

The Inner Corset

starving or exercise—both just becoming popular as means of weight control—would change more than 10 percent of a person's body size anyway. "The fat man tends to remain fat, the thin woman to stay thin—and both in perfect health—in spite of everything they can do."

But by 1926, Hutchinson, who was by then a past president of the American Academy of Medicine, was having to defend fat against fashion, too, and he was showing signs of strain. "In this present onslaught upon one of the most peaceable, useful and law-abiding of all our tissues," he told readers of *The Saturday Evening Post*, "fashion has apparently the backing of grave physicians, of food reformers and physical trainers, and even of great insurance companies, all chanting in unison the new commandment of fashion: 'Thou shalt be thin!'"

Hutchinson mourned this trend, and was dismayed that young girls were attempting to rid themselves of their roundness. He tried to understand the new view people took toward fat: "It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual disgrace, of laziness, of self-indulgence," he explained, but he remained unconvinced. Instead, he longed for a more cheerful period in the not-so-distant past when a little fat never hurt anyone, and he darkly warned that some physicians were deliberately underfeeding girls and young women solely for the purpose of giving them a more svelte figure. "The longed-for slender and boyish figure is becoming a menace," Hutchinson wrote, "not only to the present, but also the future generations."

And so it would. But why did the fashion for plumpness change so dramatically during those years? What happened that caused Americans to alter their tastes, not only to admire thinner figures for a time but for the next century, culminating in fin-de-siècle extremes of thinness, where women's magazines in the 1990s would print ads featuring gaunt models side by side with photo essays on anorexia?

Many things were happening at once, with dizzying speed. Foremost was a changing economy: in the late 1800s, for the first time, ample amounts of food were available to more and more people who had to do less and less work to eat. The agricultural economy, based on family farms and home workshops, shifted to an industrial one. A huge influx of immigrants—many of them genetically shorter and rounder than the earlier American settlers—fueled the industrial machine. People moved to cities to do factory work and service jobs, stopped growing their own food, and relied more on store-bought goods. Large companies began to process food products, distribute them via

Once upon a time, a man with a thick gold watch swaying from a big, round paunch was the very picture of American prosperity and vigor. A hundred years ago, a beautiful woman had plump cheeks and arms, and she wore a corset and even a bustle to emphasize her full, substantial hips. Women were *sexy* if they were heavy. In those days, Americans knew that a layer of fat was a sign that you could afford to eat well, too, and that you stood a better chance of fighting off infectious diseases than most people. If you were a woman, having that extra adipose blanket also meant you were probably fertile, and warm to cuddle up next to on chilly nights.

Between the 1880s and 1920s, that pleasant image of fat thoroughly changed in this country. Some people began early on to hint that fat was a health risk. In 1894, Woods Hutchinson, a medical professor who wrote for women's magazines, defended fat against this new point of view. "Adipose," he wrote, "while often pictured as a veritable Frankenstein, born of and breeding disease, sure to ride its possessor to death sooner or later, is really a most harmless, healthful, innocent tissue." Hutchinson reassured his *Cosmopolitan* readers that fat was not only benign but attractive, and that if a poll of beautiful women were taken in any city, there would be at least three times as many plump ones as slender ones. He advised them that no amount of

railroads, and use refrigeration to keep perishables fresh. Food became more accessible and convenient to all but the poorest families. People who once had too little to eat now had plenty, and those who had a tendency to put on weight began to do so. When it became possible for people of modest means to become plump, being fat no longer was seen as a sign of prestige. Well-to-do Americans of Northern European extraction wanted to be able to distinguish themselves, physically and racially, from stockier immigrants. The status symbols flipped: It became chic to be thin and all too ordinary to be overweight.¹

In this new environment, older cultural undercurrents that were suspicious of fat began to surface. Europeans had long considered slenderness a sign of class distinction and finer sensibilities, and Americans began to follow suit. In Europe, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many writers and intellectuals—the poets Keats and Shelley; Emily Brontë and Anton Chekhov—had tuberculosis, which made them sickly thin. Members of the upper classes believed that having tuberculosis, and being slender itself, were signs that one possessed a delicate, intellectual, and superior nature. “For snobs and parvenus and social climbers, TB was the one index of being genteel, delicate, [and] sensitive,” writes the essayist Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*. “It was glamorous to look sickly.” So interested was the poet Lord Byron in looking as fashionably ill as the other Romantic poets that he embarked on a series of obsessive diets, consuming only biscuits and water, or vinegar and potatoes, and succeeded in becoming quite thin. Byron, who at five feet six and a half inches tall, with a clubfoot that prevented him from walking much, weighed 202 pounds in his youth, disdained fat in others. “A woman,” he wrote, “should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be *lobster salad* and *champagne*, the only truly feminine and becoming viands.”² Aristocratic European women, thrilled with the romantic figure Byron cut, took his advice and despaired of appearing fat. Aristocratic Americans, trying to imitate Europeans, adopted their enthusiasm for champagne and slenderness.

Americans believed it was not only a sign of class to be thin but a sign of morality. There was a long tradition in American culture which suggested that indulging the body and its appetites was immoral, and that denying the flesh was a sure way to become closer to God. Puritans such as the minister Cotton Mather frequently fasted to prove

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are called gluttons. They are stupid, and heavy, and idle; and, very

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to *gain* weight. Two of the most distinguished doctors of the age,

George Beard and S. Weir Mitchell, believed that excessive thinness

caused American women to succumb to a wide variety of nervous dis-

orders, and that a large number of fat cells was absolutely necessary

to achieve a balanced personality.⁴ But when the plump figure fell

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their worthiness to God and to cleanse themselves of their sins. Benjamin Franklin, in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*, chided his readers to eat lightly in order to please not only God but also a new divinity, Reason: “Wouldst thou enjoy a long life, a healthy Body, and a Vigorous Mind, and be acquainted also with the wonderful works of God? Labour in the first place to bring thy Appetite into Subjection to Reason.” Franklin’s attitude toward food reveals a puritanical distrust of appetite as overly sensual; it also presages diets that would attempt to bring eating in line with rational, scientific calculations. “The Difficulty lies, in finding out an exact Measure”; he wrote, “but eat for Necessity, not Pleasure, for Lust knows not where Necessity ends.” By the 1820s, even schoolboys were learning the lesson that it was immoral to overeat: “Do not eat more than is necessary,” says one New York City grammar school reader. “Persons who eat too much are called gluttons. They are stupid, and heavy, and idle; and, very often, they have a sad pain in the head and stomach.”³

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consumer culture encouraged the trend toward thinness with fashion illustrations and ads featuring slim models; advertisers learned early to offer women an unattainable dream of thinness and beauty in order to sell more products. In short, a cultural obsession with weight became firmly established in the United States when several disparate factors that favored a desire for thinness—economic status symbols, morality, medicine, modernity, changing women's roles, and consumerism—all collided at once.

Thinness is, at its heart, a peculiarly American preoccupation. Europeans admire slenderness, but without our Puritanism, they have more relaxed and moderate attitudes about food, eating, and body size (the British are most like us in both being heavy and fixated on weight-loss schemes). In countries where people don't have quite enough to eat, and where women remain in traditional roles, plumpness is still widely admired. Other Westernized countries have developed a slender ideal, but for the most part, they have imported it from the United States. Russian women wouldn't dream of spending a month's salary on herbal weight-loss shakes if they didn't want to look like the women in American ads. Japanese girls wouldn't have soaring rates of eating disorders if they weren't exposed to so many Western images of skinny perfection (and high-fat Western snacks). The Chinese wouldn't be so successful in selling millions of bars of soft seaweed defatting soap in China and Japan (claiming to "discharge the underskin fat out of human bodies") if they hadn't taken the idea from us. No other culture suffers from the same wild anxieties about weight, dieting, and exercise as we do because they don't share our history.

The ideal of female thinness that developed in the United States from the 1880s to the 1920s wasn't just a momentary shift in fashion; it was a monumental turning point in the way women's bodies were appraised by men and experienced by women. The change can be traced through the evolution of three ideal types: the plump Victorian woman; the athletic but curvaceous Gibson Girl; and the boyishly straight-bodied flapper. By 1930, American women knew how very important it was for them to be thin. "How decisively even ten or fifteen extra pounds detract from one's appearance and make the most expensive gown dowdy!" proclaimed an ad for reducing salts in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. "A youthful slender figure means *everything* today." From then on, despite moments when voluptuousness was

admired again, à la Marilyn Monroe, American women could never be too thin.

The Pleasingly Plump Victorian Ideal

Lillian Russell, a well-known actress and the most famous American beauty of the late nineteenth century, would be considered quite fat by today's standards. She would be the depressed-looking model in a "before" ad, pictured later, after a presumably quick weight loss, proudly showing off how far the waistband stretched in her old polyester fat pants. But to the late Victorians, Russell had all the attributes of face and figure that women coveted most: luminous white skin, soft dimpled cheeks, long golden hair, and a voluptuous body. Tall and stately, fairly bursting from her corset, she sometimes tipped the scales at over 200 pounds.

Russell was a singer and actress who charmed audiences with her sweet doll's face, open laugh, and generous spirit. She was a perfect icon of the plush era, when heady economic times loosened the corset strings—and strict morality—of the Victorians and made way for the Gay Nineties. Russell was a lady, but she knew how to have a good time; she frequently indulged her passion for rich food at New York's best restaurants with her companion Diamond Jim Brady. (During one gargantuan meal at Delmonico's, he offered her a large diamond ring if she could eat as much as he did. Russell discreetly slipped into the ladies' room to remove her corset, returned to the table, took a deep breath, and won her ring.)

In photographs, Russell hardly looks obese, though her voluminous skirts, flounces, and trains leave her proportions below the waist a mystery. Her arms and face have the appealing plumpness of a healthy baby. With her hair piled high, in elaborate costumes and feathered hats, she is a proud prima donna, a glory of a woman from a time when being feminine meant having a good deal of soft, female flesh.

Russell's hourglass body type was widely admired, but it wasn't an "ideal" in the sense that women everywhere believed they, too, had to have her proportions to be considered attractive. Corset ads from the late nineteenth century show a wide variety of body silhouettes—"For every ideal type!"—without any suggestion that a fashionable woman

ought to be one particular shape. Dr. Warner's Coraline Corsets, for instance, were modeled in advertisements by four lovely women of very different sizes: "Made in twenty-five different patterns to fit every variety of figure—tall, short, slender, stout, either long, short or medium waisted." As long as a woman was cinched in at the waist, not nearly as much importance was placed on her actual body size as would be in later years.

A beautiful face was far more important than a good figure. Victorians admired doll-like women who seemed as pampered, porcelain, and immobile as the genuine article. Several articles in *Cosmopolitan* magazine—then a general-interest magazine with rose-cheeked beauties on the cover instead of thin women with improbably large amounts of cleavage—muse at great length about feminine beauty but hardly mention the body. In 1890, one *Cosmopolitan* writer listed the attributes of the most admired American women: "Golden hair united to brown or hazel eyes, soft, smooth skin with faint olive shading, little color in the cheeks, features sharply defined (although relieved by a slight facial fullness), and the figure healthily rounded."

When pressed, a late Victorian man might admit he preferred a little meat on a woman's bones. It was considered impolite to comment on most women's bodies, but actresses were an exception. "There was nothing writhlike about Lillian Russell; she was a voluptuous beauty, and there was plenty of her to see," wrote the critic Clarence Day in *The Saturday Evening Post*, recalling one of Russell's performances. "We liked that. Our tastes were not thin, or ethereal. We liked flesh in the Nineties. It didn't have to be bare, and it wasn't, but it had to be there."⁵

Slender actresses of the era held no candle to the likes of Lillian Russell. When the slim French actress Sarah Bernhardt visited the United States in the 1880s, she was openly mocked for her skinny body (which would seem rather large for an actress today), and was caricatured in cartoons as a broomstick, a boa constrictor, and a body made of water pipes.⁶ Photographers of the era preferred plump women as models, too. One expert, advising would-be photographers in an 1896 *Cosmopolitan* article, wrote, "The model must be far from thin, with no suggestions of hollows in the face or of collar-bones, for the camera seems to accentuate such defects." Those are the kinds of "defects" that have made contemporary supermodels famous.

Personal ads from the late nineteenth century suggest that men

seeking romantic partners preferred women who, if not fat, at least had plenty to love. In his social history of dieting, *Never Satisfied*, Hillel Schwartz describes how one prospective suitor, five foot ten and 160 pounds, looked for a woman who was shorter than him and weighed 130 to 160 pounds. Another specified he didn't want anyone "tall, lean, or lank-looking." These personal ads are quite different from ones today, where the adjectives "slim," "svelte," and "fit" are invariably listed long before "witty," "well-read," or "loves to fly-fish" are mentioned.

Women who would be considered twenty to forty pounds overweight today were just fine by the standards of the late Victorian age. For any woman today who has a body image problem, browsing through turn-of-the-century American magazines is excellent therapy. Page after musty page of *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar* contains portraits of plump women. A woman who feels depressingly large and ungainly compared with the extremely slender ideal these days might well recognize her body type as the one celebrated in late Victorian drawings. Pin up the hair; don a corset, hoop-skirted dress, and button-up shoes; she, too, would draw admiring glances from men in handlebar mustaches.

Not that she'd want to have lived then. The late Victorians admired plumpness mainly because it emphasized a woman's traditional role as a homebound mother who was entirely dependent on her husband. Feminine identity then was based on an idealized image of motherhood and domesticity. The corseted body fairly shouted that a woman was not only built to reproduce—exaggerating the breasts and hips—but that, hampered by her clothing, she was only fit to stay at home. The picture of the ideal woman, painted in so many magazines of the era, was of a placid, blissful, childlike mother. One 1886 illustration in *Cosmopolitan*, titled "Maternal Felicity," depicts a plump, well-to-do woman darning, with a baby in the crib and another child at her side; her face has such a calm, vacant sweetness that she must either have a lot of household help or very little going on upstairs. In the Victorian imagination, both would be ideal. A Victorian woman couldn't forget that her main purpose in life was to bear children and then civilize them. At the time, the English biologist and novelist Grant Allen described women as "the sex sacrificed to reproductive necessities."⁷

During the Victorian era, the plump and corseted body not only emphasized a woman's maternal role but her economic status as well.

The leisure-class Victorian woman, ideally, was a trophy wife who was a visible sign of her husband's success. Being plump was a signal that a woman was free from menial drudgery and that her husband could afford to keep her well fed. The corset physically prevented her from doing any work. "The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work," wrote Thorstein Veblen, the famous American economist of the age, in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

Like Chinese foot-binding, corset lacing severely limited women's physical freedom and was considered essential for real femininity. Hoop skirts, bustles, and dresses that took yards and yards of fabric made it even more difficult to get around. Victorian corsets weren't like the lingerie we think of today, the stretchy little undergarments-as-outergarments that appeared on fashion runways in the early 1990s. They were extremely rigid contraptions with heavy stays which, when pulled tight, exerted some twenty to eighty pounds of pressure on the wearer.⁸ The Victorians' justification for these horrendous garments was that women were such weak creatures that they needed help staying upright. Even girls learned that for health's sake they must wear corsets from an early age: "Beautiful children wear Good Sense," says one 1892 ad for the Good Sense Corset Waist (a "perfect health corset"). Corsets were touted as being necessary to support muscles, organs, and breasts that would, left alone, droop and collapse. Medical theories at the time held that women were so frail, they couldn't afford to waste their precious reproductive energies on mental or physical exertion.⁹

But the health justification for corset lacing was merely a way for the establishment to support a particular fashion in female body types and behavior, as the medical world would do a few years later, when physicians would advise women to go on crash diets to lose weight for the sake of "health." Corsets put so much force on women's bodies that they often constricted the lungs, squeezed the liver and small intestines, dislocated the stomach, and compressed the bladder. Some women's corsets were laced so tightly that, over time, their ribs grew into their livers or other organs.¹⁰

Corsets also prevented women from eating much, but ladies were considered too delicate to have any real appetite. Despite the fact that women were ideally supposed to be plump, it was considered unseemly

for them to be caught in the indelicate act of eating. Women hardly ate at the dinner table—even though many binged in secret. Like Scarlett O'Hara, who was admonished to eat before a ball so she wouldn't appear to be hungry, women ate in private. Refraining from food was a sign that one was wealthy enough not to have to worry about when the next meal would come. It was also a sign of propriety: any appetite for food was equated with an unladylike appetite for sexuality. As an actress, Lillian Russell got away with eating more because it was a mild way of titillating her public. She publicized her huge meals in much the same way actresses today send out press releases about their latest sexual partners. But for most women, it was fashionable to refrain from eating long before it became fashionable to be slender. The long tradition of seeing food abstinence as an essential characteristic of femininity and class would make it that much more important, later on, for women to diet.¹¹

Corsets also interfered with women's appetites for change. They kept women literally tied to their roles as mothers and homemakers. A new suffragist movement was brewing—Lillian Russell's mother, Cynthia Van Names Leonard, who ran a shelter for prostitutes left homeless after the great Chicago fire, was one of the leading feminists of the time—and the more freedom beckoned, the tighter the corsets were laced. Without corsets, women might become like one of those suffragists who, as one *Cosmopolitan* writer warned, were "Brawling, noisy, homeless shriekers . . . always holding 'congresses' and denouncing the tyrant man." Corseted women couldn't very well leave the home, as a few renegade women were beginning to do, to enter the professions or do charity work.

That left little for leisured women to do. Unable to work, a woman's job was to be, as Veblen put it, the "chief ornament" in the home, as delicate, immobile, and perfectly decorative as a piece of fine china. They were at once objects of conspicuous consumption and consumers of objects. Sewing, shopping, and beautifying themselves were the only activities that gave well-to-do women any outlet for personal expression. Soon, those activities became a Victorian woman's primary occupation: to be a consumer. How much a woman bought, like how much time and money she spent on her appearance, showed off how much wealth her husband had. In Edith Wharton's classic novel *House of Mirth* (1905), the wealthy Rosedale, who wants to marry Lily Bart, puts a woman's value as a status object and consumer more succinctly:

"You need money and the right woman to spend it . . . I want my wife to make all the other women feel small."

Being a consumer, and buying things to look fashionable, became an essential part of a woman's identity. Her sense of well-being and usefulness depended on how well she decorated her home and represented herself as the lovely wife her husband would be proud to show off. Women became very susceptible to advertisements aimed at changing fashions, and changing themselves. They were extremely receptive to the helpful hints offered by advice magazines, which were proliferating at the time. When magazines began to give them intimate advice about their own body size—whether to be plump or thin, for example—they would take that advice.

It wouldn't be long before the pleasingly plump ideal would pass out of fancy. Fashions in corsets would pull the small waist, originally intended to enhance the plump appearance of the breasts and buttocks, tighter and tighter. The hourglass effect became so pronounced that many women, aware that they could use padding and bustles to create a plump appearance, began to try to reduce their body size by dieting in order to have an ever slimmer waist.

By the late 1890s, magazine ads were peddling patent diet remedies and rubber reducing garments. In 1896, Lillian Russell began the first of her many efforts to lose weight. Russell spent most of the rest of her career on highly publicized diet regimes, just as Elizabeth Taylor would do several decades later. The once great "American Beauty" would have to fend off reviews that compared her with a white elephant and criticized her for not being able to fit into the narrower, slinkier dresses being worn onstage by younger actresses. "Pounds and pounds were accumulating on her already stuffed figure," wrote her biographer, Parker Morell. "But what of it? she deluded herself by asking. The hour-glass figure would never go out of style. Yet there were indications that its sands were running low, and that a closing century might decree a new aesthetic for the feminine form."¹²

The Gibson Girl

In the early 1890s, an ambitious young illustrator dropped off a whimsical drawing of a dog barking at the moon at the offices of *Life*

magazine. The art director liked the little sketch, agreed to publish it, and asked Charles Dana Gibson to try his hand at a few more. Gibson began to draw what he was interested in most: beautiful young women. The women in his illustrations were different, however, from the society beauties who had appeared in magazine pages before then. They were tall, slender, and had an air of freedom and vitality about them that was utterly fresh. The women, who were all variations on one type, had upswept hair, dainty facial features, rather broad shoulders, a tiny waist, and a vigorous build. They were the first women to appear in magazines who looked strong enough to swing a tennis racket. The Gibson Girl, as her type was called, was a wholesome, active, well-to-do young woman; she was as relaxed and lovely playing croquet or tennis as she was sitting in the parlors of society's best homes. She wasn't real, however; she was a pure fantasy, a perfect ideal that few women could hope to approach.¹³

From the 1890s until World War I, the Gibson Girl was a sensation. She was everywhere: in magazines, books, calendars, and on wallpaper. The Gibson Girl was more slender than the pleasingly plump ideal—though still quite large by today's standards—and full of a new physical vigor. She still had some of the characteristics of the late Victorian ideal, however; she had wide hips and a large, shelflike bust, and her cinched-in waist bore evidence of straitlacing (though illustrated women, of course, could achieve the effect without a painful corset). The Gibson Girl was a transitional figure between plump and slender beauty ideals. She was partly voluptuous and ornamental, but more slim, commanding, and independent-looking than the doll-like late Victorians. Her clothes were less fussy, confining, and elaborate than her predecessors', and so more of her natural body was revealed. In only a few years the Gibson Girl would bare her legs at the beach, making the lower half of a woman's body public for the first time. Before the Gibson Girl, a woman's lower body was merely a shapeless, massive pedestal on which the bust of a perfect, porcelain woman rested. The Gibson Girl's legs, exposed, were long and slim with dainty ankles. She would pave the way for a much more slender ideal: the flapper.

Charles Dana Gibson didn't create this new image of an ideal woman out of whole cloth. Rather, he was a young and fashionable man who was able to capture the spirit of the dawning era. The Gibson Girl was athletic because women in Gibson's social set, influenced by women abroad, had taken up croquet, tennis, and other genteel sports.

She wore simpler, less encumbering clothing to accommodate her active lifestyle. The Gibson Girl reflected the success of the early feminist movement's goals of freeing women from the strict confines of their clothing and their home. But she also represented how those feminist impulses had been safely harnessed in a new female ideal that was still corseted, demure, and hardly threatening. In illustrations, the Gibson Girl played sports and expanded her leisure activities, but she was never seen going to medical school, doing social work, organizing for the vote, or engaging in any other of the activities women's reformers were involved in at the time.

The Gibson Girl personified the new "natural woman" who came into vogue at the turn of the century. The first real woman of this type widely known in the United States was the British actress Lillie Langtry. This aristocratic woman—and one-time mistress of the Prince of Wales—had a body that was quite similar to the Gibson Girl. At five foot eight, she was tall, with a large bosom and hips, and a strong, broad-shouldered frame. She was known to exercise, as the upper classes in England had been doing for years. Americans, accustomed to plumper women who had delicate features, didn't like the looks of Langtry when she first toured the country in 1882. To them, she represented the worst of what could happen to a woman if she exercised: her arms and legs would become hard and stringy, with masculine-looking muscles showing through her formerly soft padded skin. The fear then, according to the historian Lois W. Banner, was that exercise burned an excessive amount of fat, and women would risk losing their bosom and hips, becoming appallingly thin.

Nevertheless, Langtry became more popular as elite Americans realized that exercise was the favorite pastime of the high-class British they tried to imitate. In 1896, *Cosmopolitan* society writer Ada Wentworth Sears, returning from a trip abroad, reported: "In England, especially, a stranger cannot help being forcibly impressed today, by the attention paid to women's athletics and to woman as an athlete." Sports (though no strenuous ones) were fast becoming necessary social graces. "If they wished to be numbered among the smart set of England or America," Sears decreed, women "must be adept at all kinds of outdoor sports." Sports were attractive to bored, leisure-class American women, who saw them as a welcome addition to the limited number of pursuits they could be involved in outside their homes.

By 1904, the Victorian ideal had become clearly outmoded. One writer for *Cosmopolitan*, Rafford Pyke, described the Gibson Girl look as the swing in the pendulum of fashion from the Victorian age, when the genteel young female had to be delicate in order to be admired. "And so she pinched her waist and shielded her complexion from the sun, and was ashamed of showing any appetite for food, and made herself interesting by having fainting-fits and hysterics whenever anything went wrong." In a few short years that look had entirely changed. "Nowadays that sort of young woman is extinct; and we have in her place the hail-fellow-well-met type, the cycling girl, the golfing girl, the yachting girl, the girl who eats like a coal-heaver, drinks 'highballs' and carries a cigarette-case in the pocket of her Norfolk jacket." Strength, not frailty, wrote Pyke, was the new watchword of contemporary femininity—though he feared that women would take things too far and begin to act like men.

Athletics really took hold because the aristocratic fancy for sports turned into a broader movement for physical fitness, whose advocates encouraged women's sports, particularly in colleges. Women's colleges were new, and critics still believed that intellectual work would sap away women's physical vigor. In response, a few of the more daring women's colleges organized physical education classes to prove to their antagonists that women had the capacity to develop strength in both areas. Calisthenics courses were offered, as well as rowing and tennis. At one college, a teacher hung wicker fruit baskets on the walls and devised a game whereby members of one team tried to keep the others from throwing the ball into the basket. (Eventually a few men tried playing "basketball" too, though it would be years before the slam-dunk was invented.) Women who participated in sports in college didn't relinquish them when they finished school; they joined gyms and country clubs, and, reform-minded, many of them lobbied for exercise classes for poor women in YWCAs and for immigrant women in settlement houses. Exercise was hailed as a health remedy for women who had been suffering from nervous disorders, hysteria, and a variety of other ailments.

It was also a remedy for a new health problem: corpulence. Beginning in 1901, insurance companies started to chart "ideal weights," and to show how being overweight was statistically linked with an early death. None of the early insurance charts was based on data about women; instead, the conclusions about women were made up

from data about a rather narrow population group, men who were old and wealthy enough to get life insurance. But for the first time it seemed possible to measure the body like a machine to test its longevity. Scales became widespread, and people began to think of their bodies in terms of acceptable numbers. A pseudoscience developed which made it seem that all human beings, no matter what their build, shape, or genetic background, could be put on a single scale that could predict how long they would live and how healthy they might be. Manufacturers and entrepreneurs devised "scientific" systems for exercise, including baths, calisthenics, rolling around, and massage, to help people measure up to the ideal.

People began to believe that there was one perfect physical form that men and women could achieve if they worked hard enough at it. For women, that ideal was still rather fleshy. In the 1905 "Most Perfect Formed" contest, held in Madison Square Garden and produced by *Physical Culture* magazine, the woman who won first place had large hips and thighs, and though she appeared sturdy and strong—particularly compared with Victorian ladies—she was much, much softer than today's aerobized ideal.

Of all the exercise regimes advocated by the new physical fitness buffs, the bicycle had the most lasting impact on women's health, clothing, and freedom. "To women, [the bicycle] is deliverance, revolution, and salvation," wrote Mrs. Reginald deKoven for *Cosmopolitan* in 1895. "It is well nigh impossible to overestimate the potentialities of this exercise in the curing of the common and characteristic ills of womankind, both physical and mental, or to calculate the far-reaching effects of its influence in the matters of dress and social reform."

For Lillian Russell, the bicycle would be the salvation of her career—or at least, her figure. Diamond Jim Brady ordered her a gold-plated bicycle, with her monogram set in diamonds and emeralds on the handlebars. The two of them wheeled around Central Park Reservoir every day. When guests visited their country house, they had to abide by the rules: Everyone had to be on time for meals and exercise at least an hour of each day of the visit. Russell lost a little weight; enough, at least, that newspapers printed some of the first "before" and "after" photos, one of which bore a caption speculating that Russell had had her fat surgically removed. (By 1912, like many fading celebrities today who make exercise videos to salvage their careers, Russell posed in a series of colored motion pictures that

showed her engaged in calisthenics and other exercise routines. She ended up writing a syndicated beauty column for the *Chicago Tribune*.)

The bicycle changed women's fashions in body size, and led to some reform in women's dress. Some corsets eased up; the Good Sense Corset Waist advertised in 1897 that it was "yielding to every motion of the body, permitting full expansion of the lungs." Women couldn't very well ride a "scorcher," as the bicycle was called (because of its blinding speed), in tight corsets and voluminous skirts, either. Fashionable women began to wear "knickerbockers," a kind of split skirt that recalled the bloomer, though most wore a shirtwaist blouse and shortened skirts that, shockingly, displayed their ankles to the public.

The bicycle and the new dress it inspired gave women more freedom to move in public. But while the new physically fit ideal was liberating to women, it would lead to more self-consciousness about their bodies. A woman's body could be more easily discerned under a bicycling outfit than previous costumes. Soon, enough of the body would be revealed to make it subject to criticism. A consciousness of legs meant that legs, for the first time, had to adapt to beauty standards. And the standard was clear: the Gibson Girl.

The Gibson Girl's popularity cut across class lines, creating a single national ideal of womanhood. By 1900, the Gibson Girl's sporting outfit, a shirtwaist blouse and a simple skirt, had become fashionable everyday attire for women. The Gibson Girl was more than an admired type, as Lillian Russell was; her appearance coincided with the development of mass-circulation magazines and advertisements, and she was the first mass-marketed ideal image to appear in newspapers and advertisements everywhere. She was both an ideal look and an ideal attitude of womanhood—wholesome, demure, active, and carefree—"A Big American Girl," as Gibson put it, in dedicating his 1896 collection of drawings. Women were no longer content to be admired for their particular traits, whether thick dark hair, an inconspicuous nose, or lovely green eyes. Now they wanted to look just like the Gibson Girl, or despair of being beautiful or fashionable.

That goal, however, was nearly impossible to reach. Above all, the Gibson Girl was a fantasy: she was never a flesh-and-blood woman, but an artist's creation. "The Gibson Girl in America represents the American girl not as she really is but as she tries to be according to

Mr. Gibson's lesson to her," one writer of the day reflected. Like a Barbie Doll, the Gibson Girl wasn't real, and had impossible proportions. Ironically, though the Gibson Girl image was equated with freedom, her body type was extremely difficult to achieve in real life. Corsets that created a Gibson-like S-curved posture, with a thrust-forward bust and arched back, were particularly uncomfortable.¹⁴

It didn't take long for advertisers to capitalize on the Gibson Girl—and on the sense of inadequacy women felt before her. Advertisers who were now selling women's clothing, soaps, and other feminine products on a mass scale realized the rich possibilities of selling items by linking them to an ideal image. "The type Gibson created," wrote the advertising historian Frank Presbrey, "became a popular means of attracting attention to an advertisement."¹⁵ Advertisers used Gibson-like illustrations to sell everything from women's clothing to trips to the seashore. Manufacturers advertised that their products created the "Gibson effect."

Women would buy products advertised by a Gibson Girl in the hope that some of her beauty, social position, and vitality would rub off on them. The Gibson Girl was so popular that any woman who could afford to was practically dutybound to buy a product that would make her look like her. No one could ever look quite as good as the fantasy Gibson Girl, yet magazines and advertisers would keep reminding women how important it was to go on trying. Eventually, the Gibson Girl would give way to an even more elusive ideal: extreme slenderness.

The Flapper

Just before World War I, there were hints that the tight-laced image of Victorian womanhood was beginning to unravel. The Gibson Girl, in her bicycling outfit, had loosened up that image a bit, but she was still a primly buttoned-up Victorian lady. The first sign that young women were ready for something much more daring may have come a few rainy spring days in the early teens, when groups of smartly styled working girls and co-eds began to wear their galoshes deliberately unbuckled. This silly fad went against every rule about how proper young ladies were supposed to wear their rain boots, which was

what made it so much fun. Their loose galoshes flap-flap-flapped on the pavement as the young women—"flappers"—defiantly strode by.

There were other signs that women were changing, particularly in the world of fashion, and that the new image of womanhood would be much more liberated, sophisticated—and slender—than ever before. In 1908, a French designer named Paul Poiret completely changed the hourglass silhouette by creating a straight, slim, Empire-waisted dress that erased any signs of a woman's hips and breasts. Soon, society women were wearing slinky dresses that favored a more small-breasted, slender figure. For the first time, extremely fashionable women, like the vain Undine Spragg in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* (1913), despaired of being too curvaceous: "Only one fact disturbed her: there was a hint of too much fullness in the curves of her neck and in the spring of her hips. . . . Excessive slimmness was the fashion, and she shuddered at the thought that she might some day deviate from the perpendicular."

By April 1914, when *Delineator* magazine asked its sophisticated readers, "Don't you want to be thin?" the answer was obvious. "This is the age of the figure," the magazine advised. "The face alone, no matter how pretty, counts for nothing unless the body is straight and yielding as every young girl's."¹⁶ In the early 1920s, Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel, an athletic young French fashion designer, emphasized the youthful dress silhouette by dropping the waistline to the hips, raising the hemlines to mid-calf, and creating the uniform of the new young woman: the flapper.¹⁷

A flapper was an impulsive, flirtatious, jazz-dancing young woman who had utter disdain for anything old-fashioned. She was, as F. Scott Fitzgerald described her in 1920 in *This Side of Paradise* (the novel was a primer for flapperhood in its day), the "Popular Daughter" of a Victorian mother, who rebelled against primness and propriety at every turn. The Victorian mother was all gentility and manners; the daughter laughed at her morality, smoked cigarettes, and kissed on her first date. Where her mother treasured her long tresses, the flapper bobbed her hair in a saucy, carefree style. The mother, in her perfectly arranged house and clothing, barely moved; her daughter was lively, athletic, and constantly on the go. The Victorian mother was a still photograph and her daughter a motion picture.

The flapper rebelled not only against Victorian manners and morality but against the body that went with it. Instead of having an

hourglass figure, whose curves suggested motherhood and domesticity, she was boyishly slim. Rather than wearing a confining corset that emphasized her breasts, hips, and waist, the flapper bound her breasts and dieted to appear even younger and thinner. She bared more of her body, in a sleeveless sheath that hit just below the knees. The flapper did everything she could to liberate herself from the delicate, claustrophobic life her mother led. She was modern, sharp, sexy, and energetic. Ultimately, however, she wanted to marry a rich man and settle down to a lifestyle that was, in some ways, as decorative and confining as her mother's. In a society where looks were becoming more and more important, she'd have to work even harder than her mother did, starving herself to keep up her "liberated" appearance. When the dancing stopped and the dust had cleared, the flapper would find she had traded the old Victorian corset for a new one: an inner corset.

Like the Gibson Girl, the flapper wasn't entirely real. She was a creation of the movies and literature, but she epitomized the spirit of the modern age. F. Scott Fitzgerald is credited with creating the flapper image based on his own wife, Zelda, who was slim and petite, with short, slicked-back hair. Fitzgerald's female characters were shocking for the age, but rather harmless. They smoked and drank and kissed with abandon; they wore rouge and eye pencil, ran with a fast crowd, and spoke knowingly about Freud. They were invariably beautiful, and beautiful, as in the case of Rosalind in *This Side of Paradise*, meant being slim, young, and springy: "She was slender and athletic, without underdevelopment, and it was a delight to watch her move about a room, walk along a street, swing a golf club, or turn a 'cartwheel.'"

Fitzgerald's women had traded Victorian tradition and morality for a new kind of narcissism. The flapper's self-absorption had a materialistic side to it, too; money bought fun, new clothes, and allowed her to stay out late at clubs with the smart set. "I like sunshine and pretty things and cheerfulness—and I dread responsibility," says Rosalind, explaining why she can't marry a man she loves because he isn't rich. "I don't want to think about pots and kitchens and brooms. I want to worry whether my legs will get slick and brown when I swim in the summer." Ultimately, though, the heady, self-centered lifestyle was an empty one for a smart young girl, who, once her youth and beauty wore off, would be left with as few options as her mother had. "Here

am I with the brains to do everything, yet tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony," says Fitzgerald's sophisticated, bob-haired Eleanor. "If I were born a hundred years from now, well and good, but now what's in store for me—I have to marry, that goes without saying."

But for the moment, the flapper celebrated her new freedoms—smoking, drinking, dancing—with abandon. In the years just after World War I, the emphasis was on living in the present, with the knowledge that the future was fast upon them. The genteel Victorian culture had been shattered by the horrors of the first modern war, and a sense of hedonism and cynicism prevailed. "The girls I wrote about were not a type—they were a generation," Fitzgerald reflected in an interview several years later. "Free spirits—evolved through the war chaos and a final inevitable escape from restraint and inhibitions."¹⁸

Several other social forces contributed to the free-spiritedness of the flappers, and to the physical symbol of their freedom, slenderness. Women had won the right to vote, and demonstrated their new sense of equality with men by cutting off their hair and doing away with other obvious symbols of sexual difference, such as the corset and the maternal body. But flappers didn't really care much about voting. They preferred the other masculine freedoms that went along with the new equality, such as staying out late and drinking gin fizzes. Unlike their feminist foremothers, social housekeepers who wanted to clean up vice and squalor and mother the whole world, flappers weren't very interested in "feminine" social reform. The turn-of-the-century feminists who won the vote had done so by claiming that women would have a purifying influence at the voting booth because as mothers, they were morally superior to men. By the 1920s—not unlike the 1990s—the term "feminism" had begun to smack of Victorian morality among young women. The flappers weren't interested in that kind of morality. They were much more interested in their freedom to be as immoral as men.¹⁹

Even more than the right to vote, birth control gave women a new sense of freedom. Contraceptives had made it possible, for the first time, for women to choose whether or not they wanted to be mothers, and to limit the size of their families, which decreased sharply in the United States between 1890 and 1910.²⁰ Many women were able to delay marriage and instead go to college, secretarial jobs, and even professions. More than anything, though, the availability of contraceptives meant a change in attitude. No longer like the pure, chaste Victo-

rians who couldn't have sex without having children, women in the twenties had a new freedom to explore sexuality for its own sake. Though most women clearly drew the line at sex before marriage, kissing and petting no longer meant ruin. Women began to have power over their own sexuality; a flapper could flirt and tease and begin to demand something for herself.

The flapper's sexuality was still young and innocent, and expressed itself in a young and innocent body. A flapper had the body of an adolescent boy, not a grown-up woman. Her androgynous look made her appear less overtly sexual than a full-bodied, hourglass-figured woman would have looked in the same slinky clothing. Roberta Seid, in her book *Never Too Thin*, suggests that the Victorian woman was able to show off her sexual characteristics—her large breasts and hips—because there was no danger she would act on her sexuality: "The suggestiveness of her clothing and shape were simultaneously denied by her demureness and presumably unsexual nature." But in the 1920s, when women actually began to exercise some freedom, sexual and otherwise, their overtly sexual characteristics had to be repressed. "When women became more overtly sexual and exposed more of their bodies, this kind of amplitude might seem, in a sense, too blatant," Seid says.²¹ In the same way, a fashion advertisement of a nude boyish model doesn't seem pornographic to us today; but put a fleshier model in an underwear ad, and it might not look quite so much like art. Without obvious curves and sexual characteristics, women's sexuality still appears to be under control. Beneath the twenties' message of sexual freedom was the symbol of female restraint: the slender female body.

The flapper's body, to put things in perspective, was slender only in relation to the plumper figures that went before. It is some measure of how extremely slim the ideal has become today that Clara Bow or Louise Brooks, both actresses who were considered quite slim for their time, would look very meaty next to most contemporary ingenues. Mary Campbell, who was crowned Miss America in 1922 and again in 1923, and had a typical flapper's body, was five foot seven and weighed 140 pounds.²² Annette Kellerman, a champion swimmer and actress who advertised her 1926 book, *The Body Beautiful*, in the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, was just shy of five foot four and weighed 137 pounds.²³ But the flapper defined a new silhouette that was straight and modern, and would only get thinner.

The slender body befitted the new aesthetic of the modern con-

sumer age, also light and streamlined. This aesthetic was reflected in the speed of automobiles, the angles of abstract art, the design of new products, and the images of mass media. Everything was straight, quick, and lean. Movie actresses had to be thinner than those on stage or in still photographs, because a body in motion appears to be larger than one standing still.²⁴ Fashion drawings, following the lead of modern art, became elongated stick figures that only suggested a body. The long, elegant figures focused attention on the neat lines of the clothing, rather than on the curves of the human body. At first, fashion drawings and models, viewed together in the pages of women's magazines, were oddly different; the real-life models looked plump and squat compared with the illustrations. But models became thinner and thinner to compete with the stick-figure illustrations, and women reading the magazines became thinner and thinner to compete with the models.

A woman's appearance became much more important to her than it had been to her mother. In this new, fast-paced culture, all the things that used to make up a person's identity—family, church, and community—became less important than her looks. "In mass culture, the old roadblocks to social mobility came down," writes Robert Sklar about the twenties. "You could change your name, ignore your religion, leave your background a thousand miles behind. But you could never afford to neglect your appearance."²⁵

A woman's appearance was much more than skin deep: it was a measure of who she was. The flapper's role as an object was even more important than it was for her Victorian mother. The flapper had to be a good consumer, keeping up with fashion and buying the latest in beauty products. With the speed of invention and fads, she had a more difficult time keeping up-to-date than did her mother, but she loved the challenge. The ultimate freedom to the self-absorbed flapper was not political equality, as her feminist forebears might have hoped, but the freedom to buy whatever she pleased.

Advertisers were quick to tap into this new sense of "freedom." Piggly Wiggly grocery stores ran an ad campaign in the twenties featuring a woman in a shopping market in a stylish cloche hat: "Here she is free—to reach her own decisions." Advertisers offered women the power and freedom to choose between products. "They promised fake liberation through consumption," writes the social historian T. J. Jackson Lears.²⁶ The most blatant example of advertisers subverting the

real impulse toward women's political freedom into the false freedom to buy products came with smoking campaigns. In 1929, Edward Bernays, advertising man for a tobacco company, organized a march of cigarette-puffing women down Fifth Avenue, led by the feminist Ruth Hale, to demonstrate women's newfound freedom to smoke.²⁷ They'd already come a long way, baby.

This new "freedom" to buy was hardly liberating. Women became bound to buying products that would make them more attractive, and better sexual objects. They couldn't easily resist the onslaught of advertisements that the new consumer culture had to offer, because many of the ads deliberately spoke to their deep-seated fears and desires. For women whose grandmothers had been trained that their role in life, as the turn-of-the-century feminist economist Charlotte Perkins Gilman put it, was to "consume, consume, consume," it was difficult to turn their back on ads that told them essentially that their human worth depended on how well they kept up with fashion and popular standards of attractiveness—including slenderness.

The narcissism of the flapper turned into a kind of masochism as advertisers pointed out, over and over again, all the things that needed to be corrected with new products. Women in the twenties had problems their mothers never dreamed of, or at least would never mention in polite company. The makers of Lysol disinfectant, for instance, marketed their product as a feminine hygiene deodorant with the assurance that women who used it would achieve "immaculate cleanliness," and the satisfaction that comes "When you know you are meticulously groomed." Pond's Cream warned of "The little flaws that make one homely." Odorono deodorant featured a woman relating "the most humiliating moment in my life: When I overheard the cause of my unpopularity among men." Listerine depicted the bad-breathed woman who was "Often a Bridesmaid but never a Bride." The message was clear: Women could never reach emotional fulfillment or be attractive to men unless they bought products that would improve themselves.

It was during the 1920s that advertisers hit on a problem that was visible enough for women to be embarrassed about, difficult enough to require buying lots of products, and best of all, would never go away: fat. Advertisers made women feel humiliated that they weren't as slim as the beautiful women in their illustrations. They sold bath salts, laxatives, reducing brushes, stimulating belts, scales, mail-away diets, and scores of other obesity cures. Every advertisement chided women

for being overweight. "Overweight these days is a woman's own fault," proclaimed one ad for a musical reducing record. And every advertisement promised that a woman would not only lose weight with the product, but her life would be better afterward.

With all these pressures from advertisements, fashion, movies, stylish friends, and even doctors who were starting to warn of the dangers of being overweight, women began to do anything to be slim. They starved themselves and chewed gum laced with laxatives to lose weight. Told to "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet," they took up smoking to lose weight; it was, as the ad said, "the modern way to diet." They followed a number of wild fad diets recommended by physicians and pseudophysicians, many of which involved fasting, purgatives, and odd combinations of foods.

Carl Malmberg, author of *Diet and Die*, wrote in 1935 that the craze for slimmness that swept the United States after World War I led many physicians to try to rationalize the fad—"Scientists and health authorities have set out to prove that it is healthy as well as fashionable to be thin." Some of those diets were the result of a mutually beneficial alliance between physicians and food producers. The United Fruit Company, for instance, was happy to advertise Johns Hopkins University physician George Harrop's banana and skimmed milk diet with the AMA seal of approval. The Hollywood Eighteen-Day Diet (585 calories a day) was promoted by citrus growers—grapefruit was a centerpiece of the regime—as being the product of careful research on the part of French and American physicians.

Despite being medically approved, the results of these diets were sometimes disastrous. "There are many people who were never intended by nature to have the appearance of slimmness," Malmberg observed. "Many of these people nevertheless set out to achieve this ideal, and in doing so too often ruin their health in what is, for them, an impossible task." Crash dieting, he reported, was responsible for the deaths of several Hollywood celebrities in the thirties. Louis Wolheim, who lost 25 pounds in less than a month for a role in the movie *The Front Page*, was so weakened by dieting that he failed to recover from an attack of appendicitis. Renée Adoree, a boyish-figured movie star renowned for her strenuous dieting efforts, collapsed and died in Hollywood in 1930, weighing only 85 pounds.²⁸

The cultural pressures to be thin in the 1920s were already so extreme that some women resorted to vomiting, as they would again in

a later era that made slenderness the price of women's freedom. In 1926, when a group of physicians gathered for an Adult Weight Conference, one prominent physician had a disturbing report about his patients' very modern form of dieting. "I discovered," he said, "that many of our flappers have mastered the art of eating their cake and yet not having it, inducing regurgitation, after a plentiful meal, either by drugs or mechanical means."²⁹

Barbie and Beyond

By the 1920s, the inner corset was squeezing women, and for the most part, it would not let up for the rest of the century. From then on, women would be under pressure to be thinner and thinner, even though the average woman in the United States grew taller, with bigger bones and a larger frame. Film stars and fashion models became more slender because their angles photographed better on screen and in magazines. Louis B. Mayer, upon signing Greta Garbo to MGM, grumbled, "In America, men don't like fat women."³⁰

In the movies, being thin was a sign of an aristocratic background and swanky style, in imitation of Europeans. Immigrants who made money often tried to slim down to appear to be longtime members of the aristocracy. In his book *The Kennedy Women*, Laurence Leamer describes how the four-generation-old obsession with food and diet that haunts the Kennedy women—who were always chided as children not to gain weight—began as a way to distinguish early members of the family from lesser immigrants. "The obsession with fat came originally from Joe (their father), whose parents in their later years had grown as portly as prosperous peasants, their Irish roots painfully evident," writes Leamer. "Joe wanted his wife and children sleek and lean."³¹ Losing weight in the first few decades of the century was mainly an upper-crust concern. During the Depression, when some people had so little to eat that advertisers were even beginning to sell cures to put on weight, only the well-off, perversely, starved themselves on diets of grapefruit or caviar.

During World War II, many women were too busy worrying about their new jobs and the fate of their families to be concerned about their body size. Ideal body sizes stayed almost the same as they were in the flapper period, though they became somewhat more sturdy and

curvaceous. In the 1920s, the bust-waist-hip measurements of Miss America winners averaged 32-25-35 (with bound breasts). In the 1930s, the contestants' measurements grew to 34-25-35; in the 1940s, they were 35-25-35.

But after the war, with women back at home, there was renewed emphasis on fitting an ideal shape. Two competing ideal female body types developed: the buxom blonde and the elegant brunette. The blonde was the direct descendant of light-haired Lillian Russell; she had large breasts, erotic appeal, and working-class sensibilities. The ideal buxom blonde—Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, or any *Playboy* bunny—was curvy, with an emphasis on torpedo breasts; in the 1950s, the average Miss America now measured 36-23-36.³²

The voluptuous body became more popular in the fifties because America had a new romance with peaceful suburban domesticity after World War II. The ideal fifties woman had the maternal, turn-of-the-century hourglass figure of her Victorian great-grandmother, though she wasn't quite so plump. Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot* (1959) seems absolutely fat by today's standards. The camera feasted on Monroe's backside when she bent over, showing off the full expanse of her derriere; nowadays, that shot could only be a visual joke. When she turned around in her tight dress, she revealed a rounded tummy.

This chubby woman was the unabashed object of sexual attraction in a movie. But she wasn't exactly the center of intellectual interest, whipping off the kind of sharp comebacks that Bette Davis and Myrna Loy always had ready. "Guess I'm not too bright," Monroe tells the saxophone player she falls in love with, and that's the deepest line she gets. Marilyn Monroe, and blondes like her, were unthreatening because though they were maternal-bodied and oozed sexuality, they were also childlike, innocent, and a little dim. Monroe herself, of course, was a smart cookie, but she knew enough to play dumb. The annoying association between blondes, breasts, body fat, and brainlessness continues even today.

The elegant brunette was thinner, longer, and more sophisticated. She had a lot more brains and class than the buxom blondes, and was the strong, smart, independent heroine in movies. Katharine Hepburn, Audrey Hepburn, and others of their type came to dominate women's magazines. Thin women—designers would argue—were the perfect clothes hangers. After reading a copy of *Vogue* magazine in 1946, the British writer George Orwell commented rather disparag-

ingly on the increasingly slender body type found in its pages. "Nearly all these women are immensely elongated," he said. "A thin-boned, ancient Egypt type of face seems to predominate: the narrow hips are general, and slender, non-prehensile hands like those of a lizard are quite universal."³³

In 1947, when the French designer Christian Dior unveiled his New Look designs, dresses with full skirts nipped narrowly at the waist, fashionable women everywhere had to become thinner to squeeze into them. Muriel Maxwell, who was a cover girl in the late forties, later recalled how the new fashion shook the modeling world. "We wondered where in the world we were going to get models who could get into them," she said. "Then out of the woods came these nymphs with no lungs and very little of the flesh that keeps you alive. These new kids really don't eat."³⁴ By the end of the fifties, when dieting was becoming more and more prominent in women's magazines, the slender Suzy Parker was the typical model, not Marilyn Monroe.

In 1959, a body type was born that was a combination of the buxom blonde and the elegant brunette. She had large, erotic breasts, a tiny waist, relatively narrow hips, and long legs. Like the Gibson Girl, she wasn't real, and her proportions were impossible for ordinary women to attain. Her name was Barbie. At eleven and a half inches tall, Barbie became the ideal that little girls everywhere could measure themselves against. Blown up to life-size, Barbie's measurements would be 38-18-34, and she wouldn't have enough body fat to menstruate.³⁵ This impossible but ubiquitous ideal—90 percent of American girls ages three to eleven own one or more Barbies—would keep women dissatisfied with their own proportions.³⁶ In their attempts to become like the plastic Barbie, many grown-up women would resort to starving themselves to skinniness, and then get plastic implants to replace the fat they lost in their breasts. (In 1997 Mattel released a new Barbie, less busty with smaller hips—in other words, more like a supermodel.)

From the time of Barbie on, both the buxom *Playboy* types and the brunette model types got thinner and thinner. When one group of researchers compared the height, weight, and body measurements of *Playboy* centerfolds from 1959 to 1978, they found that while the height increased by 20 percent, the body size decreased significantly. In 1959, the playmates weighed 91 percent as much as the average

women; but by 1978, the figure was only 85 percent of the average weight (other studies have shown that playmates have become thinner and thinner every year since). When the researchers looked at Miss America Pageant contestants during that same period, they found that their average weight declined even more than the playmates'. Before 1970, the contestants weighed 87 percent of what an average woman weighed, and after, 84.5 percent of average. The winners, it turned out, weighed even less than the rest of the contestants. The researchers noted that only 5 percent of women aged twenty to twenty-nine were as thin as the Miss America winners.³⁷ The same trend toward thinness was happening in Europe; in 1951, Miss Sweden was five foot seven and 151 pounds; in 1983, she was five foot nine and 109 pounds. Beauty queens were now not only the fairest but the thinnest of them all.

In the sixties, the fascination with youth culture and freedom gave way to flapperlike images that were even more boyish and slender than their predecessors. In 1966, the ultimate clothes hanger appeared: Twiggy. Lesley Hornby (now Lawson), known as "Twiggy," the seventeen-year-old model from England, weighed between 92 and 97 pounds and measured 31-22-32. A few models and hip sophisticates, such as Edie Sedgwick, imitated her style, but Twiggy's extreme slenderness only made a major splash in fashion spreads. Today, supermodels have celebrity status, and are more influential style-setters than are actresses, but Twiggy didn't have that kind of clout. Young women didn't seriously expect they could look like Twiggy the way they believe they can—and should—look like Kate Moss, who is about the same size. Twiggy did contribute to a more general slender trend, though, as the bikini-clad actresses and models who were the seventies ideals—Cheryl Tiegs and Farrah Fawcett—became thinner and thinner.

In the seventies, the thin ideal coincided with another wave of feminism; the androgynous, dress-for-success look became popular, along with a physique that didn't look too overtly female in the workplace. The main mission for many women was to gain power in a male-dominated world, and they found that they could fit in to that world more easily if they were thin. Like the flappers, they wanted to cast off the traditional maternal and domestic female role—and the body that went with it. Many feminists of that era, therefore, have ignored the backlash social forces that work extra hard to control women's bodies

precisely at the times when they're seeking to have more control over their own lives.

During the eighties and early nineties, women's bodies became leaner and stronger. There were varying ideals—super-thin waif models, more curvaceous Cindy Crawford types—yet not one of them had a suspicion of fat on their bodies. Jane Fonda kicked off the fit look in 1981 with her *Workout Book*, initially shaping the fitness revolution as a feminist response to a damaging ideal. "In pursuit of the 'feminine ideal'—exemplified by voluptuous film stars and skinny fashion models—women, it seemed, were even prepared to do violence to themselves," wrote Fonda. She described her own history of addiction to diet pills and diuretics, and her bout with bulimia, as evidence of how debilitating these ideals can be. Fonda found that exercise was the answer, allowing her to cope with both the social demands to be attractive and to be a strong and effective working woman. "I could create for myself a new approach to health and beauty which would not only make me look better, but would enable me to handle the intense, multifaceted life I live with more clarity and balance, to say nothing of more energy and endurance."³⁸

As it was for the Gibson Girl, exercise became both a vehicle for liberation and further oppression when it was tied to an ideal body. Despite her good intentions, Fonda succeeded in creating a new feminine ideal that has proven, in its way, just as damaging as the old one. The super-fit body has become another image to which most women can't measure up. The goal of exercise, for many women, isn't to achieve good health, but a perfectly disciplined, slender body. Exercise companies use this new ideal to sell products the way diet companies always have, promising a fantasy body. Soloflex weight machines, for instance, have an ad featuring a lean, buffed-out, headless woman's torso in a bikini. "You don't have to be a model to have a body like this," the ad reads. "All you need is just \$39 a month."

Most people can't attain that kind of sculpted physique without devoting huge chunks of their lives to the goal. Madonna is a good example of someone who started out with a subversive, rebellious, sexy body and tamed it through exercise into a disciplined and—disappointingly—more socially acceptable ideal. She reportedly works out four hours a day, six days a week. At five foot four and 100 pounds, she is 12 percent body fat; for a time, every morsel of food she ate was entered into a computer.³⁹ Oprah Winfrey is another woman who once

presented an alternative image to the world; she was a role model for those who didn't believe that a large African American woman could be a serious success. But she, too, felt compelled to whip herself into the dominant feminine ideal.

Winfrey's dieting tribulations, first losing weight on Optifast, and then, after regaining her 67 pounds plus more, going on exercise and a low-fat diet, have been public events. Dropping from 222 pounds in 1993 to 135 pounds in 1994 consumed a great deal of her time. Every day, Winfrey reportedly undergoes at least two bouts of exercise; she runs up to eight miles, works out on the StairMaster for 45 minutes, and does 350 sit-ups. She also has a personal chef who monitors her 20 grams of fat a day. Winfrey didn't stop losing weight when she became healthy; she stuck with it until she became a model of obsession which few real-life women have the time or resources to follow.⁴⁰

In her book *Moving Beyond Words* (1994), Gloria Steinem describes how working out and building muscles may be "revolutionary" for women, since it is a way out of society's "thin vs. fat dichotomy." She uses bodybuilder Bev Francis as a positive example of someone who is pushing the cultural ideals of femininity in a radical way. But bodybuilding, the extreme of the aerobically ideal, creates another ideal that abhors fat, and practically banishes femininity completely in its imitation of a male physique as a source of "female power."

In 1995, at the world women's bodybuilding championship, the Ms. Olympia contest held in Atlanta, I saw what this ideal looks like. When I first walked into a party before the event, packed with fans and contestants showing off their stuff, I was startled. There were thick bulbous calf muscles teetering on stiletto heels. There were meaty, veined forearms, and knuckly fingers that ended in long, painted nails. Thigh muscles bulged through black Lycra skirts. The hair was big, but the biceps were bigger. One competitor told me she got involved in bodybuilding in college because she disliked her "too-soft" body. Her efforts to control it at all costs reminded me of someone with an eating disorder—as did the way she eats, consuming only skinless chicken breasts and oatmeal for weeks before competition. Another, five foot nine and 161 pounds, with an upper body like armor, said she wanted to redefine the feminine ideal. "I could never achieve a petite, dainty look, and muscularity is a look that women should be able to choose," she said.

It's refreshing to meet a woman who likes being big, but in this culture you can only be big if you're also hard; you can't be strong *and* soft. Many of the women, I found out later that weekend, take steroids containing testosterone to build their muscles, with obvious masculinizing side effects—husky voices, male pattern baldness, chin stubble. The women who are trying to achieve the ultimate in feminine physical perfection, ironically, look surprisingly like men.

Not all women in our culture, of course, strive for this hard-body ideal. Exercise, for them, is just one way to control fat. The fear of fat, after one hundred years, has become extreme. We believe—and in this culture it is true to a great extent—that we must be slender to be successful. We can't get away from that message, particularly if we read magazines: Nine West shoe ads feature near-anorexic models in miniskirts telling us, "We all need diversions, we all need clever friends, we all need to lose 5 pounds (OK, maybe 10)." *Redbook* describes how we—like Oprah, Demi, and Cher—can lose weight easily, even if we don't have our own personal trainers and chefs. A *Mirabella* cover proclaims "Waif Goodbye: Return of the Real Woman," with a photo of a new voluptuary who weighs about five pounds more than the gaunt starvelings of the year before. In *Vogue*, supermodel Christy Turlington, whose ribs are visible in Calvin Klein underwear ads, complains to a magazine writer that she has a beer belly. In my local newspaper, fashion designer Bill Blass gives advice on how to be well dressed, saying, "Forget it, unless you are skinny! Don't even attempt it unless you are. It doesn't work otherwise."⁴¹ It only makes sense that two-thirds of all American women, including many who are average-sized or thin, believe they're overweight.

In this culture, even women who are only slightly over the ideal weight—who can't squeeze into those size 8 jeans—are scrutinized and penalized for their size. Women who are only 10 or 20 pounds over the ideal are often passed over for jobs or promotions. "There's a glass ceiling for overweight people," says University of Vermont Professor of Psychology Esther Rothblum, "and it's a lot lower for women than men." Consider that flight attendants at United Airlines are suspended from duty and subject to dismissal if they're only 11 pounds over the ideal weight chart, even though at that size, their weight doesn't hamper their performance. That kind of bias is hardly unusual in image-conscious jobs. An editor I know at a fashion magazine who was looking for a new assistant recently told me, "If the most perfect

person in the world for the job walked in today, and she was overweight, there's no way we'd hire her." A corporate headhunter put it even more plainly: "All things being equal, the thinnest person always wins."

That's true: one recent study of more than 10,000 young people aged sixteen to twenty-four found that overweight women are 20 percent less likely to get married than slimmer women. The study pointed to a second dismal consequence of being fat in this culture, which is economic: the heavy women had household incomes averaging \$6,710 a year less, and were 10 percent more likely to be poor.⁴² In another study, when one group of college students was asked what type of person they'd be least inclined to wed, they said they'd sooner tie the knot with an embezzler, cocaine user, ex-mental patient, shoplifter, nymphomaniac, communist, blind person, atheist, or marijuana user than a fat person.⁴³ Some people think it would be better if fat people were never born: one survey of parents found that 11 percent of them would abort a child they knew had a genetic tendency to be fat.⁴⁴

Even kids know how bad it is for them to be heavier than other kids. A hearty four-year-old I know is worried about whether she has a "fat butt" and already believes she should only eat fat-free cookies. Surveys have shown that by fourth grade, 60 percent of all girls want to be thinner. From kindergarten on, if you show kids drawings of children with different body types and ask them what kind of people they are, they'll say that the thin children are cuter, more popular, nicer, neater, and smarter than those with an average or chubby body. When reporters on one television magazine show recently asked kids what would be the worst thing that could ever happen to them, most had a quick reply: "Getting fat."⁴⁵

It's no wonder that when *Esquire* magazine polled 1,000 women in 1994, more than half of them said they'd rather get run over by a truck than gain 150 pounds. Most women can't make it through a day without getting disgusted with themselves for not having a better—meaning thinner—body. We expect the impossible from ourselves. Women who are naturally large-boned and robust damn themselves for not being delicate and slim. Women whose bodies have just undergone the astonishing job of childbirth burst into tears when they can't fit into their jeans, or get mad at themselves when they realize they're in no shape to pose on the cover of *Vanity Fair* wearing only body paint, as actress Demi Moore did two months after she had a baby. We

are cruel to ourselves and cripple ourselves by constantly obsessing about our weight. As one psychologist and body image expert, Marcia Hutchinson, says, "If you talked to your friends the way you talk to your body, you'd have no friends left at all."

Given the obvious debilitating effects of weight obsession on women, it's surprising that many feminists continue to ignore this obsession as a political issue, and personally buckle under to the expectation that we should all try to become thin. There are exceptions, of course. Among lesbian feminists, where the issue of living up to a male-defined sexual ideal rarely registers on the radar screen, there is more tolerance for fat. There's also a group of feminist writers and therapists who have devoted themselves to women's problems with weight and eating, including Susie Orbach, Kim Chernin, Susan Bordo, Geneen Roth, Susan Kano, Carol Munter, Jane Hirschmann, and many others. These women have recognized that their personal battles with weight are rooted in a culture that tries to control women's size as a way of controlling their power. Although their work has influenced many intellectuals and therapists, their concerns haven't made it very far into popular culture. Naomi Wolf, who wrote *The Beauty Myth* (1991), is one of the few highly visible feminists who has drawn attention to weight obsession as a serious women's issue; she, too, knows from firsthand experience with anorexia how debilitating the problem can be. It's telling that Wolf's book was most strongly attacked by "new feminists" for putting too much emphasis on the gravity of eating disorders as a social problem.

A few feminists are achingly aware of both their personal desires to be thin and the social cost of those desires. In her book *Femininity*, (1984), Susan Brownmiller describes how she can hardly pass a group of construction workers in New York City without sucking in her stomach, adding, "I expect I will continue to be obsessed with weight until . . . I am past the age of sexual judgment and no longer concerned with what a man might think."⁴⁶ But she knows that this self-conscious, insecure drive for a perfect appearance is debilitating for us; it is, in her words, "the ultimate restriction on freedom of mind." The feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, whose book *Unbearable Weight* (1993) dissects the oppressive meanings of the thin female body in Western culture,⁴⁷ is herself a bit anxious about her weight; she joined Nutri/System, she told me, to lose 25 pounds before she wrote her book. But her desire to be thin, she says, illustrates how

enmeshed we are in the diet culture, how conflicted we feel about weight issues, and how we contribute to perpetuating the pressures to be thin. "We almost can't help wanting to be thinner," Bordo says. "We live in a culture where there are very real rewards for being thin."

As a society, we have yet to develop an image of femininity that conveys women's real power. This, I imagine, is one that might have the curves and body fat of a mother as well as the strength and stride of a person who is as intellectually and physically capable as a man. We have yet to acknowledge how different women's bodies are from men's, and how diverse we all are, size-wise, from each other. We're stuck, as the Victorians were, molding women, molding ourselves, with painful and debilitating stays.