

The Perfect 10

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ONE

Proud

Here's what they don't tell you when you lose seven stones in weight.

They don't mention the loose skin. They forget to tell you that you'll end up with a rice cake-grey stomach that wrinkles and crumples beneath pinched fingers like tissue paper. They don't divulge that on the upper inside of freshly toned thighs two flabby folds of stretched skin will stand guard over your pelvis, like a pair of spitefully unskinned chicken breasts, with a Stalinist determination not to budge. They don't let on about the pubic pouch that they guard so angrily, that refuses to deflate in line with the rest of you, lending your naked profile a hermaphrodite edge.

They make believe your life will be a series of ketchup-red headlines yelling, 'Now Sunny Can Wear a Swimsuit and Feel Fabulous!' or, 'Sunny Buzzes With So Much New-Found Energy She Could Burst!'

The truth is that the energy reserves alone can be spiteful. Some days I'm woken at dawn by the sun streaming in through the cracks in my curtains, and I'll roll over in bed, hug my pillow, and determine to drift in and out of sleep until it's too hot to stay under the duvet any longer. My new

‘healthy lifestyle’ denies me this simple pleasure. As soon as I open my eyes I am buzzing. I can no longer spend an entire Sunday in front of the television with the papers strewn out before me, carelessly picking at the foreign news, munching on Maltesers. My metabolism is so wired I wake up feeling like I’ve been drip-fed crack in my sleep. My body wants to run everywhere: to the train station, down supermarket aisles, from my bed to my wardrobe in the morning. It disconcerts people. They assume I am running from something, and maybe I am. They don’t tell you that some days you will fall so violently off the diet wagon that you will consume a family-sized tub of salted peanuts in twenty-five minutes – your hand dipping rhythmically in and out, passing nuts to lips without thought or care, and that it won’t matter an ounce if you run to the gym the next day. The perception is that anybody who loses a lot of weight has an iron will, and this is simply not true: you are mostly good, and occasionally bad. Detoxing is for monks, or freaks. A rogue band of particularly freakish monks actually invented the concept. They had remarkably clear skin, but they were still mad.

They won’t tell you that your nearest and dearest will inhale sharply if you eat a Quality Street in front of them, secure in the knowledge that the second you digest its seventy nutrition-free calories, you will regain every pound of weight you have previously lost. All seven stones of flesh will instantly bubble and gurgle under your skin – not gone, just hiding – until you suddenly and violently explode like a puffer fish into your old fat self. Despite the effort and determination and willpower you alone have mustered, people will still believe that you need to be protected from yourself. Thus the phrases, ‘But you’ve done so well so far!’ and, ‘Move the chocolates over here out of temptation’s way.’ Cue a kindly smile in your direction. Try not to speak with your fists when this happens.

They don't tell you that you won't find anything you actually want to wear in any of the clothes shops you were too humiliated to enter pre fat busting. The kind of shops where skin-and-bones teenage assistants used to eye you suspiciously if you so much as glanced at their carrier bags.

They don't tell you how vain you will become. They won't alert you to the fact, in advance, that you won't know how to cope with looking in the mirror and seeing something you actually like, without succumbing to self-obsession, and fixating on the bits that refuse to become perfect, no matter how many miles you run, or how little dairy you eat. They don't tell you that you will replace an addiction to food with an addiction to losing weight.

And they won't tell you that you won't be in love with Adrian any more.

Adrian, who couldn't see past your belly, and who shouldered the burden of your unrequited love for so long.

Adrian, who was responsible for so many tears in front of the TV on lonely Saturday nights.

Adrian who inadvertently squished your soul daily for three years.

You just won't love him any more, and it will really confuse you.

Because you'll sleep with him anyway.

The sun is up, omelette yellow by 6 a.m. I am lucky enough to live in a suburb where the leaves are swept away by anonymous brooms before I leave my house in the morning. On holiday in Jamaica three years ago, my body clock refused to adjust to the time difference, and I woke every morning at 5.30. Stepping out on to my balcony to another postcard day, I witnessed an old muscled Rastafarian who called himself 'The Original', trawling our private beach for fish with handmade nets, before the tourists stumbled out

of bed with cloudy heads full of last night's rum, and the aftereffects of a 'cigarette' bought from a kitchen hand. Nature wasn't allowed to hamper my holiday, didn't mar my swimming and splashing fun, and living here is the same. You spend your money, you get your return. Nature – in this case excessive leaf droppage – doesn't tamper with my walk to Starbucks in the morning.

I blow on a Grande Black Coffee-of-the-Day, put aside twenty-seven Two-Fingered Fondler orders that came in yesterday, comfortably cross my legs, and sit back.

At the outside table next to me is a guy, twenty-eight, thirty maybe. He wears jeans, and a T-shirt that demands in screaming yellow on grey 'Who's the Daddy?' It tells me everything. There is no need to go to the effort of talking to anybody new any more. Just lower your eyes, and read the logo on their chest. It will say more about who they want to be than a month of conversation. My favourite T-shirt is pink, and says 'Prom Queen'. Now you know everything you need to know about me: if you have to state it like a sandwich board hanging around your neck, it probably isn't obvious.

His hair is spiky, and has been styled with care, if not expertise. He has ill-advised highlights that a cute gay boy-band member might get away with, but not your Average Joe. He fondles a Frappuccino and has just sat down, pulling up his chair with a confidence that suggests it has been reserved for him, for life. He has the look of a man waiting for somebody to arrive. But he is neither anxious nor nervous; he doesn't glance around himself with apprehension, or casually pretend to read the discarded money pages left behind on his table. He waits with pleasure. His whole manner suggests that these are a few perfect moments to be snatched before whoever he is waiting for turns up, and ruins the image he has of himself, sitting at a coffee shop

in a wealthy London suburb, on a perfect autumn morning, ruling the world.

And I know he'll do it before he does. I see an almost natural blonde exit the newsagent's and swing her hips past my table before she strays carelessly into his eye line; like a clay pigeon sprung from its contraption, I can hear a voice scream 'PULL' in this guy's head. She carries the Sunday papers – one serious offering whose ten other sections will be discarded as soon as she finds the enclosed fashion magazine, and the obligatory news of the screws, which will be devoured first. She wears a pair of dirty low-slung jeans over a small pert peach of an arse. She has the messed-up dirty-blonde hair and clean clear skin of an early morning angel who has been forced out of bed to get Sunday's essentials and is now, half dreaming, making her way back to her bed, and the man in it. She wears her genetic luck comfortably. She is the woman every man would like to wake up to. The Daddy inhales as he watches the Peach amble across the quiet road in front of us. And he watches her lightly jump to the kerb and the soft bounce in her peach of an arse as she does it. I hear his stomach grumble with hunger. There is nothing apologetic in his leer. As she moves round a corner, almost out of sight, his eyes remain fixed on those low-slung jeans, and his stare emits a residue that leaves a filthy film on my fresh coffee.

For a while I thought it was love that made the world go round, in my younger foolish days. Now I know it all comes down to sex in the end. It's the constant screwing in every continent that makes the world turn. Every sexual spark that fizzes inside all of us sends out a peculiar energy into the stratosphere that spins us, like the men who ride the back of the waltzers at the fair – scream if you wanna go faster! – and the sun and the moon, gravity and all of that other stuff has nothing to do with it. It's all about sexual

sparkles. If everybody stopped thinking about sex, all at once, our little star would fall out of the sky like a yo-yo snapping off its string. Working on this theory I realise that I am actually placing mankind in jeopardy, not doing my fair share. But feeling defensive only hardens my heart.

The Peach disappears, and the Daddy sits back, crossing his legs, glazed and freshly raised, like his morning muffin. Moments later a reasonably attractive brunette with wide hips and a foundation line that skims her jaw appears behind him, and taps him on the shoulder. I see all the faults first these days, passing instant judgements. I'm not proud of it, but it happens automatically, and is almost impossible to stop. My therapist finds it 'concerning'. I tell him I find his collection of snow globes concerning, but he ignores that.

The Daddy turns towards Wide Hips Foundation Line, and though the glint in his eye disappears, he shamelessly kisses her with a lust she didn't earn. When I see his tongue flick into her mouth I look away embarrassed. She smiles, pleased and flattered by this unusual passion, then hurries inside to buy a coffee to avert any embarrassment when he makes no offer to buy it for her. She obviously doesn't like confrontations. She doesn't have the confidence to say, 'Couldn't have bought my coffee while you were buying yours? Couldn't think that far ahead? Couldn't be bothered? Or am I just not special enough to warrant a bagel?' The Daddy and I wouldn't last five minutes. He turns back and stares at the corner where the Peach disappeared moments earlier. Wide hips returns, juggling change, a cheese-covered bagel and a cappuccino, and pulls up a chair. I silently do the calorie sums. That's too many for breakfast. She is comfort eating. I blame him, in my head. She begins to chat, and I notice that she has a habit of flicking her ring finger as she talks, stroking a band of gold with an embedded diamond, and I know what she will never know. She will

never realise that in those brief moments before she arrived, her fiancé just traded up for the Peach. I can't watch them any more.

I sip my coffee, which is still so hot that it burns my tongue. I take it strong and black, like my dustbin liners – that's the only comparison I can truthfully make. There is no room for calorific drinks in my diet, I just need the caffeine. I look up at still trees, and yellow-brown leaves that cling to their branches, knowing their days are numbered. I glance around at a litter-free street; even the teenagers consider it rude to drop their wrappers here. A rare saloon car passes noiselessly as I wait for something important to occur to me in the way that it should when you are just watching the world go by. I have always felt that time spent on my own, in a public place like this, should be full of magnificent thoughts. It makes sitting on my own less self-conscious. But mostly it's just shopping lists, credit card bills, errant vibrator orders, and late birthday cards. Then I generally read *Vogue*. But today a thought does occur to me: there may be nothing at the end of this long hungry road, and I'd be a fool to disregard it. There may be no emotional pot of gold, I may still be alone, and I'd be immature – no naïve, no breathtakingly stupid – to ignore it.

But I still ignore it.

It will be a lighter kind of lonely at least. I close my eyes and quickly dream a little dream of being emotionally dependent on somebody else, somebody bigger than me. I could maybe be a little weak, possibly a trifle pointless, just for a while. I could let somebody else make the decisions, just for once. I also decide to ignore the fact that, traditionally, arm's length has always seemed like the perfect length to me. It's what I'm used to, at least.

As a child, while my sister and the other girls on my street were playing kiss chase with the boys down the road, I was

searching my parents' newspapers and scouring pre-watershed television for a fat role model: a woman who was big and really beautiful. But I grew up in the eighties, when aerobics grabbed the attention of the Western world, and Olivia Newton-John sang about getting physical, and leg warmers even became fashionable outside the swing doors of the local gym. My favourite film as a child was *Grease*, and I would spring out of bed early on Saturday mornings and watch it on our video player before my parents woke up. 'You're the One that I Want' was their weekend alarm clock for many years. I must have seen it hundreds of times, maybe even thousands, and I can still recite every character's dialogue when it comes on at Christmas, or over Easter weekend. At the end of *Grease* Sandy, in hooker mode to snag her man, wore black satin trousers that were so tight they had to sew her into them.

Try as I might, I couldn't find my fat *femme fatale*. In magazines or on TV fat women existed only as the big old butt of the joke, and in films fat women never made the romantic lead. But instead of just biting the bullet instead of the cake and going on a diet, I decided to be my own role model, to be big and beautiful myself. Then maybe as I grew older, little fat girls might pass me in the street and know that everything might turn out OK in the end, in the same way that I desperately scoured streets with my eight-year-old eyes to find a reason to be hopeful, even then.

But I didn't even manage to convince myself. I didn't think that you could be both big and beautiful in anything other than an advertising slogan, and yet I tried to live it, clung to it as a philosophy that justified my choice not to diet. As I got older, as long as I'd take in front of the mirror meticulously applying make-up each morning, concentrating solely on the face and hair and never looking down at the body beneath, I knew the body was there, bulging and bruised,

and I hated it. I just wouldn't admit it to myself.

I brush the crumbs of my Skinny Blueberry Muffin from my running trousers and note childish screams and the noisy padding of developing feet running somewhere behind me. I turn to face the commotion: three children, one barely out of nappies, one roughly three years old with a shock of red hair completely dissimilar to his brothers, one older, maybe six, and precocious. Their mother is mousy but elegant, tall and exhausted, and has wild tired eyes that dart from the pavement to the shop to the road, her long slim fingers desperately hanging on to little hands that don't want to be held.

I turn back to my coffee and take an apprehensive gulp, but this time it doesn't burn my tongue. I sit under the umbrella that shields me from the early Sunday morning sun, and try to regain some semblance of peace. I hear chairs being pushed back and open one eye to see the Daddy and his ignorance-is-bliss girlfriend hastily moving off down the road, away from the fresh childish din. I daydream that I might spring to my feet and shout, 'Don't be a fool, Wide Hips Foundation Line! He can't be trusted!' But of course I don't. I don't draw attention to myself like that.

It's becoming harder, being seen. I notice people looking, men looking, and although these should be tiny triumphs, glances that spell sexual desire from the opposite sex, they unnerve me. I don't want men looking at me uninvited, thinking things about me that I can't control. I don't want them picturing me late at night with one hand on the remote and the other in their pants, the way that men do with women they've seen during the day. And yet here I am drinking my low-calorie drink, about to go to the gym, to burn and bruise off this week's two pounds of fat, on a quest ultimately to prove to the man that didn't want me that he was wrong, that he should have had some imagination, should have guessed what I could be.