

NOVEMBER

Let Me Eat Cake!



November 5

I am hugely relieved to report that my friend Ingrid has just left after a weeklong visit, taking her almond milk and healing crystals with her. Actually, “friend” may no longer be accurate. Since I had last seen her two years ago, Ingrid got religion and now bows to the gods of organic kale, spelt bread and Kundulani yoga. Unfortunately, she now also resembles those missionaries who come to the door early Saturday mornings, ready to witness to you. Quite frankly, I’m glad she is gone. Having her in the house was like running a bed and breakfast for a band of weight-loss zealots. The woman was obsessed with low glycemic foods and protein counts, more terrorized by the thought of saturated fats than by the prospect of an Al Qaeda attack, and hell-bent on getting at least two hours of exercise a day. Oh, and she greatly preferred that anything that went into her mouth was organic and bore a “free-trade” label, as long as the label was biodegradable. As the saying goes, with friends like this, who needs enemies?

Even before she unpacked, Ingrid surveyed the contents of my pantry, her mouth going all pouty. Sighing, she asked for directions to the nearest Whole Foods market, and she breezed back an hour later, invigorated by the aroma of sizzling tempeh stir fries in the store's take-out section. Ingrid's taut and toned arms were laden with two bags full of exotic health food, including chicken-less chicken, egg-less eggs, rainforest, gluten-free vegan cookies made with real barley malt, and bread that was oddly shaped like a missile and surprisingly heavy considering that it had no flour, yeast, salt, sugar, oil, or any other ingredients. We put away this bounty of nutrient-charged provisions on a shelf I had "cleared" of our family's two main food groups: potato chips and snack cookies, whose most vital ingredients were refined white sugar and BHT.

The next morning, Ingrid strode purposefully into the kitchen while the kids were pouring an avalanche of Sugar-Cocoa-Yum cereal into bowls. Figuring the kids were a lost cause, Ingrid offered to share her breakfast of steel-cut oats with me. I declined. That cereal would chip the enamel off my teeth.

As I sat down with my own bowl of whole-grain cereal (sprinkled, I admit, with some cookie crumbs that would otherwise have gone to waste), Ingrid warned, "That lump of refined carbohydrates might make you think you're full, but your body will still be starving for nutrients." She then confidently stirred her steel cut oats to their bland conclusion. I had known Ingrid since college and was seized with jealousy that she now wore jeans two sizes smaller than she had worn in the good old days, when our idea of a great time was hunting through the frozen foods section of the supermarket, plotting our next rendezvous with Sara Lee, Ben & Jerry, and other comrades. Ingrid used to rail that fitness was "a patriarchal social construct." Why had she turned on me?

As she spoke, I took a large swig of my coffee and

defiantly spooned up another mouthful of my vitamin-challenged cereal, simultaneously craving a hunk of chocolate chunk brownie. With our visit less than twenty-four hours old, Ingrid was already getting on my nerves. She had lost the fifteen pounds that I hadn't and fairly burst with vitality. Meanwhile, I pondered my day's schedule, trying to see when I could possibly sneak in a nap. I stole a glance at Ingrid as she poured the thick, steaming gruel into her bowl. I wondered if she would let me use the leftovers to spackle the hallway.

Unfortunately, things got worse. At six a.m. on day three of her visit, I heard a knock at the door. I ambled down the hall, my eyes barely peeled open, only to find Ingrid unbuckling her inline skates on the porch. She was glistening from a six-mile blading excursion.

"So glad I got an early start!" she chirped. "Did you know rollerblading burns 400 calories an hour?"

I waved her in and started up the coffee, sickened by the knowledge that at this ungodly hour I was already 400 calories behind schedule. I comforted myself that if nothing else, at least Ingrid and I still shared a love of fresh-brewed coffee. Over her steaming cup of fair-trade joe and mound of steel cut oats, she recited a recipe for seven-layer carob cake, but I tuned out after hearing the first three layers were flaxseed, prune puree and lecithin. What kind of twisted mind thinks up something like this? While images of glazed donuts danced in my head, I began to wonder, "Could this friendship be saved?"

November 6

The question gnawed at me until I snuck out for a mid-day burger and fries, wearing dark shades. Thanks to Ingrid I was already reduced to prowling around town incognito, like a criminal. Blast! Why didn't I have her sense of discipline?

Her commitment to exercise? Her zeal to make the world safe from Snickerdoodles?

Later that afternoon, Ingrid told me about an upcoming reunion for members of the college co-op where we had been housemates twenty years before. The co-op had been a small, funky, independent dorm, and it had attracted Birkenstock-wearing students like us who turned up our noses at the very idea of a sorority or fraternity. The ramshackle building housed about thirty students and a few recent graduates who continued to hang around, stalling for time before figuring out whether to buckle under family pressure and join the family business selling plumbing supplies, or to extort more money from their folks for grad school.

Since our “relaxed” policies allowed more students to live there than was legally allowed, life in the co-op fostered a certain ill-advised intimacy among our housemates, many of whom had nothing more in common than that they were waiting to use the washing machine at the same time. In these hothouse circumstances, relationships that blossomed while laundry was loaded into the machine were already flailing by the last spin cycle. Ah, the recklessness of youth!

“Twenty years! Hard to believe it’s been that long!” I

said. I was curious about who might show up at a reunion. It would be fun to see a lot of old pals – friends like Lana, a real live wire who not only aced all her finals without seeming to study, but also worked weekends as a cook in one of the campus restaurants. But I especially wondered about the two housemates who had broken my heart in rapid succession and whom I had lost track of completely. First was Gary, gifted with drop-dead gorgeous blue eyes and a mischievous grin, who never realized that I was in love with him. I had waited in vain for him to drop that mousy, humorless, Save-the-Whales girlfriend of his, but by the time they split up we had all graduated and gone our separate ways.

And then of course there was that cad, Hank, who eventu-

ally pushed me into the arms of a therapist after he discarded me like so much used notebook paper. Hank moved into the house during my senior year, and I was a goner the first time I saw him. He possessed the most important qualities that any young woman would want in a young man, namely, tousled blonde hair and a rakishly handsome face. To top it off, Hank's impromptu recitals of Shakespearian sonnets and scenes from "As You Like It" rendered me incapable of focusing on anything other than him. Hank had wit, brains and vanity galore, but at the time I thought his vanity was a small price to pay for a guy who would look meaningfully into my eyes as if I were the only girl in the world and declare, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate..." What else did I expect from a theater arts major?

In my standard college uniform of appallingly unflattering denim overalls that failed to hide a chunky physique, it may have been unrealistic to expect a guy like Hank to fall for me. It may have been sheer coincidence that we dated for the six months during which I became Hank's backstage gopher while he rehearsed a play that he had both written and directed. I ran to get his coffee, helped paint stage scenery, made copies of new script pages, anything that would make Hank's life easier. The play was a smashing success. My grades that semester simply smashed.

As far as I was concerned, this devotion on my part made Hank and me as good as married. This notion had not occurred to Hank. Flush with the heady success of a two-night run in a seventy-five seat theater on campus, he loped off to New York to seek his fortune, taking the female lead of his play with him. I felt like Nora in "A Doll's House," and I was almost ready to meet her fate.

It was Ingrid who helped me snap out of it. She brought me purple tulips -- my favorite -- and tried to lift my spirits in her own inimitable style. One day, I came back to the

house after class and found she had slapped a bumper sticker on my bedroom door that said, “A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle.” She also brought me fiery feminist tracts about the general loutishness of men and recruited me to work in a local soup kitchen. I never agreed with her sentiments but at least Ingrid forced me to realize things could have been worse: I could have volunteered to work in a soup kitchen regularly. Or, I could have been born a fish.

Naturally, I have felt indebted to Ingrid for pulling me back from my despair over Heartache Hank, though even that ancient gratitude had begun to wear thin. As soon as Ingrid mentioned the reunion slated for the following summer, I shifted from obsessing over her finicky foodism and instead became like Alice in Wonderland, “curiouser and curiouser” to discover what happened to Hank, Gary, and the other alumni. I realized one thing: In case Hank or Gary showed up, I wanted to look more dazzling than dowdy.

Besides, I’d done pretty well for myself, too. I married Jeff after graduate school, and we had produced four children who, by any objective standards, were good-looking and with above average IQs. I’d achieved my goal of becoming a writer, with a few books to my credit. But did I look successful? Would people at the reunion see me and say, “Wow! Judy hasn’t aged a bit!” Or would they say, “Gee, too bad she didn’t take better care of herself,” as they sadly shook their heads and walked away, feeling giddy with superiority.

If I allowed Ingrid and her health-consciousness to inspire me, perhaps I could be the one to feel giddy with superiority!

“It sounds like a great idea,” I said to Ingrid. “A good reason for me to finally get in shape.”

Ingrid visibly brightened. “Your own life is a good enough reason for you to get in shape, Judy, but if it takes a reunion to get you going, take ownership of that thought! Maybe you’d like to help me organize it. I’m the reunion co-chair, but I could really use some help with PR and logistics, since

I live out of town and the reunion would be here. Only thing is, I just want to be able to plan the menu, if you don't mind."

That figured. I guess we could count on a dinner of organic bok choy and marinated tofu steaks.

It's a good thing that Ingrid and I now had the logistics of the reunion to talk about. Otherwise there might have been little to prevent me from killing her during the remainder of her stay. She had morphed into a health food harridan, issuing dire warnings about everything I fed my family and myself. Fortunately, she couldn't go for more than four hours without running off to lift some weights or stand on her head on her yoga mat, which minimized the amount of psychic pain she could inflict on me during any given day.

As her visit mercifully drew to a close, Ingrid offered to cook dinner for the entire family. A risky proposition, but I didn't want to appear ungracious.

I was exhausted just watching her prepare the meal. Wearing organic cotton yoga pants and a t-shirt that said "Make juice, not war," she spent the entire afternoon soaking beans, double rinsing barley and pummeling a roll of something called "Betsy's Bulgur Burger" into submission. No wonder her pectorals were so firm.

"Dig in!" Ingrid ordered as she set the repast in front of us.

I forced down a few bites while my children sat there looking terror-stricken. Finally my daughter spoke up. "When are you leaving?" she asked Ingrid.

"I'm leaving tomorrow for a Worldwide Oneness Forum in the mountains," she said, swilling a green beverage of pureed spinach, zucchini and royal bee jelly, "but I've had a great time. Thanks so much for your hospitality!"

Realizing that her leftover whole grains and organic brown rice would probably exceed FAA regulations for allowable weight on the airplane, Ingrid left the remaining wholesome groceries with us, and none of it is going to waste. Our hamsters love to cozy up in their new beds of puffed

spelt, I'm using that weighty, missile-shaped kamut bread for bicep curls, and no one would ever guess the treasure trove of vitamins hidden in my steel cut oat-spackled hallways.

November 10

Ingrid may be gone now but other health demons are circling my wagon, one aerobics circuit at a time. At the Rabbi's Roundtable class today, who should breeze in but Tanya, gabbing about her recent weekend at the Oaks, a pricey spa nestled in the outskirts of town. Apparently, Tanya's strenuous days at the spa revolved around toning and stretching classes, punctuated by leisurely meals of lightly steamed vegetables, served over a discussion of the most optimal methods of colonic irrigation. An exciting night at the Oaks consisted of lying on a hard, narrow table wearing only cucumber slices on your eyelids and mud on most other places, and waiting for some solidly built woman named Pia to start kneading your muscles into a coma.

Tanya was already fit and health-conscious. During the years I had known her, I had never seen her eat sugar. Oh, she had brought boxes of chocolates and other forms of the refined white substance to me, as hostess gifts, but personally she never touched the stuff. Totally "passive-aggressive," if you ask me. She was already irritatingly slender, and her experience put her in Ingrid's league of having just arrived from the revelation at Sinai.

"I feel so fabulous! I haven't eaten any white flour or red meat for a month now, and I'm completely off caffeine," Tanya enthused.

"How nice," I said, failing to hide my annoyance and protectively stroking my cup of high-octane Columbian roast. Honestly, why can't people who have given up white flour and red meat keep it to themselves? "I actually need the endorphins released by my morning ration of Oreos," I said.

Tanya looked at me with sympathy and condescension in equal measure. I felt ashamed, but how much of this could a person take?

“I’m glad for you, I guess,” I stammered, “but it is the holiday season after all! Some of us are looking forward to festive dinners and parties! There’s always January 1!”

Tanya said, “You go ahead and enjoy, but remember, you’ll feel fabulous if you can get off the refined flour, sugar and red meat.”

“I get the idea,” I said, just as the teacher came in to start our class, much to my relief.

November 17

I don’t see why I should let Ingrid and Tanya get to me like this. Let them give birth four times and see if they don’t qualify to have “Rand-McNally” printed on vast regions of their baby-stretched abdomens. I could do this too, if I really wanted to. The question is: Do I really want to?

November 22

Perhaps I ought to really want to. This became clear to me today when I went shopping for holiday clothes at Nordstrom. While trying on a so-called pencil skirt (in my size it should be called a fat marker skirt, though I suppose that wouldn’t go over well in market testing) and a colorful embroidered sweater, I poked my head out of the dressing room to ask Maria, my saleslady, for her opinion. I stepped out of the dressing room to show her how I looked.

Maria gently pushed me toward the three-way mirror and said, “Let’s see how you look from all sides.” Immediately I threw myself against the mirror, as if sheltering a small child from falling debris. “Are you nuts? One mirror is quite enough!” Maria backed away and said in the kind of soothing tone reserved for the criminally insane, “Of course.

Whatever you say... the outfit does look lovely, though.”

I realized at that moment that I was allowing fifteen lousy pounds to make me totally deranged. The same fifteen pounds I have been trying to lose since the Clinton administration. In my defense, I have lost ten pounds already, but it has taken me five years. At this rate, I'll be absolutely svelte by the time my address is an old age home. Imagine what fashionable sizes I'll be able to wear while playing shuffleboard or on the bus to the Wednesday concert series, though I'll likely be too deaf to hear the music. There is no reason for me not to lose this featherbedding before the reunion in June. Besides, with the reunion just a few days after my birthday, I could give myself the gift of a glorious figure! If Ingrid could do it and if Tanya could catapult herself into the stratosphere of energy and robust health, I can, too.

I still bought the outfit and a pair of “relaxed fit” jeans in my current size, not my hoped-for size, since I wanted to walk and breathe at the same time. I may not have attained weight perfection yet but I'm entitled to some new duds. I will absolutely start a new diet . . . right after I polish off that pan of Duncan Hines brownies. I hate to see perfectly good food go to waste.

November 25

While cleaning the family room today, I came across some old magazines and flipped through them to see which ones were worth keeping. One immediately caught my eye with its promise of a quiz posing the question: “How fit are you?” I suspected that I already knew the answer. Still, I sat down with the magazine and a pen and took the quiz hoping it might help motivate me to begin my new diet and exercise routine. Here's what it asked:

- 1. You believe you would be more fit...**
 - a. If you lost ten pounds

- b. If you could run from the house to the car without feeling you needed to call the paramedics
 - c. If you were Jessica Biel
- 2. Which of the following actions can you do?**
- a. Bend back far enough to look at the wall behind you
 - b. Perform ten strong push-ups
 - c. Beat twenty other people to the register at the Nordstrom semi-annual women's wear sale
 - d. Think about exercise for five minutes before needing to lie down
- 3. Your favorite kind of sport is...**
- a. Rollerblading in the park
 - b. Rock climbing
 - c. Mall walking
 - d. Computer solitaire
- 4. Your idea of portion control is...**
- a. Using a measuring cup when serving yourself food, being careful not to exceed a predetermined number of calories or carbohydrates
 - b. Thinking about your hunger and listening to what your body says it really wants to eat
 - c. Forcing extravagant servings onto the plates of your thin friends and relatives when they are guests for dinner
 - d. Taking only the small cup at the self-serve frozen yogurt shop and gently smashing the butterscotch chips and bits of chocolate chip cookie dough toppings on top, so nobody realizes you should have taken the colossal sized cup instead
- 5. You can do aerobic activity, such as running, bicycling, or speed walking...**
- a. Six times a week for at least twenty minutes

- b. Three times weekly for fifteen minutes
 - c. About once a week, for about eight minutes
 - d. When someone points a gun to your feet and shouts, "Dance!"
- 6. Which of the following leaves you out of breath the fastest?**
- a. Jogging two miles
 - b. Gardening
 - c. Doing the dishes
 - d. Hearing the words, "Dessert is served!"
- 7. You weight train at least three days a week**
- a. True
 - b. Damnable lie
- 8. Which would you say most accurately describes your fitness level?**
- a. Eligible to run the Boston Marathon
 - b. Can complete a five-mile walkathon
 - c. Can drive the Boston Marathon
 - d. Able to grab the TV remote and channel surf without getting winded during the Marathon.

I tallied my score, somehow earning a negative number. The magazine interpreted this result as follows: "Apparent hostility to exercise and preoccupation with food may worsen your health, which is already questionable. Introducing modest changes, such as walking for fifteen minutes after meals, can only enhance your otherwise pathetic health profile."

This was a sobering wake-up call. In the same magazine, another article discussed the surging demand for plus-sized clothing nationwide, with "wide" becoming the operational word. This was one trend I did not want to join. I dumped the magazine, dusted off my tennis shoes and walked for a half-hour around the neighborhood. Once outside, I noticed that it was indeed a beautiful day.