

# Story of My Weight

Anne Calcagno

Until the other day, I did not know my feet had become so crookedly misshapen and wide. I told myself my socks were unnecessarily thick; the weather too hot; it stood to reason my shoes were squeezing me. That wasn't true. The things I owned or faced hadn't twisted on me: it was me. I had changed without knowing it because I hadn't looked my way for a long time. With my eyes focused away from me, I've lived out my days in an interlude. Because when I suddenly saw the width of my warped feet, my eyes next traveled up the length of my legs, noticing mottled bruises like disheveled leaves rotting on my legs—I have distractingly smashed into things. I moved to cover them, saw the back of my hand, vein-swelled and colorful, too, like a cabbage leaf. In surprise, I touched my face, the skin slack as silk. I was stunned; as if it all happens in one day, the pieces lined up: I am not young.

It feels as if I have always been fat. I married twenty-three years ago, have been overweight for twenty. Over time, I lost all personal perspective, grew overwhelmed in reaction to wide-eyed glances: when you're fat you're a focus. In public places, like the supermarket, they observe you until you can't get away from being your own prisoner. Wheeling my cart around, I peered at as much as I could, before fleeing. I've been an exaggeration of cells, a reduced woman. My short blond hair curls into squat corkscrews, tips up; sometimes, when the perm is running out, I look bristling. Yet, when the harried supermarket cashier glances up, I'm the one whose eyes roll into her lap. This is how it is to be an anomaly. Yet, the point is: the other day I looked at my feet, which are gnarled by widening corns, and it became terribly clear: like other women, conclusively mortal, I am going by degrees. No one is a constant picture.

My disfigurement was a private affair. I ate and many things became mine. My consumption accumulated, giving me the appearance of having more years than my actual age. For many years, with a lot of effort, I still could have peeled off these layers and reached a young person. But it is too late. Time went ahead and did some real altering. I am forty-one and look like hell. I've watched my failure. But my feet, the other day, weren't a continuation of this exaggerated flesh that haunts me. They were life and the broad response of time. I don't know why I saw this.

Age is an invisible train charging through the dark, wearing down the rails. Gradually, I'd been feeling in need of repair. I grew to have more bent space inside. I thought: what should I call this? What have I done? My husband, perhaps two weeks before I looked at my feet, became aware of his own wearing-down. He began to feel his life erasing, tried to leap back from the movement of the train, the foreshortening of horizons. He grappled to stop losing things. He remembered me differently; supple, eighteen, my eyes on the gravel, lifting up very quickly to notice he was there. I was like a leaf. He could have picked me up and taken me anywhere, kept me in his pocket, or pressed in a book.

The other week, a martini in his hand, he said, "You were sweet and your ankles were thin, hon! Now you're close to a heart attack."

"What's happened now?" I asked.

"For Chrissake, Susan, you're wasting your life. Listen, I don't want to watch you do this any more. Lose some weight. I'll buy you dresses. We'll make you into a star, the star of my life, Susan. We've been waiting too long to do this."

"Harry, how did this come out of the blue?" I ventured.

"Don't you understand what I'm saying?" he replied.

Harry is growing bald and his remaining disconnected hairs stood straight up with the lamplight gleaming behind them. He had finished his drink. He stared at me. We were in the middle of a movie episode and I was a girl in bright dresses, and he was a young dapper ready to love. But he was catching on fire with the lamplight gleaming around his head and shoulders.

Harry invested himself in this rejuvenative idea, insistent. He had not talked to me much in a long time, yet now he repeated himself. "You lose some weight. I'll buy you dresses. What about the good old days?" These must have been in the beginning of our marriage. Being a salesman, he started going away. Absence became a pattern. I sought company in food. I grew into a wide plateau; crushing the good old days, he says. I can't remember the good old days.

Five years ago, I did start to work. The newspaper ad looked for

someone "willing to learn." I am a secretary for an escort service, on the top floor of an old undecorated building. They call it a modeling agency. This is the way it's done: hidden and glorified. I believed the disguise for a long time because that's what you see looking up at you in the yellow pages. You have to read the fine print to figure out the code. And I didn't see it. Strangers in town get lonely, perhaps greedy. They call my boss, Rose, willing to pay. I file the accounts. An array of girls in tight colorful dresses and hose, with foreign accents or long hair, always in high heels, comes to the office dependent and warm, wanting more than they have. I give them applications and they preen themselves in front of me as if I am neutral practice for a man. I watch silent but accustomed. I keep thinking I'm to give them something, but I can't find it. I have come to believe in the heart of every woman there is a secretary; she wants to assist. These women are so different from me in their way of serving; each is a bird full of plumes and her red fingernails hand me back the forms. But she is a secretary. And I am.

I tried to explain this idea to Harry a while back. "Hell, call them something better than secretaries. You can't get help like that from Kelly Girls!" His hand slaps his knee with gusto. In the beginning, I was happy because of the way he enjoyed his own jokes.

"It's serious," I said. "So many servants in the world."

"We all need people to rely on, sweet cakes. That's what you forgot about when you decided to become tight as a rock."

When I found out the girls weren't models, I was amazed. Harry visited me at the office a couple of times to peek at photos. "Act like I'm an important account," he said.

In the meantime he had a few salesman's affairs, things in motels he rarely informed me of. He was explaining his decision to help me regain the shape he met. Upset, he confessed, he could not make love to shapeless flesh; he pursued women with angles and curves until it bored him. "I can't remember one face," he said. "You know that's pretty sad."

"Why did you tell me that?" I said.

"Because when you try to understand yourself you need a confidante. When you tell someone else your sins, you've got a responsibility to change. Now you'll make me change, hon."

"I never wanted to know everything about you," I said. "Can't you see what I do to keep myself protected?"

Harry has always wanted the woman he loves to be so riveting that the envious stares of others around him will, like a magnetic force, keep him gravitated to her. I grew into a monstrosity. But the way they stared at me spun him away.

After Harry confessed, I couldn't get rid of what he had told me, and how my weight had ruined my life. Two weeks later, on a glazed and flat day, my feet caught my attention. I stared. Minute by minute I grew amazed, because my realization was unprecedented. I paused for some time. Looking at my feet, I saw that age had bitten into them. It didn't appear hesitant to finish its meal. And I don't know why but then I knew that my hands, my eyes, my cartilage—all of me—was tied close to the same sounds and ways of others, held to the globe. I am what always happens in time, and it's so magnanimously unlike my own failings. I know now I am in common. The only thing is: I do not want to become the shape of a woman Harry chased.

If I am ever thin I will not have thrown off dead weight; my husband will have pressed it into a thin red lining right under my skin; that is what memory is like. Harry stormed into our house with yesterday's picture in mind and stuck it on me. I am very full and he has decided I'm just beginning. But no one can be emptied out. Never before has my aloneness been made so clear. There are other fat women like me; I see them in the pastry aisles. But I am in myself alone.

Harry has been out of town, on a job, for three days. At lunchtime, I went to the Red Cross shoe store and selected bright green comfort-fit pumps. Their sharp little heels protruded like horns from two tender cocoons. It was me and the geriatric ladies all belonging in the store together, relishing our colorful spoiling of our troubled feet. Things have blown open around me as if I had suddenly stepped over the horizon into a rushing wind: it lifts my hem, pulls my hair into disorder, swirls up my sleeves. Walking to work in this pictured disorder I've realized I want someone to talk to, to explain this disarray. I feel newly in existence, terribly sensitive, sick of confinement. What is this? An older woman. Unlike before, I'm impelled to watch myself as a part of everyone.

I know the women Harry slept with were likely to spend an hour getting ready to go out for coffee. He looked for this, having found me incapable of it. It wasn't for him to see that their ardent self-description is an embroidery of hunger. When these women are as young as the escorts I work with, they feel the pulse of their generation clicking in their heels, and they toss and turn looking for something. They stretch into life like branches, to grow. My husband, I am sure, never sensed this feeling in them; instead, he felt out his advantage. Their limbs were octopus tentacles he could feast on. And when they were older didn't the women still seem to be looking for an answer? By habit, they allow their men to imagine that they are waiting to be shown life. The men

become accustomed mostly to devouring them blind. The women don't ask for change. They don't like change. They want to remain beautiful and wanted. Over the years it takes more and more time.

Today, a girl walked into the office, rather tall in a red coat. Her hair was bleached, curling down her shoulders, her nose pointed, her mouth plump as a rosebud. She reminded me of a picture of the women at Louis XVI's court in France, women in high hair and lace, with red cheeks, women decadent in their life, who at the end of the world said: "Let them eat cake."

I wondered if she knew about any of this. "You think women understand the world less than men?" I asked.

She looked at me and her eyes turned very thin. "Are you kidding? Every one of those men had a mom, and if those moms hadn't been preparing men for the world the men wouldn't be able to handle anything." She looked at her red fingernails. "It takes a woman to know," she said. Then she leaned close to me. "I know how to baby men, too," she said.

"Don't do it," I said.

"Shit. I don't have much time. Is this an interview?" She pulled her hose up, tightening them, first up her ankles, then along her thighs.

"They look at photos before the interview," I said.

"I look good," she said. Then Rose called the girl into her office.

I made a collect call to my friend Rema, whom I've known since childhood. She listens without needing preliminaries though she lives far away. "Rema, thank God you're home. Can you listen now?"

"Well, tell me."

"It just hit me like a ton of bricks that I haven't given myself a look in years. Who've I been?"

"You've been living, honey," Rema says. "Where did you get this idea you have to stare at yourself all the time, to live? That can hold you up. Plenty of people go nuts."

"No. We don't have this idea straight, most of us: you have gold running in your veins, up to your heart; if you see that, you begin to catch it."

"Some people might feel that way," she says. "Sure some do. What's been happening?" Her voice is patient as lake water.

"I can't understand myself why everything has changed." I say. "Everything seems on fire. It makes me so nervous." I just looked at my feet.

Rema says, "That's how it is: you can't tell when the next thing is going to happen."

After work I like to walk a few extra blocks to the bus for exercise.

People are so busy running home, I'm unnoticed. Today, the yellow leaves were falling and breathing themselves into the wind, mingling a bitter scent of regret. I've noticed each winter comes by advance of many tantrums; the trees toss their heads, the grasses shake, disheveled, blown up, turned brown. Today, the leaves scurried over, wildly dancing between my feet while an endless blue blanket looked down, self-contained. All at once, something darted at my feet. I pressed myself up against a wall. My heart nearly leapt out of my mouth. It was a squirrel now staring at me, flicking its tail, a yard away, raising itself on its hindquarters. It began to gesture at me by way of masticating though it had nothing in its jaw. Two others ran up and all three performed this communication, chewing a mock meal, under the understanding that I had something to give them. And I do understand hunger. But I had nothing for them. On the bus going home I saw animals in people's faces: a lynx, goats, the flamingo, a saddened spaniel. But they won't show their hunger.

It saddens me to know I walked around for years in trepidation of myself without knowing or remembering about this hunger in others. I tried to hide my own but they saw it on my body. I peered out a small window which never opened. Every day circled me like gauze, and I was mummified into the years. My husband called it a disgrace. My heart closed like a little stone. Harry is ravenous for taut flesh yet now age flicks him around in its large jaw, tugs at his skin, decomposes his bones. He is amazed, denying so much hunger.

I never had the brazen confidence to deny life's big appetite, but I never thought I'd understand it, either. Yet life and time are always tapping in your ear to confide in you. Occasionally, I would be startled by sounds like a foreign song; vague, remarkable music. I placed it far away. But chords were rising through me, to describe me. This is how potential approaches you: in no one else's language. If you grasp it, other people sense it. It begins to announce itself. Like a song, you can't exactly say you see it. Mine rose up through my feet.

I looked down at myself and saw the silent onslaught of years, the wide general thing represented in my feet. This isn't my failure. I have a double dimension of weight: one fat made me hide, but this can have grace because it's everyone's mirror.

The night before Harry left on his present trip, he visited the supermarket. Lettuce, trim-fit dinners, broccoli, tomatoes, celery and crackers returned with him. He looked as happy as an auctioneer. He slapped his hands together, grinned: "Here we go! Now we're ready, aren't we?"

It was as if a beetle began crawling inside my stomach.

"The thing I want to tell you, honey, is that this isn't just about taking off pounds; it's about building a whole new spirit. A spic-and-span streamlined one, Susie. I can hardly wait."

I looked straight at him. "What I'm concerned with is my spirit. But you can't get it with celery. How could you go looking in the supermarket?"

Harry's eyes retracted quick as crabs. "You're a coward?" he asked me. "Are you? Shit, you're the biggest disappointment in my life." He turned around to the kitchen sink and spat in it. Then he grabbed the porcelain edge as if he was saving it from falling off the wall. "You're going to ruin our life," he shouted.

I have my age. It climbs around my hips and pulls them down into more and more chairs. All my veins are pulsing more fiercely, and this work, through time, has slackened my skin, interspersed it with magnets and marbles. This is an accumulation I must tend to. Life surreptitiously crowded in me. I want to walk through my markings, to pick them up as on a cafeteria line, then to have so full a dish I'll be strummed by it. Age is a sort of overeating.

I've noticed many of the escorts from my office fear life will pass them by. They fling themselves into the world to be touched. Life has walked through me and, like a town square, I have been mute through the walkings, have been the vessel, not the subject. I see that though I did not pay attention to the way life was changing me, I cannot say it passed me by. It passes no one by. I must try to tell them this. Age draws itself on the flesh and time becomes palpable. You can tell yourself certain things did not happen and let your mind become a blank slate, but the flesh won't play chameleon. It stabilizes you, and imprints the artifacts of your route; they're yours.

I am rising, heavy and powerful as an old seal, independent in my digestion, awake.

**Calcagno, Anne 1957–**

**PERSONAL:**

Born November 14, 1957, in San Diego, CA; citizenship: U.S. and Italian; daughter of Louis (in business, also a consultant) and Kathryn (a teacher) Calcagno; married Leo Michael Fitzpatrick,

September 7, 1986; children: Jessamyn C., Lucien

G. *Ethnicity:* "White/mixed." *Education:* Williams College, B.A. (cum laude), 1979; University of Montana, M.F.A., 1984. *Religion:* Presbyterian. *Hobbies and other interests:* Gardening, wind surfing, travel writing.



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**CAREER:**

*La Repubblica* (newspaper), assistant reporter and simultaneous translator, 1981-82; School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, instructional associate, 1990-93; DePaul University, Chicago, lecturer, 1992-93, began as assistant professor, became associate professor of English, 1993-2005, and past

director of Writers Reading Series; Scholl of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, teacher of writing, 2005—. North Park College, lecturer, 1989-91; American Conservatory of Music, lecturer, 1989-91; Northwestern University, guest writer-in-residence, 1993. Ragdale Foundation, guest writer in residence, 1990-94, 1998, 2003; Lake Forest College, guest artist, 1992-95; Urban Gateways, artist in residence, 1991-92. Guild Literary Complex, member of advisory board, 1991-94; judge of writing contests; public speaker; guest on radio programs; gives readings from her works.

**MEMBER:**

Poets and Writers, Authors Guild, Authors League of America, Associated Writing Programs, Society of Midland Authors, Eritrean Youth Association (member of board of directors).

**AWARDS, HONORS:**

Fellow, National Endowment for the Arts, 1989; Illinois Arts Council, fellowship 1991, grants, 1991, 1994, literary award, 2003, for the short story "What's Yours?"; first prize, academic/literary category, Chicago Women in Publishing, 1991, for the story "Patricia's Jaw"; grants from Illinois Humanities Council and Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, 1992;

James D. Phelan Award, San Francisco Foundation, 1993, for *Pray for Yourself*; Silver Medal, best travel book of the year, *Foreward*, for *Travelers Tales: Italy*.

### WRITINGS:

*Pray for Yourself* (short stories), TriQuarterly (Evanston, IL), 1993.

(Editor) *Travelers Tales: Italy*, O'Reilly Publishers, 1998, 2nd edition published as *Italy: True Stories of Life on the Road*, Travelers' Tales (San Francisco, CA), 2001.

Work represented in anthologies, including *American Fiction*, edited by Louise Erdrich, Michael White, and Alan Davis, Birch Lane Press (New York, NY), 1991; *Fiction of the Eighties*, edited by Reg Gibbons and Susan Hahn, TriQuarterly (Evanston, IL), 1991; *The Penguin Book of Italian American Writing*; and *The Milk of Almonds*. Contributor of short stories, essays, articles, and reviews to periodicals, including *New City Literary Supplement*, *North American Review*, *Slackwater Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *River Oak Review*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Rhino*.

### ADAPTATIONS:

Calcagno's work has been adapted for the multimedia performances "Something like a Risk," performed at *Stories on Stage*, in Chicago, IL, at Organic Theater, 1992; and "Story of My Weight," presented at *Lexis/Praxis*, in Chicago, at DePaul University, 1994.

### SIDELIGHTS:

Anne Calcagno once commented: "Is it the need to hallucinate, to lose oneself, to pretend to have escaped one's body? I'm not sure. But to enter the invented space becomes a need, as far as I can figure it, for a fiction writer. It happened when I was seven that I lost myself hunting for a diamond in the woods, a diamond on paper, in ink-made woods. My inventions became dear and real, worth the chase. Almost every response to my writing from high school on should have shut me up, though. The criticism certainly humbled me, which is good, since that is good preparation for this literary trip.

"Stubborn, perhaps with the right 'grain of stupidity' that Flannery O'Connor believed a fiction writer needs, I've kept writing. I've been employed as a proofreader, a copy editor, a copywriter, a simultaneous translator, a journalist, a waitress, an artist in the schools, an aerobics instructor, a grants writer, and an arts administrator. I became a tenured faculty member at DePaul University in Chicago." More recently Calcagno added: "In 2005 I resigned and joined the MFA-in-writing faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago."

In her original essay, Calcagno wrote: "Winning a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and then an Illinois Arts Council fellowship gave me confidence against the odds and the final opportunity to finish a short story collection, *Pray for Yourself*, published in 1993. I cannot be more grateful for having received public funding. It is grievous that our country so undervalues art. We will pay for this in some way as a society; this is certain.

"My first novel [not yet published], *Struck by Dina*, tells the story of a Italian family's entry into and departure from Eritrea, one of the African regions colonized by Italy. Two large Italian migrations in the twentieth century (later and smaller than the wave of immigration to the United States) were to the Horn of Africa and to Saudi Arabia. Little has been written about the connections between this African and Arabian journey; hence my interest. In the *New York Times Book Review* and elsewhere, the relative paucity of Italian-American literature has been noted (as opposed to the prolific Italian-American output in film and the visual arts), So I put a solid Italian name into the fray. We'll see."

Anne Calcagno's first novel, *Love Like A Dog*, set in contemporary Chicago, won First Place in the category First Novel from the New Generation Indie Book Awards. It was also a Finalist in their category: Animals/Pets Books. *Love Like a Dog* was also awarded the Bronze Medal in the Great Lakes Regional Fiction category from the 15th Annual Independent Book Publisher Awards. And furthermore it received an Honorable Mention in the General Fiction category of the San Francisco Book Festival, which is part of the DIY Convention (Do it Yourself awards in Film, Music & Books). *Love Like a Dog* was also a shortlisted Finalist in Inkubate's novel competition (1,200+ submissions, judged by Mary Gaitskill) for which Calcagno will attend the Summer Literary Seminar in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2013.

She is at work on a second novel *Struck By Dina* about the Italian colonization of East Africa. For stories in her collection *Pray For Yourself*, Anne received the San Francisco Foundation Phelan Literary Award, as well as an NEA and two Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowships. Her fiction has appeared in *The North American Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Epoch*, and a number of anthologies, including *Don't Tell Mama!*, an anthology of Italian-American writing, *In the Middle of the Middle West: Literary Nonfiction from the Heartland* and *Whose Panties Are These? More Misadventures from Funny Women on the Road*. She won an Illinois Arts Council Literary Award for her story 'What's Yours?' published in *Other Voices*. She has given readings and lectures throughout the country.

A dual national, Italian and American, Anne is also editor of *Travelers' Tales: Italy*, which won Foreward's Silver Medal for Best Travel Book of the Year. Her features and travel writing have appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Italian American Historical Society*, *New City*, and *The Chicago Sun-Times*.

A member of The Authors Guild and on the faculty of the MFA in Writing Program at the School in the Art Institute of Chicago, Anne lives in Chicago, is married, and the mother of two tireless young people. She can be seen about town, walking her pit bull and German shepherd.

