

Linda Davis

The True Definition of Fat

ze-nith *n.* **1.** For twenty years Alyson attempted every diet fad imaginable with no success. Grapefruit, South Beach, Suzanne Somers, Hilton Head; the list of Alyson's failed diets read like the glossary to a B-movie star's unauthorized biography. If only it were half that glamorous. Finally, when she was forty-two, she dropped forty pounds in three months. Her cousin Rip, who was the same age as her, had died suddenly of brain cancer. At a service on the one-year anniversary of his death, Alyson's mother said "Alyson and Rip were like two peas in a pod," and "as thick as thieves." Her mother collected clichés the way some people collected coins. Alyson, in canary horizontal stripes (she was making up for all the fat fashion taboos she'd eschewed all those years), corrected her, saying how they hadn't been close since childhood. Her mother, a good Catholic (still) looked shocked; her eyebrows disappeared under a brush-fire perm. The mourners were being herded into a line to greet Rip's widow, Sara, and their young daughter, Jewel. Alyson tried to slip outside unnoticed but the canary was too loud. "Excuse me, I'm not feeling well." Alyson flew towards the door. "They were as thick as paste, those two," she heard her mother say as she stepped outside.

yen *n.* **1.** (Three years earlier) at work, Alyson blew out the four candles on her fortieth birthday cake. "Are you four years old? You look older, Ms. Alyson. Are you four years old? You look older, Ms. Alyson . . ." Danny repeated over and over again, what seemed like fifty times. Danny was an autistic man who lived at Voices, the assisted

living home in New York City that Alyson co-managed. He was obsessed with two things: Alyson and his Webster's Dictionary. The residents at Voices had no choice about the enclosed lives they led, which didn't bother them in the least, since most of their lives were lived internally. One resident fidgeted with the string of his party hat. "What did you wish?" he asked. Alyson lied, "I wished I was four again." What she really wished was the same thing she'd been wishing for twenty years: to be thin. After work, at her third floor Upper East Side walk-up, Rip had left a message. "Happy birthday, Ally wally." He never forgot. "Please call me back this time. Please." She pictured Rip in his swanky Beacon Hill office: the slicked back hair, blood red suspenders on a virginal white dress shirt. Alyson ate from her birthday cake box while standing up. This was what her life had become: standing while eating, not returning phone calls.

xerophagy *adj.* **1.** Alyson tried to lose weight. Every day. Diet words inhabited her brain, insipid as old lovers: Zone, Atkins, Grapefruit, Protein, Pilates, Water, Digestive Enzymes, colonics, fasting and self-invented diets: the All-You-Can-Chew Gum Diet, the Eat-Before-You-Go-To-A-Party Diet and the Toothpaste Diet. "I speak diet. I'm a diet scholar." Alyson chuckled over cocktails with Charles, a man she met through a computer dating service. Charles laughed at all of her jokes, but later, online, he felt compelled to be candid about his feelings publicly. He wrote, "Great personality, but not attracted to her." Alyson hated that his rejection made her eat a pint of Chunky Monkey. Her skin, it seemed, was the only thing about her that was thin. The heavier she got, the thinner her skin. "Webster's says you are pulchritudinous—that means beautiful." Danny had said this three days prior, his eyes not meeting hers. If only she had remembered that before eating.

wide *adj.* **1.** By thirty-nine, Alyson weighed the most she ever had: one hundred and sixty-nine pounds. As a 5'2" former ballerina, the weight was significant. At her yearly physical, she blocked her eyes when she stood on the digital scale. A crepe thin nurse with oversized freckles that resembled henna tattoos shouted, "169!" like some crazed carnival barker. In the examination room, undressed, Alyson noticed with horror that her chest had officially lost the race it had been in with her stomach. The doctor referred her to a nutritionist, a man from New Zealand who wore beads around his neck and padded around his ionized office in silk Chinese slippers. He put Alyson on a strict diet of raw food and supplements for a month. Three weeks

into the regime, Alyson told him, “I feel like a civil war is being waged in my stomach, with casualties on both sides.” Her stomach was distended like a water balloon. The nutritionist concluded she was going through early menopause, and there was nothing he could do to help her. “Both armies are raising their little white flags.” At reception, Alyson asked if she could get a discount for that, the metaphor-stealing thing. The assistant looked at her with a face as blank as a snow drift.

vol-um-in-ous *adj.* 1. “Life threw you a curveball.” Her mother was visiting for the weekend. “You could have been a professional ballerina. I blame myself.” Alyson reassured her mother, but deep down there was a part of her that expected, with

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each visit, that her mother would magically fix her life. Lately, their time together felt like a single woman’s club; they talked about dates, drank white wine spritzers, said things like, “All the good ones are taken.” After two drinks, her mother got teary. “Maybe you’re right. Rip turned out alright and I raised him. Look how successful he is. Shrink to the stars. Did I tell you he’s going to be on TV next month? Public access, but still. You should call and congratulate him.” Alyson wished she could lose a pound for every time her mom told her to call Rip. Her mother adored her cousin and frequently used him as a self-esteem Band-Aid. Alyson popped open a can of mixed nuts, separated out the Brazils (her feeble attempt at dieting for the day), and shoveled the rest in her mouth. Everyone has their own version of Band-Aid, she thought.

un-bal-an-ced *adj.* 1. Alyson had an idea. For one month, she would make herself sick with food. She slid dry pancakes that a previous IHOP customer had left behind into her purse and ate them at home later; she consumed a bottle of chewable vitamin C in three days; she had a salt and sugar derby, alternating between popcorn and nuts one hour and pie and cookies the next; she rose at two

in the morning and ate bowls of cereal. By the end of the month, she felt healthier, more invigorated than she had in years. It lasted a day. Then, she got sick; heaved for three days straight. It was thrilling. She imagined all the calories leaving, like unwanted dinner guests. Danny regressed while she was out sick. Danny had a heart-breaking story; he’d lost his entire family: mother, father and sister, in a car crash, as if being born autistic wasn’t enough bad luck for one lifetime. After reading his case file when she was first hired, Alyson ate an entire bag of roasted and salted almonds. All of the hurt in the world was a great reason to eat more, she thought. She was the first person Danny opened up to. He’d stopped speaking, spent hours watching his fingers twitch through crossed eyes. He even stopped reading his beloved dictionary. Coincidentally, a representative from the state health board was visiting that week and put in a recommendation to have Danny moved to a more intense program. The ensuing battle worked nicely as an excuse for Alyson to return to her regular eating habits.

thick *adj.* 2. Alyson’s mother surprised her with a ticket to see her childhood idol, Sylvie Guillem, perform in Ashton’s *Ondine* at Lincoln Center. It was also a thinly veiled attempt at reconciling her with Rip—who flew down from Boston for the weekend with Sara. Alyson hadn’t been to the ballet in twenty years. Ballet plus Rip equaled her past. As she watched Guillem float across the street, she remembered the year when Rip first got his license, how he always came early to pick her up at the Ballerina Academy. He would sit, feet up on a metal chair, and watch attentively. All of the ballerinas wanted to date him because he was cute, friendly, and frankly, interested. Alyson was so proud of him, she lied and told them he was her brother. Back in the packed Lincoln Center Theater, tears poured from Alyson’s eyes like sweat on an August day in Manhattan. “Scraped cornea,” she explained, squinting and blinking upwards, before she excused herself and left early, stopping and buying candy coated peanuts from a street vendor on her way home.

siz-a-ble *adj.* 2. “You’re my best friend, you have to be a bridesmaid,” Crystal said. The thought of wearing the same hideous cardboard dress as five other women, all of whom wore single digit sizes, sounded like social suicide. Alyson could already see the photos, where she would look like both a sixth and seventh bridesmaid. The reception was at Crystal’s wealthy sister’s beach home in Southampton. The sister had a full-time staff and toddlers that drove electric cars over manicured lawns. Alyson nicknamed the sister, “The French Revolution,” because of the way she’d seen her

treat the help. Alyson decided to sit with her mother at a corner table, instead of at the head table. One of those bands they dragged out for weddings was singing “Endless Love.” The singer wore a pale pink tux and winked at Alyson as she crossed the dance floor. When she sat down, the bridesmaid dress gathered around her like a tribe. She ignored the shrimp cocktail, played hard to get with the creamed soup but ravaged her salad and the salad served to the empty seat beside her. She also drank champagne. Lots. Everyone looked thin to her, or maybe she hadn’t had enough to drink? This was America for Christ’s sake. Even the teddy bear ice sculptures were looking awfully svelte. Then this bit of wisdom from her mother: “If you play your cards right, you could be married soon too.” She nodded towards the singer. Alyson got up. “I feel like I have a full house now, Mom. Work and all. Let’s leave before he starts singing the Captain and Tennille.”

room-y *adj.* 1. Alyson began to think that all her years of hiding were the real problem behind her weight struggles. She decided to switch to skimpy clothes that put her fat on display, like chicken thighs in the refrigerated case at the supermarket: skin-tight jeans and a camisole. Maybe if everyone knows how disgustingly fat I am, it will take my appetite away. She planned her “revealing debut” for the evening of Crystal’s bachelorette party. In the packed elevator of the French Revolution’s Upper West Side apartment, en route to the penthouse, a young girl stared at Alyson’s waist for fifteen floors before whispering to her mother, “That lady is fat, Mommy.” Alyson stayed on the elevator, took it back down. She didn’t want to go home and eat, so she went to work. When she slipped the nurse coat over her bared body, she felt as if she were coming up for air. Alyson watched “America’s Funniest Home Videos” with the residents. Danny told her she was “de rigueur—that means mandatory” to his happiness.

quan-ti-ty *n.* 1. “Weight is an equation,” a three-hundred-dollar-per-hour Park Avenue nutritionist told Alyson. “Intake minus exercise equals weight.” “If that’s the case,” Alyson told Crystal over pancakes at IHOP, “my body is flunking math. I starved myself for a week, jogged daily, and nothing.” Ophelia, the waitress who usually waited on their table, ignored them. “What’s up with her?” Crystal asked. Alyson replied, “She’s angry because we never come here anymore.” Failing math or not, Alyson knew that the time she and Crystal spent together had shrunk from a squared number to a fraction ever since Crystal had met her boyfriend. “You can’t quantify friendship,” was Crystal’s refrain. She was looking more and more like her sister; wearing hip, hip huggers and she’d barely touched her blueberry waffles.

preg-nant *adj.* 1. “Sara had a girl!” Alyson’s mother called her at work to tell her the news. Alyson felt her heart fall. “Rip is as happy as a clam!” Alyson played with her stomach. She was alone at the front desk at work. The flesh and fat had very little feeling which made it easy to believe that it wasn’t part of her. There was the round bowl she could make when she gathered all the fat together in a circle in the middle and, of course, the love handles she fondled on either side of her waist. The most impressive shape of all was the one where she formed a small shelf upon which she rested her cereal bowl. She considered naming her shelf, like men named their penises. Maybe “Suzie,” or “Cathy,” something adorable. “Sara looks well,” her mother droned on. A *People* magazine headline in the reception area screamed, “The bare belly is in!” Alyson flipped through the pages and stared at the exposed stomachs of the Jennifers, Kates and Nicoles. She convinced herself that all these girls smoked. “I gotta get back to work, Mom.” Alyson left work early. Women everywhere on the streets were wearing bare midriffs. A conspiracy. There was only one place to go. At IHOP, Ophelia wasn’t on duty. A new waitress who was so thin she had to wrap the strings of her apron around her waist twice asked her when she was due. A wave of sadness washed over Alyson, but she spoke quickly to hide it. “I actually just gave birth! I’ll take a super stack with extra butter—for my milk. They say breastfeeding shrinks the waist. Here’s hoping!”

ob-tru-sive *adj.* 2. Women in Manhattan were thin and well-groomed European-types who lost weight eating baguettes and butter croissants. They got weekly pedicures, walked in stilettos whenever they were recycled back into fashion, accessorized themselves like Christmas trees. And they did it all with ease, without question. It made Alyson feel like beauty was a game that came with a set of instructions that her box was missing. Alyson stared at women everywhere she went. She considered homosexuality as if deciding between a matinee or evening performance. God, women were beautiful, she thought, even unattractive ones. One night, when Alyson was high on maple syrup, Ophelia from IHOP asked her to come home with her. She lived in a dreary fifth floor walk up in Queens. Cockroaches scattered like marbles when Ophelia turned on the light. She put on Janis Ian and walked over to kiss Alyson. Ophelia smelt like stale coffee and BO. Alyson imagined the hair she was sure to have under her arms; she could almost see her hopes and dreams walk out the door, catch a subway somewhere else. She apologized and told Ophelia she had to leave. “Your loss.” Ophelia threw her coat at her. “I could have pleased you like no man ever has.” Alyson picked up the dropped coat and thought, that’s not saying much.

no-ti-cea-ble *adj.* 2. Rip and Sara arrived late to Christmas dinner. Alyson had hoped they wouldn't show. Sara was six months pregnant and wore a dark green wool knit skirt set and candy cane earrings. She looked more beautiful than ever. Alyson spent the day ticking off things she didn't like about Sara. The earrings were first on her list. She added: talks too much, has to be touching Rip every second, and goes to the bathroom often. So what if she bakes a perfect pie? When all was said and done, Rip would wake up and smell the coffee, and the truth would hurt. I'm turning into my mother, Alyson thought. "I started my own practice." Rip made the announcement at dinner. "Child psychology." Alyson coughed so hard, a kernel of corn flew out of her mouth and across the table where it landed on Sara's raised fork. Sara, who often changed the subject, ate the bite and pointed to her belly. "You're next, Alyson. How cool would it be if we had kids close in age? They could grow up together—like you and Rip." Curiously, this was one occasion when Alyson lost her appetite. It wasn't until after dinner when they played charades that Alyson began to feel remotely comfortable.

meat-y *adj.* 1. Though she told people that she took her job at Voices because she wanted to do something "worthwhile," Alyson really worked there for selfish reasons—to improve her self-esteem by being around people worse off than her. They weren't. She felt like the Grinch when he finds out that the people in Who-ville loved Christmas even when they got no toys. Simple things pleased the residents immensely. She met Danny Sherrill, an autistic young man of indeterminate age, who began to speak, reciting definitions, when she gave him a Webster's Dictionary. She told her mother about Danny. "Call Rip," she suggested. "He'll be able to help you. He just had an article published." Alyson asked her if it was related to autism. "No, but still. It's all the same, right?"

large *adj.* 1. Crystal and Alyson took a New England road trip. It was fall and the trees littered autumnal rainbows on the ground. They stayed at B&Bs and explored coastal towns with glass-blowing shops. Crystal bought glass-blown teddy bears in different sizes. In Massachusetts, they surprised Alyson's mother. "I'm fit to be tied!" She crossed herself. They spent the evening looking at old photos, newspaper articles, and other bits of Alyson's ballet memorabilia. Framed pictures were everywhere. Alyson saw Rip, her father and mother together, and the different, thinner version of herself, watchful, beckoning. Hundreds of eyes staring at her, in concert: a symphony

of stares. She tried not to look, but they taunted her like a nagging cough. "I had no idea!" Crystal gaped when she saw a picture of Rip. "You have a brother?" Alyson's mother answered. "It's her first cousin, though he may as well be a brother. They were raised together after my sister passed. She thinks he's a sellout now, but . . ." Alyson interrupted her. "Is it time to go, Crys?" Alyson's mother looked like she might cry, so they stayed the night. She made them sleep in her bed, while she slept on the sofa in the living room. Alyson would have insisted that her mother keep her own bed, but she knew she wouldn't have slept a minute surrounded by those photographs.

kit-chen *n.* 1. Weddings: Were they ever enjoyable? Rip married Sara, a young woman whom more than one person said had resembled Alyson. "When she was younger," they added. Alyson knew they meant when she was thinner. The wedding was in a windowless downstairs ballroom of an ocean-side hotel. Alyson's father brought his new wife, a slim woman with mousy brown hair and a few facial moles that Alyson wanted to scrape off. Alyson didn't want to go to the wedding, but her mother had put her foot down. Both feet, and her knees, too. She preyed on her. Alyson brought a date to hide behind, though he could only hide a small portion of her because he was so slight. John was the maintenance man in her building on 83rd and York. He was so skinny, he leaned backwards when he walked, like a thin-stemmed flower. He drank eight cups of coffee a day and his tobacco-stained hands trembled when he reached for the cup. John made her feel like she was still beautiful. She gossiped to him about other men, as if he were a girlfriend. Often, he tried to kiss her. She laughed, said that her mouth was saved for eating. Though she joked about food, deep down she knew the joke was on her. Food was her lover; the way she dreamt about meals ahead of time, inhaled them with reckless abandon, and felt guilty later. Alyson stopped dating John after she met his mother, an Irish immigrant who had knitted a sweater for her that took a month to make.

jum-bo *adj.* 1. Everyone, it seemed, had an opinion about Alyson's weight, as if her looks were public property. She saw how much they wanted her to be the way she used to be, so she gorged on bags of nuts until she felt like a beached whale, over-salted and marooned on the couch. Yet another floss-less night, sleeping in her clothes.

imm-ense *adj.* 1. At twenty-six, Alyson weighed one hundred and fifty-nine pounds. People gave her "hint gifts" at holidays: diet books, running shoes and the "ab-detonator." Alyson re-gifted them the following year to her thinnest friends.

huge *adj.* 2. Alyson's best meals were the ones she snuck from people's homes or the pantry at the art gallery where she'd been working for two years. The more she hid, the more visible she became. She felt like a well-situated billboard.

gross *adj.* 1. While her weight continued to climb, men still climbed into bed with her. It was a veritable hiker's convention. The tent-like blouses she wore worked! Sex to her was a motel with a permanent "Vacancy" sign on the window. She went to BU to visit her old roommate and ran into her ex, Eddie Colfax, who told her he had written her a letter and asked if she'd come to his off-campus apartment to get it. "Let's go." She led him out the door by his two-toned school scarf. In the letter, he apologized for breaking up with her because she wouldn't have sex. She pulled on his belt buckle. Eddie looked puzzled, but not that puzzled. Afterwards, he told her she had an "eighteenth-century body." She told him he had twentieth-century manners and left quickly.

fat *adj.* 1. "Human tongs." This was her father's nickname for her when she was young. Alyson was always the thinnest girl in the room; the girl whose thin arm was needed to pull things out of tight spots that other people's arms wouldn't fit into. She loved when her father called her that. It was possibly the most he ever needed her. He couldn't relate to her ballet accomplishments, and now that he and her mother were separated, he'd been swallowed up into the dating vortex. It had been a while since she'd seen her cousin Rip, though everywhere she went, she thought she saw him in a crowd. She knew a part of her missed the old days—playing ping-pong with him through both sides of *Abbey Road*, him helping her with her physics homework, her helping him with the finer points of *Bleak House*—but was surprised to find herself too proud to admit it. She'd assumed that she'd lost her pride when the weight she'd gained nearly surpassed her total body weight in junior high school. Her mother remained the only constant from her former life. "We all have our trials and tribulations; you'll bounce back. I'm glad you have Rip." She didn't want to burst her mother's bubble, so she grew her own—by eating more.

el-e-phant-ine *adj.* 2. When she quit ballet and other parts of her life, Alyson had to earn money. She worked at a fish restaurant in Times Square but quit because she couldn't tolerate the tortured screams of the lobsters. She switched to an East Village vegetarian restaurant where the woman owner had long gray hair and wore socks under Birkenstocks. She got caught eating a customer's leftover tofu pumpkin pie

and didn't return to work out of embarrassment. Alyson felt awful, because she liked the owner. Alyson met a woman in her building named Crystal. She didn't like her at first: too thin and she had this thing about teddy bears. And yet, there she was, wearing a Squeeze tee shirt and carrying a VHS of *The Lady Vanishes*. They spent an entire day together, longer than Alyson had spent with anyone in months. Crystal talked about her awful narcissistic sister. Alyson bit into a bran muffin, swallowed her memories of Rip. "I'm an only child," she said, mouth half-full. Crystal out-ate her, cementing their friendship.

dis-tend-ed *adj.* 1. Alyson quit ballet when her new dance instructor, a widower in his fifties who had grandkids in Staten Island, developed a hernia from lifting her. Fifteen years of plies gone. It didn't seem fair. Alyson told the instructor that there should be some sort of accrued interest for all the years she'd put into dance—a municipal bond, a 401K, something. "Life stinks and then you die," he said, clutching his lower waist. Alyson thought about introducing him to her mother. Without exercise, she gained more weight. Dress sizes passed her by like subway stops: 6, 8, 10, 12. Next stop, size 14. Without dance, Alyson's social life dried up as fast as a disposable contact lens. The only time she wasn't alone was when she walked down the corridors of Manhattan, staring at the sea of faces that surrounded her. Loneliness didn't preclude her from hiding. When Rip came to town, he telephoned. "Let's get together. It'll be fun. My number is . . ." Alyson deleted the message without listening, ate two cannolis and called a psychiatric doctor in the morning. "Just because you're related doesn't mean you have to act like you are," he said. Alyson didn't blink.

col-o-ssal *adj.* At Boston University, Alyson lost focus, even though she took up espresso. She drank huge quantities of beer, hoping it would cause her to miscarry. It didn't. She sat in large auditoriums and stared at her wrists, her shoes. Every professor sounded like the teacher in *Charlie Brown*. She had no interest in geology, physics, even French. When she failed all classes but Mural Making, she dropped out. "I got an offer I couldn't refuse from a New York dance troupe." Alyson enthusiastically lied to everyone who asked. She went to the Planned Parenthood on 33rd Street in Manhattan. Alone. No one even knew. She was surprised how hungry she was that night. She had thought her new-found love of food was due to the pregnancy. As much as she ate, she never felt satiated. Her appetite was like the horizon. She never got to the end.

big *adj.* **1.** That Christmas, Alyson consumed approximately 10,000 calories of food: 10 healthy handfuls of roasted and salted almonds (800 calories), 4 pieces of walnut-raisin bread with butter (600 calories); 2 ½ glasses of champagne (550 calories); 10 slices of assorted cheeses with crackers (900 calories); corn, sweet potatoes and spinach gratin (2,000 calories); salad (250 calories); 2 glasses of cabernet (900 calories); veggie lasagna (900 calories); slice of cornbread (300 calories); 2 ½ slices of pecan pie with whipped cream (2,600 calories); 10 Christmas cookies (1,000 calories); coffee with cream and sugar (200 calories). She avoided making eye contact with Rip throughout the meal. The few times she managed to sneak glances at him—when he was talking to someone—he looked ridiculous. Everything seemed to be pointing down on him: hair, eyes, mouth, shoulders and clothes. The things about him that she had once found pleasant: his solemnity, his intelligent-looking brown eyes, his boyish dark brown curls, now looked comically grotesque. Rip barely touched his food. It bothered Alyson, though she didn't know why. Spineless, spineless, spineless, she chanted in her head. He tried to have a glib conversation with her about music. How had she ever mistaken him for interesting? Alyson abruptly excused herself, grabbed a fistful of almonds, (80 calories) and went home.

ab-normal *adj.* **2.** Three weeks after lacrosse captain Eddie Colfax broke up with her for not sleeping with him, Alyson visited her cousin Rip at Northwestern. Rip lived with three other students in the quintessential college boys' home: four cars in the driveway, two of which had the hoods up, and a dead front lawn, even though it was the end of Chicago's rainy season. Inside, the carpeting was ripped. Three-day-old pasta-caked dishes sat in the sink. The home's dreariness was magnified by the multitude of mirrors on sliding closet doors that ran the length of the bedrooms and along one whole wall of the living room. Alyson and Rip were in a great mood—they'd been to a Rockpile concert. She expected to get the futon to herself, that Rip would spend the night on the brown corduroy living room sofa. But he climbed in with her, as if they'd planned it all along or at least on the drive home. Alyson didn't want to embarrass Rip. They'd been raised together. He was her best friend. Had she done something that invited this sort of attention? She trusted him more than herself. Maybe he was in love with her. Why should the fact that they were related matter to one's heart? He started by trying to undress her, than forced himself on her again and again. She feigned sleep every time. At 6:10, with the stereo on low (Rip's stereo was never off) and dime-store blinds flirting with the first light, Rip entered her from behind. Though his first touch had woken her up, Alyson lay still. All she could think

of was the same thing that was never far from her mind when she thought about Rip: how sorry she felt for him because he'd been orphaned at age ten. He finished and started snoring—nearly within the same breath. She snuck into the bathroom, looked down and saw a dictionary. She looked up incest. "Sexual relations between persons so closely related that marriage is illegal or forbidden." Within thirty minutes, Alyson was on a Greyhound Bus headed towards Boston, clutching Webster's Dictionary to her chest, a gnawing emptiness eating away at her.