

Naked, Finding my Feet
By Helen Peppe

(Chapter 1) Hunger and the Chocolate Devil

I was thirty-eight and I was fat. Periodically I would ask my husband, Eric, “Do I look fat?” He would say, “No, you look great.” His answer had not changed for twenty-three years. So the same day I discovered I was fat, I discovered that my husband was a liar. The thought of possible weight gain had occurred to me when I had to buy a pair of size fourteen pants, up from size twelve, but I had always considered myself muscular and several women had recently told me that clothes sizes were now running small. They conjectured that it was a corporate tactic to encourage the purchase of diet books, low fat foods, and exercise equipment. The theory sounded plausible.

That day of discovery began, as all my days did, with two Reese’s peanut butter cups and a root beer. Sometimes I varied the meal with a Three Musketeers, as they have forty-five percent less fat than the average leading chocolate bar. I had never been allowed sweet food as a child except at Christmas. My parents raised their nine children on a very tight budget, one that didn’t allow for chocolate, caramel, doughnuts, store bought cookies or soft drinks. I hungered for junk food deep in my soul, and Eric, knowing this, bought me all the candy I could eat from our first date when we were fourteen years old.

I wasn’t ignorant of the fact that a high consumption of calories without a way to burn them would make me fat, so I was careful. I skipped lunch and breakfast in favor of chocolate and caramel and ate a moderate supper. I intermixed fruit: apples and bananas for snacks. Years of this behavior and it still felt like a luxury to have a whole bar of candy for myself first thing in the morning. I loved the feel of the wrapper, the moment of anticipation when the chocolate was

revealed, a Willy Wonka moment only without the gold ticket. For me the prize was the bar, the raised chocolate swirl across the top so beautiful. I never felt full after my breakfast of Reeses, so usually by mid morning I was back at the cupboard. Often, in between real snacks, I nibbled on peanut M&Ms. My mind disqualified nibbling in my daily caloric intake, particularly when the item was tiny and only *coated* with chocolate.

Now here I was standing naked in front of the bathroom mirror, turning in different directions, and it was like I was seeing myself for the first time in years. How had I been so oblivious? My breasts rested on a roll of fat that rested on another roll of fat that rested on yet another roll of fat that hid my c-section scar. I couldn't remember the last time I had seen it. My butt dimpled, jiggling to stop in a manner that made me think this reflection couldn't be mine. I had no flexibility. My arms felt short and useless, ineffectual like a T-Rex, as I struggled to evaluate my fat from all angles. I had read once that Queen Elizabeth the first had banned all mirrors from her castle. I had thought maybe it was because her teeth had decayed, and she didn't want to see them. The Brits have always been notorious for their poor dental hygiene, but, as the image staring back at me refused to look thin despite twisting in different directions and waving my arms, I, with sudden empathy, knew it was more than that.

I wanted to cry out of embarrassment to be me and despair. I had gone from ignorantly complacent to mortified in just a few minutes of uninterrupted mirror time. I pulled the scale out of the closet and weighed myself, shocked at the 175-pound digital reading. I was only five feet four inches tall, and if I am to be completely honest, actually a quarter of an inch shorter.

"I'm disgusting! How did I get this fat?" repeated like the music from *Psycho* in my head. I never allowed myself to be naked more than the few seconds it took between removing my clothes, getting in the shower, and putting them back on again as soon as I got out. I always

avoided the mirror as I stepped out over the side of the tub, preferring to look down at the floor, my eyes often settling on the lint and dirt that liked to gather in the corner where the tub and wall met. Having children, one of them a teenager, meant I was always clothed. Once I covered my body beneath my shirt and pants, I could forget about it, pretend everything was as it should be. Somehow, this morning, for reasons I couldn't begin to understand except that I was showering at a different time than usual when both kids were in bed, something made me pause and look.

I simply couldn't believe what I was seeing. I couldn't believe that this old fat person was me. How could anyone who loved me not tell me what had happened? I was trapped inside all of this fat, and I was suffocated by the sudden knowledge that there was no quick fix to my problem. I couldn't call Eric at work where he was tuning pianos and hear him say, "Don't worry about it. I'll take a look when I get home and see what I can do." He couldn't even make me feel better because he had been my fat gauge and had obviously lied. How many times had I asked him, "How do I look?" and he had answered, "Fine," or "Great," or "Perfect, let's go get some Mexican food." Before he came home every night he called and asked, "Do you need anything, more chocolate, more Sprite?"

I felt sick to my stomach, and then I felt anger, anger and defeat. My busy working and mothering life didn't allow for this kind of catastrophe. How could I get un-fat when I didn't even know for sure how I had gotten fat? I always ate small portions at supper. I always guarded against going back for seconds, and I never ate lunch. My life was so hectic I didn't even have time for regular showers. It was the pattern these days to enter a grocery store late afternoon for supper ingredients I should have had, and in a sudden panic clutch at my head, trying to remember if I had brushed my hair or washed my face after I had gotten up that morning. Many days I worked in my pajamas until it was time to get one of my kids to a class.

My choices were either dieting or exercise. How could I fit exercise in? I didn't know anything about it except that it took a lot of time, looked uncomfortable, and that I didn't want to do it. Periodically over the last twenty years I had been inspired to get fit. One time I had purchased a stepper and another time a small trampoline. Just the purchase of these items had made me feel healthier. I had used these tools randomly for about four months and then leaned them against the basement wall behind the Christmas decorations, feeling better about myself for having tried. With a "Now that's done" mental checkmark, I went on with my life as photography and writing projects, in addition to homeschooling my son, took priority.

Exercise, as I now had two children, Morgan and Alex, and multiple jobs, just didn't seem to be an option. Alex was a young teenager now and although he took several classes at the University of Southern Maine, I still worked with him daily on writing and literature. Plus I had to nag at him several times a day to do his math, history, practice his banjo and to stop surfing porn sites. The answer had to be to eat less, a restricted diet. So I resolved not to eat anything but just enough to get by. The bookstore aisles were full of crazy self-deprivation plans and colon cleansing programs. Dieting was what people did when they needed to lose weight.

Instantly I was starving. I felt a panic to eat. I craved chocolate, and I knew there was chocolate in the cupboard and probably some peanut M&Ms on my desk. So I rationalized that one more time of eating chocolate wouldn't make a difference and that this would be the last time before I cut back on everything. Okay, I reasoned. I had a plan: I would eat some chocolate, and then I would diet.

For the next few hours I worked hard. I didn't eat anything. Then I thought it would be okay if I ate an apple, but it was soft, mushy even, putting a bad taste in my mouth, and I yearned for just one peanut butter cup to remove the bad feeling in my mouth. By late afternoon I was

clearly not any thinner, and I was grouchy from having to justify every bit of food that went into my mouth. And, worse, now that I had officially recognized I was fat, I had felt each of my rolls shift around the waistband of my stretch pants all day. I saw the fat on my arms jiggle the way my grandmother's did. I was disgusted with myself, miserable and very sad. I desperately wanted to be *not* fat. So I made a decision, actually a commitment: I was going to exercise, and I would not stop until I was forty pounds lighter. I would turn forty in a year and a half and that was the deadline I gave myself: forty pounds by the time I was forty.

It was about six in the evening, and I still had a lot of calls to make for work, images to download and edit for a book on horses, a writing assignment on a local horse farm, laundry to dry and fold, a son to pick up from class, dinner to make, and the cats' litter box had not been emptied in days, all while I entertained a three year old. I understood with sudden harsh clairvoyance that this would never change. I made a decision then and there to lose weight. I didn't want to be both old and fat. I couldn't be. I would not put off exercise until tomorrow because it would never be easy. I understood that if I viewed my health like something I would fix if I had enough time, then I would never do it. I would never see my c-section scar again. And if I kept on the same path without change my feet might just disappear, too. Just as I put Morgan into her stroller with some juice and Cheerios, I remembered that Alex had asked me to proof his paper for his American Government class. I walked out the door and began walking.

That first walk on the Greenbelt Walkway in South Portland, Maine, was considerably more miserable than I had thought a walk could be. I was hoping it counted as real exercise. I wasn't sure walks did because they were free and could be done outside of a gym. If walks worked to lose weight why were there hundreds of expensive steppers, ellipticals, ski machines, rowers, and treadmills for sale in all the stores? But I had to start somewhere. Morgan began to

fuss and complain.

“Uuaahhh,” she whined, straining against the stroller’s harness. “I want to walk. Let me out!” She threw her Cheerios over the side.

“Not this time.” I usually let my kids do what they wanted if it was reasonable, so she wasn’t accustomed to refusal of her requests. “Just sit, quietly.” I panted, painfully bending to get the baggie. Sweat was beginning to slide down my temples. I stood and gripped the stroller handle tighter in my frustration, trying to ignore the stretched sounds of Morgan’s vowels that made my stomach tighten with rising impatience.

“I don’t want to ride. Let me out,” she began to cry.

“It’s going to be fun. We’re going to walk in this big circle for a while longer and then we’ll be home,” I consoled her. Even to me it sounded stupid. “You can have a lollipop when we get back if you’re good,” I bribed.

Discomfort assailed me: my thighs chafed, my underpants rode up my butt, the sweat dripped into my eyes, my shoulders ached, my breasts hurt from the now wet underwire in my bra, and I had to pee. My goal was to walk three miles in an hour so that I could get home, get in the car, and pick up Alex when his class ended. It was hot, humid for September.

I wished I had put on sneakers instead of my Birkenstocks. My toes hurt from clenching to keep my shoes from flipping off. Pieces of hair kept working their way into my mouth and across my eyes. I passed women and children who were smiling and laughing. Joggers passed looking thin, energetic, at peace with themselves. They made me feel left behind. I was so tired, winded, and miserable that I had to fight not to turn around. My thoughts swirled with hate and images of food. Then I had the idea that if I just got through this walk I would reward myself with a chocolate brownie. I thought about treats the entire walk: my brownie and Morgan’s

lollipop.

When I got home, my clothes and hair were soaked. Now that I had stopped I began to feel nauseas and there was an odd heaviness deep in my bowels. My legs quivered. I wanted to sit so that I could eat my reward brownie, but there wasn't time. I hadn't walked fast enough. I peeled off my pants, shirt, and bra and put on dry clothes, which immediately stuck to me, damp and restricting. A glance in the mirror revealed I was no less fat despite the last hour and ten minutes. My lungs felt raw, and I was still out of breath as I rushed to give Morgan her lollipop which took longer than I had expected because she rejected the grape one, and I couldn't find a raspberry, the only flavor that would work.

I got her in the car and slid into the driver's seat. I began to shiver. The sick feeling in my stomach increased. I hoped I wouldn't have to get out of the car and see anyone. I had in half a day gone from being oblivious to my fat to being embarrassed by my sweaty obese body and sick to my stomach. Maybe my body wasn't the type that could exercise. Maybe, if the sickness didn't go away, I would need to go to a doctor and there was a special prescription that could help me lose weight. I fantasized about all the possible maybe scenarios as I drove across Casco Bay Bridge up High Street and down Forest Avenue. I arrived at the turn around outside the science building ten minutes late. Alex was waiting on the bench inside. He saw me and ran out throwing his backpack onto the seat before getting in and slamming the door. He looked at me and forgetting to harangue me for being late said, "What happened to you?" Then he made a face, moved as far away from me as possible, and said, "You really stink."

Back home at 7:30, I was frantic to make phone calls and dinner, but I had to shower first. The pile of laundry and the vacuuming would have to wait. The sickness had shifted to

intense hunger. I wanted to eat everything as I made spaghetti, marinara sauce, and Italian bread. I ate grapes and Wheat Thins as I worked, but nothing touched the pain of hunger. How could people possibly lose weight by exercising when it only increased appetite? That night my moderate supper portion did nothing to satiate the aching emptiness in my stomach. I proofed Alex's paper, and then went to bed to prevent myself from eating anything else.

As I lay there, staring into the dark, desperately hoping for sleep to come quickly to relieve me of my misery, I tried not to whine, but the words slipped out, "I'm so hungry. This is unbearable. I hate this so much!" My vowels lengthened with frustration.

Eric rolled toward me. "Want me to get you something? What would make you happy?" The desire to ask for a big piece of chocolate cake and some Sprite danced temptingly before me but when I looked at his face in the darkness I thought for a second I could see glowing red where his eyes were supposed to be.

"No thanks," I muttered and turned away. How I wanted with all of my aching stomach and my mouth to say yes.

"You sure?" he continued. "It'll only take me a minute." He got up on an elbow and looked down at me. Were those horns I saw on his head? "You really don't need to worry. You look great to me." He hugged me. Waiting for sleep, I wondered if he actually believed what he was saying, if he knew he was lying, if he knew how desperate I was to really need *not* to worry, to really *need* to look great. At some point, it was going to be too late to look good because I was in a race against time. Middle age was reaching its sticky tentacles out to me: I was almost forty, the new half way mark to death. I had passed that point for the former age expectancy several years back.

Now that I had seen my body for what it really was, covered in dimply cellulite and

unable to walk three miles without collapsing, I hungered for a lean and healthy body almost as much as I hungered for chocolate. In that unreal place just before sleep, I thought how smart Queen Elizabeth was, how clever. She had designed her life so that she could only view parts of herself at a time, and she had never seen any part that couldn't be moved into her line of sight which meant her bottom and the backs of her thighs had always been hidden from her. I had lived similarly for several years always avoiding my reflection. Somewhere deep inside, my unconscious self must have known what was happening, but it had been so much easier to avoid mirrors, like Queen Elizabeth. She understood, all those hundreds of years ago, what I was just discovering: some things shouldn't be seen from all angles and other things shouldn't be seen at all.

(Chapter 2) Food that Bites

I was seven years old when animal meat began to make me gag, in or out of my mouth, cooked or uncooked. If I let the images of the animal, as it looked in life, enter my mind, I could not bring myself to put the meat to my lips. At any thought of flesh, muscle, ligament, tendon, or blood, I would throw up in my mouth. If I allow myself to go back into my memories, I can hear the frantic flapping of the wings and the screaming of the chickens as the ax meets their necks in great chopping actions that cannot be reversed. I can smell the thick sickening stench of their bodies in the boiling water, and I can feel the feathers stick to my hands like cobwebs. I can see the chopping block, a large stump in the woods, its rings wet and stained with blood. Beside the stump chicken debris litters the grass and pine needles.

My choice not to eat meat was made while holding a headless chicken, its veins and arteries sticking uselessly out of the bony neck, hanging limp. The blood dripped onto my bare feet. None of us kids ever wore shoes in the summer and fall. I can still remember what it feels like to stand barefoot in the grass after a frost, the ground hard and unyielding, the grass blades like thousands of tiny frozen sticks poking into my bare soles. Or walking into the chicken coop, warm manure mixed with sawdust squishing up between my toes, the scratch of a chicken's toenails as it races across my feet to get away, I can remember that, too. Along with thinking they could never *really* get away.

The younger girls, my three sisters and I, would sit around the pot of hot water in a circle, dunking headless chickens and plucking feathers like some juvenile coven deep in the country of Auburn, Maine, where we grew up. My family had long ago dubbed my sister Alison a witch. She could find things no one else could. She was mysterious. Me, they called a pest. I didn't get to be called a witch until I had children and then for reasons unrelated to locating lost keys or a

few coins. My father told us we had to get all the feathers off, even the difficult small pinfeathers that clung stubbornly to the chicken's alarmingly naked and human-like armpit. No one else questioned the seasonal chicken slaughter. They pulled feathers and tossed bodies while they laughed and discussed what they would have for lunch. Seeing naked chickens made them hungry. Seeing naked chickens made me want to eat food that was unrelated to warm bodies that had once stood, walked, run, and enjoyed the sunshine.

“Why,” I would ask, “do we have to eat them? Can't we eat something that doesn't have to be killed?”

“Just behave yourself and stop being so silly,” my mother would say.

“Less talking, more plucking,” my father would order.

It was always me against them especially the day my rabbits appeared on the dinner table, their long hind legs bent up to their naked slit bellies. Their furry strong feet gone. My father said they weren't the same rabbits. Mine had escaped. I was the youngest but I wasn't the dumbest. I didn't believe him just as he didn't believe me when I told him that I wouldn't eat meat ever again. The pots on our stove held cow tongues that simmered gently in water. The papillae disappeared during the boiling, but it took time. Then my mother would chop the tongue up and feed it to my father in sandwiches. Being a vegetarian was the only way for me to disconnect myself from the death. My father insisted I wouldn't be able to exist without meat. But I did, and thirty-one years later he is still convinced that no one can survive without eating meat at least two meals a day, three even better.

The third meal of the day, supper at my childhood house, dinner at others, invariably didn't smell good. The stink of roasting lamb, frying liver and hearts, boiled tongues and chicken necks, and simmering pig parts made me sick. Boiling was my mother's preferred method for

most food, New England style, she said. Vegetables were cooked to mush point without seasoning. Usually served unstrained floating in water, they collapsed into sludge at the first touch of a fork. Neither butter nor salt and pepper could save them. Spaghetti was one of the more bearable meals, but too often the tomatoes were stringy resembling blood clots, and there was always ground meat that had to be pushed off the plate.

“Stop being so gross,” my mother reprimanded me when I told her what the tomatoes reminded me of. “Just eat your spaghetti.”

I considered it her fault that I knew what blood clots looked like and her fault that they haunted me. When I told her so, she smacked me.

“Just behave yourself,” she said. “I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

But if a wet tomato string or a piece of ground hamburger got into my mouth by accident, especially one that harbored buried sinew or a small piece of bone, my stomach threatened to send my supper back.

Drinks were no better. Milk for several years was either made from a powder or served fresh from the cow, which meant it was either warmly revolting or filled with chunky pieces of milk skin from sitting in the fridge. I couldn’t open my mouth to drink but had to suck the milk slowly, teeth clenched against the rim of the glass so that no clots got in because that’s what I thought, milk clots. The only other drink, unless it was summer and there was Koolaid, was water. Never did water seem a viable choice. My friends didn’t have to drink water. They drank juice and soda and milk from cartons and jugs. Our water came from a well that was surrounded by snakes, infested with snakes if you dared lift the cover and look. Sometimes the water had a colored tinge. “It’s fine. Just let it run until it’s clear,” my father would say. It could run for as long as it wanted. I wasn’t going to drink it.

There was very little safe food in my childhood with the exception of plain refined pasta or white bread and peanut butter. Even baked beans had huge lumps of pork fat to be negotiated. School hot lunches held similar fears: American Chop Suey filled with tomato strings and pale pieces of meat, soft cold vegetables, pigs in the blanket that were made with the cheapest bone filled byproducts that could be purchased. I detested the snotty slime of eggs. I didn't like chunks of anything in my food, no coconut, no walnuts, nothing. In the summer I lived on raw vegetables and fruit. I had to be wary of worms in corn on the cob and green apples, but these were nothing compared to other possible food horrors equating to the sudden crunchy pieces in a hot dog or the wet red part of a grilled hamburger. My mother called me a picky, finicky eater, difficult to get along with, naughty. My aunt gave me a special blue plate to encourage me to eat everything on it because a clean plate is a happy plate. It did not go unnoticed by me that all of her children were obese.

My earliest fantasies are those that involve unlimited chocolate, covering all sorts of gooey centers. I would fantasize that I had boxes in my adult house full to the brim of every kind of candy bar I had ever coveted. From Marathon bars and Charleston Chews to Chunkies and Clark bars, I wanted them all. Fat wasn't even a passing thought. I did wonder about the health of my teeth, but that wasn't an obstacle. My parents had dentures and they were doing fine. I also fantasized about owning a few horses and a lot of dogs, all different breeds: ones to protect me, ones to cuddle, and ones that needed rescuing. I never factored a husband and his personal desires into my plans. Considering someone else's needs would negate the fantasy aspect. I was going to be in complete control of everything in a perfect dog and chocolate nirvana.

My childhood has never left me. If my parents had known how every moment would be cemented into my brain, they might have thought twice about eating my rabbits or my 4-H

lambs, Tillie and Tommy, or my two chickens that were given to me as a gift by Mr. Landry.

“Oh, she’ll soon forget all about it,” is not what happened at all. Every food choice I have ever made as an adult is a direct consequence of childhood experience. I can’t forget the bleating of the lambs and the ewes when they were separated or the killing of the male lambs, or lifting the lid on a pot in the kitchen only to see a half submerged cow tongue, bits of slimy grey gel floating around it. I can’t forget the deer slaughter in the cellar, the floor beneath the kitchen. I can’t forget the mice that my father killed with DeCon, a powerful poison that caused internal bleeding, painful slow death. I can’t forget the kittens my brothers drowned, the mother cats’ haunting meows calling and searching for her babies. Rabbits scream and kick violently before they die. Chickens screech and flap and scratch before they are beheaded. Some things simply stick with you no matter how much time passes.

(Chapter 3) Walk On

The morning following the day of fat discovery, I ate my Reese's peanut butter cups very slowly, trying to make them last. My plan was to get through the first hours of the day without eating anything else but an apple and a handful of crackers. Alex didn't have any classes until late that afternoon so he was going to babysit Morgan. I would exercise unencumbered by stroller and complaints. My plan would have been perfect if I wasn't so sore. All of my muscles ached including the arches in my feet, the pain increased as each hour passed, and I couldn't believe how hungry I was. My stomach hurt it wanted food so badly.

This time I left with a pair of old sneakers on my feet and my hair pulled back. I was learning. I hobbled at first, but then the pain eased into the background. Having only walked that once I didn't know any other routes so I retraced my steps from the day before which seemed even more pointless than the first time I did it. I had to keep reminding myself why I was out there when I had so much work to do at home. I hated every step. I was so angry that I was fat, and I was so angry that other people weren't. Sweat soaked my clothes after what I guessed must be a mile. I discovered that I was the type of person who sweated a lot. My usual practice had been to wear my clothes for several days before throwing them in the hamper to reduce laundry. Now on day two of my exercise-to-lose-weight plan, I was on my third outfit with a fourth waiting in the wings for my return. This meant I was going to have to do more laundry more often or buy additional clothes. I made a mental note to stop at Target after dropping Alex off at class.

I passed what looked like the same happy mothers. Their children weren't whining in the strollers. The women didn't seem distressed about their fat either. More joggers passed. I felt only malice toward them and wished they would fall and rip the skin off their thin knees. They

smiled at me as they passed. I was positive they were making fun of my fat and my weak attempt at exercise. They thought they were superior in their fitness, their muscular shapeliness. I struggled on forward but felt like I was going nowhere. I was always telling my kids to think positively, not to waste energy on being negative, but with each step, my inner voice chanted, “I hate this, I hate this, I hate this.” There was no amount of emotional gymnastics that could leap semantics and turn the words positive.

If I wasn’t thinking about how much I detested each step, I was mentally reviewing all the work I had to do before I could call the day quits and go to bed. The only good thing about walking was that while I was doing it, the hunger abated. The growls deep within my abdomen calling out for food were replaced for about an hour with an unsettled feeling which, in conjunction with the all the sweat, felt a little bit like the flu. That thought made me think that if I had the flu, I might be able to lose a few pounds without walking plus I would have an excuse to lie down.

With all of my internal complaining and work lists, the hour of torture ended, and I returned to the steps of the apartment we were renting while we saved money and searched for a new home. I climbed the stairs and entered back into nonstop childcare mixed with nonstop business work that involved phone calls that I tried to make in Morgan’s short silences. In between I did laundry until I had to drop Alex off at school. Hours later I finally had the opportunity to sit and read several books to Morgan, a period of about thirty minutes. When I tried to stand to get her a juice, my legs didn’t want to work. Slowly, barely bending them, I moved to the fridge. Then I noticed my feet. Bare, the arches protested as I attempted to push off on my toes to take steps. My heels felt like they had lost their padding.

I was crippled. I had crippled myself in a way that couldn’t be healthy. “Morgan, I hurt,”

I complained to her. “I can hardly move.” Her answer was to wrap her arms around my waist and go limp. I finished my journey to the fridge and decided I deserved a handful of M&Ms for all my pain. Morgan refused my offer of candy in favor of Cheezits. Her green eyes stared back at my brown ones when she shook her head in disgust. I put on slippers to cushion my bony heels. I took Advil but yearned for a narcotic. Fatigue surged through me in one big wave. I hated exercise so much that my head felt like it would explode with being so hopelessly fat. After two days of torture I looked the same. No twisting and turning in front of the mirror had revealed even the slightest difference in my rolls and dimples. I sat down on the couch with Morgan, my fat arm resting against her thin one. She was so lucky. All she had to do was not *get* fat. She was perfect, tiny bones and muscles showed beneath her skin. It would be so much better if my goal was to not *get* fat instead of the depressing backwards route.

Day three began as day two only there was more hunger and more pain. I weighed in. No change. I said the f word a lot in my head with energy and at different volumes. Day four I added adjectives and nouns. The string of expletives in my head became longer and more colorful each day I stepped on the scale. After two weeks I complained a lot to anyone who would listen. It is possible I even whined.

“You’re doing it for all the wrong reasons,” Eric counseled. “If you want to be fit, that’s one thing, but don’t do it because you want to be thin. That’s silly. You look wonderful. Normal people who don’t have to be thin for their careers can’t just walk and be thin in a few weeks. Actors have trainers and are on carefully controlled diets.”

I wondered if those diets included Reeses and peanut M&Ms. We had been together since we were kids, so he knew what I was thinking, “They can’t eat whatever they want,” he said. “Be realistic and you’ll be happier.”

“I’ll be happier when I’m thin!” I yelled because some things he needed shouted at him. “If other people can do it, then I can do it, too” I insisted. In the case of learning how to play the penny whistle that had been true.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t,” Eric said. “I said you’re putting yourself through an awful lot for something I’m not sure you value. You’ve always made fun of thin people and all the time they take to keep themselves that way.”

“I still do make fun of thin people. In fact, I hate them.” I continued to shout because the words came from deep within me, and I could never keep what I was feeling from Eric. “But I also want to be like them. It’s not fair.”

And it wasn’t, I grumbled to myself because, after two weeks of agony, I felt none of the natural high exercise people love to gloat about. I began to suspect that they made it up in an effort to make fat people feel even more left out and hopeless. I despised every second I walked, my fat rolls rubbed uncomfortably, awkwardly, beneath my wet clothes. The numbers on the scale didn’t go down. Instead they went up. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I was always starving. I was always in physical pain. I was behind in laundry, dusting, vacuuming and work for mine and Eric’s jobs because of the hour and half missing from my day, and I weighed more than ever. It occurred to me that maybe I was the type of person who couldn’t lose weight. Maybe my body type was meant to be fat. I had heard people say that no matter what they did, they couldn’t lose a pound.

And the major problem with exercise, as I had feared besides the fact that it sucked, was all the time it took up in my life. When I wasn’t doing it, I had to be thinking about the next time I would do it. Each morning began by planning the walk around Alex’s classes, Morgan’s music and gym class, basic child care, making meals, cleaning, and my job of scheduling Eric’s day of

piano tunings and music rehearsals. Plus I was in the middle of completing my own book project, a guide to horse stables and professionals in Maine. The stress of waking up and thinking, “Okay, how am I going to walk an hour and a half today without Morgan?” was pushing me to the edge of the cliff. I was overwhelmed. I knew that if I let myself start to think about all that I had to do that I would cry and not be able to stop. I had no babysitting options beyond Alex, and he was taking college classes, which at fourteen was a lot of responsibility. I couldn’t rely on him.

In addition, each time I sat caused stiffness in what I thought must be every muscle in my legs. But my feet were the worst. It was as if I had never used them before I began walking. Every section of the part I stepped on felt like it was bare bone against floor. I was pretty certain I was crippling myself for life, that a cane would soon be the only option. I felt so old and hopeless. I couldn’t control my own toes from curling in pain when I watched anyone dance on run barefoot. I thought about my feet the way men think about sex: no matter what I was doing, my sore feet clouded my thinking. I had completely forgotten what it felt like to walk without pain.

I had never been the type of person to give up except that time I had thought I could make myself jump on a tiny circle of a trampoline for twenty minutes each afternoon. That goal hadn’t been well thought out. My parents would be the first to tell anyone that I was a natural nag, a nuisance, a born pest. It took months of begging, leaving notes in my father’s lunch box, on his pillow, on the refrigerator, but I got my puppy. It took even more consistent hourly begging to get a horse, but I got one of those, too. My sisters and brothers called me a spoiled brat, but nagging sometimes worked, so they could call me whatever they wanted.

I had made a commitment to myself, and I had to believe that if I worked harder, the

weight would come off. I wanted to be thin. I *needed* to be thin even if it was only for a few months. After that I could be just fit and healthy as Eric kept telling me was the more noble goal. Despite being a vegetarian all of the part of my life I could remember, I had never been thin except as a child. I had never even come close to a flat stomach or a firm bottom or small shapely thighs as an adult. Now that I was nearing middle age, I saw that my chance for an attractive body was disappearing just as quickly as my life.

Oddly, my yearning for low body fat made me despise thin people. My contempt increased daily. Well dressed joggers and bikers would whip by me, making me feel abandoned and lonely. The sense of being left behind made me vindictive. I had to force myself not to stick a foot out and trip them or better yet whack them with a big stick from the brush at the side of the path. If I could have, I would have fed these people rich desserts and chocolate to make them fat like me. Then we could all be equal. I was never so happy to see overweight people, especially those heavier than myself.

Secretly cursing healthy exercise committed Americans caused karma to turn on me. On a routine visit my gynecologist referred me to Casco Bay Surgery in Portland. My bottom was always sore, but I figured that this was yet another negative side effect of exercise. There were so many I had stopped enumerating them. I met Dr. Roberts on a sunny fall afternoon after spending thirty minutes in the large waiting area and another ten in the small examination room.

When Dr. Roberts entered I was surprised at how young he was. He didn't look much older than me. But what if he wasn't? What if he was younger? It had to happen at some point didn't it? As I aged, young men and women would be graduating and beginning practice. It was unrealistic for me to expect that I would always be the younger person in the doctor patient relationship. This realization made me feel very tired. Time was not waiting for me to adjust to

the facts that were staring me in the face each day stepping out of the shower: I was fat, I hadn't done nearly any of the things I had dreamed about as a child, and I was approaching middle age. I had just wasted forty minutes of my life doing nothing.

I expressed my concern to Dr. Roberts. "How old are you?" I have always been a little forward despite my problem of not liking people very much.

He laughed, knowing instantly why I'd asked. That was a good sign. He was smart. But also a bad sign because I looked my age. "Forty-five," he answered. Then after a very uncomfortable exam that if he'd been any younger would have been extremely embarrassing, he recommended a hemorrhoidectomy. My first thought was that I'd have an excuse not to walk because I rarely thought about anything else except walking and feet. But my consciousness was brought back suddenly from fantasizing about days of rest when Dr. Roberts mentioned no solid food for a week.

He smiled pleasantly at me as he recommended food in the form of liquids before and after surgery. All I heard was no chocolate because, even melted, chocolate couldn't be considered a clear liquid. I questioned him in detail on the hazards of opaque versus clear then I interrogated him on which food items created the least stool. I was panicking. I was feeling a strong need to eat even as I sat there. I loved to eat. Loved it. He was one of the thin ones. He couldn't understand. Dr. Roberts was probably thinking a few weeks without solid food would do me good. Now that I had recognized I was fat, I was positive that that's what everyone saw when they looked at me.

"Boy she sure is fat," they'd think. Then, "She needs to get off her fat butt and do something." They would have no idea how hard I was trying because when you looked at people you didn't know where they were in their weight loss programs. I understood this because when

I saw overweight people jogging it was tempting to assume that a faster pace didn't take weight off any better than a slower one. I had to remind myself that they could have started jogging when they were a lot fatter. I could be seeing an after picture of thirty pounds difference.

Whenever I talked to a doctor, anyone actually, I tried to get into the conversation as soon as possible that I was exercising so that they would know *I knew* how fat I was. I wanted to bring it all out in the open to avoid all confusion.

I had asked my gynecologist at Generations about weight loss. I had complained (bordering on tearful whining) how I wasn't losing weight like I expected. At my emphatic and continued insistence that something must be physically wrong with me because I was working so hard and not losing, he checked my thyroid. But the test results took away all hope. I was normal. I had to accept that my fat was a result of my sedentary lifestyle. I knew that as a writer I spent a lot of time sitting, teaching Alex meant I sat, reading to Morgan, reading to me, making phone calls and downloading images and then sending them off to publishers meant more time in the chair.

I spent hours and hours on my butt each day. The question was how could I still work and teach Alex and *not* sit? The challenge seemed insurmountable, and I was exhausted just contemplating it. It would have been so easy to be prescribed a pill for a thyroid condition and allowed to go on 'as is' with my busy but sedentary lifestyle. Reversing the fat dilemma seemed impossible to me as I left Casco Bay Surgery in early October. I was stuck, and I didn't know what to do, so I just continued with the original plan and walked on.

(Chapter 4) The First Pound

I would be a vegan if not for milk chocolate and some types of dark chocolate. I have both food fat issues, but I am the type of person who can address only one deep-seated crazy neurosis at a time. I lack self-control. If I see chocolate, I eat it. Dr. Atkins and South Beach Diet books were everywhere, but their diet concept didn't make any sense to me. Cutting carbohydrates seemed stupid when I needed my brain and my energy more than ever to keep on my exercise regimen. Fortunately neither of my doctors recommended dieting as a permanent weight loss solution so I felt like I had a doctor's unwavering approval when I vowed to never go on what people refer to as a "diet." However, every person I spoke to had a different amazing fool proof diet to pander to me. My response to them was, "If you're right, why isn't everyone thin?" They had no answer I could sink my teeth into.

I have witnessed many people lose weight on self-deprivation diets but most gained it back. If I lost weight, I couldn't bear the thought of it coming back to me. I loved to read, one of the sedentary activities that helped me to get fat in the first place. Whenever I had questions, I attempted to find answers in books. Sometimes I googled on-line, but the Internet couldn't be trusted so my teenage web surfing son kept telling me. Slowing metabolism means there has to be either less food or more exercise. Age was dragging my metabolism to a gentle yet inelegant swagger. I read that the human body is a master at adapting to new situations, which translated to the conundrum that if I lost weight by reducing calories solely, then I would have to eat fewer calories each year in order to maintain the original weight lost. That meant that in a few years I could be at 1000 calories per day, always hungry, and consider myself lucky to be maintaining. As the years continued, the 1000 calories would get lower and lower, meaning no fun food unless I acquired worms. In my sixties I would be forced to eat tiny nutritious amounts as if my stomach were stapled.

I knew myself well enough to understand that if I based my weight loss on cutting out the foods that made me happy that I would fail. I could think of only a few people who agreed that I could eat chocolate daily and still lose weight. Eric was one of them, however, he was fat, so I didn't think it was smart to trust his weight loss strategies completely. My sister Sharon was another. Sharon was, ironically for me, a professional in the exercise business and a serious runner. She lived in Maine, but not nearby and I saw her rarely, but, as I wrestled with my exercise ignorance, I contacted her. I had never, until the last month, fully appreciated my sister's high level of fitness or her exceptional drive to stay that way. Her philosophy is simple: Eat, but burn as many calories as you can. On the days you eat more, exercise more. Sharon recommended that I buy running shoes.

Each day, just as I awoke, I considered first when I would exercise and second what my treat would be for that day. It could be two dark chocolate covered needhams or three small pieces of milk chocolate covered fudge or two small peanut butter logs or milk chocolate filled with soft caramel. I sat to eat them, slowly enjoying each bite. I was determined not to give up this small and only relaxing part of my daily life.

So, I continued to walk. I was four weeks into my walking program, exercising seven days a week if possible. Alex babysat Morgan for me so that I could concentrate on the discomfort, not on Morgan's needs, but there were some days that Alex wasn't available, and the weather was too bad to take Morgan out. Knowing there were days when exercise was not possible, I never planned a day off. The daily reading on the scale had capped off at 178 pounds. I was now, after a month, back to my starting weight of 175 pounds. I decided to start jogging. I had a 68 year old aunt who didn't actually jog. She ran. Aunt Pauline had begun running when she was 55, and she now raced in marathons, traveling to New York and even Greece to

compete. Many times she had told me how much she loved running. She was thin and muscular, vibrant and happy. So I reasoned that if my aunt could run marathons at age 68 and enjoy it that I could at age 38 possibly manage a slow jog.

The first day I attempted to move beyond a fast walk left me gasping for air in a way that couldn't be healthy. I had jogged twenty steps. I used telephone poles to mark my distance. I counted up three distant poles and told myself I couldn't stop until I reached the one I had marked. What had seemed like a short distance visually was much longer in jog mode. I simply could not get enough air into my lungs. My muscles burned and shook, buckling closer and closer to the tar with each stride until I reached the designated pole and stopped bent over gulping air. My sides, probably with all my wind sucking, cramped with gas. The new up and down motion jostled my bladder and made me think of nothing but the need to get to a bathroom.

I had been embarrassed before sweaty and fat, panting from the effort, but lack of oxygen to my brain removed my filter for caring what people thought of me. Only seconds from passing out, holding my sides, bent over, on the side streets surrounding the Greenbelt Walkway, my thoughts were loud and clear, *Who gives a shit what people think?*, *How am I ever going to jog a mile?*, and *I really need to invest in a sport bra*. As soon as I had contemplated jogging I had had this image of a future version of myself happily jogging the three and a half miles around Portland's popular Back Bay. How would this ever be possible? The only thing I knew for sure was that unlike walking, one should not eat only minutes before jogging: I burped food and was quickly sick to my stomach. For one of the first moments in my life, pregnancy and the flu aside, I didn't want chocolate.

