

"Amazing . . . will break your heart even as it makes you cackle with laughter, leading you into a more joyful and healthy relationship with your body."—MARY PIPHER, Ph.D., author of *Reviving Ophelia*



Writers Dish About Food, Eating, Weight, and Body Image

INCLUDES ESSAYS BY

Diana Abu-Jaber, Jane E. Brody,
Amity Gaige, Joyce Maynard, Laurie
Notaro, Whitney Otto, and others

EDITED BY HARRIET BROWN



FEED ME!

Writers
Dish
About
Food,
Eating,
Weight,
and
Body Image

E D I T E D B Y H A R R I E T B R O W N

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Dear Reader,

We hope you enjoy this sneak peek at three stories from *Feed Me!*, a collection of poignant, heartbreaking, and funny essays from some of the literary world's most accomplished authors—about one issue that plagues us all: our relationship with food.

For any woman who's ever counted a calorie, felt guilty about eating dessert, looked in the mirror and wished she had a different body, discussed her most-hated body parts with her friends, called someone fat, or been called fat—in other words, for every woman—*Feed Me!* will resonate.

Feed Me! will be available in stores on **January 27, 2009**. Please share these stories with friends and send us your thoughts in an e-mail to RHPPG@randomhouse.com. We look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,

The Random House Publishing Group

PRAISE FOR
FEED ME! Edited by **Harriet Brown**

“For every woman who as ever a) hated her body, b) stepped on a scale more than once a day, c) cried in a dressing room, d) all of the above—a funny and heartbreaking collection of essays about the tyranny of thinness. Though you could buy roughly four Entenmann’s cakes for the cover price, this book could actually fill you up.”

—**BETSY LERNER, author of**
Food and Loathing: A Lament

“This amazing collection of essays breaks your heart even as it makes you cackle with laughter. Brown offers readers a gazpacho of writers all of whom are in the soup when it comes to food, weight and body issues. Aren’t we all? This book will lead us forward into a more joyful and healthy relationship to our bodies.”

—**MARY PIPHER, PH.D., author of**
Reviving Ophelia and Seeking Peace

“Eating is supposed to be enjoyable. For many, it is anything but. These fascinating stories reveal the complexity of eating: the joy and misery, the acceptance and rejection, the nurturing and deprivation, the connection and isolation.”

—**Ellyn Satter, author of**
Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family

“These diverse tales of humiliation, survival, and acceptance of the most personal and shameful of body dramas are palatable and poignant . . . I devoured the book!”

—**Nancy Redd, New York Times**
bestselling author of *Body Drama*

THE I-LOVE-MY-BODY PLEDGE

I pledge to speak kindly about my body.

I promise not to talk about the size of my thighs or stomach or butt, or about how I have to lose 5 or 15 or 50 pounds. I promise not to call myself a fat pig, gross, or any other self-loathing, trash-talking phrase.

I vow to be kind to myself and my body. I will learn to be grateful for its strength and attractiveness, and be compassionate toward its failings.

I will remind myself that bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and that no matter what shape and size my body is, it's worthy of kindness, compassion, and love.

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INTRODUCTION

Harriet Brown

The one piece of jewelry I never take off is a necklace, a gold chain with a single gold charm in the shape of a fork. I wear it the way other people wear a cross or a Star of David—to hold close something as necessary as life itself. I wear it to remind myself to celebrate food and not fear it, to enjoy it and not abuse it.

I wear it to remember (as if I could forget) how my daughter fell down the rabbit hole of anorexia, and how food was the medicine that cured her. Six times a day our family sat down together and ate, bite after agonizing bite. Food nourished her body and brain, mind and heart and soul, back from the terrible borderlands of anorexia.

I wear the necklace in honor of the power of food. We eat the way we breathe—instinctively, without being taught, as a matter of survival. You can live without booze or drugs, but you can't live without food, not for long, any more than you can not breathe, not drink, not sleep.

And maybe that's why the act of eating is so fraught in this culture: because it's not optional. Because we have to do it, three or four times a day, every day. It calls to mind our creaturely origins and holds the potential to affect our physical selves. In an appearance-driven culture, we believe—we seem to *want* to believe—that food can make us large or small, powerful or weak, attractive or ugly. We are, increasingly, judged by both what we eat and how we look.

And man, are we judged! I doubt there's been another time in American history when what you put in your mouth has come with such a heaping side of *shoulds* and *don'ts*. It's the rare woman today who doesn't know the dark side of the fork, the way food can be a curse rather than a cure, a source of anxiety rather than sustenance. No wonder so many of us have "issues" around food and eating. I've seen grown women cringe at the sight of a plate of pasta. I know women who swear they'd be happy if they just Never. Had. To. Eat. Again. I've felt that way myself. As much as I love food (and I do), I have on occasion wished I could just give it up forever.

The essays in this collection explore many aspects of the relationship between food and looks, eating and body image, appetite and desire. They are poignant, thought-provoking, wise, and hilarious. And they reflect not only the experiences of this talented group of writers—they reflect the experiences of so many of us in the twenty-first century. Whether they're describing the indignities of shopping for clothes in a size zero world, the paradigm shift of another culture's perspective on weight, or

the dawning understanding of a mother's experience with food and love, these writers speak to all of us who have ever worried about how we look or what to eat.

The pressure to be thin is now felt by both women and men. It starts earlier than ever, a fact that may explain why children as young as six are now suffering from eating disorders. Wendy McClure's poignant essay, "Day One," describes the first day of the first diet of her life, at age ten. Alas, it was only the first of many diets McClure embarked on out of her longing to fit into the cultural mainstream—a longing most of us can relate to all too well, whether we're just ordinary folks or elite models like Magalei Amadei. Amadei's essay, "Top Model," describes her ironic struggle with body hatred and bulimia even as her face was gracing the covers of *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Glamour*, and other fashion magazines.

The conflation of eating and appearance affects every corner of our lives, as Joan Fischer points out in her mordantly funny essay, "Take This Cake and Shove It." Fischer's only slightly tongue-in-cheek piece offers a Swiftian solution to the interior conflicts of food and appearance, food and sex, food and love.

The average American woman eats about eighty thousand meals as an adult, and each and every one of them involves choices about fat and sugar, carbs and calories, organic and processed, how much and what. Every choice can and often does trigger a tidal wave of feelings, from self-loathing to celebration. In modern-day America, feeding yourself is an act of bravery.

It doesn't start out that way. We're born knowing hunger and satisfaction. Babies practice sucking in the womb. But if you've ever tried to get a baby to eat when she's not hungry, you know how powerful the internal self-regulation mechanism can be. Women especially are taught early on to ignore our appetites and

to deny ourselves what we're longing for. There are consequences to such self-denial, as Dana Kinstler notes in her bitter-sweet essay, "Sugar Plum Fairy," a chilling description of anorexia from the inside out.

In fact, I think that's the true definition of disordered eating: eating that's divorced from real hunger. *Our* real hunger, not what our parents or our doctors or the media tell us we should be hungry for.* By the time we're adults, many of us have only the faintest sense of our own appetite. We don't know when we're hungry and when we're full. No wonder we obsess over the numbers on the scale, the curve of our hips, the fat content of our yogurt. No wonder we struggle with so many food-related fears: The fear of not getting enough. The fear of not being able to stop. The fear of taking up too much room.

No wonder, really, that we've become so afraid of food. I've been reading studies and books and following news stories and blogs about fat for the last two years. In that time we've been warned that fat can cause diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and even global warming. Fat is contagious—if you've got a fat friend, even if she lives hundreds of miles away, you are (supposedly) more likely to get fat yourself. Fat has become a moral issue, and what and how you eat is now a religion. A piece of chocolate cake isn't just flour, butter, cocoa, sugar, eggs, baking powder, and milk; it's now a dangerous object, something that can kill you and then send you straight to hell.

On the other hand, a Baggie full of celery sticks might as well come with a halo. It's one more way to abnegate the self, something we women are trained from an early age to aspire to do.

* There's another reason to want to stay connected to our appetites: A 1970s study showed that when you enjoy what you're eating, you get more nutrition from it. See Harriet Brown, "Go with Your Gut," *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2006, op-ed page.

Like the joke about the miser who feeds his horse less and less each day until finally the horse dies of starvation, and the miser complains to his friend, “Why did he have to go and die just when I had him trained to live on nothing?”

Why indeed?

And so I wear the necklace to remind myself (to paraphrase the song) that a fork is just a fork, whether it holds lettuce and tomato or fettuccini Alfredo. A fork is a means to an end, and on good days, that’s how I think of food, too. It’s a way to care for myself, and for those I love, through the steady, courageous, often fraught act of eating, one spoonful at a time.

The words *fat* and *thin* exist only in relation to each other. Think about it. I might look fat standing next to one person, thin next to someone else. What’s pleasingly plump to one is unacceptably obese to another. What looks normal to me seems emaciated to you. The words we use to describe these physical conditions run the gamut from positive to negative—and sometimes encompass both ends of the spectrum:

Plump, zaftig, voluptuous, thick, big, curvy, chubby, stocky, husky, overweight, fat, obese, morbidly obese.

Skinny, slim, wiry, athletic, lithe, slender, skeletal.

On the whole, though, anti-fat hysteria has come to dominate the public dialogue about food and body image. *Obesity* is the ace of spades in the blame game, a word that’s become code for much more than weight. People who are obese aren’t just fat; they’re gluttonous, lazy, smelly, stupid. Fat prejudice, either overt or subtle, is not just socially acceptable; it’s become pretty much *de rigueur*. I’m thinking, for instance, about a children’s book that was published a couple of years ago, a collaboration

between two of my former favorite children's writer/illustrators. The book depicts a sloppy, slovenly family (including children) who sit on the couch all day drinking soda and eating junk food, and whose collective hefts break a waterslide in an amusement park and various other presumably solid structures. The heavy-handed moral of the story is that all these characters have to do is stop stuffing their faces, eat salad, and take a little exercise, and they, too, can join the "normal" majority.

More recently, a schoolteacher felt compelled not only to make her students sing a song about how fat Santa is but to videotape them doing it and put the video on YouTube. The lyrics include lines like "Oh! Santa Claus, Santa Claus, how much do you weigh? I'm glad I'm not a reindeer that has to pull your sleigh!" Imagine how an overweight child would feel, reading this book, singing this song, hearing this message in the voices of adults she trusts.

In this oh-so-politically-correct society, people who would never dream of saying *nigger* or *kike* have no trouble whatsoever taunting those who are fat. I learned this the hard way, on a summer afternoon when a group of neighbors had gathered spontaneously in someone's backyard to eat cake. We had a feel-good schmoozefest, at least until one woman mentioned a plump (but hardly morbidly obese) movie and TV actress and added, "She's so fat, I can't stand watching anything she's in. I'm afraid she's going to have a heart attack any minute."

Aside from the magical thinking involved (um, the movie or TV show has *already been filmed*), the sheer thoughtlessness of this comment blew me away. I thought, *She doesn't mean to be cruel*. But actually she did, as evidenced by the fact that she kept talking about this fat actress, pontificating along the way about how unhealthy fat people are, why don't they simply eat less, she'd

gained a couple of pounds after each pregnancy and had just cut back on her eating until the pounds came off, and so on and on and on—all while she sat right beside me, seemingly unaware of the irony of the fact that she was forking up a piece of cake *that I'd baked*. Eventually I gathered my courage and said that it offended me to have her characterize and criticize overweight people that way, that there's plenty of evidence to suggest not only that fat is *not* unhealthy but that overweight people may live longer.* Over the next few weeks, I raised this with her a couple of times. She insisted that she couldn't understand why I was offended, that "everyone knew" being fat was bad for you, that she *liked* this actress and was only expressing concern about her health.

This neighbor, by the way (do I have to say that she's naturally thin?), is the kind of person who goes light-years out of her way to champion diversity on every level, to speak and write in defense of the poor, the differently colored and abled, the underclass.

Everyone, in fact, except the weight-challenged.

Okay, the *fat*. For years I avoided that word. I used euphemisms to talk about myself and others. I—or they—were overweight or pleasingly plump or stocky. *Fat* was giving up, letting your stomach out, wearing muumuus and mules. *Fat* was for other people. *Fat* was for losers.

When I began writing about food and eating, I realized I had to desensitize myself to the word. I had to learn to use it without inflection, as a simple descriptor, as in "I have more fat on my body than you do" or "She's got some fat around her middle." This kind of desensitization is a cornerstone of the fat

* Katharine Flegal et al., "Excess Deaths Associated with Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, April 20, 2005, pp. 1861–67.

acceptance movement, which promotes the (shocking! subversive!) notions that fat is a noun or adjective, not a statement of morality; that health is *what you do*, not *what you look like*; and that you can, in fact, be healthy even if you're fat.

Not only that: You can be fat and not conform to our cultural stereotypes of fat people, which are so often reinforced by those photos of headless and morbidly obese people that accompany each news article and press release about obesity. For years, whenever I'd fret about being fat, my husband's automatic rejoinder was "But you're not fat." What he meant was "You're not ugly, you're not stupid, you're not a loser." And it's true; I'm none of those things. But it took me a long time to separate them from the physical realities of my body.

The other side of the association of fat with moral turpitude is our national conviction that to be thin is to be healthy, morally superior, and attractive—even if you're emaciated to the point of death. Three years ago, when my daughter was ill with anorexia, she was regularly complimented by salespeople, technicians at the pediatrician's office, and even strangers on the street for her "fabulous figure," for her "natural slimness," and for "getting the thin genes, lucky you!"—all at a time when she looked severely unwell and was literally on the verge of hospitalization. But here's the most disturbing thing: Now that she's at a healthy weight, slim but muscular, smiling, her skin glowing with health, far more beautiful than she was at seventy pounds—the compliments have stopped.

No wonder we're so fucked up about food and eating.

Through my blog, also called Feed Me!, I've connected with many women who read, write, and think about issues relating to body image, weight, and food. My blog is part of "the fatosphere," a loose collection of bloggers who write about body image and eating and size acceptance, meaning an attitude toward

fat that's nonjudgmental—the notion that bodies come in different shapes and sizes, and you can be healthy (or unhealthy) no matter what size you are. Writer Kate Harding is also part of this fat-acceptance movement, one of a growing number of young women who are challenging the conventional wisdom around fat and thin. Harding's wonderful essay, "You're Not Fat," deconstructs some of this fat-related baggage, and explains why she goes out of her way to wear the label like a badge of honor.

The fat-acceptance movement is gaining momentum, but it's not without its own complications. What's the role of ideology and politics when it comes to your own body, your own feelings, your own size and shape and eating habits? Politics and ideology are abstract concepts—they're "shoulds." We *should* feel proud and happy no matter our size or shape. We *should* feel comfortable with our own appetites. We *should* be okay with taking up room in the world. But human beings have a funny way of not reacting well to the notion of *should*, as Ophira Edut notes in her essay, "Battle of the Bulge." Edut's tale of the conflict between her work as a "body activist" and her own relationship with her body is bound to cause controversy, but it's truly a universal conflict. How many of us grapple with the contradictions of weight and body image and food? I'd guess Edut is in the vast majority of American women.

Like so many other women, I've wrestled with issues of weight and body image and food for a long time. I came late to the notion that not every woman can or should have a body like Audrey Hepburn or Keira Knightley, and that each of us is hard-wired to have a certain physical size and shape. That weight and BMI and other numbers don't tell the story. That you can be fit and active and have, as Ellyn Satter says, a "joyful, competent relationship with food" at any size.

About ten years ago, I got to know a woman named

Mimi Orner, who taught women's studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. We had daughters in the same family child-care home, and we chatted now and then during drop-off and pickup. Mimi had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer when her daughter, Sophie, was two, and she went through one horrific treatment after another, trying to stay alive as long as possible.

Mimi was a woman of size in every way—generous, big-hearted, and fat. Her capacity for joy was compelling. “Let’s go play!” she would say, and off we’d go to the park for ice cream cones and to watch our daughters climb around the playground. The fact that she openly enjoyed food astonished me at first. Here was a fat woman who ate with pleasure, who wasn’t obsessed with the scale or the mirror, who didn’t even pay lip service to the gods of thinness. I asked her once, “You mean it’s okay to eat ice cream if you’re fat?” I’d spent so much time feeling I should apologize for weighing more than 110 pounds that Mimi’s behaviors seemed radical to me.

As the cancer progressed, Mimi fought pain and weakness, but she held on to her appetite and her enjoyment of food. We met occasionally at a Chinese restaurant for lunch, and she tucked into the Hunan chicken—her favorite—with the same gusto she always had, despite the morphine pump she now wore in a fanny pack. It wasn’t until a month or so before she died that her appetite deserted her—the beginning of the end, she called it, and she was right.

At Mimi’s memorial service, friends and students, colleagues and neighbors got up one by one to remember and grieve and tell stories about her. Every one of those speeches was moving, but the one I remember best—the one I can’t get out of my mind—was by a young woman who stood, tears streaming down her face, to explain why she and Mimi had parted ways.

“Mimi was my inspiration,” she said. “She loved her body and accepted it. But I just can’t do it. I can’t come to terms with myself. And Mimi couldn’t understand that. She thought everyone was as brave and smart as she was.” She raised her head and looked around the crowded room. “And I’m just not.”

Mimi died in 2000, but that young woman’s words still echo in my head each time I look in the mirror and wince, or see myself in a photograph and feel my heart sink, or choke on the words of self-loathing that lie on my tongue like stones. Words have so much power—the ones we say to ourselves and the ones we share with other people. A therapist once suggested that if a friend followed me around saying half the things I say to myself all the time, I’d ditch her in a heartbeat. Point taken. I began trying instead to channel my inner Mimi, to imagine what my friend would say or do in a given situation.

I wrote a pledge about loving your body and posted it online, inviting people to print it out, sign it, and put it somewhere they could see it every day—preferably beside a mirror. And they did. Several colleges have used it as part of body image awareness seminars and events. It’s been passed around LiveJournal and blogs and other people’s websites.

The response has made me, for the first time, feel more hopeful. Hopeful that if we talk openly about fat and food, bodies and weight and longing, that we can begin to heal the wounds inflicted on every woman in this society. That we can learn to eat when we’re hungry, know what we’re hungry for, and stop eating when we’re full. That we know, really know, the meaning of enough. That we can feed ourselves with pleasure and competence and joy, and use the power of the fork for good.



HE CALLED ME FAT; IT SET ME FREE

Sari Botton

We were snuggling cozily after one of our first nights together when Brian, the man who would later become my husband, basically called me fat.

“This is interesting—I think I’ve grown emotionally,” he decided out loud. “You’re the most voluptuous, full-figured woman I’ve ever been with, and before now, I would have had a hard time being attracted to that.”

My jaw dropped. My heart sank. My cellulite seemed to expand.

Most of the women he’d been with before, he went on, had been skinny. “I’ve been fighting with myself for a long time, trying to get past what the media programs you to be attracted to,

and let me tell you, it's hard for guys," he insisted. "But this shows me that I'm able to see a whole person and be attracted to someone more deeply, on many levels."

He had this proud look on his face, like he was waiting for me to congratulate him. I wanted to disappear.

Mind you, even at my heaviest I am not a large woman by most people's standards. And back then I was at my dating skinniest, just about 105 pounds. I'm a hair under five feet, so 105 pounds on me is lean but by no means skeletal. I've got some diet-proof curves, and I'm a double-D cup. But I was pretty darn trim at the time.

I can't remember how I responded exactly in that stunning moment, but I recall having a hard time finding words. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to have heard, either. On the one hand, this so-far great new guy in my life was saying he was into me. On the other, I was pretty sure I had been insulted.

After no small amount of tears, a long discussion about body image issues, and great effort on Brian's part to extract his foot from his mouth—including assurances that what he had been trying to express, rather clumsily, was that I was attractive to him—we tried to put it behind us.

In time, this painful encounter would turn into an incredible gift. It would set me free from a lifetime of dieting and overexercising. I'd allow myself to gain some weight, essentially make peace with my softer shape, and even come to like it. And I'd come to understand that it's not just women but men, too, who are in their own way oppressed by the media standards for women's bodies. But not until I was done silently suffering.

I replayed Brian's monologue in my head more than a few times, dissecting it, weighing it for meaning and intentions, and trying

to reconcile it with the way I felt about my body before that incident. I was thin! I was sure of it! How could he have seen me as anything else?

I'd been so proud of how thin I'd gotten, too. The year before, when a relationship with a younger guy ended, I'd turned to the Zone as part of a breakup makeover that included shearing my waist-length hair to right below my increasingly prominent jawline.

A few weeks into Zone-ing, though, fewer and better carbs somehow turned into nearly zero carbs. Sushi turned into sashimi, sandwiches on sprouted whole-grain bread turned into chef's salads, PB&J on rice cakes turned into peanut butter on a spoon, and I found myself swept up in the Atkins craze of 2002. I burned almost everything I ate and more, running four to five miles six mornings a week and walking over two miles to and from work each day. I sort of knew my attention to diet and exercise was bordering on an obsession, but so many people around me were doing the same thing, making it seem almost normal. Plus, in my mind, it was paying off because I felt great and I looked great. Or so I thought.

It wasn't the first time in my life that I'd taken to an extreme what began as an effort to trim down a little. In my teens, like so many girls who first encounter the mushy reality of the influx of female hormones and a slowing metabolism, I wrestled with an eating disorder, starving and aerobicising my slightly puffy adolescent form down to as little as eighty-seven pounds.

Eventually, the severe deprivation stopped, but never a certain secret desire to be super-thin, nor the sense that everything in life would be perfect if only I could reach and maintain that perfectly flabless model weight. Through my twenties and thirties, I kept rigorous track of everything that went into my mouth and felt ashamed if I ate anything extra or fattening. I exercised

religiously, punitively, and was hard on myself when I took days off. My weight fluctuated by a few pounds now and then, but I was always able to fit into the same sizes, two and four, depending on the brand. I wasn't skinny-skinny, but I was pretty slim—and always a little stressed out about trying to stay that way.

I realize that's not very original. The idea that society's standards of weight and beauty have a negative, neurotic impact on girls and women—well, we all know that sad story. What is news, to me at least, is how tortured some men are by those body standards and how conflicted they feel about them.

It's not just Brian: In the past year, I've heard about three similar encounters. We're talking about *three* different men, nice men, basically telling *three* different, perfectly lovely women, "Wow—look at my progress! I'm able to see past your fat to your soul!"

One friend of mine wanted a medal from his girlfriend because he was finally open to dating a woman who wore a size six after a lifetime of going out exclusively with zeroes and twos. Another begged his new love to give him time to become attracted to her physically because, he explained, he was very drawn to her emotionally but had a hard time being turned on by someone who wasn't rail-thin. In the third case, a guy I know who for years gave his hearty wife a hard time about not being model-like finally got it. Having met a not-so-friendly model when he was out with a friend, he discovered that what was on the outside wasn't necessarily an indication of what was on the inside.

These stories don't exactly inspire sympathy for those men. But I can see how, for them, becoming attracted to women who look different than what they've been trained to expect feels like a noble victory over shallowness and vanity. I can relate; it's the

same proud feeling a woman has when she matures to the place where she's able to be attracted to a nerd or an ugly guy for the first time. I have no illusions that women are immune to a degree of looks-ism, but we are a lot more forgiving. And no woman I know would ever say to a man, "Look how far I've come! I'm able to be attracted to you even though you're *so not cute!*" Clearly, these guys still have insensitivity to conquer.

Maybe I was naive, but before that difficult body-type conversation with Brian, it hadn't fully occurred to me that the images in magazines and on television and movie screens affected nice, sensitive, emotionally intelligent guys, the kind who do yoga and go to therapy of their own volition, who wear Tibetan meditation beads and talk about their feelings. *These* guys feel like they've failed if they haven't attracted a woman who lives up to those ridiculous body standards?

I was also unaware of how ridiculous those standards are, that if you aren't super-skinny, you are essentially fat. Recently, I was flipping through *Details* at my physical therapist's office when I came across a short piece entitled "Why Fat Is Back in Hollywood," about how suddenly bones are out and curves are in. The softer-edged Scarlett Johannsons and Rachel Weisz of the world, writer Holly Millea suggested, are gaining popularity over their harder-bodied, emaciated sisters. Great. But why is the word *fat* in the headline? Who'd call those women *fat*?

In any case, this "fat" trend sounds great to me, although I don't trust it. I feel like I've read that story a hundred times in the past twenty years, and still nothing has really changed. The preference for "real bodies" in movies and on television never seems to stick, nor to completely sink in with men—or women. At least not in the United States.

Maybe a change will come about in Europe, now that

Madrid's fashion-week executives are banning underweight models from the catwalks. Men from Mediterranean cultures are already known to prefer their women with some meat on their bones, regardless of trends. And God bless them. Keith, the flirtatious Jamaican super in the East Village tenement where I lived for eleven years, used to practically coo when I'd bloat up during PMS. "Oh, you're putting on some *size*, baby!" he exclaimed once when I came back from a run. I nearly burst into tears on the spot.

"Do you not know that you never tell a woman she's gained weight?" I demanded, my voice cracking.

Keith seemed stunned. "No—no!" he pleaded. "I told you that because I think you look good! I like women like that!" Part of me didn't believe him, but he wore an almost lecherous smile that didn't lie.

Fortunately, Brian seems to have joined the ranks of these men who appreciate a softer belly, an ample *derriere*, a rounder shape overall—not to mention a happier wife who doesn't deprive herself of the pleasures of good food and wine. One afternoon this summer when I was wearing a bathing suit, he embraced me from behind, nuzzled my neck, and held me tight. He asked, "Do you remember that conversation we had early on about how you were more voluptuous than I was used to?" Um, *vaguely*. "Well, I'm a total convert now. You are so incredibly sexy to me, and I want you to know that I just love your curves and your softness."

It's a good thing, because I've only gotten curvier and softer since we met. After we had that awful conversation early on, I sort of threw my hands up. I figured if I'm depriving myself and overexercising and he still thinks I'm padded, I surrender. Hello, rice and potatoes. Hello, wine. Hello, dessert now and then. I

stopped running as often, then altogether, because of injuries. I substituted walking, yoga, and other gentle exercise. I started enjoying myself more. My face filled out a little; everything filled out a little.

I can't tell you exactly how much weight I've gained. I am guessing it's about fifteen pounds—a lot on my frame, although I still don't fall into the overweight category. I feel like I've got an extra little layer of woman on me, and it feels good, like this is the weight my body is meant to be. The reason I can't tell you exactly how much weight I've gained is because I don't know. I never weigh myself—except, of course, when I'm in the vicinity of about 105 pounds. When I go to the doctor, I face away from the scale and ask the nurse not to tell me the numbers, even though no nurse or doctor has ever told me I need to lose weight. Alas, I have some leftover body image baggage. It may never go away completely.

But I've made tremendous progress—with the help of an adoring and now more evolved husband who, by the way, seems even sexier to me now that he appreciates my body the way he does. Last month I tried on a skirt that had been one of my favorites the fall that Brian and I met. And I could barely squeeze into it. It was the first time in my adult life that my clothes didn't fit, and I started to freak out. I immediately shifted back to my default settings and started scheming about how I would get myself back down to that size (two, to be exact). I vowed to fit into it in three months—no, two; no, one! Then I took a deep breath. I looked at myself through kinder, wiser eyes, the eyes of a real woman who is loved by a real man, the eyes of a woman who likes her rice and potatoes and dessert sometimes. And I threw the skirt away.



THE GRIEF DIET

Caroline Leavitt

We're all at dinner. The restaurant is one of Manhattan's fanciest, with white tablecloths and a hushed quiet and waiters in black suits, and the menu is so long that I joke it might as well be a novel. My boyfriend, Rick, whom I've been living with for six months, has invited his parents to eat with us. His mother, all frosted yellow hair and overstuffed dress, talks about her latest diet. His father, tall and lean and handsome, jokes, "In my next life, I'm marrying someone skinny."

Everyone except me laughs. I push my bread plate away, the slice of semolina uneaten even though it looks delicious and I'm so starving I could eat my shoes. Rick watches and takes my hand and squeezes it encouragingly.

I'm five feet four. Size two. One hundred and three pounds. My ribs and hip bones show. The last time I was this thin, I was seventeen.

I nibble at my dinner, and when the waiter brings the dessert tray around, Rick's mother urges me to have some. "Go on, live a little," she says, "a skinny Minnie like you." But when I point to the chocolate cake, Rick frowns. I know what's coming. "We'll split it," he says sharply, and when it comes, he quickly cuts it into halves, his half being seven eighths, mine a sliver. It doesn't matter, because by now my appetite is gone. Rick has moved his hand off my thigh, his body edging away from mine at the table. I fake a smile, I eat, the sugar melting on my tongue. It's so delicious.

Outside, we say goodbye to his parents, people he has urged me to call Mom and Dad, and we have a fight about it because although they're nice enough people, they're hardly my parents, and I feel stiff and uncomfortable calling them anything but Mr. and Mrs. Usually, I don't call them anything at all. "Goodbye!" Rick calls to them, and then he draws me closer in a hug, and his parents beam, seeing the affection. I relax right up until his grip tightens. "Did you have to eat that chocolate cake?" he hisses, and when I push away from him, he grabs my hand and kisses it. "Darling," he says, "I'm just thinking about you."

That night we come inside our apartment, a huge prewar on the Upper West Side. "Come here," Rick says, and he kisses me passionately, and I forget that I couldn't eat dessert. The way he trails his hands along my spine makes me forget that he thinks I'm fat. I peel off his shirt and kiss his chest, which is golden from the sun, and he smells of soap and cinnamon and I'm starving for him, greedy for his kisses. He burrows into the thicket of my hair, and then we're rolling on the floor and kick-

ing off his pants and I'm sliding out of my thin little dress and every cell in my body is switched on like New Year's Eve, that's how much I want him. He sits up and looks at me, amused.

"What?" I say.

He points to my belly. "You've got a little pot." He sees me wince, and he kisses my shoulder. "Oh, sweetie," he says. "It's okay. Now I know what you'll look like pregnant with our child." All the passion drains from me. I am fat and I have a pot. I'm frozen with shock, but he's pulling me down, kissing me, urging me into sex; now I'm dry and it hurts, and I push away from him at the end. He looks at me with deep concern, smoothing back my hair. "Do you want to talk to someone?" he asks quietly.

"About what?"

He rolls me against him and holds me tight. "Many women get frigid," he says, "but it's a problem we can work on together." I break free of his grip and go into the bathroom, running the shower as hot as I can stand it. Oh, and I lock the door.

I know what you're thinking. What's wrong with me that I stay with someone who is clearly torturing me? Why don't I have any self-respect? Why am I with him?

I moved in with Rick three weeks after we met, and I have to endure this because the alternative is simply too terrible. If I leave Rick, I'll have to grieve for another man, one I really loved, who loved me back, who didn't care if I ate sixty desserts, let alone one.

Backpedal six months. I had been living with a man I adored. We traveled everywhere, we ate out, we gorged on movies, books, films, and of course, each other. I was 120 pounds and a size six and radiant. Two weeks before we were supposed to be married, he woke up in the middle of the night. "I don't think I

feel so good,” he said, and before I could grab my keys, he was prone on the floor, dying in my arms.

Of course I grieved. I spent a thousand dollars going cross-country, talking to psychics, mediums, priests, and rabbis. I got a grief counselor and went to group meetings of young widows. My friend Beth moved me into her apartment and took care of me, shuffling me to meals, to movies, to go shopping with her, and I admit I spent most of my time sobbing. I cried so hard in my apartment that the neighbors knocked on the door, terrified something new had happened. I burst into tears in the middle of the subway, in the supermarket, in the shower, everywhere. Everything looked black and white and faded. I began to think that it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if a truck ran me over. “I can't do this anymore,” I told my therapist. “Yes, you can,” she said.

I read a lot about grief, and when I read that widows often found love again, and because it had been so good the first time it was even better the second, I thought that might be my salvation. If I were in love again, I'd have another person to think about. I wouldn't feel so empty and hollow.

I wanted to be in charge. But mostly I wanted not to grieve, not to think, and when I saw Rick's ad in the *New York* magazine personals, I answered it. On our first date, he took me on a picnic. He brought cheese and apples and a bottle of wine and sweetly presented me with my own novel to sign. I felt something new: happiness. Of course it was sweet in the beginning. He called me twice a day, he was interested in what I was interested in. He held my hand and held me at night, and when he talked, his conversation was filled with the future. We'd go places, we'd be together, we'd have a child, we'd marry. There was no place for grief.

“Isn't this a little early?” my mother asked me, shocked. “Are

you sure this is what you should be doing?” my friends said. And when I told my therapist and she said, “You’re running away,” I stood up. “I don’t want to come back to therapy,” I told her and gave her her last check.

As long as I am with Rick, I know I won’t grieve. Rick is the reason I can go to sleep at night. His body warmth keeps me from having to think about my fiancé. Rick’s filling our schedule with endless trips to visit his family, to restaurants, to concerts means I don’t have to think about how alone I am for a second. His whole family converges on their summer cottage every weekend, cousins and relatives, and I don’t mind going. There’s a lot of distraction.

Rick first comments on my eating habits four months into our relationship. “Seconds?” he says when I grab another handful of grapes. “That’s an awfully big potato for one girl,” he says. At first I laugh, but then I see Rick isn’t laughing. Dinner is often broccoli and a baked potato (no butter, of course), and if I am a bit hungry, I tell myself, well, it’s certainly better than crying, isn’t it?

After one of our dinners, I go to see my friend Jane. “Caroline!” she says, shocked. “You look like a twig!”

“I guess I lost some weight,” I tell her.

She has made lunch, but I’m so used to not eating that I pick at the food. I lose weight. I go from size six to four and down to two, and when I’m there, Rick asks me to marry him. I know I don’t love him, that my heart is a hollow little fist of grief, but I nod and whisper yes, because this means I will never have to grieve, not ever again.

We tell his parents, who are delighted, and then my mother, who is upset. She takes my arm. “First of all, you look like hell,” she says. “And second of all, you’re still grieving, honey.”

I smile at her. “No, I’m not.”

“Oh yes, you are,” she says. She starts to tell me that she doesn’t like Rick, there’s something about the way he treats me that she doesn’t like, some hardness, and when I begin to cry, at first I think that it’s about her disliking my boyfriend, but then the tears get harder and I’m starting to cry for my dead fiancé, great gulping sobs.

She wraps her arms around me and I burst into tears. “You have to leave him,” she warns. “You’re doing a disservice to both of you. Do you love him?”

I shake my head no.

“Do you want to stay with him?”

“I have to stay with him,” I tell her. “If I leave, I’ll remember what I lost, and I won’t be able to stop crying.”

My mother grabs both my hands. “You’re my daughter and you’re a skeleton,” she tells me. “That’s not love, what he’s doing. Grief you go through and then you’re done. But this—” She holds up my wrist. “This breaks my heart and makes me grieve for you.”

When my mother leaves, I feel a seismic shift. I keep hearing her words in my head; I keep thinking that she’s grieving for me. Plus, to tell someone the truth of what I’m doing somehow unlocks something.

At work I no longer want to rush to get home, because then I’ll be monitored. Instead I work overtime so I’m given a raise, and when I call Rick to say I’m going to be late, I’m eating a bagel! Imagine, a bagel! I wake up early and get out of the house, leaving the one piece of toast I’m allowed for breakfast without comment. I work at Macy’s. Marlise, my friend, sets something down in front of me. A gooey warm cinnamon bun from downstairs. She touches my arm. “Share it with me,” she orders. I take a bite.

I go and buy half a dozen candy bars. I wolf down three and save the others, and when I come back, Rick is staring sullenly at the computer. He gets up and puts an arm around me and says in that tender voice, “You know, honey, you were so beautiful when I met you. I just hate to see you fat.”

I jerk my arm away. I can still taste the candy. “My friends tell me I look terrible. My mother says I look like a skeleton.”

“Well, they aren’t sleeping with you,” he says and kisses me on the cheek, and anger flares up in me like a lit match. I think, *Well, neither are you.*

Rick keeps asking me, “When are we getting married?” I put him off. I tell him I need six months to decide if I can marry him, and when the six months are up, I tell him I need more time. “Why?” he asks. He wants to have a baby. He wants a life. When I reach for a T-shirt of his that night because I’m cold, he takes it from me. “I’m saving that for my son,” he tells me.

Please don’t get me wrong. There is sweetness here. He is not a totally bad person. He holds me when we sleep. He tells me I am beautiful. He’s smart and funny and politically aware. He’s like the idea of Santa Claus that you hope and hope will be true. Also, I’m lying to him about myself all the time, so maybe I don’t deserve Santa Claus. Maybe I deserve the coal.

In the end, it isn’t food that does us in. It isn’t when he goes onto my computer and adds jokes to the novel I am writing because, he says, “it’s too serious.”

There’s something else. I come home one day and he’s reading mail on the couch, frowning. “What’s up?” I ask, and he shakes his head and then looks at me. “You told your friend Jo about our fights?” he says. His face is crumpled in hurt, and everything in me freezes.

I grab the paper from him. “You read my mail?”

“We’re a couple,” he says. “We’re one. What’s mine is yours, isn’t it? Why, do you have something to hide?”

I don’t know what to do. I call Jo and ask her not to write anything personal to me anymore. “What?” she says, astonished.

“Rick’s reading my mail,” I say.

Something snaps on the wire. “I will not stop telling you what I want to tell you,” she says, and her voice rises in anger. She tells me we are friends, that I can’t let another person destroy that friendship and control it. She tells me this has to stop. “Our friendship is based on the truth!” she says.

The truth. When was the last time I faced the truth about myself? I get off the phone with Jo and then go find Rick. “You can’t read my mail anymore,” I tell him. We argue, and suddenly he says, “You dress like a religious fanatic! Can’t you be more feminine? Would it kill you to wear a ruffle?”

That night we break up, and three weeks later, I have a new apartment, a big studio in Chelsea where the previous tenant died of AIDS. I stand in the middle of the apartment, alone, and I feel all the grief coming back, and I sob and sob and sob.

I grieve. Of course I grieve. Four months, six months. A year of hard grieving and four more years of lesser grief. What I most feared is happening, and somehow the grief, having been dormant, has gained power and I can’t shut it off. My friends take care of me, inviting me over, and each time, they place food in front of me. Eat, they say. We’re here. It’s okay. You can eat. Jane puts soup in front of me. “If you don’t take a sip, I’ll be so hurt I won’t know what to do with myself,” she says, and so I do. My stomach clenches. I take another bite. And then another.

I know people who ballooned up when they broke up, who

would buy a whole tub of ice cream and polish it off. Alone, I eat cereal for breakfast, bread sticks and cheese at lunch, and for dinner, I try to make pasta and eat a few bites. I go to a grief counselor who doesn't condemn me for my time with Rick; she nods. "Do you know what a brave thing it is you did?" she tells me. "You just have to get through it," she says, "one bite at a time."

It's a whole year and a half later when I meet this smart, funny journalist named Jeff. I'm a little wary, but I tell him right off the bat about my fiancé. I don't mention Rick. Jeff nods and takes my hand, and then we go out to eat, and of course I'm self-conscious and order the lightest thing on the menu and eat only half of it, taking tiny little nibbles. Mouse bites. "Aren't you hungry?" Jeff asks, concerned, and I smile and eat a little more. When the waiter clears the table, I start to get ready to leave. "Wait a minute, wait a minute," Jeff says, pulling me down. "We have to have dessert."

Stunned, I sit down. The waiter gives us a menu. "What's the most decadent thing on here?" Jeff asks him. I stare at the descriptions as if they were classic literature. White apricot mousse. Lemon chiffon pie. Chocolate turnovers. My mouth waters, and I swear my hands shake. "You decide," Jeff says to me.

"We could share the mousse," I say hesitantly. I've picked the richest thing on the menu, and I feel fabulously guilty.

Jeff nods. "We should get the death-by-chocolate cake, too," he says and beams happily, reaching across the table for my hand.

That's when I fall in love. That's the beginning of what turns into a marriage as rich and sweet as any dessert.



ATTACK OF THE XL GIRL

Laurie Notaro

As soon as I opened the door to the boutique and took a quick look around, I shook my head, sighed, and went on in. It had been this way all day.

Every stop my friend Meg and I made was like another flash of bad skinny-girl déjà vu. I'd open the door, take two steps in, and there we were, confronted by racks filled with nothing but really cool funky designer clothes.

Initially, I was in heaven. I was visiting Meg in Seattle shortly after she had her baby, Carmen, and I was more than excited about my shopping opportunities. In my hometown, pickings are slim, and unless I wake up each day with the desire to dress

“drone” and head to my local Gap, Banana Republic, or J. Crew like everyone else, I’m a little more than slightly out of luck. Since Meg, being a new mother with an infant, had been basically confined to the house for eight weeks, she was itching to get out. “I want to go shopping. I’m dying to buy something without an elastic panel that stretches from my crotch to my waistband,” she said to me over the phone a couple of days before I arrived. “I don’t even care that I’m completely fat right now, I am just dying for some real clothes!”

Secretly, I was a little delighted because Meg had always been my rail-thin friend who made me look like a Pittsburgh Steeler when I stood next to her. She could eat troughs of any given dairy product without consequence and once actually wrinkled her nose at a box of Godiva, explaining chirpily, “You know, I’m just not a chocolate kind of person.”

Although Meg lacked the very qualities that I counted as some of my finest and I somewhat doubted that her DNA was indeed human, she had remained a wonderful friend for over a decade, and now, for once, I was going to see her fat!

After my plane landed, I met Meg at the curb, where she picked me up in her Bronco, which was now outfitted with a baby seat. As she jumped out of the front seat and ran to open the tailgate, I stood back and screeched.

“Liar! Liar!” I yelled as I pointed at Meg and her “I had a baby basically yesterday but am going to the Oscars tonight in a dress made from Cling Wrap” figure. “Who are you, Sarah Jessica Parker? Come on, you said you were FAT, and I gorged on pretzels and Pepsi the whole way down here thinking that for once our butts were going to be in the same BMI category! This is so not fair! If you don’t show me a stretch mark right now, I’m grabbing a bag of Hershey’s Kisses and a six-pack and I’m getting back on that plane!”

“I can do better than a stretch mark,” Meg said as she laughed at me. “I had a nine-pound baby and got forty-four stitches as a reward!”

“Ewwww,” I said with a gasp. “That’s what you get for being Miss Healthy! See, this is where a slothlike lifestyle packed with sugar, processed foods, and caffeine would have really paid off for you and given you a baby with a small little softball head!”

“Oh my God, look at how fat I am!” Meg cried, outstretching her arms. “I now have two fat rolls!”

“Oh, Meg,” I said, putting my arms around her. “Poor, sweet, skinny Meg. Those aren’t fat rolls, my friend; those are your boobies.”

So not only was Meg still Depression-era thin, she now had cleavage to boot, which up until then had been the one and only area between the two of us where I reigned supreme, even if I had it on my back, too.

As if the fact that Meg was now buxom wasn’t enough to drive me mad, once we went shopping the next day, things began falling apart more quickly than a Twinkie dipped in hot chocolate. There, in front of me, were rows and rows of the kind of clothes I struggle to find, all laid out before me simply for the taking. Overwhelmed by excitement and the possible damage these incredible finds were going to have on my Visa bill next month, I made fashion sparks fly from my fingertips as I flipped through the items on the rack like they were a deck of cards. Again and again, I caught my breath and gasped, “Oh!” with desire to a brown velvet waistcoat with antique jet buttons—but it was a size six. Not gonna work with my 38C torpedoes unless the whole thing was made out of very forgiving spandex and a Seal-a-Meal machine. “Oh!” to a striped pair of corduroy bell-bottoms à la Janis Joplin in her heyday (which I guess translates to “alive”), but alas, that size four wasn’t going

to fit unless I was able to clone the original pair and sew the two of them together. “Oh!” to the most darling fifties-style aqua poplin day dress, but then the size-two tag squashed my hopes like a potato bug beneath the sole of a strappy, three-inch, skinny-heeled sandal. Not compatible with this user, unless the dress came with a hidden expansion panel the size of a movie screen.

This happened again and again and again. Size six. Size four. Two. Zero. And then, when I saw that a slovenly size-eight skirt on the clearance rack was the fat lady in this circus, I knew I was in the wrong freak show.

I was in a Skinny Store, where double-digit girls were not allowed, mainly because in this single-digit world, they plainly didn’t exist.

I was dully reminded of an experience several months previous when I wandered through SoHo during a short trip to New York City. I had decided that during my trip, I would allow myself one extravagance, and I had decided I was going to buy a dress—maybe even a “not on sale” dress—in one of the funnest parts of the coolest city in the world. That was going to be my gift to myself. A great, wonderful, expensive dress. I was dying to throw my money away, I was dying to simply give someone my money, I tell you, but alas, no one would take it. Nanette Lepore didn’t want it, and neither did Anna Sui or Cynthia Rowley. I might as well have been on a scavenger hunt with no clues, because that’s the kind of luck I was having trying to find a size L dress in New York City. Fat money was apparently no good there. Salespeople looked at me as if I were a mythical beast, something only whispered about in the safety of a shadowy stockroom. Even size eights didn’t belong in this world, because the only clothes displayed were the zeroes, twos, fours, and

sixes. I felt like the biggest girl in the universe—as if I had been exposed to Chernobyl-like amounts of radiation and had just flattened entire Japanese villages simply with the crumbs that had fallen from my mouth.

After being submerged in the Land of Protruding Ribs for so long I had a craving for barbecue, I finally lost it when a salesgirl asked if she could help me.

“Honestly, it’s useless, because you don’t have my size, I need a fourteen, and I am a giant in your world,” I said, throwing up my hands. “Apparently everyone who shops here is the size of a Keebler elf or a first-grader.”

The salesgirl actually laughed, putting me a little at ease. “We do have other sizes,” she said nicely. “Is that the dress you like? I can pull it from the back, where we keep our plus sizes.”

Now, I didn’t know whether to run or shove a Suzy Q in her face in protest. The plus sizes? An eight was a plus size? Okay, sure, my size dress requires more material than, say, a dress for an Olsen twin, but come on, it’s not the size of a car! I suppose you can never be too careful, though; put a size-fourteen dress on a rack, and who would really be surprised if the whole fixture was just ripped right out of the wall and took an entire building down with it?

I left before the salesperson returned with the dress, even though I’m sure she had to hire several men right off the street and maybe a forklift to help her carry it. Even if that dress fit me perfectly, my Fat Money was not going to be burned there.

I learned a lesson that day, and that lesson was that if a store is too embarrassed to have me as a customer, if a store is too skinny to carry my size and display it out in public with the thinner, cuter sizes, then I’m too proud to give them my money. And I felt the same way in the store in Seattle.

Before I could say, “Meg! Let’s get out of here, the only people who could fit into this stuff are junkies!” I turned around just in time to see her pluck a familiar aqua poplin day dress off the rack and head to the dressing room with it in one hand and Carmen in the other.

“I’m going to try this on,” Meg giggled.

I nodded and smiled, trying to hide my dismay and encourage my friend to have fun at the same time. “I’ll watch the baby while you’re in the dressing room,” I said.

The next boutique was the same—dresses that could only fit a pretzel stick (nonsalt) or Meg—so I watched the baby after scouring the racks and finding many adorable things but none in my size. Finally, in subsequent stores that we visited, I didn’t even bother with the clothes section of the store and headed straight for the “non-size” items, like body lotion and candles, and then just sat in front of the dressing room with Carmen until Meg was done. I should have brought some change to jingle in my pocket, I thought; I have officially slipped into the role of The Guy on shopping expeditions, except for the part when other customers in the store would assume the adorable infant was mine. Then I’d have to explain, “No, she’s my friend’s baby,” at which Meg would pop out of the dressing room and the other customer would gasp, “Oh! Yours? But you look so great!”

“You’re not having any fun,” Meg said sadly as we added another bag to her growing mountain of great, cool clothes finds. “You haven’t bought one thing! We should just go home.”

I realized then that Meg didn’t know that we were visiting skinny-only stores, because Meg had been only one of two things in her life: skinny or pregnant. I mean, the girl thought that she was FAT simply because she finally filled something out, even if it was just her nursing bra.

“No, absolutely not,” I replied. “We are not going home. You’ve been dying to go shopping for months! We’re going to hit every store you want and you’re going to buy fabulous things. I just haven’t found . . . the perfect fit yet, that’s all.”

At the next store, I exploded with manufactured enthusiasm over a fig-scented candle, asked the salesgirl some pertinent and pointed questions about acne cream, and then held up a pair of underwear the size of a cocktail napkin and bellowed to Meg, “I have been driven MAD trying to find these!”

However, the angry little miss inside my head was having a field day all her own: You know, in California every restaurant has to post its health-inspection grade in the front window so the customers know exactly what they’re getting into. If you’d like to go home with your intestines intact, you pick an A joint; if you have a decent co-pay and want some paid time off from work, choose option B; and if you’re angling for long-term disability or an alternative to gastric bypass surgery, C is your way to go. The same should go for boutiques. I say, don’t waste my time, just say what you are. Let me know right off if I have a better chance of fitting into something at Baby Gap than I do in your store. I want to see it posted in your front window—“Sizes Six and Under: For Paris Hilton, women with tapeworms, and young boys”; “Super Small Sizes: For Lara Flynn Boyle, political prisoners on hunger strikes, and everyone else 180 calories away from death”; and “Teeny-Weeny Sizes: For skeletons that hang in doctors’ offices, mummies, and Prada models.”

I have been a frequent visitor to sales racks in almost every major department and clothing store, and guess what’s on them? XS’s and S’s. Sizes zeroes, twos, fours, and sixes. Rarely at Banana Republic will you spot a hallowed L on the sales rack, and ditto for J. Crew. The large sizes are always the first ones to

get picked (for a change). Which tells me one thing: There's way more of us out there than there are of them, and they'd better watch it. Should we decide to declare war on them, well, my Fat Money is on the Fat Girls. We don't need bullets; all we need is to pass around a box of See's chocolates for some extra energy and then huff and then puff and then blow their bones down.

I mean, can it get any worse than this? Any worse than stores that house the larger-than-chic sizes away where no one can see them, and shops that simply don't carry them at all? Will they become like the airlines and start weighing people at the door before they're allowed access? "Oh—a size fourteen? Hmmmm. Well, you, with your waterbed-like ass, take up as much room as two Lilliputian size zeroes. You'll have to wait until those attractive thin girls over there leave before you can come in. But don't you dare handle any of our stock too much. We don't want you passing the fat gene to our clothes, you size LARGE!!"

"Jeans?" Meg cried delightedly, and I suddenly realized that the little angry voice inside my head hadn't been completely contained there after all. "Did you find jeans? Did you find something cool to get? I knew you would find something here! This is my favorite store, you know!"

"Not yet, but I'm on a mission!" I assured her. "I'm sure this is the place."

While Meg met her match in the dressing room, I strolled around the shop with Carmen, desperate to find anything so Meg wouldn't feel so bad about me not being able to fit into a tank top the size of a panty liner. I finally sighed with relief when I spotted a lightweight butt body shaper with some pretty lace around each leg in the lingerie section. I flipped to the tag and nearly gasped. What I saw there nearly took my breath away and almost made me drop the baby. L. I saw an L. What on earth a

girdle was doing in this shop I didn't know and I didn't care—it had probably been misordered and had sat there for years, been used as a dust rag, to stuff a couple bras, kill some bugs, who knew—but finally I was going to buy something and walk out with a bag of my own.

I raced up to the counter with the girdle and pulled out my credit card. The owner of the shop—a pretty, young, skinny-Minnie girl with collarbones so prominent they could be used for rock climbing—picked it up, looked at it for a moment, and with a little laugh said, “Oh! This is NOT the right size for you!”

I smiled, excited, pleased, and humbled that she had mistaken me for a medium, since all she had really seen for such a long time were miniature-size people that she had absolutely forgotten what a real human looked like. “Oh,” I said. “It's okay. That's a good size for me.”

“No, really,” the woman said, nodding vigorously. “You need an extra-large, and that's not a size we carry in the store regularly, but I can order it for you. I can have it here next week.”

And then she tilted her skinny little head.

And then she smiled at me.

Even the girdle I wanted to buy was too small. The woman, that awful, awful woman, wouldn't even let me buy that stupid LARGE girdle. I WAS TOO FAT FOR THAT.

My face started burning around the edges and I didn't know what to say. I was stunned and embarrassed and mortified and I was FAT and I felt like I was in the seventh grade again and a cheerleader had just told me my pants were too tight and I had also just had my period in them.

“Should I order it?” the owner said.

“I don't think so,” I finally said, looking right at her. “My fat ass doesn't live here.”

Feeling as big as a Kodiak bear, I then sat down on the Skinny Store couch, mumbling something aloud about hoping that it could support my weight. I thought very, very hard about farting on it for a simple yet effective form of revenge, but then remembered I had an innocent baby in my presence and gracefully, though reluctantly, refrained (although I did not refrain from leaving a tiny wad of now flavor-depleted Bubble Yum underneath it).

But wait.

There are such things as happy endings, even for a size fourteen wandering the streets looking for a fabulous dress to take home. On my next trip to New York, I found Jill Anderson, a small boutique in the East Village that sells fantastic clothes in XS, S, and M, and then dares to put an L on a tag, too, and mean it. Not only was there a size fourteen dress right out there on the sales rack next to a six, a four, and a two, but there in that dress was room for my boobs, my butt, and my hips. I no longer felt like a Chernobyl monster. I felt like a girl and I felt pretty and I felt good. When Jill was named Best Women's Designer in New York by a prominent media outlet this year, my heart swelled with joy, not only for her, but for all of the L's out there who had finally found her at last.

Although there will never be world peace, I do find much comfort in the fact that there is a place out there where size doesn't matter, where all that matters is that you're a girl (and sometimes that doesn't even matter so much because on one occasion, I was trying on the same dress that a man was, and it may be up to debate, but I will still argue to this day that I looked better in it than he did). Despite the shame of the "plus sizes" hidden away in stockrooms or the XL's that are only available by special order in other places in the universe, there is one place in

the East Village where a size two and a size fourteen accidentally touched butts in a dressing room and war didn't break out. No one screamed and no one called the Fat HazMat team. They both laughed, the size fourteen was lacerated by the jutting hip bone of the size two, but after a little hydrogen peroxide and a Band-Aid, all was dandy and then the fourteen and the two told each other just how great they looked in their dresses. The cut scabbed over, but I'll always have that dress.

In the East Village at Jill's, we'll just wait until the rest of the world catches on.