

sizing up  
myself  
**sizing myself up:**  
**tales of a plus-size model**  
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I didn't know I was fat and ugly until I was twelve years old.

The awakening came on my first day of junior high. After carefully applying frosted pink lipstick and electric blue mascara, I boarded the school bus feeling like pretty hot stuff. My peers made it clear that I was mistaken. They jumped up and down on the bus chanting, "Overweight Kate, Overweight Kate." I slumped into the front seat and tried desperately not to cry.

Shortly thereafter, a made-for-TV movie aired and accidentally offered me a golden ticket. It was one of those sensationalized, movie-of-the-week deals, and the lead character was in the hospital for bulimia. There she met a beautiful girl who was being treated for anorexia. I decided to emulate her. Completely disregarding the fact that the anorexic girl *died* at the end of the movie, I thought, *I'll stop eating and be anorexic, too. I'll get cute and skinny, and everyone will like me.*

So I did and they did. I was right. In my seventh-grade year I lost thirty pounds and grew four inches. My weight loss was rewarded with friendship and acceptance. Suddenly, I was popular and invited to all these parties—the connection wasn't difficult to make. Skinny equaled friends and popularity; fat equaled teasing and loneliness. I'd be damned if I'd eat a normal meal again.

Later that year my family moved twenty miles away, and I transferred from my old public school to an elite private school. At the new school, my body wasn't an issue, but everyone thought I was weird because I wore thrift shop clothes instead of the designer outfits they sported like uniforms. I couldn't win.

I think most people assume that anorexics want to be beautiful or to look like models. If I dig below the surface, I realize I didn't care about any of that. I just didn't want to be ridiculed. I didn't want to take up space. I wanted to shrink away from the cute, petite girls I would never be. I wanted to hide from the objectifying, dissecting eyes of all the boys who would never ask me out.

When I was sixteen, life became even stranger: A photographer approached me to model. Although I had created myself in the image of a model to avoid criticism, I had no interest in the profession or the women themselves. I wanted to be a writer. I loved to read; I used to hang out at a cafe in San Diego and talk about books and poetry. I fancied myself quite the intellectual.

But the photographer was persistent, and the next thing I knew, I was signed with a modeling agency in Los Angeles. In 1991, they entered me into their annual "Look of the Year" contest and I placed third, winning a \$75,000 contract. It was intensely surreal to walk down a New York City runway that night while hundreds of people watched—among them Donald Trump, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and David Copperfield. At home, my classmates called me "bag lady" because I wore thrift store clothes. Yet, there I was wearing Alaïa

couture and making seventy-five thousand bucks for it. Inside, I was laughing hysterically.

I continued modeling while I finished high school, not really sure when I'd work off the contract. I had every intention of going to college, especially since I was accepted to Berkeley, my first choice. But fate intervened: Berkeley accepted me for the following spring, so I had a six-month window after graduation and was free to do as I wished.

Two weeks after graduation, I hopped a plane to New York, planning to stay only those six months. Three months later, I was on my way to Paris, where my career took off. I worked seven days a week, twelve to eighteen hours a day with high-profile fashion photographers. I traveled throughout Europe and to Africa. Needless to say, I never made it to Berkeley.

I realize this lifestyle might sound idyllic, and for obvious reasons, it was. But there was one catch: the modeling industry's weight requirement. The tall part I could handle; I'm five-foot-eleven. But I was expected to be really skinny, and my weight was a constant problem. (By the way, here's an idea of what a "weight problem" is in the fashion industry: At five-eleven and 125 pounds, I was ordered to lose ten or twenty pounds.)

My size was my livelihood and my size was my self-hatred. I'd go to the gym at one o'clock in the morning to try to sweat out as much water weight as I could. On my days off, I'd try to sleep all day so I wouldn't eat.

Eventually, all I thought about was how I looked. If I went to a party and nobody told me I was beautiful, I assumed it meant I was ugly. I was paranoid about my body, and constantly checked myself out in shop windows and mirrors to make sure my stomach was flat. I was obsessed. At night I lay awake worrying that my clothes wouldn't fit the next day.

On one really high-profile shoot with Ellen von Unwerth for Italian *Vogue*, I was dressed head to toe in Versace. Ellen asked me to pose straddling a chair backward. As I lowered my backside into the chair, the skintight Versace pants didn't, um, "stretch and conform." I split the ass out of 'em. There is really no delicate way of saying it. I was mortified.

After one show season—during which I'd been living on coffee and cigarettes—my health failed. I went to see a nutritionist, who helped me to start eating properly. Because I'd starved myself for so long, I gained weight quickly and easily. Clients started complaining about my size, and I began having anxiety attacks and bingeing uncontrollably. The harder I tried to lose weight, the more I wanted to eat. I'd hit a brick wall with dieting. I just couldn't do it anymore.

After seven years of dieting, and a year and a half of professional modeling, something in me snapped. My business manager was giving me hell about my weight, telling me I "wasn't trying hard enough." Suddenly, I realized I'd become victim to society's body ideals. I hated that. I wanted to be the righteous woman I'd always dreamed of being, not the socially programmed putz I'd become. I wanted to live on my own terms. I wanted to set things right with myself and with my body. More importantly, I wanted to stop contributing to the illusions (and delusions) that were at the root of my own self-destruction.

I had a revelation while I was working with Peter Lindhberg for *Harper's Bazaar*, a very exclusive booking. We were all working so hard to create an illusion that *none of us could even live up to*—not the photographer, not the fashion editor, not the models. I realized we were creating an ideal that simply doesn't exist, and I was hurting myself for fiction. I quit and moved back to San Diego to figure out who I really was—behind the image.

I spent two years getting reacquainted with myself. And what I discovered was freedom. Freedom to be whatever it was I needed to be at any given moment. The freedom to be silly, to be stupid, to be brainy, to be ugly, to be beautiful, to be anything at all. And I made some ambitious vows to myself: I would no longer bow to the self-consciousness of external validation, and I would accept myself unconditionally. I would no longer try to fit my body into a cultural ideal. In other words, I lightened the hell up and decided to enjoy life.

So . . . “how did I do it?” How did I go from being the kind of girl who would have looked at my current appearance and thought, *Oh, I’d never want to look like her. It’s so unfeminine to be that big, it’s so ugly. How could she enjoy her life?* It didn’t happen overnight. Believe me, it was hard gaining forty-five pounds when I’d spent the previous seven years associating each pound with shame and ugliness.

Sure, I’d had a great revelation that I wanted to be true to myself, but I didn’t have the slightest clue how to get there. My life had so totally flip-flopped. I’d been a highly successful model hanging out in New York City with all the “cool” people. Now I was “fat,” delivering pastries and selling books at Barnes and Noble in San Diego. It didn’t make any sense! I was so afraid of everything then: of what others thought of me, of what would happen to me. I was afraid I’d never be successful again, and my life would never again be exciting or extraordinary—that was a big one. And I hated that I was so scared, because all the people I’d ever admired, like Maya Angelou and Malcolm X, were fearless and bold.

Throughout high school I’d imbibed poetry, literature and movies about freedom. Seizing the day. Making life amazing right now.

Being righteous. Being different. I listened to punk rock, got tattoos, dressed in thrift store clothes. I wanted so badly to be an individual. I *believed* in individuality—in theory. I thought I was above all the superficial crap, but I couldn’t even embrace the most basic part of myself that is so different from everyone else: the way I looked.

One thing that helped change my perspective was meeting my friend Missy. Missy didn’t represent the culture’s idea of beauty, but she possessed a more awe-inspiring appeal. Missy had something—the *thing*—I was searching for. She had confidence. She didn’t edit her opinions to appease others. She knew she was “different,” and rather than try to fight it, she laughed at it. Embraced it. Spoke her mind. If we were at a club and there was a cute guy, I’d try to act cool and coy. Missy would just bust out and tell him he was the cutest boy she’d ever seen.

And it was amazing to watch the responses. Missy came to visit me in New York once, and I took her to see a local band I liked. The room was full of supermodels, and while the band played, everyone stood around, checking each other out. Not Missy. She was jumping around the dance floor doing funny moves. And who did the lead singer hit on? Not the bevy of supermodels on hand, but Missy—because she’s got life. It was her attitude that inspired me to forget everything I’d learned about the way you’re “supposed” to act or look. The people who were free from all that bullshit were having a much better time.

After living with my parents for two years in San Diego, doing some incredible soul-searching, I knew the time had come to move on. I needed to go find my place in the world with my newfound sensibilities. In 1996, I moved back to New York, intending to go to college and study elementary art education.

A friend of mine suggested I try plus-size modeling. I’d worked with Christine Alt, a plus-size model, once before. I remembered

being awed by her courage, thinking, "I could never be that cool. I could never dare to be that different."

When I entered the plus-size modeling world, it was quite a different entity than it is today. Everyone in the industry—photographers, advertisers, designers—was so scared of taking a risk, or making the shoots too racy. I'll just say that. For the most part, they just didn't get it. I'm asked sometimes if I ever felt embarrassed, because I'd work with people who "knew me then" (when I was skinny). It never occurred to me to be ashamed. I'd spent the past two years discovering joy and learning to be comfortable with who I was and how I looked. I knew I was right. I knew in my bones that anyone who couldn't see or understand that beauty was not bound by size, color or anything else was wrong. I just knew it.

I was *inspired*. I wanted to change the modeling industry. And with a lot of help, that change is happening. Much of the credit goes to plus-size retailers like Lane Bryant, Liz Claiborne and The Avenue—and to *Mode* magazine. The visionaries at the helms of these companies have transformed America's image of a full-figured woman.

Ironically, I've had a better career as a big-gal model than most skinny models have in their lifetimes! I've been featured in Gucci's Spring 2000 ads, and I have a beauty contract with Isabella Rossellini's makeup line, Manifesto. My picture has appeared on a billboard in Times Square and I was declared one of the "fifty most beautiful people in the world" by *People* magazine. And the best part is, I did it on my own terms.

I love to witness the moment when someone's perspective shifts before my eyes. It's the moment I go from being "pretty for a bigger girl" to just being pretty. I ask myself often what my life would have been like had I just told those kids on the bus to go to hell. Or if I'd merely smiled at them, thanked them for their opinions, and asked

them out for pizza. I mean, what if I'd had that kind of strength? Would I have gone through the same struggles?

A friend recently reminded me that it's not really about strength, though. Anorexia, as with all eating disorders, is a disease—and a complicated beast. Many factors could have contributed: my personality, being sexually harassed by my P.E. teacher when I was eight, my family's move to weight-obsessed southern California when I was ten. The kids on the bus could have simply been the final straw. What I do know, however, is that I wasted seven years of my life depriving my body of basic nutrients. I risked death, long-term health problems and emotional instability—and I've only recently begun to understand the psychological implications of this experience.

My life is pretty incredible these days, but it would be a lie to suggest that those seven years of self-deprivation and alienation from myself didn't profoundly influence my perception of the world today.

Far too many women and men share the roots of my story. And we spend far too much time and energy contemplating our inadequacies. We forget that we are all perfect in our imperfection.