



Copyright © 2012 Condé Nast

the body

myth

Hostility against thin people is at an all-time high, and fashion models are taking the brunt of the criticism. Yet there's no evidence that images of models provoke eating disorders. So why, **Rebecca Johnson** asks, does skinniness make people so mad? Photographed by **Irving Penn.**

Kate Moss is slender enough to appeal to fashion designers and photographers—and also to enrage many who see photos of her. But she is not, by any medical measure, anorexic. In this photo: hair, Julien d'Ys for Atlantis; makeup, Kevyn Aucoin. Sitings Editor: Phyllis Posnick

Letters to *Vogue*:

March 1977

Dear Editor:

The female body is an art in itself, and seeing all the sleek, slim bodies photographed artistically, I find myself wishing that I, too, could look like that. Now I find that I have the ambition to start that all-important diet and begin exercising regularly—THANK YOU!

December 1987

Dear Editor:

While I stand at the [high school] cafeteria salad bar, I see girls drink a pint of chocolate milk and eat a slice of pizza, plus a package of Ho Hos. I have a piece of advice: Hand them a copy of *Vogue* and a full-length mirror. I used them in January 1986 and today I am a healthy 4' 11", 102-pound young woman.

January 1996

Dear Editor:

I have always considered your magazine to be reputable and in good taste, so I was extremely disappointed upon seeing the enclosed picture of one of your models. This woman looks deathly ill from anorexia. *YOU* as a leader in the world of fashion have a responsibility to stop portraying sickly thin models as desirable. You have lost one consumer.

March 1996

Dear Editor:

Vogue, Vogue, Vogue, we don't like this!! [accompanying picture of Shalom Harlow in Christian Dior gown]

Have you ever noticed that the only acceptable time to say "I hate you" to a friend is when she has lost weight and you haven't? As America gets fatter and fatter—33 percent of us are now officially over our ideal weight—hostility to very thin women, and to images of them, seems to have grown. As recently as ten years ago, readers wrote to thank magazines for presenting an ideal. The relationship between reader and magazine was cozy and hortatory. Today, letters to editors, designers, and even advertisers tremble with outrage over the size of Kate Moss's femur. How dare you promote an image, they ask, so toxic to our fragile self-esteem?

Small wonder, then, that the fashion industry is defensive on the issue: "Calvin's going to pass on this one." "Donna's too busy with her IPO to talk." "Norma would like to talk, but she's on her way to India." After you; no, after *you*. This past spring, one advertiser, the Omega watch company, made headlines when it announced it would suspend advertising in British *Vogue* partly because the company found models like Trish Goff "skeletal," "anorexic," and "extremely distasteful."

What's going on here? Have the exigencies of the season—the long, lean line of the new evening dress, the cling of double matte jersey, the androgyny of the man's pant—created demand for a model so thin that she must, by definition, be ill? Or worse, a heroin addict? Is the fashion industry, with its constant, restless mandate for something new, in this case a model who doesn't look like whoever came before (curvy Claudia or luscious Cindy), generating higher and higher levels of self-loathing and poten-

tially life-threatening diseases in women? Should fashion spreads that show impossible-to-achieve bodies carry a warning on the bottom of the page: DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME?

Once, these were questions answered only with idle speculation. Though cases of anorexia can be traced as far back as the thirteenth century—at least one historian believes that saints Catherine of Siena and Clare of Assisi suffered from it—most scientists and psychiatrists ignored it as a disorder too rare to merit serious study. (The exceptions were followers of Freud, who speculated that the anorexic rejects food because it reminds her of her father's phallus.) However, as I learned when I asked these questions, scientists are now grappling with the sociological and biological roots of anorexia, forever changing how we think of the disease.

But let's pull focus, for a moment, to examine what is happening in society at large. Fat, or fear of fat, is not, as it turns out, a feminist issue. It's an issue for everyone. Men and women. Would Al Franken's book be a best-seller had it been called *Rush Limbaugh Is an Idiot* instead of *Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot*? To make an insult stick these days, all you have to do is add *fat*.

Even children disdain fat. A study conducted on ten- and eleven-year-olds finds that drawings of people with handicaps, wheelchairs, and missing hands are rated more appealing than drawings of fat people. I tried a similar experiment on a friend: "If you had to choose between being 100 pounds overweight and losing your left hand, which would you choose?"

"The 100 pounds; I could lose it."

"No," I amended the game, "you could never lose it."

Pause.

"I guess I'd give up my hand."

"How about 50 pounds?"

"Could I give a few fingers?"

Feminists cite this broad-based preference for skinniness as proof of a male-dominated society's tyranny over women's bodies. As a good liberal, I hate to disagree with feminist orthodoxy, but I think they're wrong on this one. To begin with, thinness as an ideal has traditionally accompanied periods of greater freedom for women. It was in the 1920s, when we won the right to vote, that skirt lengths went up and the boyish flapper body came into vogue. You see this in popular culture as well. In the movies, curves sexualize and humanize, but the formidable careerists—Faye Dunaway in *Network*, Sigourney Weaver in *Working Girl*, and, more recently, Téa Leoni in *Flirting with Disaster*—are tall, skinny, and angular.

It would be one thing if it were healthier to be fat than thin. It's not. As far back as 60 years ago, scientists found they could extend the outer limits of a rat's life span 33 percent by placing it on a severe calorie-restricted diet. More recently, scientists at the National Institutes of Health have observed the same phenomenon in preliminary work on monkeys, animals whose DNA differs from ours by less than 2 percent. We've yet to see similar experiments on humans, but in places like Okinawa, Japan, where diets are low in calories but nutritionally sound, the incidence of centenarians is as much as 40 times greater as on other Japanese islands.

Nobody is sure why this is, but researchers have observed that the skinny monkeys had a one-degree decrease in body temperature. It's life as a slow roast instead of a fast fry. However it works, it is doubtful that being thin can help very many models live longer; too many of them smoke.

I don't go to the gym three times a week and forgo foie gras in order to live longer. I do it to look better. It's just a happy co-

incidence that vanity and health should go hand in hand—or is it? Could hostility to thinness be nothing more than sublimated envy for the promise of prolonged life? Maybe the art director at his light box picks the shot where Trish Goff looks her thinnest because he's responding to some atavistic knowledge that to be thin is to live longer? Probably not. To him, as to the designer, it's aesthetic. Clothes hang better on thin women. When fat settles in, it renders the body formless, amorphous, like a landscape blanketed in snow. In athletes and very thin people, the endoskeleton, the ligature, and the striae of muscle become visible, reminding us of what a wondrous piece of machinery the human body is.

To find a picture visually arresting is one thing; to try to emulate the model by losing weight is something else altogether. The model is chosen for her job precisely because she does not look like you or me. She is selected because she is extreme—extremely young, extremely pretty, and extremely thin. The more so, the better. (Kirsty Hume stands five feet eleven inches and weighs less than 120 pounds. Such a body is, for most women, unattainable.) But now she is criticized for this extremity—not, by the way, for her youth or her beauty. We all get to be young sometime, and we accept that beauty is genetically determined and beyond our control. The model is criticized for her weight because that is something we can change. Her body becomes a rebuke to all women. Don't show us this, the critics complain, because it makes us want to look the same way. In the broadest sense, this leads women to become unhappy with their bodies; in its extreme, it leads to anorexia nervosa. At least that's the conventional wisdom. But is it true?

Anorexic is a word used so casually and so often that it has come loose from its original, clinical meaning. When I lost twelve pounds on a diet recently, my mother immediately began clucking about anorexia, though I did not meet a single diagnostic criterion for the disease. Besides being significantly under the average weight for a woman her size, a true anorexic is someone who insists on constant weight loss. This standard alone exempts models like Kate Moss. In the four years that she has been a famous model, her weight has remained steady. She's just a skinny girl.

Does making a skinny girl an icon create eating disorders? In the simpleminded pop psychology of books like Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, the answer is yes, but those books do a great disservice to women by throwing around false statistics to buttress an ideology of victimhood. When it was originally published, Wolf claimed that 150,000 women a year die from eating disorders, a figure Gloria Steinem repeated in *Revolution from Within*. If that were true, it would mean ten times as many women die

from anorexia as die in car wrecks. They don't. (In the paperback edition, Wolf deleted the figure and wrote instead that "there are no reliable statistics.") The American Anorexia/Bulimia Association estimates that 1,000 women die from the disease yearly, but even that seems high. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, only 62 died in 1992. Much more significant are the thousands who die of heart disease and hypertension each year, brought on partly by being overweight. As Howard Shapiro, a New York City diet doctor, says, we shouldn't be angry with Madison Avenue for showing us images of beautiful, thin women; we

should be angry with food manufacturers, who mislead consumers by labeling high-calorie foods like jelly beans or bagels "fat-free," or with chain restaurants that serve portions so large they're obscene.

Wolf and others place the blame for eating-disorder deaths on the media, but when you talk to clinicians whose sole practice is the treatment of

anorexics, they say otherwise. Photographs of models may have some influence on young women with eating disorders, but, says Richard Gordon, Ph.D., author of *Anorexia and Bulimia: Anatomy of a Social Epidemic*, "it's a complex, multi-determined disease. It's too simplistic to say, 'It's the culture.'" For an anorexic, the goal of thinness is not to be attractive. It's more about being in control. It comes from family experience, mood disorders. Even sexual abuse can be a factor."

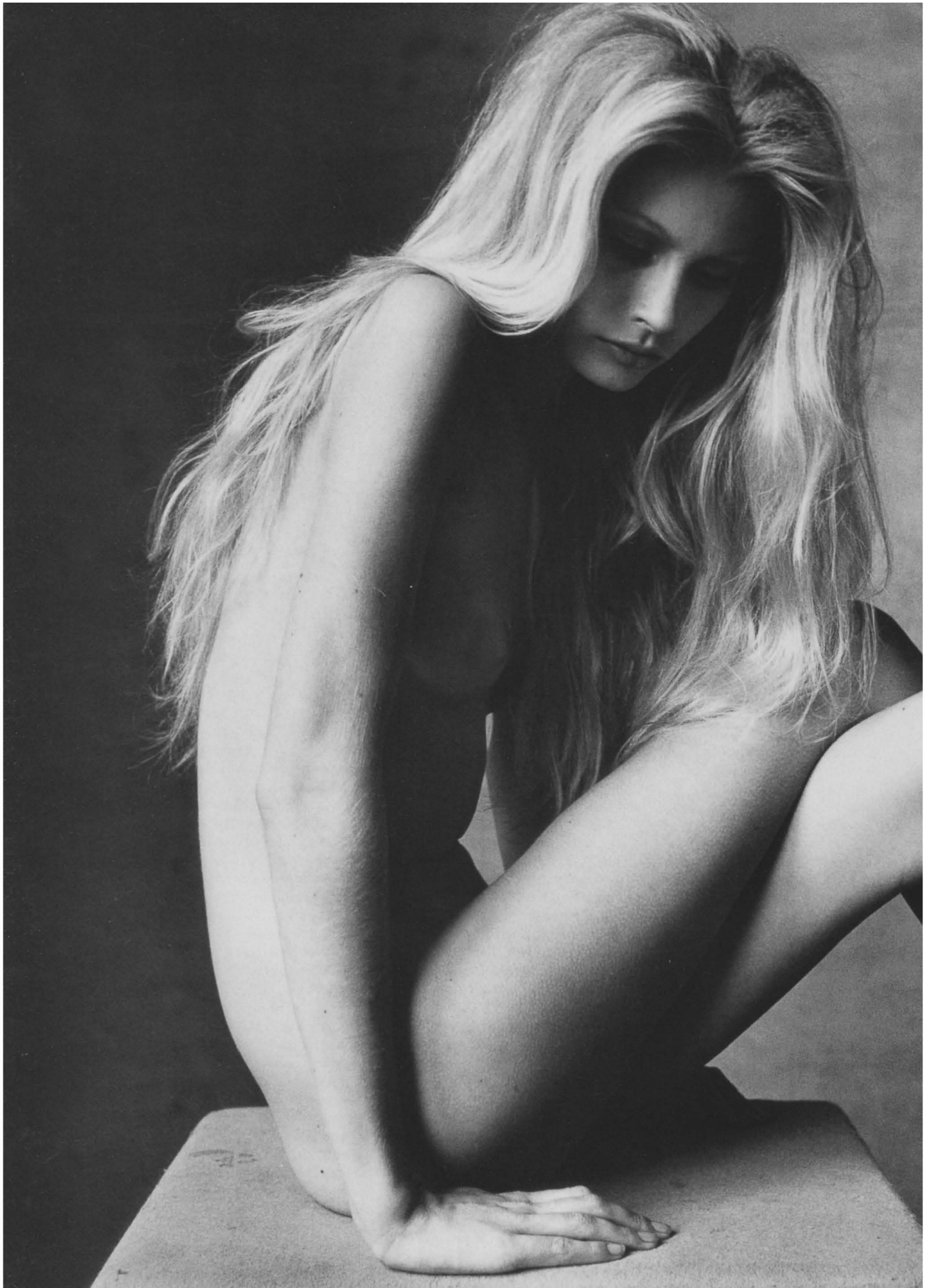
"I really don't believe the media play such a big role in it," agrees Susan Ice, M.D., medical

director of the Eating Disorders Program at the Belmont Center for Comprehensive Treatment in Philadelphia. "Families of anorexics are always trying to blame someone else, but when I work with anorexics, I don't work with things in the culture. What I try to change are family dynamics and the ways people communicate with one another." Ice goes on to say that the problems usually begin during two key phases of life: early adolescence, when hormonal puberty begins, and late adolescence, when girls leave home and go away to college.

Many researchers are beginning to suspect that eating disorders are based more on a biological predisposition toward a personality type rather than societal influences. "This is not a social fad," says Michael Strober, Ph.D., director of the Eating Disorders Program at the University of California in Los Angeles, "this is a serious disease." As scientists in the past decade began to detect genetic influences in such psychiatric disorders as schizophrenia and manic depression, Strober began to wonder if there might not be a similar inherited component to anorexia. Sure enough, his surveys indicated that mothers and sisters of anorexics were ten times more likely to suffer from the disease than members of the general population.

Correlation is not causation, but Strober and others began to wonder whether the personality characteristics of an anorexic—inflexibility, persistent self-doubt, extreme perfectionism, obsessiveness, avoidance of novel experiences, the need for sameness in one's life, and general timidity—might be inherited traits.

Should fashion spreads that show impossible-to-achieve bodies carry a warning on the bottom of the page, DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME?



Copyright © 2012 Condé Nast

The model is chosen for her job precisely because she does not look like you or me. She is selected because she is extreme. Extremely pretty and extremely thin

At five feet eleven and less than 120 pounds, Kirsty Hume embodies the extremity of a fashion model.

Meanwhile, at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Walter Kaye, M.D., was trying to isolate what that biological difference might actually be. "Lots of women diet," he says. "Very few end up at 65 pounds. We wondered if there was some special vulnerability that would lead them to lose that weight."

Kaye found that anorexics tend to have higher-than-normal levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin in their blood. Since low levels of serotonin have been linked to impulsive and violent behavior, it makes sense that elevated levels would accompany the restrained, inhibited behavior of the anorexic. Now Strober, Kaye, and four other researchers are studying anorexics and their sisters to see if they can isolate a genetic marker.

The more I inquired about anorexia and its relationship to a reigning aesthetic, the more abstract the disease came to seem. True, everybody I talked to had an opinion about it, but their opinions all reflected their own interests and biases on the subject. The designers either wouldn't speak or denied it was even an issue. "This is just a made-up story," said Michael Kors. "Everyone is

looking for someone to blame." The feminists wildly overstated the case. And the scientists wanted to reduce everything to the double helix of the DNA molecule. What I wanted to hear was the voices of real women. So I arranged to spend an afternoon at the Renfrew Center, an eating-disorders clinic in the heart of a bucolic nature preserve in Philadelphia.

Women, mostly young ones, spend an average of three weeks at the center (at

around \$950 a day). Their time is taken up with therapy, and their meals are closely monitored—everybody must agree to eat a minimum of 1,500 calories a day. I did have one mystery cleared up by the visit. On a bulletin board in the admittance area, somebody had posted a photocopy of a waif-laden Benetton ad. On it were written comments like "These images piss me off—we're trying to get away from this"; "She looks sickly, meek, vulnerable." When I asked about it, I was told that therapists often encourage patients to write letters to the editors of fashion magazines in order to "find their voice." That explains where some of the angry letters are coming from. I couldn't help noticing, however, that the first comment on this list was "I wish I could look like her."

I spent most of my time there with three graduates of the program, all of whom were on antidepressants and all of whom still struggled with serious issues of self-esteem. Not that you could tell by looking. They appeared perfectly healthy and were normal weight, though all three instinctively reached for pillows on the couch to cover their

stomachs when they sat down. (The director of the center had requested that I not ask them their current weight.) When I asked if any of them thought their problems with food could be traced to the media or images of models, they all answered no, even though when I showed them a photo of Amber Valletta, they agreed that she was "too thin." One woman traced her eating disorder to sexual abuse by her father. Another said she had thrown up her entire life. She got treatment only when her disintegrating marriage caused her to start vomiting—or, as they say at the center, "purging"—five times a day.

"Mostly, I blame myself," said Tamie Beeman, a stunning five-foot-ten-inch, 21-year-old brunette who resembles a young Cindy Crawford but who once had a laxative-abuse problem so acute that she ended up in the emergency room a few times for stomach pain. "When I was growing up, my mother was overweight and my father was mean to her about it. In my head, I connected his cruelty to her weight. If I was thin, I thought, nobody would be mean to me."

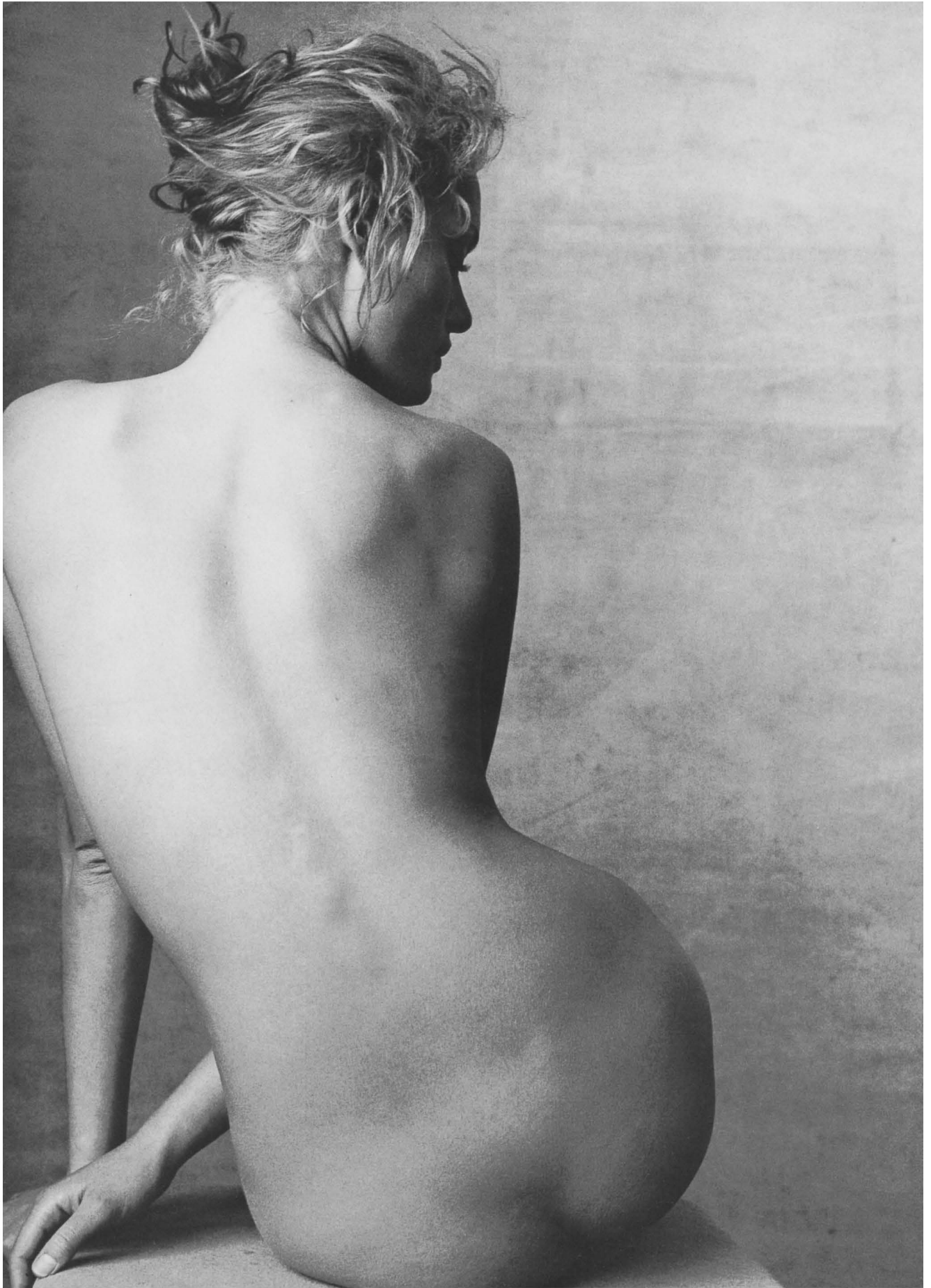
Beeman was supposedly in recovery, but that day she had eaten only one piece of low-fat banana-cream pie and was already beginning to wonder how she would get through a family dinner that evening without eating anything. As she said, "...If you're an alcoholic, you never have to pick up a drink again, but when you have an eating disorder, the issue never completely goes away. You've got to eat."

As I listened to Beeman talk about her own ambivalent relationship to her looks and her body—"People tell me I'm beautiful. I don't believe it myself, but I need to hear it"—I could hear echoes of the thousands of conversations I have had with my female friends. We are a culture of strivers. Whatever we have, whoever we are, it's never enough. There is always someone at the party who is thinner and prettier. If we seem obsessed, it's because beauty, for women, is the promise of happiness. "Look at how deeply it's written into our culture," says Nancy Friday, who took on the subject in her most recent book, *The Power of Beauty*. "It's even in our fairy tales." When asked if she had any regrets in life, even the great Eleanor Roosevelt answered, "I wish I'd been prettier."

If we resent the model on the page, it's because she alone, in the freeze-frame of the moment, is the fairest of them all. (Even if she herself doesn't believe it—as we know from the seemingly disingenuous but de rigueur model quotes "I've never thought I was pretty" or "I was a geek in high school.") The vast majority of us go on to turn our discontent into something positive, like drive, ambition, an M.B.A., or a Ph.D., but the anorexic can't. She converts her angst into the controllable world of calories ingested versus calories expended. It diverts her attention from the larger world to a much smaller one. "I preferred the pain in my stomach," Beeman said, "to the pain of my situation." It seems wrong to hang such a heavy psychic burden on the shoulders (however bony) of this season's model. □

If we
resent the model
on the page,
it's because she
alone, in the
freeze-frame of the
moment, is the
fairest of them all

Amber Valletta,
one of the original
so-called waifs,
is proof that a
willowy body can
still be womanly.
On Amber and
Kirsty: hair,
Orlando Pita for
John Frieda
salons; makeup,
Pat McGrath for
Streeters, U.K.



Copyright © 2012 Condé Nast