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Fat Psyche

Being pudgy of frame is nothing compared to being overweight of mind

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

I have a fantasy: one day when I am finally famous and my true worth is recognized and I've become the first flat-chested woman in the history of the world to be a sex symbol, I will be interviewed. The journalist writing my profile for the *Sunday Times Magazine* Section ("Bette-Jane Raphael: Child Of The Fifties, Woman Of The Seventies") will ask me: "How do you stay so slim? Do you have to diet much?" And I will reply: "Oh, no, I've never had a weight problem. I'm one of those women who can eat anything and never put on an ounce."

In my fantasy I am telling the truth. In my fantasy I am naturally slim. I have never opened the refrigerator door quietly in the middle of the night. I have never sat down with only a spoon and a half-gallon of fudge-ripple ice cream in front of me. I have never cried over the fact that Ebinger's Bakery, after eighty years in business, closed, and that I will never again see another piece of Blackout Cake (chocolate cake, fudge icing, chocolate sprinkles) for as long as I live in this forever diminished world.

In my fantasy I have never worn anything larger than a size 7. Lycra and spandex have never crossed my thighs. I didn't, at the age of 13, wear bathing suits with little skirts at the hips. Never, in my fantasy, have I weighed above 110 pounds.

Fat chance.

The fact of the matter is that I will never be thin, that I *have* never been thin, and that even when I weighed 98 pounds and my father said "Auschwitz" every time he looked at me, I wasn't thin. (And don't hate me, lady, I am far from 98 pounds today. That was only after surgery and starvation in Lenox Hill Hospital and it only lasted for three days.) I have never been thin because, simply put, I have a fat psyche. Were I to wear pre-teen twelves and have matchsticks for legs, I would still be fat. I have a fat head. Or, I am fat in my head.

Every mirror I look into distorts me. There isn't a mirror made which shows what I really look like. Fat. Once I had a dream that my teeth were fat.

I was hoping that the women's liberation movement would liberate me from being fat. But then I heard the following story, and whether, ultimately, it is a true story or not, it effectively ruined any chance the liberationists had of making me thin. A very attractive man, a friend of a friend, met a beautiful woman whom he tried for weeks to date without luck. Finally,

however, she agreed to go out with him and he took her to "21" for dinner. But she wouldn't order anything except a glass of water, which she used to swallow some pills. The man was furious. The woman was reputed to be Gloria Steinem.

Now as I say, I have no proof that this episode ever actually happened. But where fat is concerned I take no chances. If that skinny, liberated woman can worry about her weight, who am I not to?

Let me tell you something. When you are fat, nothing else matters. It does not matter whether a fantastic man loves you, or whether you are making forty thousand dollars a year at a job you like, or whether you receive rave reviews for your latest novel. If you feel fat you can't enjoy any of it. Nor can you spare much sympathy for other problems, yours or anybody else's. Why, you wonder, does your friend bother you with the fact that she is having a profound anxiety attack? Can't she see that you are fat? How can you possibly help *her*?

Would you like to know who I hate—I mean besides Hitler? I hate Audrey Hepburn and Jackie Onassis (and her sister, that princess) and Twiggy. These women are an affront to everything I stand for. For which I stand.

Perhaps you might wonder whether I have a distorted body image. Perhaps you might even speculate whether my feelings of fat are actually feelings of self-hatred which I have irrationally transposed into physical terms. Well, stop wondering. I spent six years in analysis and if you don't think I understand all that by now, you're crazy. But as my mother would put it (and *has* put it): "What's to understand?" In other words, understanding is nothing more than that. It is not resolution.

So it goes on. I weigh myself every morning, every night, and sometimes I go home from work after lunch for a quick look at the old Detecto. Once I worked at a place which had a pay scale in the ladies room and I figure I spent about fifteen dollars a year in pennies. It got so that people noticed I was away from my desk a lot and they finally caught on. When anyone needed me and I wasn't around, they'd just say: "Check the scale."

I thought I'd found the answer to the problem when I heard about a group called Fatties Anonymous, and I went to one of their meetings with high hopes. But they kept asking God to help them, and I thought, "Hell, it's

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God who made me fat in the first place. I'm not going to *Him* for help." Anyway, it turned out the Fatties didn't want me. When I tried to explain that being fat of mind was as much hell as being fat of form, they all threw lettuce at me.

Once I really did find the answer. It was called Eskatrol and it was a pill and when I took it in the morning I didn't feel like eating for the rest of the day. I didn't feel like sleeping at night, either, but I thought that was a small price to pay for conquering the disgusting habit of putting food in my mouth. Life, for a while, was wonderful. I could go for days without chewing on anything more fattening than a pencil. I was free. I was—I tremble to say it—thin.

Then the F.D.A., who I am convinced wants America fat and tran-

quilized, took it all away from me. Eskatrol, because of its amphetamine content, was classified as a dangerous drug and taken off the market. Dangerous! Is thin dangerous? Is energy dangerous? I can librium myself into idiotic docility, but energizing myself up with Eskatrol is dangerous. (I fully believe that all those amphetamines prescribed by male doctors during the '60's to women who wanted to lose weight were actually responsible for the entire women's movement: women had more energy than it takes to clean a house—and when the male establishment caught on, they quickly took the pills off the market.)

But I'm getting political, and politics have little to do with fat. Although fat people can't get elected to anything. That's why they have to become judges. They can be appointed instead of elected.

I am still off the subject, which is fat and is a topic from which I am not

usually swayed. In fact, aside from my paranoia, it is the only topic I can really settle into. The number of friends I have lost by conspicuously and noisily dieting over lunches and dinners far exceeds, I'm certain, the number of pounds shed during the same given periods.

Just how much fat became an ingrained part of my psyche is difficult to say, but I would blame it, in part, on

HIGH ON TOGETHER

*Last night love—
I needed
no drink.
I was high
on together.
Three hours
when even though
others were about
we talked
hidden
by the inanities
of drinking conversation.
Could we have been more close?*

*And at home—
sleep
would not
come
to part us.
Hours awake
my mind blown
like a dandelion
gone to seed
in a soft wind—
scattered words,
scattered phrases,
scattered thoughts
of things
you had said—
I had said.
After a while—
blowsily, drowsily,
I drifted
out of mind.*

—FRAN MICHELSON

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an unfortunate early experience. It happened in camp when I was six years old. I won third prize as a tomato in a masquerade contest. This was more serious than it sounds, because I didn't wear much of a costume, just red pajamas, some green crepe paper on my head, and rouge. And I was judged a proper tomato. If I ever track down the camp counselor who suggested that costume—when I wanted to go as Sleeping Beauty or a harem girl—I will kill her.

Unless she's fat.