

The Adultery Diet

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Extract

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Everybody asks how I did it. Women gather around me at parties, stop me in the halls at work, their eyes measuring my new body, their smiles tight with the long history of their failures.

Tell me, their eyes plead. Every one of them has a shelfful of diet books at home: low-carb, no-carb, Weight Watchers and Zone, South Beach, Dial-a-Meal, and hamster diets of lettuce and seeds. They've done Marnie and Jane and Beto, yoga and hip-hop, Tae Bo, Buns of Steel, and the Ab Lounge. They've hired personal trainers, had their stomachs stapled or their lipo sucked. Now they're angry and ashamed. They feel like failures. But even more, they feel betrayed—all the books and commercials have lied to them. And let's face it, they have lied to themselves. They come to me for the truth.

"There's no secret," I tell them. "Just diet and exercise."

But that's a lie, too. Every diet has a secret: vanity, wounded pride, rage. Or desire. "You have to want it," I say, and they nod.

But the world is full of *its*. You need something stronger than crème brûlée, more seductive than chocolate, more powerful than hunger itself. And in the end, you learn that the *it* doesn't matter. It's the *wanting* that gets you to the gym in the morning, propels you past the bakery on your way to work, carries you back to the gym in the evening for the unforgiving cardio with the Lycra-clad gazelles from Ford and Elite. You have to hunger, not starve. You have to be driven to walk those twenty-four blocks to work, then turn left towards the stairs instead of joining the crowd at the elevators. Something has to be eating at you.

"Eva looks great," the men say to my husband, and I see him smile. What man doesn't want to be envied? What man doesn't want to get his wife back at forty-four, finding—to his surprise—a younger woman emerging from under the weight of the years like a flower growing from a snowbank? They don't say it aloud, but their eyes say, *How did she do it? Can she teach my wife?*

Sure, boys. But be careful what you wish for.

When did the bathroom scale become the tyrant that rules my life? I used to laugh at women who weighed themselves every morning, back when I was a hot young thing: leather miniskirt, cup of coffee and a cigarette for breakfast, out the door. But the times, they are a changin'. Even Dylan probably owns a scale now and growls at it every morning when it breaks his heart.

“What time’s Chloe’s plane leave?” David comes into the bathroom and reaches for his toothbrush. I step off the scale and quickly slide it under the shoe rack in the closet.

“Two thirty.” I slip my bathrobe on and step into my slippers. “And she’s not even close to packed yet.”

“She’s a junior in college. She’ll figure it out.” He glances at me in the mirror. “Might be time to get you a new robe.”

I look down at my no-allure velour, threads pulling

at the seams, hem unraveling. “Chloe gave me this for Mother’s Day. When she was eight.”

“You’ll still be her mother, even if you get a new robe.”

I imagine silk, poured over lean curves. But I’d need a new body first. “Maybe she can get me one in Paris. Do they have Mother’s Day over there?”

David smiles. “I think the French have a different idea of motherhood.”

Slim and chic, probably. Audrey Hepburn wheeling a carriage along the banks of the Seine. Did Parisian women own bathroom scales?

“Do you have a busy day today?”

David shakes his head. “A meeting in the afternoon with Maribel Steinberg and her agent. I’ll have to get the contracts ready this morning.”

Maribel Steinberg. I’d spotted her new book in the stack of manuscripts on David’s bedside table: *The Be-True-to-Yourself Diet*. I’d picked it up and flipped through it while David got ready for bed. The agent’s letter described it as “a diet book for women who don’t believe in dieting.”

“Isn’t that like selling guns to Quakers?”

David glanced over at me. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you may not like guns, but if you buy one, you want it to work.”

He shrugged. “Our marketing people like it. They’ve got a whole publicity campaign ready to go. Straight talk about weight loss. Manage your weight without self-hate.”

“Catchy.”

But the numbers don't lie. Three weeks of positive self-concept, moderate exercise, and goal-oriented self-reward, and I've lost a grand total of two pounds. True, my daughter is flying off to Paris for a year, and the magazine I write for is going through a major redesign to revive its sagging circulation, both substantial "stress factors", according to Maribel Steinberg, that can lead to "destructive self-modeling". But *two pounds*?

"Mom, I can't find my passport!"

David looks up at me, his mouth full of toothpaste. It's a look that says, *She called for you*. The same look he used to give me when she was three, crying out in the middle of the night. His hair (what remains of it) and beard are silvered now, and he's heavier around the middle, but there are still moments when I catch a glimpse of the twenty-six-year-old grad student, with his passion for poetry and social justice, hidden beneath the middle-aged editor.

Does he think the same when he looks at me?

Chloe sits on the floor of her room, piles of clothing and open suitcases scattered around her. She's got her purse on her lap, her wallet in one hand. "I can't find my passport," she says again, plaintively. "I had it in my purse when we went to the bank yesterday, but it's not there now."

"You want me to look?"

She gives me an impatient look. For a moment, she's fourteen again, wearied by her mother's inability to comprehend the complexities of a teenager's life.

"Where'd you put your traveler's checks?"

She opens her purse and, takes out an envelope. When

she opens the envelope, she finds her passport tucked inside among the packets of checks. "Oh, for God's sake." She slips it into the inside pocket of her purse, where she keeps her cell phone, then stuffs the envelope of checks back into her purse. I notice a condom packet lying next to the hairbrush in her purse and look away quickly. At least she's being safe.

"And you've got your ticket?"

She rolls her eyes in exasperation. "Yes, I've got my ticket." She shoves her wallet back into her purse, zips it closed. "I'm not a child."

I leave her there among her luggage. It's her story now. David and I are just the parents she comes home to for a few weeks in the summer, the unchanging background against which the changes in her own life can be accurately measured. For her, the future's all possibility: college, Paris, career and, yes, sex. We're what she has to leave behind. We've made our choices, and now she wants us to get out of the way so she can make hers.

David's in the shower now, steaming up the mirrors. I sit on the bed listening to the traffic on Riverside Drive. Is the story really over at forty-four? If you're basically happy and successful—good jobs, nice apartment, a child in college—what else would you really wish for? It's hard to think that the story now might be simply more of the same or, even worse, a slow decline, like dust settling in an empty house. When did life stop being about hope?

But even in the midst of that thought, I can't help reaching for a scrap of paper to scribble down *Old houses*

as easy metaphor for our lives. Is that why we love them? One of the pleasures of my job as an editor at *House & Home* magazine, among the endless photo tours of overdecorated celebrity homes and stories on refinishing hardwood floors, is my monthly column. At times, it's hard not to laugh at the idea of someone who's spent the last twenty years living in apartments on the Upper West Side of Manhattan writing a monthly meditation on what architecture means to our lives, for a readership of wealthy professionals blessed with the luxury of restoring Victorian homes. My publisher had his doubts when I first proposed the column, but it proved surprisingly popular with readers, and I've even received invitations to appear at home shows and on a public television program devoted to restoring old houses. Invitations I've politely declined, not wanting to reveal my fraudulence. Writing a sex-advice column for single women in their twenties, or tips for surgeons performing open heart surgery, would be almost as unlikely as what I'm doing now.

David's out of the shower now, humming to himself as he towels off. It's my turn now, but it's a small bathroom, and I find myself feeling strangely self-conscious (the numbers don't lie), so I go into the kitchen and eat a cup of non-fat yogurt while I stand at the sink.

Sex advice for single women. *Enjoy it while you can, honey. You won't have that body forever.* I'd carried condoms in my own purse once, merrily fucked my way through college and then half the pubs on the Upper West Side in my first year in the city. Shouting, "I'm looking for a job in publishing." over the Eurythmics

while the guy waved frantically at the waitress for more margaritas, like a soldier terrified of running out of bullets in the middle of the battle. The results were predictable enough: I'd studied my share of ceilings, taken my share of early morning taxi rides, and in the end, I'd met David—just a few weeks too late to fuck my way into an editorial assistant's position at a big publishing house, since I'd just taken a job at *House & Home* that might actually pay my rent. (An old joke there, which one of David's male colleagues had once told at a Christmas party: "She took an editorial assistant's position. Bent over the copy machine, apparently, with her panties around her ankles.")

But now it's all joists and tuck pointing. Home, after all, being where the heart is.

David comes into the kitchen as I'm throwing away my empty yogurt cup. "So, you can run Chloe out to the airport?"

It's the third time he's asked me this question since yesterday, when we agreed that I'd take her because of his meeting. As always at these moments, I'm faced with three choices: (1) scream; (2) murder; or (3) reassure him that he shouldn't feel guilty for not seeing her off.

"Liz is picking us up at ten," I tell him.

"You think that's early enough?"

I look at him. "To get to LaGuardia? Yeah, I think we'll make it."

"Provided Liz doesn't get you lost on the way out there."

"I'll navigate."

Liz is my oldest friend in New York, and as long as I've

known her, she's always gotten lost. She could be driving around the block looking for a parking space, and she'd make a wrong turn and find herself in the Jersey Pine Barrens. David's theory is that it's a single woman's cry for help. But the truth is much simpler: she gets to talking and loses track of where she's going. When she wants to make an important point, she likes to emphasize it with a change of direction. And since she can talk passionately on almost any subject—especially the untrustworthiness of men—any trip in her car includes abrupt lane changes and sudden turns.

Still, she's offered to drive Chloe to the airport, excited to see her off on her Parisian adventure. "With French men, at least you know where you stand," she assures my daughter as we head out of Manhattan. She jerks the wheel hard, cutting off a transit bus. "When you aren't lying down, that is. It's impossible to believe anything a man says in bed."

Chloe nods. She's got one hand on the dashboard, the other clutching her seat belt, and looks terrified. Is it Liz's driving, or her romantic advice? What twenty-year-old wants to listen to a jaded single woman in her forties on the topic of love? It's like getting medical advice from an undertaker.

To make it worse, the car's full of cat hair, which is playing hell with my allergies. Liz got two Siamese when she turned forty, saying, "If I'm not going to have kids, I need something else to torture." She named them Touchy and Surly, and likes to hand-feed them bits of raw liver from the butcher at the Food Emporium on Broadway. "I'm training them," she tells me. "The next

guy who lies to me, I'm going to cut out his liver and feed it to my cats."

My streaming eyes and the hairball forming in my throat are the only reasons I can ride with Liz without terror. Five minutes in her car, and I don't even notice the trail of rage and destruction we leave in our wake: the cab driver screaming at us from the shoulder, where we've forced him off the road, the pimped-out Caddie that pursues us for ten blocks with the driver waving a gun from his window. By the time we arrive at the airport, any terror Chloe had about her flight or the prospect of life in another country is gone. She happily yanks her suitcases out of the car's trunk and leads us through the terminal at a trot, saying, "Really, Mom, you don't have to wait."

But it's my job to sit there, the worry building inside me until I say something so exasperating that my daughter rolls her eyes then leaps up to join the line for security like she's trying to force her way onto the last chopper out of Saigon. One last hug, and then Liz and I stand beyond the Plexiglas, watching as Chloe moves slowly through the line, slips off her shoes to put them through the scanner, then waits to be waved through the metal detector. On the other side she gathers up her things, pauses to give us a last jaunty wave, and she's gone.

"Well, that's done," Liz says, as we walk back to the car. "I think you handled it very well."

I'm sobbing. My baby's gone forever, and I forgot to remind her to write. She'll return like Sabrina, full of elegance and soufflés, a confident woman with a string

of French lovers to her credit and strong ideas about accessories. I'll look like a frump next to her when we walk down Broadway, just another Upper West Side hausfrau out with her lovely daughter.

"Let's go get you drunk," Liz suggests.

The ride back to the city is a blur of screeching brakes and sickening thuds, through which we pass on a steady current of Liz's chatter, like a comet through fiery skies. We arrive at her building's garage without a scratch, although insurance companies from here to Boston stagger and fail under the carnage. She takes me upstairs, makes martinis in her kitchen, and we sit beside an open window, where I can breathe the sooty Manhattan air as her cats prowl the entryway, lying in wait for unsuspecting men.

"I should call the office," I sigh after the first martini. I've taken the day off, but you never know what can come up in your absence. Someone might have invented a new spackling compound. Track lighting might have made an unexpected comeback. After the second martini, I say, "Where did the years go?" By the time we finish the third, the subject is blowjobs. Why so many? And to so little effect?

By six I have to be poured into a taxi for the bleary ride back home to hearth and husband. I'm a middle-aged mother who's just sent her only child off to be ravished by God knows how many odiferous Frenchmen, but for some reason, I can't stop giggling. Earlier, Liz had gone to the kitchen for more drinks, and after a moment I heard her bellowing, "No! Stop that! No!"

Her cats came tearing out of the kitchen, tails high, but they slowed to a languid walk as soon as they'd left her behind. One of them walked a cautious circle around the other one, sniffed at the base of his raised tail, and then casually mounted him.

Liz came back into the living room at that moment carrying our drinks, and she stamped her foot and shouted, "No! Stop it!"

As the cats vanished down the hall, Liz stood staring after them in despair. "As if it wasn't bad enough that there are no straight men left in this town, I end up with gay cats." She handed me my drink. "I caught them fucking on my bed last week." She glared at me. "Stop laughing. It's my bed, not some furry little Fire Island. You think *I* want to sleep in that? Anyway, I should be the one fucking in it."

Only Liz, I hear David saying. And, Who can blame them? She's probably had that effect on lots of men.

I giggled. "Maybe you shouldn't have gotten two males," I told her.

"They're *brothers*. That's what makes it so gross. How was I supposed to know they'd spend all their time humping each other?"

The cab's two blocks from my building, and now I'm giggling again. David will be appalled when he sees me, and that thought alone makes it impossible to stop. I force myself to take a deep breath, tighten my jaw, and gaze out the window at the blur of Broadway. It all looks so . . . *lurid*. Is this really where I live? How did that happen?

But it turns out David isn't even home. There's a message from him on the machine. He's taking Mairibel Steinberg and her agent to Michael's for dinner to celebrate the contract. Walking the author, he calls it, showing her off to all the other editors. What will she order? Will she be true to herself, or just pick at a salad?

I peer at the leftovers in the refrigerator. There's a box of two-day-old mu shu calling to me with all the seductive power of three martinis. I sit at the kitchen table and eat it cold, straight from the box. It's oddly pleasant to sit here in an empty apartment, no one to feed. Chloe's winging her way across the Atlantic at this moment. She likes the shades down on the window during a night flight, preferring the faint womblike light of the enclosed cabin to that expanse of darkness beyond the glass. She'll read, then sleep. And when she wakes up, she'll see the red roofs of Paris. What could be more pleasant?

I leave the empty takeout box in the sink, stagger into the bedroom, and crawl beneath the covers. The light's on above me, but I lie there dreamily, eyes closed, imagining my daughter's excitement. It's oddly arousing. Hope. Change. French food. French men. It's the opposite of marriage, motherhood, and middle-age. It's the hollow feeling in your belly that tells you anything is possible at this moment. You're open to the world, just waiting for it to sweep you off your feet. Terrifying, but also breathless and thrilling.

The light's still on, but I can't make myself get up to

turn it out. I'm too tired, and the room's spinning slightly—just a pleasant whirl, like waltzing with a count in a Russian novel. Snow drifts and candle light. Pale girls in furs.

David will turn the light out when he gets home.