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Fat Pride

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On this particular day in 1987,

as I bicycled home from the student rec center, no one moored at me. Mooers seemed to have grown scarcer than they'd been in my fat years as a teenager, despite the fact that I was now even bigger than that and went outside more frequently. Maybe it was because I projected more confidence these days, or maybe a woman over twenty-five just didn't attract the same kind of attention from men. Whatever the reason, I now got only a dozen or so moos per month, usually from men traveling in pairs or groups. It could happen when I was biking or

walking, but rollerblading was the spectacle that delighted them most.

Today I had just finished a good workout, and I was proud of the way I felt and imagined myself to look, speeding exuberantly along under my own muscle power. Surely anyone could see how thoroughly at home I was in my body. The iron-pumping men in the weight room always nodded respectfully to me. My workouts, like theirs, were profound exertions that altered my consciousness. Like them, I had tested and gradually extended the limits of my physical capacity over months

and years. My relationship with my body was no different from any other trained athlete's.

I still had a slight endorphin buzz from the workout. I felt energy and pleasure shining from my skin. I put the bike away and went to the rack of apartment mailboxes, feeling like a walking advertisement for fat pride.

"You look tired!" an elderly woman called out merrily from a second-floor window to my right.

What? I kept my gaze grimly focused on the mailboxes. She didn't even know me. What was she doing talking to me at all, let alone saying something so imbecilic? I had no more obligation to respond to her, I told myself, than I did to one of the mooers.

"You look tired!" she said again, a bit louder, as if I hadn't heard her. There was no malice in her tone. She obviously intended her remark to be sociable.

I had once comforted myself through a heartbreak by reading a wickedly funny advice book by Judith Martin, aka "Miss Manners." Before that, I had thought of etiquette as a collection of insincerities practiced by people too timid or stupid to express themselves in more-original ways. Miss Manners had revolutionized my thinking. Etiquette could be subtle, intellectually demanding, and as full of emotional tensions as any great novel. Miss Manners writes that "You look tired" should not be regarded as a welcome observation. Clearly this woman at the window was out of line. On the other hand, Miss Manners writes that younger people, even under provocation, must be outwardly respectful to their elders. Then again, Miss Manners also says that being polite doesn't require you to give your time away to strangers: you may gently let them know that they have pulled you away from your private concerns.

"What?" I said, glancing up and around as if startled from my reverie: *Surely you don't mean me, do you?*

"I said, 'You look tired,' " the woman repeated. Once my face was aligned with hers, she faltered. "Aren't you . . . You work in the office there, don't you?"

"No," I said. The receptionist at the Casa Feliz Apartments was Mexican American; I am Anglo. I wore my hair however it happened to fall after showering, whereas her dark, thick hair was pressed into gravity-defying curves. Her creamy, well-tended complexion contrasted with my pimples, blotches, and peeling. Her face was rounder, her features softer than mine. She was shorter than I, and smaller in the hips, more cylindrical than pear-shaped. She favored feminine outfits and big hoop earrings. I dressed for action. Other than the fact that we were both fat, we looked nothing alike. Could this woman have been thinking of someone besides the receptionist? Her eyesight was probably poor. Maybe from that distance she could see only a smeary blob, anyway. But if so, where did she get off presuming to announce that the blob looked tired?

"I think you have me confused with some other fat woman," I said. I may have missed by a slight margin the genteel Miss Manners tone I was aiming for.

The woman's head snapped back as if she'd been slapped. "I didn't say that." Her voice sounded both defensive and affronted. She struggled for a moment, and I could see her weigh-

ing social acceptability against grievance. "I would never say anything like that —" midsentence, she rallied and found solid footing in indignation — "because I have some manners."

I pondered a range of responses: *It's interesting you mention manners, ma'am, because Miss Manners has pointed out that "You look tired" is not a compliment. Or: Miss Manners says that personal remarks should not be addressed to strangers. Or: You seem to regard the word fat as some sort of obscenity. Why is that, exactly?*

My endorphin buzz had ebbed by then. Now I was tired. "Actually," I said, "being fat is not as bad as you might think. There are lots worse things than being fat." *Self-hatred is worse, I thought, or hiding in shame. Anorexia and bulimia are worse.* I was prepared to elaborate, but the woman withdrew from the window without inviting further conversation.

I was aware back then, in the

late eighties, that such a thing as a fat-liberation movement existed, but I didn't know how to take part in it. There was widespread bigotry against fat people, I understood, on roughly the same order as racial or sexual discrimination. There was scientific error comparable to the suppression of Galileo's findings. There was terrible suffering that was mostly invisible or was trivialized because the fat were ridiculous. And these persecutors didn't even need to burn and torture: fat people punished themselves. It was wrong the way we were treated; it was even — yes, why not? — evil, and I had a moral duty to combat it.

But what could I do? A movement needs courageous leaders, great orators. My college career was a muddled shambles. While trying to get thin — first unsuccessfully and then later with anorexic success — I had flunked classes and changed majors repeatedly. After eight years in college, I had no professional goals, was nowhere near graduation, and hadn't even declared a major. All my reading and thinking and feeling weren't going to change the world by themselves.

I had realized that being fat didn't mean I was lazy or greedy or a failure as a human being. But what came next? If I wanted to go out and rescue other fat people from misguided self-loathing, I needed to be a better person: Someone more accomplished and eloquent. Someone bigger, emotionally stronger.

(end of excerpt)