

## Reducing

They called it reducing. The term, a bastardized colloquialism lost in translation by the woman who made the morning talk show rounds hocking her book about French women never getting fat.

“What would this French woman think if she knew about my secret dream to jump out of a life-sized cake?” Veronica said out loud as she read each page. She had read the book three times straight through, a luxury afforded during slow times at her museum docent job. Plus her father was just rich enough to pay her monthly rent and her mother just thin enough to encourage Veronica to whittle her body into a shape a little more svelte.

Veronica’s mother enjoyed calling everything without a noticeable shape “svelte.” Each winter she said, “Oh look, Veronica, at the svelte aspen trees. Aren’t they lovely this time of year?” Or, “I hope they don’t recreate those svelte buildings for the World Trade Center memorial.” Or even, “I miss the old rotary dial phone I grew up with, the anticipation of waiting for the dial to click back to zero before my call went through and that svelte phone cord that curved around my equally svelte waist. That was back in the day when everyone loved Susan Anton. Did you ever see that one movie where she unapologetically towered her svelte frame over her leading man? That would’ve never happened in your grandmother’s time, what with everyone worshipping pudgy little Marilyn Monroe. I’m surprised she didn’t crash clean through the grate with her chunky legs in that one movie. You know, where she wears the white dress and everyone goes crazy for her like they’ve just seen an angel with no concern that she probably had a major thyroid problem.”

Veronica and her mother mostly talked about being svelte, celebrities and their botched plastic surgeries, and how gratuitous a gesture for Starbucks to announce their calories on every dessert.

“We all know the perils of frosting. It’s a pity a corporate headquarters somewhere felt the need to share their most gruesome details,” her mother said as she and Veronica removed a birthday cake flavored cake pop off its white paper stick before dissecting it with the skill of a surgeon trained to operate on miniatures.

The two women cut the round ball in half. They kept halving the halves until they were left with tiny pink confetti-sized confections.

“What will Roger think of you splurging like this? Naughty us.”

Veronica’s mother had a way of injecting herself not only into Veronica’s body image, but also her relationships. Veronica had already vowed not to over share this new man. She had changed the rules without advanced notice that Roger would escape the ruthless mother/daughter gossip tag team. Every other short-lived relationship got pulled through what Veronica referred to in her head as, “The Wringer,” a ritual of one shared cake pop between two women carved into an array of microscopic minicakes as her mother prodded and dutiful Veronica, gumming each morsel into a sticky froth, supplied the answers.

Roger was not Wringer material. In a downtown gallery he curated pottery from ancient places Veronica pretended to know about. He wore unfashionable glasses and took a homemade sandwich for lunch. He did not know about Veronica’s secret dream to get a job as a lady that jumps out of cakes at bachelor parties. More than anything Roger was off-limits because he called Veronica “Ronnie” and no one, not even her father on

their father/daughter dinner dates when she was still young enough to not comprehend the calories in an ice cream sundae, had ever called her that.

“Let’s go to the movies, Ronnie,” Roger said.

He didn’t ask why she only pretended to eat her popcorn before bumping into her own elbow to spill the buttery mess. He didn’t ask why Veronica, Ronnie to him though they had only gone on three dates and only kissed twice, sipped from her Diet Coke instead of slurping the paper cup down to the free refill line. Roger didn’t ask why Ronnie thought she needed to lose weight to jump out of a cake, or why she would want a job jumping out of a fake, hollow cake wearing a bikini to flounce around a stag party like she was there to be eaten more than adored.

Roger didn’t even ask why Veronica whispered right before the first preview, “If I hold onto your arm half-way through it’s only because I might float away.”

The movie centered around a family who moved to an obviously haunted house: unaware husband, wife whose dishes during the night disorganized themselves, a little girl who talks to her invisible playmate and a cat who runs away. Veronica’s breath sped up during each scene, but not because of the possibility that a portal to hell hid in the family’s basement.

She was reducing.

If Veronica could only train her body to slim those hips another half inch off each side and suck in an imperceptible gut one more fourth inch...at 104 and a half pounds Veronica needed to reduce two more pounds to feel svelte. During each movie she wanted for a superfluous shot of a bachelor party and a lady jumping out of a cake. The shot never came. She studied each film, waiting to compare her body with the body of a

woman bold enough, some who didn't understand the honor of the job might even say desperate enough, to jump out of a cake. Her gallery co-workers already worried about her prominent collarbone and the way she complained of pain if she sat too long in a desk chair without padding. But Veronica longed to be jump-out-of-a-cake-thin. She pondered her lifelong goal to wear a white fringe bikini and a jaunty white cowboy hat, a cowboy hat that looked sleek and tasteful the way Olivia Newton-John wore one with those white over the knee boots in the closing scene of *Xanadu*.

The more she fantasized about jumping out of a cake like a muse come to life, even the interrogative quality of Elk's Lodge florescent lighting revealing no beginning riptide of cellulite pulling her exquisite body towards middle-age, she held tight to Roger, her three date boyfriend.

"Oh, Ronnie, don't be afraid. It's just a movie," he said as she closed her eyes and clawed the sleeve of his black T-shirt. "At least one of these hapless dimwits will survive so they can make a sequel. You know what I do when I get scared?" he whispered, unconcerned with the moviegoers clustered around the new couple who made their presence known in the flickering darkness.

"If I don't hold on tight I'll float all the way up to the ceiling before I finally disappear."

Veronica's hunger made the words that came from her mouth sound too slow and far off. But it was worth it to be the girl in the cake. She would even jump out of a pie if that was all she could find. The first documented girl to jump preferred pie. This was over one-hundred years ago when pie was still the rage. The girl's husband shot the man whose pie she jumped out of. In front of New York society's upper crust. This story, to

Veronica, meant that girls who jump out of dessert harness enough power to change a man's destiny. She liked the idea of that, and of using "upper crust" as a double entendre.

Over the movie projector's perpetual click clack she heard her heart beating between her ears. She wanted to eat her dropped popcorn off the dirty floor. She wanted to follow this with hot turkey sandwiches piled in mashed potato fluff. She wanted to be able to eat dinner and still be jump ready. Most of all she wanted Roger to quit talking.

"Oh, Ronnie, you really are sweet. Just focus on the character you think will make it to part two and you won't be so afraid," Roger said as Veronica's nails grazed his skin.

Veronica wasn't afraid of anything but her overwhelming desire to eat food off the movie theater floor. Just one forgotten Whopper. Just one misplaced popcorn kernel. She knew she was close to falling in love with Roger because of the way she forgot to lie to him. If she had seen a candy rolling around on the floor, she would have placed it in her mouth without apology. And she already confessed how she sometimes went for days without eating and other times how she baked double or triple brownie batches then devoured them all until her head throbbed from a sugar overdose. She never baked cake or pie. Both desserts carried an air of importance Veronica chose to save until the time was just right.

"Am I floating away yet?" she asked as the movie credits rolled.

Veronica never opened her eyes to see which family member survived for the sequel. She hoped in the fuzzy background of her consuming hunger that the cat used up only one life.

Roger probably assumed his almost girlfriend's talk of floating was a new kind of female sexual code unknown to the online dating world, with its insular emails leading nowhere but the ubiquitous string of first dates with few second helpings.

"No, Ronnie, you aren't floating away yet but you will be very soon."

"Is it time for pie?" She stood to stretch away two hours of sitting in the dark instead of making out.

Veronica thought all men wanted to touch her because all men wanted to touch everything from boyhood on: those little toy cars, bugs, bicycle chains, the motors of bigger and bigger cars, women who jump out of cakes for a living. Of her seven first dates in the last few months since putting up her Internet profile, Veronica faked seven orgasms in three different movie theaters. Movie theaters attracted the kind of men who chose companions, even temporary ones, from a series of posed photos that tried to look spontaneously snapped. See the witty quip or two centered beneath. Something about how ridiculous this whole thing felt, expecting love to find two strangers online, but how about they both just give it a try, that tone of an inside joke, wink-wink, nudge-nudge. No fake hollow cake in sight. To Veronica the whole thing almost felt like selecting a mail-order bride for the night.

She stopped eating two days before each first date to ensure the proper tingle along her nerves. She wore the same crotchless stockings and tastefully short black skirt. She guided each of seven strange hands towards her body, most of the time before the previews ended. If the theater was empty enough to sit in the back row, the men sometimes stroked themselves while they touched her. Others gasped as their tentative fingers skimmed the demarcation line between her lower stomach and pubic hair. One or

two just went for it fast and rough. Veronica tried not to cringe as her body made contact with a jagged hangnail.

Keeping her eyes closed the whole time helped Veronica bask in the sensation of floating. Sometimes if one of the men's fingers brought her close enough to dissolve into her body's pleasure, she thought of her cake, doing Olivia Newton-John circa 1980 proud in the smallest fringed bikini with the most expert soft focus track lighting at the most discerning of the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elk's Club bachelor parties. This fantasy still never sent her over the edge, each man's motions a little bit off, the cadence of his rhythm more distracting than alluring until Veronica, bored of the game, bucked and whined in phony gratification. The men removed their hands and finished the movie.

When she accepted Roger's first date request she had already seen the same movie with a different man the night before. As the opening credits flashed, she moved Roger's hand between her legs.

He stopped her before he felt any morsel of the warmth hiding in her seductive clothes, clothes her mother said over a shared cake pop weeks back made her look "trollopy but svelte."

"My goal tonight," Roger whispered in the dark, "is to really get to know you. I hope you want to get to know me, too. Why rush to the end when we don't even know which race we're in?"

Veronica spent the entire movie focused on its plot instead of honing her sexual acting skills. After the movie Roger took her for coffee and pie at a diner in the arts district downtown close to where he worked. As the pie arrived with its downy meringue

enveloping a neon lemon filling, Veronica wondered what it felt like sizing up pottery all day. How did one vase make the cut but a bowl did not? Did Roger randomly choose a certain ceramic piece because he liked its color, its shape, its provenance, or did he run out of time at a specific point each afternoon and pick what sat before him? Is that the same way, Veronica wondered, he selected her from the dating sight they both subscribed to, two single professionals who ran in the same canapé fundraiser circles but never curated each other.

Three dates later and no cake pops divvied up with her mother to discuss the “gruesome” details, Veronica was almost ready for Roger to take her home. Of course he had his own private pottery collection. The idea of being surrounded by so many priceless, breakable things made her think about how delicate something precious can become, whether it be a woman’s implicit spot between her legs, a Chinese vase or a hollow cake that might split apart unless she lost two more pounds before crawling inside.

First came the ritual of coffee and pie. The couple sat at opposite sides of a diner banquette. Veronica’s narrow body barely indented the plasticine cover. The booth creaked under Roger’s heavyset frame.

“Look how different we both are?” he said. Veronica examined the pie menu.

Imagine that, a restaurant with its own menu devoted to pie. Not a small and sticky dessert menu or even a pie and sundae menu. Just pie. 24 flavors with the franchised trademark of a different pie for every hour in the diner’s 24-hour day.



“How are we different?” Veronica pretended to listen but focused her attention on what looked like a nearly animatronic photograph of a coconut cream pie in its high calorie splendor.

“Well for one thing we’ve seen three different movies in the past three weeks but I get the sense you don’t even like movies.”

“You’re right. I don’t.”

“And we’ve faithfully come here after each show, but I don’t think you like pie much, either.”

The more Roger studied Veronica under the diner’s florescence, the more she imagined bathing in coconut cream. She wanted to cover her body with pie. To hide inside it, to jump out of it, to shed it like a sweet second skin.

“You are very wrong about that one,” she said, hoping no one would notice that she slipped the laminated pie menu into her purse. “I adore pie. It’s just that right now I’m reducing.”

“Oh, Ronnie, are you kidding? I know enough about women to know that’s some sort of modern term for dieting.”

“Correction. It’s French.”

“No, more like it’s ridiculous. You’re a person who in no sense of the word needs to reduce. In fact it’s just the opposite. I think you could actually stand to gain...”

“Please don’t ruin this,” she said at the waitress came over to their table.

Right in front of her, a blonde with Bridget stamped on her plastic nametag though Veronica guessed her real name to be something very un-svelte, like Debbie, Roger said, “We won’t be ordering tonight.”

“Roger, please!”

“My date doesn’t eat. The most lovely woman I’ve met in a long time refuses to even share a piece of pie with her very interested beau.”

“Fine.” Veronica hated the word beau. She stared at Bridget’s nametag, refusing to make eye contact with a girl at least fifteen years younger and naturally slender. “I will have key lime. The gentleman prefers something of the chocolate variety.”

Veronica added the word “variety” because not only was it a word her mother might say when she ordered at a diner with paper napkins, she hoped Roger sensed a hint of sarcasm hiding under her pink carnation sweater set. If sarcasm was the wrong word, maybe she meant irony? Veronica made a mental note to ask her mother the next afternoon at coffee, where they would definitely discuss this dating disaster.

After Bridget sauntered off without writing down their order Veronica said, “Thanks for embarrassing me. Now everyone in the kitchen thinks I have some sort of eating disorder. How can a practical stranger be so cruel?”

“Oh, Ronnie, I’m not nearly as practical as I seem just because I deal in clay bowls for a living. But I swear you should see how pretty some of them are. You would get a kick eating off one. Why it might even make your crazy idea of ‘reducing’—which he pronounced in a convoluted French accent—seem silly.”

“I wasn’t calling you practical. What I meant to say is that we are practically strangers,” Veronica stood from the table, “and when what’s-her-face comes back will you please ask for my pie to go.”

She stormed towards the bathroom. At least she thought the word was stormed. As her hunger took hold she imagined the wood paneled hallway leading away from

Roger, a man she intended to never see after the night ended, transforming into 24 of the most faultless pies. Golden crusted. Berry filled. Dolloped and then dolloped again.

Perfect for a good, old fashioned jump.

In the empty bathroom, after Veronica double-checked for feet, she practiced her jumping out of a giant hollow pie stance. Pie officially usurped cake in her fantasy.

Staring in the bathroom mirror's warped middle she swore she saw a very toned woman in a white fringe bikini staring back. Veronica loathed the vacant feeling of her stomach caving in on itself but loved the way her jeans, she wore jeans now on dates with Roger because she knew he lacked the passion to touch her privately in a public place, rested low on her straight hips. Almost the way jeans fit an adolescent boy. Maybe there was a sort of power in looking like a boy with soft lips? Maybe there was even power in a strange man buying you a piece of pie after he selected you off the Internet?

Veronica knew Roger liked her more than the other men she went on one date then never heard from. One of the men a few dates back even called her a freak, right to her face. If there was a way to behave like a gentlemen when calling a woman you just felt up in a movie theatre a freak, and then only because she may have tried to bite you in a very sensitive area because she was so very hungry and mistook your body for something more edible, this man chose not to treat Veronica like a lady. Veronica knew when she lived out her fantasy, when she reached the goal of seeming to materialize from a giant pie, some men may treat her like an object, like an entity no different than the pie that birthed her from a basic short crust dough. But they still had no right to call her a freak.

She knew not to jump out of a cherry pie. Her mother taught Veronica what certain kinds of men thought of when they heard the word cherry. How they danced around with their longish, peroxide-bleached hair when she was in high school to that song where the guy sang about mixing up some kind of batter then letting his girl lick the beater. Pecan pies were probably not much better. To Veronica a man who hired a woman to jump out of a pecan pie was only after sex, and not the normal kind. Ditto for lemon meringue.

As Veronica's reflection morphed in the diner bathroom mirror each time she reached closer she chose the only pie flavor that suited her dream.

Apple.

Technicolor photos of pie stared up at Veronica as she tossed the stolen menu in the bathroom trashcan. Whoever heard of a s'mores pie? Or a raisin rum? Yes, it had to be apple. As American as. Apple pie of my eye.

Her grandparents grew up during the depression. A favorite story told at each Thanksgiving of her youth by an uncle twice removed who knew Veronica's family before they acquired necessities like the AmEx Black Card revolved around the family celebrating Christmas with a dozen people sharing a mock apple pie. Stale Ritz crackers, lemon juice, cinnamon. Not one apple passed the family's lips that holiday and no one ever knew. Veronica vowed as she reapplied her lipstick in the bathroom mirror that she would dedicate her first jump out of an apple pie to her ancestors. To put the proverbial, and non-perverted, cherry on top Veronica vowed to make the pie herself.

She texted Roger from the diner bathroom, an act her mother found socially deviant unless she texted her in the middle of an especially bad date.

Her first text said: i am sorry. i overreacted.

Roger: that is ok. u r under a lot of stress from trying to reduce.

Veronica: do you think olivia newton-john reduced?

Roger: didn't u know annoying blondes were forbidden 2 eat all through 70's?

Veronica: u find on-j annoying?!

Roger: grease...have u ever been mellow...xanadu...yes!!! (imho)

Veronica: even her white fringe xanadu bikini?

Roger: she wore a dress. no bikini.

Veronica: wtf? i thought u didn't ♥ her?

Roger: i didn't ♥ her. guess she shoulda worn a bikini. i bet u look good in a bikini. i bet u look even better out of 1.

Veronica texted while a woman tried to scoot beside her to wash her hands: is that a sext?

Roger: yes!!!

Veronica: no 1 has ever sexted me b4. will u take me home? 2 your home? and can i still have my pie 2 go?

The couple held hands as they left the diner. Veronica felt intimate, and worthy of the intimacy for the first time since she posted her Internet profile. A Styrofoam container of pie weighted each of their free hands.

“If you would've ordered peanut butter, we could be like the couple in that old commercial.” Roger insisted Veronica walk on the inside of the sidewalk as they neared the parking garage.

“Like you getting your chocolate in my peanut butter?” she asked.

“I understand the chocolate bar. But what kind of freak walks around eating from a jar of peanut butter?” Roger placed his container of pie on the hood of his car. The parking garage halfway between the diner and the movie theatre sat empty on a late weekday evening.

“I hate the word freak.” Veronica aimed for Roger’s hood but her nervous hand missed. She heard the sound of her key lime burst from its container and rupture against the garage floor. “In fact it’s my least favorite word. Like of all time.”

She said nothing about her dropped piece of pie.

Roger said nothing, either. She knew that he knew not to mention Veronica’s mistake if he ever wanted to see her again. “I’m sorry, Ronnie. Do you have a bad connotation with that word?”

“Not at all. When I was little I even dreamed of being in a sideshow.” She opened Roger’s Styrofoam container. The chocolate pie looked like brown silk under the flicker of parking garage lights. She picked up the slice of chocolate pie with one hand and placed the entire wedge in her mouth. The chocolate cream disappeared in one forceful swallow. In a chocolate after breath she said, “But I’m not unusual enough to be on display. It makes me very angry. Extremely disappointed in myself.” She burped.

Roger opened the car door and rooted around for something Veronica could get sick in.

Veronica burped again. “For not being unique.”

“We should get you home, Ronnie. Didn’t you say a few dates back...”

“A few dates back was our first date.” Veronica clutched her stomach. She bent over, not to be sick but to stare at her key lime pie.

Overhead lighting brought out the pie's understated green tint. Gawking just the right way revealed darker flecks of lime zest like strands of a jeweled green necklace laced through the splattered pie. Veronica felt the urge to become part of such a beautiful dessert engulf her.

"Ronnie?" Roger shook her into listening. "On that first date didn't you mention how close you are to your mom?"

She placed both of her knees on the cement floor. Propped with her hands to keep from falling face-first into the dropped key lime pie, Veronica knelt and licked a bit of filling. She aimed for a splotch that did not touch the floor. The crust was a wash.

Sitting up she let the remnants of pie cling to her cheeks. "Close? I hate her for what she's turned me into. Do you know how it feels to never even get to have a whole cake pop to yourself?"

Veronica undid her blouse by yanking until her buttons shot across the parking garage floor like plastic bb's. Her bra fell next to the discarded shirt in a conceded beige pile. With one hand she smeared the key lime pie across her small breasts, paying careful attention to build up layers of broken crumb crust around her nipples.

"If I can't jump out of a pie right now at least I can become one."

"Ronnie, Jesus, we need to get you home. Have you been drinking?" Roger moved to help her stand up but Veronica shoved him away. Mounds of crust slid down her chest.

"You need to get in the car right now. You need to get in the car and then we'll go from there."

“Go away!” Veronica yelled at Roger. Her stomach quaked from swallowing the piece of chocolate pie without chewing. A rush of sugar coursed through her body. “I mean it. If you don’t leave me alone I’ll tell the next person who walks by that you attacked me.”

She removed her pants but quickly covered her exposed body with more of the dropped pie. Veronica lay on the parking garage floor. She could hear her heart beating inside both ears, resounding and swift. How could she make a mock key lime pie? Maybe a combination of lemon zest and suntan lotion, for that’s all she could smell over the gassy garage exhaust.

“If I can’t jump out of a pie I will become a pie,” she repeated so many times she lost count. Her throat felt dry. Pie congealed on her concave belly. She could not see Roger anywhere.

He left her in the parking garage so long, she worried her almost boyfriend would bring back the police or one of those paramedic teams who apply restraints to “difficult” people as easy as some women braid piecrust into lattice.

Roger returned out of breath carrying two plastic bags with the diner’s logo stamped on each wrinkled side.

“I thought you left me here,” Veronica said, unable to turn her head and look at Roger without more pie sliding off her body.

Roger removed four whole pies from the sacks without saying anything. From her strained position Veronica saw what she thought was a coconut cream, a cherry pie, a pumpkin pie and a lemon meringue.

“Are you teasing me?”



Roger lined the pies next to Veronica. “Do you want to do this, or should I?”

She turned from him to stop the tears that burned as they crept out each eye.

Veronica lost the rest of her key lime pie to the floor. Surrounded by crumbs, she tried to sit up to assess the mess.

“No. Relax.”

Soon cherry pie filling covered her breasts, the feel of jellied fruit similar to shower gel. The crust Roger mashed in his palms before applying around Veronica’s breasts in a mock version of lacy lingerie. Towards her navel he arranged slices of coconut cream by cutting the pie with his pocketknife in jagged portions.

“But how did you know?” Veronica asked.

Roger saved the pumpkin pie to paint orange stripes like war paint down Veronica’s arms and legs. He asked for permission to color the tips of her hair with lemon meringue.

She waited for Roger to eat the amalgamation of pie off her body. What man wouldn’t want to spend time with an edible woman. He sat next to her. Roger took her hand in his messy, sticky hand. He held her hand without speaking. He held her hand for a very long time.