



Zed 5

ZED no-frills issue, number 5, FAPA 185, November 1983; published now and again by Teresa and Patrick Nielsen Hayden for the Fantasy Amateur Press Association and an additional few. Contents copyright (c) 1983 by P & T Nielsen Hayden. This issue's unsigned material written entirely by Teresa. Customs declaration: amateur periodical, not for sale, no commercial value. ee#220, rhp#52. Gary Farber, lest we forget.

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WE MET JOHN-HENRI HOLMBERG for the first time this Worldcon; or rather, we met him at a party at Bill and Mary Burns' house in New York, a week before the convention. That was splendid; we even managed some time to talk that evening. Maybe John-Henri will forgive me for reducing all his intelligent conversation to one question -- really, he said a great deal more than this one thing -- but it was the thing that's left me thinking ever since. We were all three upstairs at the Burns' house, quite late in the evening, and at one point John-Henri said, "So tell me. How is it that you both look like normal people instead of like fans?"

Never in all my fantasies of fannish interactions had I imagined that question. I wasn't offended, you understand, just puzzled. So I smiled and said, "I'm not sure. What's the difference?"

"Neither of you are fat."

Um. I've heard that before about American fans, in British fanzines. I guess I haven't thought much about it since I first got into fandom, beyond the occasional vague thought that the average female fannish weight is probably twenty pounds over the average general female weight. Which isn't sexism on my part; fannish men have the same tendency, but I can't guess their weight.

Early on in the convention, Patrick was riding down the elevator in the Holiday Inn where we were staying, looking pretty much mainstream-normal, which may be why he got to hear this. A mundane couple, also on the elevator, were talking, and one asked the other: "Where are all these fat women coming from?"

I thought that was kind of dumb-funny, and once or twice at the con alluded to it, and to John-Henri's question, in conversation. Not really thinking about it at the time, you understand. Both times (I kicked myself the first time and really kicked myself the second time) a dead silence fell. Then I'd look around at my friends and acquaintances and realize as if for the first time that some of them are more than mildly chubby. It had never seemed important enough to think about before, for some reason.

I should mention something else here. In the autumn of 1982, my then-neurologist Dr. Ginsberg started prescribing Dexedrine to control the drowsiness of my narcolepsy. He overdosed me for a bit there, and I dropped over thirty pounds in about six months. I didn't have a scale, but I know that I went from a size 12-14 to a size 4. In March 1983 they hospitalized me for emaciation (among other things), but that's another story. Anyway, there I was, skinny as hell for the first time in my life. It was strange. I'd always imagined how happy I'd be if I weighed that little, looked fashionable, et cetera, but it turned out to be uncomfortable. Cold weather and unpadded chairs were almost painful. I started feeling semi-transparent, almost not there, as if other people could squint hard and see straight through me. And yet I'd keep running into old acquaintances who'd exclaim over how great I looked. I personally thought I looked moribund.

But the strangest part of it was feeling obliged to apologize to all my female fannish friends -- wanting to say "It's not real! I cheated!" You see, I knew perfectly well that no few of them dieted on and off, with not much success, and that they felt just terrible about it. (I didn't think they looked so bad. Now, me, I could stand to lose a little, but they didn't need to do any such thing. We used to stand around in little circles and all say that to each other.) I knew what that was like.

Myself, I started my first diet when I was twelve, about the same time I started junior high and got stuck in a required semester of Home Ec. Along with baking-powder biscuits and cream sauce we had a two-week unit on Personal Grooming, wherein formidably ladylike Home Ec teachers came in to supplement our usual teacher in giving lectures on standing, sitting, and bending over (1968 -- remember miniskirts?). I

learned about hairstyles that would disguise the shortcomings of my face, and dress styles that would disguise the shortcomings of the rest of me. Then they got out the color wheels and told me what colors to wear. Most of this information, I later found out, was dead wrong. But what's junior high for?

The meat of the matter is that sometime during all this I became fired with an idea. I was going to look spiff and well-groomed. And I knew just where to start: I was going to Lose Weight, because I was Too Fat. (I look back at pictures. The hell I was! I look like a very normal pre-teen girl, if rather more despairing than most.)

I started dieting. I ate little salads and boiled-egg messes at dinner, skipped breakfast, and dumped half my lunch down the garbage at the school cafeteria. My mother was amused, though I can't imagine why; she went on and off diets all the time herself.

Then one afternoon a week later while I was standing in line at the local grocery store with my bunch of carrots and green onions, I fainted. When I woke up I felt wretchedly nauseated and cold, so I stopped dieting for a while.

Let me compress a huge amount of experience into one sentence. "I continued my sporadic attempts at weight loss, off and on, for the next ten years." If you've ever been an on-and-off dieter you know how much ground that covers. There's the hopeful feeling when you hear about a new diet, and the near-euphoria of deciding to do it. That feeling is hard to describe, almost saintly rapture, almost sexual arousal, located somewhere on the extreme opposite side of the map from depression. EVERYTHING IS WONDERFUL. You feel light and airy and powerful, smug, hopeful, immensely relieved. You're in control. All obstacles are mere trifles, there to be kicked lightly aside, and you could dance all night. And then if you do lose weight that feeling shows up again, fleetingly, especially the relief.

But as you get into the diet, euphoria is more and more replaced by a sort of silent misery, a mute, cold feeling of utter deprivation like the crash after a dose of speed. You're obsessed with food, and yet you don't particularly want any one food when faced with a choice. That is, you can't stand food when it's in the flesh. Instead there are these recurrent insistent images, dreams, fantasies of preternaturally wonderful bagels with cream cheese, grilled ham-and-swiss sandwiches, bags of fresh raw almonds. (Insert your food folly of choice here; those are my cravings.) And you dream food, stuffing apparently endless lots of candy or pie down your throat, waking up feeling bloated. Some nights I would wake up five or six times, realizing that each time I'd been dreaming of eating.

And my sense of smell became hideously acute. I could smell an apple or orange in the back of someone's closed bottom desk drawer, and identify a bag of candies being opened two rooms away down the hall. Never believe that sugar doesn't have a smell.

And sometimes, when it all got to be too much, I'd eat something. The desire for food comes and gets you when you're tired and worn down. It didn't help that as I got older I was plagued with weird fits of tiredness; it was hard to stay on a diet and hard to contemplate starting one. I was feeling cold and miserable too often already.

But there you are, a week into your diet and sunk in chilly despair, and you eat something. With me it would be a cheese danish, or an enchilada, or maybe an oatmeal cookie. And the food would always look just incredibly alluring but it never tasted good enough, it never made you feel all that much better, and once you'd eaten it you'd plunge down into a pit of despair, sinking further than the euphoria of beginning the diet had ever pulled you up. Like: O God. I ate a cinnamon roll. Blew my diet. Never be skinny. Nothing going to work. Beautiful future poofed out like a candle. And besides...besides...I WANT ANOTHER CINNAMON ROLL RIGHT NOW!!!

What an unpleasant dilemma, dear readers.

I could discuss all the different diets I've tried at this point; why not? There was the high-protein low-to-zero-carbohydrates diet that had my breath smelling like fingernail-polish remover. It left me with a perpetual taste for mayonnaise (if you're only counting carbohydrates, mayonnaise is legit), a passing taste for diet chocolate soda (after three weeks of hamburger, eggs, cheese, and mayonnaise, it tastes rich and wonderful), and took off fifteen pounds that all came back once I stopped eating all

that protein. There was the "last chance diet" I tried, where you eat only vile-tasting liquid protein concentrate stuff, 12 ounces of it a day. I didn't eat anything else for six weeks. My skin dried out, I stopped having to wash my hair, my fingertips cracked open and bled, and I looked like a Biafran baby poster. But, by God, I felt wonderful. For the first time in my adult life, I weighed 118 pounds. Eventually an old friend ran into me at the student union, where I was unobtrusively leaning against a wall until a dizzy spell passed. Pete was always the soul of tact; he grabbed me by both shoulders and said "Teresa! My God, you look awful! When was the last time you ate something?"

I smiled happily. "Six weeks ago."

Pete skipped class and forcibly dragged me across campus to The Chuck Wagon, home of the half-pound burger patty grilled over mesquite charcoal. I wish I had one right now. He bought me a Chuckbox-burger and made me eat the whole thing, but really, he didn't have to worry. After the first bite I was gone. I remember that burger in exquisite detail. I could draw the exact patterns of the pickles and ketchup and mustard I put on the patty. (Try paying that kind of infinite attention to a good meal sometime. Not only will you likely eat less, but the experience will be overwhelming. Can you imagine what sex would be like if we paid as little attention to it as we pay toward most of our eating?)

Anyway, it was probably a good thing that I ran into Pete Kushibab, thank you wherever you are. I was halfway to anorexia nervosa, and besides, when your bodily wastes are nearly black and smell exactly like a home permanent you must be doing nasty things to your innards.

Mind you, those are just two diets. There were more.

Right now you may be feeling like you've lost the point of whatever it is I'm saying -- or, more likely, that I've lost the point of it all. Never fear! Help is on the way. What I have here is a letter from Debbie Notkin, written in January of 1983 in response to a comment in a letter from Bill Rotsler that we printed in ZED 4, November 1982.

For the record, here's the pertinent paragraph of Rotsler's letter:

"It's not that I find nude women uninteresting to look at, it's just that most women (and a helluva lot more men!) are not that interesting to look at. I remember going to my very first nudist camp with a very busty stripper named Jenny Lee. My main worry was not that I might have an "inappropriate" erection -- this was in the early '60s when nudist parks were pretty "cool" -- but that I might have to look at the unclothed horror of some 300-pound woman with 19 scars and a tattoo which depicted the 4th Battle of the Staple Wars."

(Come to think of it -- this is Teresa again -- I have a friend with about 19 scars, who is overweight to boot. Not only does she not go to nudist parks, she mostly doesn't have intimate relations with anyone, for fear of that reaction of revulsion Rotsler mentions. It causes her a whole lot of pain.)

But here's Debbie Notkin, who can always explain it better than I can:

DEBBIE NOTKIN
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Dear Bill,

Your letter in the most recent ZED had two salient effects on me: it upset me, and it gave me the impetus to bring up a subject that's been on my mind for a long time.

When you wrote about your worry about seeing "the unclothed horror of some 300-pound woman," did you think at all about what that phrase might mean to some of the people who would surely read it? You might want to write off the infelicitous phrase as hyperbole, and in fact it almost certainly was. Hyperbole, however, can be painful. Nonetheless, one letter in a FAPazine is nowhere near as important as the influential Rotsler's Rules for Masquerades, which have become de rigueur for almost every convention progress report and program book. Most of your rules seem to be encouragement to contestants to behave with common sense and professionalism, and I have the highest respect for

them. Rule #1, on the other hand, is philosophically very different from the others, and very hurtful in its effects.

There's a major cultural imperative: "Don't be fat." The message is that if you're fat, you have no chance of every physically attracting another human being, that you are withdrawing yourself completely from the all-important sexual sweepstakes. The subtext is that no one has to be fat, and no one with any self-control is fat. (This may be true, but it's certainly open to argument.) How close your own body shape comes to a magic, ever-shifting socially defined "perfection" affects, especially for women, not only your sex life but the clothes you can buy, the careers that are open to you, the respect with which you are treated and, inevitably, your ability to get along with yourself.

Ideally, eventually this will change in this culture, and people will be dealt with on the basis of more important qualities than the shape of their bodies. Ideally, eventually no one will care if you're black, either. Meanwhile, the fannish community seems to be one of the few havens that fat people can find in this world. Among fans, many fat people find companionship, affection and even sexuality, often for the first time.

"There should be a weight limit for the purchase of leotards" is a message from the cruel world. Fat people get lots of messages like that: Don't wear bright colors, people will look at you; don't wear tight clothes, it accentuates your problem; keep a low profile, maybe no one will notice. I'm not a masquerade contestant myself, but I love the idea that I could be -- that there's one place in the world where I could put on something outrageous and parade across a stage in front of several hundred people, and no one would hiss, or laugh, or cringe. But your Rule #1 makes me feel that you'd be out there either laughing or cringing -- I can't tell which. Masquerades exist for the pleasure of both the contestants and the audience, but it's hard to imagine a situation in which one group could really enjoy themselves if the other one was not.

At any masquerade, at any event inside or outside fandom, there are going to be a lot of people with tastes and preferences like yours -- that's fine. Inside fandom, at least, I know there are some people with different tastes, people who find fat people attractive and actively enjoy seeing us in leotards and tights, or even in nothing at all. Are their pleasures somehow less important than yours? Does it truly hurt the quality of the masquerade if I walk across the stage in a leotard, particularly if the costume is well-designed and the presentation intelligent and brief? Would it be somehow different if the costume I wore was a loose, A-line dress? Your excellent rule about the contestant resembling the character should deal with most "offenders" anyway -- no intelligent fat woman would choose to appear as C'mell, for example, and there are very few fat barbarian princesses to choose as role models.

One more aspect of this I'd like to point out, and then I'll stop, I promise. Since there's so much emphasis in this culture on weight and appearance, I've met very few women who believe their own body to be acceptable. Ask around among your conventionally beautiful female acquaintances, if you like -- I'll bet you that almost all of them obsess about the proportions of some part of their body: too big, too little, out of shape, out of line. The result of this is that a lot of women whom you might enjoy seeing in skimpy costumes stay away from them, and from masquerades, out of fear that your Rule #1 is directed at them. Even if the purpose of the masquerade is to titillate the audience, which I don't accept, then encouraging the maximum number of contestants should encourage the maximum number of good-looking ones, by anyone's standards. If the purpose of the masquerade is for the contestants and the audience both to enjoy themselves, on lots of different levels including the sexual, then encouraging the maximum variety of entrants is an obvious advantage.

I hope it's clear that I have no intention of challenging your own tastes and preferences, just the implication that they are universal. I really would like to know how all of this strikes you, whether or not it makes sense, and what it means

to you. I think this is an important enough subject to be aired in the "public forum" of fanzine discussion. Besides, I'm curious about your response.

Thanks once again for the drawing you gave me at New Year's Eve. I'm a big admirer of your art work, and I'm delighted to have a Rotsler drawing of my very own. (9 January 1983)

Well. What the hell is it that we're talking about when we talk about fat, weight, dieting? It's an elusive thing; I suspect that if I knew enough, "fat" would turn out to be like "love" or "sex" -- two categories under which I've found an amazing number of truant concepts sheltering. What is the anorexic seeking when she starves herself far past the point of any imaginable standard of beauty, sometimes even dying for her obsession? Or the bulimiac kneeling in front of the toilet to painfully force herself to vomit up her dinner? Or my dear, strong, intelligent mother, 57 years old this past June and still sure after forty years of dieting that this next one is going to Do It, like Bullwinkle trying once more to pull a rabbit out of his hat?

Let me quote something I heard a woman dietician say once on TV, during a special program on overweight. She was discussing the way some women obsess over their body image and weight, constantly going on and off diet programs from puberty on. What I remember her saying is something like "A mere fifteen or twenty perceived excess pounds can consume most of the spare time and energy of these women for twenty years." I tell you: in my experience, that is completely true. And I'll tell you another thing: that if I estimated that two out of three of the women I know in fandom are stuck feeling seriously unacceptable, out of control of their own bodies, I'd be understating the problem.

Here, another anecdote. Get me going on this topic and I have an endless supply of them. A few years ago a friend and I were going on hilariously together about our mutual travails over The Matter Of Fat. We were having one of those conversations where one person says "Did you ever -- " or "Remember the -- " or "How about the -- " and the other replies with "Yes," "Omigod yes," and "Don't tell me you did that too! Why, I once -- " and then you both laugh yourselves silly. After about twenty minutes of this she stopped, thought for a second, then said, "But, Teresa -- when were you ever fat?" Answer? At that moment I weighed as much as I've ever weighed in my life; she weighed perhaps forty pounds more than that.

I've noticed it cropping up often since then. Women who think they are fat will talk about exactly the same feelings and experiences, in almost exactly the same language, whether they're ten or two hundred pounds over the line. An example of this that comes up in female group conversations is when one person will announce, groaning, that she's gained five pounds and has to go on a diet. Women who weigh less than she does will nod sympathetically -- they've done the same thing themselves, again and again. Women who weigh more than she does will stare incredulously: what the hell is she worried about? Each one of the women probably thinks she weighs too much. Some of them may be right, some certainly are wrong, but they all see themselves as being in the same position.

Clearly, the phenomenon doesn't have much connection with any sort of objective physical reality. When I was so gaunt that I couldn't sleep comfortably for my bony hips and shoulders pressing against the mattress, I still had a fat person somewhere inside me. A very confused fat person, it is true. It leads me to make inappropriate jokes at the Worldcon -- surely my friends all know that I'm inherently overweight, no matter what I happen to look like? -- and to apologize for somehow accidentally getting thin. And I'm forever getting into embarrassing situations when a friend needs a shirt or something to wear out into the rain or to a party or job interview. Every damn time, it seems, I'll be casting about for the right garment, saying "Ah, I have just the thing, I'm sure it will fit you." And it never does. I'm sure there's at least one woman in Seattle fandom who by now suspects me of some weird underhanded motive in continually doing this. I can't help it; I just always think I'm about the same size they are. A tad smaller, perhaps? But not much.

I promise, I'll just tell you one-and-a-half more stories and then I'll finish

this thing. Promise, okay?

One day, back when I was in college, I got a letter from the local Planned Parenthood clinic delivered at a friend's house. I couldn't have possibly gotten mail from the clinic at my mother's address. Anyway, the letter was one sheet, saying something like "You have had a type B reaction on your Pap smear test. Please get in touch with us as soon as possible."

So I phoned them up and got a woman who I later discovered was a very uninformed recent volunteer there. We had a conversation that went something like this:

Q: Hello, what's this letter about?

A: Oh, one of those, you need to see a gynecologist about a colposcopy.

Q: What's a colposcopy? And what does this letter mean?

A: Oh, it doesn't hurt at all, we have a list of recommended gynecologists, it won't even cost very much.

Q: Yes, thank you. Now what does this letter mean? What test results?

A: Oh. Well, you have a small cancer, don't worry, with surgery it probably won't spread.

Complete hysteria! I wailed and cried and was ineffectually patted on the back by the friend whose apartment it was; I was scared out of my wits. Of course Pap smears aren't used as final diagnostic tests; in fact I was fine, though we had a lively time finding that out. But at the time I called mother and told her shakily not to leave home, that I was driving over and had something important I needed to talk to her about.

Half an hour passes. I am sitting on my mother's bed, as is my mother. I am sniffly and barely in control of myself. "I have something" (I swallowed hard) "I have to tell you about." I considered that statement for a moment and hastily added "To start off with, I'm not pregnant!"

"I never once thought you might be," mother said serenely. (Nonsense! Mother always worried about my sister and me getting pregnant, not that we ever quite managed it.)

"I went to the Planned Parenthood clinic a while back, and today I got a letter from them (sniff)" (I was losing my composure) "and so I called them to ask what it was about and they said -- they said --" (Definitely losing it now.)

Mother looked at me with great and compassionate maternal understanding. "You have V.D.," she said.

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!"

Anyway, after that mother and I discussed the whole brouhaha, and she explained that there was no way that a Pap smear was a final diagnostic test, and that they would merely have found some abnormal cells. "Besides," she said, putting her arm around my shoulders and smiling, "look on the bright side. At least if you have cancer you'll probably lose weight." We both cracked up over that one.

Later that evening my sister came home, and I went to talk to her about it. I started off explaining about the letter from Planned Parenthood, and she fixed me with a concerned stare. "You're pregnant, aren't you?" she said.

"No, dammit!" Then I told her about what had happened.

She punched me lightly on the shoulder. "Well, kid, at least if you have cancer you'll lose a lot of weight."

"Thanks loads. Mom already thought of that."

"That's just like her."

I didn't tell either my mother or my sister that I had already thought about that, before either of them mentioned it to me.

More recently I was talking to a friend who was facing the prospect of surgery for the nth time in her life. A sort of fistula the size of a cow heart had formed inside her abdomen after a piece of surgery some six years earlier, and had quietly collected dead white blood cells all that time, only at the end of the process giving notice that it existed and was a major liability. She was having to deal with expecting more weeks and months of pain, incapacitation, cost, loss of her job, plus the incidental removal of her tailbone, in order to have the fistula removed. We were sitting on her sofa

trying to cheer each other up, when a horrible thought occurred to me. Not the one I'd proposed five minutes earlier, about how she could have her doctor save the pieces of her coccyx for her so that she could have them polished and mounted as pieces of jewelry (we'd gotten some giggles out of the notion), but an even more terrible one. I looked at her, my face twitching slightly. I didn't believe what I was about to say. "Look at the bright side. At least you'll lose weight."

She looked at me, and she couldn't keep her face straight either. "I already thought of that," she said. We collapsed on each other's shoulders and laughed ourselves sick.

Patrick was there at the time. He had no idea at all what we were laughing at. I explained it and he still didn't think it was funny. On the other hand, I've told that story to other women who have been constant dieters and they thought it was hysterical. Sick, of course, but very funny.

Now for the \$64,000 question: Why is that funny? I can't quite explain it; I only know that it is.

In a way, I'm asking what this thing is that all us made-fat-in-spirit types are dealing with. None of us can say what it is, what it looks like; but if we all share our perceptions of it and of ourselves, maybe the lines of our conversation will start to delineate the shape of that hole. (It's like living around someone who avoids dealing with or talking about something. They may never mention it, but after a while you start seeing the shape of the omission, and then you can start guessing what it is from its silhouette.) We'll be sending this ZED to some non-F ns who I know are interested in this; I want more information. I'm tired of living with an unnameable and well-larded ghost.

Any ideas?

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"Perhaps the most charming case of his peculiar note, which however wilful in its sadness is always at the opposite pole to malice, occurred when a younger poet (long ago now) published a diary. I should explain that Eliot takes cheese rather seriously; as witness the pronouncement, 'I find I can no longer travel except where there is a native cheese. I am therefore bounded, northwards by Yorkshire...' and the rest of the points of the compass were all tidy (I think he had a fair run to the south) but I no longer know what they were. The younger poet had recorded a lunch with 'Tom!' at which he had told Tom that simplicity and deep feeling were what made good poetry, and Tom had agreed. This was what gave his own poetry its lasting qualities ('Yes' Tom had said) and on the other hand gave good reason to prophesy that the poetry of Tom would only prove a passing fashion. Tom had seemed much struck by this. Meeting Eliot not long after I made bold to mention the diary, and he said, 'Very interesting. He did me the kindness...to send me the proofs...of the parts...concerning myself.' I said I hoped he had found them all right. His manner became a trifle severe, though not noticeably sadder. 'I found it necessary,' he said, 'in the interests of truth, to correct the name of the cheese.'"

-- William Empson in T. S. Eliot, ed. March and Tambimuttu (1948)

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CANADA

to:

"Thou whoreson Zed! Thou unnecessary letter!" - Shakespeare