CAROLINE KNAPP

Add Cake, Subtract Self-Esteem

When are our appetites about more than just food? Detailing her own struggle with anorexia, Caroline Knapp offers some pointed observations about the ways our contemporary culture fosters "disorders of the appetite" in women, creating an environment in which it has become normal to define questions of female self-worth and female power in relation to what one does (or does not) eat. Knapp was a columnist for the *Boston Phoenix.* Some of the pieces she wrote as the anonymous "Alice K." are collected in *Alice K.'s Guide to Life* (1994). Her other books include *Drinking: A Love Story* (1996) and *Pack of Two: The Intricate Bond Between People and Dogs* (1998). She died in 2002 from complications of lung cancer, just after completing her last book, *Appetites: Why Women Want* (2003), the book in which the following essay appears.

THE LURE OF STARVING — THE BAFFLING, SEDUCTIVE HOOK — WAS that it soothed, a balm of safety and containment that seemed to remove me from the ordinary, fraught world of human hunger and place me high above it, in a private kingdom of calm.

This didn't happen immediately, this sense of transcendent solace, and there certainly wasn't anything blissful or even long-lived about the state; starving is a painful, relentless experience, and also a throbbingly dull one, an entire life boiled down to a singular sensation (physical hunger) and a singular obsession (food). But when I think back on those years, which lasted through my mid-twenties, and when I try to get underneath the myriad meanings and purposes of such a bizarre fixation, that's what I remember most pointedly — the calm, the relief from an anxiety that felt both oceanic and nameless. For years, I ate the same foods everyday, in exactly the same manner, at exactly the same times. I devoted a monumental amount of energy to this endeavor — thinking about food, resisting food, observing other people's relationships with food, anticipating my own paltry indulgences in food — and this narrowed, specific, driven rigidity made me feel supremely safe: one concern, one feeling, everything else just background noise.

Disorders of appetite — food addictions, compulsive shopping, promiscuous sex — have a kind of semiotic brilliance, expressing in symbol and metaphor what women themselves may not be able to express in words, and I can deconstruct anorexia with the best of them. Anorexia is a response to cultural images of the female body — waiflike, angular — that both capitulates to the ideal and also mocks it, strips away all the ancillary signs of sexuality, strips away breasts and hips and butt and leaves in their place a garish caricature, a cruel cartoon of flesh and bone. It is a form of silent protest, a hunger strike that expresses some deep discomfort with the experience of inhabiting an adult female body. It is a way of co-opting the traditional female preoccupation with food and weight by turning the obsession upside down, directing the energy not toward the preparation and provision and ingestion of food but toward the shunning of it, and all that it represents: abundance, plenitude, caretaking. Anorexia is this, anorexia is that. Volumes have been written about such symbolic expressions, and there's truth to all of them, and they are oddly comforting truths: They help to decipher this puzzle; they help to explain why eating disorders are the third most common chronic illness among females in the United States, and why fifteen percent of young women have substantially disordered attitudes and behaviors toward food and eating, and why the incidence of eating disorders has increased by thirty-six percent every five years since the 1950s. They offer some hope — if we can understand this particularly devastating form of self-inflicted cruelty, maybe we can find a way to stop it.

I, too, am tempted to comfort and explain, to look back with the cool detachment of twenty years and offer a crisp critique: a little cultural commentary here, a little metaphorical analysis there. But what recedes into the background amid such explanations — and what's harder to talk about because it's intangible and stubborn and vast — is the core, the underlying drive, the sensation that not only made anorexia feel so seductively viable for me some two decades ago but that also informs the central experience of appetite for so many women, the first feeling we bring to the table of hunger: anxiety, a sense of being overwhelmed.

There is a particular whir of agitation about female hunger, a low-level thrumming of shoulds and shouldn'ts and can'ts and wants that can be so chronic and familiar it becomes a kind of feminine Muzak, easy to dismiss, or to tune out altogether, even if you're actively participating in it. Last spring, a group of women gathered in my living room to talk about appetite, all of them teachers and administrators at a local school and all of them adamant that this whole business — weight, food, managing hunger — troubles them not at all. "Weight," said one, "is not really an issue for me." "No," said another, "not for me, either." And a third: "I don't really think about what I'm going to eat from day to day. Basically, I just eat what I want."

This was a cheerful and attractive group, ages twenty-two to forty-one, and they were all so insistent about their normalcy around food that, were it not for the subtle strain of caveat that ran beneath their descriptions, I might have believed them.

The caveats had to do with rules, with attitudes as ingrained as reflexes, and with a particularly female sense of justified reward: They are at the center of this whir, an anxious jingle of mandate and restraint. The woman who insisted that weight is "not really an issue," for instance, also noted that she only allows herself to eat dessert, or second helpings at dinner, if she's gone to the gym that day. No workout, no dessert. The woman who agreed with her (no, not an issue for her, either) echoed that sentiment. "Yeah," she nodded, "if I don't work out, I start to feel really gross about food and I'll try to cut back." A third said she eats "normally" but noted that she always makes a point of leaving at least one bite of food on her plate, every meal, no exceptions. And the woman who said she "basically just eats what she wants" added, "I mean, if someone brings a cake into the office, I'll have a tiny slice, and I might not eat the frosting, but it's not like a big deal or anything. I just scrape the frosting off."

Tiny slices, no frosting, forty-five minutes on the StairMaster: These are the conditions, variations on a theme of vigilance and self-restraint that I've watched women dance to all my life, that I've danced to myself instinctively and still have to work to resist. I walk into a health club locker room and feel an immediate impulse toward scrutiny, the kneejerk measuring of self against other: *That one has great thighs, this one's gained weight, who's thin, who's fat, how do I compare?* I overhear snippets of conversation, constraints unwittingly articulated and upheld in a dollop of lavish praise here *(You look fabulous, have you lost weight?)*, a whisper of recriminating judgment there *(She looks awful, has she gained weight?)*, and I automatically turn to look: Who looks fabulous, who looks awful? I go to a restaurant with a group of women and pray that we can order lunch without falling into the semi-covert business of collective monitoring, in which levels of intake and restraint are aired, compared, noticed: *What are you getting? Is that all you're having? A salad? Oh, please.* There's a persistent awareness of self in relation to other behind this kind of behavior, and also a tacit nod to the idea that there are codes to adhere to, and self-effacing apologies to be made if those codes are broken. *I'm such a hog*, says the woman who breaks rank, ordering a cheeseburger when everyone else has salad.

> ***That one has great thighs, this one's gained weight, who's thin, who's fat, how do I compare?***

Can't, shouldn't, I'm a moose. So much of this is waved away as female vanity — this tedious nattering about calories and fat, this whining, shallow preoccupation with surfaces — but I find it poignant, and painful in a low-level but chronic way, and also quite revealing. One of the lingering cultural myths about gender is that women are bad at math — they lack confidence for it, they have poor visual-spatial skills, they simply don't excel at numbers the way boys do. This theory has been widely challenged over the years, and there's scant evidence to suggest that girls are in any way neurologically ill-equipped to deal with algebra or calculus. But I'd challenge the myth on different grounds: Women are actually superb at math; they just happen to engage in their own variety of it, an intricate personal math in which desires are split off from one another, weighed, balanced, traded, assessed. These are the mathematics of desire, a system of self-limitation and monitoring based on the fundamental premise that appetites are at best risky, at worst impermissible, that indulgence must be bought and paid for. Hence the rules and caveats: Before you open the lunch menu or order that cheeseburger or consider eating the cake with the frosting intact, haul out the psychic calculator and start tinkering with the budget.

Why shouldn't you? I asked a woman that question not long ago while she was demurring about whether to order dessert at a restaurant.

Immediate answer: "Because I'll feel gross."

Why gross?

"Because I'll feel fat."

And what would happen if you felt fat?

"I hate myself when I feel fat. I feel ugly and out of control. I feel really un-sexy. I feel unlovable."

And if you deny yourself the dessert?

"I may feel a little deprived, but I'll also feel pious," she said.

So it's worth the cost?

"Yes."

These are big trade-offs for a simple piece of cake — add five hundred calories, subtract well-being, allure, and self-esteem — and the feelings behind them are anything but vain or shallow. Hidden within that thirty-second exchange is an entire set of mathematical principles, equations that can dictate a woman's most fundamental approach to hunger. Mastery over the body — its impulses, its needs, its size — is paramount; to lose control is to risk beauty, and to risk beauty is to risk desirability, and to risk desirability is to risk entitlement to sexuality and love and self-esteem. Desires collide, the wish to eat bumping up against the wish to be thin, the desire to indulge conflicting with the injunction to restrain. Small wonder food makes a woman nervous. The experience of appetite in this equation is an experience of anxiety, a burden and a risk; yielding to hunger may be permissible under certain conditions, but mostly it's something to be Earned or Monitored and Controlled. $E = mc^2$.

During the acute phases of my starving years, I took a perverse kind of pleasure in these exhibitions of personal calculus, the anxious little jigs that women would do around food. Every day at lunchtime, I'd stand in line at a café in downtown Providence clutching my 200-calorie yogurt, and while I waited, I'd watch the other women deliberate. I'd see a woman mince edgily around the glass case that held muffins and cookies, and I'd recognize the look in her eye, the longing for something sweet or gooey, the sudden flicker of *No.* I'd overhear fragments of conversation: debates between women (*I can't eat that, I'll feel huge*), and cajolings (*Oh, c'mon, have the fries*), and collaborations in surrender (*I will if you will*). I listened for these, I paid attention, and I always felt a little stab of superiority when someone yielded (*Okay, fuck it, fries, onion rings, PIE*). I would not yield — to do so, I understood, would imply lack of restraint, an unseemly, indulgent female greed — and in my stern resistance I got to feel coolly superior while they felt, or so it seemed to me, anxious.

But I knew that anxiety. I know it still, and I know how stubbornly pressing it can feel, the niggling worry about food and calories and size and heft cutting to the quick somehow, as though to fully surrender to hunger might lead to mayhem, the appetite proven unstoppable. If you plotted my food intake on a graph from that initial cottage cheese purchase onward, you wouldn't see anything very dramatic at first: a slight decline in consumption over my junior and senior years, and an increasing though not yet excessive pattern of rigidity, that edgy whir about food and weight at only the edges of consciousness at first. I lived off campus my senior year with a boyfriend, studied enormously hard, ate normal dinners at home with him, but permitted myself only a single plain donut in the morning, coffee all day, not a calorie more. The concept of "permission" was new to me — it heralded the introduction of rules and by-laws, a nascent internal tyrant issuing commands — but I didn't question it. I just ate the donut, drank the coffee, obeyed the rules, aware on some level that the rigidity and restraint served a purpose, reinforced those first heady feelings of will and determination, a proud sensation that I was somehow beyond ordinary need. I wrote a prize-winning honors thesis on two hundred calories a day.

The following year, my first out of college, the line on the graph would begin to waver, slowly at first, then peaking and dipping more erratically: five pounds up, five pounds down, six hundred calories here, six thousand there, the dieting female's private NASDAQ, a personal index of self-torture.

This was not a happy time. I'd taken a job in a university news bureau, an ostensible entree into writing and a fairly hefty disappointment (I was an editorial assistant in title, a glorified secretary in fact, bored nearly senseless from day one). The boyfriend had left for graduate school in California, and I was living alone for the first time, missing him with the particularly consuming brand of desperation afforded by long-distance love. I was restless and lonely and full of self-doubt, and the low-level tampering I'd been doing with my appetite began to intensify, my relationship with food thrown increasingly out of whack. This is familiar

territory to anyone with a long history of dieting: a fundamental severing between need and want begins to take place, eating gradually loses its basic associations with nourishment and physical satisfaction and veers onto a more complex emotional plane in which the whole notion of hunger grows loaded and confusing. Sometimes I was very rigid with my diet during this period, resolving to consume nothing but coffee all day, only cheese and crackers at night. Other times I ate for comfort, or because I was bored, or because I felt empty, all reasons that frightened and confused me. I'd make huge salads at night, filled with nuts and cubes of cheese and slathered in creamy dressings; I'd eat big bowls of salty soups, enormous tuna melts, hideously sweet oversized chocolate chip cookies, purchased in little frenzies of preservation (should I? shouldn't I?) from a local bakery. I started drinking heavily during this period, too, which weakened my restraint; I'd wake up feeling bloated and hungover and I'd try to compensate by eating nothing, or next to nothing, during the day.

For a year, I gained weight, lost weight, gained the weight back, and I found this deeply unnerving, as though some critical sense of bodily integrity were at risk, my sense of limits and proportion eroding. I'd feel my belly protrude against the waistband of my skirt, or one thigh chafing against another, and I'd be aware of a potent stab of alarm: *Shit, the vigilance has been insufficiently upheld, the body is growing soft and doughy, something central and dark about me — a lazy, gluttonous, insatiable second self — is poised to emerge.* Women often brought pastries into the office where I worked. Sometimes I'd steadfastly avoid them, resolve not even to look; other times I'd eye the pastry box warily from across the room, get up periodically and circle the table, conscious of a new sensation of self-mistrust, questions beginning to flitter and nag. *Could I eat one pastry, or would one lead to three, or four, or six? Was I actually hungry for a Danish or a croissant, or was I trying to satisfy some other appetite? How hungry — how rapacious, greedy, selfish, needy — was I?* The dance of the hungry woman — two steps toward the refrigerator, one step back, that endless loop of hunger and indulgence and guilt — had ceased to be a game; some key middle ground between gluttony and restraint, a place that used to be easily accessible to me, had grown elusive and I didn't know how to get back there.

This, of course, is one of appetite's insidious golden rules: The more you meddle with a hunger, the more taboo and confusing it will become. Feed the body too little and then too much, feed it erratically, launch that maddening cycle of deprivation and overcompensation, and the sensation of physical hunger itself becomes divorced from the

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body, food loaded with alternative meanings: symbol of longing, symbol of constraint, form of torture, form of reward, source of anxiety, source of succor, measure of self-worth. And thus the simple experience of hunger — of wanting something to eat — becomes frightening and fraught. What does it mean this time? Where will it lead? Will you eat *everything* if you let yourself go? Will you prove unstoppable, a famished dog at a garbage bin? Young and unsure of myself and groping for direction, I was scared of many things that year — leaving the structure of college was scary, entering the work world was scary, living on my own was scary, the future loomed like a monumental question mark — but I suspect I was scared above all of hunger itself, which felt increasingly boundless and insatiable, its limits and possible ravages unknown.

I suspect, too, that this feeling went well beyond the specific issue of food, that anxiety about caloric intake and body size were merely threads in a much larger tapestry of feeling that had to do with female self-worth and power and identity — for me and for legions of other women. This time period — late 1970s, early 1980s — coincided with the early stages of the well-documented shift in the culture's collective definition of beauty, its sudden and dramatically unambiguous pairing with slenderness. There is nothing new about this today; the pressure (internal and external) to be thin is so familiar and so widespread by now that most of us take it for granted, breathe it in like air, can't remember a time when we weren't aware of it, can't remember how different the average model or actress or beauty pageant contestant looked before her weight began to plummet (in the last twenty-five years, it's dropped to twenty-five percent below that of the average woman), can't remember a world in which grocery store shelves didn't brim with low-cal and "lite" products, in which mannequins wore size eight clothes instead of size two, in which images of beauty were less wildly out of reach.

But it's worth recalling that all of this — the ratcheted-up emphasis on thinness, the aesthetic shift from Marilyn Monroe to Kate Moss, the concomitant rise in eating disorders — is relatively recent, that the emphasis on diminishing one's size, on miniaturizing the very self, didn't really heat up until women began making gains in other areas of their lives. By the time I started to flirt with anorexia, in the late 1970s, women had gained access to education, birth control, and abortion, as well as widespread protection from discrimination in most areas of their lives. At the same time, doctors were handing out some ten billion appetite-suppressing amphetamines per year, Weight Watchers had spread to forty-nine states, its membership three million strong, and the diet-food business was about to eclipse all other categories as the fastest-growing segment of the food industry.

This parallel has been widely, and sensibly, described as the aesthetic expression of the backlash against feminist strength that Susan Faludi would document in 1992. At a time when increasing numbers of women were demanding the right to take up more space in the world, it is no surprise that they'd be hit with the opposite message from a culture that was (and still is) both male-dominated and deeply committed to its traditional power structures. Women get psychically larger, and they're told to grow physically smaller. Women begin to play active roles in realms once dominated by men (schools, universities, athletic fields, the workplace, the bedroom), and they're countered with images of femininity that infantilize them, render them passive and frail and non-threatening. "The female body is the place where this society writes its messages," writes Rosalind Coward in *Female-Desires*, and its response to feminism was etched with increasing clarity on the whittled-down silhouette of the average American model: Don't get too hungry, don't overstep your bounds.

The whispers of this mandate, audible in the 1970s and 1980s, have grown far louder today; they are roars, howls, screams. The average American, bombarded with advertisements on a daily basis, will spend approximately three years of his or her lifetime watching television commercials, and you don't have to look too closely to see what that deluge of imagery has to say about the female body and its hungers. A controlled appetite, prerequisite for slenderness, connotes beauty, desirability, worthiness. An uncontrolled appetite — a fat woman — connotes the opposite, she is ugly, repulsive, and so fundamentally unworthy that, according to a *New York Times* report on cultural attitudes toward fat, sixteen percent of adults would choose to abort a child if they knew he or she would be untreatably obese.

Hatred of fat, inextricably linked to fear of fat, is so deeply embedded in the collective consciousness it can arouse a surprising depth of discomfort and mean-spiritedness, even among people who consider themselves to be otherwise tolerant and sensitive to women. Gail Dines, director of women's studies and professor of sociology at Wheelock College in Boston and one of the nation's foremost advocates of media literacy, travels around the country giving a slide show/lecture called "Sexy or Sexist: Images of Women in the Media." The first half of the presentation consists of images, one after the other, of svelte perfection: a sultry Brooke Shields clad in a blue bikini on a *Cosmo* cover, an achingly slender leg in an ad for Givenchy pantyhose, a whisper-thin Kate Moss. Then, about halfway into the presentation, a slide of a postcard flashes onto the screen, a picture of a woman on a beach in Hawaii. The woman is clad in a bright blue two-piece bathing suit, and she is very fat; she's shown from the rear, her buttocks enormous, her thighs pocked with fleshy folds, and the words on the postcard read: HAVING A WHALE OF A TIME IN HAWAII. The first time I saw this, I felt a jolt of something critical and mean — part pity, part judgment, an impulse to recoil — and I felt immediately embarrassed by this, which is precisely the sensation Dines intends to flush out. At another showing before a crowd at Northeastern University, the image appears on the screen and several people begin to guffaw, nervous titters echo across the room. Dines stops and turns to the audience. "Now why is this considered funny?" she demands. "Explain that to me. Does she not have the right to the dignity that you and I have a right to? Does having extra pounds on your body deny you that right?" The crowd falls silent, and Dines sighs. There it is: This obese woman, this object of hoots and jeers, is a tangible focus of female anxiety, a 350-pound picture of the shame and humiliation that will be visited upon a woman if her hunger is allowed to go unchecked.

Dines, among many others, might identify culture as the primary protagonist in this narrative, a sneering villain cleverly disguised as Beauty who skulks around injecting women with a irrational but morbid fear of fat. There is certainly some truth to that — a woman who isn't affected to some degree by the images and injunctions of fat-and-thin is about as rare as a black orchid. But I also think the intensity of the struggle around appetite that began to plague me twenty years ago, that continues to plague so many women today, speaks not just to cultural anxiety about female hunger, profound though it may be, but also to deep reservoirs of personal anxiety, Fear of fat merely exists on the rippled surface of that reservoir; mass-market images are mere reflections upon it. Underneath, the real story — each woman in her own sea of experience — is more individual and private; it's about what happens when hunger is not quite paired with power, when the license to hunger is new and unfamiliar, when a woman is teased with freedom — to define herself as she sees fit, to attend to her own needs and wishes, to fully explore her own desires — but may not quite feel that freedom in her bones or believe that it will last.

> ***Fear of fat merely exists on the rippled surface of that reservoir; mass-market images are mere reflections upon it.***

Once, several months into that first year of weight gain and weight loss, I met some friends for Sunday brunch, an all-you-can-eat buffet at a local hotel restaurant. All-you-can-eat buffets terrify me to this day — I find them sadistic and grotesque in a particularly American way, the emphasis on quantity and excess reflecting something insatiably greedy and short-sighted about the culture's ethos — and I date the onset of my terror to that very morning. Such horrifying abundance! Such potential for unleashed gluttony! The buffet table seemed to stretch out for a mile: at one station, made-to-order omelets and bacon and sausage; at another, waffles and pancakes and crêpes; at another, bagels and muffins and croissants and pastries; at yet another, an entire array of desserts, cakes and pies and individual soufflés. If you're confused about hunger, if the internal mechanisms that signal physical satiety have gone haywire, if food has become symbolically loaded, or a stand-in for other longings, this kind of array can topple you. I couldn't choose. More to the point, I couldn't trust myself to choose moderately or responsibly, or to stop when I was full, or even to know what I wanted to begin with, what would satisfy and how much. And so I ate everything. The suppressed appetite always rages just beneath the surface of will, and as often happened during that period, it simmered, then bubbled up, then boiled over. I ate. I ate eggs and bacon and waffles and slabs of cake, I ate knowing full well that I'd feel bloated and flooded with disgust later on and that I'd have to make restitution — I'd starve the next day, or go for a six-mile run, or both. I ate without pleasure, I ate until I hurt.

Years later, I'd see that brunch in metaphorical terms, a high-calorie, high-carbohydrate testament to the ambiguous blessings of abundance, its promise and its agonizing terror. As a rule, women of my generation were brought up without knowing a great deal about how to understand hunger, with very little discussion about how to assess and respond adequately to our own appetites, and with precious few examples of how to negotiate a buffet of possibility, much less embrace one. Eating too much — then as now — was a standard taboo, a mother's concern with her own body and weight handed down to her daughter in a mantle of admonishments: *Always take the smallest portion; always eat a meal before you go on a date lest you eat too much in front of him; don't eat that, it'll go straight to your hips.* Sexual hunger was at best undiscussed, at worst presented as a bubbling cauldron of danger and sin, potentially ruinous; the memory banks of women my age are riddled with images of scowling mothers, echoes of recriminating hisses (*Take that off, you look like a slut!*), fragments of threat-laden lectures about the predatory hunger of boys. And the world of ambition was in many ways uncharted territory, one that required qualities and skills — ego strength, competitiveness, intellectual confidence — that were sometimes actively discouraged in girls (*Don't brag, don't get a swelled head, don't be so smart*), rarely modeled.

This is a complicated legacy to bring to a world of blasted-open options, each *yes* in potential collision with an old *no*, and it makes for a great deal of confusion. The underlying questions of appetite, after all, are formidable — What *would* satisfy? How much *do* you need, and of what? What *are* the true passions, the real hungers behind the ostensible goals of beauty or slenderness? — and until relatively recently, a lot of women haven't been encouraged to explore them, at least not in a deep, concerted, uniform, socially supported way. We have what might be called post-feminist appetites, whetted and encouraged by a generation of opened doors and collapsed social structures, but not always granted unequivocal support or license, not always stripped of their traditional alarm bells and warnings, and not yet bolstered by a deeper sense of entitlement.

Freedom, it is important to note, is not the same as power; the ability to make choices can feel unsettling and impermanent and thin if it's not girded somehow with the heft of real economic and political strength. Women certainly have more of that heft than they did a generation ago; we are far less formally constrained, far more autonomous, and far more politically powerful, at least potentially so. Forty-three million women — forty percent of all adult women — live independently today, without traditional supports. Women make the vast majority of consumer purchases in this country — eighty-three percent — and buy one fifth of all homes. We have an unprecedented amount of legal protection, with equality on the basis of sex required by law in virtually every area of American life. We are better educated than the women of any preceding generation, with women representing more than half of full-time college enrollments. By all accounts, we ought to feel powerful, competent, and strong — and many women no doubt do, at least in some areas and at some times.

But it's also true that an overwhelming majority of women — estimates range from eighty to eighty-nine percent — wake up every morning aware of an anxious stirring of self-disgust, fixated on the feel of our thighs as we pull on our stockings, the feel of our bellies and hips as we zip up our pants and skirts. Women are three times as likely as men to feel negatively about their bodies. Eighty percent of women have been on a diet, half are actively dieting at any given time, and half report feeling dissatisfied with their bodies all the time. There is no doubt that this negativity is a culturally mediated phenomenon, that culture gives the female preoccupation with appearance (which in itself is nothing new) its particular cast, its particularly relentless focus on slenderness. But the sheer numbers, which indicate an unprecedented depth and breadth of anxiety about appearance in general and weight in particular, suggest that something more complex than imagery is at work, that our collective sense of power and competence and strength hasn't quite made it to a visceral level.

To be felt at that level, as visceral and permanent and real, entitlement must exist beyond the self; it must be known and acknowledged on a wider plane. And this is where women still get the short end of the stick; for all the gains of the last forty years, we are hardly ruling the world out there. Congress is still ninety percent male, as are ninety-eight percent of America's top corporate officers. Ninety-five percent of all venture capital today flows into men's bank accounts. The two hundred highest-paid CEOs in America are all men. Only three women head Fortune 500

companies, a number that hasn't budged in twenty years. We also have less visibility than men; women — our lives, issues, concerns — are still featured in only fifteen percent of page-one stories, and when we do make front-page news, it is usually only as victims or perpetrators of crime. And we still have less earning power: Women continue to make eighty-four cents for every dollar a man makes; women who take time off from work to have children make seventeen percent less than those who don't even six years after they return; men with children earn the most money while women with children earn the least.

This gap, I think — this persistent imbalance between personal freedom on the one hand and political power on the other — amps up the anxiety factor behind desire; it can leave a woman with a sense that something does not quite compute; it can give choices a partial, qualified feel. A woman, today, can be a neurosurgeon, or an astrophysicist; she can marry or not marry, leave her spouse, pack up, and move across the country at will. But can she take such choices a step further, or two or ten? Can a woman be not just an astrophysicist, but a big, powerful, lusty astrophysicist who feels unequivocally entitled to food and sex and pleasure and acclaim? Can she move across the country and also leave behind all her deeply ingrained feelings about what women are really supposed to look and act and be like? External freedoms may still bump up against a lot of ancient and durable internal taboos; they may still collide with the awareness, however vague, that women still represent the least empowered portion of the population, and these collisions help explain why appetites are so particularly problematic today; they exist in a very murky context, and an inherently unstable one, consistently pulled between the opposing poles of possibility and constraint, power and powerlessness.

The world mobilizes in the service of male appetite; it did during my upbringing and it does still. Whether or not this represents the actual experience of contemporary boys and men, our cultural stereotypes of male desire (and stereotypes exist precisely because they contain grains of truth) are all about facilitation and support: Mothers feed (Eat! Eat!), fathers model assertion and unabashed competitiveness, teachers encourage outspoken bravado. At home and at work, men have helpers, usually female, who clean and cook and shop and type and file and assist. And at every turn — on billboards, magazine covers, in ads — men are surrounded by images of offering, of breasts and parted lips and the sultry gazes of constant availability: Take me, you are entitled, I exist to please you. For all the expansion of opportunity in women's lives, there is no such effort on behalf of female appetite, there are no comparable images of service and availability, there is no baseline expectation that a legion of others will rush forward to meet our needs or satisfy our hungers. The striving, self-oriented man is adapted to, cut slack, his transgressions and inadequacies explained and forgiven. *Oh, well, you wouldn't expect him to cook or take care of his kids, who cares if he's put on a few pounds, so what if he's controlling or narcissistic, he's busy, he gets things done, he's running the show, he's running the company, he's running the* COUNTRY. That litany of understanding does not apply to women; it sounds discordant and artificial if you switch the genders, and if you need a single example of the double standard at work here, think about Bill and Hillary Clinton. Bill's pudginess and fondness for McDonald's was seen as endearing; his sexual appetite criticized but ultimately forgiven by most Americans, or at least considered irrelevant to his abilities on the job; Hillary got no such latitude, the focus on her appearance (hairstyle, wardrobe, legs) was relentless, the hostility released toward her ambition venomous.

The one exception to this rule, the one area where a legion of others might, in fact, rush forward in service to a woman's needs, is shopping, particularly high-end retail shopping, but in itself, that merely underscores how lacking the phenomenon is in other areas, and how constricted the realm of appetite is for women in general: We can want, and even expect, the world to mobilize on our behalf when we're equipped with an American Express gold card and an appetite for Armani. But beyond the world of appearances and consumer goods, expressions of physical hunger and selfish strivings rarely meet with such consistent support. Instead, the possibility of risk can hang in the air like a mildly poisonous mist; for every appetite, there may be a possible backlash, or a slap or a reprimand or a door that opens but has caveats stamped all over the welcome mat. A novelist tells me in a whisper about a glowing review she's received; she can barely get the words out, so strong are the chastising echoes of her family: *Now, don't you let it go to your head*, her mother used to say, and it took her decades to realize how truly defeating that phrase was. ("Where's it supposed to go," she asks today, "someone else's head?") A scientist, brilliant and respected, secures a major grant for a project she's dreamed of taking on for years and later describes what an emotional hurdle it was to fully take pride in the accomplishment, to really revel in it: "I couldn't say it aloud, I just couldn't get the words out," she says. "I don't think a man would *get* that." An educator, who's taught high school for thirteen years and is now pursuing a PhD in education, tells me, "For years, I've carried around the feeling that if I really allow myself to follow my passions, something bad will happen." She can't follow that line of thought to any logical conclusion; rather, it expresses an amalgam of worries, some specific (she's apprehensive about being consumed by work, and about making sacrifices in her personal life), but more of them generic, as though the admission of hunger and ambition is in itself a dangerous thing, quite likely a punishable offense.

This quiet, dogged anxiety, this internalized mosquito whine of caveat, may explain why the memory of that hotel brunch would stick with me for so long; the experience seemed to capture something about the times, about the onset of a complicated set of conflicts between an expansive array of options on the one hand and a sense of deep uncertainty on the other, a feeling that this freedom was both incomplete and highly qualified, full of risks. Certainly that's how I felt in those early unformed twentysomething years, as though I were standing before an enormous table of possibilities with no utensils, no serving spoons, no real sense that I was truly entitled to sample the goods, to experiment or indulge or design my own menu.