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Navel Gazing

One Woman's Quest for a Size Normal

Written by Anne H. Putnam

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Navel Gazing

*One Woman's Quest for
a Size Normal*

ANNE H. PUTNAM



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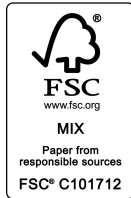
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I

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Manhattan Beach, California, June 1993

The inner thighs of my bike shorts swish past each other and my jelly sandals – purple of course, like everything else I’m allowed to choose – squeak a little, my feet slipping around in them as I trot down the hill, trying to keep up with Andrew. The pavement is already hot, burning the soles of my feet even through my shoes, and the Southern California sun is beating sparkles into the ocean that stretches out in front of us. I squint against the glare and try not to think about all the girls down on the beach in their bikinis, flirting and laughing and not wearing huge T-shirts over their swimsuits to protect them from sunburn and shame.

I’ve always loved living in Manhattan Beach. Our house is three blocks from the water, and my best friend lives a couple of streets over, just through the top of Sand Dune Park. We spend our weekends on the beach, making sand castles and trying to ignore Andrew, and pretending we don’t think his best friend, Scott, is super-hot. I love where I live. But lately, since I started the third grade and turned

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eight, things have started to feel . . . different. I have these new classmates – they're twins, and everyone remembers which one is which because one is chubby, like me. I never realised or cared before that all my friends are skinnier than I am, but now the thought of sitting on the beach with them in nothing but our swimsuits makes me feel squirmy.

Andrew crosses the street without looking, and I swallow a cry of protest and launch myself after him. His long legs glide easily over the pavement – he got my mom's body type, slim and leggy, while I'm stuck with my dad's long torso and heavy frame, and have to move my legs twice as fast as he does to keep pace. He barely looks at me as I catch up; he's probably embarrassed to be seen with his fat little sister, but he needs a partner in crime. We both do.

When we reach Manhattan Avenue and turn left, the sign comes into view: Moon's Market. Right next door to the pizza place with the surfer on the logo, which is next door to the deli where our older sister, Catie, sometimes works when she comes home from college in the summers. As we pass the deli, I start planning how I'm going to spend my allowance; we each have a ten-dollar bill, which goes pretty far at Moon's.

We duck into the heavy cool of the store and pause, relishing the shade, letting our eyes adjust after the brightness outside. I hover in front of the candy stand, running my tongue over the inside of my mouth to try to figure out what kind of candy I'm craving. Fruity? Chocolatey? Crunchy? Sour? I reach for the bright yellow pack of Starburst, then pull my hand back – *too crinkly, Mom might hear*. I choose

the milder, slightly waxy Mambas instead. Starburst Lite. Less flavour, less packaging, just as much sugar and satisfying chew. *Still fat-free, at least.*

I can feel Mr Moon watching me. I wonder if he's thinking we might steal something or if he just thinks I'm too fat to be eating all this candy. I try to ignore him, focusing as hard as I can on the chocolate-toffee Heath bar in my left hand, but the hot, prickly blush invades my face anyway. I wish he would do something, move around, but he always stays behind the counter, watching.

Now I have two candy choices in my collection, one fruity and one chocolate, but I want more. Who knows when I'll get the chance to come back? Mom doesn't leave us alone often, and never for long. I scan the racks, thinking not only of flavour but of longevity too; I can't very well hide a pint of Cookies 'n' Cream ice cream under my bed or in my Barbie shoebox. I grab M&Ms, plain, and red liquorice Twizzlers, then pull back again for one last look. I hear the door to the refrigerated case close and turn to see Andrew standing over my shoulder. He reaches over me to grab a KitKat bar – he already has a big bottle of Pepsi under his arm.

'That's it?' I'm desperate for him to buy more, to even us out and make me less a glutton than a deprived child of a health nut. He looks at the pile of brightly coloured wrappers in my arms, and the burn spreads across my cheeks again. Andrew sees, and looks away.

'Let's just pay and get out of here. Mom'll be home soon.'

I lay my plunder on the counter and unfurl the bill I've

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been clutching in my palm; it's hot and limp, and a little damp. Mr Moon takes it slowly, but instead of getting my change he just stares at me. I shift my weight to my other foot and look at the counter. My purple feet. The cold, blue-grey cement floor.

'Does your mother know you're here?' His voice is deeper than I expected, more masculine than his slight, bent frame would suggest. His eyes are narrowed at me; I feel like I've been busted for shoplifting, or worse, like I've been caught buying candy behind my mother's back. Which, of course, I have been.

'Of course she does.' Andrew speaks up with a voice steadier than my whole body. 'Don't you think our parents would *find out* if we were sneaking out of the house all the time?'

I'm not sure his bluff has worked, but Mr Moon pushes a button on the register and hands me my change without another word, and we flee into the sun's harsh glare.

'Jeez, that was close! Do you think he'll tell on us?' I'm panting – the way back home is all uphill. I try to swallow my heavy breaths and ignore the stinging in my calves.

Andrew barely looks at me, just shrugs and grunts. His stride is almost double the length of mine, and he takes the hill easily.

'Whatever. That old dude probably doesn't even know who Mom is. When was the last time you saw her go into Moon's? Or even the pizza place?'

I exhale in relief. He's right. Mom only shops at the grocery store, and she would never go into the pizza place. Only

Dad takes us there, although Mom might order a delivery from them on special occasions.

‘Yeah, OK.’

We walk in silence, the only sounds my huffing and puffing and the squeak of my rubber shoes on the asphalt. Andrew drinks half his Pepsi on the way home, but I’ve got all my candy stuffed carefully into my waistband under my big T-shirt. I never eat it until I can really savour it, alone in my room.

By the time we reach our street, I’m trailing a good twenty feet behind Andrew, and he’s getting fed up. When he gets to our front gate he stops and turns, placing his fists on his hips with exasperation.

‘Come *on*. Mom’s gonna get home soon and want to know where we were!’

I glare at him, but I don’t quite have the breath to say anything in response without embarrassing myself further.

‘Come on, Annie,’ Andrew puts his hands on his thighs like he’s calling a dog, ‘snap, crackle, pop, burn that fat!’

I feel like I’ve been slapped. My face, already hot from the weather and the hill, burns until it stings, and tears gather at the corners of my eyes. I will them to go away – nothing entices further torture like the sight of tears.

As I reach my brother, I glance up at him, just to show him I’m not afraid, and to hiss ‘Asshole’ in his direction. The bad word feels less powerful than I thought it would, but for a second I think Andrew might feel kind of bad for saying what he did. Then he spots the tears, and the possibility of having to show real remorse stops his pity cold.

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‘Oh, what, now you’re gonna *cry*?’

‘No!’

Yes.

Andrew scoffs at my tears and pushes through the front door. I give myself a minute to calm down, kick at the gate as if it might be on his side, and then follow him in.

The house is cool, quiet. I know it won’t be empty for long, so I head straight to my room to stash my candy. The chocolates have become a bit squidgy from being so close to my warm belly, but they’ll firm up eventually. I hide the treats in different parts of my room, so that if one is found the others will be safe, and nobody will ever figure out just how much I hoard at one time. I wedge the Twizzlers inside one of my shoes, the white patent Mary Janes that are too stiff to wear. The Heath bar is flat, so it fits in between the pages of *Teen Bop*, in my nightstand. The M&Ms I stuff into my underwear drawer, careful to cover them with plenty of Disney Princess panties.

The Mambas, though, I hang onto for a minute. I really want to eat one or two before my mom comes home and smells the artificial fruit flavours on my breath. I open the package and take out two of the raspberry ones, tiny rectangles wrapped individually with a waxy paper. I tuck the rest of the Mambas in between the mattress and the headboard, and sit down on my bed to slowly unwrap the first of the two allotted candies.

I pop the Mamba in my mouth and fold up the wrapper into smaller and smaller squares, until it’s barely visible. The candy on my tongue is soft, and warm from the trip. It

doesn't have much flavour besides sweet, with a hint of ber-riness. I hold it there in my mouth without chewing for a minute, savouring the taste of refined sugar and the texture of taffy, then I let myself bite it. Once. Twice. And then I swallow. It's all over too fast, and I'm glad I've grabbed another. The second piece is gone almost as quickly as the first, although this time I pause to let the partially chewed candy squish between my two front teeth, where there's a big gap that gets bigger every year. The sound is hideous, but it feels delicious.

Just as I've swallowed the candy, and am allowing myself to consider grabbing another, I hear the front door open and my mom calls out a greeting. I leap off the bed, call back, and rush to the bathroom to scrub the scent of sugar off my teeth and tongue.

*

Andrew and I went on these candy-seeking excursions as often as we could – whenever my mother left us alone in the house for more than ten minutes or we could think of an excuse to 'go on a walk' together. They were some of the few occasions where we willingly spent time together, and they were the roots of a lasting bond; my brother and I were united in our rebellion against our mother's healthy kitchen.

We were partners in candy-sneaking crime, and we kept each other's secrets – I didn't tattle when he hid his asparagus in the African violet on the dining table, and he never snitched about the stash of sweets in my bedroom. We moaned in tandem after visits to friends' houses, where Girl Scout cookies and bags of potato chips sat unguarded in

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low cupboards, accessible to all. We told anyone who would listen about our sugar-free prison – wildly exaggerated tales of carob-chip ‘cookies’ and fruit for ‘dessert’.

But there was something that separated us in our fight for fructose: I was fat, and Andrew wasn’t. To be fair, I wasn’t really tormented for it; my family was much more into ridicule and torture of each other’s intellectual failings. I can count on one hand the number of cruel comments my brother ever made about my weight, which is exactly why, unfortunately for him, I remember every instance as sharply as if he’d just said it an hour ago. But still, my weight problem was never far from anyone’s mind; it was always there under the blubbery surface. I was the elephant in the living room.

Andrew was naturally thin; he had my mother’s long legs and straight body. But he also shared my mother’s active lifestyle: he sought out games of pickup basketball, rollerbladed for fun, and was satisfied with one small bar of chocolate. I, on the other hand, would much rather read a book than run a lap, and would stop at one piece of candy only if that was the limit of the offer. We were both normal kids, with normal childish sweet teeth, held hostage by the Wicked Witch of the Watercress, like a reverse Hansel and Gretel. But we were also very different from each other, and it showed, not just on our bodies but also in the way we were treated.

For all our dramatic complaints, sugar wasn’t completely banned in our house. There were birthday cakes, and Christmas stockings stuffed with malt balls, and once I even had a Valentine’s Day cookie-decorating party, when the house

was strewn with heart-shaped sugar cookies dripping with pink royal icing. But the few non-holiday treats we got, the flukes, those were all down to Andrew.

Intentionally or not, our parents treated us differently. At a restaurant, when the waitress asked if we wanted to see the dessert menu, I'd hold my breath and telepathically beg Andrew to say yes before my mom could say no. I rarely said anything, for fear of the awkward silence while my parents tried to figure out how to nix the idea without hurting my feelings and starting a sulk. The same was true of grocery shopping – I'd linger over the Fruit Roll-Ups or snack packs, hoping Andrew might catch my drift and decide he wanted them too.

He didn't always get what he wanted – far from it – but he didn't get a loaded response, either. When Andrew asked for something, the response was usually 'Don't be ridiculous,' or sometimes 'OK, just this once, but only if you stop hiding your green beans in the houseplants and start eating them!' But it was never an uncomfortable pause and a guiltily stuttered reminder of 'what the doctor said about your weight being a bit high ...' To me, Andrew seemed so bold – I wouldn't *dare* ask for Cookie Crisp instead of Cheerios just because my friend got Rice Krispies Treats cereal – but to him it was just a request, and sometimes a negotiation, and the worst our parents could do was say no.

But if Andrew had an easier time of it with my mom, at least I had my dad – when he was home from his never-ending business trips. See, I wasn't the only portly one in the family; my dad was also thickening more around the

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middle every year. And just like she watched what went into her own mouth and her kids' mouths, my mom tried to monitor my dad's habits as well. But Dad was a grown-up, even if he didn't act like one; he had a car, and money, and the same rebellious sweet tooth we kids had. It was a dangerous and fun combination.

Dad and I were two peas in a plus-sized pod. Whereas my mom and brother were generally quiet, shy, and slender, Dad and I were loud, bombastic, and rotund. It was the family divide: the WASPy Wamplers, my mother's matriarchal family, and the Pudgy Putnams, my dad's knock-kneed, pear-shaped clan. I knew exactly where I fit in. So it was no surprise that I was Dad's first choice for his 'adventures', as he called them. Later, we started calling it FaDaBoTi: Father–Daughter Bonding Time. And what is more bonding than food?

For us, food was at the clogged heart of FaDaBoTi. Dad would come home from a business trip on a Thursday, spend about twenty-four hours playing with us and chatting with my mom and talking about how good it was to be home, and then by Friday afternoon he'd have itchy feet again. This was perfect timing for the rest of the family: Andrew and I would be running around the house, getting in my mom's way, fighting and shouting at each other and yelling for parental intervention – '*Moouuuuuuum*, Andrew's touching me when I told him not to *touch me!*' – and my dad would open the front door, jingle the car keys, and wait for the thundering of our feet. We would pile into the car, pausing to fight