. And she wanted to be near me constantly, holding my hand or sitting in my lap.

Much to my surprise and shame, Mervina wasn't easy for me to love. Her disadvantages should have roused my compassion, but the other girls were so much cuter, and I was shallower than I knew. Thankfully, the Holy Spirit brought the thunder that week and convicted me constantly, which resulted in Mervina getting most of my attention and affection. And the conviction didn't stop there, because God has used that precious little girl to expose the stranglehold beauty has on my heart. Year by year since, He's been helping me see people, including myself, the way *He* does—because God doesn't care what we look like; He sees inside.

It's because of His mercy that God tells us the truth. How sad it must be for Him to see us clinging to false hope and worshipping at the altar of *pretty*. He wants us to abandon the goals of youth and beauty because they promise to disappoint. To whatever degree we have them, we'll lose them, in spite of our best efforts to the contrary.

There's a different way to live. As a loving father, God calls us to lay down our pursuits, along with all the disappointment and burden they bring, and rest.

## DIFFERENT KIND OF EYES

Janice Dickinson's desire to be beautiful is not unique, though most of us don't have half her excuse. In her autobiography, Janice writes about her tragic childhood—how she was molested, beaten, and emotionally abused by her father. Every day, in some form or another, he told her she was worthless. I can only assume she believed him.

No doubt Janice has gone to extreme measures to hold on to beauty, but understandably so. I can't begin to know the pressure of having to prove to her wretched father and to herself that she had value. Her beauty gave her that sense of value and earned her a significant place in the world. So yeah, she's extreme. But like her, my worth is tangled up in the way I look and, more specifically, in the way other people see me. Janice is just a louder version of the rest of us.

.....  
*While we're busy searching  
 for our value, God has  
 already ascribed it.*  
 .....

And it's not the way God intended for us to be. While we're busy searching for value, He's already ascribed it.

*We are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.*

EPHESIANS 2:10, NLT

When I look at the world around me, God's artistry is obvious. And as I learned in Sunday school, the same hands that created mountains and sunsets and puppies and the brilliant colors of autumn made each person—including me—with care and purpose. When I fixate on the world's definition of beauty, not only do I inevitably feel bad about myself, but I also miss out on what God has in mind for me—the good things He wants me to do—which ironically always result in making me more

beautiful on the inside. God says I'm His masterpiece, which is something I have to sit with for a minute—it's huge. I mean, the same incredible, intentional detail I see in a single flower is evidence that God was specific and intentional in creating me. In His image, no less. I imagine that believing I'm a masterpiece is the first step toward being okay with my aging, imperfect self.

*I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,  
may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people,  
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love  
of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—  
that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness  
of God.* EPHESIANS 3:17-19

It's not enough to know we're loved. God wants us to be rooted and established in His love—to be anchored and defined by it, and to see the world through its lens. Wrapping our minds around God's enormous, indescribable, beautiful love for us in Jesus is the key to being happy with the way we've been made.

Unfortunately, I often have a hard time getting those verses from my head to my heart. I have moments of awe when I'm content with God's acceptance, but they don't last long, and sooner or later I'm back to being discouraged by the mirror. Because the immediate gratification beauty offers is powerful; the approval of others is powerful. Recently I've begun to pray that God's love would become more important to me than my desire for outward beauty, more important than my longing to be accepted and admired by others. I'm praying that God would change what matters to me.

*How beautiful on the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring good news,  
who proclaim peace,*

*who bring good tidings,  
 who proclaim salvation,  
 who say to Zion,  
 “Your God reigns!”*

ISAIAH 52:7

“How beautiful the feet”—love that. I wonder how different my life would be if the beauty of my *feet* were the priority of my life. If my extreme focus on my wrinkles and my dress size died a quick death and my eyes instead became fixed on others and the Good News I so often forget to share. If my gospel-carrying feet got more action than my workout video. If I heeded the call to talk more about salvation in Jesus than about losing five pounds. If I put other people’s needs above my desire to be affirmed.

I want beautiful feet.

We can be different. We can be freed from insecurity. We can be content with what we have, and we can develop an inward beauty that stands the test of time. And because the pressure from our beauty-obsessed culture isn’t going to let up, we can learn exactly what we’ll need to fight back.

#### SWIMMING UPSTREAM

*She is clothed with strength and dignity;  
 she can laugh at the days to come.*

PROVERBS 31:25

I love this verse because I love this woman. She laughs. She’s happy and carefree. Bring on the gray hair and belly rolls—nothing can steal her confidence. And I want to be just like her. I would love to laugh at the days to come, because laughing would mean I’m not afraid of them, that my heart is full of joy and my self-worth on solid ground.

So what does this woman have that I don't have? Strength and dignity. It takes strength to push back against the pressures of our culture and to resist the urge to cling to youth. It takes dignity to stand tall in spite of humbling changes in our aging bodies, to reject the notion that we're more valuable if we're beautiful. Strength and dignity have the power to keep us grounded

.....  
*While vanity is a fierce  
 opponent, strength and  
 dignity are its kryptonite.*  
 .....

in the reality of God's loving acceptance. With them, we can wage war against the constantly critical inner voice and experience a confidence that doesn't ebb and flow. Because while vanity is a fierce opponent, strength and dignity are its kryptonite.

It's time to get back to Sunday school basics: God made us and He loves us. If we believe that, we'll begin to be content with the unique way we've been created. And although the temptation to find our worth in beauty remains, God will provide strength and dignity for the journey.

And we'll laugh.

#### REAL LIFE

I recently got back in touch with our friend Tara, the beauty queen. She's married now, with seven-year-old twins, Daniel and Caroline. I was sad to find out that for the past year and a half, little Daniel has been fighting leukemia. Their lives have been consumed with doctor visits and chemo. As a mom, I can't imagine how terrifying it must be.

Yet as Tara tells it, God has been her rock, her refuge, and her friend. In journal entries she posts online, Tara talks about the good God has done and continues to do in her life. She has tremendous faith.

Recalling her wisdom twelve years ago, I can't help but wonder

.....  
*When we misplace our  
 worth and allow our hearts  
 to chase after things that  
 fail, we miss out on a  
 deeper, more meaningful,  
 all-consuming relationship  
 with our loving Creator.*  
 .....

if God got the vanity idol out of Tara’s way early on in life to make room in her heart for more of Himself—to help prepare her, in part, for the road ahead. Because when we misplace our worth and allow our hearts to chase after things that fail, we miss out on a deeper, more meaningful, all-consuming relationship with our loving Creator. Tara knows God in that way, and because she does, she rests in Him now.

EXCERPT FROM JOURNAL ENTRY POST #168 .....

*Too often, I’ve been afraid to let others see the real me, and I’ve camouflaged myself in beauty and poise—but while man sees the cover, God knows my core. And cancer has its own unique way of stripping away my veneer and false pretense. God’s process of making us more precious is to take us through fiery trials—not to burn us, but to strip away the self-centeredness that mars the radiance of His reflection in us.*

*As voiced by Casting Crowns in the song “Stained Glass Masquerade,” when I’m full of myself and begin trading the altar in for a stage, I miss out on the tremendous blessings God has designed for my life. Less of me plus more of Him equates to real joy, peace, and fulfillment.*

TARA MCCLARY REEVES