

# Good Girls Do Swallow

The Darkly Comic True Story of How One  
Woman Stopped Hating Her Body

Rachael Oakes-Ash



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



'*Good Girls Do Swallow* is for any woman who's ever eaten chocolate and felt guilty about it, whether she is a size 8 or 16.

**Marie Claire**

'A book that's as harrowing as it is hilarious ... it's a damned good read.'

**[Bodyscoop.com.au](http://Bodyscoop.com.au)**

'A non-fiction Bridget Jones.'

**Sydney Morning Herald**

'Honest and very amusing. A definite on your book shop list.'

**Sunday Telegraph**

'Oakes-Ash's honesty is bound to be appreciated by chicks who think they're the only ones who've ever devoured an unthawed cake straight from the freezer.'

**The Australian**

'If you have a friend who keeps moaning they are "too thin or too fat" - buy them this to shut them up.'

**[BodytalkMagazine.com](http://BodytalkMagazine.com)**

'A black, funny and touching story.'

**New Woman**

'It's the sort of book where you can curl up with a packet of chocolate biscuits, eat the whole lot and come away without guilt.'

**Amanda Keller (Australian comedienne)**

'A page-turning read.'

**The Sun Herald Tempo**

'a dark yet comic account of her struggle for a figure to die  
for.'

***Vogue***

'This brave, modern-day Joan of Arc has come out, not from  
the closet, but the pantry!

**[Femail.com.au](http://Femail.com.au)**

'A worthwhile and entertaining read for anyone.'

***Cosmopolitan***

# GOOD GIRLS DO SWALLOW

Rachael Oakes-Ash



**For Mum, Dad and Kate**

## **CONTENTS**

**Praise**

**Title Page**

**Dedication**

**Introduction: So you want to be anorexic? Join the queue**

**Queen drama queen**

**The Carol Brady syndrome**

**Overripe and underdone**

**Thindarella**

**A pound of flesh**

**What goes down must come back up again**

**Mirror mirror**

**Till diet do us part**

**Go figure**

**12 Steps, a pas de deux and a triple backflip**

**Mutiny in aisle six**

**Leave the light on in the fridge**

**Good girls do swallow**

**Figures to die for**

**Left-overs**

**After-dinner mints**

**About the Author**

**Copyright**

# INTRODUCTION

## So you want to be anorexic? Join the queue

**WHEN I AM THIN I WILL GET** a boyfriend. When I am thin I will be promoted. When I am thin I will have a baby. When I am thin my husband will love me. When I am thin my grandchildren will want me. When I am thin I will be young again. When I am thin I will fit into my casket.

If I calculated the hours I have spent obsessing about my own thighs when I should have been studying or working or enjoying sex, and if I 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 have spent gorging from the third shelf of my fridge, the total sum would be over two-thirds of my 30-odd years on this earth. Between the ages of seventeen and 31 I lost over 10 stone (63 kg) and gained 12 (76 kg).

As a woman in the 20th, and now 21st century, I have denied my hunger over and over again in the hope that changing my body would change my life. I am not alone in this denial: more than 95 per cent of women have dieted at some time. Like most of them I have experienced the disappointment of regained weight. It is accepted that 95 per cent of dieters regain the weight they have lost within 2 years but the belief that I would be in the 5 per cent that remain thin forever kept me on the diet cycle for decades. If I could remain thin then everything else would be okay. My parents would not fight, my boyfriend would not leave me and my phone would always ring.

I blamed my inability to pour my twenty-something body into a pre-pubescent-sized snippet of Lycra for the fact that 'he' did not call me. I blamed the reading on my bathroom scales for the fact that the girls went out without me. I was forever asking tape measures and clothing sizes to validate my worth in the world. I loathed any woman who lost more weight than me and won the prize I coveted - the thin body and all it promised.

When I wasn't invited to *the* party I blamed my fat. When I didn't get *the* job I blamed my fat. I watched twig-sized girls on the covers of magazines get the man with the money, the gilt-edged invite to the soiree, the jetsetting jobs with first-class airfare. I told myself it was because they were thin. I convinced myself that if I too became a twig, if I denied my real hunger then I would be rewarded. So I got thin time and time again, denying myself nourishment, using laxatives for weight control and thus endangering my own life in the process. At seventeen I was anorexic, at twenty I was bulimic, at thirty I had binge eating disorder.

Anorexia nervosa (self-starvation) used to be a teenagers' disease. It now affects the lives of three times as many women in their twenties and thirties as it does adolescents. Bulimia (bingeing and purging) is used as a means of weight control by celebrities and mortals alike and about 40 per cent of people with anorexia will later develop bulimia. Bulimarexia (starving and purging), binge eating disorder (compulsively eating vast amounts of food) and night eating disorder (only bingeing late at night) have recently been added to the list of emerging eating disorders as women fight the battle of the bulge, wrestle with impending old age and struggle with their roles in the workforce, the home and the marital bed. There are three times as many people with eating disorders than people with AIDS in the US alone.

When I was anorexic I tried to starve my sexuality from my body. I was not a victim of incest; I had no major traumas when I was young. I just did not want to grow up. At

nineteen I was raped, but my Bad Body Image had already taken hold in the schoolyard years before. My group of friends spent lunch hours commenting on each other's schoolgirl bodies while comparing diets torn out of teenage mags and wagging the compulsory weigh-ins at the beginning of term. We embodied the statistics. Seventy-two per cent of high school girls want to be thinner and eighty per cent think that being thinner is better.

At my anorexic best I was proud of my self-starvation and flaunted my bones in lycra and midriffs, asking for all eyes on me. If a calorie passed my lips I stayed home and wore baggy, oversized clothing in an attempt to hide the mammoth body which existed only inside my head.

Advertising seemed to tell me that when I was thin I would drive a convertible with the wind in my hair, when I was thin I would go out with a Brad Pitt lookalike and never be lonely, depressed or unhappy again. But when I got thin nothing much changed. I still lamented the shape of my body. Thousands of exclusive party invites did not miraculously appear in my letterbox and no hero in a shining Lamborghini pulled into my driveway.

I got the body I wanted but not the life I had been promised. I was still broke and driving a car with a roof; I was still depressed, still lonely and still waiting to meet Brad Pitt - and I still thought I was fat!

Psychological testing shows that pictures of thin female models create anxiety, stress, depression and self-consciousness in test subjects. Yet I subscribed to every fashion magazine going, cutting out pictures of models and pasting them on the cover of my schoolbooks, dreaming of long legs and flat tummies when I should have been studying my twelve times tables.

According to *Glamour* magazine 75 per cent of women think they are too fat, and the results of a 1997 large-scale survey stated that 89 per cent of females want to lose

weight. Yet the majority of women in both these surveys were an average and healthy size. Sound familiar?

And now Bad Body Image is being thrust upon unsuspecting males. Since the '60s GI Joe has increased the equivalent of almost 16 inches (40 cm) around his now bizarrely muscular chest. Only recently, another eating disorder has been added to the expanding list. 'Bigarexia' affects more males than females and is prevalent in gyms across Australia. The predominant symptom? The sufferer can never be big enough.

Bad Body Image is not an epidemic, it is a fact of western women's life. We are bombarded daily with images of thin, young and beautiful women dripping in diamonds and surrounded by handsome men. On average we view four hundred to six hundred advertisements per day and of these one in every eleven broadcasts an obvious message about the importance of beauty. In 1986 it was estimated that almost 70 per cent of all female television characters are thin, compared with only 5 per cent who are overweight. Imagine the percentage today (think *Friends* and *Ally McBeal*).

There is no doubt that for women eating disorders are linked to sexuality and how we welcome our physical development or fight to keep it at bay, whether we are starving ourselves to prevent the development of breasts and hips or stuffing our faces to hide the curves that mark our entry into womanhood. We wrestle with food when we are really wrestling with our hormones. Some women binge and purge to mask the pain of sexual abuse, some stuff themselves to deter wandering hands while others use dieting to ensure those wandering hands are touching them.

My mother never dieted, but my friends' mothers did. I thought they were exotic and grown-up and I felt the same when I spoke their secret female language of grams, kilos and calories. It is suspected that daughters of dieters will most certainly have Bad Body Image and will then pass this

legacy on to their own daughters. When we see our mothers wrestling with the shape of their breasts or thighs then it is more than likely we will wrestle with ours. There we have it: generations of dissatisfied women beating their bodies with tape measures in the hope that they will be thinner than their own mothers.

I dieted because I thought being thin would attract The Gaze. My life was spent in search of The Gaze and naturally I chose a career in the limelight. Look at me, I'm a radio announcer; look at me, I work in TV; look at me, I know famous people! When The Gaze did fall on me nothing much changed. I still did not like myself very much. I was living the life the advertisers promised and I was still searching for something to make me happy.

The year American women got the vote was the year the Miss America beauty pageant was introduced. Women work the same hours as men and do the same jobs as men but we still do not receive the same pay as men. As a general rule, women are only paid more than men in two industries, modelling and prostitution. It's no wonder we think we need to be thin and beautiful to get anywhere in this world.

The politics of dieting and hunger denial are complex. There are a thousand rules to stick to as you wake up in the morning: lemon and warm water to start the day, body brushing followed by a run, cardboard cereal and a sip of black tea, take the stairs not the lift, salad with no dressing, decline bagels in the mid-morning meeting, munch on carrot sticks, sip on mineral water at after-work drinks, cancel meeting in favour of gym, decline date because of size of thighs, devour contents of fridge at midnight. Imagine life without body obsession and food fixation. All that extra time to do what you want. Scary, isn't it?

If you think the debilitating effects of dieting are restricted to teenagers and young women then think again. Eighty-one per cent of ten-year-olds surveyed in 1986 had been on a

diet. An estimated 40 per cent of nine- and ten-year-old girls in America are trying to lose weight.

Those ten-year-olds already know that if denying hunger and dieting won't do it, then when they grow up they can choose from liposuction, surgery, stomach stapling and appetite suppressants. Women in Asia fork out thousands of dollars for face reduction surgery so they can appear like the western women on the billboards. You know those women, the ones who look nothing like the average western woman. Not my average female friends anyway.

The bottom line is that we all die. No amount of starvation, plastic surgery or midnight vomiting is going to prevent that happening. Dieting keeps us, as women, in constant competition with each other's bodies and keeps us out of the boardrooms and in the kitchen (or the bathroom). Female politicians are ridiculed by cartoonists for their body size. Is it their excess fat that is making the decisions in parliament? No. So what does their body size have to do with politics? The number of women working in management and as professionals increased in the 1920s and the 1960s and again in the 1990s. The idealised image presented to women in these three decades was first that of the flat-chested flapper girl then Twiggy and then Kate Moss.

The road out of body obsession is far from smooth. Dieting is a \$500 million industry annually in Australia alone and is estimated to be worth over \$33 billion worldwide. The dieting gurus have an investment in their diets not working because if the diets did work then there would be no ongoing demand for them. Feed the public the image of thin, virtually pre-pubescent women, depend on their natural competition to create dissatisfaction when viewing these women and keep the cash register open when they think the answer is dieting. The majority of bulimics report the onset of their bulimia occurred during a period of dieting.

It took me approximately 365 cream-filled pastries, three dozen boxes of Sara Lee croissants, 250 custard slices, 15 family-sized cheesecakes and 215 chocolate Yogo biscuits before I realised I had a problem. Then I tried to diet the problem away. It took me a further 467 tubs of Haagen Daaz ice cream, 82 chicken fillet burgers and 3891 Tim Tams (more chocolate biscuits) to do anything about it.

My obsession with dieting, body, food and flesh got in the way of me living my life. It damaged my friendships, my family, my workplace, my bank account, my boyfriends, my social life and my sex life. If I could have lifted my head above the plate of danishes I was always scoffing then I might have seen the real world around me.

You can live a life free from body obsession. You don't have to spend your days blaming your body when things go wrong. You do have a choice whether to believe in the airbrushed eye candy served up on billboards, by advertisers and on television each night.

You can eat, you can have sex, you can like your body and you can relate to other women in an honest, open and supportive way. Girlfriends are not the enemy because their thighs are thinner than yours; food is not the enemy because you don't know how to feed your own hunger appropriately; your body is not your enemy because you are scared of commitment and believe you need to be saved by Prince Charming.

I have written this book because I know that every thought I have had about my body other women have had about theirs. I am not alone in the beating of my body, my envy of other women and my denial of my own hunger. I am sick of waiting to be thin and knowing I will never get there because, at one hundred and sixty-two centimetres tall, even when I weighed forty-six kilos I still thought I was fat. It's ridiculous sticking pictures of Sarah O'Hare, Elle Macpherson or Naomi Campbell on my fridge when I am

always going to be five foot four and Rachael Oakes-Ash. But stick figures of them on my fridge I did.

I set myself up for a life of disturbed and disordered eating when at age six I first blamed my body for life's little letdowns. Breasts that budded before their time, skinny girls' playground taunting and thin blonde princesses who always got their man combined to fuel my body hatred. The gym, along with dieting and purging, kept me stuck on the body hatred loop for what I thought was life. The times I did try to get off the loop I was so scared and confused that I jumped right back on.

Recovery is possible. I know. I recovered. But in order to get there I had to see Carol Brady for the two-dimensional mother she was, I had to break free from my Diet Pals, stop believing in Thindarella, turn my back on the mirror, and leave the light on in the fridge in order to stop punishing myself. Only then was I ready to swallow.

It would be unrealistic to think I will never look at my body in a disparaging light again or that I will never again long for the unattainable. I love shopping and I always want what I can't have. But I have now learnt how to manage my insatiable hunger and accept my body the way it is: strong, healthy and average.

# QUEEN DRAMA QUEEN

Dear God

I want to be adopted. Please, please God, make me adopted. Maryanne's parents are beautiful, Susan walks funny and Ariane's a wog. I am so boring next to them; please, I needed to be adopted.

Let my proper mother be some real famous movie star with an even famouser boyfriend. She had to give me up because the movie studio forced her to; they said it would ruin her career and she thinks of me whenever she has to cry for the camera.

Please, God, if I am adopted I promise I won't spy on my sister Megan and her boyfriend anymore.

In the name of our Father, His son and the Spirit that's holy

Amen

Dear God

Please forgive me for taking photos of my sister and her boyfriend when they weren't looking. It's just that the door was open a smidge and they were making all those funny noises again and Mum and Dad said they're not allowed to have the door closed and she was really awful to me in front of my friends when she said I was getting boobies and I just wanted to get her back and I know that's why I'm not adopted and I'm really sorry.

I promise to be extra good from now on. I won't throw my school lunch over the balcony into the garden and I won't spy on my sister (which will be really hard because she's been grounded for a month and will be at home all the time).

Amen

Dear God

Can you please send me a black best friend? Please, please, please. Just like Janet in *Good Times*. I would just loooove a black best friend. No one else has one and everyone will be soooo jealous.

So if you can arrange to send me a black best friend I would be really grateful.

In the name of the Father and all that

Amen

Dearest God

I forgive you for not sending me a black best friend. Mum said I should spend more time with Ariane Pappadopoulos and her family. They're Greek and speak funny and all sleep in the same bed.

I have been rehearsing my cooking show in Mum's kitchen and I think I am pretty good now. I have got two cameras, one up in the ceiling corner and another on the wall and I practise talking to each of them in turn, just like on TV. I've even got one inside the oven so when I put the food in or take it out I can talk straight into the camera.

So, you can send the television talent scout to find me now. I am ready.

In the name of everyone

Amen

Dear God

Mum says we are moving house from Brisbane to live in Sydney. My oldest sister is crying all the time; she doesn't want to leave her boyfriend. I told her there'd be other boys in Sydney who she can make funny noises with. She hit me with a school book.

Mum says I can still be an actress in Sydney at my new school. I'm practising crying just like Marlene in *Days of Our Lives*. When I scrunch my eyes up really tight and pinch my thigh I can just about do it.

Please God, let the kids at my new school like me. Mum says I may have to skip a year because the school in Sydney is backward. I don't think I will because then I'll be the youngest in my class and I want to be the oldest always.

Amen

Hey God

Please tell my sister I am not possessed by the devil. She's just trying to get back at me for spying on her.

Don't tell her this but I really don't mind fighting with her; it is good practice for my career as an actress. The actors on television are always shouting at each other.

Amen

P.S. Can you get Martin Johnson to fall in love with me? I think he likes Maryanne instead - do you think it's because I'm so big? Maybe you could stop my chest from growing.

Dear God

Do you think I might really be possessed by the devil? I'm bleeding from strange places and I just found two nipples on one side of my chest. Do you think I have cancer? Please, please make the nipples go away. No one has three nipples, I checked in my Dad's magazines he keeps next to his bed. Please make one of them fall off. Please, please.

Amen

Hiya God

My third nipple fell off and I flushed it down the toilet. You don't think it'll clog the drain, do you? It was only small. Thank you God for getting rid of it. I've stopped bleeding too, God; thank you, thank you, thank you sooooo much. I promise I'll stop stealing food from Mum's cupboards.

Amen

Dear God

I'm bleeding again. God, can you make it stop, please, please God? No one else at school bleeds and I just know they look at me in a funny way, I am sure of it. What is wrong with my body, God? Please make it go away.

Amen

P.S. I won't bleed to death, will I, God?

Dear God

I feel so sad, God. Please let my father have cancer.

It doesn't have to be terminal. Just life or death kind of stuff – you know the sort: lots of tests, remissions and relapses. If not cancer, then you could have him held hostage in the Middle East for the whole world to see. Oh yes, God, the whole world, that's much more exciting ... please let my father be held hostage and let there be a broadcast live on prime-time news networks around the globe with shots of me, his distraught and loving daughter, pleading with the kidnappers for mercy. That's what I really want, dear God. I promise I'll be good. I just need a reason for all this sadness, God. Please give it to me.

Amen

Dear God

I can't stop listening to Meatloaf. His songs are just sooo sad. Do you think anyone will ever love me? Then I could have a broken heart and sing songs like Meatloaf. Have you listened to his words? They are soooo beautiful.

I just cry and cry and cry and I don't know why.