



Readers Write

SIZE

MOST PEOPLE HAVE NO IDEA THAT I used to be fat. Three years ago I weighed more than 250 pounds. Now I weigh half that amount. To this day I worry that I'll wake up one morning and my size-6 pants won't fit, or I won't be able to slide behind the steering wheel of my car. Before I open my eyes in bed, my fingers reach for clavicle or hipbone, to make sure they are still there and not hidden in flesh.

When I was heavy, I dieted constantly with little success. If any weight came off, it came back in a few weeks. I tried Weight Watchers, Diet Center, and Nutri-System. I went to a clinic for eating disorders. I read diet books and magazines. I

joined support groups. I took speed and antidepressants for their appetite-suppressing side effects. I consulted with weight-loss doctors and exercised obsessively. I fasted, I binged, and I tried to accept myself as fat and be happy with it. I wore the same pair of size-26 green denim pants almost every day.

I lost the weight with the help of a twelve-step program that told me I was helpless to control my addiction and needed to surrender to a higher power. I still weigh and measure everything I eat, consume no flour or sugar, and eat nothing between meals. What makes it easier is that I have no craving for food

other than normal hunger. At parties, I no longer feel attached to the buffet table by a giant rubber band, or count how many times I have gone back for more, or hide twenty cookies in my purse.

Food did not make me happy, but it did make me numb. When I had a quart of ice cream and a book or the TV, the world around me disappeared. Food was my drug, my entertainment, my companion. It took the place of relationships. It dulled feelings of longing or passion. My size was both a fortress I could hide in and a prison to contain my bottomless rage.

Now, when I experience moments of acute pain, instead of reaching for an an-

esthetic, I close my eyes and surrender to the feelings. I have learned that these feelings will not kill me.

What haunts me still is my own face in a photo taken six years ago. A large woman with a double chin peers directly at the camera. She does not smile. I wonder where she is now. Then again, I sometimes feel she is with me everywhere I go.

Name Withheld

THREE YEARS AGO I LIVED IN A HUGE flat in an overpopulated city. The bottom floor of my building housed a Starbucks, a Gap, and a 7-Eleven. Inside the Starbucks, I would sit at a table large enough for four (though it always had only one chair) and scribble volumes of notes about nothing. Outside the aquarium-like window, schools of pedestrians and taxicabs passed by.

At my thirty-first-floor office, I was greeted every morning by no fewer than twenty e-mails, all of them equally insignificant. My phone had the capacity

to handle twenty-five incoming calls at once.

At lunch I would walk to the “food court,” where stalls offered everything from sushi to vegetarian burritos, and you had to order a ham sandwich by its individual components: type of ham, type of cheese, type of bread.

I now live in a small cottage in a tiny village in Sweden. There is only one grocery store in town, just a short walk down a single-lane dirt road from my house. The produce section has only what I need and nothing more. About twice a month they get fresh chicken breasts, and I silently rejoice.

We have a little bank, but the two tellers work only on Mondays and Thursdays. If a banking “emergency” arises on some other day, I can take out money at the gas station — unless it, too, is closed, which it often is.

I am writing this in my aptly named “dining closet,” which doubles as my office. I sit on a small wooden bench un-

derneath a single window. Looking out, I see a light blanket of snow covering the ground.

It’s nice to live in a place that is more my size.

*Anders Porter
Grythyttan, Sweden*

WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN, THE FIRST thought on my mind every morning was of food: plump, glistening hams and dripping ice-cream cones. And then the tears would come, and I would waver momentarily. I couldn’t do it. Not again.

But as I lay there, the steely control would return. The drill sergeant in my head would begin to bark orders: One half of one grapefruit for breakfast! No sugar!

I would slip out of bed and begin to do a hundred sit-ups — one for every pound I weighed. My tailbone would grind against the floor, but I felt only my bulging stomach as I touched elbows to knees. *Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine.*

I skipped lunch at school and waited to eat at home, alone, where I wouldn’t have to watch the other, weaker students cram food into their fat mouths. After school I had one orange, peeled bare, not even any membrane. How tenderly I lingered over this peeling ritual, prolonging the act of eating.

At dinner the drill sergeant would turn her head momentarily and allow me three items: one serving of meat — very small! — one serving of starch, and one serving of vegetables. Even this, I knew, was excessive. Soon, when I was stronger, I would eat only one item at dinner as well.

My period stopped. My mother took me to the doctor, who prescribed hormones.

“Those aren’t going to make her period start again,” my older sister said. “Her period stopped because she’s too skinny. She’s anorexic.”

But my mother ignored her. What did her older daughter know, with her too-big hips and mouth to match? She’d always been jealous of her slimmer sister.

I smiled to myself. My sister would never get down to my size, no matter how many meals she vomited. She lacked self-control.

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they’re the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn’t as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we’re unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don’t want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

Feel free to submit your work under “Name Withheld” if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author’s name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don’t question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you’ve already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We’re sorry, but we can’t respond to or return your work, so don’t send your only copy unless you don’t want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you’ll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Small Towns	September 1	February 2004
Deception	October 1	March 2004
Out Of Reach	November 1	April 2004
Second Chances	December 1	May 2004
Lessons	January 1	June 2004
Stepfamilies	February 1	July 2004

Meanwhile, in some dark corner of my mind, I wished that, just this once, my mother would listen.

*Deanna
Beverly Shores, Indiana*

WHEN I WAS SIXTEEN YEARS OLD, I went to fat camp. My mom had to practically drag me out of the car. Nine weeks was a long time to be away from my family.

“What are you doing here?” a very large girl asked.

Was she serious? “I’m here because I’m fat.”

I’d thought my bluntness would get a smile out of her, but it didn’t. She just looked down and quietly whispered, “You’re my goal.”

I couldn’t understand why she would say that to me. I was *fat*. Then it dawned on me: size is relative. Here, I was the thin girl.

I will probably never see that girl again, but I remember her words whenever I look in the mirror. “You’re my goal” will always be the sweetest, saddest thing anyone’s ever said to me.

*Alison Lanni
Pittsford, New York*

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, WHILE MY friends were stuffing their bras, I wore blouses with double pockets, one on each side, to hide my abundance.

At fifteen, I went swimming in a cool, clear lake. I stepped out of the water onto the clean, bright sand, feeling purified and peaceful — until I noticed something hanging from my red beach umbrella. My eleven-year-old brother, Billy, had taken my size-36D bra, filled it with sand, and tied it to the umbrella’s metal spines. Everyone could see its big, sandy cups hanging like dirigibles in the still air.

“I’ll pound you!” I screamed. “I hate you!”

I wanted to run to my mother and rest my head on her billowy chest. She would have understood. But she had died of breast cancer when I was ten.

Humiliated, I covered my body with a long, loose blouse, folded my arms over my enormous mounds, and went home to tell my father what Billy had done.

“I’ll never be able to go swimming again,” I said. “Everyone on the beach saw it.”

I don’t know exactly what response I had expected, but it wasn’t knee-slapping laughter.

“What do you have in there?” my father asked, sticking a finger in one of my shirt pockets.

I cried myself to sleep that night, cursing my body and hating men. I wanted to wear a sign around my neck: PRIVATE PROPERTY. KEEP OFF.

Years later, I married a man twenty years my senior, who’d grown up during the “sweater girl” years of the fifties. “I’m a breast man,” Dave would proclaim to his buddies. He was known for what he owned: a Cadillac, a lucrative investment business, and an attractive wife with D-cup proportions.

Dave liked to press his clammy hands around my breasts, rub each nipple with his thumb, and suckle like a piglet. Greedy consumer that he was, he wanted quantity, of which I had plenty.

Dave and I divorced after five years. I’ve finally gotten men to stop pawing me, and I didn’t need a “Private Property” sign to do it. All it took was losing a breast.

*Fran K.
Rancho Mirage, California*

IN 1937, DURING ITS ANNUAL ROSE FES-tival, the city of Portland, Oregon, chose my mother as its Rose Queen. She wore a size-36 bra and had wavy brunette hair and a slim, pointed nose.

I am the daughter of the Rose Queen. People say I look like her. She has never said that.

A photo of me in sixth grade shows a girl with short, thick hair framing a chubby face. Although those pudgy cheeks got their share of comments from my mother, it was my hips that drew the most attention. Though I longed for the color-coordinated skating outfit displayed in a store window, I got a homemade skating skirt and my father’s long underwear — complete with an ample fly. “As soon as your hips are a little smaller,” my mother said, “we’ll buy that outfit.”

“Look what I got for you,” she said another day. My excitement at seeing a Macy’s shopping bag quickly faded when

she pulled out a girdle.

In high school, I took over the sewing of my own clothes. Shopping for fabric, I went for the pink-and-purple flower prints. My mother bought me the navy blue. “You look slimmer in dark colors,” she said. The excitement of finishing a dress or a skirt and wearing it for the first time lost some of its spark when she commented, “It’s a shame about your hips.”

While my hips required slimming, my breasts were too small. As I tried on the dress I had made for the prom, my mother tugged at the fabric around the chest, hoping for a miracle. “A little more fullness here would make it hang so much nicer.”

College gave me distance from my mother’s criticism, though I still bought dark clothes to hide my hips, and even wore a girdle now and then. I grew my hair to a length where it would tumble and tried out for the lead in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. My obsession about my size diminished.

Years later I learned to laugh at my mother’s remarks. I even helped her stuff socks into the bodice of my wedding dress so that I could fill it out. But the clincher was her final comment before releasing me to walk down the aisle: “It’s too bad you couldn’t have lost a little weight in your nose.”

*Kathleen Barry Albertini
Honeoye Falls, New York*

I AM A MEMBER OF MY LOCAL CHEVRE *kaddishe*, the Jewish burial society. When a woman in our community dies, we prepare the body for interment. Ellen calls me about our next assignment. “She’s big,” Ellen says. “We’ll need all the help we can get.”

Only five of us are able to meet the next day at Carlson’s Funeral Home. The deceased is Betty Moore, eighty-two years old, a convert whose Jewish husband died about twenty-five years ago. Betty was a somewhat cantankerous person, at odds with the Jewish community since her husband’s death; she was thrifty, had no kids, only a few living relatives.

When we arrive, Betty is laid out in a tiny, closet-like space lined with metal instruments and bottles of chemicals. The air reeks of formaldehyde, death,

and urine. We put on aprons and rubber gloves, take out the prayer manual, and get to work.

Custom demands that we wash Betty all over while one of us recites the prayers. We debate about how best to accomplish our sacred task without breaking our backs. Betty is so large it's like bathing a small whale, and there are more than the usual breaches of etiquette before we have dressed the deceased in leggings, jacket, bib, and a headdress that covers her eyes (so she won't be blinded by God's light).

The real problem is the plain pine casket, which frugal Betty selected twelve years ago. Two of us are immediately certain she will not fit in it.

"I think," says Becky, "that if we fold her arms and cross her legs, we can get her in."

"How about putting her in sideways?" Pat offers.

I imagine Betty insisting, *It's my coffin, and I can get in it.*

After a Talmudic-like debate, Carol suggests we call in Mr. Carlson, the funeral director, and ask his advice. Short and square, with a shiny light blue yarmulke flopping to one side of his head, Mr. Carlson eyeballs the situation and says, "If you try getting her in and she doesn't fit, you're going to have a heck of a time getting her out."

This leads to another debate, in the fetid air of the cell, about whether to go with a larger, more expensive casket.

"We have the money," Deborah says. "There's extra in the community fund."

"Let's do it," I say. By now we are nearly two hours into the burial ritual. All I want is out.

But first there must be another ten minutes of debate: Are we sure we have the money? Does Carlson just want to make a bigger profit? Finally we all agree to spend the money, and we hoist Betty up into her beautiful, spacious box with the mahogany veneer.

At our closing ceremony, conducted in the miraculously clean air of the funeral home's guest room, Carol says, "You know, it seems just about right — perfect, really — that such a poor, angry woman should receive a luxurious casket as a gift from the community she fought with."

Everyone agrees. As for me, I leave

befuddled, irritated, head aching, spirit diminished, yet enormously grateful for the fresh air and sky.

*Genie Zeiger
Shelburne, Massachusetts*

EVERY SO OFTEN, A WOMAN AND HER toddler walk their dog past my house. Always the little boy is carrying a big stick, almost bigger than he is. He likes to poke at rocks and leaves with it. He scrapes it across the top of my garden wall. He uses it to dig holes in the earth. He drags it behind him or pushes it along in front.

When I first saw the enormous stick in his hands, I had to fight the impulse to run out of my house and take it from him. Every maternal instinct in me screamed, *Sticks are dangerous! He's too little to have that! He'll poke his eye out!*

Yesterday was freezing cold but sunny. The sun had made the ice on the ground slick. The little boy, bundled in a sturdy snowsuit, toddled along with his stick as usual, pushing, poking, pulling, and dragging. He crossed a patch of ice and fell backward with a thud. His mother, several paces ahead, didn't see him fall. Worried that the big stick had somehow lodged in his eye, I grabbed my coat and started to run out to assist him.

Before I could leave, though, I saw him sit up and use the stick to push himself up to a standing position. It was such a clever thing to do. A smaller stick would have been of no use.

He fell again and had to use his stick twice more before he reached the edge of the ice. Then he ran off, stick in hand, to join his mother.

*Carolyn Graham Tsuneta
Bend, Oregon*

I STOOD IN THE SWELTERING DRESS-ing room of Mervyn's, ill-fitting pairs of jeans slung over the door or entwined about my feet. It was the final week of summer before my sophomore year in high school, and my dream of sashaying back onto campus in a pair of slick Guess jeans was quickly giving way to the reality of relaxed-fit pants. I was pissed: pissed that I could tell as soon as a pair of jeans reached my knees that they wouldn't fit; pissed that what *would* fit was bland and baggy; pissed at the number called

my "size."

"How's it going in there?" chirped my mom, forever the optimist.

"We need to go, *now*," I said. "My body disgusts me. . . . *Our* body disgusts me!" I had realized that I would always have my mom's plump, hourglass form, and I was not even close to welcoming it.

"How do you tolerate your body, Mom?" I asked in the car. "I mean, is this how we'll always be?"

She chuckled wryly, having probably said the same to herself in front of a mirror.

What she said next saved me: "You have my body," she said, "and I have Grandma Theresa's body, and she needed hers for all sorts of tasks in the Old World. Your body may seem awkward now, but you will come to appreciate it. See what works with it and what doesn't, but don't fight it."

Later that night, still miffed, I sat with Mom and looked at old sepia images of ancestors with sturdy builds, strong hands, and, yes, big hips.

"This one came over here from the Azores and started her own bakery," Mom said. "This one took care of the homeless after the 1906 earthquake, cooking soup in Dolores Park. . . . And this one farmed olives and raised three boys all on her own."

Now, every time I hoist a pack on my back, or sling a mixing bowl at my side, or find my center of gravity on my snowboard and dance my way down the mountain, I give a nod to those ancestors.

*Amy Shellman
Aptos, California*

(end of excerpt)