

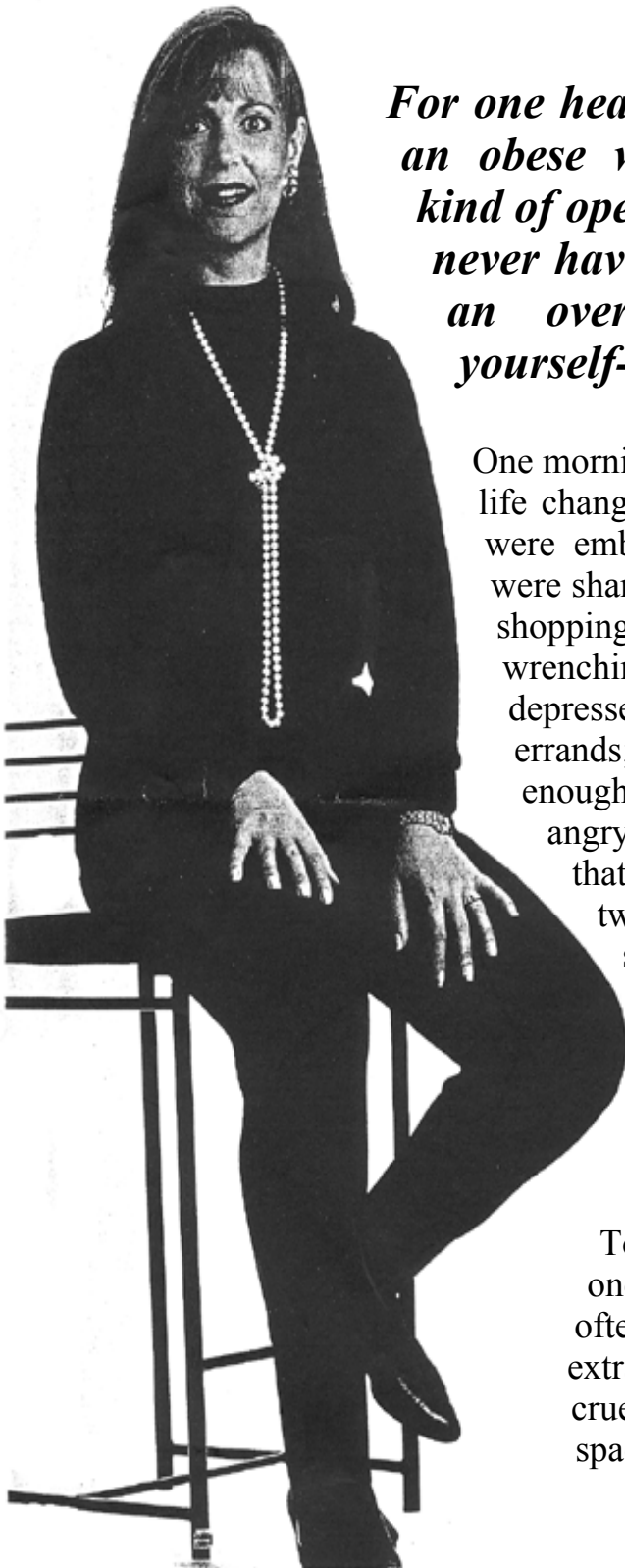
# Fat Like Me

By Leslie Lampert

*For one heartbreaking- exhausting week, I lived as an obese woman—and endured, every day, the kind of openly contemptuous behavior most people never have to suffer. If you have ever laughed at an overweight person—or are overweight yourself- you must read this story.*

One morning I gained one hundred fifty pounds, and my whole life changed. My husband looked at me differently, my kids were embarrassed, friends felt sorry for me, and strangers were shamelessly disgusted by my presence. The pleasures of shopping, family outings and going to parties turned into gut wrenchingly painful experiences. In truth, I became depressed by just the thought of running even the most basic errands; a trip to the grocery store or the video shop was enough to put me in a bad mood. But mostly, I became angry. Angry because what I experienced in the week that I wore a fat suit -" designed to make me look like a two-hundred-fifty- plus pound woman—was that our society not only hates fat people, it feels entitled to participate in a prejudice that on many levels, parallels racism and religious bigotry. And in a country that prides itself on being sensitive to the handicapped and the homeless, the obese continue to be the target of cultural abuse.

To many, obesity symbolizes on inability to control oneself or to maintain personal health. Fat people are often perceived as smelly, dirty, lazy failures (whose extra girth must also be expected to shield them from cruel insults and blatant disdain). The issue of personal space also plays a prominent role in this prejudice—



many feel that fat people take up more than their justifiable territory on the bus, in movie theatres, in store aisles, in general.. Judging from 'my' recent experience as a counterfeit obese person, it seems we are more tolerant of ill mannered, indecent individuals who are slim - than we are of honorable, oversize citizens.

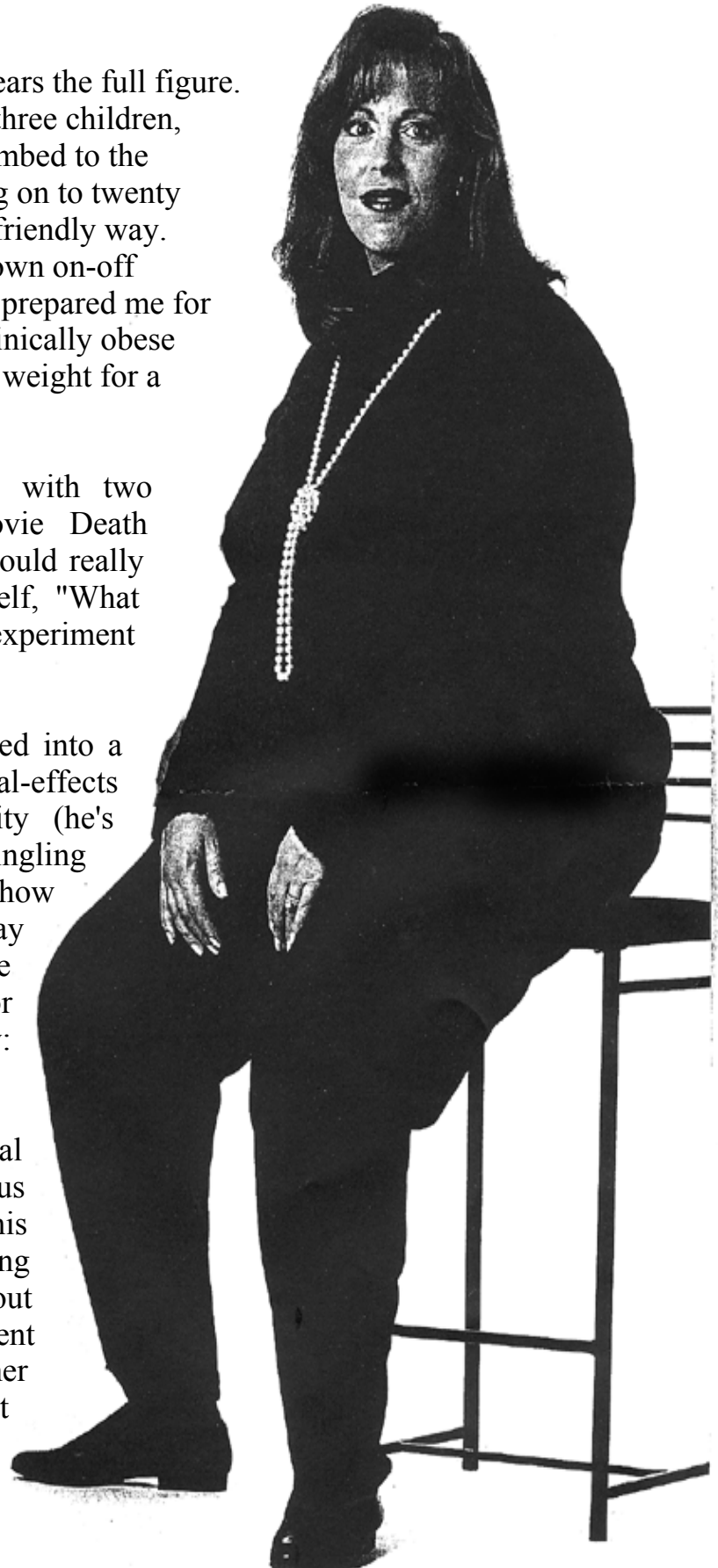
We are a society that worships slimness and fears the full figure. I am no different. After having given birth to three children, waved good- bye to thirty long ago and succumbed to the natural laws of gravity, I found myself holding on to twenty or so pounds that I've never looked upon in a friendly way. And anyone who knows me could reveal my own on-off on-off dieting battles. But nothing could have prepared me for the shame and disrespect imposed upon the clinically obese (that is, those more than 20 percent over ideal weight for a given height).

When Goldie Hawn was weighted down with two hundred extra pounds in last year's movie *Death Becomes Her*, I thought, I wonder what it would really be like to look so big? Then I asked myself, "What would it be like to live like that" And so this experiment was born.

Each morning during the first week, I slipped into a custom-made "fat suit" designed by special-effects artist Richard Tautkus of New York City (he's responsible for costumes worn in *The Ringling Bros. Circus*, the upcoming *Star Wars* road show and a number of hit movies and Broadway shows), and made my way into a world where I was alternately treated as invisible or regarded as a spectacle. Following is my diary:

#### **Friday 10A.M.**

I take a taxi from the Ladies' Home Journal offices in Manhattan to Richard Tautkus Studio, in Long Island City, for Richard and his assistants, Jim and Steven, to finish sculpting me into my new persona. I am nervous about this assignment, especially when I recall a recent newspaper series reporting a study of former fat people (all of whom had lost significant amounts of weight after intestinal bypass surgery) who said they'd rather be blind,



deaf or have a leg amputated than be fat again. Can it really be that bad?

The costumers can hardly believe the swelled-up me before them. The costume—made from air conditioner filters—is surprisingly lightweight, but its bulk is already making me sweat. I'm led to a three-way, full-length mirror. I'm stunned. I look authentic. Too authentic!

I am uncomfortable seeing myself like this. "You're still pretty," comforts one of the guys jokingly, "for a fat girl." I do not laugh.

12P.M.: I take my first taxi ride in the fat suit. Did the driver sneer at me? I must be imagining it. It took me a little longer than usual to maneuver myself into the cab. Was the driver impatient? I arrive at the photo studio and, with difficulty, get out of the car. Did I say something funny? The driver is openly laughing.

8 P.M. I show my husband and kids the before-and-after pictures from the photo session. My husband reconsiders his willingness to go out to dinner with me in my disguise. "It makes me sad to think of you this fat," he says. "I'll be uncomfortable knowing that people will be staring at you and making fun of you." My kids chorus, "Don't pick me up at school looking like that."

We talk about fat discrimination. "I don't dislike fat people," says Elizabeth, my ten-year-old. "It's just that I wouldn't want anyone to say mean things about you." Nine-year-old Amanda says flatly, "You scare me." Alex, my seven-year-old son, laughs nervously and wants to try on the costume.

11P.M.: I am trying to fall asleep in my own body. My husband is quietly snoring. I am hurt by his reaction to the fat me. While he's never made a disparaging comment about my body in the twelve years we've been married, I feel awful at having seen the look of repulsion on his face when he saw the photos.

## **Monday**

7A.M.: I suit up and take the commuter train to work. No one sits next to me. I feel incredibly self-conscious. People look long enough to let me know that they disapprove, then go back to reading their morning newspapers. Two women go as far as to whisper blatantly, glaring at me with a "how-could-you-let-yourself get-like-that" attitude. I take up one and a half seats, and, yes, I feel embarrassed. Yet shame takes a backseat to the resentment I'm feeling. How dare these people judge me on the basis of my dress size?

8 A.M.: At the office, everyone is eager to hear about my experiences and to see if my disguise has had an impact on the real me. One editor remarks that in my fat suit, my body movements seem more aggressive. A staff member asks me how I'll feel if while on assignment I bump into an old boyfriend. Another one says I seem depressed. Yes, I am depressed—and, suddenly, very hungry.

1 P.M.: I am lunching with two colleagues at a swank restaurant uptown. I am cranky, conscious of all the smirks and stares. In an effort to seem helpful, the waiter pulls my chair way out so that I can fit at the table. My embarrassment at having to shimmy into the chair with too-tight armrests is certainly noticed by the other patrons, who are sneaking looks whenever they can.

Okay, I'm fat, I'm thinking. But I'll bet some of you are pill-poppers, embezzlers, adulterers and lousy parents. I wish you had to display symbols of those character flaws as openly as I have to reveal my above-average body size (which some medical experts are beginning to define as a genetically linked trait—not a personality weakness). We skip dessert and leave.

5:30 P.M.: Driving home from the train station, I stop at a red light next to a car with two teenage boys in it. I look over. The boy on the passenger side puffs out his cheeks at me and bursts out laughing.

6:30 P.M.: Pick up the kids at school and go to a take-out chicken shop to get dinner. My kids make me walk in first.

I order two roast chickens, potatoes, gravy, veggies, corn and a half- dozen brownies. Some kids in the restaurant refer to me as "That Fat Lady"; the adults with them muffle their amusement.

While the man at the cash register is ringing up my order, he asks me how many people I'm feeding. I reply indignantly, "Six people. Why?" He says that had he known, he could have suggested a less expensive family-pack meal. I am upset for assuming he was trying to ridicule me.

## **Tuesday:**

10 A. M.: On my way to Bloomingdale's to go shopping, I stop for ice cream at Haagen-Dazs. I order a double scoop of chocolate-chocolate chip, and as I watch the youngster behind the counter evaluate my size, I fight the urge to say something defensive. Walking down the street eating the cone, I see one well-dressed man shake his head in disparagement and another laugh out loud as he passes me.

Walking into Bloomingdale's is difficult. First, I can barely fit in the revolving door, and when I get inside, I feel all eyes are on me. Interestingly, I am not ignored the way I thought I would be. Two perfumers practically attack me with their latest fragrance. One man behind the counter asks me if I want a makeover.

I proceed to the elevator. Have to squeeze in. A couple of women giggle. I ask the saleswoman for help in the sportswear section. She refers me nicely to the "big gals" department.

On the way home, I buy a dozen bagels at a bakery in Grand Central Terminal. I eat one on the train. Why do people find it so repulsive to watch a large person eat? I do not give in to the frowning looks. I am hungry.

## Wednesday

10 A.M.: I'm having a consultation at a beauty salon near my home. I tell the hairstylist, who's third as a rail, that I want a different look. She gently explains that I need a fuller hairstyle to compensate for my ample figure. I am not offended. She has been honest, but not insulting. We talk about the difficulties of dieting. I have made a friend.



Even the most ordinary activities—like riding the train to work and walking along the street—were a source of embarrassment and frustration



1 P.M.: I am meeting some friends for lunch at a restaurant in the suburbs. They can't wait to see my transformation and hear about my project. I am feeling depressed and do not want to go. I am getting tired of constantly being on the defensive. My friends jokingly argue over who gets to sit next to me, so that they can feel skinny. I am delighted when I see another large woman seated at the table next to us. I notice that she is eating a salad. I order one, too.

2:30 P.M.: I go grocery shopping. Everyone peers into my cart to see what the fat lady is buying. A couple of women are exasperated at not being able to get by me in the canned goods aisle. I apologize and turn sideways. I dread the candy aisle, but I promised my kids Skittles. I grab the bag of candy and look to see if anyone is watching. I discreetly put it in my cart. I feel like a criminal.

4 P. M.: I worry that I'm getting paranoid about others' reaction to me. I decide to talk to an overweight woman to see if she has the same feelings. Unfortunately, she does. "I am sick of being judged by what I put in my mouth," Denise Rubin says. Rubin, thirty-two, an attorney, is five feet two and weighs over two hundred pounds. "I'm tired of being regarded as less-than because of my more-than size. When are we going to understand that fat is an adjective, not an epithet?"

I listen sympathetically, but do not have an answer for her.

## Thursday

9:30 A.M.: Elizabeth has told her fifth grade class about my assignment, and the teacher has asked me to come, in my fat suit, to share my experience with the students. Elizabeth is no longer embarrassed to let her friends see me. During this week, we have all been transformed. We are anxious to tell my story to others; to make people understand the prejudice. The kids in this classroom—most of whom know me—laugh at first, and then fire questions faster than I can answer them: How did I feel? Were people mean to me? What's it like to be fat?

2 P.M.: I drive to the city to finish up some work at the office. I must admit, being behind the wheel at this weight has not been easy. I have had to adjust my seat to the farthest position so that I can fit comfortably, but, as a result, I can barely reach the pedals.

7:30 P.M.: I'm having dinner at a see and-be-seen kind of place in the city with my costumer, Richard. We have made plans to meet in the lobby of a nearby hotel, so that I wouldn't have to walk into the chic restaurant all by myself. Richard is late, so I window-shop in the lobby. I am met with the looks of disdain that I have come to expect. Richard finally arrives at seven forty-five, and he kisses me hello. We walk arm-in-arm to dinner. I feel safe.

The nightmare begins. A sea of beautiful people are sitting at the bar. It is so crowded I can barely manage to take off my coat. Richard, a good-looking man; whispers from behind. He can't believe how blatantly I am being made fun of by the crowd at the bar. I wait in line to tell the hostess we have arrived, but she pretends not to see me. Richard steps in, gives her our name, and she shows us to our table.

We had asked for a table in front. We get seated in the back by the hostess. The two thirtysomething women next to me can barely contain their horror as I clumsily try to pass through the space between our tables to slide onto the banquette seat. The water glasses shake as I unwittingly rock both tables. Richard and I order a drink, and I take a roll from the bread basket. The two women are glaring at me. I order a goat-cheese salad and pasta with cream sauce. They giggle. The rest of the meal proceeds in much the same manner. Richard and I look at the dessert menu, ignoring the two women.

I excuse myself to go to the ladies' room. Once there, I change out of my fat suit and into my own clothes. I know that sounds crazy, but I'm so upset that I have to do it. I come back and slink into my place. The two women are stupefied. Richard is ready to take revenge. He tells me that as soon as I left, one of them asked him, "What are you doing with that fat pig?" He replied, "She's my girlfriend." "That's not possible," said one woman. "You must be a hustler." My blood is boiling. Richard tells them about my project. They are angry at me. *Angry* at me! They quickly pay the check and leave.

Richard and I leave after our coffee. I am put off by flirtatious looks from the same men at the bar who were previously so rude to me.

## **Friday**

4 P. M.: I take my kids to the mall to buy clothes for our upcoming trip down south. Today while we're shopping I get two "Wows," countless dirty looks and one snort from various strangers. But I care less about what people are thinking. Perhaps it's because I know the project is coming to an end; perhaps I am resigned to society's disfavoring of me, the fat person. I still feel the sting of the everyday prejudice I experienced, but I feel less rebellious.-I feel worn out. .

7:30 P.M.: I'm out to dinner with my husband (sans fat suit). I am surprisingly sulky, not at all rejoicing in my instant weight loss. Instead, I feel ashamed of my culture and how much pain we cause people who are less than our concept of ideal. I'm thinking about ways I can help obese people feel more powerful what I can do to deliver the message about maintaining positive self-esteem. Yet I am still using all my willpower to refrain from ordering dessert.

### **MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD.**

The editors of Ladies Home Journal believe that the issue of size discrimination is one that is not addressed nearly as often as it should be. We would like to hear from readers who, because of their weight, have undergone experiences similar to Leslie Lampert's. How are you coping with such behavior? Is this something you discuss with your friends, your family your co-workers? Please send your letter to Ladies' Home Journal, Box H, 100 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017. We will publish a representative selection in a future issue

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

**Women's Therapy Center Institute** 80 East 11th Street, Suite 101, New York, NY 10003; 212-420-1974. National referrals for support groups, individual therapy, self-image counseling.

**National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance**, P.O. Box 188620, Sacramento, CA 95818; 800-442-1214 for recorded message; 916- 558-6880 for assistance. Newsletter for members; information for chapters across the country; answers questions on discrimination issues.

<http://naffa.org>