

The Last Big Sin by Kit Reed

—*Sylphania, AZ, June 3, 200-*

Look what I was promised, see what I got. Toxic puce coveralls so the locals can pick you right off if you run; nobody walks free from this place until they're saved. Oh, yeah, the fluffy beach towel, like this was ever a beach. Flip-flops, and that's it, and for this I am paying through the nose. Welcome to Sylphania, the Reverend Earl's high ticket desert spa, I sold short to buy in here, and what do I get? Rusty trailer at the perimeter, a few yards off from the abandoned sweat lodge and dog years away from the clubhouse where the Reverend Earl and his special anointed chosen ripple their abs in the Jacuzzi or flex their pecs in the cloverleaf pool between takes. They get wraparound shades and gourmet lunches and bathrobes with the logo in gold for they are the stars, and fat boy here, a.k.a. me? My chances of scoring a walk-on in the 24/7 evangelical infomercial? Pretty much nil. It is the genius of the Reverend's establishment. The clubhouse is heaven—the Afterfat—and we the converts are somewhere south of purgatory, because only the buff and perfect enter there. *Success*, the Reverend Earl preaches. *Success through sacrifice*.

I started this journal because it's gonna be a while. If I tank here I do the exposé: networks, life story to *Imagine*, the works. Even strip searches won't find this trusty PDA; when you're my size no matter how much you lose, there are folds.

At inspections the Reverend gravely assesses me. *Not worthy*. Again.

I stand there shivering. "I lost the weight."

Icy, he is icy. "Some."

"Most of it."

He pinches more than an inch. "There's flab." That glacial blue glare is killing me.

"I'm dying here." I am a mess. I am ashamed. I will do anything to please him. "I will do better."

"Yes." Ice crystals glitter in the air between us. "You will."

Now on TV the Reverend comes on all warm and loving, preaching from the crystal cathedral on a perpetual loop. When he talks the talk the man is hot—hotter than early Billy Graham and the Reverend Al Sharpton and Tony Robbins put together; he is the last great persuader, and just when you're off guard he sticks in the knife: "Look at yourself," and you do. He goes on, "You're disgusting," and you blush. Then when you are shaking with shame and guilt Reverend Earl exhorts you, "You don't have to be that way!" while a heavenly choir of emaciated angels hums backup and digital clouds skate across the sky behind the great glass arch; fix on those polar eyes and, zot, you are mesmerized. Hours later the Reverend Earl and his choir hit high C as the sun comes up via satellite relay beamed into every living room and trust me, your heart swells and you believe! Next comes the testimony of the converted, stories a lot like yours, even though the Reverend's gaudy converts look nothing like you. They step up to the mike like Ghosts of Christmas Future, I would do anything to be that thin. *They were never this fat ...* you think, but they were. One by one the chosen testify. And the Before pictures: wow. Fatter than you!

Like certain religions, the system is built on guilt.

We're not talking Sodom and Gomorrah here. Now that pretty much anything goes in that department, nobody much notices what you do to get your kicks. Except for the one thing. The Reverend Earl has hit

on the last great vice. It's so big that it leaves the Seven Deadlies in the dust and us feeling all dirty and glad, writhing with delight because it's our secret and it's so terribly wrong, and it's ... Think soft cheeses in gobs: baked Brie and triple creme dripping off your knife; think Porterhouse steaks, so richly marbled that the fat goes straight into your heart valves; think chocolate in any form.

Food is the forbidden fruit.

It's the ultimate seduction, the guilty secret you keep—that box of Godivas you sneaked before sex, the ice cream after and none for her—the joy of scarfing hamburgers on the sly, secretly larding your veins because you know it's bad, and being bad is such a rush. It's the last guilty pleasure and the hell of it is, most people get away with gorging because they work out or they scarf and barf and nobody knows.

The unforgivable sin isn't overeating. It's getting fat.

Which brings us to me.

I know you look at me and go, *eeewww*. I see you leering, like I'm a walking piece of pornography. You're excited to look, you're ashamed because you get all evil and lascivious and OK, superior: *Oh man, I am never going to get like that*. You want to touch but you're afraid to touch; you'd like to poke that finger at my belly and see how far in it goes because I am the physical expression of your own secret, cherished vice. You are excited and revolted, shrinking as I pass, like I am overflowing into your personal space, and the difference between us? Body weight.

Shrink says I'm overcompensating. Mom says I was born big-boned. I blame thyroid. Those pesky brown cells.

OK, it was the food: sausage grinders and pizza at midnight, the B.L.T. but with two pounds of bacon on it instead of two strips; special ice cream sundaes at four A.M., quart of Ben and Jerry's Everything But, with hot fudge sauce and smashed white chocolate and pork rinds crumbled on top so it isn't too sweet; buy out the candy at the movies and take two buckets of popcorn into the midnight show and gobble it in the dark, and this is exclusive of my daytime three squares. See, foodaholics are no different from that bunch confessing over coffee at AA: when you want it all the time because you're seriously addicted, nobody sees you binge. At mealtimes I was a model of restraint. Seconds only. Sweet'n Low and no milk. Even Mother wondered; OK, I lied. The rest, I sneaked, in the dark hours when nobody sees you and they can't hear you belch; close the door softly and tiptoe downstairs after your lover goes to sleep, if she wakes up she will reproach you: wasn't I enough?

In daylight, nobody knew. Listen, when I dress for business, clients treat me with respect. So what if I shop at Big Men Outfitters, the XL rack? The black suit, I had hand tailored with matching vest, vertical pinstripes, and if I do say so I look impressive. Like Gibraltar. Like, who wants to buy life insurance from a young guy? But no matter how successful I am, I hear you muttering as I go by.

I have not gone without women. Amazing what turns some people on. Girlfriends came into my life and then they went; it was a mutual conclusion arrived at over time. I had my needs. No woman could compete.

I moved back home after the last breakup, because in the settlement Nelda took the apartment and all my stuff. I would be there still if it hadn't been for Mom. After her Saturday night macaroni and Belgian waffles, Mom nudged me into the Barcalounger. She tipped me back and flipped on the tube. "Be good. Have fun." She stuck the remote in her pocketbook and left. If you want to know the truth at that angle I had leverage issues. I couldn't get up to change the channel. I was stuck in the recliner until she got back, staring at hours and hours of the Hour of Power, featuring the Reverend Earl.

This is how he works you, the unconverted. He rubs your nose in it. The way you look. "You're disgusting." Every bite you ever ate. "Stop," I said; I would have done anything to cut him off but the recliner kept my feet higher than my head. I struggled but I was stuck, looking up at the Reverend Earl between my feet. I threw my can of beer nuts at him, begging. "Please stop." My five-pound fruitcake missed the screen. "Stop it. Just stop."

It went on for hours.

"You can do it." The Reverend Earl bored right into me. "But you need my help."

By the time the sun came up over the Crystal Cathedral, I was shaking. I could swear somebody had oiled the choir and dusted them with gold. Good thing my Nokia was charged. Nelda was still on my Speed dial. Late as it was, she picked up.

I was raging. I shouted into the phone. —Nelda, was this your idea?

She tried to get off the line. —Oh, Jerry. I was just ... She couldn't think of an excuse.

—Was it?

—Can't talk now, I have to see a person about a thing.

—Nelda, it's the middle of the night!

—Not really. They're waiting, gotta go.

I said to Nelda, —What can I do to get you back? Mind you, Nelda was not the first, she was just the next.

—Lose the weight, she said, and I am here because she made it so clear that she didn't much care: that sigh, right before she finished and hung up, like, what's the use. —Just *lose the weight*.

I shook the phone, we were in separate states of mind at the moment, so she has no idea how mad I was. —That's easy for you to say.

What are the stages of death? I went through denial and rage to acceptance. By the time Mom came home I was in tears.

"Well Jerry," she said, "Did you like the show?"

I was too beat up to speak. "OK," I said. "OK."

I sent for the brochure.

You know how sometimes you decide do a thing just because they say it's going to be hard? Like hard is a religion. I sold everything and came here. Who knew it would be this bad? Think maximum security. Think detox. Think results guaranteed.

"Yeesh," I said on the first day.

When the guy in front of me shook his head his jowls flopped and the ground shook. He said, "Pretty much." His name is Nigel Wilson, and his nickname, that no longer fits? I saw what he put down on the form. Nickname: Slim. "It's what the Reverend wants from all of us. Thinness."

Yitch, I thought as he waddled up to the Armed Response box where the nurse-trainers were waiting.

I'm never going to let myself get that bad. But I had, and I did.

The evaluation makes getting into the Green Berets look like an ice cream social and the physicals at Fort Benning and Parris Island look like church. There's the carbolic shower; one of the Rev's trusties comes in with a loofah and scrubs all those parts you've gotten too bulky to reach. OK, I'm here because I hate myself for being fat. I hate it and I am ashamed. You sit in the waiting room for hours. And then and only then, when you are at rock bottom, the entrance interview.

"Look at yourself. You are disgusting." The Reverend Earl fixed me with those eyes. If you want to know the color, look into the heart of an iceberg and look hard. "Jeremy Hale. What do you want?"

Everything in me welled up and I croaked, "Thinner!" I wanted to look amazing and live in the clubhouse and testify on the infomercials as advertised, and maybe I wanted Nelda to come begging so I could blow her off, but I was too beaten down to say.

"And what will you give to get it?"

He was my leader; I would do anything he said. I said what he wanted. "Everything."

Thinner, yes, but at what cost? Oatmeal at five, take seconds and they axe your lunch. It's pathetic, grown man like me reduced to stealing food. Scrub your mess tray with sand and do a mile on the track before the motivational speech; step aerobics and encounter group followed by work detail. Tiger's Milk for lunch, laced with the Reverend's special Herbal Compound. I don't know what-all they blenderize but you end up starved. Meanwhile the Rev's hand-picked favorites lounge, scarfing Mai Tais and lobster salads before taping, greasing each other's lats and triceps in preparation for the shoot. The chosen put on gold thongs and parade for the camcorders daily while I pull duty in the silo or in the herb processing shed followed by dinners that would make a rabbit puke.

I will spare you the details of the daily humiliation—huge mirror, naked you—sordid food diaries, where you list every bite you'll eat in a given week, with confessions and public shamings if you stray. Oh yeah, the motivational bikini trunk show, like any of those mink thongs will ever fit. Plus random cavity searches and sermons and inspirational hymns piped in nonstop while we slaves to body image mix the Reverend's Herbal Compound.

I do everything he wants! So why am I shambling around out here in the wilderness with my skin hanging off me like an extra coverall, while up at the clubhouse . . . Oh, never mind. To make it worse we're separated from the women by a half mile of desert, so there are no saving graces in this place, no sweet touches, no woman's hand like a scented scarf trailing across your face. Nothing but hunger and the discipline and the Reverend Earl promises that we sold everything to pay for, the glamour of life in the Afterfat. And all I can think about is food. I'm hungry all the time.

Did you ever get exactly what you want and find out it's not what you wanted at all?

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—July 4, 200—

Today was visiting day. Don't ask me why I was hoping for Nelda. Mother brought brownies. I couldn't look at them. I couldn't *not* look at them.

I said, "Mother, what are you trying to do to me?"

"Eat," she said. "I baked all night."

"I'm not supposed to." I was brave. I pushed them away.

She pushed back. "It's practically your birthday. Go ahead."

"I can't."

"You've been so good." Mother as Satan, unless it was Eve, going, "One little taste won't hurt."

So now we are up against it. The fundamental fact. In regular detox, you do without your drug of choice until you can do without it. Alcoholics, if they never take another drink they can hope never to take another drink, but foodaholics? Stop eating and you die. When food is your drug of choice, temptation is every day.

"I made them special." Mom's chin was quivering. "Just one bite."

She stared at me until I opened the tin. I didn't care if the trusties turned me in, I tore right through them, three dozen in all. Mom said, "I miss you, honey." She thought I didn't see the look of contempt slipping down over her face like the act curtain at a bad play.

I wiped my mouth. All gone, and so soon! I tried to stare her down. "But this is all worth it, right? I mean, I look thinner, right?"

"I don't know, Jerry." She shoved another tin across the table. "You look about the same to me."

"Bye Ma. Gotta go."

She called after me. "You forgot your present."

It was fudge.

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—Aug. 15, 200—

Don't pretend you're better than me, you out there tapping your flat belly and sneering because I don't fit the template. I've seen you picking at your salad and eyeing my platter at those business lunches where I walk away richer and you leave feeling superior, you are fucking starving, I can see. You know damn well that you keep yourself strong by mocking people like me. Well, I know your dirty secret. When you can't have a thing, you think about it all the time. Face it. Food is the new sex. The last thing people lust after that it's wrong to have.

I think about it all the time. You'd think I'd miss Nelda more but I'm too hungry to think about anything else. But can I raid the kitchen or steal a car and loot an all-night diner? Not likely.

Results guaranteed. The Rev's trusties clubbed the twin converts they caught in the kitchen. They dragged in one runaway sobbing at the end of a rope. And me? I am in so tight that I yelled along with the rest of them. "Let that be a lesson to you."

Then why do I feel trapped? And what happens when I finally get a gold star at the weigh-in? Too hungry to know.

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—Sept. 30, 200-

It's harvest time and we are packaging the Reverend's patented mix for shipment to high end shops worldwide. I slap labels on the herb packets as they come down the assembly line and for the first time since I hit Sylphania, I've met the women and trust me, they're nothing like the ones on the Hour of Power. You only see the winners: Britney and Eve, the sleek bikini brigade and the Earlettes, his anorectic choir, but do you care? You're leering at the Before pictures—chubby porn. Admit it, you get off on Food Channel excesses too, bare naked Bananas Foster and Nipples of Venus and Christmas pudding bombes. Girls come easy for you, but fat women are a forbidden pleasure and desserts, you can not have. See, the women I work with are all Before pictures. Pudgy girls who'll never make it to the Afterfat shuffle around in pink coveralls that hang off them in folds, like the skin off my belly. I hardly look. When you're starving, you have bigger things on your mind, although ... I mailed Nelda on my PDA, even though she never answers back.

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—Oct. 4, 200-

I found a Hershey's kiss taped to one of the packets slithering toward me on the conveyer belt. I looked up. *Who called?* At the head of the line, where girl converts were heat-sealing the packets and throwing them back on the conveyer belt, a great big redhead caught my eye and smiled.

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—Nov. 15, 200-

It's all changed.

She came to me in the night. Someone huge leaned on the outside of the trailer; I felt it rock. It was somebody to be reckoned with. The whole thing shook. I woke up hungry and excited. I stuck my head out. "Who's there?"

"Me."

It was too dark to see. She had a beautiful voice. "What do you want?"

"Same thing as you." It was rich and smooth as melted butterscotch. "And I have it."

I was faint from excitement and shaking all over. "You do?"

"Didn't I just tell you?" She had a rich laugh too. "Now, are you going to let me in?"

"Why me?"

"I know you from the shop." she said. "You know, the Hershey's kiss? Now let me in."

I could still taste it. I thought about the situation: my exposed position in the trailer, the Reverend's acolytes patrolling: trustees collecting points so they can fly up the food chain and join the choir. "I don't know."

"Don't you want it?"

"Of course I want it," I said, so low that only she could hear. "But we can't do this here."

"Where?" Her voice flowed like cream in the darkness. I don't know what had happened to the moon. "Hurry, I can't wait much longer."

"Oh, lover. Where?"

I came outside and quietly shut the door on my trailer and weeks of loneliness and heart-starved misery. We were two big shadows out here in the dark. I swallowed hard. "I know a place."

It was pretty much fated. We moved as one. Her shadow joined mine like a partner in infidelity, which is what she was. We crept across the midnight desert and into the abandoned sweat lodge. The Reverend gave up his smoky macho rants after somebody overheated and died. The entrance was boarded up so we cut a slit in the hides. I could feel her sweet breath on my face. "Now?" Her voice trembled with anticipation. I felt her vibrating, the friction of coverall against coverall with intimations of the flesh beneath. I was on fire. We were both shaking. She murmured, "Now?"

"Not yet. Wait here." I circled the sweat lodge, looking for hidden entrances, for alarms and pitfalls, anything that would betray our presence here because exposed like this, sneaking around in the night in the Reverend's tightly organized kingdom, we were in imminent danger of discovery and I'd die if anything happened to interrupt what we were about to do because it had been so long for me and for her too. I remember what she looked like on Induction Day, majestic in that brocade slipcover thing with shoulder length earrings of white jade. She was splendid. Now she looked diminished.

I whispered, "You've suffered."

She whispered back, "So have you."

We tiptoed over to a soft place and stood trembling, listening, tense and excited and crazy with desire to complete the act.

Her voice was electric in the hush. "Is it OK? Is everything OK?"

"Yes," I said and we fell down together on blankets in the shelter of the slanting hides. Panting and tremulous, we began.

Forgive me, she had an entire Black Forest cake.

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—Nov. 15, 200—

For the first time since I got here, I feel good. The Reverend relies on guilt and repentance and conversion for his pitch. I've tried all three and frankly, I'm sticking with guilt. Nothing beats the rush that comes with hiding and lying so you can take your pleasures. The delicious feeling you get when you're done, because you had to sneak.

Monday I flunked the weigh-in.

Nigel Wilson, who is a trusty—one foot in the clubhouse—looked at me with a cold eye. "Three pounds. You've picked up three pounds."

"Water." I was lying and I liked it. "Replacing fluids after a workout, like the Reverend says."

"As if."

"What makes you holier than thou?" OK, I do not like the man.

He mauled my flank. "Flab! I haven't pinched more than an inch in months. Three pounds." Another week with the Universal Gym and the Abdomenizer and Nigel will join the heavenly choir. Thong bikini with his name on it, plush bed in the clubhouse, steak and lobster for breakfast, lunch, and Christmas. He sneered, "You've got a week."

"OK," I said, because he had put the fear in me. No more getting caught like this. The minute we finished I was going off to the bathroom to practice putting my finger down my throat.

He slitted his eyes with that judgmental, skinny-guy scorn. "Are you seeing somebody?"

"Who, me?" The sensation was delightful. I was excited. Scared. "Hell no."

"You know what we do to people like you." He was in my face—closer than people got when my belly still stood between me and them. "Are you?"

I blinked. Lying. What a rush! "Absolutely not. No way. No."

"You know what happens when you get caught, right? First we strip you naked for the public shaming. Then there is the confession piped everywhere on closed circuit TV followed by the running the track bareassed. Then there is the showing of that tape in the mess hall at every meal for weeks. Ready yet?"

Nigel's breath smelled like fermenting cucumber. I backed away. "No."

But Nigel was on a roll. "Then of course there is the purging and starvation, and I ask you, whoever she is, is it worth it?"

I couldn't exactly answer.

"Is it?"

You bet it is. "No."

Of course we are meeting regularly. I have become a bulimic virtuoso, and she? Does my lover secretly

do the same? And where—where does she get the food? Last night we fell down together in the sweat lodge and it was wonderful: chocolate mousse cake and Russian white chocolate ice cream and the proximity of our bodies. I touched her smeared cheek. "You never told me your name."

"Zoe," she said. "I thought you knew."

"Zoe, we can't go on meeting like this."

All her soft places pressed against me and she murmured, "I know we can't, Jerry. But we will."

"Oooh, yes." I think I may love her. I think if we keep on meeting like this, one of these nights when we've finally had enough to eat, we will have sex.

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—Nov. 22, 200—

My throat is sore and my mouth is sour from barfing; I gargle before and after I meet Zoe, but as long as she doesn't have to know ... after all the trouble she went to, Zoe would be revolted and frankly, so am I, but I have my position to think of. The final fitness training—tucks if necessary, to take up the slack in my hide. The clubhouse and the show.

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—Nov. 30, 200—

So I made it to the clubhouse, but not like you think. For our sins, the gravest of which I think was the three-tiered fruitcake, Zoe and I are indentured here. We scrub pots in the Reverend's kitchen, for our sins, and the level of exposure to temptation makes it clear that he doesn't care if we topple and get fat.

"I think I love you," Zoe said last night, right before it all came down. The Last Good Time. We'd polished off the last pie—blueberry; even in our niche in the darkened sweat lodge, safe in our nest of blankets, I knew our teeth were turning blue.

"Yes." Full for once, full and happy, we rolled toward each other and I murmured, "Now?"

Snaps popped; the pink coverall was open. I could feel her warmth. "Oh, Jerry, I'm afraid you'll think I'm too ..."

"Don't say it. Don't say anything." I buried my face in her beautiful, soft neck.

Zoe blushed; I felt the heat. "What if you think I'm too fat?"

I laughed deep inside. "Not the way we've been burning it off, baby. Come on, this way, that's it ..." I ripped my coverall open. *Now*, I thought, but a question stopped me. "About the food. You never told me where you get the food."

"It's not important."

"I need to know where it's coming from." I pictured the two of us loading up desserts and cheeses and escaping; I pictured the two of us surrounded by steak bones, making love in a cave.

Her laugh was wonderful. "If I tell you I'll have to kill you," she said.

Then I rolled her over and sat up. "If you love me, tell me. Otherwise I'll have to . . ." I didn't know what I would have to do. I did know that Zoe and I were bonded, even closer because, in spite of our orgies—was she bringing feasts and then sneak-going all bulimic on me?—in spite of the desserts we consumed together at tremendous speeds, we were losing weight. Others about us were losing theirs through terminal hardship whereas Zoe and I . . . Together, we were three inches from gorgeous. We had everything, and if we were about to risk it all by making love, I needed a guarantee that the orgy would never stop.

A long silence fell. She removed my hand from her coverall. She was done kidding. "If I tell you they'll kill me."

I disengaged her fingers and sat up. "You don't love me."

She was silent for a long time. "I do!"

"Prove it."

"I'll show you." She rose. "Wait here. And promise not to follow me."

She came back with the three-tiered fruitcake. Frosted! Her voice was sweet. "Now do you believe I love you?"

"I do." I pulled her down into our nest of blankets. The food! I gave what she wanted. "And I love you too."

So we were entangled, surrounded by pie tins and the rubble of the fruitcake when the roof came off. Hides fell away from the sweat lodge frame, exposing us to the night and the glare of a dozen flashlights. Trustees swarmed in and seized us. Blinded, I heard Nigel: "See!" A vibrant voice—the Reverend Earl?—cut through the others. "Bring them in!"

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—Dec. 1, 200—

Ironic, isn't it? The small print in our contract. Comply and you get what you paid for. Defy and you forfeit your rights. I heard Zoe scream. I felt the sting of the hypodermic that put me out.

We woke up in the bunkroom off the kitchen, while workers in white coveralls and hairnets—other Sylphania failures? Wetbacks? Local hirees?—prepared the meals. Still groggy from last night's tranquilizer darts, we crept out for breakfast. The dietitian put us to work scraping plates and scrubbing pots. Except for our daily Tiger's Milk plus formula, we're not allowed to touch the food. It was awful. Exhaustion rolled right over the hunger and at the end of the day we fell down and slept like stones.

—Dec. 2, 200—

The drugs are wearing off. In the middle of the night we both woke up. Never mind which one of us said to the other, "There's nobody in the other bunks. We could make love."

The other said, "What if you hate the way I look when I'm naked?"

"I'm beginning to think that's not so important."

"That's funny. So am I."

Nice idea, but in the end we were just too tired.

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—Dec. 3, 200—

Today I sneaked out of the kitchen behind the breakfast cart and ended up in the briefing room. The attendant parked it and left. This is how far my self control has brought me. I didn't steal one sausage or Danish—Danish, in a diet spa! The clubhouse is nothing like the kitchen wing. Opulent rooms with plush carpets and velvet curtains, candy dishes everywhere. I crouched behind the ficus when the chosen filed in for the meeting and thought, *I'll never make it in this crowd*. The thing is, they're perfect, the Rev and his anointed and, shit. Nigel! Nigel must be perfect too. Nigel is tight inside the inner circle of the Afterfat. The Reverend Earl is nothing like he is on TV, but I knew that. What I didn't know was that at these things he gobbles pastries and the special chosen follow suit and they finish the mixed grill down to the last chop and they are still perfect. How? I saw them pop kidneys into their mouths like bonbons and throw in two red pills on top and I watched them send for more food and I thought bitterly, *Is this what you mean by sacrifice?*

"Now, Sylphania profits," the Reverend Earl said to the bookkeeping angel. This Mr. Universe wannabe in a silver thong read the report and my jaw dropped. The profit line makes even Tiffany's look poor. "Now," the Reverend said, "The international Herbal Compound breakdown. Britney, please." I leaned forward with my jaw cracked wide to take in the details and lost my balance and started the ficus trembling. Nigel swiveled my way. I mouthed, *please*. The bastard blew the whistle on me.

"Hogs," I spat as they dragged me out, "you're eating like hogs."

And the leader I trusted, whose promises brought me here? "Breakfast is our one indulgence," the Reverend Earl said.

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—Dec. 5, 200—

We have a plan. Yesterday Zoe and I established the routines: what time the Sylphania kitchen shuts down, exactly when the daytimers split for home while we finish up and take the garbage out, and what

time it is when we unload the last dishwasher and fall into bed. Why are there a dozen bunks when it's just us two? Not clear. There's more going on than lean steaks and lobster sandwiches and clever salads for craft services at the Reverend's shoots.

"OK," Zoe whispered. We were so wiped that we collapsed on opposite bunks. "By now you know where I got the food."

"Not really. Why are we whispering?"

"Look." She cracked the door. "The special shift."

They came in the back. There were only two, in hairnets and brown coveralls. They worked quietly, opening a secret locker and revealing riches: a turkey and a ham and gallons of butter and sugar and cream; one worker dressed the turkey and the ham and put them in to roast. Swiftly, the other mixed giant batches of cheesecake batter and chocolate cookie dough. The kitchen is like a hothouse; by night, rich dinners grow. The smell was glorious. I pressed my face to the crack in the door and dreamed. Zoe whispered, "Ssst." I jerked awake, flailing. "What, what?"

"Come." She guided me through the darkened kitchen like a lover leading a sleepwalker to bed. We were at the door. "You'll see."

Tiptoeing—have I mentioned about how when you're, um, bigger, you walk lightly so they won't notice how big you are? Tiptoeing, we went out. Ahead, the special shift rolled a cart downhill in the dark, heading for the barn. One zipped a key card and a door opened. A triangle of light blazed on the path. Zoe dropped behind a patch of Yucca and pulled me down next. "What are they ..."

"Shh. Not now. Tomorrow we go in."

"How are we going to ..."

Risky as it was, she giggled. "Do you believe what works? My Discover card."

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—Dec. 6, 200—

God it was close. We waited forever for the night detail to clear the barn. They took a crown roast of pork tonight, Devils Food cakes and I don't know what-all. They took a lot. After much time and with great caution, Zoe and I headed downhill. Just when we thought it was safe the barn door slid open and we scattered like leaves in front of a blower. Zoe threw herself behind a truck. I rolled under a tractor just in time. The Reverend Earl stood framed by light. He came out wiping his hands on his pants.

"My God." Zoe said when it was safe. "I had no idea the Reverend Earl ..." Shaken, she broke off.

"The Reverend Earl *what?*"

Poor Zoe! Her voice quavered with uncertainty. "I don't know."

I didn't expect her Discover card to work in the key card slot but it did. "So this is where you got the ..."

"Follow me."

How could I not? I smelled food. The place was clean and sterile and bright as a biotech lab or a model dairy farm but there was no livestock here that I could see. Instead crates of the Herbal Compound lined the corridor and filled the stalls, waiting to be moved out. I thought I heard somebody singing—a soprano, faint but beautiful, high and pure. "Zoe, stop! Someone's here."

Zoe turned. Oh, yes. She has been here before. "Yes. Somebody's here. And she ... Oh, Jerry, this is so terrible."

"So this is how you get the ..."

"Shh." Too late. The singer heard and the song stopped. We rounded the bank of crates. We were at the last stall. Empty, I thought. No crates piled up, no sweet cow staring out with a white blaze on its face. Zoe said anyway, "Betty, I brought a friend."

I looked in. My God, she was huge. The stall was lined with velvet quilts and a gurgling mattress with satin sheets—a waterbed?—and expanding to fill the space was the singer, the donor of wonderful leftovers that Zoe and I had shared, Reverend Earl's prisoner, I guess, unless she was his lover—my sweet Zoe's girlfriend Betty, the biggest human being I've ever seen. "How. Uh." I could not ask this woman *How do you let yourself get so huge?*

"Oh, Betty, the Reverend." Zoe sounded heartbroken. "How could you take food from him?"

"You knew where I was getting it," Betty said. "You just didn't want to know."

Never going to let myself get that way—Did I think that? Shame!

There are things women know without having to tell each other. "It isn't about sex," Betty said.

In her own way she was magnificent, quivering in pink satin, graciously offering the roast duck and the trifle she'd saved for Zoe, but she made me ashamed and afraid.

"All this. All this!" My hands waved out of control. I do not know what I was asking her. "Why does he do it?"

She flicked at a scrap. "You mean Sylphania? Three things."

"No. This."

"All of it." Zoe and I overlapped, asking different questions. "Why?"

Betty sighed and the great bed rippled. "The money, of course. And before the money, the power."

"You don't have to stay here, you know."

"It's too late for me."

I groaned. "We'll save you!"

Lovestruck, she shook her head at me. "No thanks, he's good to me and I can't."

But Zoe understood. Gently, she prompted, "And the rest?"

"The rest? You mean, what does he get from me?" Rocking, Betty considered. Then she looked into us

with those beautiful eyes and smiled. "He loves to watch me eat."

Zoe glanced from me to Betty and back. There was a click. Our eyes locking. Something understood. Still I had to find out. "And you shared your food with us—because?"

"When your best friend falls in love, you want to help," Betty said with a lovely smile. "And besides . . ." Still smiling, Betty blushed and said modestly, "I'm trying to lose weight."

.....

—*Later*

I'm going to kill him.

A lot if it is what he did to Betty, you've gotta know what that was like, and half of it is Nigel, but mostly it's the herbs. We could have left poor Betty where she was and gone out to expose the Reverend, but she started crying and we stayed too long. The door opened at the far end of the barn. Betty raised a massive arm, hissing, "Hurry. Hide!"

Zoe and I threw ourselves into the stall with her and landed on the gigantic bed; it was astounding, the way Betty flowed. As the bed billowed, debris bobbed up and down: hairbrushes and mirrors, giant negligees like froth on storm-tossed waves; magazines and leftovers and abandoned food trays concealed in the satin folds. I heard his voice. "Betty, I'm back."

We lunged for the velvet pads that covered the walls. Then the giant mattress lurched as Betty reached up. She spoke in a new voice, "I thought you'd never come."

"Sweet pants," the Reverend Earl said in a voice I'd never heard before. "I brought a suckling pig."

"Oh darling, you shouldn't have, please take it away," Betty said and I recognized the desperation—what the poor girl was trying so hard and failing to tell her lover/torturer/voyeuristic partner in unspeakable crime. Fat Betty was in a place I know. She was salivating, begging for more even as she pleaded to be left alone. We are all weak, *weak*. "I'm trying to lose weight."

And he was putting her on the skids. "Of course you are, and I'm helping. Before they stuffed this baby, they filled the cavity with herbs."

Betty's voice hit a frantic whistle. "Oh no, not the herbs!"

"Now now, you don't have to eat it if you don't want to." Bastard, bastard! That smarmy laugh. "Just say no."

There was a seismic shift as Betty grabbed the tray. Zoe and I heard it settle damply into her lap and we heard her eating and weeping and eating more but most of all we heard the Reverend Earl and this is when I knew I had to kill him. The Reverend Earl Sharpnack, sponsor of sacrifice and sanctimonious purveyor of the Afterfat was crooning, "Look at yourself, you're disgusting. Disgusting," and the whole time he was panting like a pervert at a peep show while poor Betty sobbed and gobbled and gobbled and sobbed until the suckling pig was gone and the Reverend had his fill and left.

At the end she begged us to kill her. "I can't help it," she said. "I'm hungry all the time."

Zoe said, "I love you Betty, and we're going to get you out."

She only groaned and lowered her head. "It won't help, I'll still be hungry all the time." Defeated, she added, "And so will you!"

Zoe and I exchanged looks. *Shit!*

Then Betty finished it. Us. Me in this place. Earl Sharpnack, you're gonna die. "It's the herbs."

.....

—Jan. 1, 200—

OK, it wasn't just about his Herbal Compound, which turns dieting into a self-propelling engine of need and hunger and despair. It wasn't even knowing that he forced it down me in that Tiger's Milk, sentencing me to starvation for life. Or that one look at Betty made clear that the hunger keeps its teeth in you even after you gorge and gain back the weight. I wasn't trying to stop him from selling the Compound worldwide to catch new converts, either, and it wasn't just what he did to Betty, it was something worse. It wasn't even his sneer when I caught up with him outside the darkened kitchen while Zoe sobbed, begging me to stop.

It's what he said to me.

"Bastard." I had him by the throat. I was speechless and gargling with rage. We were at the bottom line. When I could get a word out, it was, "Why?"

Then the Reverend Earl Sharpnack, no divinity school credentials that I could see, the Reverend Earl straight-armed me and this is how he leveled me. He grabbed a handful of loose flab on my belly and kissed my cheek. "Because I like you this way."

"You mean fat? I'm not fat any more, I'm ..."

"No," he said and the contempt was stupendous. "Suffering."

"Because ..."

"Somebody has to do it," he said. "So I can watch."

So I killed him.

Now I am here. Sad about Zoe, though. I stood for a long time contemplating the body. I lost track of Zoe until I heard somebody driving up in a truck. Then somebody big dropped into the sand with a thud and I heard heavy footsteps coming up behind me and then she spoke. When I turned, my head snapped back on my neck. It was like the little shock you get in an eye test when the right lens slips into place and you see something you never saw before, and for the first time. The woman I loved was overweight.

"Jerry, you shouldn't have done that."

"I had to. He was a fucking voyeur!"

"Hurry, we have to go." She pulled me toward the truck.

But I was still raging. "He wasn't trying to help us, he was getting off on all you ..." I heard Zoe gasp and I covered my mouth.

My lover's eyes narrowed in her chubby face. She let go of my arm and spun me around, glaring. "What did you just say?"

"Let's go," I said, because I owed her. She had brought the Reverend's pickup, which she had stolen—for me!

Instead of jumping into the truck she handed me the keys and stood there, studying me.

"Us, I mean, he gets off on watching all you, I mean us ..."

She said in a low voice, "Fat people?"

As we stood there a chasm opened between us because my Zoe was still overblown and quivering, whereas I had lost the weight. "Forget I said that Zoe, it ... ah, it was the way he looked at me."

"Jerry, look at me!"

How could I tell this woman who loved me that she needed to lose weight? "I killed him because he looked at me the way everybody used to look at me. Like fat porn! He was ..."

"What was he, Jerry?" Zoe said in a low voice, and sweet as she was she stood before me with her chins shaking and in spite of the privation, she had more than one. "Jerry, what?"

Not so different from you. Not Zoe, standing there in her oversized body. You, out there in the world, and now ... Me.

"Nothing, Zoe." I looked at her in a spasm of double vision: lover, companion. And pathetic fat woman, sinking into the sand.

Her eyes were black beads in that round face. She laid out the next words with extreme care. "Jerry, I love you."

She was waiting for me to seal the transaction but I was fascinated by the way the fat on her legs pooled around her ankles like ... I scrunched my eyes shut so I could go on. "I love you too. I do! Come on, Zoe, let's go."

And this is how my Zoe astounded me. The sun came up and I saw tears. "He was my last hope," she said and shoved me into the truck. And she stood there in the road behind me mourning for the bastard, the only man in the world who could make her thin.

I felt so bad for her that I floored it and bombed out of there. I drove all night and into next week to get where I'm going, and never mind that I will spend the rest of my life ravenous. I went through hell to get this far, so look on my works ye mighty and give me a break. All the lights are blazing in my girlfriend's house—is it a party or did she leave them on for me?

—Nelda, honey, it's me. Let me in. I lost the weight.

The End

