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Title continued: OF SOCIETY'S ATTITUDES ON BODY SIZE — A CREATIVE WRITING APPROACH

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EATING DISORDERS: AN EFFECT OF SOCIETY'S ATTITUDES
ON BODY SIZE - A CREATIVE WRITING APPROACH

A Thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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Washington, DC
April 20, 1988
THESIS: Our culture's acceptance of stereotypical ideals of female body size fosters a prejudicial attitude toward those who do not approximate the ideal, and has resulted in the eating disorders of anorexia and bulimia.

I chose this topic after experiencing a personal insight while taking the Liberal Studies Program course "The Moral Development of the Child." My reaction to reading W.E.B.DuBois' statement on the "inaudibility of the Negro" in Erikson's Identity, Youth and Crisis, was that I too was a victim of prejudice as a large woman in a thin-oriented society; I had often felt "inaudible." Through the creative process of writing three fictional short stories whose main characters are anorexic, bulimic or overweight, I hope to be able to make my readers more aware of the illnesses of anorexia and bulimia while portraying the overweight woman as someone with a weight problem but who is also someone intelligent, sensitive, sexy, and with a sense of humor. I do acknowledge the health risks complicated by obesity; I do not deny these. My thesis really is about self-acceptance and the ensuing self-esteem such acceptance brings which in turn may result in a desire by the overweight individual to become "healthily-sized."

Conservative estimates report that as many as six million individuals in this country suffer from anorexia and/or bulimia. The majority of sufferers (90-95%) are female. And 56% of Americans overall are trying to lose weight. While intellectually it might be argued that we are concerned for health reasons about our weight, in a study done by the City College of New York, 83% of the female participants indicated they dieted "so that my clothes will fit better."
An individual is considered "anorexic" if she is twenty percent underweight and if this condition is caused by a psychological inability to eat. The anorexic is one of the few whose psychological problem can result in death. Bulimia is the consumption of large quantities of usually high-calorie foods in a short period of time (e.g., two hours) and the victim subsequently attempts to rid the body of the foods or calories through "purging." Purging is carried out by vomiting, using diuretics or laxatives, or excessive exercise.

The victims of eating disorders -- anorexics, bulimics, and the obese -- apparently share similar psychological factors which contribute to their illness. Victims often feel they did not get sufficient maternal attention as infants which results in a lack of self-esteem. Feeling the need to prove themselves worthy of this "significant other's" love, victims establish an exaggerated view of what mother expects and develop the perfectionist syndrome. Bulimics and anorexics feel they might attain such perfection through their body size, while obese victims who suffer from this syndrome feel they can never do anything "good enough" for mother, so why bother trying? Obese children actually do gain quite a lot of attention in the family structure as "problem children," though maybe not the kind of attention for which they are striving.

Eating disorders flourish at puberty when a girl begins to feel a loss of control over her body. She then may either decide she will take control of it herself through anorexia or bulimia, or she may attempt to deny her sexuality by becoming somewhat asexual via obesity. Kim Chernin notes in Womansize, The Tyranny of Slenderness, that "A woman obsessed with her body, wishing to make her breasts and thighs and hips and belly smaller and
less apparent, may be expressing the fact that she feels uncomfortable being female in this culture." A "standard of beauty" is definitely a gender issue. Men are not considered worthy or acceptable primarily because of their "attractiveness." However, women have been judged on this standard for centuries. A man is more often judged on his mental capabilities or physical strength. In her book on female standards of beauty, *Femininity*, Susan Brownmiller considers woman's attempt to achieve a perfect appearance "the ultimate restriction on self-acceptance and esteem."

Eating disorders probably have existed for centuries, but their increase over the last ten to fifteen years can be directly connected to a mass media society. A recent analysis of television characters and articles and ads in magazines indicates that 69 percent of female TV characters today are very thin compared to only 17.5 percent of the male characters. In contrast, 25.5 percent of the males are heavy whereas only five percent of the female characters are heavy. In this study covering magazines aimed at the women's market, there were 63 ads for diet foods; in the comparable number of magazines generally purchased by men included in the survey, there was only one ad for diet food. In the same magazines, articles addressing body size or shape appeared 96 times in the women's publications, eight times in the men's. These same women's magazines, however, also give much print space to calorie-laden recipes accompanied by beautifully photographed pictures of food. Our society is guilty of giving us rather mixed messages: food is associated with home and entertaining and the "good life" -- but don't you dare eat that food or you'll become fat and ugly!
I read a number of books and articles on the eating disorders in order to understand them better and to have insight about my characters. The preface (written by an M.D.) to one of the books (read after submitting my thesis proposal) agrees on point with my proposal -- which is still my attitude -- about this issue:

On the bottom line, the current epidemic of eating disorders results from tremendous cultural and psychological forces impacting on human biology. In the area of eating, as in most other areas of life, we are reminded of Aristotle's golden maxim: A life of moderation may be more effective than striving after some unrealistic "ideal" form. A certain self-acceptance, of both our appearance and our psyche, may be necessary before we can begin to make the most of who we are.⁶

The stories and poems I have written are food preparation titles. I hope to have them published some day in book form with the title "Warter, Make Mine..." "Al Dente" is the story of a bulimic couple out on a date; "Poached" is my poem on the illness. "Half-Baked" is about a married anorexic woman who struggles with an ethnic concept of acceptable behavior for women; "Peeled" is the poem on this topic. "Medium Rare" is my story of a large woman who comes to terms with her size and who embodies qualities not always associated with a large woman. Originally titled "Well Done," I decided that was too final a state for this character and that "Medium Rare" was more the essence I wanted to convey. "Boiled" is the poem addressing large women in society.

CONCLUSION: If women who do not conform to society's standards because they are larger than the norm or "ideal" were more accepted by our culture, the acceptance might enable overweight women to gain sufficient self-esteem to attain a healthy weight and thus diminish the incidences of anorexia and bulimia too.
REFERENCES


7 Tavris, p. 32.

POACHED

On Bulimia

I am a yolk and I hate the gelatinous mass of white that I fear may envelope me.

So I spew it.

I crack the shell and out it comes through my mouth and my anus and my bladder.

But then it gets lonely inside the shell and I fill it up
Again.

Crack and spew; crack and spew.

Alas, the yolk remains whole, unscrambled.

And how long before it breaks from all that cracking?
AL DENTE
Ruth clamped the container of Baskin-Robbins' Rocky Road ice cream tightly between her knees as she sat in the rear pew of St. Anthony's Church on Mount Vernon Avenue and quickly looked around to see if she shared the darkened vestibule with anyone. A gnome-like old woman sat in the front pew near the bleachers of votive lights which sprang up to petition the good graces of the Blessed Mother who stood behind in an elevated dugout with arms outstretched to accept the players into her league. The Blessed Mother didn't need scouts for her team, Ruth mused. You merely had to be able to pray the rosary and you were on the team. Well, Ruth didn't know the rosary; you didn't learn that in the synagogue. She wasn't on the team, she just used the clubhouse to eat her quart of ice cream out of the sight of her mother.

It had become a real game with Ruth, fooling her mother as to how she remained slim. Her mother just sat in front of the television, day and night, eating and growing; growing and dying. Ruth wouldn't let that happen to her -- she had found the key to happiness, but she'd be damned if she'd share it with her mother. Or with anyone for that matter. Life was such crap anyhow. You took what pleasures you could from it and let everybody find their own devices to flush the crap away. Rocky Road was one of Ruth's devices.

She ripped the top from the freshly hand-dipped container and began the feasting. She impaled the sweet, creamy mass with a six-inch white plastic soda spoon and shivered as the soft wetness hit her extended tongue. Marshmallow globules impeded the rapidity of the ingestion process, gumming up the works. Ruth shifted these masses to the cheek cavity so that a spoonful of only cocoa-flavored cream woven with pecans
entered her lips -- ecstasy. She swallowed the cheeked debris and shuddered as it slid slimily down her throat. Ruth was officially in the middle of a sugar "high."

You'd never know Ruth was capable of consuming up to 10,000 calories a day; she was so tiny. She was barely five feet tall and weighed around 85 pounds, including the two pounds that must have been weight from the mass of brunette kinky hair that she carried on her head. She hadn't had it cut since she was eight years old and had decided that she wanted to become a ballerina. The hair hadn't grown commensurate with her years; it seemed to stop when she was about 15 and it just seemed to get bushier and brittler with age. Her eyebrows too were bushy. She was not what one would call "attractive," but she felt attractive because she was thin and wasn't thin synonymous with attractive? Her eyes bugged out like Billy Joel's; he was a star.

When she'd left for work that morning she'd felt especially good. She liked the image that she saw in the mirror in the smaller of the two bedrooms in the apartment she shared with her mother. She tucked her black sweater into the size two taupe trousers. Black made one look so much smaller. She turned sideways and looked in the mirror. No breasts; no hips. She looked behind her and ran her hands over her buttocks -- or what was left of them. Success. She was skin and bones.

The shimmering figures on the stained-glass windows peered down at her in the pew as her thighs grasped the container harder. It took thirty-seven pieces of the glass to make up the archangel which fought valiantly with a fifty-four piece demon to her left. Ruth counted the stained glass pieces of the figures as she gorged the ice cream store's
"Flavor of the Month." She liked to buy the "Flavor of the Month" because the manager gave ten percent off, and when you were eating two or more quarts a week that added up to a substantial savings over a year.

Ruth wondered if the demon figure commanded more of the stained glass pieces and more space on the window because there was more evil in the world? Ruth felt so good, so evil, so hedonistic. And in a Catholic Church yet. This is how sex must have felt to her friend Norma who slept with a married man in his wife's bed when the wife flew out of Dulles to Frankfurt as a stewardess for TWA. Ruth would never do anything that disgusting. Besides, she was sure the "Rocky Road" was more fun than Norma and Hal could have.

Having completed the act, Ruth wiped her mouth with the scratchy white paper napkins that Baskin-Robbins provided. She did not want to display any telltale signs of her moments of pleasure in the church. She walked out the front door of St. Anthony's and dipped her remaining napkins into the holy water font -- she needed it to erase the stickiness from her fingers which had oozed from the marshmallow in the ice cream. This was a better use of the holy water than the Catholics made of it.

St. Anthony's always reminded her of the first time she had met Sid, "her man" as Ma called him. Ruth had had a particularly bad Monday at work. She was a typist in the personnel office at the same government agency where Sid worked. They hadn't met each other at work though. Two of the other typists had called in sick that day. Typical in the government. She had to answer their phones too in addition to her boss wanting the monthly report typed three days early because he wanted to take off on Friday so that he could go to Rhehoboth with his "boyfriend" Lance. To top it off, Ma kept calling because the cable TV was out.
"Did you remember to pay the bill, Ruthie?"

"Yeah, Ma. I paid it."

"You know how absent-minded you are, Ruthie. Like the time you forgot to send back the card to Aunt Goldie for Harriette's wedding."

Ruthie remembered "forgetting" to return the acceptance card for cousin Harriette's wedding. She'd had a special disdain for cousin Harriette since the time that Harriette had knocked Ruth's ballerina bedroom lamp on the floor when she visited Ruth's family for seder. Harriette was spoiled and she refused to put the ballerina down when Ruth asked her to return it to its appointed place on the mahogany night stand. Harriette said that it was an accident. Well, she didn't use the word "accident" at six years of age. She said that she "didn't do it." Ruth knew better, even though she was only three years older than Harriette. The ballerina hadn't leaped to her death in the small space between the night stand and the wall which was painted a dusty rose and topped along the edge of the ceiling with a cream-colored seashell scalloped border. Ruth had to pick up all the ceramic bits of the ballerina from the wine and beige and black paisley-swirled wool rug that Ma had gotten from Aunt Trudy. Aunt Trudy had taken what she could with her when she moved in with her daughter Maureen when her husband Ben died. The rug looked good in Ruth's bedroom and provided some warmth in the winter over the creaky parquet wood floor. The worn spot where Aunt Trudy's couch ended and foot traffic began was hidden by the mahogany bed that matched the two night tables that sat on either side of it. But that was all that matched in the bedroom. A chest of drawers which was painted every five years to match the room paint stood at the foot of the bed. An oval mirror which needed to be resilvered hung over the drawers.
The ceramic fingers and toes from the statue were placed in the brown paper bag lining the wicker waste basket with the tan straw band about two inches from the top of the basket. Ruth would turn the basket, minus the trash contents, and perch it on the top of her head and pretend she was Jimmy Cagney playing James M. Cohan. The "hat" was perfect for tap dancing to "Yankee Doodle Dandy," especially if she could borrow the bamboo stick that held up the rubber plant in the hallway to use as the baton that Jimmy held as he strutted on stage . . . "born on the Fourth of July. . . ."

Several months after the ballerina died, Ruth found one of the statue's eyes under the bed as she hunted for a missing knee sock. The curled eyelashes and blue eyeball were all that remained. Ruth tossed the eye into the trash bag and hated cousin Harriette anew. She also wondered who was the better off of the ballerina pair, the dead one or the one forced to spend her life with a dirty pleated lampshade on her head?

The cable television company representative told her that there had been a problem with the satellite, or the transformer, or something. Ma didn't care; she'd missed "Days of Our Lives" and Rachel and Mack were supposed to get back together again today after being separated because Rachel had had an affair with her illegitimate son Jaime's real father. She grinned as she thought of Harriette who married a boy from Malden, Massachusetts, named Harold. Harry and Harriette. They sounded like a dance team . . . "Dancing in the dark, da, da, de, da. . . ."

So on that August Monday in 1986 to better handle Ma, boss, and memories of an obnoxious cousin, Ruthie headed for the Baskin-Robbins store. This required her getting off of the metro bus two stops early, but the detour was worth it. She entered the store and looked at the flavor
list to see if anything new had been added. Cherry Cheesecake. Was that on the list last week? It didn't matter. She knew what she wanted.

"I'll have a double chocolate shake for here and a quart of Rocky Road with four spoons to go."

She'd suck the shake down her throat at the counter as the clerk meticulously scooped the Rocky Road into a cardboard container. The request for four spoons assured that no one would know that the quart, in addition to the shake, was for her. Her favorite part of the shake was when she had to suck hard to get an undissolved clump of the chocolate ice cream through the straw. The imminence of this special treat was signalled by the cessation of shake flowing through the straw. Two hard sucks; the clump was now dislodged and sped through the plastic tunnel to her throat: colder and creamier than the liquid, the change in temperature and texture was what she relished.

The Rocky Road was now packed and she paid her bill. Five-ninety plus six percent tax. She handed the clerk a five and two ones and put the sixty-seven cents change in the coin purse of her green leather Baro'et French purse.

"Enjoy the ice cream" the girl behind the counter ordered her.

"Oh thanks, it's for a dinner party; dessert is my contribution. Can't cook."

"Sure," the clerk thought. "That's why she asked for four spoons. The hostess won't have any spoons. Why do these ice cream junkies feel they have to make excuses for their purchases? You'd think they were buying whipped cocaine."
Ruth threw the milk shake cup into the brimming trash bin near the door. She caught the eye of a skinny, short, frizzy-haired being -- a male version of herself -- wearing black-rimmed glasses, Hush Puppy oxfords, chinos, and a red plaid shirt. Even in the sweltering heat, he still wore a navy blazer. Or was it simply a sport coat? What was the difference between a sport coat and a blazer? One sounded much more confining than the other. This man did not look much the sport; blazer would not define his spirit either. Woody Allanish, yes. Woody, mellow.

She tried to muffle a small burp, which sounded like a gurgle, the result of the lactose being rushed into her empty intestines. A smirk appeared on "Woody's" face. Not one of disgust for bad manners, but one of knowing, understanding. Ruth wiped her lips with the back of her hand. She then jerked five of the flimsy paper napkins out of the aluminum box on the counter next to the ice cream cone display. You needed that big of a wad to do any good.

"Good stuff" said Woody.

"Yeah. Not as good as Hagen-Daz, but who can afford that?"

Woody was paying for his banana split as Ruth placed her hand on the brass door knob, cold from the air conditioning. The door had barely shut as she stepped out onto the sidewalk, the air heavy with humidity common to a Washington summer day. Woody entered the banana boat extravaganza with gusto, the spoon first piercing the middle scoop of Pralines 'N Cream with hot fudge sauce and whipped cream cascading down the sides of the scoop. The obligatory maraschino cherry lay in the rear of the plastic-coated banana boat. Ruth had just missed the traffic light to cross Commerce Street so she shared the sidewalk space with Woody, he now exploring
the depths of the far left scoop of Jamoca Fudge, a small bit of sliced banana accompanying this mouthful.

Ruth liked the way "Woody" ate with utter abandon, oblivious to traffic and pedestrians as they asserted themselves toward the beckoning "Walk" sign. By the time they crossed the street, Buttered Pecan wearing a caramel glazing was dead meat. All of this eating observation was making Ruth salivate for the quart of Rocky Road she carried in the crook of her arm. She lost "Woody" as she walked up the steps to St. Anthony's when she last saw him tip the pointed end of the boat toward his mouth and drink the melt-down of ice creams and toppings.

Several weeks later when they stood near each other in the GSI (Government Services, Inc.) cafeteria, black coffees in hand (you had to remain under control on the job), Ruth looked at "Woody" and said "Ah, the Boat Man."

"Woody" smiled and introduced himself as Sid Meltzer. He was a contract specialist in the administrative services section of the agency and he worked on the second floor of the building. Ruth hoped she'd run into him again in the cafeteria and of course she did and they began their "dates."

"Ruth, come change the channel for me, honey. Wheel of Fortune's on next on Channel Nine."

"Be there in a minute, Ma."

"Hurry baby, you know I don't like to miss Vanna coming out. I just love it when the audience goes wild when they see her in those pretty dresses. You should get one of those pretty things, sweetie. Mrs. Costello across the hall says that you can buy imitation Vanna dresses real cheap on the buying channel."
Ruth knew she'd never be caught dead in something that fat slob Vanna White would wear. Vanna actually shook when she walked across the stage at the start of "Wheel." And grinned. Like a fool. Those people slapped their palms together and cheered for her like she was a hero as she twirled.

"I'll bet she's stuffed her share of heroes in her mouth to get all that flesh, Ma. She's disgusting."

Salami, ham, provolone, lettuce and oil on a doughy Italian roll. Ruth pictured Vanna alone on the beach in South Carolina as a teenager stuffing her face, the oil running out of the right side of her mouth and down her chin. Ma had told her that Vanna was from North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. "Entertainment Tonight" had reported that North Myrtle Beach was proclaiming itself "The Hometown of Vanna White." Imagine being rewarded for jiggling your skin. Ruth changed the channel and silently questioned if it would be worth the extra $2.50 a month to get remote control for the cable.

She went back into her bedroom and put the finishing touches, which weren't much, onto her outfit. Black slacks, black sweater, black loafers. Small silver hoop earrings and some Krystle cologne that Ma had bought her.

"Maybe you'll feel like Krystle Carrington when you wear it."

Ma lived in the world of television. She looked like a juke-box wearing a house dress. Slippers were her shoes of choice. Her ill-fitting dentures drove Ruth crazy, especially when she insisted on eating corn on the cob and they clicked on the chewing action. She kept her silvery hair cropped short so that she wasn't required to do too much to
it. She didn't do too much with herself in general. She sat in the
naugahyde recliner which had been unofficially "Pa's chair" until Pa
died at 57 from emphysema. She talked on the phone a lot to her assorted
sisters, in-laws and cousins, but she rarely left the house. Her girth
and varicose-veined legs made it an effort to get out and neither she nor
Ruthie drove, so she enjoyed staying inside in the air-conditioned
apartment in suburban Washington.

"Who wants to go out with all that crime out there in the streets?
They see a helpless old lady like me and they mug ya. No thanks. I'll
stay here with Phil and Oprah, thank you."

"You need some color, Ruthie. Why do you wear black so much? Sid
must think you're in mourning or something. Of course, he's no fashion
plate either. What a pair. Where you two going tonight anyhow?"

"Ma, you ask the same question every week. You know we go out to
eat every Saturday night."

"Yeah, that's what you say, but you could fool me. You and Sid are
like two sticks. You two need some meat on your bones."

"Don't I bring you the match books from all the restaurants we
visit?"

Ruth picked up the over-sized brandy snifter from under the blonde end
table in the living room and penetrated its contents with her spindly fingers.

"There must be a hundred match books in here, Ma."

Tonight they'd add another cover to the collection. Sometimes Ruth
wondered if this was all she'd ever be able to show for her years of dating
Sid -- a matchbook collection. The truth was, she didn't really care if
their relationship led anywhere. It provided her with some attention, a
weekly meal out, and ...
They'd decided on "Alfredo's" because Paul Trofino who worked with Sid had recommended it. Paul had always given him good tips when it came to restaurants so he trusted that "Alfredo's" would be good. Good to Paul and Sid meant highly edible food in large or ample portions at reasonable prices. Reasonable by Washington prices anyhow.

They walked up 17th Street and approached the White House on their right. A bag lady wearing an old mustard-yellow blanket as a shawl hovered near the fence to the Old Executive Office Building. Instead of shoes, she wore two cardboard shoe boxes on her feet; each was attached to a foot with an intricate configuration of string and rubber bands. "Bandolino" brand on the left foot; "Connie" brand on the right. The bag lady was rotund with gray, messy hair that looked like it hadn't been combed or washed in months.

Ruth glanced at the woman and mentally noted that she was a candidate for a "hosing down." A "hosing down" was a list she compiled in her head of individuals who needed to be liberally sprinkled with liquid dish detergent from the top of their heads to the bottom of their toes and then hosed down with warm water to remove whatever was removable from their bodies. It was not a list made up of just street people either. The middle-aged man who headed the finance division at work was on the list: his grease-encrusted head looked as though it was never shampooed. Yet, he wore three-piece suits to the office everyday. Melanie, the clerk in data processing made the grade too: she reeked of cheap perfume but obviously did not use deodorant. She dressed in the latest trends: leather mini skirts and spandex leggings. She must not have cared that she was simultaneously ruining her clothes and her image with this revolting habit, or lack of habit.
They left the lady with the boxed feet behind and crossed the street and headed toward Connecticut Avenue and the Riggs Bank Building which housed Alfredo's on the first floor level. It was not very crowded because it was Saturday and the office buildings were closed. Besides, who stayed downtown in Washington at night anymore? Everybody went to the suburbs these days.

"Nice room" Sid smiled.

"Yeah, nice" echoed Ruth.

The bus boy placed an oval wicker basket lined with a peach colored linen napkin cradling a loaf of Italian bread on the table in front of them. He then dropped a white earthenware bowl of butter pats alongside the bread basket.

Ruth was the more unable to control her wants. She greedily sought the hardened mound which rose against the covering material. Her right hand plunged into the linen and grabbed the encrusted flour and yeast concoction, ripping a generous portion off and stuffing it into her mouth, not taking the time to butter it.

As she chewed, she ripped another piece off with her bony fingers, buttered and presented it to Sid.

"Good bread" she mumbled between chews.

"Thanks, Ruthie" Sid mouthed as he opened his cavity to accept the offering. His waiting tongue extended from his lips and withdrew with the doughy, buttery substance on it. He licked his lips and looked appreciatively at Ruthie with his big, cow eyes.

The bus boy brought large goblets of water, but he wasn't fast enough for their mounting hunger.
"May we have two coffees with cream, fast?" Ruth blurted out. Ruthie had become a sort of liberated woman and ordered without heed to mannerly behavior considerations. Herve, the bus boy, obliged them, and they were now able to calm down a bit after the initial bread and butter frenzy had subsided.

Their waiter Raul noticed their animated excitement at being served the coffee, so he approached them to see if they might like a cocktail. "No thank you, the menus please" said Ruth.

Sid loved it when Ruth got aggressive like this. By the time that Raul returned with the menus, Sid and Ruth had consumed the entire basket of bread and all the butter pats.

"More bread. More butter. And a warm-up on the coffee" Sid said.

He began to feel a bit of the initial tension of the evening let up now. It was going to be a good session; he could feel it in his butter-laden blood.

When the waiter added hot coffee to their cups, they drank in the liquid and groaned as it heated their insides.

"Um, um, um. Is there anything better than caffeine?" Sid questioned Ruthie.

"Now Sid, there are a few things" chortled Ruth. She could think of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, Armand's deep dish pizza. And of course the ice cream.

The tight feeling in Sid's neck began to ease up as he became aware of the coffee meeting the Italian bread in his stomach. The void was beginning to fill; the emptiness would soon be over.
As they read over the menu, they languidly buttered the bread and ate it, sipped the coffee, sipped the water. And moaned as they read aloud the descriptions of the food.


"Fried mozzarella sticks. Golden cheese sticks battered then deep fried in olive oil until golden brown. Served with our special marinara sauce. Alright!"

"Fried zucchini. Tender pieces of summer's bounty encased in bread crumbs and fried until crusty. Served with Alfredo's caper garlic dip. Oh my god, I think this is it. Don't you think so Sid?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I need to know a few more things about it. Here's the waiter."

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"The fried zucchini appetizer. Are the zucchini cut in rounds or in sticks?"

"In rounds, sir."

"Good, good. Now the dip that comes with that. Is that made in-house, or is that a packaged dip?"

"Sir, Alfredo's makes everything here, including the pasta."

"Fine. Good." Sid liked the notion of homemade, so comforting and caring, like your mom's rice pudding loaded with swelling raisins on a cold winter day.

"Are you ready to order now?"

"Is he kidding, Sid, we just got here. Don't let him rush you," Ruthie admonished after the waiter had left.
"Of course I won't, Ruth. You know I like to take all the time that is necessary."

"Okay, I won't push you."

Ruth knew that if Sid were pushed he might not be able to perform as well as he could. And she did not want to take the chance of him "losing it."

"Pastas. I think we should concentrate on pastas at a place like this, don't you, since Raul said that they are homemade?"

"Yes, honey" Ruth cooed.

She didn't often use such endearing terms with him, but she wanted to assure that things went well for both their satisfaction after all. She wanted to strengthen his feelings of manliness.

"Linguine. In clam sauce. I wonder if it's white or red. Fettucine Alfredo. Now in a place called "Alfredo's," that should be interesting. Baked ziti. Baked with what . . . I see, three cheeses. But what kind of cheeses. One thing this place could use is a better menu."

"Now baby, don't get upset" Ruth soothed.

She needed to continue the earlier enthusiasm engendered by the bread and butter.

"Perhaps we could get the waiter to bring us our salads while we make up our minds. It says that all meals are served with Alfredo's special house salad."

"If you want."

What does he mean if I want? We need the salads at this point, not merely want them.
As they ate the salads, they continued with the menu reading.

"Lasagne. Mama Regina's old world favorite. Who the hell is Mama Regina? Alfredo's wife, mother? Served Florentine-style. With spinach I take it. How can they spoil the purity of a lasagne with spinach?"

Ruth started to get agitated now too.

"I know. I hope they use fresh parmigiana here and not the damned boxed stuff. Sid, surely they wouldn't use dry, Kraft brand parmigiana. Then it's called parmesan. If they believe in truth in advertising they'd have to spell it right wouldn't they? They wouldn't lie to us would they Sid?"

Sid couldn't wait any longer. The moment had come. They had to order dinner -- and right now.

Raul took their orders.

"Let's see. You've had your two salads. Now you'd like one fried zucchini appetizer. Cut in circles, yes. One order of fried mozzarella sticks. One order of Fettucine Alfredo, one baked ziti. Anything else. More bread I take it?"

"I think I'm going to change mine, Sid. Instead of the Fettucine Alfredo, I'll have the spaghetti with tomato sauce. Is the sauce smooth and creamy or are the tomatoes thick and chunky?"

"It's tomato sauce, miss."

"Oh, okay, fine."

"And you sir. The baked ziti."

"Gosh Ruthie, you made me change my mind too. I'll have the spaghetti too. But be sure that it's al dente. We cannot eat spaghetti that is not al dente."
"Fine, sir."

The waiter departed with a deep breath and a raised eyebrow.

"Sid, my god. I almost forgot the al dente. Jesus, what would we have done if they'd have brought out our pasta overcooked? I hate to think of what that would be like. You saved our virtual entire night."

"Eh, am I not the master of ordering?"

Herve brought the third basket of bread along with the round zucchini slices fried in olive oil. They took turns feeding each other and stuffed the zucchini in their own mouths when the other one wasn't able to eat fast enough. They wiped their empty appetizer plates clean of the residue of olive oil and bread crumbs with the last of the buttered Italian bread slices.

Raul then brought the mammoth platters of spaghetti with tomato sauce and placed them in front of each of them. Al dente.

They twirled the spaghetti around their fork tines and sucked it off each other's forks. They scooped sauce up in the large spoons and slurped it heartily in.

The waiters and bus boys watched from their serving area. They had never seen such an eating performance by two little, skinny people in all their lives. People who weren't also drunk, that is.

Raul asked if they'd like any dessert.

"We'd like to see the menu, please" laughed Ruth. She was really asking for it. Sid was as turned on as he could ever be.

"Umm. Spumoni. Tortoni. Zuppa Inglese. Italian Cheesecake. Cannoli. That's it. I'll have a cannoli."

"Sir, do you care for anything?"

"No, just more ..."
"Coffee, correct?"

"Yes."

"Ah waiter, I'd like extra whipped cream on top of that cannoli. And a bowl of whipped cream on the side. I like whipped cream."

Sid knew he could not contain the excitement much more. When Ruth ate dairy products in front of him it was all he could do to maintain his control.


By the time he paid the bill he was ready for the grand finale. Tonight they had decided to do it at the Jefferson Memorial. They took much pleasure in picking public spots to do it.

They took a cab there, Red Top from Arlington driven by, Sid was sure, an illegal alien who couldn't read traffic signs. But what the hell, you had to live dangerously sometime. They looked for the darkest, emptiest spot which was sometimes difficult with all the tourists around in Washington in the summer. They found a tree near the river but well out of the shadows of the flood lights so they could have some privacy. After all, they both lived with parents. How could you take somebody home to do it with Ma or Dad right there in the house?

Sid always took care of Ruthie first, no chauvinist was he. He'd insert two fingers right down the middle of her throat and she would gag. Ruthie vomited it all up . . . the bread, the butter, the cannoli, the cream, more cream, the pasta. Al dente.

God, Sid felt so good knowing he made Ruthie feel like this. Sid grabbed Ruthie's tote bag and pulled out the little moistened towlettes
with the awful name, "Wet Ones," and unwrapped two of them for her so she
could clean her mouth and hands. Then Ruth took a few mouthfuls of
Orangina soda from the lukewarm bottle Sid held and prepared to do for
Sid what he'd done for her. Their love was so giving.

Ruth felt tenderly toward Sid as she held his head in her lap, one
arm under his head providing a limp pillow, the other rubbing first his
stomach and then his Adam's apple which was quite prominent. Ruth
considered the Adam's apple so masculine yet such a sensitive spot.
Sid's stomach would start to turn as he reacted to the tickling sensation
the stroking caused. Almost immediately after Ruthie's fingers reached
his tongue, way before tonsil-level, Sid would begin his ultimate act of
pleasure.

After they'd thrown the "Wet Ones" and the Orangina bottle in the
wood planked garbage cans near the edge of the river, Ruthie shivered a
little. They walked along the Potomac with forty-five boy scouts from
Schenectady, New York, then out toward Maine Avenue in silence where Sid
hailed two cabs. Ruth hoped her driver wasn't some damned Afghan; they
all stunk like garlic.
BOILED
On Obesity

A chef is complimented for fluffy rice.
When a woman turns out fluffy, the chef is ashamed.
Will anyone buy the dish?

Grains that don't stick to each other are good;
If they clump together, mama might throw out the whole damned pot.

An admonition to mother chefs:
Don't boil your babies.
MEDIUM RARE
I think it all started about the time that my latest attempt at fat exorcism was winding up. Dr. Volmer, my therapist, said he would only treat me on an individual basis if I agreed to join his therapy group of women patients who felt they had weight problems. This under the guise of his being able to better assess my mental health on my ability to interact with others. I never felt I really had difficulty with others; it was my difficulty in interacting with myself that caused me to seek help. Part of me hated me and it was that part that made me act inconsistent with the other part which liked me pretty well. If Doc Volmer was going to hold me hostage for an additional $160 a month before Blue Cross picked up their eighty percent, who was I to question him since I was pretty hopeless at the time? Besides, I did enjoy our individual therapy sessions at the office he used at the hospital downtown on Thursdays during my lunch hour.

Getting to Washington Circle and back in a cab and seeing Dr. Volmer for our forty-five minute "hour" on my lunch hour was always a challenge. But not as much as the challenge of trying to fool my boss as to why I regularly dropped whatever I was doing on Thursdays at 11:45 and flew out of the office. When I'd docilly asked Mr. Kelly's permission to take a half hour's sick leave along with my lunch hour on Thursdays so I could see my shrink, he told me that shrinks were only for "people who have nothing to do, and I keep you plenty busy." I wonder if that's why I was his fourteenth secretary in nine years? The one before me retired from the Government on an "early out" after she complained that she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown after working for Mr. Kelly for only six months. I do think she wasn't ready for living alone in a city. After all, she'd only left home to take this job at the age of 52 so she could get a better
retirement by working at a higher grade than she could get in Connecticut. So maybe it wasn't all Mr. Kelly's fault. The one before her, though, left his office ranting that she'd prefer typing on a toilet in the ladies' room to working for him. Hell, the guy had hired me right off the bat when I interviewed with him so I thought I owed him gratitude and didn't want to ruffle his repeatedly ruffled feathers. In West Virginia I had worked in a public welfare office and the highlight of my day was answering the dumb-waiter when it arrived loaded with the mail for the caseworkers at quarter past the hour, twice in the morning and twice in the afternoon. Mr. Kelly's thinking I could work for lawyers made me feel pretty good about myself.

When the final "weight group" session was over, I realized that the only thing I'd lost in the three months in which it existed was my own aversion to fat women. So I guess this marked the time when I started liking myself. Frankly, most of the other women didn't look too bad to me to begin with. There was the tall redhead from Dale City, Faye, whose husband was leaving her for a woman half her age. Faye said he chided her that when she turned forty, he'd trade her in for two twenties, and he practically did just that. But it was only one twenty-one year old that did the trick for him. I'd have been real pleased to look like Faye. She was around 5'10" and wore a size 12 or thereabouts. Geez, I was 5'8" and packing it into a size 20 at the time so Faye was like Twiggy to me. At first I was a little angry that women like Faye were in the group because they weren't really fat, so what was their beef? Now Faye did wear a lot of full skirts and said that I'd be surprised at how she looked with her clothes off.
"I am enormous" Faye practically screamed at me.

Hey, if I could suction the fat all into one area and hide it with a full skirt the way Faye supposedly did, I would. However, my fat is more generalized as opposed to localized.

I really felt bad the week that Faye bawled her eyes out because her louse of a husband Jim had left her a note saying he was taking his secretary, Joy, to Freeport for the weekend and he'd probably not move back into the house when he returned. Faye thought she and Jim were "working things out." When she found the two tickets from the travel agency last week, she was sure they were for her and Jim, and she packed Todd and Cary off to grandma's after school on Friday. So I can guess why Faye hadn't liked undressing in front of Jim.

The group had convinced me that my own problem centered around my taking my clothes off too readily -- at the drop of a hat, so to speak. I think I look better in the nude or naked -- now which one is in the artistic sense? Without the stricures that clothes provide, the extra skin is allowed to hang in more gracious folds and can be quite appealing. Lots of men have been able to spot the appeal even with my clothes on. God knows I've always loved men, so I enjoyed sharing my pulchritude with them. Now the group was going on in the early '80's, pre-Aids and right at the height of the sexual revolution, so please don't click your tongue too loudly at me. I too felt a smidgen of guilt about being promiscuous, and sharing my indiscriminate behavior with the group lessened that guilt. I do think that I rather enjoyed shocking the group with my exploits as a female Don Juan, Amazonian style.
Being intimate with men made me feel "wanted" by them. I felt a sense of completeness that was lacking in me then. Besides, I had to rebut my mother's prediction for me:

"I know no one will ever want you, so I hope God lets you die with me."

To a sixteen-year old, this statement can create quite a bit of ambivalence toward her mother. Bernadette, a group member who was in medical school, was ambivalent toward me. Her reaction surprised me the most. On the one hand, she says, she is truly repulsed by my actions (and I figure I'm in for the sermon about self-esteem, which I have given to myself plenty of times), but on the other hand, she wants to stand up and cheer because I'm doing with men the same thing that men have done with women for centuries -- use them for my own pleasure. I took Bernadette's tirade pretty well because it wasn't totally negative. I guessed that Bernadette wasn't having any fun herself considering all the studying and rounds and I wanted to help her out. I've always been complimented for a sense of style and I thought Bernadette, who only needed to lose about 25 pounds, could look much better if she'd wash and curl her hair with some hot rollers and not wear it with a huge barrett with all the hair kind of clumped in the back. She wore the same Aztec print wrap-around skirt and army green shirt to group every week. And those shoes. I know I have something of a high heel fetish -- my closet once had the same number of pairs of high heels as men I'd slept with, 35 -- but why those awful moccasins with no hose at all? Speaking of pantyhose, Bern. If you buy control tops two sizes bigger than you wear, you can pull them up to the bottom of your bra and create a smooth line so you won't get so much mid-riff jiggle. I oughta know. The control top acts as a "tummy tarp."
But I could never tell Bernadette what I really thought about her, the same way I could never share my own pain with the group. Like about my once being an antonym. But I could tell Dr. Volmer when we were meeting alone.

"I was an antonym."

"Would you like to explain what you mean by that, Charlotte, that you were an antonym?"

"Well, Dr. Volmer, I was in the fifth grade at St. Casimir's School. That I remember because Sister Susan was my teacher and I'll never forget her, for making an antonym out of me."

"Go on."

"Sister Susan asked me and Teresa Stanyak to stand in front of the class. I suppose she had explained the meaning of "antonym" and decided it was her innovative teaching trick to use living visuals to demonstrate the term to the class."

"I see."

"So, Teresa and I stood in front of the class -- fifty-seven of them strong, it being a "baby boom" class, and had adjectives flung at us so the damned nun could make her point. "Fat and skinny?" one beckoned. "Short and tall, big and little, wide and narrow." Someone guessed "thin" and they were at least on the right track for now Teresa's adjective was ascertained. She was definitely "thin." But the kids just couldn't guess that "thin's" antonym was "thick." There I stood, blushing, my pale white skin sizzling uncontrollably with shame, as every descriptive of "overweight" known to my first-generation American classmates was hurled at me. Chubby. Fatso. Tubby. I felt like a dart board at a carnival; stick me in the proper square and you'll win the game. The students were losing the spirit
of this being an English lesson. I wanted to crawl into the cloakroom and
die. Or have the bell ring for lunch so I could walk in the freezing cold
over the River Bridge to my home where the chill could replace the heat I
was feeling from embarrassment. The embarrassment I tried to camouflage
by laughing, stop the impending tears by biting my lip. I'd shift feet.
Hold my left wrist with my right hand from behind, the blond downy hair on
my forearm bristling. Turn sideways. Fold my arms in front of me across
my round belly, which I'd not really thought about up to this point in my
life. Jana Saslaw screamed "immense." My god, Jane had shit herself on
her way to the cloakroom the week before and feces trailed her path in
the classroom. We were instructed to "be nice, it was an accident."
Why couldn't they be nice to me? Wasn't it an accident that I'd gotten
fat? Surely nobody intentionally stuffs a ten-year old to become the
antonym of thin. "Thick." John David Lis guessed "thick" and my first
experience with fat crucifixion was over. I removed myself to my desk
where I kept smiling, my cheek muscles hurting from being forced for what
seemed like endless time. I bent my head down and pretended to look with
interest at the remainder of the English lesson. Sue Regula bent over from
the desk behind me and told me I shouldn't have worn the red sweater with
the angora collar that I had on, a hand-me-down from my older cousin Blanche,
because my breasts, still braless, were showing. And I'd loved that sweater
because it was so soft; I never wore it again."

"Our time's up. I'll see you at group on Monday."

I wasn't the only one trying to please a parent among the group.
Maureen's mother had taken up with a D.C. policeman she'd met in a happy
hour at a bar around the corner from her office when Maureen was 14.
"Mother would come home occasionally. I guess to see if the house was still standing. She opened a checking account in my name so I could write small checks for cash and groceries at the Giant and so that I could pay the cab driver to pick me up from band practice. I was petrified living alone in a house, but she never seemed to think of me. She divorced my dad when I was six. I loved to go and visit him on weekends when he was in town. He was a college graduate who worked as a long-distance truck driver. He lived with my grandmother and an uncle who was stationed at Fort Belvoir. This at least seemed like a home to me. I begged her one year at Thanksgiving to fix a turkey so I could feel like everybody else at school. But she refused, saying it was too much trouble for just the two of us. She fixed broiled steak after she got up at three o'clock in the afternoon with a hangover after staying out til 4 a.m. with the lady upstairs. I guess happy hour turned into happy night. My father drank himself to death at age 38 when I was fifteen and my mother fought with my grandmother about my dad's will, so I never visited there again."

Maureen was ashamed of being a lesbian. She was still looking for a mother. Maureen taught children who were blind and deaf. It was hard for her to let the hurt out in salty streams of wetness which rolled down her full, firm cheeks. She felt she wasn't good enough at her work, that progress was so slow with the children. When she felt frustrated, she'd go off a diet and eat a couple of candy bars in the teachers' lounge and felt imperfect. The candy bars settled in her rear end and she walked like a much older person; her spirit was broken. I never saw Maureen laugh. Why does God permit the wrong people to be mothers?

Sally was a mother struggling to raise two kids by her second husband. She was a "bottle blonde" like me -- natural though way back when -- so I
liked her right off and she was identifiably chubby so I felt a certain
camaraderie with her since her weight problem was more in league with
mine. She was short and round like a "weebil" (those wooden figures kids
play with who look like they'd all sit on potty chairs). She worked as a
nutritionist which was kind of ironic in a "physician heal thyself" way.
Sally had married and divorced her current third husband four times.
Having never been married, I wanted to know the secret to her success in
getting men to make a commitment.

Women like Sally are taking more than their fair share of the men who
are willing to be married, leaving a deficit of those available for the
rest of us. Women in my age bracket -- forty -- have an especially diffi-
cult time, what with Vietnam and gay liberation. Until all the men and
women who have a desire to marry have at least one chance at it, a tatoo
system would be nice where people were imprinted on their ear lobe or
some other easily visible but not too offensive body part after being
once married and divorced so their status were easily recognizable. Then
women like Sally couldn't have the chance so often. However, when Sally
revealed that husband number three-through-seven had strangled her pet cat
and had her arrested for pointing a pistol at him in self-defense when she
feared she was going to meet the fate of the cat, I decided that maybe
tattoos weren't quite necessary for my future happiness.

The group ended in April and I realized I'd learned a lot from the
other women, mainly that if all that was wrong with us was that we had a
spare tire here or a rippled rear there, should we be so hard on ourselves,
given all that we did have to contend with in life? I was no longer repulsed
by fat women (myself included) and decided that now that I liked myself
better, I would try to meet men with a mind toward a serious relationship.
And I vowed no more "clothes off" to feel connected.
Never really enjoying the bar scene unless I was galvanized with three or four white wines prior to entering, I put an ad in a magazine catering to big women, "Large Lovely Ladies." Dr. Volmer questioned me on why I chose a national magazine instead of one with local circulation, when I told him of my plans at my individual session, since geography would probably play a part in the selection process.

"The audience for this magazine has already stated a preference for larger women, so I figure that puts me a step ahead in the game. My fear of rejection by men is so great that I'd rather deal with less responses than bigger hurts."

"I know you feel mother rejected you, but is there something else?"

"My senior year in high school was when I started entertaining thoughts of suicide. It was bad enough that I had few friends outside the school day, but then two of my teachers chose me for public humiliation. And one of them was a priest, an ugly little priest who looked like Peter Lorre. He taught the religion class twice a week. I hated to go to class because I would walk in with my classmate Diane from gym class, which was also twice a week, and would be flushed from rushing to make the class from the gym which was on the other side of the school. Father Benson was very fond of Diane and flirted with her. She was blond and tall and slender. I was blond and tall and fat. He would refer to me sarcastically as "little Charlotte" and then laugh just like Peter Lorre and of course he'd be joined by all the boys in the class, adolescent boys being so immature. And why shouldn't they join him? He was supposedly a role model as a priest teaching in a Catholic high school. One day one of the boys forgot his text book and Father Benson was kind enough to suggest that the boy move
over next to "little Charlotte" (chuckle, chuckle). "Now don't be shy Peter, get right next to her; maybe you'd like to ask her to the prom, Peter. Little Charlotte, wouldn't you like to go to the prom with him? My skin surged again with the heat of humiliation just like it did when Sister Susan made me an antonym. Nuns and priests were supposed to be God's people, dammit. And I couldn't understand why they wanted to pick on me. What had I done to deserve this?"

"You know that just because a person is in a religious order doesn't make them perfect or God-like. They're human and there are misfits in the religious profession just as there are misfits in other professions."

"Then there was the episode with the gym teacher, Miss Mihalka. I hated Tuesdays and Thursdays so much that year because of the religion class and the gym class, that I pretended I was sick on those days as often as I could and still graduate. Near the end of the school year, Miss Mihalka announced that we would have several mixed classes where the boys' gym class that met at the same time as ours would join us and we would learn "social dancing." We would accomplish this in two sessions at two Thursday classes. The gym class was 45 minutes long and it took Miss Mihalka an unbelievable 35 minutes to "partner" us. First we had to be arranged by height. Being one of the tallest, Miss Mihalka placed me at the end of the girls' line. I was not the tallest but Miss Mihalka probably thought it would be nice to make a spectacle of me for some unknown reason. There were three boys and two girls left at the end and it took her over five minutes to decide just what to do with this odd number. She hemmed and hawed and put her index finger to the corner of her mouth in a quizzical fashion. Oh what to do? This with seventy plus pairs of eyes staring at this dilemma. When she'd paired the other girl, it then took her quite a long time to mate me with a partner. She chose the captain
of the high school football team who left class rather than dance with me for ten minutes and, I suppose, be teased by his friends that he had to dance with the "school fatso." Everyone laughed when Bill walked out cursing Miss Mihalka loudly. I could barely see to dance the fucking square dance, and couldn't help wondering what was so "social" about this whole experience?

After I left West Virginia, I read that Miss Mihalka and her twin sister were among the first single women to adopt children, two Vietnamese orphans. I hoped that she could be more sensitive with them than she was with me. And I could only think "who cares?" when I read the notes from the class' twenty year reunion that Bill had died of a massive heart attack at the age of 38. I called in "sick" the next "social dance day." I felt quite antisocial.

"Time is up."

I had several interesting episodes with the ads. My first response was to Brian, an engineer from upstate New York. I was pleased to hear from him very soon after I sent my letter and photo, considering he had received 384 responses to his ad. Lots of us are looking for love. I should have been a bit cautious when he forwarded me a two-page personal resume printed on legal-size paper, listing his likes and dislikes in addition to such vital statistics as married and divorced after five years; jilted after a one-year engagement; and lived with a woman for six months who turned out to be homosexual. (When I met him, he told me all he wanted to do was introduce her to the niceties of a menage a trois.) Since he could only visit during the Summer when the plant that he worked in closed down for a three-week period, and I was spending the coming
Summer in England, I combined a visit with friends who lived in his vicinity with my meeting him.

Brian lived about two hours away from my friends and we agreed to meet for dinner Saturday night after I spent Friday night and Saturday with my friends. I wanted to dress just so for this date, but my friends insisted we go out on the lake in their new boat on Saturday. I had only fifteen minutes to dress and do something with my hair, which at this point was in a "natural" curl from my permed shoulder-length locks blowing in the wind all day on the boat. At least my "blind date" jitters didn't have a chance to dance what with my racing around to get ready. To this day I have visions of every man I meet cursing at someone as they reject and leave me.

Fortified by an afternoon's worth of wine coolers on the boat and wine with our Italian dinner and wine at the lounge where we went to dance, I had a really lovely time. Brian was a good conversationalist and a good dancer and we hit it off really well. That is, until I believed he was driving me back to my friends' home and he detoured to the Huck Finn Motor Inn parking lot where he pulled out five-by-seven photos of his two pet cockatiels perched on his living room drapery rod and asked if he could photograph me in the nude since photography was his hobby. I declined the invitation and stuck with my "clothes on" resolve.

I couldn't believe my eyes when I came across an ad from a man in England who said he liked big women and if you were planning a trip to London, drop him a line. I jotted him a note and told him the name of the hotel I was staying at in London until I left for Oxford where I was taking a course in Summer school. Low and behold, on my arrival I had
a message waiting for me from Ted Barnes. I arranged to meet with him the next day in the hotel lobby to get acquainted. Ted warned that he was a "bit odd-looking." I like all types and I thought this was such an adventure in communication that I said what the hell? Ted was about 6'4" and looked much older than his 50 years. He used a walking stick to get around, but I wasn't put off by his looks. To me he was just an old hippie and I sure enjoyed his gift of gab and delightful English accent. Ted was on the public dole and my first thought was that he was looking for a female gigolo. So I wrote the afternoon off as a harmless risk and bid Ted "adieu" as I had a ticket to see "Evita" and didn't want to be late for the theater. He wished me luck with my studies and suggested I take the train in from Oxford some time to see him and have dinner. "Fat chance," I mused.

You can imagine how impressed (accepted?) I was the following week to find a letter in my mail slot at the dorm from Ted. I hadn't given him my address, merely mentioned that I was attending Trinity College. The letter was neatly typed and included his phone number so we could chat some time "if you get lonely." Which I did, in that I was in the minority among 19 and 20-year olds. I had several pleasant phone conversations with Ted and set a date to meet in London at Padding Train Station the second or third weekend after I arrived at Oxford, there being no special plans on my agenda, which was not the case for most of my time there. Another adventure!

It was an extremely warm day in mid-July and the train to London was stifling. I loved riding through the English countryside and reminisced about "Brideshead Revisited." My lofty dreams were jolted when I saw
Ted approach me some 15 minutes late on the train platform. He could barely walk so I went over to him. He had the look of Jesus after climbing Mount Calvary. He explained that he had been ill during the past week, but still wanted to make our appointment. We stopped in a pub in the station for a shandy, a combination of beer and lemonade, which sounds disgusting but which is really quite refreshing. Ted's idea of a fun afternoon was to go back to his flat in Islington and fix me dinner so I could see how a native lived. This didn't sound too bad and I was very conscious of Ted's financial situation, so I agreed. I wanted to take a cab and would have gladly paid for it because it was so warm, but he insisted we take the subway, that a cab was a luxury he wasn't accustomed to.

My Lord! I have never experienced such a commute in all my life. Down stairs, up escalators, around platforms, in and out of elevators -- all ancient -- plus transferring subway lines three times. All this in the stifling heat and Ted about to collapse and only able to walk three or four steps before resting on the walking stick, the wall or me. The people on the trains all stunk from sweat. I transcended reality and chalked this up to a dream or an episode from "Twilight Zone."

We finally arrived in Islington an hour and a half after we departed Paddington. Ted needed another "fizzy" so we stopped in a "Blimpie's" -- a place I've always avoided dating back to my oversensitivity about being associated with anything connoting behemoth proportions. Back out in the Saturday sun, there was a refreshing coolness after the hellish subway. We made our way to the street market just like in "My Fair Lady" where we purchased mussels -- or were they cockels? -- for the pasta dish Ted proposed preparing for us.
Ted might have been cooler had he not been wearing corduroy pants and a sweatshirt emblazoned with the likeness of Jerry Garcia and the words "Grateful Dead Tour" on the front. We must have made a strange sight, me in my khaki slacks and vest over a tee shirt, which Ted likened to a "guerilla warfare outfit" and Ted in the hippie sweatshirt with the look of a crucified soul in his eyes.

Ted's flat was right around the corner from the fish stall at the market, and it looked really nice from the outside, a newly painted bright red door with brass knocker on a green brick townhouse. The house was divided into three flats, and Ted's was the middle one on the second floor. Sweet Jesus, can looks be deceiving! His flat consisted of one average-size room that was the living/bedroom, a small kitchen area and an even smaller bathroom. The kitchen was dark and dingy and I practically ran through it to get to the living area. I am known for a squeamish stomach. First Ted offered me some bourbon that he had been saving since 1975, but I couldn't consume his treasure. Next he offered me some cold water which was cooling in the fridge in a bleach bottle he'd rinsed out and which he was "pretty sure" was clean. Nor could I consume his trash. My work was cut out for me to not insult him by not eating the pasta dish, so I encouraged him to talk which is really what he wanted to do.

The living area was peculiarly furnished. Therere were three places to sit. One was a typing chair, another a dentist's chair and the third his mattress on the floor. I chose the typing chair and he sat on the dentist's chair. Ted was an electronics' buff, it appeared, and he had rigged up an incredible stereo system which consisted of every type of discarded speaker Ted could find -- I counted twelve speakers in all.
Ted advised that he didn't like to play the stereo unless he was sure the lady who lived upstairs wasn't home as she complained about the "noise." The room was ringed with shelves, five deep, but some only inches apart. The shelves held every kind of trinket known to a Five & dime store in the 1950's plus a life-size RCA Victor stuffed dog adorned with a gas mask; a second gas mask lay next to "Victor." If I'd thought the cockatiel-shooting engineer in New York was somewhat strange, my imagination ran away with me wondering who else wore the other gas mask and for what purpose.

Ted was a pitiable person. He had come to London in the late 1950's to teach ballroom dancing at a dance studio. He was from Bayonne, New Jersey, where he had taught at an Arthur Murray studio. He'd married a fellow dance instructor who acted virginal and who wouldn't permit him to have sex with her during their brief marriage, but she left him for a Spaniard to whom she was pregnant. Celia and the Spaniard moved to South Africa and here was Ted, a dancer barely able to walk.

I had decided to catch the 5:30 train back to Oxford, the last express train, and I announced that I must leave by 4:15. Ted requested one favor of me. Would I mind kissing him on the cheek and hugging him? He placed the ad in the magazine for large women, he said, because he liked their "softness and warmth." I felt like a Madonna as I bent over to kiss him and put my arm around him, knowing how it felt to be lonely and alone, wanting the feel of human contact. And it was good to do it with all my clothes on.

That Winter I threw out a lot of those high heels in my closet; some were worn out, some out-of style, but a lot of them just didn't quite fit me anymore.
PEELED

On Anorexia

Take the outer covering from my bones; I need no meat.
Get to my core, the inner me; I am not flesh.
It is my soul I want you to see.

The World tries to bite me; I won't let it near.
Consume my body; Then I will be at peace.
It is my soul I want you to see.

Even after you looked into my soul,
Would you and I be satisfied with the Me
We see?
HALF BAKED
Lydia sat with her legs tucked underneath her, swami-style, on the corner of the Haitian cotton sectional sofa that curved around the walls of her living room like a pliable horse shoe. She had put a lot of effort into decorating the house; if only it weren't in god-forsaken Woodbridge. She picked her way through the Waterford candy dish, a wedding gift from Aunt Tina in Miami. The dish sat on the brass and glass coffee table in front of her. She ate only the M&M's that didn't have their "M" on them because that meant they did not exist then, so she wasn't really eating anything. This activity completed, Lydia placed the top back onto the dish and thought about making a visit to Aunt Tina soon. Like the airline advertisement said, she needed Florida "bad." She cursed Fidel Castro as she dragged herself into the kitchen to use the phone to call her friend Darlene about lunch next week, at least that would be something to look forward to soon. Had Castro not taken over, she and her family could still be living in Havanna, the "good life" in the house with three maids and an orchid-filled veranda.

A maid was what was forcing her to stay at home this past year and not work outside the home as she really wanted to. Roberto, her husband, refused to let her have a maid twice a week so she decided she'd fix his wagon and quit work altogether at the real estate office in Old Town Alexandria where she'd become a member of the "Million Dollar Club" for selling over one million in property in one year. The job was terrific because she got to set her own hours and meet interesting people, and the commissions were great. The commissions were what paid for the redecorating last year. She'd totally redone the house herself, all white with mauve and steel blue accents throughout. As long as he didn't have to pay for
it, Roberto didn't care what she did with their home as long as she didn't raise the issue of "moving closer in."

"My accounting business is here and I'm the man of this house and we'll live where I say we do."

It was a losing battle. Roberto was so stubborn, he wouldn't even consider compromising and moving halfway between both of their jobs. Her real dream was to live in Washington so she could be nearer to mother and the rest of her family who mingled in the diplomatic community. She even considered renting a post office box with a better address, but gave that idea up when she quit working and it seemed like it would be a real pain in the neck.

Lydia's brother Juan lived in Potomac and he hired a maid to live-in, and his wife Amanda only did volunteer work. Her sister Rosa worked as a teacher, but she had help with the house and the kids. And Rosa's husband only worked for the government but they had a home in McLean. Lydia had thought she could change Roberto because he had seemed so infatuated with her when they first met eight years ago through Rosa's husband.

"Roberto, you'll love my wife's little sister Lydia. She's got the most gorgeous dark hair and big brown eyes and a figure that'll knock your socks off. Come over for dinner Saturday night and we'll introduce you."

Roberto was ready for marriage now that his father had died and he was alone and just turned 35. Plus, he hadn't met anybody in quite a while who was willing to accept his workaholic lifestyle. Lydia swept him off his feet -- and she didn't care about his working so much because she was just completing her course for the real estate license so she was pretty busy herself. Roberto did admit that she was a bit too independent for
his likes, but he assumed she'd "settle down" once they were married and into a routine. Roberto nagged at Lydia about spending too much on clothes, so she had the bills for Saks, Ann Taylor, Bloomingdale's, Garfinkle's, Lord & Taylor and Rizik's sent to her mother's address. She used the money she kept in a separate checking account from her real estate commissions to pay the bills which she picked up when she'd visit mother after her manicure on Tuesdays. Now that she wasn't working, the charge accounts were almost paid off because she didn't need that many clothes out here.

Before picking up the portable phone in the kitchen to call Darlene at the real estate office, she got onto the scale to weigh herself to see if the nonexistent M&M's had done any damage. No, still 85 pounds. She kept the scale in the kitchen, she told Roberto, because that was the only room in the house which wasn't carpeted and the scale weighed more accurately on the tile floor. The scale was a real convenience in the kitchen because when she actually did eat anything -- which was rare -- she'd be near the kitchen. She even weighed herself when she hadn't eaten anything all day, just black coffee, diet soda and water, to see how the liquid affected her. Sometimes she'd be on the scale as many as 15 to 20 times a day. Then she'd record it all in a steno pad she kept on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard, pretending she was experimenting on her metabolism. The steno pad was titled "Self-Improvement Project." She was fearful of her weight getting out of control when she wasn't working so she figured she'd turn the tables altogether and really become "perfect" so that when she returned to work she could get into the "Golden Agents' Club."

The calves of her legs ached as she raised them to get off the scale, maybe she was coming down with the flu; she'd felt miserable for a week now. Maybe she should cut back on the exercise. Nah; no pain, no gain.
Lydia took the portable phone downstairs to the basement rec room so she could get in a few miles on the exercycle while she yakked with Darlene.

"Dar, it's your favorite refuge out in the boonies. How's it going?"

"Peppi (Peppi was Lydia's nickname at the office because she was so full of energy), I'm so glad to hear from you. I thought of you last week when we were all stuck on the damned parkway in the snowstorm. Lucky you, no more traffic."

"Lucky? Traffic would be like manna from heaven to me. Do you know how boring it is living in this shit-hole town?"

"Why don't you come in for lunch next week? Charlie would love to see you. Maybe we could even coax you into coming back to work."

"Charlie just wants my commissions."

"Or your bod. He always did have a thing for you."

"Maybe I need some adoration. Roberto keeps bugging me that I'm getting too thin."

"Surely you're not thinner than you were at the Christmas party? I thought you had a cold or something. Are you going really crazy?"

"No Darlene, I'm not crazy. You must be Puerto Rican like my husband. Have you ever seen some of those Puerto Rican women in the vacation pictures I brought in?"

Lydia pedaled harder as she recalled last Summer's vacation in San Juan. She wanted to go to Barbados, but Roberto insisted they travel to Puerto Rico to visit his family. He refused to give in to her on anything, but she'd show him this time. In fact, maybe she'd leave him this Summer and find herself a rich diplomat. Or one of those wealthy businessmen in Miami Auntie Tina knew.
"I know you don't have the big Polish bones that I do, but what are you down to now?"

"Oh 98, 99 which is about right for my frame and 5'4" don't you think?"

"Geez, I'm no expert. I thought models weighed one hundred plus five pounds for every inch over five foot."

"No, no, no. That's much too much for me."

Lydia didn't like lying to anybody, but Darlene didn't really need to know what Lydia's weight was. Besides, she was just probably jealous of her since Lydia was so stunning and she knew it. And something in her life was going to be solid gold. If it wasn't her marriage, then it would be her body. She'd show everybody. Nobody would be able to stand her soon. She'd half thought about having a baby during this hiatus from work, but that didn't seem to be in the cards for them. She was sure that she was pregnant at Christmas and had told her suspicion to mother, but her visit to the gynecologist after the EPT test gave an odd reading proved negative. She really thought she wanted a baby -- she knew it would be the most beautiful baby anyone could imagine coming from her -- but now that she was thinking about splitting from Roberto, this might not be such a good idea. Perhaps she needed some estrogen. Annie next door had given her a "Redbook" article that said an estrogen imbalance might be the cause for the peach fuzz hair growth that was popping up all over her body. Lack of estrogen or depletion of body fat below normal levels. Maybe this was why Roberto didn't seem to be paying any attention to her in bed at night.

"I got over that Christmas flu, but I think I'm getting another one. I'm real nauseous all the time and I'm just freezing."

The odometer on the exercise cycle registered another ten miles. She jumped off the bike and took the black felt tip pen and drew a line connecting the
dots on the map of the United States showing where she could be if she
were pedaling outside.


"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, just made it to Aspen on the bike. I'm trying to pedal across
the country on my exercycle."

"God, that sounds boring as hell to me."

"It isn't really. I kind of imagine where I'd be and what I'd be
doing and how many heads I'd be turning if I was traveling alone so it's
kind of fun - harmless escapism." It beats the ten miles I bike around
our development every day."

"You're biking inside and out? What happened to the Spa Lady
membership?"

"Still going there. Hell, I get the house work done in an hour
and I'm out the door as soon as the old man leaves for his office."

"I wish I had half of your energy."

Lydia wasn't sure right about now how much energy she actually did
have. She guzzled her third Time Release Dexatrim of the day with the last
of the French Roast coffee from the morning pot.

"Yeah, I'd like to have your freedom. You can come and go as you
please with nobody to tie you down."

I think the grass is always greener, Pep. How was your niece's
wedding? It was last weekend, wasn't it?"

"Oh so-so. You know my sister Rosa can't stand me because I'm so
much better looking than she is and I did outdo myself for this event.
The buyer at Rizik's found a dress for me and it was fantastic."
"I'll bet. Was the wedding nice, though?"

"Juan spared no expense for his one and only, but I know I stole the show from Cynthia. I guess I shouldn't have really done it to a bride. And mother was furious with me because of this so she picked at me all day. "Fix your makeup. Your eyes are sunken. Your breath is so strong. Take some mints." I'm never good enough for her standards so I just say "screw it."

"Well, Peppi, I hate to run but I've got a settlement at 1:30 in Fairfax on that house on Prince Street you listed once, so I gotta go. How about lunch next Wednesday at Henry Africa? My treat."

"It's a deal, see you then."

The Dexatrim was starting to work its tricks on her. Her mind began to race. Back upstairs to the scale. The pedaling may have moved the indicator down a bit. Nope, still the same. It was time to go to Spa Lady for the workout. The lavender sweat suit was best. It had a drawstring waist and she could pull it as tight as she needed to and the baggy top made her look normal. She just wished she could warm up a bit. Maybe an extra tee shirt over the spandex leotard and two pairs of socks would help. The warm air from the heating duct felt good on her face as she bent over to tie her Reeboks. She was light-headed when she stood up from bending over. Too much caffeine today.

She'd throw a load of laundry in the machine so it could wash while she was at class. Not much to wash, just the flannel nightgown she wore and another tee shirt and Roberto's things. She looked in the bedroom hamper, but the laundry was missing. Had she already done the wash? She looked in the washer thinking maybe she'd forgotten, but it wasn't there. When she did locate the laundry, already put away in the closets, she
started to think she was losing it. The nausea was overwhelming. She chewed two Rolaids and closed the cap on the bottle as she got on the scale again; the ninth time for this morning.

As she cranked the engine on the Nissan in the driveway, Annie waved at her from her kitchen window. Annie was always showing her articles and books she thought Lydia should read. Lydia would love to have the time to be able to read; maybe when the "Plan" was complete she could take the time. She stepped on the gas pedal with the car in reverse before she looked in the rear-view mirror and grew colder and her heart raced as she realized she barely missed Annie's four-year old chasing her dog Saki. Damned kid. She jerked to a stop and said a Hail Mary. Close calls always required a prayer. She got to Spa Lady as Eileen the instructor was starting the music.

"Come on girls, lift those legs higher. Blow. Blow. Inhale."

Lydia's blows and inhaled weren't quite coordinating with Eileen's commands. Her stomach ached. She wished it was possible to take it easy, to rest, but she had so much to accomplish. When the class was over, she would go home and do the laundry then the house would be perfect and that made her feel good. She could call Darlene and invite her to lunch soon. She wished she could be as content as Darlene seemed. She envied that.


As Lydia drove home, it seemed like the temperature had fallen 20 degrees. She knew she was probably exaggerating. Roberto would bitch about the utility bills, but she didn't give a damn. She'd turn the heat up as high as it would go. He got a pretty good deal with her. Gorgeous and intelligent; someone nice to have at his elbow when they went out.
He wouldn't even compliment her on how perfect she was becoming, the bastard. And wasn't she doing it all for him because if she was perfect he'd give her a maid and her family would respect her and not feel sorry for her that she'd married beneath her. And maybe she wouldn't leave him then.

She turned the furnace thermostat up to 88 degrees and hung her down coat in the hall closet. She looked for the laundry and thought she was going crazy, or was Roberto playing a trick on her. He did that kind of thing when they were first married, but now he didn't have time to play games with her. She got on the scale; the reading was going toward 86.

"It must have been the Rolaids" she muttered. "This will not do."

She was angry. She grabbed the steno book and wrote shakily in large letters: "Goal Weight - 80 pounds." I'll be the best that I can be. Roberto will surely take notice of me.

She needed another Dexatrim, that would take care of the Rolaids. The house wasn't warming up fast enough. She decided to take a nap on the loveseat in the breakfast room, adjacent to the oven. She turned the gas oven to 500 degrees and opened the door so the heat would get right to her. First she went to the living room hall closet and got her down coat to use as a cover.

She curled up on the love seat, dreamed of the orchid-filled veranda in Havana and her Aunt Tina's yacht in Miami. But Lydia wasn't going anywhere.