

A MAMMOTH UNDERTAKING

by Roz Warren

My best friend and roommate Eliza woke up one morning with the sudden conviction that she had to become very fat, as soon as possible.

She immediately got out of bed and went to look at her naked body in the full length mirror in her bathroom. Eliza was average weight for her height. She worked out. She ran. She had always worked hard on her appearance and had been satisfied with the results. Now she looked unfinished to herself, an uninspiring collection of skin and bones.

Standing on the bathroom scale under the fluorescent light, she realized that she resembled a spare, sturdy piece of modern furniture, like a Scandinavian coffee table. She suddenly yearned to be a comfy chair -- plush, overstuffed and yielding.

She got off the scale, pulled on her bathrobe and marched down to the kitchen. Instead of her usual breakfast of black coffee and yogurt, she made herself a batch of whole wheat pancakes, doused them in maple syrup and butter and polished off every last bite. She was on her way.

Within a week, she had gained five pounds. They formed a neat little bulge at her belly and sat tentatively upon her hips. "I'm making progress!" she said to me happily, scrambling some eggs for us one morning.

"You're nuts," I said.

"No I'm not," she said. "I simply want to be a fat person. The fatter the better."

"What for?"

"I want to be all that I can be."

"You're nuts."

"I'll make you eat those words," she vowed.

Eliza steadily put on weight. However, watching television one evening, she had a sudden insight -- she wasn't putting on the right kind of weight. To gain, she'd been eating large portions of her favorite foods. But that wasn't enough. Being a Genuine Fat Person didn't mean merely ingesting an excess of salad and whole wheat bread. It meant cutting loose entirely -- washing down a double helping of macaroni and cheese with a gallon of chocolate milk, and following it up with a plate of Ding Dongs.

For lunch the next day, she proudly served me a huge sandwich made from a dozen pre-packaged luncheon meat slices and American cheese singles between two slices of Wonder Bread, oozing with Miracle Whip.

"It took me hours to unwrap all the plastic," she said. "but you're worth it."

"You're crazy," I said, contemplating the preposterous sandwich.

"Trust me. I'm onto something very significant here."

"Yeah -- it's called high blood pressure."

Concerned, I got Eliza a subscription to Weight Watchers magazine.

I was a bit nervous as she pulled the first issue from the mailbox and examined it. Would she be touchy about such a critical gesture?

However, she merely smiled. Later, I crossed my fingers as Eliza vanished into her bedroom with the magazine and a fresh bag of Doritos.

She emerged an hour later, still smiling. "I love it!" she cried.

"You do?"

"It inspired me! There was an article about a woman who used to sneak down to the kitchen each night when her family was asleep, to prepare cake mixes. Then she'd eat the entire thing, right out of the mixing bowl! Why on earth didn't I think of that?"

The next night, Eliza dreamed that she took part in an elaborate awards ceremony in which Captain Crunch, Ronald McDonald and the Pillsbury Dough Boy presented her with a beautiful patchwork quilt. The quilt was made up of millions of American kitchens at midnight. In the center of each kitchen stood a sleepy fat person, putting together and then devouring a cake mix.

"We present you with this coveted award, Eliza," the Pillsbury Dough Boy said in his high-pitched, giggling voice, "for your heroic effort to become larger than life." Happily, Eliza took the quilt, wrapped it around herself, and strode proudly from the stage to thunderous applause.

She awoke to find herself standing on the scale in her bathroom, her down comforter draped about her shoulders. Peering into the mirror, she let the comforter drop. To her profound joy, her outline, which only weeks before had been hard and lean, was now fuzzy and indistinct. She had acquired a pale luminous softness, like a woman in a nineteenth century painting. Her physique had traveled back in time -- she had mysteriously evolved into a glowing, voluptuous, Retro beauty.

"Renoir would have adored me!" she exalted.

"Renoir is dead," I said when she told me of this vision the next day.

"Cindy Sherman would probably cross the street to avoid having to look at you. And not only is all this weight unstylish, it's also unhealthy!"

"You can't be sure," she said. "For centuries, doctors thought being large WAS healthy. The current emphasis on being thin could turn out to be just as misguided. Why, in a few years health food stores could be selling blocks of cholesterol instead of tofu. I wouldn't be surprised if doctors discovered that the key to a long life is a positive outlook combined with an additional fifty pounds. I personally have never felt better."

This was hard to deny. At 160 pounds, Eliza seemed happier than I'd ever seen her.

At 175 pounds, all of Eliza's hard edges had vanished completely. As if to compensate, she developed a sharp wit. Everyone enjoyed her company and adored her wonderful new sense of humor.

One of them, Ralph, soon confessed his love to her.

"I always wanted you," he said to her as they lay in bed the first night they made love. "But you seemed so hard and unapproachable. Now I feel so comfortable and relaxed with you."

Eliza merely smiled and patted her ample belly in the darkness. "I'm up for a midnight snack, darling," she said tenderly. "Want to split a pot roast?"

"Okay," I said to her after he'd left the next morning. "He's adorable. But I still think you're throwing yourself away."

"On the contrary," she said. "I'm finally finding myself. All my life, I've worked and slaved and struggled to be thin. What if that was completely wrong? You know they say that inside every fat person there's a thin person longing to be released?"

I nodded.

"What if inside certain thin people there's really a fat person being slowly crushed to death?"

I was stunned. "Are you telling me that you've really been a fat person all along?"

"That's what I have to find out. And the only way is to take this as far as it can go."

"But how far is that?"

"My goal," she said, "is to reach that point where life is reduced to three fundamentals -- procuring food, preparing food and devouring food."

"And everything else," I said, "will be -- you'll forgive the expression -- icing on the cake?"

"Exactly!"

"And what then?"

"Who knows?" she said with a mysterious smile, reaching for a cupcake.

Almost a year after she had begun her great project, Eliza woke up in the middle of the night. She heaved herself out of bed, moved majestically to the bathroom scale and climbed aboard. The needle danced crazily back and forth, in a desperate attempt to adjust to Eliza's increased poundage. Then, with an anguished Clunk! The scale broke.

"Jackpot!" breathed Eliza to her reflection. The fat lady in the mirror grinned back. Giggling, she tore off the voluminous flannel nightgown she wore and raced out into the night.

“Hallelujah!” she cried. “I’m fat at last!”

The noise she made woke up her neighbors. We all went to our windows and looked out, then watched, mesmerized by the unique sight of all three hundred pounds of naked Eliza joyfully jitterbugging across the lawn in the moonlight.

It should have been awkward, or ugly. She should have been grotesque. But it wasn't in the least bit ugly. Instead, it was one of the most touching, enchanting and beautiful sights we'd ever seen. We had each feared in our hearts that we were ugly in some way. Seeing Eliza, we lost all fear. All we wanted to do was to join her, to laugh and dance with relief and joy. .

But as we moved to do so, Eliza stopped dancing and spread her arms wide. A great rush of wind came and caught her and she began to rise, like a succulent cookie in an oven, or an old-fashioned zeppelin loosed from its moorings. As we watched, dumbfounded, she rose quickly into the night sky and vanished forever.

And everybody who rushed out of their homes and into the yards that night swear that her disappearance from sight coincided exactly with the appearance in the sky of a brand new cluster of stars, which the astronomers named Zorga Molar Constellation, but which Eliza's neighbors always refer to knowingly as The Fat Lady.

And those of us who slip downstairs at night to finish off the roast chicken, or settle down on a Sunday afternoon with a good book and a box of Thin Mints, know that she watches over our meager efforts to duplicate her art, tenderly, eternally smiling and supportive and, at long last, satiated.

