

DON'T KEEP DOING WHAT YOU'VE  
ALWAYS BEEN DOING

**A**DA DEPARTED THE island of fat as she arrived: with little fanfare and for her very own reasons. Edited, she was still luscious. Thin again is not simply thin.

The journey had begun in the usual way. She was approaching a twenty-fifth college reunion, where she would see the man who got away, a man Ada hadn't seen in twenty years.

If that had been all, she might have dieted for a week, then figured out a reason not to go to the reunion. She did not wish to show herself to that particular man a hundred pounds heavier than she had been when they were in love. But that was not all.

She coveted, wanted back, her young brown body, and she mistook that for wanting back her young brown beau. It was a serendipitous mistake, and she went with it.

She began a diet and made an appointment to discuss gastric bypass. She liked backup plans. She didn't exactly want to go under the knife. But truth be told, she wasn't completely repulsed by the idea of being passively sculpted into someone more acceptable. All her other necessary conformity had been achieved by too much hard work.

She had thought she was too tired and too old for hard work. But the invitation had arrived, bringing with it a renewed willingness to go for it, even if she didn't get it, be it a smaller size or a new man.

It startled her to discover hidden within her half-century heart a spirit of conquest. She did not numb herself to that spirit's flutterings. She embraced them. They were all she had to embrace.

Lucius was gone. Lucius was always gone. Lucius was her husband, and he lived at work. If Lucius had been present, she might have embraced him. But he was not. Ada was lonely.

To be different, she had to do different. She knew this. So many times she had warned her daughters, "Crazy means keep doing what you've been doing and expect a different result."

She wasn't crazy. She was ready to work. She called the number in the bariatric surgery ad. She punched in the digits, hoping that she wouldn't need surgery, but wanting to be prepared if the pounds proved unmovable. She left her name and address on a recorder with a request for brochures.

She would be fit and fifty. She would not succumb to mammydom, or mommydom, or husband-come-undonedom. She would have change.

And she would have it in a relative hurry.

The day she committed herself to her goal was in every sense an ordinary day. Just as on every other weekday, she read her mail late in the afternoon, when she first came in from work. Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, this meant when she came in from KidPlay, the day-care center where she was founder,

director, and chief baby changer. Tuesday and Friday, this meant when she came in from tending her increasingly helpless parents. She liked to face the mail before she showered off the germs and finger paint of small children, and the drool and piss of old people.

Most of the mail was bills and pleadings and invitations. She liked to read the bills and begging letters with her out-in-the-world armor on, gray Juicy sweats and a Burberry raincoat. By the time she got to the invitations, her coat was off, she had washed her hands, and she had a sip of cola in her mouth. The trials of her day were over. Tribulations would come again with the sun, but well-earned rest came with the dark. She usually saved the most promising envelope for last. This day, that was a thick navy envelope edged in silver. The colors of her alma mater. Hampton. She tore open the envelope carefully, over-washed hands wielding a tarnished silver knife.

First the announcement of the reunion, then more. With a long, bold stroke, the chairman of the reunion had struck out his typed name and written, in royal blue ink, “Honey Babe” and “It’s been too long.”

Half an hour later, as the shower water sprayed down on her shoulders, she replayed the moment of opening the letter, seeing then decoding the scrawl over and over again: “Honey Babe, it has been too long.”

The words had tickled. Matt Mason didn’t talk like that. But he had. Now. After twenty-odd years, a pen-on-paper wink. And it came from her first love. It came from the first man she had shown her body to. A sound between a chuckle and a giggle, a sound she had not made in a decade, had percolated up

from her bronze throat and out her plum lips. That gut laugh emboldened her. She laughed again in the shower, remembering.

The shower ended. Old age was coming. Night was coming first. She stood naked before the full-length bathroom mirror. She gazed at the ass in the glass. She didn't want the body she saw.

This body was largely unknown to her. She had never pushed this body to its limits of exertion or its limits of pleasure. She had rarely looked at it. She shivered at the unfamiliarity of her own fat, flesh, and skin.

She had twelve months to get a body she might want to see, want to know, want to show, want to share. Time enough.

She took the first steps as many take them—with high hopes. At the outset of a journey, there is nothing unusual about high hopes. The unusual would come later, after she stayed on the path long enough to discover, when she had walked it to its end, when she wore single-digit sizes again, that journey's end was nowhere near where she thought it would be.

The day she set out, she felt virtuous. There was no one to warn Ada Howard, First Lady of the Full Love Gospel Tabernacle, wife of Preach (otherwise known as Lucius Howard), mother of the twins, Naomi and Ruth, and ninth-generation Nashvillian, that the path she was walking was more dangerous than she could have imagined when she cracked the spine of her new moleskin journal and wrote, "*My Diet Book.*"

MAKE A PLAN: SET CLEAR,  
MULTIPLE, AND CHANGING GOALS

**A**FTER THE WORDS “My Diet Book,” she wrote: “Rule 1: Don’t keep doing what you’ve always been doing.” Then she wrote: “Rule 2: Make a plan.” Her immediate plan was to weigh less than two hundred pounds. She didn’t know how much she weighed, but pushing on the seams of her size 3X sweats, she knew it was something way over two hundred.

She didn’t think she could bear to know the precise number.

Like she couldn’t bear to know if Preach was cheating, or with whom. There was some funny—or not-so-funny—stuff going on. He’d bought a new car. He’d lost weight. He had a new haircut. He was gone all the time. He never wanted to have sex. And now he wanted to put a shower in his office, and he wanted the congregation to pay for it. He had to be cheating. And he had to have lost his mind. But she didn’t have proof. She had suspicions.

For years he had adored her, and she had adored him. And then they hadn’t. She tried to remember the last time she and her husband had had sex. It would have been a holiday. One of

the birthdays. Valentine's Day. Their anniversary. There were years they only had sex six times.

And there were years they'd had sex six days a week, sometimes two or three times a day. Twenty-five years of feast and famine.

And every day of them faithful. At least on her part. Always. Good marriages are not open. Good women do not cheat. Ada was a good woman. And she was allowing herself to be inspired, uplifted, pulled forward, by the possibility of flirting with, then doing more than flirting with, Matt Mason.

She wished her sisters were still alive. Glo, and Mag, and Evie weren't with her anymore. If they were, they would be near to seventy. Glo and Mag barely saw fifty-five; Evie, twenty years older than Ada, just made sixty. Her mama said, "Evie went to take care of the babies."

Ada wondered how many lovers, if any at all, her sisters had had. Big and born to boss, Evie had been a man magnet. But not one of her sisters had ever said anything to Ada about tiptoeing into cheating situations, or if they had even known anything about it.

Ada wanted to know something about it. She shocked herself by smiling as she contemplated the fringes of the possibilities.

Ada had never been with another man. It was now or never—this one or no one.

She already had a dispensation—of sorts—for Matt Mason. Preach thought she had slept with Mason before she and Preach had met, and had already "forgiven her for it." Except she hadn't actually slept with Matt Mason. Matt Mason was unfinished business.

Unfortunately, Matt Mason liked the kind of woman she used to be, small with big breasts and a big, but not too big, booty. Truth be told, that was Ada's favorite shape too. Or had been. Till she married Preach and started liking great-big.

Preach thought big was sexy. His for-real drill Sergeant daddy was forty the day his only son was born to a country girl who had a little bit of meat on her bones and hailed from a corner of Arkansas time forgot. Even though Preach was born in 1960, just in time to be Queenie's first-anniversary present to Sarge, Preach was old-school.

Matt Mason was something else. He was western. He was international. He was a black man not rooted to the South, not dripping in blues, or blues transported and transformed in the North into sweet soul music. Matt Mason was jazz and funk and hip-hop. He was spare and spacious and modern. He was Miles Davis in Paris, he was Serena Williams at Wimbledon.

Matt Mason was raised in Colorado by his born-Negro parents, black professors, who sent him to nearly lily-white public schools. He took naps beneath a quilt lovingly made from old protest T-shirts featuring Che Guevara and Stokely Carmichael and a raised fist. Matt Mason rocked the New Black Aesthetic. After graduating, with Ada and Preach, from Hampton University, he went to UC Berkley for graduate school. Having lived most of his adult life in Seattle teaching at one U, he now lived in Los Angeles teaching at another. He practiced capoeira, a Brazilian fighting art developed by slaves, almost like a religion. He liked skinny women.

Preach dismissed Mason as a "colored internet-ual" or a

“wonky black nerd.” Ada didn’t dismiss Matt Mason. She needed him.

Ada was scared. And Ada was woman enough to know that the only thing that always conquers fear is real good loving.

For years Ada had feared four things: blindness, death, leg loss, and clutter. Mag and Evie and Glo—Ada had lost them all to “the sugar.”

“One out of four black women over forty-five have diabetes.” Some white woman had spat that statistic at Ada at a cocktail party, and it had terrified her.

Ada didn’t want to be one of the afflicted women. And yet somehow she was small the day she buried her first sister, and she was large by the time she buried her third.

Some of it was that her mama went chasing her father down Whisky Road after burying her third daughter, and started pretending she wasn’t Ada’s mother. Her mother was still alive, but Ada was an orphan.

Ada didn’t blame her mother. Ada put on a bit more fat, like she was putting on big-girl clothes, or pulling up her socks, and got on with it. Soon enough, Ada was proud of being one of the large ladies.

Large ladies ran the church. Large ladies ran the neighborhoods. She knew down in her bones part of the reason she was as big as she came to be was that *she wanted to be*. She admired great big women. When she was small, she had coveted their authority, their beauty, and their significance. Then she got some for her own damn self.

Now large worried her—two ways to Sunday, twinned ways to Sunday. If she stayed large, her daughters were more likely



to get large. And scared as she was of diabetes, she was six times more scared of her daughters getting diabetes.

For reasons bigger than getting back at your husband, or being afraid of blindness, Ada needed to want a man who liked skinny women.

So she did. She invited herself to want Matt Mason. At fifty, Ada had thirty years of only giving her body to one man, and one man only, behind her. Now she had too few or too many, but certainly not the right number, of years of giving her body to that same one man ahead of her. She wanted to stray. Once. At least.

She didn't want to go to her grave not knowing the difference between her man and men. She didn't want to lead her daughters to Sugarland, or Strokeland, or even just Babyand-NoManland.

She would shift herself into a more helpful shape. She had shifted shape before. She was not a complete diet virgin. In the past, she had tried to use her willpower. Ada had a lot of willpower. She would pick a diet, almost at random, and she would stick to it almost perfectly, for a week or maybe two. When it didn't work, she would stop abruptly, eat something to comfort herself in defeat, think about big Botero sculpture-women and Hawaiian princesses, and wonder if society wasn't just conditioning her into thinking she should be smaller when she was meant to be large.

Except she wasn't sure she was meant to be large. And she knew she wasn't meant to be suspicious. But she was both.

She wrote down four names. She knew her husband, and she knew their world. One of the names made her sick. One of

the names made her want to jump off the roof. One of the names made her want to cry. And one made her scratch her head and shrug. She inked over the names.

She would use what she had to get what she wanted. She would look like the kind of woman who could find out her husband was cheating and not have half the world believe, even if it wasn't true, that her body was the reason. She'd be somebody the prospect of having to go on a date wouldn't devastate. Be a body less likely to go blind or lose a leg. Be a body that was less likely to orphan or burden her daughters. Capture Matt Mason. Sin. Confess—to God, not her husband. Return to her marriage recommitted.

Ada had a plan. She didn't know the details yet, but she had an intended destination, Fitland, and some good reasons to get there, Naomi and Ruth; and as far as she was concerned, that was a plan.

Having a plan, even a crazy, not fully formed plan, let Ada breathe deeper if not easier.

Reality had Ada flummoxed. Reality had her scared. Reality had her boxed in. She had never had another lover, and she was afraid Preach was cheating. Her girls were getting plump, and she was getting fatter. Her long gaze into the bathroom mirror had revealed a pretty brown and beached whale.