

Fat Girl's Rhapsody

Sleeping With the Enemy

You're having lunch with an ex-boyfriend at the second restaurant he suggested. At the first, the seats were too small, made of wicker, arms on the sides. Even if the arms of the chair were wide enough, you worried that the fragile architecture of the chair would crumble beneath your weight. You don't know why you continue to spend time with your ex. It was a lousy relationship—he lied to you, cheated, but somehow, spending time with him is better than nothing. You stayed with Alex because you figured no one else would want someone like you. You figured that you better hold onto him because he might be the guy not taken. No matter how bad things got, being with him was better than being alone. The story of that relationship isn't original, but it is yours. Alex, plagued by a fitness obsession and a need to lead by example, orders a light chicken salad, dressing on the side. Although your stomach is growling you do the same.

“Get what you want,” he says. “I had a big breakfast.” He is feeling benevolent.

You shake your head, marveling at his arrogance. “I'm not hungry.”

You are, in fact, starving. He makes you voracious—hungry for a double cheeseburger perhaps, coated with calories or a mound of golden French fries, so hot that puffs of steam fill your mouth with each bite, and after, leave your mouth slick with a thin layer of grease. But you don't want to hear his lectures about healthy eating. You don't want the slender, slightly worn-looking waitress to smirk and repeat your order in a too-loud voice. When the food arrives, the lettuce wilted, dotted by a few chunks of pale chicken, you're no longer hungry. The leaves are soaked in oil and vinegar, and pushing the food around the plate makes it even less appetizing.

“Emma and I just bought a new couch,” Alex says.

You smile politely, tuning out the numbing details of his new relationship.

“You’re quiet,” he says.

You shrug. “I don’t have a lot to say.”

“You should try and make friends—start dating again.”

You’ve been single for the past nine months. The two relationships you had after Alex were equally disastrous, and you don’t have the emotional energy for the *dating game*.

Alex can’t resist this Project. “There is a guy at work. He’s a quick wit and I think you guys would get along great. He’s *very* open minded and has a wonderful personality.”

Translation: he has told his co-worker that you’re fat, but have a great face/*wonderful personality/nice hands*—the compliments fat girls get. *He means well*.

Alex sighs, pushes his plate away, and pats his lips with his napkin. “I’m full,” he says.

He has barely touched his salad, but then again, he always was a skilled liar. You stop chewing, leaving partially masticated lettuce leaves and slivers of carrot drenched in tart vinegar resting in your mouth. It’s a terrible combination, but the thought of swallowing this last bite is unbearable. This is where you will make your stand. After more awkward yet loaded silences, Alex leans across the table and places a moist Judas kiss on your left cheek. You look around the restaurant. It’s crowded, and there is little room to maneuver between tables. You briefly consider trying to revive the conversation, but he’s pulling his coat on. You have to get up. You slowly slide away from the table,

remove your napkin, and stand, hoping that no one is watching as you suck your stomach in and squeeze between chairs and condemnation and tables and judgment and wait staff wielding water pitchers.

The Obesity Crisis Intervention Team

The moment you step inside your apartment you breathe a sigh of relief. You're alone. The muscles in your back loosen, and after dropping your satchel to the floor, you slip out of the bra that has been strangling you. This is the happiest you will feel all day. Your mother has left two messages on the answering machine, and there's a thick letter from your father. Together, your parents have formed an Obesity Crisis Intervention Team or OCIT for short. In his letter, your father has included samples of OCIT propaganda—two brochures for weight-loss programs at Rice University and UCLA. “You should take time off from school,” he writes. “All those degrees you're getting aren't going to do you any good, because no one is going to hire you at your size. I'm only telling you what no one else will.”

The problem is that everyone tells you exactly what he or she thinks of you. Strangers in grocery stores or teenagers shouting as they drive by, your friends who only want the best for you, little kids who don't know how to lie and are fascinated by your “largesse.”

“Don't forget that we love you,” your father says, ending his letter, which you throw into a box filled with the other detritus of the OCIT campaign. For Christmas, he gave you Richard Simmon's *Deal-A-Meal*, which is stuffed in the back of the hallway closet. For your birthday, he gave you Oprah Winfrey's *Make the Connection*, which

you sold at the used bookstore. In the corner of your bedroom sits an expensive exercise bike that is worth three months' salary. You often trip over the barbells that should but don't help you tone your arm muscles. Just once, you wish he would give you a gift you could enjoy rather than a gift that is, when stripped bare, for himself. Since his retirement, he has made the project of your weight loss his personal crusade. He is trying to create a space for you in a family where you don't look as if you belong. You never knew he was so resourceful or so driven. You never knew he had so many dreams for you. He is a good father, but that is hard to remember when the only thing he can concentrate on is your weight and your weakness. He wants an explanation. He wants to understand how you could do this to yourself. You and your father have more in common than he realizes.

A Cautionary Whale Tale

An epidemic is the spread of a contagion. It is the unstoppable march of an infectious disease across humanity. Throughout history, there have been many epidemics—measles, influenza, small pox, the bubonic plague, yellow fever, malaria, cholera—but none is so deadly and pervasive, it would seem, as the obesity epidemic. Instead of fever, leaking pustules, swollen glands, or lesions, your symptoms are girth and sheer mass. The obese body is the expression of excess, decadence, and weakness. Your body is a site of massive infection. It is a losing battleground in a war between willpower and food—one in which you are the ultimate loser. According to government statistics, the obesity epidemic costs \$117 billion a year though there is little clear information as to how researchers arrive at that overwhelming number. The methodology

is irrelevant. What matters is that fat is expensive. Two in three adults are considered overweight. One in three adults are considered obese. The definitions of overweight and obese are often vague and obscured by acronyms like BMI and the measures of various other indexes. What matters is that too many people are fat. The epidemic must be stopped.

Anorexia Envy-osa

You're watching *Nightline*—an exposé on the horrors of eating disorders. You are morbidly fascinated by these programs and their human subjects. There is something about the gaunt faces and angled bodies of anorexic girls that at once attracts and repulses you. You wonder what holds their bodies together. You envy the way their flesh is stretched taut against their brittle bones. You envy the way their clothes hang listlessly from their bodies, as if they aren't even being worn, but, rather, floating—a veritable vestment halo rewarding their thinness. The reporter speaks with disdain about the rigorous exercise regimens these girls put themselves through, the starvation, and the obsession with their bodies. And still, you are envious because these girls have willpower. They have the commitment to do what it takes to have the bodies they want. You ignore their thinning hair, rotting teeth, internal organs dissolving into mushy nothing. You prefer, instead, to obsess over their bodies the way others obsess over yours. You tell yourself that tomorrow you're going to be that girl who eats a Saltine cracker and says she's full. You'll be that girl who spends hours at the gym, draped in oversized clothing. You'll be the girl carefully purging unnecessary calories from her body with a well-placed finger down the throat. You'll be the girl everyone loves to hate

to love as your teeth yellow and your hair falls out but your body finally begins to become more acceptable. This is where you will make your stand.

The Grocery Problem

It is late at night, very late. After the bars have closed and the swing shift has let out for the night and the world is mostly still. You want as few witnesses as possible as you navigate the wide fluorescent aisles, buying waffles, frozen egg rolls, a pack of hotdogs, maybe some ice cream. Later, you will sit on your couch and stare at your reflection in the glass sliding doors leading to your balcony. You will see the way your breasts sag, and the rolls of fat under your arms. You refuse to look at your thighs, your calves, your swollen ankles. For the most part, you avoid all reflective surfaces. You've gone for days at a time without looking in a mirror, even avoiding the rearview mirror in your car, because not only do you not want to see how bad things have gotten, you don't want to see how sad you look. But then you will look, and see the fleshy masses of your thighs, sticking together uncomfortably, and you will start to cry, your double chin wavering slightly, so you will eat and cry and think, "Tomorrow, I'll start. Tomorrow, I'll be good." For now, however, in this den-of-sin market, you will be bad. You are bad because eating makes everything feel so good. You stare down at the too-clean, too slick floors and the food, glorious food, pulling you into its embrace. You slowly roll your cart down each aisle, carefully inspecting the goods, staring blankly at nutrition labels that you are only pretending to read, so that if someone happens to see you, they will think that you are on a diet. You toss a head of lettuce and a can of Slim Fast into your cart, to pacify. It is, after all, about appearances.

Perfect Fit

Before you go to bed each night, you look in your closet, trying to decide what to wear the next day. You have a limited range of outfits that fit comfortably. You wear them interchangeably, trying to convince yourself that you have a vast wardrobe. The closet is in fact full, but it is full of clothes that no longer fit, memories of the way you used to be, the way you were five years ago, even last year. You want to throw these clothes away, but you keep them. Someday you will lose weight, you tell yourself. This is where you will make your stand. You are momentarily impressed by your frugality and you also hate shopping so its easier to hold on to the ghosts of bodies past. There are only a handful of stores and online purveyors selling clothing for the obese, and most of their wares are ill fitting, poorly made, garish in color. It's humiliating to go into Lane Bryant or Casual Male, or, on a good day, The Avenue with the salespeople who are too thin to wear the clothes they sell. It's depressing to try on a bigger size than you chose the last time you were in the store. You are appalled by the styles, as if all fat people are old ladies shorter than 5'6" who have no waists and a yen for beading, synthetic fibers, and large, flowing caftans. It is difficult to find anything that fits, in every sense of the word.

It's a Small World After All

You don't really want to go to school because the seats in the classrooms are too small, but you are also too ashamed to tell someone so you can get a comfortable chair. And the campus is littered with Pretty People—thin, tan, blonde, younger than you. They mock you with their mere existence. You arrive at class early every day so that no one will watch as you try and cram your body between the chair and the attached desk that

your chest flows over, leaving you little room to take notes. By the time class is over, your right leg has fallen asleep, the circulation cut off, and your knees are throbbing in pain. Its just as hard to get out of the desk because you have so securely wedged yourself in, so you wait until everyone has exited the class room before trying to get up, knocking over the chair next to you as the kids from the next class are walking in and staring at you. When you get home that evening, you'll have bruises on your right thigh that are tender to the touch. So maybe you won't bother going to class tomorrow at all. That happens more than you care to admit.

Work isn't much better. The seats there are also too small, and by the end of your shift, there are tears in your eyes because your chair handles have been digging into your thighs for so long that you've started to bleed through your pants. You're a tele-marketer, because for that job all you need is a good voice and pleasant phone manner. Customers never have to see you. You're overqualified for this work so each day you pore through the newspaper, circling ads you'll never respond to because, in the back of your mind, you hear your father's voice reminding you that no one will ever hire you. Besides which, the chairs in interviewers' offices always have arms that are too small, and you are left, perched precariously on the edge of the seat, praying the interview will pass quickly so that you can put an end to this newest humiliation. You can only drive certain cars or go to certain movie theaters. Traveling by air is an unfathomable ordeal as you slowly make your way down the aisle, seeing the look of dread in each passenger's eyes as they think, "Please, don't let the fat lady sit next to me." Once you find your seat, there is the fresh humiliation of having to ask the flight attendant for a seat belt extender. You can't help but realize that the bigger your body grows, the smaller your world becomes.

Gym Bunny

When you arrive at the gym, five of the six recumbent bikes are occupied by gorgeous, extraordinarily thin women predominantly of the blonde persuasion. You look around, wondering if there's a movie being filmed or if it's Sorority Work Out Hour. While you are unable to deduce their exact reason for being in the gym at the very time you've come to this place, it is clear that these girls are all here together. You are irritated, frustrated to see exceedingly thin people at the gym. It doesn't matter that they are most likely thin for this very reason. They are mocking you with their bodies. There is a smugness to how they use the exercise equipment, their placid facial expressions saying, "this is hardly bothering me," their bodies glowing with a thin patina of perspiration rather than the gritty sweat of serious exertion. They wear their cute little outfits—shorts so short that the material is more a suggestion than an actual item of clothing and narrow tank tops with the scooped shoulders designed to reveal as much surface area of their perfect bodies as possible. They use the machines effortlessly, programming the computers for the most challenging levels. They know they look good. They are rubbing it in. Bitches, you think.

You are forced to use the bike you hate the most—the one near the entrance to the cardio/weight room where your sweat and huffing and puffing and personal tics are on display for each and every person coming and going through the adjacent doors. You settle in, program the machine for sixty minutes, knowing you will stop at forty, but giving yourself some room to push if you aren't dying. You glance over at the girl next to you. She has been on the bike for about two minutes longer than you. When forty minutes

have passed, your legs are hurting fiercely. You look at your neighbor, and she looks back at you. She has been eyeballing you the entire time, wondering just how long you are going to last.

After forty-five minutes, you lock eyes with your nemesis again. There is a glint in her eyes. You know what's going on here. She is challenging you. She is letting you know that however long you last, she will last longer. She will not be bested by a fat ass. At fifty minutes you are certain that a heart attack is imminent. You are dizzy, faint, legs trembling, but death is preferable to losing to the trollop. At fifty-three minutes, she glares at you, leans forward and grabs the handles of the bike. You turn up the volume on your music and start bobbing your head to the beat. At fifty-four minutes, she grunts and tries to stare through you. Finally, she stops, and you hear her say, "I can't believe she's still on there." Her friends nod in agreement. At sixty minutes, you calmly stop pedaling, peel your shirt away from your skin, wipe the bike down and slowly exit the room. You *know* she is watching. You feel smug and temporarily triumphant. You step into the bathroom and throw up.

Not In My Backyard

Your dirtiest secret is that you hate other fat people. You hate the sight of them, their very being, their weakness. Looking at them is too much like looking at yourself. You make fat jokes whenever possible so that you're the one who gets there first. This is where you'll make your stand. In your head, you judge other fat people the way the rest of the world judges you. You ask the same questions: How could they let themselves go like that? What must they eat? Why don't they exercise? You refuse to have fat friends

for fear of what people might say if they saw the two of you walking toward them, an immovable wall of uncontrolled flesh—epidemic approaching, protect yourself. You refuse to date fat men because it would all be too awkward. When you're with friends and you see a fat person, you feverishly ask if that's what you look like, feel only a small sense of relief when they assure you, No, you're *not that bad*. You're sure they are lying. There is no one crueler to other fat people than a fat person.

In your bedroom, you keep a notebook filled with pictures of impossibly thin women—Kate Moss, Nicole Richie, Keira Knightley. You call them your *thinspiration*. You admire and curse them in the same breath. You should be appalled by their narrow and slight and sharp bodies, but you aren't. You only want to know the secrets of their success so that you too can go to a store and giggle coyly when they don't carry the perfect pair of pants in a Size 0.

Butcher Block

You and your father are sitting in a plush room at the prestigious Cleveland Clinic. It is July. Everything is slick, expensive wood, marble. You think, "This is how I spend my summer vacation." There are seven other people in the room—two fat guys, a slightly overweight woman and her thin husband, two people in lab coats, and another large woman. You do that thing that fat people always do around other fat people—measure yourself in relation to their size. You're bigger than five, smaller than two. Above the median. You're at an orientation session for gastric bypass surgery. For \$270, you listen to the benefits of having your anatomy altered to lose weight—the only effective therapy for obesity, they say.

You listen to a psychiatrist talk about how to prepare yourself for the surgery, how to deal with food once your stomach is the size of your thumb, how to accept that the normal people in your life might try to sabotage your weight loss because they are invested in the idea of a fat you. You learn how your body will be nutrient-deprived for the rest of your life, and you learn how you will never be able to eat or drink within half an hour of doing one or the other. Your hair will thin, maybe fall out. Your body may be prone to dumping syndrome, a condition that doesn't require a great deal of imagination to decipher. And of course, you might die on the operating table or succumb to infection in the days following the procedure. Bad news: your life and body will never be the same. Good news: you'll be thin. You will lose 75% of your excess weight within the first year. You'd be lying if you didn't admit that it's all very tempting, the idea of falling asleep for a few hours, and waking up to know that, soon, most of your problems would be solved.

Then, it's time for questions and answers. You have none, but the woman to your right—the woman who doesn't need to be here because she's maybe ten pounds overweight—she dominates the session, asking intimate, personal questions that would best be saved for a later time. She talks about how she already has the required letter from her psychiatrists and medical team attesting that she needs this surgery, because of her back. Her husband sits there, smirking, and it's clear why she's here. This isn't about her body at all. It's about him and how he sees her body. There's nothing sadder, you think. Then, they're showing you videos of the surgery—camera and surgical tools in slick inner cavities cutting, pushing, closing, removing essential parts of the human body. The insides are a steamy red and pink and yellow. It is a grotesque and chilling scene. Your father, on your left, is ashen, clearly shaken by the brutal display. “What do you think?”

he asks you quietly. “This is a total freak show,” you say. He nods. It’s the first time you’ve agreed in years. Then, the video is over and the doctor smiles and chirps that the procedure is brief, done laparoscopically. He assures you that he’s done over 3,000 operations, lost only one patient—an 850 pound man, he whispers apologetically. Then, the doctor tells you the price—\$25,000. But they’ll discount the \$270 orientation fee once you make your deposit.

Afterward, you have a one-on-one consultation with the doctor in a private examination room. His assistant, an intern, takes down your vital information. You’re weighed, measured. The intern listens to your heartbeat, feels your throat glands, makes some additional notes. The doctor finally breezes in after half an hour. He looks you up and down. He glances at your new chart, quickly flipping through the pages. “Yes, yes,” he says. “You’re a perfect candidate for the surgery. We’ll get you booked right away.” Then he’s gone. The intern writes you prescriptions for the preliminary tests you’ll need, and you leave with a letter verifying that you’ve completed the orientation session. It’s clear that they do this every day. You are not unique. You are not special. You are a body requiring repair. Your father is waiting in the well-heeled atrium. He puts a hand on your shoulder. “You’re not at this point yet,” he says. “A little more self-control. Exercising twice a day. That’s all you need.” You agree, nodding vigorously, but later, when you’re alone in your bedroom, you pore over the pamphlets you received, unable to look away from the Before/After pictures. Maybe this is where you’ll make your stand.

Another Story

If this were another story, I would talk about feeling trapped. I would confess that I have an uncomfortable, almost abusive relationship with my body. I am constantly and intimately aware of my size. Fat is all I ever think about and it is exhausting. If I were telling another story, I would say that I haven't always been this way. For the first eighteen years of my life I was thin and athletic. I played basketball and softball and tennis and field hockey. I was on my junior high swim team and worked as a lifeguard for several years. I wore cute clothes and had all the confidence in the world. But terrible things happen. People take things from you that they have no right to take. You start to hurt. You lose your mind. Whether you realize it or not, the easiest way to make yourself feel better is with a pint of cold ice cream or a slice of pizza. You think, life is safer this way so you keep eating hoping that with each pound, the wall of flesh you're building around your body will make it so that nothing bad ever happens again. Before you know it, three hundred pounds have passed and you're left wondering how you could let this happen. You start trying to tear down the wall but find it much harder to bring down what you built up. If I were telling another story, I would confess I never have the space to breathe or see myself as anything other than fat and if, no... *when (this is where I make my stand)* I lose this weight, I will still see myself as fat. I will never get away from this.

Rhapsody

"Rhapsody" finds its origins in Latin, Greek. It is a portion of an epic poem adapted for recitation. A highly emotional utterance or a highly literary work. An effusively rapturous or extravagant discourse. In the archaic sense, a rhapsody is a

miscellaneous collection. A medley or confused mass of things. It is a literary work.

Miscellaneous or disconnected pieces. A written composition having no fixed form or

plan. A rhapsody is a composition enthusiastic in character but indefinite in form. The

sum of words that mean to sew. To stitch together. To sing.