



'I THOUGHT THAT DIETING MADE YOU THIN AND THAT THIN MADE YOU HAPPY...'

RACHAEL OAKES-ASH HAD IT ALL — A BEAUTIFUL HOME, ENVIABLE CAREER, FAMOUS BOYFRIEND AND A CELEB-STUDED SOCIAL LIFE. BUT BEHIND THE FAÇADE, SHE WAS TRAPPED IN A BULIMIC NIGHTMARE AND DESPERATELY TRYING TO SWALLOW HER PAIN WORDS RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

'WHILE I HAD NO CONTROL OVER WHAT WAS GOING ON AROUND ME, I TRULY BELIEVED THAT IF I COULD CONTROL MY WEIGHT, CONTROL HOW MANY CALORIES WENT INTO MY MOUTH, THEN I COULD CONTROL MY LIFE'

You can measure the success of the girl by the mules on her toes, that's what I always thought. I wore a delightful pair of Bruno Magli ones to my 30th birthday party. Exquisite square-cut toe in a divine shade of steel raw silk with a swatch of charcoal velvet. A fitting shoe, I felt, for a successful radio announcer, TV presenter and media star on the rise in Australia. I threw a cocktail party for 150 friends in my waterfront home. Girls in equally stunning mules clinked mango daiquiris with men in tuxedos before a multi-million-dollar view of Sydney harbour.

'But behind the image of the self-confessed party girl with the perfect public life was another Rachael. If I had put down my cocktail, stubbed out my cigarette and instead spent my birthday party calculating the hours of my life I had spent obsessing about my thighs when I should have been studying or working or enjoying sex, and if I had added those hours to the number of weeks I spent weighing and measuring in the kitchen and the bathroom and then if I added the combined sum to the number of nights I had spent gorging from my fridge, the total sum would have been way too large a percentage of my 30 years.

HURTING ON THE INSIDE

'The Rachael whom nobody saw behind the image was a young girl who at 17 was anorexic, at 19 was raped, at 20 was bulimic and who'd spent the first year of her 30s with a binge-eating disorder and clinical depression, with her head stuck in the fridge, square-toed mules thrown aside. Between the ages of 17 and 30, I lost over 10st, gained 12st and blamed my body for all that was wrong in my life.

'I was six when I first noticed my thighs, after being rejected from a ballet class because I wasn't graceful enough. I was reminded of them again when I was 11 and was the only girl in primary school to have curves. I continued to bash them, pound them, feed them and starve them in the belief that if my thighs were thin then my life would be perfect — I'd have a boyfriend just as all my

slimmer schoolfriends had, my father would stay home and not travel every week and my mother would be manicured and happy like Carol Brady of my favourite TV show, *The Brady Bunch*.

'At 17 years old and weighing just over 7st, I had dieted myself to almost nothing. I was in my final year at school, in the middle of exams and had been dumped by my first boyfriend. While I had no control over what was going on around me, I truly believed that if I could control my weight, control how many calories went into my mouth, then I could control my life.

'By the time I was 18 going on 19, I had bulimia. I was petrified of putting the lost weight back on. Working out on the treadmill three times a day only half-worked so I tried regurgitation as an alternative method of weight control. Only problem was, I've never really been able to vomit. With a stomach of cast iron, I could easily down enough food to feed a developing nation but, once down, as far as I was concerned that food had nowhere to go but my thighs. Even with my arm halfway down my throat, I could not hurl. The inability to vomit should be a major obstacle to bulimia but it didn't stop me. I took to laxatives instead and spent many a night doubled over in pain as the 20-odd laxatives I had swallowed that evening took effect.

'My binges meant my food intake ranged from half a water cracker to the entire contents of Tesco's aisle six. And, every time, my bingeing would leave me in a state of panic, my inner voices admonishing me for my lack of control and telling me what I knew all along, that I was a pathetic failure who would amount to nothing. Pretty soon the voices would be too loud to ignore and I would find myself downing laxatives again to purge myself. For eight years of my life I binged and purged, fluctuating from a size eight to a size 12 and back again.

'The very nature of a binge means it must be private. Sometimes, I would plan my binge during staff meetings, telephone calls and family ►

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gatherings, dreaming of Viennese shortbread and New York cheesecake when I should have been taking notes or cooing over the latest family addition. Other times, I had no time to plan, pulling my hat down low over my brow and heading for the nearest late-night supermarket like a woman possessed. I stole food from friends, family and the local shops.

To the outside world, though, my life looked just fine. I had the lifestyle I had always craved. I worked for a record company, hanging out with international rock stars on world tours. And I worked on radio, counting down the Top 30 while interviewing big-name celebs such as Janet Jackson and Björk. I was on television and invited to all the opening nights. I lived in a harbour-side home, drove a groovy car, went out with a man who was famous. But inside I knew I wasn't good enough, I felt like a fraud and lived in constant fear of exposure.

I obsessed about my weight, refusing invitations to parties because I was convinced everyone would laugh at my fat – when I did go to them I practically inhaled vodka shots ten to the dozen. I bought into the belief that dieting made you thin, that thin girls are rich, famous, dripping in diamonds and happy, happy, happy. Yet I had been a size eight time and again and that hadn't stopped me thinking I was fat.

REALITY BITES

But with my head constantly stuck in the fridge or down the toilet there came a time when I could no longer convince myself that I was fine. I hadn't been to work for days for fear of colon leakage. My bank account was dry with all the money I had spent on midnight binges, gym memberships, diet pills, liquid meals, and no-fat-no-flavour, might-as-well-be-cardboard treats. Even when my jeans told me I was a size eight I was convinced my mirror told me I was bigger than a Harrods sale. I just didn't know what was normal any more and had lost all perspective on my weight, my body size and my life.

Then I lost my radio job. Next went the television job when my contract was not renewed. Then my boyfriend dumped me and as a result I lost my position as "and guest" on the glamorous invitations he received. Next I lost my sculpted body, since without the job I could no longer afford personal trainers. That meant my designer clothes no longer fitted me and to top it all I had to move out of my harbour-side home. I had no way of defining who I was. I wasn't "Rachael, media star" or "Rachael, the girl with the fabulous home" or "Rachael, so and so's girlfriend". Without my external trappings I had no grasp of the real me. By the time I was 31 (a year after my Bruno Magli-shod cocktail party), I had eaten my way from a size eight to a size 16 and I knew something had to give. It was time for action.

In order for me to stop the bingeing I had to take my power back. I had to stop endowing food with

emotional qualities. The food didn't hate me, the food didn't love me, it didn't invite me to eat it, it had no thoughts about me. It was simply food.

I began by trying to accept my body in all its rippled glory. I struggled with this for months. I threw out all my thin clothes, chucked out my scales, bought clothes that fitted me and every book on binge eating I could find. I spent hours visiting websites committed to helping women obsessed with their bodies and I brought real food into my home. All food was legal, nothing was sinful, I could eat what I wanted so long as I was hungry and stopped eating when I was full. It was terrifying to me but I joined a support group of women who were trying the same thing and we rang each other whenever we were overwhelmed.

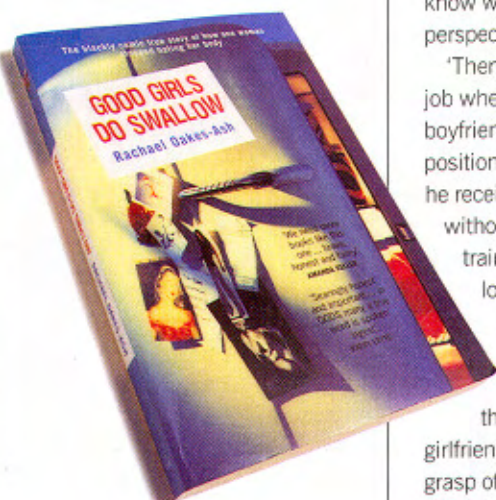
I knew that I had to look at the triggers for my eating so I kept a food diary and wrote about how I felt every time I ate and what happened prior to a binge. I began to realise that I ate for comfort, to swallow anger, for punishment and for reward.

Facing my problems meant learning how to be comfortable in my own skin, turning off the phone, the computer, the television, shutting the fridge door, the alcohol cabinet, cutting up my credit cards and enjoying my own company. It wasn't easy. It was two steps forward and ten back on some days, less on others. I began to understand the word "no" and that limits needed to be placed on my excessive behaviour. I invested a mortgage in therapy and it paid off. The struggle got easier with every positive choice I made until making positive choices became second nature. Of course, there are still days on which I blame my butt for the unfairness of the world. There are moments where I think if only it were thinner then my ex would want me back. But I know that's rubbish and now the days when those moments come are few and far between.

The questions I've had to ask myself are: why is my life considered doomed if I have a fat bum, a wide waist or a flat chest? Why am I forced to try on tiny clothes in changing rooms with interrogation-room lighting? And what woman on her deathbed honestly says, "Gee, I wish I had dieted more"? We need women in shops who are honest about our bodies, who when asked, "Does my bum look big in this?" reply, "Yes, your bum is huge and it's beautiful!"

Of course, I am one of the lucky ones. I abused my body for decades with laxatives and starvation. I could have ended up infertile but I didn't, I could have ended up with no teeth from acid decay but I didn't, my bowels could have been permanently scarred but they aren't. But that's not to say that that doesn't happen. It does.

I wrote *Good Girls Do Swallow* because I figured if I have felt this way then other women have as well. But I have learned to love my beautiful bottom, to understand that changing my body size does not change my life and I have finally realised that the key to a good life is to swallow, not starve. ■



● *Good Girls Do Swallow* (Mainstream Publishing, £7.99) will be published in the UK on 18 October 2001. You can visit Rachael's website at www.lipschtick.com.au.