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101 Things to Do Before You Diet

Mimi Spencer

Published by Bantam Books,
An imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

Extract

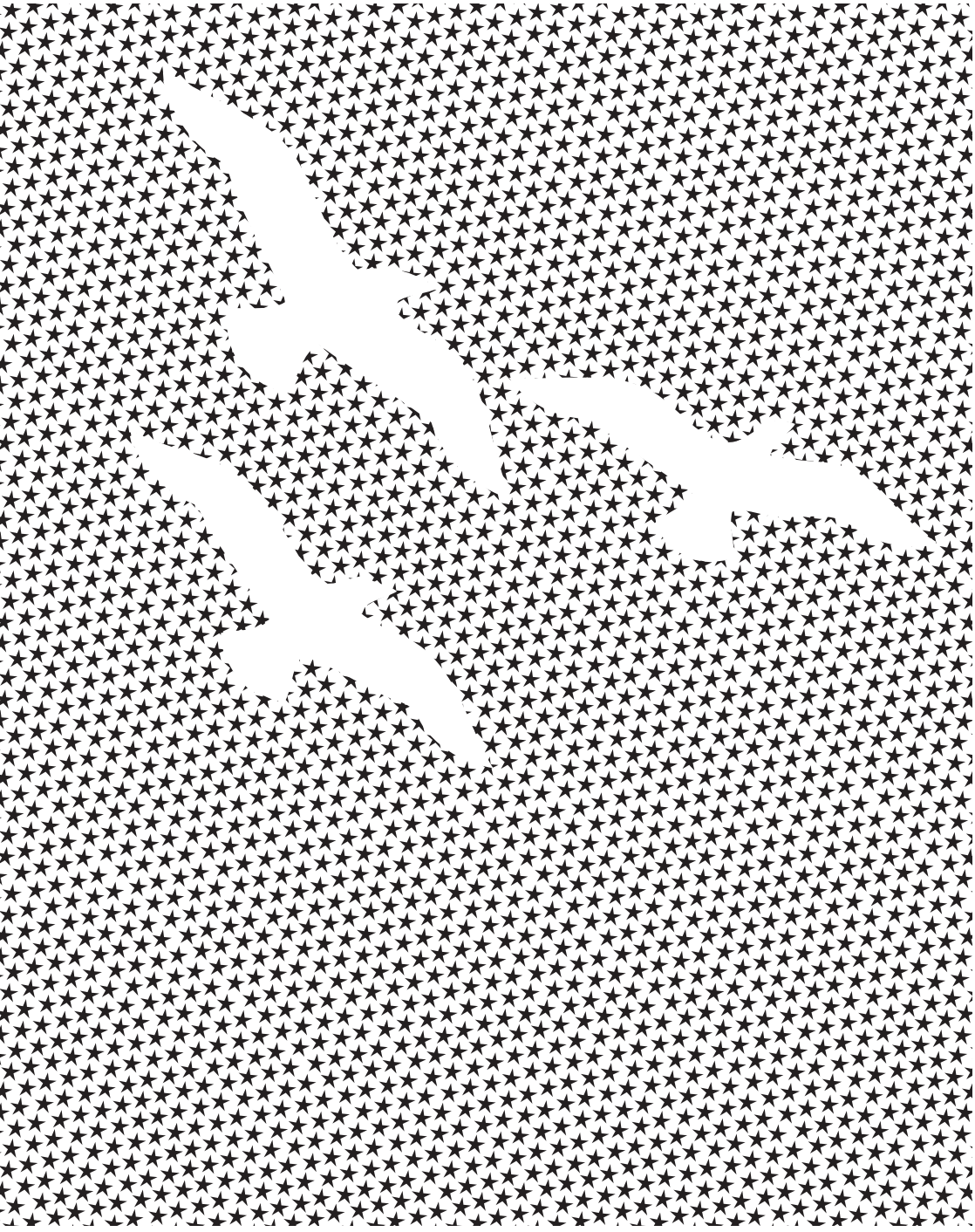
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CHAPTER ONE
CHANGE YOUR MIND TO CHANGE YOUR SHAPE

Body Brilliance Starts in Your Head

First things first: do not stop eating! Isn't that a relief? But you *do* need to start loving – not that pretty cupcake, not those great ankle boots with the stack heel, not J Lo's new fringe, but YOURSELF. Your head needs to be in the right place from the outset. So get it out of the sand (or out of the fridge – or, come to that, out of that glossy magazine) and look in the mirror. This is where your journey begins; a little love and a lot of honesty will be your outriders on the road to glory. This chapter is about reassessing your relationship with the world. It's about seeing sense, gaining perspective and understanding what works for YOU. Not the girl in the lemon-yellow sweatpants. But you.



1 DON'T READ DIET BOOKS*

It is a dispiriting fact that the greatest preoccupation of our age is with weight and its loss. As the world grows ever richer and rounder, we seem to grow ever more fascinated by the heft or otherwise of our fellow men. Though, of course, we're far more interested in the women.

Think about how dieting and all its attendant nonsense have saturated our culture. How much time and effort it absorbs. We have trained ourselves to size people up in the blink of an eye. We're constantly aware of weight – its cruel lack or its licentious excess. We're hooked on A-list eating patterns, on quick-fix pills, on self-help miracle cures and the latest celebrity-endorsed regimes to issue from LA.

This, dear friends, is Diet Porn, a perverse phenomenon which undermines us all at a critical, visceral level. It gnaws away at our self-esteem, and sucks up vast tracts of time and energy which could be usefully expended elsewhere. While other eras basked in the Renaissance, the Golden Age, the Belle Epoque, we're lucky enough to have a TV schedule which boasts *Back Inside Britain's Fattest Man*. Look, I'm not expecting us to spend our evenings ruminating upon the complexities of our existence. But a little bit of thought beyond Gastric Bands of the Stars would make for a pleasant change.

Among the first requirements, the platform upon which you will stand if you are really going to tackle the bagginess that has crept into your life, is to Think Straight. You *have* to rid yourself of the dysfunction that marks our modern dance with diets. It's a ludicrous, exhausting gavotte and it has to stop. You have to be in the right frame of mind. You have to sidestep the weird extravagances, the wild promises, the wicked propaganda of an industry dedicated to keeping you in its grasp.

So stop staring at Jordan's butt and wondering how she does it. Start living. Stop measuring yourself against a warped societal norm. Start enjoying what you've got. Stop believing quick-fire fibs and what Susie Orbach calls 'the fictions that

dominate our culture'. Start reading something edifying instead. Get your sustenance from poetry, from Plato, from dancing the tango in T-bar shoes, a red rose clenched between your teeth. Just don't get it from cake.

*This, I hasten to add, is not a diet book. It is a 'not-a-diet' book, designed to develop positive relationships – with your jeans, your butter dish, your waist, your world.

2 BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL

You are already gorgeous. You just don't know it yet. To truly absorb this fundamental fact, you may well need to readjust your Fat Goggles and recognize that carrying a few extra pounds is not a cardinal sin, no matter what the more pernicious quarters of the media would have you believe. Dr Kerry Halliday, a psychologist specializing in body-shape issues, regularly encounters women who are a perfectly normal, decent size – 'and yet they've convinced themselves that a size 12 is fat! So many of the people I see are a healthy weight, but they have a fat head, full of fat thoughts. There's this constant dialogue of guilt. It's there when they go to sleep, it's there when they wake up, it's internal and introvert and isolating.'

Enough already! Embark on the new-you project from a position of STRENGTH. Loving yourself doesn't make you a narcissist, it makes you a realist, armed and ready to resist the onslaught of our bizarre, thin-obsessed culture.

You do, however, need to be realistic about your expectations. I've known for years that I'll never be a size 8, far less a size zero. I know that Kate Moss can do hot pants and I can't, that my thighs sometimes kiss in the middle like old friends, that a miniskirt makes me look like a maxi-pack . . . There's something very liberating about recognizing these small facts, about accepting them, and

then – wahey – letting them go, like so many shiny helium balloons. You're suddenly free.

This doesn't mean letting *yourself* go, though. This project is not about giving in and giving up, installing yourself in the shadows and waiting for the seasons to change. No. This is a plan of action, a quest for change, a manifesto to celebrate all that is great about being a woman.

So accept yourself, right now. Don't live the dream, live the reality. You're not Katie Holmes. You have a soft tummy. You wish you looked better in a bikini. Watch those shiny balloons go, one by one. Pretty soon, you won't even know they were there. And remember all the while that the fat-cat dieting industry is founded upon the expectation of failure; you, my dear, should start with the bracing power of hope.

3 OPEN YOUR EYES AND RECOGNIZE YOUR WORTH

By and large – unless you have some karmic reason to believe otherwise – you only get one body. It may wax and wane, ebb and flow, but broadly speaking you're lumbered with these legs, that chest, those buttocks, this mortal coil. Rather than poke it in the eye with a fork, wouldn't it be better to love it? Just a bit? But how can you love someone you don't really know?

Before the off, you need to understand exactly what shape you're in. Unless you turn on the lights now, you'll never grasp the truth – so get a grip. Sneak a look. You won't bite. I'm not expecting you to conduct a microscopic investigation of every inch, but you do need to have a handle on how you really look, who you really are and whether those wide-legged palazzo pants are really such a good idea.

So stop ignoring your reflection – in shop windows, in the mirror, in those brutal changing rooms where you catch a rare

glimpse of your unfamiliar buttocks . . . None of it is going anywhere unless you do. Look through holiday photos. Don't shy away from the truth – it's never as bad as you expect (though that bikini in Tenerife really was a shocker).

Once you have had a proper gawp – yes, naked, with the lights on – you can start to weigh up your options. I don't suggest you install vast mirrors on every available surface – you're not Peter Stringfellow – but do administer a good dose of exceptional honesty. If you're the kind of person who likes to keep scrapbooks and ticket stubs from amazing journeys, you might want to take 'before' photos so that you can marvel at the 'after' shots in a couple of months' time (best keep these to yourself).

Whatever you see, don't be mirror-miserable. If you face the music and feel fat, don't spiral off on a project of shame and finger-pointing. You're only on Point 3. We've barely begun! Instead of seeking out and dwelling on the downers, look for and big up your positive points, remembering all the while that you're never as fat as you feel. Your task – with the help of the next ninety-eight tips – is to stop feeling fat and start feeling fabulous. Understand now (and recall often as you read the next ten chapters) that a gentle softness, a Rubens roundness, is feminine and beautiful and *absolutely* fine. It is infinitely more appealing than a desperate yearning for a flat stomach and toothpick thighs. If in doubt, ask a man.



SHIFT YOUR SHAPE, NOT YOUR WEIGHT

It's worth noting early on that you – yes, *you* – don't really want to lose weight at all. What you want is to *change shape*. If you are round and bottom-heavy, you want to be leaner. If you are wide and wobbly, you want to be taut and toned. I know, I understand. Me too. The issue, then, isn't how much you weigh per se. It's not even your BMI rating. This score (mine happens to be 21.9) is necessarily abstract, a general theory that cannot hope to measure the particulars and peculiarities of the individual. It takes no account of body type, ethnicity or composition – and as such ought to be treated with informed caution. A perfectly fit, lean athlete can easily be classed as obese using this system. According to the BMI standard (your weight in kilograms divided by your height in metres squared) Brad Pitt is classed as technically 'overweight', while Arnold Schwarzenegger and George Clooney are both 'clinically obese'. Even Dame Kelly Holmes clocks in as a heavyweight.

If you're seriously overweight, or desperate to have a number stamped on your size, a BMI score may be of use to you – indeed there is no real alternative that does the job any better. But for a run-of-the-mill, slightly-on-the-chubby-side subject, knowing your BMI is about as much use as knowing how to do quadratic equations. And when did you last have to remember that the highest power of x is x^2?

Far better to feel the real. Use your eyes. Use your pants. Use your unforgiving and not-entirely-kind mirror. We all know, for instance, that muscle weighs more than fat. We all know that fat located in certain areas is more troublesome to the eye than in others. We all know that one woman's eleven-stone hell is another's eleven-stone paradise. Find your happy place.

4 STOP WORSHIPPING THIN AND LOVE THE SKIN YOU'RE IN

It is hardly a revelation to note that as a society we are obsessed to the point of distraction by thin – associating it, as a recent survey found, with 'success'. By the tender age of six, most girls are dissatisfied with their bodies and want to be thinner, according to research published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, with almost half believing they need to go on a diet to lose weight. 'Girls seemed particularly aware of teasing and likeability on the basis of weight and shape,' the report concludes. The psychologists' explanation of this body-bashing is that in these egalitarian times, given few remaining hierarchies based on religion, background, money or education, we tend to judge people in terms of their appearance. Image is currency. It's diverting to think that until the seventies, only overweight women dieted. Today, only overweight women don't.

Of course, this book is all about stopping that rot. While there's nothing sinister or odd about wanting to feel fit, be healthy and look great in a pair of shorts, there is danger in persuading yourself that all your troubles could be eliminated if only you slimmed down. Life – fat, thin or somewhere in between – will always pelt off on its own trajectory whether you are ten stone nine or eight stone nothing. Even at your gotta-be weight, you'll still have to deal with your husband/teenagers/aggravating mother-in-law. There will still be bills and traffic jams and that annoying stain on the rug where you spilled red wine. You won't enter nirvana as your scales strike nine. So stop putting all your hopes and dreams into one skinny little packet. Recognize that being thin is not the same as having a good body. Know that thin can be thick (it won't make you bright; in fact, starving your body of essential nutrients is plain dumb). Once you've gained perspective, you'll probably lose weight. Life's weird like that.

5 USE YOUR BRAIN, NOT YOUR FORK

Kooky as it sounds, you can 're-programme' your brain to eat well. Along with physiological demands, hormone surges and social pressures, there is another influence at work on your appetite. Psychology.

The human mind is a lot like the human child. Tell it not to do something, deprive it of something (anything, really – *High School Musical* stickers, Spiderman lunch-boxes, chocolate-coated Brazil nuts), and it will want it *more than any other little thing on the face of the earth*. It will obsess. Ever tried to think 'I mustn't have that cake'? About as successful as 'I mustn't think of pink elephants,' right?

In a study by psychologists at the University of Hertfordshire, dieting was actually found to *increase* cravings for 'forbidden' foods such as chocolate. In their experiment, researchers showed eighty-five women a series of images of enticing chocolate cakes and oozy puddings drenched in fudge sauce – and found that subjects showed significantly more desire for these than when they were shown pictures of other covetable objects, such as perfume or Mercedes cars. So far, so what? Well, among *dieting* women (those who had dieted in the last year or who were on a diet at the time), the responses were even stronger. They experienced heightened cravings and feelings of guilt. 'Dieting appears to make a difference to how people perceive food, in this particular instance, chocolate,' the study concluded. 'Instead of helping people to eat more healthily and to cut down on products which are bad for their health, the negative effect induced by dieting appears to have the opposite effect in that it can increase the desire for the actual foods they are trying to avoid . . . If we constantly deprive the brain of the food we most desire we crave it even more.'

Clearly, you need to nip that right in the bud – first by allowing yourself just a little of what you fancy, and then by moderating your behaviour around foods that will make you fat. As it turns

out, 'think thin' is not such an empty phrase. According to another recent report, it *is* possible to think yourself thinner. The study involved forty-seven women who were each asked to spend half an hour thinking after having consumed a large lunch (something I've always found delightfully easy to do, though falling asleep is a constant threat). Researchers found that encouraging the subjects to remember the details of their last meal made them a third less likely to eat snacks. Suzanne Higgs, who led the research, submits that this could point to a stronger connection between memory and body weight than previously thought. 'How well people can remember could be a factor in explaining why some eat more than others,' she told the *Daily Telegraph*. 'There are certain things that we do now which are rather distracting and could stop people recalling quite as well what they have eaten.'

So pay attention. Watch what you eat, in a non-invasive, laid-back sort of way – like a chilled parent keeping an unseen eye on their kid in a paddling pool. Some people uncover the truth by keeping a food diary, believing that detailing their intake limits it and helps avoid 'unconscious eating'. Try it. It doesn't work for me. I did once write a food log covering the period between breakfast and lunch – and found the experience so tedious that I turned to shortbread for solace and to add texture to my day. But it may work for you. The idea, really, is to be conscious of what you eat and know where your foibles lie, waiting to trip you up at the first tummy rumble.

Even if you don't buy the psychobabble, you can at least recognize that your ego, super-ego and id need to be pulling in the same direction, towards a healthy, balanced, confident new you. You'll do way better if you stop punishing yourself about your body and the space it occupies. Punishment will only lead to rebellion and a recidivist streak, hurling you senseless back towards the open fridge. Be kind. Think good thoughts (but don't add fudge sauce).

FAT DAYS MAKE YOU HUMAN, NOT HUMONGOUS

You know how it feels. You wake up all wrong. Your face stares bleakly out from the mirror, demanding to know why you even bothered emerging from the sack. Your wardrobe is a freakish obstacle course, a land of booby traps and trip-wires, filled with oddly shaped jackets and cheek-sapping colours. That dress you looked a-*mazing* in last Friday? Nightmare. The sexy, sultry siren shoes? Slutty. The red V-neck sweater, the one that made you feel like Gina Lollobrigida? More like what-a-load-of-crapida.

There are days when the very same clothes on the very same body can feel inordinately different – and it all depends on something as insubstantial and subjective as your mood. We all have days like these. No one is immune to bad-hair days, bad-skin days, big-bum days, days that are full of ladders and scuffs, broken nails and dashed dreams. They arise because we're human.

More to the point, they arise because we're women.

They're the brute consequence of hormones, emotions, perception, a chance comment, an off look. These unfathomables can't be put in a Petri dish and prodded with a pipette. They can't be marshalled into a thesis to be delivered at a symposium. But they can have a potent effect on your day and how you feel about it. Accept them. Don't fight them. Today will become tomorrow, and that dress that makes you look like a pumpkin may have turned you into a princess by then, just because you've *changed your mind*. Even Hamlet knew that 'there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'. Don't read too much into it. Read Shakespeare instead.

6 LAUGH IN THE FACE OF CELEBRITY MAGAZINES

Open any weekly magazine and you'll come across the usual parade of whip-thin women, their brows set in grim determination to avoid lunch. Over the past decade, many of our contemporary heroines seem to have reduced like stock on a stove until there's nothing left of them. Nothing but skin and bones. It is this look, this *lack*, that has become an aspiration and inspiration for a whole generation of girls.

We've always admired icons, of course. Jennifer Aniston herself remembers idolizing actresses as a child. 'Their hair, their clothes, their make-up were perfect,' she says. 'Looking back, I realize it wasn't a good thing. I was wanting to become this unattainable person.' The consequence, she later confessed, was an eating disorder that wrecked her health. 'I started taking vitamins and exercising and went too far. You get into that Zone Diet thing and you kind of get addicted to that.' Similarly, Sarah Michelle Gellar has let slip that being a celebrity means inhabiting another space, another dimension – and that for a civilian to join in the charade is a hopeless enterprise. 'Look,' she says, 'it's crazy for people to try to be as thin as we are. We have personal trainers and personal chefs. It's our job to look this way.'

Clearly, there's no point even attempting to keep up with the weightless A-list – though many mere mortals, seeing the absence of proper female flesh up there on the pedestal of fame, will try. I've known this truth for years, of course – ever since, well over a decade ago, I stumbled upon the art director of *Vogue* magazine using a scalpel to carve a few centimetres off Claudia Schiffer's ankles. It was, I hasten to add, a transparency he was working on, not Schiffer herself, which would have made an awful mess of the parquet floor. But even so. I have always been pretty miffed that even Claudia – an original supermodel and all-round babe – wasn't deemed quite good enough for public consumption in her natural state.

In real life, of course, celebrities have to work their butts off

(literally) to look even halfway gorgeous. If they ever stopped making an almighty effort, everything would collapse, like a lolly left out in the sun. I promise you. With all the preening, pummelling and priming that goes on, it's little wonder that most of them don't speak a second language, make their own marmalade or play the piccolo. They simply don't have the time.

They do, however, have the time to follow zany diets based on spirulina, bee pollen and obscure Amazonian berries unavailable on the open market. It's all cayenne-pepper cordials and Myoplex Protein Shakes out there in the Hollywood Hills. Fridges are locked at night and the key sent home with the housekeeper. Trainers are on the doorstep at dawn, armed with grape-seed extract and the latest in high-tensile exercise apparatus.

'Clearly, there's no point even attempting to keep up with the weightless A-list – though many mere mortals will try.'

Sure, the bodies these women end up with are, very often, stupendous. But at what cost? Not long ago, an engaging picture turned up showing the chance meeting of Cameron Diaz and Victoria Beckham at the MTV Music Awards. Both had poured their syrup-coloured selves into tiny little tubes which were, briefly, doing duty as dresses. At one end of the dress, the women were all naked neck and shoulder blade, taut face and bronzed skin, their breasts buns of steel. At the other end of operations, both wore silver winkle-pickers, which looked like the kind of implements Gordon Ramsay uses to kill crabs. This, it struck me, is the modern uniform for celebrity dress-up. Perfect skin, muscular boobs, long limbs, wicked heels. And a body primed like an F1 piston, in such a streamlined state that its maintenance would clearly be a full-time, staff-required, no-let-up job.

Such extreme maintenance has lately become the stock lifestyle in Hollywood and beyond, leaving folk like us languishing in

the slow lane. Bombarded daily by images of physical perfection, we've come to view these bionic women as normal. And so, while our glossy magazines are populated almost entirely by sparrow-models and syrup-skinned celebrities, the back pages are dedicated to fat-busting fad diets, liposuction ads and essays on why five-bite meals will turn you into a Glamazon in a lunch hour (as long as you don't actually have any lunch).

In the process, many of us have lost all perspective, developing unnatural ideas about what women are supposed to look like. Think of our screen stars, our popstars, any model on any catwalk anywhere in the world – I've got handbags which weigh more than they do. I could fold someone like Lindsay Lohan up and stash her in my pocket. In this Looking Glass world, a ninety-pounder is a heavyweight. True perspective can be gained when you consider that the pin-up of the 1890s was Lillian Russell, all *two hundred pounds of her*. We don't even have to mention Jayne Mansfield, Rita Hayworth, Jane Russell, Sophia Loren, Raquel Welch – none of whom would get the job today – to know that something's up.

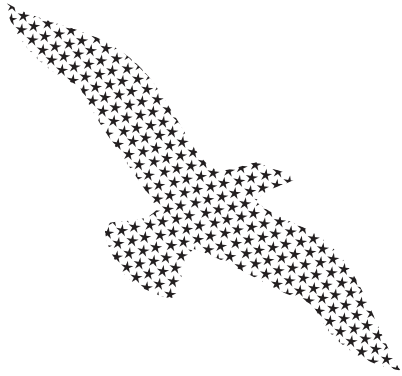
To maintain this abnormal body shape, our icons – those brave enough to step up to the plate and admit it – are permanently hungry. Elizabeth Hurley has admitted as much. Marcia Cross, who plays Bree Van De Kamp in *Desperate Housewives*, recently confessed that staying thin was 'a living hell', and that she felt she had been banned from eating since joining the show. Actresses, models, singers, presenters – all are subject to the dictatorship of thin enforced by the minders, agents and producers who know very well what sells. It happened to All Saints, to Girls Aloud, to Myleene Klass. I know from my experience in the fashion industry that it happens to hopeful young girls from the moment that first Polaroid is taken in the reception of the modelling agency. Christina Ricci recalls the favoured put-down for wannabe actresses in Hollywood: 'They say "She looks too healthy", which means "She needs to lose weight".'

It's a strong current, this grim undertow of the image game, and it's almost impossible to resist. Some try. When British model of the moment Daisy Lowe arrived in New York for her first season

of shows, she was called 'a little hefty'. Her response? 'I am who I am. My old agents in New York suggested I lose weight. So I moved agents. I'm extremely proud of the fact that I am two sizes bigger than most models. Being a stick is so unsexy.'

Too right, and it's something that magazine editors are slowly, gingerly, coming to realize. Says Sophia Neophitou-Apostolou, editor of *10* magazine: 'The designers I work with now are demanding a more womanly girl and art directors are complaining that, these days, they're adding curves rather than shaving them off.' Those art directors do, however, want those curves in the regulation sex-pot places, as Elizabeth Hurley recently discovered when her breasts were electronically enlarged for the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. 'On my last *Cosmo* cover,' she told *Details*, 'they added about five inches to my breasts. It's very funny. I have, like, massive knockers. Huge. Absolutely massive.'

Right. So let's just admit that it's a weird, air-brushed world in the inner sanctum of fame. You, however, are not an inflatable doll, to be pumped up and down at will. Your challenge is to ignore these extremes and reacquaint yourself with the bell-curve of normal womanly weight. Real women are soft in places, good to cuddle. If the celebrity template starts to look reasonable to your eye, then stop staring. Shut the magazine. Go for a jog instead.



THE SIGH OF SIZE:
HOW WE LOST OUR WAY

Twenty-five years ago, the average model weighed 8 per cent less than the average woman (yes, Twiggy was abnormally petite in her day). Today's model weighs 23 per cent less than the average.

As long ago as 2000, the BMA, in its report *Eating Disorders, Body Image and the Media*, noted that the extreme thinness of celebrities was 'both unachievable and biologically inappropriate', observing that the gap between the media ideal and reality appeared to be making eating disorders worse. 'At present, certain sections of the media provide images of extremely thin or underweight women in contexts which suggest that these weights are healthy or desirable,' it stated, recommending that normal women in the upper reaches of a healthy weight should be 'more in evidence on television as role models for young women'. Television producers and those in advertising should review their employment of very thin women, and the Independent Television Commission should review its advertising policy, the report recommended. Almost a decade on, the opposite has happened.

Every now and again, one of their own takes up arms. Emma Thompson, for example, is known to be on a crusade against the idiocy of thin that plagues her profession – and has intervened when Kate Winslet (on the set of *Sense and Sensibility*) and Haley Atwell (on *Brideshead Revisited*) were encouraged by producers to shrink a couple of sizes. But generally speaking, it's a way of life in which many are either trapped or complicit.

It is perhaps worth regaining a little perspective about what constitutes beauty. Back in 1913, *Webster's Dictionary* defined the word thus: 'properties pleasing the eye, the ear, the intellect, the aesthetic faculty or the moral sense'. Hmm. I'm not sure that a double-zero perma-hungry woman with a lock on her fridge door fits any of those criteria. Are you?