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Slimming through wasting diseases

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Dec. 5, 2012 My Table Is Spread

Put down that doughnut. Push away that hamburger. I'm going to tell you a story. It is not a story to complement a spread table.

Last February, I went into the hospital and came out, one week later, minus my sigmoid colon. The surgery went well. All the post-op complications -- atrial fibrillation, heart failure, pulmonary hypertension, wound tears -- resolved.

I went home on oxygen, but was off oxygen within a month. I stopped taking pain medication and the wet wool blanket wrapped around my brain went away. I learned to live without a smoldering, or raging, infection and the accompanying antibiotics. The afternoon came when I didn't need a nap to make it through the rest of the day.

It was a while before food looked, smelled or tasted good. But, according to friends and family, I looked good. By which, they mean, I lost weight.

Haggard is the new black.

In October, I was diagnosed with an intestinal parasite. As I write, I'm still circling every morsel and each bite, wondering how, and if, it will go down and stay down.

And the consensus is? The sicker I get, the better I look.

"An intestinal parasite!" people -- by which, I mean, women -- exclaim, before asking, "Ooh, girl, where do I get one of those?"

I try to imagine a similar conversation in Haiti. "You have cholera? You look great! Hand me a glass of that fecal-contaminated water."

If you want to know what it's like to be an American woman, try having abdominal surgery and abdominal parasites and then watch the envious expressions on other female faces.

Pay no attention to the oxygen tank. Just watch those thighs shrink!

I tell my doctor I'm going to put out a weight loss video. It will be a two-part set. Disc one will feature a tag line like this: No more diets! No more weigh-ins! Eat what you want! Just find a surgeon who'll gut you like a fish! Lose colon; lose pounds!

Disc two will provide the follow-up: Keep that weight off! Make friends with intestinal worms and parasites and wear your bikini everywhere, every day!

Maybe I'll lead tours to developing nations where our chances of contracting wasting diseases are high.

Maybe I'll market a line of organic foods infected with (organic) human waste. Parasite cocktails. Worm candy. Lose a dress size by Christmas!

The message for women? The less of you there is, the more attractive you become. Whittle down, diminish, shrivel, reduce, how small is small enough?

Judging by the looks of Fashion Week models in New York last fall, starved to death is too thin. Almost starved to death is just right. We want to see those ribs, those shoulder blades, those hipbones. And we don't much care how, by what procedure or loss or disorder these sharp angles emerge.

Every woman knows the aphorism, "A moment on the lips; a lifetime on the hips."

Here's my rejoinder, "Go ahead, vomit or starve yourself. Who cares, as long as your dress size is 'Elf'?"

Actually, I care. My oldest granddaughter is 7. I delight in the easy way she moves. She runs hard and turns wobbly cartwheels in my yard. She attacks an ice cream cone just like her brothers. She hasn't learned to catch her reflection in every store window and every male face. She hasn't learned to suck in her stomach and angle her body in photographs because someone told her it's "slimming."

She wears unmatched skirts and T- shirts and pink cowboy boots. It isn't a "look," just clothes she likes or clothes she found as she bounded out of bed.

One of her younger girl cousins dresses as a firefighter. Another leads with her chubby tummy, as yet unaware that tummies, especially the female variety, must be concave, or else hidden.

She hasn't learned to cover her pores or her problem hips. She hasn't bought her first pair of tweezers, her first facial mask, her first pimple cream, her first hair dye/gel/volumizer/straightener/curl-enhancer, her first lash-lengthening mascara, her first Spanx.

She's never eaten a pizza and then snuck into the bathroom to stick a finger down her throat and gag it up.

If she's hungry, she asks for seconds.

She laughs, loud. She jumps in the pool without a thought for her hair. She grins, wide, happy to show her missing teeth. She plunges into the leaf pile and climbs the tree.

She hasn't learned to duck and cover. Rather, my granddaughter takes up all the space she needs. It's a space I'm grateful to share. It's a space I'm trying to protect.

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