

# **13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl Study Guide**

## **13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl by Mona Awad**

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# Plot Summary

13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl by Mona Awad is a fictional account of Elizabeth's battle with obesity. For as long as she can remember, Elizabeth has been self-conscious about the extra weight she packs around. She desperately wants to fit in; to be considered worthy of dating, and to be accepted by her peers. Instead, she and her best friend Mel who is also overweight, spend hours together imagining how things could be different.

Elizabeth begins an earnest attempt to lose weight when she meets Tom, fearing that she might accidentally smother him as they slept beside each other in bed. She manages to cut her physical body down by half, dieting with the determination of a woman possessed. By the time she introduces Tom to her mother for the first time, she is able to wear clothing that she would never have considered in the past and her mother is so proud of her that she not only insists on showing her off to her co-workers and managers, but also buys her clothing that show off her new look.

Elizabeth's mother is also obese, and Elizabeth notices her mother's health is deteriorating, but her mother has no interest in discussing it despite losing the feeling in her legs now and then, and the obvious struggle that it is for her to breathe. Soon after, she passes away and Elizabeth spirals, depressed and lost in the world for a time. She finds herself in a cycle of temptation and diet, falling on and off in her efforts to be slim and telling herself she is doing it all for him. Tom misses the woman he married however. Elizabeth becomes increasingly embarrassed by the left over stretch marks and rolls that remain after great weight loss, and hides her naked body from him when she never had before. She pushes him away, using one excuse after another. Then she discovers that Tom has been hiding in his office to watch pornography with plus sized women. When Elizabeth discovers the web pages he enjoys, she and Tom fall apart.

Eventually, Elizabeth moves back to her mother's apartment, leaving it exactly as it was despite her father's efforts to inject change. She reconnects with her best friend Mel, and eventually moves into the South Tower of Phase One in the Beyond the Sea complex. Her window overlooks the Malibu Club Spa and for a long time, Elizabeth works out on Lifecycle One, trying to rid herself of the last vestiges of her fat body but try as she might, she feels as though she is stagnating. One day, she simply quits going down to the gym but it isn't until her building catches fire that she finally realizes the folly of weight loss at the expense of life.

The reality hits her hard as she and another resident are standing outside waiting for the fire department while another resident cycles on alone in the gym despite the danger, the alarms and the sirens. In that moment Elizabeth discovers a basic truth and considers its ramifications. Armed with the knowledge that life requires moderation, Elizabeth suddenly feels as though she can change everything.



# Chapter One: When We Went Against The Universe

## Summary

Elizabeth and Mel go to McDonald's on a sunny afternoon, having nothing better to do, and sit outside eating McFlurries. Bored, they have talked themselves almost silent. They decide to do Fate Papers but the universe appears to be against them. Both get repeated 'no' answers regardless of the questions asked. Mel notices that the men at the table next to them are looking at her, and Elizabeth turns to see three men in business suits, each holding a Big Mac. Though staring at their food now, Mel insists they were staring at her breasts earlier, and that she's been giving off sexual vibrations strong enough for the both of them all day. Mel suggests they offer them their sexual services, convinced that they can probably charge as much as \$50 for a purely oral encounter; or perhaps even as much as \$100. Again Elizabeth is reminded of how little Mel has in the way of morality where men are concerned. When Mel continues to push the idea, Elizabeth suggests they go to the bathroom first. Mel confirms that they will only give oral sex, but just as they are headed to the men's table, Elizabeth pulls her back again insisting they do Fate Papers first.

Fate will say yes, and even though Elizabeth makes Mel do it again, the answer is the same. When they go back out, the men are leaving and the opportunity passes, but it will not be the only opportunity either of the girls has to engage in sex with older men. As time goes by, Mel will climb into cars or taxis or even a bathroom stall near Union Station for as little as \$50. She continues to wear her Catholic school uniform for one man long after she drops out and when Elizabeth runs into her in a coffee shop, she listens to Mel's stories, trying not to stare at her arms which are covered in bruises. Elizabeth isn't immune to improper treatment at the hands of strange men either. She has found herself in a parked van, her wrists bound with a pair of dirty socks; and she has allowed one man ten years her senior to grope her in the park. Years earlier, she'd experienced oral sex with a friend of her mother's every day after school until overcome with guilt he confessed his behavior to her mother. After that, Elizabeth never saw him again.

Mel assures Elizabeth that even the Fate Papers wanted them to engage in oral sex with the men at the next table, and Elizabeth wonders what happens when you ignore the Fate Papers but Mel seems unconcerned.

## Analysis

Mel and Elizabeth are introduced as bored young women looking for excitement. Both girls grapple with the insecurities that accompany poor body image, and share the difficulties that come with obesity. Mel is more outgoing than Elizabeth, although both



use sex as a substitute for love and companionship often spending time with older men just so that they would feel wanted or attractive even for a short time. The fact that both girls are overweight not only forms a common bond between them, but also forms an invisible barrier between them and everyone else in their age group. Despite the struggles they both face with weight, they are unable to pass up the Blizzards from Dairy Queen or the McFlurries from McDonald's. Together they are able to ignore the snide comments or looks they get from their peers, but neither is immune to the hurt and loneliness that follows.

Boredom is the only thing either girl shares with their classmates. Mel and Elizabeth are often self-deprecating, comparing how overweight they are, and discussing which of them is less attractive than the other. Mel insists that Elizabeth has better skin and breasts than she does, and Elizabeth is convinced that despite Mel's psoriasis and the mustache she regularly has to bleach, she is still more attractive than Elizabeth is. Mel is not as heavy as Elizabeth, and as such, Elizabeth is convinced that Mel has a much better chance of attracting the attentions of any boy they like. Mel prefers older men however and even a casual glance from a stranger might elicit solicitation for sex from her. Elizabeth is less exploitative and manages to distract Mel long enough that the table of men next to them leaves, but Mel still basks in the attention she perceived from them. She talks about men and sex with a familiarity that sometimes embarrasses Elizabeth, and goes into great detail as she tells Elizabeth the reasons she'd rather have a breast man over a man who is interested in a nice behind because she considers that to be her worst feature. Mel struggles with a lack of morality that even forced her to change schools when her classmates resorted to name calling when she offered sexual favors to a boy who already had a girlfriend.

Both girls clearly seek approval, acceptance and love from any man who comes into their lives. This foreshadows a dark time both emotionally and physically for both of them. Elizabeth describes how she sees Mel later in life, sporting bruises on her arms, and admits to having been tied up herself. Elizabeth tells herself that one day she'll be beautiful, growing into her nose and out of her body, but the only time she sees herself as looking nice is through a man's eyes.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What are the common denominators in the friendship between Mel and Elizabeth? Is their friendship a benefit or a detriment to each of them and why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are Fate Papers and how do they affect the girls if at all?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What kind of men do Mel and Elizabeth claim they are looking for and why?

## Vocabulary

pulverized, technically, saunters, obscure, psychological, respective, ominous, maw



# Chapter Two: Your Biggest Fan

## Summary

This chapter is told in second-person from Rob's perspective. Rob is well on his way to being blind drunk when he decides to visit "the fat girl" whose name he can't quite remember. He only knows that she's likely to be home, and that she'll be happy to hear from him like she always is. He is right. She is. He asks if he can visit her, and she's happy to have him, but reminds him not to wake her mother. It's been a while since Rob went to her in a state of crisis but Rob remembers the last time. She watches for him and calls him to the side door, reminding him to be quiet. She makes him BananaRama while he sits on the couch comparing her to other women in his life; how she makes time for him when others don't; how she bakes for him while others can't be bothered; how she remembers the things he likes while others don't care enough to remember; and who listens – really listens to him in a way that none of the others do. Rob has a new set of songs he wants to try out on her and she is excited; honored to listen unlike those people in his life who would have felt put out at his request. She is thrilled of course (as though he could do anything that wouldn't thrill her) and she validates him insisting he persevere.

Sometime after playing the B side of his album at her request, Rob wakes in bed next to Elizabeth. Rob gets up carefully, and leaves her a copy of his album 'Novembril Musings', autographed "To My Biggest Fan" and then sneaks out, realizing only afterwards the poor choice of words with his autograph. The Other One waits at his door and sets on him, berating him when she realizes that he'd been with the fat girl, and says she can't believe him. A week later the fat girl still won't answer Rob's calls. For reasons he isn't clear on, he drives to her house sober three weeks later. For some reason, he needs to see her. When he gets there, he discovers she is being entertained by another aspiring young artist, who is eating her fresh BananaRama. She raves about his talent and praises the young man who is sitting on the Indian cushions that Rob used to sit on. Calling him Samuel, she listens and tells him how great he is, while the broken chords he plays ring in Rob's ears long after he is home.

## Analysis

Elizabeth is revealed as desperate for approval as she accepts both Rob and Samuel's self-involved behavior, and encourages them to pursue their dreams. She attempts to inject some of herself into both encounters, but it is clear that both men are there for her approval. They seek her out when they need someone who will support them unconditionally, praise them and stroke their delicate egos when they are down or insecure. Elizabeth does so in order to maintain the minimal contact she has with these men, enjoying the feeling and the idea that for the moment, they need her desperately.



Insecurity and narcissism are introduced as character traits in the men who spend time with Elizabeth. Rob is desperate for someone – for anyone to boost his ego and moral. He needs his number one fan to gush over him; fawn over his efforts; and swoon when he plays for her. Elizabeth is that person for him. Samuel is insecure about his music and needs a positive response to whatever he plays so that he has the courage to move forward.

Elizabeth suffers from the same insecurities, but hers center on fitting in with her peers. She is acutely aware of her obesity, and uses food as a comfort when she is anxious or when she is lonely. As such, she is already baking when Rob shows up.

Rob is surprised to discover he is jealous when he discovers that Elizabeth is spending time with another musician named Samuel. Although he'd never promised her anything, and treated her as disposable, he still can't help but be angry when someone else usurps his position with her. That also leaves a vacuum in his life that cannot be filled by the people that are usually part of his circle. The only one that ever put him first was Elizabeth.

It is not surprising that Samuel and Rob are very much alike. Both go to Elizabeth for approval, and for unfailing support, and both are so oblivious to her and her needs and desires that neither one is able to remember the simplest thing – her name.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Rob feel the need to go to Elizabeth, and what does he get from the time he spends with her that keeps him coming back?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Elizabeth refuse to return Rob's calls, and what line does Rob cross that precipitates her decision to cut him out of her life?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways are Rob and Samuel similar to each other, and what does Elizabeth hope to gain from her contact with either one?

## Vocabulary

subgenre, tentatively, fervent, primordial, indignation, transfixed, ethereal, incandescent





# Chapter Three: Full Body

## Summary

Elizabeth sees China in school and wonders aloud how she manages to do her eye makeup. China offers to do hers for her so they skip class in favor of a makeup session in the women's bathroom. Elizabeth is amazed by the results. China talks about the boys she has dated, and to fit in Elizabeth tells her about a guy she met on line who wants her to send him a full body shot of herself. Elizabeth is reluctant, admitting she hasn't told him about her weight – an issue that has a life of its own. Afterward, they skip English as well, and go back to Elizabeth's house where China shows her how to wear her tights as a top by tearing a hole in the crotch and sticking your head through, putting your arms through the leg openings. Fishnets are best for this, she assures Elizabeth. Elizabeth does so, and almost feels attractive, but then insecurity creeps in again and she asks China if she looks fat. China chastises her, admitting she wished she had hair like Elizabeth, and that she admires her ankles as well. China asks Elizabeth about Blake and when the subject of a full body photos comes up again, China offers to take the photos for her, and they make plans to take the photos that Saturday.

Elizabeth avoids mirrors, almost feeling as though she imagines China feels. Later she tells Blake all about the outfit and, calling her Bettie, he expresses his wish that she'd send him photos again, but she begs off claiming to be too tired. Her mother comes in, forcing Elizabeth to end the conversation abruptly. She continues to stand in the doorway and asks Elizabeth if she went to school, admitting that she knows Elizabeth has been depressed as well. She crosses her arms over her own large stomach and Elizabeth fold her arms over her own, determined not to actually look at her body if she can help it. Her mother tells her that the eye makeup makes her look as though she's been punched, but Elizabeth doesn't care.

On Saturday China is ready to take photos for Elizabeth. Elizabeth isn't ready, still undecided as to what to wear, whether or not makeup should be used and what location would be best. China looks over the clothing choices, but makes no suggestions. China takes several photos, lets Elizabeth change, and then takes some more. Blake calls just to tell her how excited he is that she is taking the photos, and asks when she'll send them. At the same time, China finds a photo of Blake in the drawer and tells Elizabeth she feels weird about continuing. She can't understand what Elizabeth expects from the relationship, adding her opinion that the hurdles they face are insurmountable on many levels, the photos being the least of them.

After that, China decides Elizabeth has enough photos, and gets ready to go to Java where she is supposed to meet Andrew. Elizabeth checks out the photos, deciding they look just as bad as the last ones and that she does look like she's been punched. China leaves and Elizabeth imagines the evening she'll have. Then she calls Mel, who answers the phone but sounds distant until Elizabeth admits that she was right about China. They talk for a little while and when she hangs up, Elizabeth begins to remove



the posters that cover her wall, crumpling them up as she goes. The phone rings and she hopes it is Mel again, but she knows it is Blake. She contemplates telling him that her computer is broken and as the phone continues to ring, she imagines herself as China. On Monday, Elizabeth appears at school as promised to participate in the project they are presenting together. China's makeup is perfect while Elizabeth's is mostly gone now.

## Analysis

Mel distances herself from Elizabeth when Elizabeth begins hanging around China, disappointed that her friend would show so little taste, and revealing some jealousy at their new friendship. She foreshadows problems for Elizabeth.

Elizabeth has ongoing anxiety where her body is concerned. Her self-image is extremely poor, and she confesses that she makes every effort not to look at herself. Blake is introduced as the man Elizabeth is carrying on an online relationship with. A quadriplegic, he used to be an actor, but now struggles to maintain even the very basics. He has already sent Elizabeth photos of himself both before and after the accident and is asking for hers in return, but she's been less than honest with him, and hasn't disclosed her battle with obesity. As such, she is afraid to reveal this now, fearing he will no longer want contact.

While Blake is oblivious to the truth, Elizabeth is able to maintain the façade and demeanor of a sultry, beautiful woman who is a sexual goddess. Even Blake believes that she will be the answer to restarting his sex life. A photo will change all of that in Elizabeth's mind, so she continues to hide behind excuses. She shows China photos of herself which are all composed with her body covered either with an artful display of cushions or water and flower petals which suggests that her poor self-image has been an ongoing issue in her life and are affecting her on a day to day basis in ways that reflect in her expression and demeanor as well. China points out that Elizabeth looks either frightened or angry in all of them.

Elizabeth's mother is introduced and revealed to be overweight as well. The genesis of Elizabeth's problems with weight are likely partially due to heredity and partially to the poor eating habits that were normal in her home as she grew up, the likelihood that she would be overweight as well were overwhelming. It is clear that Elizabeth's relationship with her mother is contentious, although she has some sympathy for the position she is in. She has heart problems and has been alone for many years already. Added to her weight, she is hardly a catch so Elizabeth doesn't begrudge her having a boyfriend, but instead prefers to maintain a relationship of mutual ignorance where neither questions the other or pries into anything personal.

Elizabeth returns to Mel after China cools her friendship when they meet so that she can help Elizabeth with the photos. Although enthusiastic about the idea earlier, she seems put out by the whole experience when it comes time to take them, and the photos are predictably horrible. As such, Elizabeth goes back to the friend who shares



her weight problems and is sympathetic to the issues she is facing and joins her when she badmouths China and tells Elizabeth she'd warned her that China would be a problem.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What does Elizabeth hope that China will help her with, and what happens instead?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Elizabeth so worried about sending Blake a photo, and what makes her think that doing so will change anything between them?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Mel think China will be a problem and what is her general opinion of her?

## **Vocabulary**

anointed, configuration, definitively, doppelgangers, anatomically, emanating, affectation

# Chapter Four: If That's All There Is

## Summary

Achibald is Elizabeth's coworker. One day he casually approaches and hands her a piece of paper containing a standing offer for oral sex. He tells her that he is quite gifted, so it would be worth her while despite the army of boyfriends he's sure she has. The next day she suggests they go for coffee and Archibald jumps on the idea. He waits until she is off work and they get into a cab where Archibald immediately begins removing her shirt, insisting the driver won't care. Telling the driver to just drive in circles, he disappears between her legs and she tries to maintain a neutral expression as he tries to fulfill his promise of an amazing experience. After seven minutes, acutely aware of how public their situation is, Elizabeth finally fakes an orgasm to bring the experience to an end. Archibald doesn't believe her, but isn't offended and admits that he's wanted to do that since the first time he saw her. He is more than willing to try again anytime.

Later, Elizabeth tells Mel about her experience, and though she describes it as a bust to Mel, she still calls Archibald the next night. He begins coming over on a regular basis, and Elizabeth describes their sexual antics as "definitely not terrible." Elizabeth begins calling him her boyfriend a few weeks later. Eight weeks later, she still isn't sure why she keeps calling him, but she does. He is the first boyfriend she has ever had who she could be naked around without feeling ashamed or hiding her midriff and admits to Mel that he touches her as though he enjoys it, and she can hardly believe it. One night Elizabeth is waiting for him to show up when the phone rings and a woman identifies herself as Britta – Archibald's girlfriend. As Elizabeth tries to absorb that news, Archibald arrives and she confronts him. He smiles, telling her she is hot when she's mad, and Elizabeth cries as he explains that Britta is a stalker he dated before he started seeing her. He kisses her, and touches her until she isn't able to throw him out like all of her instincts tell her to.

After every visit with Archibald, Elizabeth promises herself she'll end the relationship, but instead she tells him she missed him, or asks why he's late. She ignores the phone that won't stop ringing and begins suffering panic attacks when she leaves the house. Her doctor prescribes pills that she and Archibald share exclaiming their love for each other. They watch movies, eat take out, and Elizabeth stops looking in the mirror. When Elizabeth continues to see Archibald, Britta arrives at his apartment to confront them. She is so angry with Archibald that she explodes and throws his harmonica at him, hitting him in the face. When she sees the amount of blood, she takes off her sweater to staunch the bleeding, instantly remorseful, and tells Elizabeth to call a taxi. They wait together in the hospital, and although Britta tells her she can go, Elizabeth can't because she has no wallet or money, and she has no intention of borrowing from Britta. The television is muted, but broadcasting a Jerry Springer episode in which two overweight girls are screaming and clawing at each other on stage with a caption that says "I Cheated on You with Your Best Friend" underneath. Britta stands up and announces she is going to the cafeteria and for the first time, Elizabeth has no desire to



eat, despite hunger pangs that remind her she hasn't eaten in hours. She watches Britta disappear down the hall.

## Analysis

Archibald is introduced in this chapter and claims to be an admirer of Elizabeth's. He offers her oral sex, and surprising herself, Elizabeth allows him to indulge himself with her. At first Elizabeth thinks he is joking, but there is no smile on his face, so she says she'll think about it. His interest in her is enough to have her considering the offer and taking more time with her clothing and makeup than usual the following day. When Elizabeth tells Archibald that she'd like for them to go out for a coffee, he can't hide how pleased he is and the way that he looks at her makes her feel as though she is wearing something sexy and alluring. Their first sexual encounter occurs in the back of a taxi, for which he apologizes later. The experience is so public in nature that Elizabeth is too embarrassed to relax. Although at first Elizabeth convinces herself that this will be a one-time only experience with Archibald, and she tells Mel that the whole thing was less than satisfying, she can't seem to help calling him again, and again. It is unusual for Elizabeth to feel as though she is attractive to another person, and the idea that he finds her desirable is like an aphrodisiac all on its own.

Britta is also introduced in this segment as a woman who is even larger than Elizabeth, and as someone who has given up on fashion and style. She hasn't given up on Archibald however, and calls Elizabeth to tell her that Archibald is her boyfriend. Though hurt, Elizabeth confronts Archibald who manages to convince her that Britta is a stalker – an old girlfriend who can't let go. Elizabeth is addicted to the way he is attracted to her, and as such is willing to believe the story he gives her but also foreshadows that they have reached the beginning of the end. Her desire to believe Archibald clashes with the constant calls from Britta which she then refuses to answer revealing that a part of her already knows the truth.

The truth hits Elizabeth from all sides in this segment. When Britta arrives at Archibald's apartment to confront him regarding his infidelity, Elizabeth is ready to leave. There have been a myriad of signs that foreshadowed the end at this point, including the fact that she no longer finds his harmonica playing endearing and his body is more of a turn off than a turn on, but Britta arriving is the final straw. Elizabeth is on her way out when Britta throws the harmonica at Archibald and before Elizabeth knows it she is sitting with Britta at the hospital while Archibald is treated for facial lacerations. While they are sitting there, Elizabeth tries to discern whether Britta and Archibald have what she would consider a real relationship; curious as to whether or not he discusses music with her, or shares the music he loves with her, but it doesn't appear as though Archibald and Britta had that kind of relationship. While Elizabeth tries to sort her feelings out, she inadvertently notices the television program on which has two overweight women fighting over a man they both wanted.

The similarities are eye opening for Elizabeth, and her reality slap continues when Britta announces she is starving and heads to the cafeteria to top up. Elizabeth realizes that



although she hasn't eaten in some time, the idea still isn't appealing which foreshadows changes in her near future. Seeing Britta is an eye opener for Elizabeth who recognizes a possible reflection of herself with a little more weight and a little less self-respect in her. It is perhaps the wakeup call she needs to make some changes in her life.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is Elizabeth able to be comfortable with Archibald, even naked? Why does that change and when?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Elizabeth describe her relationship with Archibald, and how does she justify continuing to see him?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Britta insist that Elizabeth should be thanking her, and why would Elizabeth agree?

## **Vocabulary**

obscenely, dissonance, platonic, empirical, fervently, festooned, existential, presumably



# Chapter Five: The Girl I Hate

## Summary

Elizabeth watches the girl she hates as she smothers clotted cream over both halves of a scone and then puts jam on top of that. She makes satisfied moaning and groaning noises as Elizabeth tries to ignore her. Elizabeth eats nothing, and later munches on a salad followed by flax cereal and some unsalted almonds. She is determined to stick to a regimented calorie intake, and to give herself an emotional boost she decides to phone her boyfriend Tom and confirm that he's booked the plane ticket for her to come to New York. He has, and says he looks forward to seeing her. They hang up and she promises herself that she'll just say no when the girl she hates invites her to go out for lunch. When she calls to invite her though, Elizabeth agrees and sits through another session where she eats a combination salad of fennel, dill and pomegranate and the girl she hates eats her way through a pizza and then has a cinnamon bun to finish it off.

Later Elizabeth has dinner with Mel and tells her about Itsy Bitsy. Mel still insists on calling her Elizabeth even though Elizabeth has reminded her more than once that she is calling herself Beth now. Mel orders a hefty dinner of roast beef with all the trimmings while Elizabeth manages to sound enthusiastic about the heart salad she ordered, extolling the virtues of romaine, artichoke and palm hearts. Mel offers to share her appetizer, but doesn't push when Elizabeth refuses. Mel admits that she wishes she had the discipline Elizabeth does. Elizabeth reminds her that there was a time when Mel committed herself to using an Exercycle, and Elizabeth saw her as a force of nature while she herself was in her agoraphobic stage, feeling as large as a whale and unable to find a direction in life. Elizabeth had tried to be a supportive friend, but eventually Mel slipped, losing steam and gaining everything back she'd lost and more. Elizabeth compliments her clothing, and they talk about past events. Mel doesn't want to talk about her boyfriend Henry, but she has no trouble with giving Elizabeth her opinion where Tom is concerned.

Changing the subject, Elizabeth tells Mel about a woman she calls Aggressively Naked who does all of her grooming after her workouts completely naked, including putting on her jewelry and her makeup. Elizabeth continues to compliment Mel's change purse and offers to take her home, but Mel insists she enjoys the bus ride so they sit together in her car until it comes.

Later Elizabeth assesses herself in the mirror. She has 24 days before she flies to see Tom and although he insists he loves her just the way that she is, Elizabeth is determined to reach her goal. She already weighs about half of what Mel weighs. She takes note of her progress, and then lies on her bed thinking about Mel. The next morning Elizabeth gets on the scale to see that the needle is actually going down. At work, Itsy Bitsy secretly eats a cinnamon bun and waves to her. A part of Elizabeth hates her deeply at that moment, but she still agrees to have lunch with her and somehow the hate she feels changes and becomes something like love.



## Analysis

This segment introduces several of Elizabeth's coworkers, and discusses their quirks and foibles. Elizabeth is working to reduce her weight, and trying hard not to resent those around her who seem to be able to eat anything and still remain small. Elizabeth's new boyfriend, Tom is introduced and is clearly the reason that she is working so hard to decrease her weight. They'd met a year earlier on a music forum on line, although she tells everyone that they met at the Underworld's live show.

Elizabeth and Mel continue to get together now and then, and their friendship continues to be an ongoing theme, but they don't see each other nearly as often as they used to. Elizabeth complains that she feels as though Mel has disappeared, and while Mel assures her she hasn't, she can't help but agree that they see each other seldom now.

This segment reveals a role reversal as well. Elizabeth has always been larger than Mel, who at one time was diligent about using her mother's Exercycle and watching her weight, but now Elizabeth is half Mel's size, and still determined to lose more before she goes to see Tom, the next time.

Food is an ongoing issue as Elizabeth struggles to lose weight while it seems as though everyone around her is eating their way to perfection without gaining an ounce. Elizabeth nicknames people in her life who exemplify the body image she is looking to attain. Her coworker is given the moniker 'Itsy Bitsy' while another woman from her gym is given 'Aggressively Naked' as a nickname because she is completely unashamed by her own body image and spends as much time in the buff as she can.

Elizabeth recognizes that Mel has put on weight, but rather than draw attention to that sensitive subject, she compliments her purse, and her top, trying to think of anything positive to send her friend home with. Elizabeth even listens to the music they listened to together when she is in the car with Mel, knowing she wouldn't care for most of what she listens to now.

Tom is introduced as yet another of Elizabeth's boyfriends discovered on line. He claims to have fallen in love with Elizabeth the moment he met her, despite the fact that she was three times his size.

Hate and love are closely paired in this segment as Elizabeth continues her ongoing struggle to lose weight. Though calm and determined on the outside, her craving for the foods that others are able to eat are enormous and she finds herself resenting those who have no weight issues and are able to eat as they please while she struggles through black coffee and salad hell in the hopes of reducing her weight somewhat. When she is able to ignore the anger associated with dieting, she feels a sense of anger leaving and love taking its place in her heart.





## Discussion Question 1

Why does Elizabeth call her co-worker Itsy-Bitsy and why does she feel an ongoing resentment towards her?

## Discussion Question 2

Where do Elizabeth and Tom meet and when does he tell her he fell in love with her and what changes has Elizabeth made in her life since then?

## Discussion Question 3

How do Elizabeth and Mel reverse roles in their friendship, and how does Elizabeth try to adjust her behavior to save Mel's feelings when they are out together?

## Vocabulary

clavicles, consolation, irrevocable, inexplicably, anorexic, garnered, agoraphobic, copiously

# Chapter Six: I Want Too Much

## Summary

Elizabeth tries to find clothing that fits her shrinking body, and stands in the changing room with a spaghetti strap dress that she already knows does nothing for her. In fact, the dress has huge gaps in front where her chest is straining to break free. Elizabeth tries to show the sales girl, Trixie, what she means, but Trixie appears to be oblivious and suggests she hide the bulges with a scarf or better still, accent them with a necklace. She runs off to get a scarf, ever cheerful over Elizabeth's objections and brings back one that in no way matches the outfit "just so that she can see."

Elizabeth waits, wondering what she subjects herself to the kind of humiliation she feels at the moment. She thinks about how she survived by eating turkey wraps for a year to get where she is now. Another woman is in the change room shoehorning herself into a pair of jeans that Trixie assures her are "cute," and the big butt that she is worried about can be hidden with a wide belt and a pair of cute boots.

Trixie helps fasten a scarf around Elizabeth's neck, and while it covers the front of the dress as promised, it looks ridiculous to Elizabeth, despite how pleased Trixie looks with the results. Elizabeth insists she doesn't want the scarf and doesn't like the dress, so Trixie shrugs, unable to help her. The other customer is much more appreciative of Trixie's efforts and waits patiently for the belt that will make her butt look smaller.

## Analysis

Trixie is introduced as the sales girl in the clothing store that Elizabeth goes to in order to find clothes to fit her now-smaller frame. After a year of struggling with exercise machines and diets, Elizabeth is ready for something new, but Trixie is the kind of sales person who insists that anything and everything looks cute, regardless of the truth.

Reward is the theme that should be attached to weight loss, but this segment reveals the ongoing struggle Elizabeth has with finding clothes that don't make her feel like a whale wearing a tent despite the sales girl's assurances that it looks "cute." Elizabeth stands in the changing room that she sees as a portal to hell, and listens as Trixie continues to overuse the word cute to describe everything.

Self-image is an ongoing theme as Elizabeth tries to match new clothes to her new and smaller frame. After a year of hard work, both with exercise machines and diet, Elizabeth tries to find clothes that reveal her new and improved look. Trixie assures her that the too-tight dress Elizabeth is wearing looks good on her and simply needs the accent of a scarf to hide the bulge around her chest. Elizabeth is done with hiding behind accessories and simply wants to find some clothing that she can wear without hiding herself.



Insecurity is also a theme as Elizabeth finally manages to get through to Trixie that she is unhappy with the dress. Trixie shrugs and gives up on the idea of accessorizing Elizabeth into the new dress and goes to help another customer who is proving to be less difficult. As soon as she leaves, Elizabeth is sorry, and wishes Trixie would return and find just the right accessory to make the outfit work.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is Elizabeth trying to accomplish, and why is this frustrating for her?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What bothers Elizabeth most about Trixie and why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is the difference between Elizabeth and the other customer in the shop, and why might it be easier for the other woman to find something than it is for Elizabeth?

## **Vocabulary**

petulant, intolerant, apocalypse, humiliation, elliptical, optimistically, placated, mutinous



# Chapter Seven: My Mother's Idea of Sexy

## Summary

Elizabeth and her mother sit in a seafood restaurant waiting for her mother's friends from work to arrive. Elizabeth is wearing a gauzy outfit her mother bought for her that afternoon which leaves her midriff bare and is accessorized by pink strappy heels and skin tight low-risers. Elizabeth feels as though it is either far too much or far too little. When her mother's friends arrive she wastes no time in showing Elizabeth bragging about her weight loss, and making her stand and turn for them.

Later, as they walk through the market her mother is bursting with pride. She'd rented a Sebring just for Elizabeth's visit and on the way home reminds Elizabeth that they are going for dinner the following night and she is to meet her at work when her shift is over. Elizabeth prefers to meet her at the restaurant, but her mother is determined and even lays out the clothing she wants her to wear the next day. To Elizabeth it looks like a bandage the color of Pepto-Bismol and she leaves it on the floor for the day hoping that her mother's Abyssinian will ruin it, but he doesn't. The shoes that go with it are sling backs the color of vomit and Elizabeth can hardly stand in them. The group of coworkers they go out with is mostly made up of men who are her mother's bosses, and her mother brags about Elizabeth, even telling them that she's taken up belly dancing, which they admit they'd like to see.

Her mother gets a large Frosty on the way home, telling Elizabeth that the bosses loved her. Elizabeth sips her Diet Coke and doesn't mention diabetes or blood sugar. Her mother drives with incredibly slow intensity, and finally Elizabeth asks her why. She admits she can't feel her feet. Elizabeth asks if she's seen a doctor, but her mother insists she's fine and will be ready to go dancing the following night. Elizabeth's mother coaxes her into a yellow mini dress and white boots from the wardrobe of her slimmer days, and Elizabeth stands in the bathroom as her mother calls out to let her see how it looks. She takes in the collection of objects that make up her mother's reality including gift baskets of sickly sweet smelling bath salts; a well-used pumice stone; Fendi that she sprays on herself each day and soiled nightgowns hanging on the door.

Later they sit on the balcony and her mother talks to her about Tom who is arriving the following night and asks about her father and his opinion of her weight loss – something he always claimed was a matter of choice for Elizabeth if not her mother. She asks if Elizabeth plans to move to Tom's location, and Elizabeth admits the possibility exists. They go out dancing, and Elizabeth does her best to dance long enough to warrant going home, but her mother isn't satisfied until the dance floor is empty and the band is packing up. Even then, insisting the night is young, she prods Elizabeth to find a Goth club and watches Elizabeth dance there until she felt as though she'd validated the cost of the cover charges.



Tom and Elizabeth's mother sit together while Elizabeth finds a restroom. This time Elizabeth ignores her mother's suggested wardrobe and wears a white and black Max Azria. Feeling bold and sexy, she stands watching as men unloaded fish, imagining which one she'd want to entertain more completely. Then she stops at the flower store to buy her mother a bouquet of stargazers. Later Tom takes a picture of Elizabeth and her mother together, but nothing he says puts them close enough together to actually touch. Elizabeth's mother decides that Tom is a keeper. As Elizabeth packs to leave, she asks her mother if there is anything she should know about her health, but her mother brushes it off, telling Elizabeth she'll miss her and that she's beautiful as she tucks an errant hair behind her daughter's ear and makes her promise to call when she gets home. Elizabeth promises, but won't call for some time.

## Analysis

Elizabeth's mother struggles with weight issues that she has long given up on doing anything about. That may explain the pride she feels for Elizabeth who is determined to lose weight before the next visit she has with Tom. Elizabeth's mother makes a point of showing Elizabeth off to both her coworkers and her employers, and is thrilled that they seem to like her as well. It is clear that Elizabeth's mother has accepted her excessive weight, and does little to reduce or even manage her obesity. Elizabeth's mother doesn't realize that the more she does to treat her daughter like a show pony at an event, the less likely she is to see or talk to her again any time soon. While Elizabeth is able to swallow her pride, bite her tongue and play the part of the prancing daughter for a few days, her reaction to her mother clearly foreshadows that she is unlikely to return soon or encourage this kind of a visit again any time soon.

The author uses good examples of simile when comparing the dress Elizabeth's mother wants her to wear to a Pepto Bismol colored bandage with vomit colored shoes, or iridescent vomit which clearly define the differences between what Elizabeth believes is beautiful and what her mother thinks is appealing.

Elizabeth's weight loss prompts her mother to buy her new clothes, but her impression of what has sex appeal is a far cry from Elizabeth's. Elizabeth has always dressed to hide the weight she so desperately wants to lose, and her mother is her exact opposite where style and sex appeal are concerned. Rather than leave something for the imagination, Elizabeth's mother believes in letting it all hang out, especially where Elizabeth is concerned. She tries to accommodate her mother, dressing in the clothing she bought for her, but the style makes Elizabeth uncomfortable revealing much more than she is accustomed to, and she feels as though the clothes her mother chooses do more to mock her weight loss rather than complement it. Elizabeth's mother believes that fish is the secret that helped her to lose so much weight, and Elizabeth can't be bothered to correct her.

Despite issues with weight and poor health, Elizabeth's mother continues to ignore reality. She eats food that contributes to her weight without any concern as to their contribution to her failing health. This is made evident when she reveals that she has no



feeling in her feet as she is trying to drive them back to her apartment and continues to consume the Frosty she picked up on the way. She also continues to smoke, bumming them from her daughter when necessary. When Elizabeth queries her regarding her health, her mother brushes it off, insisting she is fine when all of the signs clearly indicate she isn't.

Although this chapter clearly shows that Elizabeth's mother has no interest in moderating either her diet or living habits to accommodate her obesity and accompanying health issues, there are still signs that she covets the body she could have had. She saves all of the clothing she once wore when she was younger, either hoping to fit into them herself one day, or perhaps giving them to Elizabeth.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Elizabeth's mother spend most of her time with Elizabeth, and what does that reveal?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Tom respond to Elizabeth's weight loss, and what is his reaction to the clothing she is wearing?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Elizabeth's father feel about obesity and how do his feelings on the subject vary depending on whether Elizabeth or his ex-wife are the subject of the conversation?

## **Vocabulary**

preternaturally, mutinous, gesticulations, iridescent, undulate, impetuous, pomaded



# Chapter Eight: Fit4U

## Summary

Elizabeth takes the dry cleaner tag into the Fit4U outlet near the outskirts of town and hands it to the clerk who disappears with it. She'd found the stub in the Gucci knockoff purse that she picked up from the police station. The woman behind the counter takes the ticket from her and looking around, Elizabeth has trouble imagining her mother coming into this place as the woman disappears into the back. Elizabeth waits for at least an hour, smokes almost half a dozen cigarettes in her mother's Taurus and tries not to think. She doesn't want to think about the call from the funeral director telling her she can pick her mother up anytime. The phone rings and she ignores it, instead announcing her presence in the dry-cleaners again. Finally, after Elizabeth pounds on the service bell repeatedly, the woman returns to the counter.

First, the clerk asks Elizabeth if she's the daughter, and then brings out the dress her mother had left behind but even before she unveils it, Elizabeth knows which dress it is. She'd seen in many times and her mother often wore it for days on end. A note is pinned to the dress in her mother's hand and Elizabeth asks the clerk what it is about. The dry-cleaner takes the dress off the hanger and spreads it on the counter where Elizabeth can immediately smell her mother's perfume and body odor, familiar and painful memories surfacing at the same time. The dry-cleaner explains how she raised the hem but couldn't fix the hole. She was unable to match the small pearl buttons on the back either, but leaving the ones that remained, she'd added several black buttons. She admits she was unable to repair the series of small holes in the hip region either. Elizabeth's mind plays a series of snapshots of her mother at various sizes and varying hair styles. She remembers her mother trying other dry-cleaners, and returning to the car angry that something couldn't be done for this dress and in the background, the dry-cleaner is giving her the same advice. Try somewhere else. To soften the blow, she tells Elizabeth she won't charge for the small repair – only the cleaning, asking Elizabeth to tell her mother she tried, but there was nothing more that could be done for this dress. Elizabeth promises to tell her as the dry-cleaner hands her the dress carefully.

## Analysis

Elizabeth's mother dies and Elizabeth is summoned to take possession of her belongings. She does so in a fog, trying not to consider the events of late. Picking up her mother's belongings is surreal to Elizabeth and she deals with the funeral director in the same fog as she now sits in, waiting for the dry-cleaner to return with her mother's clothing. This should be a simple task, but the waiting gives her time to think, and she recalls the funeral director explaining the virtues of cremation to her in his grandfatherly voice. She remembers searching for the least offensive urn for her mother – a skill they shared.



The dry-cleaner brings out a dress the Elizabeth remembers well, and that triggers a flood of memories of her mother throughout the years. Snapshots of her mother wearing the dress, of herself helping her mother to fasten the buttons, and even of incidents when she became upset over having stained it come to her in a flood, and with it the sense of loss is more acute.

The shop is a small place with hardly any storefront that is sandwiched between a Thai massage parlor and a holistic center. Looking at the shop, it is easy to see that it has been there for many years and although it takes seeing the dress her mother left there to put it together, Elizabeth vaguely recalls having been there before.

The dry-cleaners is a stark contrast from the crematorium where wealth and excess were in evidence all over when Elizabeth made arrangements for her mother.

The dress that her mother left at the dry-cleaners is a clear representation of how difficult it is for women who are overweight to find clothing that is both comfortable and somewhat attractive. These rare dresses become all-occasion favorites and embody the essence of the woman who all but lived in it. Even dry cleaning the dress didn't eliminate the smell of years of wear. When the dry-cleaner touches the two remaining pearl buttons to demonstrate her inability to find any to match, possessiveness comes over Elizabeth that surprises her. Shame and rage vie for expression with shame in Elizabeth as the dry-cleaner goes over each flaw and segment of damage the dress has but those feelings subside when the dry-cleaner asks her how the damage occurred and Elizabeth really has no idea.

The grief recedes again, leaving exhaustion as Elizabeth tries to come to terms with her loss again. Elizabeth realizes that one emotion she seldom saw in her mother at a time when she was happy or comfortable with herself which reveals that her weight played an even bigger role than she let on to Elizabeth which is another thing they shared – if apart.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What similarities are revealed between Elizabeth and her mother in this segment?

## **Discussion Question 2**

In the memories that Elizabeth has while recovering the dress from the drycleaners, why was her mother angry, and what realization does Elizabeth come to as a result?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What does the dry-cleaner tell Elizabeth regarding the dress and its future, and why would she say that?



## Vocabulary

profusely, holistic, suffusing, emulate, combustion, iteration, dignified



# Chapter Nine: She'll Do Anything

## Summary

The novel's perspective changes to third person limited. Dickie begins to extol the virtues of the obese girl he is sleeping with to Tom and Matt just as they are finishing their second round of drinks at the Dead Goat. Tom is eating a Macho Nacho platter and Dickie describes in intimate detail what his night with an obese girl was like, claiming that the best part of their relationship was that she was willing to do anything. Matt orders another drink, despite one DUI already and mentions that he once slept with Judy whom Dickie quickly assures him doesn't count. Judy is only a size 12 whereas he was talking about was an actual fat girl. Dickie then offers her services to Tom and Matt, who both decline. Tom is livid and on the way home he can't help but mutter and curse Dickie's stupidity.

Tom and Elizabeth live in a complex of apartments that are located just off the highway, a place he hates. He was roped into paying an extra fee of \$95 for the privilege of a mountain view, but what they got was a sliver of the foothills eclipsed by a steak house's lights across the street. Elizabeth wanted the place because it had a fitness center that Tom considered to be sub-standard but in an effort to be supportive, he agreed.

When he gets home, Elizabeth is wearing an overly tight cocktail dress - one of many she'd purchased since reaching her diet plateau. Still, when she asks Tom if her outfit is too much, or if it's too tight he wants to tell her she's overdressed but instead it comes out "you look great." It is the same when he smells the burnt vegetables she's cooking and tells her how great it smells, quietly patient with food that reminds him of maggots and smells like boiled barn. They talk about their day - another new thing in their lives lately - and she prods him until she wrings his entire day out of him. Eventually, he tells her about Dickie and his offer to loan out his fat girlfriend to Matt and him, and is stunned when she suggests he should take Dickie up on his offer. He tries to change the subject, but Elizabeth is angry and adds that she hates how he sees her. The suggestion and her anger make Tom mad enough to walk out on her. When he gets back she is watching an episode of America's Next Top Model in which a fat girl is the winner - something she was angry about the first time they saw it, insisting that one of the other girls had features that were prettier overall.

Dickie continues to talk about his obese new girlfriend. On the Fourth of July, Tom and Elizabeth go to Matt's for a staff barbecue. Brindy answers the door in cutoffs and a t-shirt. Tom is careful not to look at Brindy too long and goes out back to join Matt at the grill. When Tom asks where Dickie is, Elizabeth suggests he's probably having sex with his new girlfriend, although her tone and wording is much cruder. Brindy thinks that Dickie dating a large woman is kind of sweet. Determined to enjoy the barbecued food, Tom eats though Elizabeth turns almost everything down.



Tom and Matt smoke a joint and Matt tells him what a lucky man he is, looking at Elizabeth. Tom only sees the woman who can't shake the heaviness that still governs everything she does, everything she eats and everything she wears. He has seen behind the curtain, and knows that she feels alien in her new, slimmer body. One of them suggests they drive to Dickie's house to see his new girlfriend. It takes some time for Dickie to answer, looking as though he'd just gotten out of bed. They angle for an invitation in, but Dickie refuses and slams the door. Neither of them had managed a glimpse of Dickie's new girlfriend. When they return to Matt's, Elizabeth is gone and Brindy comments that she seemed upset. Tom drives Matt's truck home and calls out to her when he arrives, but there is no answer. He notices an old picture of Elizabeth taped to the Gazelle from the staff barbecue two years earlier, in which she is grinning and relaxed. Although she constantly insists she lost the weight for him, Tom often wishes she hadn't. Hearing the sounds of sex from down the hall, he goes to the bedroom to find Elizabeth watching fat girl pornography on his computer, horrified and disgusted.

## Analysis

Dickie is introduced as a new character who works with Elizabeth's husband Tom for a man named Matt. Dickie happily shares his sexual exploits with both men, whether they are interested or not. In this instance, he has found a largely overweight woman that he brags gives him the best sex he's ever had. His crude manner and conversation upsets Tom, who tries to shut him up, but without success. Dickie struggles with erectile dysfunction, and sees his new girlfriend as the answer to that problem.

Weight and obesity are a primary theme as Dickie enjoys the fact that his new girlfriend is willing to do anything – a fact that is likely largely due to insecurities she has attached to her obesity. Dickie extols the virtues of 'gastro sex' with a fat girl, the author describing the way he sees life as though through the eyes of a frat boy. Tom is disgusted by Dickie's comments and behavior, knowing intimately the struggles that obese women suffer with.

Tom and Elizabeth struggle to adapt to the new body Elizabeth has and the diet she is determined to maintain. Elizabeth has lost considerable weight, but the cost to her relationship with Tom is dear. The stress of maintaining her new figure has transformed her from a happy and generally content woman who loves music to a calorie counting vegetarian who is tense and frustrated, and sees everything as a hurdle or as a complete let down. The insecurity that surrounded her as an obese woman stays with her, but now that she has slimmed considerably, she is even more insecure about her new body than she was about herself when she was obese. Her clothing styles have changed from wearing loose and comfortable clothing to extravagant dresses that are too tight and too revealing despite her new figure.

Although Tom does his best to be supportive – even though he is largely disgusted by the food she serves him and sees how increasingly unhappy she is about how she looks. Despite having lost the weight, she is embarrassed about the excess skin rolls that are slow to recede. Rather than being proud of the weight loss, she is more



insecure than ever, even refusing to let Tom see her naked. Before, she would lie in full view of him naked while now she hates the way she believes he sees her now – as a kumquat eater. In her heavier times, she enjoyed eating in relative comfortable silence, but now dinner demands conversation, and she questions him relentlessly. Hearing the story Dickie told them, she becomes convinced that Tom wants to sleep with Dickie's fat girlfriend, and tells him he should. To Tom, this is a slap.

Elizabeth insists she lost the weight she did for Tom, but Tom fell in love with her despite her obesity, and now he struggles with the new and infinitely more insecure and unhappy woman who is his wife.

Matt and Brindy throw a staff barbecue on the fourth of July, inviting Dickie who says he will bring his new girlfriend; along with Tom and Elizabeth. Elizabeth is overdressed as is usual these days, but when she asks Tom if that is the case, he tries to be supportive and tells her she looks great. His inability to be honest with her foreshadows a coming problem in their relationship as weight will likely play a major role in the end of their relationship.

White lies are a main theme throughout this segment as Tom continues to do his best to be supportive where Elizabeth's weight loss is concerned. He lies about the food she cooks, attempting to eat it even though it smells like burnt barn and cabbage; and he lies about the clothing she wears even when it is much too revealing and definitely too tight to be comfortable with.

Resentment is also a theme as Elizabeth carries bitterness and resentment for anyone who is naturally slim, badmouthing Brindy before they even arrive at the barbecue. Her unhappiness surrounds her like a security blanket and foreshadows increasing problems for Tom in the future.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What are the main differences that Tom sees in Elizabeth when he compares who she was before the weight loss and who she is now?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Tom so upset by Dickie's comments regarding his new girlfriend, and what should he have done from the very beginning?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How has Elizabeth's wardrobe changed since her weight loss and how does Tom feel about this change?

## Vocabulary

peripheries, quandary, trajectory, absurdity, interminable, draconian, decadent, transfixed



# Chapter Ten: The von Furstenberg and I

## Summary

Elizabeth tries on the von Furstenberg again, hoping against all hope that this time it will fit. She's tried before, and failed, the clerk radiating sympathy as she returned it. Suddenly the zipper goes higher and then to her surprise, all the way to the top. She turns, looking at it, and is horrified to see a tear on the seam. Her hands are sweating and she struggles to get the zipper down, but it's stuck fast. The saleswoman returns again, offering assistance, and when she returns yet again, she offers to look for another size for Elizabeth. She would have placed the order for Elizabeth, had she had \$500 to secure it. Of course, not knowing if it would fit, Elizabeth didn't dare. Elizabeth sits there, considering how to handle the situation she is in. She considers offering to pay for it, but she doesn't have enough money and wouldn't have had even if it had fit.

She is beginning to feel herself, the volume of her butt straining at the seams and threatening to split the line of bows at the back. Idly she wonders if this is what she'll be forced to do – wait until she simply oozes out geologically. Elizabeth is willing to wait.

## Analysis

Elizabeth goes from shopping for clothes that compliment her oversized figure to shopping for brand named clothing after she loses weight. This reveals a deep seated desire to be accepted; to be one of the beautiful people. She goes on increasingly expensive shopping trips, buying dresses she can't afford, but it is the reward she promised herself for the weight loss she's accomplished. One such dress that Elizabeth covets has a von Furstenberg label and she has dreamed of owning it since it first appeared on the manikin. She had tried several times in the past and failed to squeeze herself into the dress. On one such occasion she learns the cost of that particular dress is \$500 and, despite knowing that she can't afford it, Elizabeth can't stop herself from going in and trying it on.

Elizabeth's inability to pay for the von Furstenberg foreshadows possible legal consequences when the damage to the expensive dress comes to light.

Self-awareness is a strong theme as Elizabeth comes face-to-face with the fact that she is still too fat to fit into the dress she wants so much. Unfortunately, it takes the dress actually splitting on a seam as she is trying to shoehorn herself into it for Elizabeth to tumble to that realization, but the cause and effect are clear.

## Discussion Question 1

How has Elizabeth's style in clothing changed and why might that be the case?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Elizabeth continue to try on the dress despite being unable to afford it?

## Discussion Question 3

What are the possible consequences once the damage to the dress is discovered?

## Vocabulary

asphyxiated, exquisitely, exertion, incredulity, décolletage, abhorrent



# Chapter Eleven: Caribbean Therapy

## Summary

Elizabeth's one guilty pleasure these days is the Caribbean Therapy that she gets from Cassie at the Aria Lifestyle Salon. She calls them to make her appointment, trying to emulate the carefree but infinitely too busy façade that a woman with an important life like hers would have and after mistakenly calling Cassie Cammie instead. She books the Caribbean Hand Treatment, insisting it be done during lunch hour and acting as though her day is filled with important meetings that will accommodate nothing else. Finally, she manages to arrange it, and goes to the Aria Lifestyle Salon instead of eating lunch. Cassie comes to collect her, and waddles back to the nail station in front of her. Elizabeth tells her what treatment she wants, choosing the same as she had the week before despite the fact that it had caused her peeling and discomfort, and even bleeding of her cuticles. Cassie soaks Elizabeth's hand and examines her hands, exclaiming at how damaged they look and Elizabeth lies, blaming the dry weather and insisting Cassie work her wonders so that she can attend an imaginary Museum opening. As Cassie does her nails, Elizabeth takes mental note of the excess skin around her upper arms, reminding herself of how unattractive that is. She imagines Cassie as she ages whenever she gets hungry, and Cassie's older and bloated self is enough to fend off any appetite she has.

Cassie and Elizabeth talk as she works. Cassie reveals details of her life, sharing what baking she's done and passing the recipe along. Elizabeth feigns interest, assuring her she'll try it and exclaiming as to how much she loved the previous recipe. In truth, Elizabeth hadn't made it. Instead, she lies to Cassie, telling her about the alcohol laced bundt cake she made – something her co-worker Eve had actually done. Recently married, Cassie and her husband seem to be perfect for each other, and all Elizabeth can think of at that moment is the bondage video she'd discovered on her husband's computer featuring two obese women. By this time, Elizabeth is anxious to go. She can hardly bear to wait long enough for Cassie to finish and pays little attention to her warnings that her nails are still wet.

Back at work, the remains of Eve's bundt cake are on the counter and Elizabeth pointedly ignores both it and her hunger as she goes into the restroom to check her lipstick and examine herself in the mirror, comparing herself with what she'd seen in Cassie.

Later, when she gets home, she discovers Tom has already eaten, having stopped for a burrito on the way home. Disappointed, she makes a salad and invites him to eat with her, but he declines wanting to finish his while it was warm. Later, he comes out of his office and asks her if she'd listened to the new Nick Cave he'd sent her earlier, and she admits she hadn't yet. She sits alone, watching a cooking show advocating dessert for dinner over and over again, picking at her nails while she does.





Cassie is surprised at how soon Elizabeth comes back, but Elizabeth spins another lie about an important event – dinner and Phantom of the Opera afterward and Cassie relates how her young husband spoiled her on her birthday. Elizabeth envisions their tender moments as Cassie prattles on, unaware that Elizabeth is fantasizing about her life. Cassie tells her where they went for dinner and even what she ate, gushing about it all. When Elizabeth later tries to recreate the event at the same restaurant and even ordering the same food, Tom can't understand her motivation, and when she adds that for dessert they should try the same cupcake place as Cassie's husband took her, he worries that this is the beginning of a bad spiral. He takes her hands, noticing the recent manicure and noting how soon it followed the previous one. Finally, Tom tries talking to her initiating the conversation by saying she's been different since her mother died, but Elizabeth isn't ready to talk to him.

When they get home, Tom shuts himself in his office again, and Elizabeth lies on the couch staring at her mother's urn. In some of the photos, she and her mother are the same size and then there are the photos of the visit when she met Tom. Elizabeth remembers how her mother had given her a pedicure when she'd complained she couldn't afford one.

Elizabeth's next visit to Cassie isn't the balm she usually gets and even Cassie's concern for her falls short of missing the mark with her. Finally, Elizabeth asks Cassie if she's happy. Cassie admits that for the most part she is, but her attitude cools towards her considerably. She finishes up with Elizabeth quickly. The next time she tries to book an appointment she is told Cassie is booked solid.

Elizabeth wakes to the smell of baking and Elizabeth again assures Eve it is just until she finds a place for herself. Elizabeth has moved out of her apartment with Tom. Her father had prompted her to come home, but instead she looks up Mel's number and calls her. She and Mel had spoken only infrequently since she moved away. These days, Elizabeth gets her nails done at a place Eve recommends, tipping exactly 15 percent each time.

## Analysis

The all-encompassing effort of losing weight is so consuming that there is little of Elizabeth left afterward. Somehow, her efforts to lose weight had taken over her life, ruling not only her food consumption, but altering her very sense of self in the long run. Once she loses the weight, Elizabeth remembers how in the beginning she was afraid to sleep beside Tom for fear that she would smother him accidentally in her sleep. Though unfounded, the fear is real for Elizabeth. To remind herself when she is struggling, Elizabeth goes to an overweight aesthetician and stares at the rolls and folds that are excessive, telling herself how warm, and how difficult Cassie's life must be compared to hers now.

Relationships are a theme that is important in this segment, as Elizabeth tries to find her way back to the beginning with Tom. Unfortunately, rather than talk to Tom about the



way she is feeling, she tries to recreate Cassie's life experiences with her husband in an effort to piggyback on the happiness they have. Of course this is unsuccessful, and leaves Tom feeling confused and fearful that Elizabeth is on a downward spiral.

Truth becomes subjective in this segment as Elizabeth borrows from the lives of those around her to enhance the details of her own life in the eyes of others. Rather than contribute an honest idea or emotion, she claims to have baked the cake her co-worker Eve baked, or claims to have exotic plans to go to important places in an effort to justify her continued need for regular manicures. These seemingly harmless lies reveal just how little of Elizabeth's own personality has survived her desperate dieting.

Anxiety and a sense of loss are common feelings for Elizabeth. She counts every calorie and worries about every ounce while coveting the treats that other people seem able to consume without consequence and watching shows that reveal decadent desserts in an effort to enjoy them via osmosis. This is as unsatisfying as the food she makes herself and leads to the occasional binges followed by self-recrimination and a lack of self-respect.

Jealousy is also a strong theme in this segment as Elizabeth listens to Cassie describe the highlights of her relationship with her husband. Married only three years, they are still very much in love and Elizabeth listens carefully as Cassie describes how her husband spoiled her for her birthday; how much fun they had together; where they went and what they ate. With so little joy in her life, Elizabeth borrows the details of Cassie's life instead, and tries to recreate her happiness by taking Tom to the same places and ordering the same meal. Most of this behavior leaves Tom feeling confused and concerned – neither of which Elizabeth had hoped for. Cassie's life is not the only one she covets. Elizabeth also wishes she could be more like her coworker Eve who bakes constantly and brings her sweet treasures to work to share with the rest of the staff while she herself is able to exercise her willpower and remain content with yogurt and dreams of Paris. Elizabeth, on the other hand, seems unable to walk by the treats that Eve brings without stealing a guilt ridden piece. The alternative is for Elizabeth to avoid the room entirely until her co-workers have managed to consume every crumb of the calorie laden treat of the day.

Friendships are a brief theme as they become far and few between in Elizabeth's life. Her relationship with Tom has deteriorated beneath whatever friendship they may have had, and while Tom still has feelings for her, he has no idea how to cope with the closed off person his wife has become. At work, Elizabeth seems envious of the lives going on around her. Unable to actively participate in her own existence, she invents one that she thinks will make her more interesting. Unfortunately, the lies she tells makes building any real relationships impossible. After she moves out of the apartment she and Tom shared, Elizabeth begins to nurture a friendship with Eve, staying with her temporarily. She misses having someone in her life who knows her intimately however, and finds herself calling Mel. She and her boyfriend were struggling, she admits, and Elizabeth tells her briefly about herself and Tom, but the women don't share the same connection as they had when they were younger.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Elizabeth borrow details from her co-workers lives or outright fabricate plans or details when she has her appointment with Cassie?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Elizabeth feel the need to return to Cassie repeatedly, and what does she gain from these appointments beyond the actual manicures?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the catalyst that most likely causes Elizabeth and Tom's separation, and what is the reason for these actions from Tom's perspective?

## Vocabulary

esthetician, asymmetrically, implements, exhilarating, disconcertingly, oppressive, communal



# Chapter Twelve: Additionelle

## Summary

Once Elizabeth returns home, she feels compelled on occasion to return to the Addition Elle shop that she had spent so much time in previous to her weight loss. She enters to find familiar displays filled with animals and sequins that she had once hated so much. The stereo still plays variations of songs involving women and Elizabeth reminisces her way around the racks. A saleswoman offers assistance, but Elizabeth tells her she is just looking. She and her mother had spent countless hours shopping together in this store, but the saleswoman doesn't recognize or remember her. Now, in fact, they take in her size and shape and question why she's chosen their shop to browse in.

Elizabeth grabs a few dresses randomly and is headed to the fitting room when she sees a calf-length velvet blue dress with rhinestone buckles hanging nearby. She puts the other items down and takes that one into the fitting room. Memories of previous visits assault her as she hangs up the dress. Then, taking it off the hanger she holds it up against herself, episodes of previous shopping excursions still playing in her mind.

The saleswoman knocks on the door and asks if she can be of assistance, but Elizabeth assures her she's fine. The saleswoman warns her that they are about to close. Elizabeth slips the dress over her head and when she gets it on she finds herself standing suddenly in the dark. The canned music stops and Elizabeth decides they are getting serious about wanting to close. When she hears the knock again, and call out to her, she finds she is unable to answer. Her voice refuses to participate as the rest of her absorbs the fact that the dress feels dangerously close to fitting rather than large enough to swim in like she'd expected. The idea is horrifying, but rather than panic she decides to wait until her eyes adjust to the gloom and she is able to measure exactly how close the fit really is.

## Analysis

Elizabeth craves familiarity and comfort, and goes into Addition Elle where she and her mother had so often shopped. Neither of the clerks remembers her, but she is half the weight now as she used to be, and she is without her mother. The store is still comforting in its way however, as it is exactly the way she remembered it. There are still the same gaudy looking appliques and animal prints, and the same music still plays in the background.

Memories assault Elizabeth as she stands in the store as former shopping trips and the clothes that had come from them play over in her mind. She remembers the Addition Elle slacks her mother had to wear and the way both her mother and one of the saleswomen had jazzed them up with matching necklace and earrings, bag and shoes.



She remembers how hard she argued with her mother rather than try on the clothing and how her mother had almost always insisted that what she tried on looked fine.

A sign announces that functional can be sexy, but Elizabeth knows how far from the truth that is. Elizabeth can feel the saleswoman following her around the store, and decides to prove that she isn't mocking them by trying a few outfits on. She grabs them almost at random and heads to the fitting room, stopping in surprise when she sees the dress that is hanging. The velvet, midnight blue dress has puffed sleeves and buckles and reminds Elizabeth of the dress she'd tried on so long ago that was just like it. She can't resist trying it on.

Perspective is also a strong theme in this segment as Elizabeth enters the store she and her mother shopped in. The past and present collide as she looks through the racks, knowing the plus sizes won't fit her. The sequins, bows and animal prints are comforting now in their familiarity while in the past she'd entertained notions of pulling them off their respective garments.

## Discussion Question 1

What memories come back to Elizabeth as she stands in the store, looking at the rack of clothing?

## Discussion Question 2

What attachment does Elizabeth have to the velvet dress she tries on, and what is so important about it?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Elizabeth discover that is dangerously close and why is it so important that she see the truth for herself first?

## Vocabulary

undulation, appliques, palpable, brocade, legitimately, functional, atrocity, melancholy



# Chapter Thirteen: Beyond the Sea

## Summary

Elizabeth lives in Phase One of the South Tower in the complex called "Beyond the Sea." Her bedroom has a view of the Malibu Spa and Fitness Center and she wakes every morning to the sight of her neighbor Char working out. Elizabeth feels no animosity towards her, despite the fact that she continually runs into Elizabeth's time slot on Lifecycle One. She makes her way downstairs for the time slot she's signed up for – 7:00 to 7:30 am, but as Char's time ends, her workout does not. She continues to pedal as though her name was in the next time slot as well. Elizabeth stretches, and then moves closer in an effort to convey her time has come, but Char makes no effort to stop until Elizabeth pointedly clears her throat. Though she acknowledges that it is Elizabeth's turn, Char continues to pedal, the stolen minutes adding up. Finally she removes herself, six minutes after her time ended.

When Elizabeth goes back up to her suite, one of Char's short-haired cats darts past her in the hall. Stumbles into her apartment, stabbing herself on her mother's credenza – something she couldn't bear to get rid of. Elizabeth dreads the following morning already, and listens to Char in the apartment next door. The next morning Elizabeth decides to confront Char about her time slot on the treadmill. At seven sharp she goes straight to Char and clears her throat. Char asks Elizabeth to give her a few minutes – but that defines the issue in a nutshell. Elizabeth loudly informs her that her time is up, as it had been yesterday and the day before. Char wipes the machine down, telling Elizabeth to relax and then heads for the stretching mats. Ruth shows her approval, and Elizabeth concentrates on the Aquafit class while she pedals through her time.

The next morning Elizabeth doesn't go to the gym, and in fact relinquishes her hard fought for time slot. She watches Char each morning, and every evening eats foods that she should avoid with her father. He doesn't mention Tom or her mother, and Elizabeth allows him to come over to watch television with her from time to time. One night he asks her about Mel, and Elizabeth admits that they still see each other now and then. He wants to ask her more, but instead just hands her a bowl of popcorn. Her father is currently dating two women in the complex, and he goes to see one of them after leaving Elizabeth.

After he leaves, Elizabeth goes to bed and dreams about blowing up the women's clothing store, Bebe. Sirens and alarms finally clang with enough insistence that Elizabeth wakes and hears the night security person Carlos telling everyone not to panic. Elizabeth stumbles out. Char's door is open and Elizabeth can hear her calling out to one of the cats, Toffee. Elizabeth helps her retrieve the cat from under the love seat and carries her outside while Char carries the second cat. Together they sit on the grass, cats hissing. One lone woman pedals on in the Malibu Club, oblivious of the alarms. Char offers her free passes to the zoo where she works, and even mentions that she could probably arrange a special tour of her favorite animal. Put on the spot,



Elizabeth blurts out turtle – the selection disappointing but not difficult to arrange. Char comments how sad the pedaling woman is, and adds that variety is the best way to exercise.

Mel had asked her once where she thought all the fat went once they lost it, wondering if it is all around them. Perhaps it forms the building blocks of the universe, she suggests, amused by the idea.

Elizabeth considers what Char told her and thinks about varying the exercise routine from machine to machine and setting to setting. She continues to watch the woman pedal, thinking she is on the verge of an important awakening – one that she figured would change everything.

## Analysis

Elizabeth learns to stand up for herself when she is forced to confront Char for cutting into her time on the exercise equipment in the gym. Each session is scheduled, and Char routinely ignores the end of her session, and pedals onward through Elizabeth's first few minutes, angry when someone tells her that her time is up. Elizabeth finally steps up after some encouragement from Ruth and tells Char that her time is up. She makes such a fuss about it that she isn't sure she wants to go back afterward embarrassed by the whole affair.

Elizabeth tries not to look at the other women who are exercising when she goes in. She knows that if she sees their sweaty faces, panting with exertion, she'll start feeling like they are all a sorry bunch of fat Rodentia. Sometimes she imagines that there is a hidden camera in the ceiling and a studio audience that is much too amused by the hours of exercising whales.

Elizabeth and Ruth exemplify the lengths that some people are willing to go to in order to lose weight, drinking Iron Maidens which are supposed to be great for the blood and to promote energy, but look like black sludge. Ruth has two heart health meals delivered to her each week, but to Elizabeth it doesn't appear to be helping her one way or another.

Elizabeth is still suffering from some separation anxiety after the death of her mother. She is still unable to get rid of many of her mother's things, and still has the urn filled with her mother's ashes, despite her mother's request to dump them in the ocean. She has pictured herself at many different bodies of water, but always rejects them as not "the one" for one reason or another and the ashes continue to sit. Her mother's glass credenza is one that both she and her father have walked into time after time, and he suggests that she get rid of it, but she hasn't.

Elizabeth and Ruth share a cupcake, reminding her of the many times that Tom had shared his dessert with her, knowing that her portion had left her wanting. His love for her even had him turning away so that she could eat it without his eyes on her. Elizabeth compares how she feels on a treadmill to how a gerbil feels in his cage, going



around and around on his wheel. She wonders what life might have been like for them instead had they applied all of that energy to something like a trip to Paris or a walk just for the sake of walking.

Elizabeth no longer believes in the whole exercise regimen. She feels like she is running in mud and there is no traction which is a good metaphor for how many people who are dieting feel.

Recognizing the importance of what little family remains, Elizabeth and her father get together somewhat regularly. They watch television, eat popcorn, and carefully avoid any subjects that might topple the fragile peace they have together.

When the building complex catches fire and Elizabeth and her neighbors are forced outside, she is surprised to see one woman pedaling on in the gym with determination. Watching her, both Elizabeth and Ruth consider how desperate to exercise a person would have to be to continue despite personal danger, and Elizabeth feels as though she is on the verge of understanding something monumental.

## Discussion Question 1

What recurring argument is Elizabeth and Char having and what does Ruth council Elizabeth to do?

## Discussion Question 2

What is Elizabeth's relationship with her father like, and what concessions do they make in order to spend time with each other?

## Discussion Question 3

What insight does Elizabeth hang on the precipice of as she sits outside waiting with other residents for the fire department?

## Vocabulary

impervious, relinquish, anorexic, diminished, ineffectually, isometric, precarious, abdicated





# Characters

## Elizabeth

Elizabeth (aka Lizzie; aka Beth) is the main character in this story. She presents herself initially as a grossly overweight young woman who is more than a little self-conscious about her physical state, and struggles constantly with unhealthy self-image issues. Elizabeth lives with her family in Mississauga, Ontario and enjoys the experience so immensely that she and her friends have taken to calling their hometown Misery Saga instead.

Elizabeth has gone through several stages in her life, some inspiring change and some less encouraging overall. She goes from calling herself Lizzie when she is dating Archibald to Beth when she is dating Tom. The relationship with Tom is one that inspires her to be more, or in truth perhaps less than she has been in many years. She diets with a regiment that has her seeing a change both on the scale and in the mirror.

Elizabeth particularly hates sunny afternoons which seem to stretch on forever with seemingly little to do but the same things that she and her friend Mel had been doing for years.

Elizabeth's father is the manager of a hotel, but she seldom sees him since he left her mother when Elizabeth was just five years old. She knows that he dates frequently, having found traces of women in his apartment when she'd visited.

## Elizabeth's mother

Elizabeth's mother has black hair that she wears in a spiked hairdo like a cross between Liz Taylor and a sea urchin; each spike crisply standing with the help of pomade. When her hair isn't done, it appears more auburn than black and looks shaggy as it hangs around her face. She has skin like Snow White – a feature that Elizabeth is jealous of – and her mouth is full and the color of the inside of a plum. Her left eye is slightly lazier than the right one, and her eyes have odd gold flecks in them. Her nose was broken by a baseball when she was young and played catcher without a mask, leaving it with an odd slope.

Elizabeth's mother has struggled with weight issues for her entire life and now she suffers from heart and lung issues as well as diabetes. On the second evening of Elizabeth's visit, her mother admits that she can't feel her feet as she is attempting to drive them home but she won't talk to her about these issues, refusing to admit the severity of the troubles she is having or reveal anything her doctors have told her.

Elizabeth's mother dies in the course of the novel, and Elizabeth keeps many of her mother's things - including her mother's ashes in an urn - in her own apartment because she can't bear to part with them yet.



## Rosemary (aka China)

China is a girl that Elizabeth goes to school with who shows her how to use makeup to accentuate her eyes. She has hair that she wears in an Annie Lennox style now, formerly having looked more like Joey Ramone. She is a tall and very thin girl who is as pale as the dead, and always appears as though she is about to walk into a music video.

China likes to give state names to the guys who she believes are stalking her, the latest one, Warren, dubbed Alaska. The one before Alaska was named Utah, and kept writing her name on her father's windshield. Before him was New Hampshire, but her favorite was Maine – a medical artist who assured her she was the perfect woman. China claims to know when a man is psychotic by signs like he begins watching her as she sleeps. The one she named Vermont burned her face out of all of his photographs of them and left the remains on her front door.

## Tom

Tom is pale and thin and he has chin-length sandy colored hair. Tom is Elizabeth's boyfriend of sorts who she met while surfing an online music forum called Dirty List dedicated to fans of the band Underworld. They meet in person for the first time at Underworld's last live New York show and though Elizabeth is at her heaviest then, he takes no notice of it and takes her hand as they line up to go inside.

## Blake

Blake is the person that Elizabeth meets on line. He wants her to send him a full body photo of herself, but she hasn't revealed how overweight she is to him yet, and is reluctant to do so. Blake calls himself 'Cosmic Dancer' online – a reference to the Hindu deity, Shiva. He is 47 years old and is a quadriplegic. Blake lives near L.A., and is a Goth fan. They talk about the movies they would be part of if possible, and discuss what soundtracks would qualify to be the music that went with their lives. Blake constantly tells Elizabeth that he believes she is the miracle that will give him back his sexual ability. He says he dreams about her, and about getting out of his chair to be with her. Blake is so taken with Elizabeth that most nights when they talk, he is brought to tears by the joy he feels that they found each other on AOL.

## Archibald

Archibald is a coworker of Elizabeth's at the bookstore and weighs about half of what she does. Archibald's hair is graying at the temples. He has a freckled chest, thin and speckled with tufts of hair, and his back is what Elizabeth considers to be severely stooped and knobby. He lives in a basement apartment and loves listening to the Peggy Lee album containing the song "Is That All There Is?". He is the type of man who enjoys



women that are on the larger side, and tells Elizabeth that he's wanted her since the day they met. He smokes and plays the harmonica semi-professionally, he tells Elizabeth.

## **Britta**

Britta is Archibald's girlfriend. She is huge and carries a dachshund that she dresses in a small tweed coat and keeps on a very short leash. She has dirty blonde hair that she wears 'bubble flipped'. Britta wears tight black slacks which are covered in dog hair; tasteless Addition Elle sweaters that scream she's given up on any sense of style or fashion.

## **Itsy Bitsy**

Itsy Bitsy also known to Elizabeth as The Girl I Hate is the girl who befriends Elizabeth as they are both the only ones at work who are in their age group. Itsy Bitsy can eat anything she wants, often eating sweet concoctions or meals that are carb rich while insisting that the salad Elizabeth ordered can't possibly be enough for her. Itsy Bitsy is super thin and likes to wear tights with hearts down the seam. She usually buys her clothing from vintage shops and they are typically a cross between whorish and quirky. She makes noises like the cookie monster when something she really likes is in front of her. During Elizabeth's first week at work, Itsy Bitsy shows her how to work the photocopier, and free a jam and even tried to help Elizabeth's headache using pressure points. In her mid-twenties, Itsy Bitsy and Elizabeth share a common hatred for a woman they call Probiotic Yoga Evangelist who works in HR.

## **Soy Foam**

Soy Foam is the nickname that Elizabeth gives to a woman in accounting who would always order an Americano but with the steamed soy milk on the side which she ate separately. She confesses one night that she has begun early menopause, and now has to shave her face.

## **China's Boyfriends**

Warren is one of the guys that China dated. She calls him Alaska, naming all of the guys she believes stalks her after U.S. states. Some of the other state named guys in her life include Utah, who wrote her name on the windshield of her father's Honda; New Hampshire who read Hesse in original German on her front lawn; and Vermont who burned all of her faces out of the photos of her that he had and left them on her doorstep.



## **Trixie**

Trixie works in a clothing store that Elizabeth frequents and uses the word "cute" with such frequency that Elizabeth cringes every time she hears it. Trixie is responsible for several regrettable purchases Elizabeth has already made since she began losing weight, and is a master when it comes to telling people what they want to hear. She assures them that their butt is not too big for those jeans; a belt will accent the non-existent waistline or a scarf can cover the bulging and straining of zippers or buttons.

## **Dickie**

Dickie is the type of person who enjoys broadcasting his sexual exploits to anyone who will listen, and often continues to do so even when no one wants to hear. His latest conquest is what he calls a 'fat chick' that he assures Tom and Matt gives him the best sex he's ever had. He follows that by assuring them that despite her size, she was a comfortable fit, and goes into detail regarding the gastric bypass surgery she'd had and the scar it had left behind.

## **Matt (aka Hot Pocket)**

Matt is the supervisor for both Tom and Dickie at work. He has a good sense of humor and is an easy going guy, but despite that, he is also capable of maintaining control. He has a girlfriend named Brindy and together they are raising a daughter named Maddy.

## **Cassie**

Cassie is one of two aestheticians at Aria Lifestyle Salon where Elizabeth likes to go to get her nails done once a week. Cassie has blue eyes and peach colored skin. She is an obese young lady who Elizabeth likes to use as incentive to remain diligent on her diet, using visual reminders to reinforce her resolve once weekly. Cassie has been married for three years, and seems to have a positive and supportive husband who accepts her as she is. Elizabeth covets this relationship and acceptance, although she won't admit it.

## **Ruth**

Ruth is a divorce lawyer who lives on the upper floor of Phase Two of Beyond the Sea. She is also a diligent treadmill user and gives Elizabeth advice both where her divorce is concerned and with the problems she is having in the Malibu Club with Char. Ruth is dedicated to the Malibu Club, and even has two dinners delivered by Hearthealth each week, but her stomach has not gotten any smaller since Elizabeth met her. In fact, she looks much the same as she does in the photo of herself at the age of 17.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Human Race Game

The Human Race Game symbolizes Mel and Elizabeth's desire to be accepted and part of a world where they exist only with people they feel appreciate them and love them. The Human Race Game is a game that Mel and Elizabeth play. In the game, the entire human race is eliminated and then each girl chooses who would be put back in. Those who are put back in have to be done by unanimous decision.

## Fate Papers

Fate Papers represents Elizabeth's feelings of lack of control in her life, as she's willing to listen to the "answer" a random drawing of paper supplies to her questions. Fate Papers is a game of chance that is mixed with prophecies. Two pieces of paper are labelled, one with "yes" and one with "no" and then crumpled up into balls. A question is put to the universe and the first paper that lands is the answer. Sometimes it is necessary to do it more than once, two out of three acceptable if the answer is wrong.

## Kanebulle

Kanebulle is the name used in a Scandinavian Café to refer to a cinnamon bun. It is representative of the sweets that Elizabeth no longer allows herself as she struggles to lose weight.

## Exercycle

The Exercycle is symbolic of Mel's efforts to lose weight. Once her mother's machine, it is a symbol of failed efforts to live a healthier lifestyle.

## Goth

Goth is symbolic of rebellion and social isolation. Typically associated with the color black, a Goth ensemble may include multiple piercings, tattoos, and dark makeup.

## Gazelle

The gazelle symbolizes Elizabeth's rapid weight loss, and the idea that the weight loss alone doesn't mean she's changed on the inside; moving on the gazelle, one doesn't actually get anywhere, just as losing weight alone hasn't made Elizabeth a better or



happier person. A gazelle is a machine that is a hybrid between a treadmill and a cardiovascular machine that Elizabeth uses faithfully in an effort to lose weight.

## **Max Azria**

Max Azria is the designer that created the outfit that Elizabeth is wearing when she sees Tom after her dramatic weight loss. The designer dress not only symbolizes her triumphant weight loss, but represents a style that her obesity prevented her from ever entertaining. It is elegant and comparable to something worn by Grace Kelly in Rear Window.

## **Dead Can Dance**

Dead Can Dance is the album that Elizabeth used to listen to non-stop when Tom was first dating her. Now she finds it depressing and can't wait until he turns it off. The music that she once listened to happily now belongs to another lifetime and is a symbol and a constant reminder of how big she used to be.

## **Von Furstenberg**

Von Furstenberg is the designer who is on the label of the dress that Elizabeth covets, and has tried on many times. Her most recent attempt resulted in split seams as she is trying it on. The von Furstenberg is a dress that symbolizes to Elizabeth that she has finally reached her goal weight loss.

## **Caribbean Therapy**

Caribbean Therapy is a symbol of status and self-importance that Elizabeth tries hard to carry off. Caribbean Therapy is a style of manicure done at the Aria Lifestyle Salon. Elizabeth goes one weekly to be pampered and preened over; have her nails cut, shaped and colored, and to feel as though she is more or better than she is.



# Settings

## Mississauga (Misery Saga)

This is where Mel and Elizabeth live, and both complain that there is nothing to do there. This is part of why they call the city Misery Saga.

## McDonald's

The McDonald's restaurant on the corner of Mavis and Wolfedale is where Elizabeth and Mel first go against the advice from Fate Papers, missing the opportunity to have casual sex with strange older men who Mel is convinced were watching them.

## Dead Goat

The Dead Goat is where Tom enjoys going to get the kinds of foods that Elizabeth no longer cooks or brings into the house for him. Tom is partially responsible for the cooking process of the Macho Nacho platter – one of his favorites.

## Wendy's

Wendy's is the restaurant that Elizabeth accuses Tom of sneaking out to after they fight about Dickie's obese girlfriend and his offer to Tom and Matt to sleep with her if they want to.

## Southern X-posure

Southern X-posure is the strip club that has a free lunch buffet close to where Tom, Matt and Dickie work.

## Ben and Jerry's

Ben and Jerry's is where Elizabeth goes once every couple of weeks for a Saturday night treat in which she lets herself have a Brownie Bonanza.

## Aria Lifestyle Salon

The Aria Lifestyle Salon is where Elizabeth goes once a week to have her nails done in a style called Caribbean Therapy by Cassie.



# Themes and Motifs

## Elizabeth and Tom

Elizabeth and Tom's relationship shows readers that love can't be stereotyped, as Tom's love and acceptance for Elizabeth is real - arguably stronger than her love and acceptance for herself, and it is only after Elizabeth caves to societal pressures to be thinner that her and Tom's relationship suffers and eventually deteriorates. When Elizabeth and Tom first meet, she is twice the size she should be, but Tom seems oblivious to her weight. He sees her, beyond the outer shell, and genuinely loves her for the woman she is. They share an interest in music, and spend a great deal of time talking on the phone together, enjoying each other's company. Tom meets Elizabeth's mother who agrees he is a keeper and before long, they become man and wife.

As Tom is a thin man, when they begin sleeping together Elizabeth worries she'll roll over and smother him accidentally as he sleeps so and begins losing weight. During one break between visits – 54 days – Elizabeth makes a concerted effort to lose weight. Tom supports her efforts even eating many of the same food she is restricted to despite the fact that they smell worse than rotting cabbage rather than tempting her with a separate meal of his own. It takes time, but Elizabeth is determined, and manages to lose half of her total body weight, but there is a cost to her success and it is dear. It is almost as though the weight Elizabeth loses is equal to the woman Tom fell in love with.

Losing weight changes Elizabeth from the soft, gentle and easy going woman he met into a strained, perpetually hungry and often angry woman who counts every calorie and covets every treat she sees. She begins to imagine herself in a life other than her own, supplementing her reality with that of her co-workers or simply her imagination. She begins getting manicures on a weekly basis, booking her appointments during her lunch hour, and using an aesthetician who weighs as much as she used to. Elizabeth enjoys the way Cassie touches her hands as she works on her; and she uses Cassie's weight as motivation to stay on her diet. She begins lying to Cassie, telling her that she has an important meeting or a dinner followed by the opera to go to, and Cassie gushes and helps her to look her best for the fictional event. Elizabeth has lost so much of herself that she has nothing left of her own so she borrows her co-worker's lives and tells Cassie about them as though they are her own.

Tom misses the woman Elizabeth was when he met her. He didn't care that she was overweight, and although he supported her in this endeavor, he found they drifted further and further apart in the process. He tries to talk to her, but she tells him that he can't understand. She feels like a stranger in her body and has no idea how to fix it. She hides herself from him; never allowing him to see her naked and their sex life is barren. Tom is lonely, and misses the woman he fell in love with.

When Elizabeth discovers pornography involving overweight women on Tom's computer, Elizabeth is speechless and hurt to the core. She leaves Tom, unable to





repair the damage done by what she'd seen on his computer or to find her way back emotionally to the woman she was when they met.

## The Weight of Extra Weight

This story revolves around the life events of a woman named Elizabeth and her struggle with the weight - literal and figurative - of extra weight which is revealed in 13 chapters - glimpses into her life. Elizabeth and her friend Mel both struggle with weight issues, as does Elizabeth's mother and the weight of this extra weight is evident in many small ways as well as a few major ones.

Elizabeth feels her obesity in a number of ways. She is self-conscious of her body, seldom even wanting to see it herself let alone have anyone else look at it. She spends hours searching for clothing to creatively cover the extra bulges and rolls that she knows shouldn't be there. She loves food and binges on occasion, but just can't help herself. Then she meets Tom. Tom is a man who sees Elizabeth as she is without the burden of her weight. It simply doesn't matter to him. He loves who she is, and he is the man who inspires the will Elizabeth needs to lose weight.

Elizabeth's mother dies as a result of poor health likely related to her excess weight. When Elizabeth sees her mother for the last time, she is wheezing loudly; can't feel her feet when she is driving, and her face is flushed and mottled looking. These signs are all clear indicators that Elizabeth's mother is at dire risk of obesity related complications, but is unwilling to deal with it or discuss it with Elizabeth despite the questions she asks.

Elizabeth's mother shows no signs of trying to diet, but is overtly proud of her daughter for managing to do so. As soon as she sees Elizabeth slimmed down, she takes her shopping for new clothes. Of course, they are a little more revealing than Elizabeth prefers, but her mother manages to talk her into not only allowing her to buy them for her, but into wearing them in public. She only ever wears them once – on that visit, but after her mother dies, Elizabeth changes and adopts that style of dress full time. She begins buying dresses weekly and wearing outfits that are much more and much less than the outing or event calls for.

Somehow, losing the weight changes Elizabeth from a happy woman with a weight problem into a sullen, hungry, irritable woman who worships everything food and eats little. Elizabeth becomes increasingly ashamed of her body, avoids being seen by Tom naked, and avoids sex with him. Tom is lonely, and the woman left in Elizabeth is not the woman he married. In losing the equivalent of another body, she loses herself and eventually Tom when she accuses him of wanting to sleep with Dickie's fat girlfriend. Unfortunately, Tom realizes that she isn't entirely wrong. He misses her.

## Trading Lives

An overall message in the novel is to follow what makes you happy in life, and not to bend to the will or expectations of others. The novel shows Elizabeth coveting, and



sometimes borrowing from, other women's lives frequently in an attempt to gain some happiness from them vicariously. All of Elizabeth's life, she's dreamed of being someone else. Somehow she feels as though she missed the call when it was her turn to step up and have a life. Now, she feels as though she is trapped in limbo. All Elizabeth really wants is someone who loves her for herself; someone who will see the value in who she is, and respect that individual.

Elizabeth meets Tom and then eventually marries him. He is the kind of man who wants her to be happy and even her mother warns her to hold onto him. In fact, he goes out of his way to make sure that Elizabeth has whatever she wants. Tom sacrifices little things for her - his own desserts when he knows that hers leaves her feeling unsatisfied; the choice of apartment locations - even paying extra for a view he can't see more than a sliver of on a good day. Tom moves in there with Elizabeth because she likes the idea of the gym that several buildings share, despite the fact that Tom notices it is substandard at best.

Unfortunately, the life Elizabeth has then isn't what she wants either. Unsatisfied with the sight of herself, she begins to diet with a vengeance, determined to cut her weight in half. Doing that changes her significantly and once the weight is gone, Elizabeth goes through a period where she must learn who she is all over again. She begins to trade her boring life with that of those around her, using her manicurist Cassie's life to supplement her outings with Tom, copying the outings Cassie and her husband shared. She also uses the baking behavior of one of her co-workers as something she claims she does herself when she is talking to Cassie. Neither of these borrowed lives are satisfying to her as they are empty recreations of the originals.

Elizabeth continues to attempt to trade her life for a better one until one day when she is sitting outside of her complex on the grass, waiting for the fire truck to arrive, and watching the woman who remains in the gym despite the apparent danger. Char and Elizabeth both understand the futility of her actions, and something even more profound tickles at the edges of her consciousness and she knows she is close to understanding.

## **The Value of Exercise**

Elizabeth struggles with obesity for most of her life. Her mother also has weight issues, and dies as a likely complication from her excess weight and the terrible strain that it put on her lungs, her legs, her back and her internal organs. Elizabeth loses almost half of her body weight, but the body that she has left is one that she finds embarrassing. What Elizabeth is lacking is an exercise regimen. Elizabeth needs to rid herself of the extra folds of skin that reveal how large she was not that long ago - the tell tale signs of her former obesity. Every time she sees them, Elizabeth is fat all over again.

When she and Tom move in together, she talks him into moving into an apartment that has a rather substandard gym in it so that she can work on the parts of her that she needs to. She also moved a piece of exercise equipment into their suite for the days when she didn't feel ready to face anyone else. Still, she isn't able to pull her body



together to the degree that she wants to. She is increasingly anxious about food, hungry all of the time and has little time for Tom. They separate as she moves out.

It isn't until she moves back to her hometown that she finally starts a program that may help. Again she moves into a complex with a gym, and at first signs up for the treadmill but doesn't go. When she finally does begin going, and manages to fight for her slot on the treadmill, she is disappointed to see little in the way of change. It is Char who explains to her one night that the only way she will be successful is if she makes every part of her work at random. Create an environment that constantly surprises your body, and she assures Elizabeth she'll get results. The value one gets from exercise is not from repeating one exercise over and over again but by doing an increasing variety of exercises to challenge the body.

## Clothing and Obesity

The author draws the reader's attention to the unique difficulties an obese person faces when selecting clothes - something readers who have never been obese are likely not even aware of. This action of the author helps foster empathy for the main character, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth and her mother have two very different clothing styles. Elizabeth is looking for elegant and concealing. She wants something that covers the bulges and rolls she has and does it without bows, sequins, lace or ribbon work. Simple, elegant, and generous of cloth could easily describe something Elizabeth would look for on a clothing rack. Her mother, however, is an entirely different story.

Elizabeth's mother selects the clothes she buys for Elizabeth based on their ability to draw the eye; to attract attention and reveal almost everything. Low cut, bare midriff as well as strappy shoes with heels that make Elizabeth teeter unsteadily and a bag to match. Elizabeth's mother loves to accessorize everything from jewelry to handbags. Elizabeth sees it as brash and revealing; embarrassing and classless. She wears the clothes her mother buys, but only once and not before trying to coax the dog to enjoy it instead.

After Elizabeth's mother dies, Elizabeth's tastes change. It was almost as though she has absorbed the essence that was her mother when she picks up her car and belongings from the police station, and becomes an amalgamated version of the two of them. She begins dressing the way her mother would have dressed her; tending to overdress for every occasion and even wearing high heels and a cocktail dress to a barbecue thrown by Matt and Britta. Everyone else is in shorts and casual wear. She tells Tom that she feels uncomfortable in her skin and looks it as well.



# Styles

## Point of View

13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl by Mona Awad is told almost entirely in the first person from the main character Elizabeth's perspective. There are two exceptions. The first occurs in the second chapter in which the perspective switches from Elizabeth's first person perspective to a supporting character, Rob and uses a second person point of view. This perspective is evident as the writer stops using the pronoun 'I' as she had in the first chapter and began using 'you' in the second when referring to Rob and his actions, although the story is told through his eyes for this brief time. Rob is a man who uses time with Elizabeth as a way to boost his ego and restore his self-confidence. Elizabeth is his guilty secret. In the third chapter the author returns to using the main character Elizabeth in the first person perspective and the chapters that follow maintain this format until chapter nine when the author changes to third person limited as Tom copes with the sexual antics and opinions of his co-worker Dickie. The reader is given a glimpse into Tom's mind as he considers how things have changed since Elizabeth lost weight. Elizabeth tells him she feels like a stranger in her body and is shy and distant from him, unlike the happy, sexually active couple they used to be. Elizabeth is still presented in the first person perspective as the chapter progresses and the remainder of the story is told using Elizabeth's voice as the main character in the first person as well.

## Language and Meaning

13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl by Mona Awad is a story told entirely in contemporary English. This 13-part story follows the main character Elizabeth as she progresses from a young adolescent through to adulthood, and chronicles her struggles with obesity and self-image. The story begins while Elizabeth is still attending school, but her focus is scattered and her efforts to attend classes and learn the material are minimal. Elizabeth's largest concern is the image she projects, and in her opinion, that image is strained to exploding. Elizabeth is interested in boys and music like any girl her age, but her self-image revolves around how much she weighs and as such, she has neither the courage nor the self-confidence to be more socially active or participatory. Instead, she skips class and allows another girl to do her eyes for her.

As Elizabeth matures, her focus changes from school to work. Elizabeth continues to struggle with low self-image, and rather than risk possible rejection in public, she uses her computer to meet potential suitors. She quietly resents the co-workers she has that seem able to eat anything without gaining a pound while she has to exist on wheat grass and soy milk, but she still sticks to her diet. She leaves Mel behind, in favor of computer relationships and finally meets Tom - the man she marries. Tom is a supportive spouse, willing to stand by Elizabeth regardless of her forays into food he hardly recognizes.



While Elizabeth begins with the desire to lose weight, her journey trades one addiction - food - for another - weight loss. The behavior that led to obesity is continued, but presents itself in a healthier package at the outset. Slowly however, Elizabeth becomes so fanatical about her diet that food becomes both a blessing and a curse. She longs to eat as she pleases but can't so instead she uses food as a reward to herself which can become a crutch over time as food becomes the equivalent of approval.

As such, Elizabeth goes from a gradual awakening to her obese condition which, as she matures, leads to her desire for self-improvement. The self-improvement changes Elizabeth from a young lady who enjoyed music and company to a woman who watches food programs on television, collecting recipes she'll never try. Food slowly becomes the center of her life as she deprives herself from it in formats she enjoys.

## Structure

13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl by Mona Awad is a story of 167 pages, which is further divided into 13 chapters. These 13 chapters average 12 to 13 pages each with the smallest chapter containing five pages and the longest chapter containing 20 pages. The chapters are titled to reflect the contribution each one makes to the story that is Elizabeth's life.

The story opens while Elizabeth is still attending school, half-hearted in her efforts to complete any particular program or course content. At this stage in her life, Elizabeth is already struggling with obesity, as is her best friend Mel. To compensate for their excesses, Mel is ready and willing to sell herself off to any man who will have her. Elizabeth plays along, but her heart isn't in that either. The second chapter titled "Your Biggest Fan" refers to Elizabeth as the fan. Rob is a drunken louse who only comes to Elizabeth when he is emotionally wounded or in need of validation. Elizabeth strokes his ego and gushes around him, willing to see to any need he has while in truth Rob would be embarrassed if anyone he knew learned that he was leaning so heavily on his biggest fan. In the third chapter Elizabeth is delving into online dating while working to support herself. Still obese, she neglects to share this information with her online boyfriend, Cosmic Dancer, who asks her repeatedly for a full body photo of her, hence the title "Full Body."

"Is That All There Is" refers to a Peggy Lee album that Archibald and Elizabeth are listening to together when his girlfriend Britta bursts in and tells Elizabeth that she's been sharing Archibald with her the whole time. "The Girl I Hate" reveals that Elizabeth resents any skinny woman who is able to consume whatever and as much of any food as she desires. "I Want Too Much" refers to Elizabeth's attempt to find tasteful clothing for women of her size, while "My Mother's Idea of Sexy" refers to the style Elizabeth's mother insists is not too bold or too revealing, but is. "Fit4U" is the dry-cleaner that Elizabeth's mother took her favorite dress to, and which Elizabeth must retrieve after her mother's death. "She'll Do Anything" is what Dickie brags is true where his new, overweight girlfriend is concerned. "The von Furstenberg" refers to the label on a dress that Elizabeth covets but can never seem to fit into. "Caribbean Therapy" is what the



weekly manicure Elizabeth treats herself to is called, and "Additionelle" refers to the place where Elizabeth and her mother used to shop together for plus sizes. "Beyond the Sea" is the name of the complex that Elizabeth moves into in and where she finally learns that doing anything so intensely that you lose yourself in that action or are unable to do anything else is counterproductive.



## Quotes

I'd say we're each worth at least fifty bucks.

-- Mel (One: When We Went Against The Universe paragraph 19)

**Importance:** Mel tries to talk Elizabeth into offering several business men oral sex for money, revealing how little self-respect she has for herself, and how desperate she is for the attentions of a man, even if it is someone she doesn't know.

Wrotethissongbout you.

-- Rob (Two: Your Biggest Fan paragraph 40)

**Importance:** This slurred admission from Rob is what he tells Elizabeth when he shows up on her doorstep in an alcoholic fog, looking for acceptance and love without personal cost.

He wants a full-body shot of me.

-- Elizabeth (Three: Full Body paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Elizabeth reveals that Blake has been asking her for a full body shot of herself, but that she is reluctant to send it to him, convinced that if she does, he will immediately lose interest in her because of her weight.

I'm sure an attractive girl like you has a ton of admirers.

-- Archibald (Four: If That's All There Is. paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Archibald reveals his interest in performing oral sex on Elizabeth, complimenting her by asking her out after acknowledging that she is likely a busy woman with many suitors, unaware that the opposite is really true.

Fifty-seven days.

-- Elizabeth (Five: The Girl I Hate paragraph 26)

**Importance:** Elizabeth reveals to Tom that she has been counting the days since they'd last seen each other, hoping to communicate that she had been keeping track and was looking forward to seeing him.

Cute.

-- Trixie (chapter 10 paragraph Six: I Want Too Much)

**Importance:** Trixie is the kind of person who uses "cute" to describe everything from scorched earth to the apocalypse. It is a word that brings Elizabeth to a boil every time she hears it in reference to something she's tried on.

I don't know about this outfit.

-- Elizabeth (Seven: My Mother's Idea of Sexy paragraph 2)



**Importance:** Elizabeth's mother's tastes lean towards the very revealing and Elizabeth repeatedly tries to select something that covers more of her, feeling terribly exposed in the outfits that her mother likes.

Nothing you can do about that.

-- Dry-cleaner (Eight: Fit4U paragraph 24)

**Importance:** The dry-cleaner patiently explains that this dress should be retired and that there is little that can be done for the tears and burns, but Elizabeth only hears her mother's voice in her head, worrying at a spill or tear.

Best sex I've ever had, hands down.

-- Dickie (Nine: She'll Do Anything paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Dickie begins to date a fat girl who has had gastric bypass surgery, and can't stop bragging about how she's willing to do anything that he asks. It is a revealing look at how desperate a fat girl can be for attention.

How are we doing in here?

-- Saleswoman (Ten: The von Furstenberg and I paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This is a phrase that Elizabeth dreads, especially as at this moment she is definitely not okay. In fact, when the ramifications of tearing the dress sink in, Elizabeth wishes she could slow down time to a comfortable but geological speed.

So is there an occasion we're getting ready for or...?"

-- Cassie (Eleven: Caribbean Therapy paragraph 15)

**Importance:** When Cassie asks this question, for some reason Elizabeth is compelled to invent a life that isn't real. Perhaps her own life is one that she finds boring and lacking in color.

Are we okay in there?

-- Saleswoman (Twelve: Additionelle paragraph 20)

**Importance:** This is a question that Elizabeth has come to hate or dread over the years and has since the first time she heard it. This time, the saleswoman simply wants her to leave and is trying to hurry her along somewhat, but Elizabeth is standing in the dark change room, the dress in place over her, and to her horror, rather than too big, it seems to fit. The dark of the change room hides the degree to which it does, allowing Elizabeth to continue her denial a little longer.

Are you on here next?

-- Char (Thirteen: Beyond The Sea)

**Importance:** Char is one of the other residents in Beyond the Sea and the gym facilities



available are to be shared by all. As such, sign up sheets are available to all who want to participate. They clearly list how the day will be divided and Char consistently works out longer, running into Elizabeth's time and then playing innocent.