



# The EMBARRASSMENT DIET

*The Embarrassment Diet*

By Bryan Levandowski

After Betsey Duncan had shared how much weight she'd lost on this secret new diet—"Four pounds the first week, I swear to you, and six pounds the next!"—Trix couldn't help but notice none of the other women seemed the least bit concerned. But why would they? Natalie, whose surprise 50th it was, had been a size four since the 80s. Diane only put on weight when she was pregnant, a feat she'd given up after her fourth kid, and Frances, who always flaunted the fact that she had the metabolism of a horse, ate whatever she liked and never gained an ounce. The five of them sat in Natalie's furniture ad living room, where various shades of taupe aggressively competed to be the best and brightest. On the coffee table sat three bottles of wine, a few lipstick-rimmed glasses, and a bowl of cinnamon scented potpourri. Trix studied the four other women, sitting shoulder to shoulder like a shelf of porcelain dolls in tiny neat dresses, then down at herself, caked in a heavy black brocade shift over two sweat-soaked layers of Spanx.

Out of nowhere, Natalie turned to her: "I'm so happy you were able to make it tonight," she said.

"Wouldn't miss it!" Trix said, hoping she didn't sound too eager. She'd only known these women for a few weeks and was still making up her mind whether or not they liked her.

"When Betsey told us about your marriage, well, let's just say I know exactly what you're going through. Divorced three years myself and never felt more free."

Trix started to say they weren't actually divorced or even planning on a divorce, but stopped and let Natalie continue.

"Pardon me," Natalie said, "estranged. One step at a time, right?" she laughed and refilled Trix's glass and held up her own for a toast, changing the subject.

As the topics of conversation flitted from work to TV to local gossip, Trix found herself growing anxious over the lack of a cake, but as a new member of this group of friends, she was still warming up to their eccentricities. Like the Saturday before, they'd all met in the park for a picnic and each woman showed up with a bottle of wine and nothing else. Trix had brought enough food to feed a small family for a weekend, but ended up leaving it in her car and only taking a bottle of pinot grigio to the blanket.

When it became evident that the party was to be a cakeless one, and with the conversation stuck in a holding pattern centered on a mix of the terrible twos and middle child syndrome, Trix, excused herself and went to the bathroom. She stood in front of the mirror with both layers of Spanx around her ankles, where she saw just how far from a size four she actually was, and decided she would ask Betsey about that miracle diet. She pinched her love handles and frowned, then drew in a breath and pulled the Spanx back into position. She stood there a moment longer, hesitating as a swell of laughter erupted in the other room, a swell she would've given anything to have been swept up in, and got out her lipstick to reapply. Seconds later she heard Betsey's voice approaching.

"Knock knock!" Betsey said from the hallway. "I'm taking leave and wanted to say goodbye!"

Trix smacked her lips and opened the door. "How does it work?" she asked. Betsey squinted. "That diet," Trix added.

"I can't tell you that," Betsey said, putting on her coat. "But I'll tell you this: it's fool-proof."

"Is it expensive?"

"It's worth it." She pulled a business card out of her purse. "Write it down. I'm not supposed to give it to anybody." Betsey turned this way and that in front of a mirror, either admiring herself or for Trix's benefit. "And whatever you do," she lowered her voice, "don't let it get to you."

“I don’t understand,” Trix said.

Betsey started for the door. “What I mean is, don’t get caught up in it. When it’s over, it’s over. You’ll see.”

“What kind of a diet is this?”

“One that works,” Betsey said. She pecked two air kisses at Trix and walked out the door.

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Trix laid in bed that night, listening to the sound of her husband watching TV in the guest room. She thought of telling him about the diet, but she didn’t want to get his hopes up. Not again. As the sound of Leno chattered through the walls, she recalled what it was like to lie next to him, smelling his after work smells and running her fingers through his chest hair. One morning last week he’d smiled at her before leaving, but he didn’t come home that night. If this diet worked, she thought maybe it would get him back on her team, back in her bed. She blew a kiss at the wall and rolled over and went to sleep.

The next morning, as soon as her husband’s car pulled out of the driveway, Trix called the number. A woman answered with a voice like Windex. “What you need to understand about the Embarrassment Diet,” she explained, “is that it’s three parts psychology and one part physiology.” She asked Trix a few questions: her current weight, her goal weight, what she ate on a daily basis, and some that caught Trix by surprise and made her want to hang up the phone. For example: “Tell me about a time you felt so ashamed, you just wanted to die,” the woman said, as nonchalantly as if she were asking Trix if she preferred butter or margarine

“Excuse me?” Trix said.

The woman slowed down her voice, revealing a slight nasal twinge that caught Trix’s attention. “Tell me about a time you got caught doing something so shameful and had to face

the consequences.” Then, almost friendly, she added: “The harder it is to talk about, the better.”

A sour heat began to climb up Trix’s chest and into her throat. “Why do you want to know that?” she asked.

“It’s all part of the process,” the woman said. Trix swallowed, and described a misunderstanding at a park across town that had happened two years before. As she told the story line by line, the woman responded with an affirmative, “Hmm hmm,” on the other end, as though ticking off a box for each. Once Trix had finished, the woman probed for a few more details, which Trix reluctantly gave up, before scheduling her first session for the following Wednesday at 3:00pm.

After she hung up, Trix noticed a tiny puddle on the black lacquer countertop. Looking down, she saw her face, wet, and her eyes, puffy, and she instantly regretted what she’d told the woman.

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Wednesday afternoon at 2:59 and Trix was sitting on the sofa as she’d been told. “Someplace comfortable, but not too comfortable,” the woman had said. “With plenty of space to move around. And be alone.” She watched the clock turn to 3:00 and a second later the phone rang.

“Beatrice Levinson?” It was a different woman’s voice, warm and beige, like a bowl of oatmeal.

“Speaking,” Trix said, her voice cracking.

“Great. Let’s get started.” The woman asked about her week, what she ate and how she felt. Trix heard her typing the information into a computer. “And how do you feel about today’s session?”

“A little nervous,” Trix said.

“Nerves are good,” the woman said. “Nerves help.” Trix was about to ask what she meant but the woman interrupted her, saying the session was about to begin.

“Hey! Somebody stop that lady!” A new voice pitched and cracked out of the phone, loud and familiar, hitting Trix in the cheek like a bee sting. “Yeah, you lady!”

Then another voice punched out: “Look around you Beatrix, people are staring.”

A third voice came on. “Hey lady! You tryna kidnap that little girl?”

Then other voices, back and forth, like a mob. “Yeah, she was. I saw her too!”

“Who the hell do you think you are, lady?”

Trix’s body exploded with heat, every hair stood up like a toaster coil. Everything about that day came back in an instant, singeing its way through her body.

“No!” Trix feebly mouthed.

“Hey!” the woman on the phone shouted, grabbing Trix by the throat. “I saw you trying to sneak her out the gate!”

“She’s a kidnapper!” came the other voice, stabbing Trix in the ribs.

Now the oatmeally voice came back, but nothing about it was comforting anymore.

“They’re moving in, Beatrix. Everybody’s staring and pointing at you.”

Trix jammed her eyelids together and bit down hard, as tears ran from her eyes onto her open lips. The harder she clenched, the more vividly that day manifested itself around her. She saw the jungle gym with its peeling paint, the sliding board with the spray painted penis, the seesaw that creaked each time it went up and down, the way each adult, one by one, took their child from whatever structure they were playing on and began walking toward her, their faces grotesque masks.

“Somebody call the cops on this crazy lady!”

“Here comes her mother. Now you’re really gonna get it.”

“What the hell’s going on here?”

“Lydia, this crazy lady was tryna abduct your Abigail right outta this park.”

Trix grabbed her throat as her body crumpled up like charred tinfoil, sweat forcing its way out of every pore. “Stop saying that. I did not try to kidnap her,” she said, her voice an echo.

“Nobody is listening to you,” the first woman hissed. “We saw everything.”

“Guilty! Guilty! Guilty as hell!” came a mocking voice.

“She got no kids of her own so she comes here to steal one of ours!” said another.

Trix felt like she was playing dodgeball with the voices, hot bricks of anger and accusation flying at her from every direction. She backed away and ended up in the corner. Her chest began to tighten.

“Don’t let her get away. The cops are gonna be here soon!”

Trix’s body shrunk even smaller as the room fell away. She opened her mouth to speak but a sob caught her voice.

A screeching sound pitched out of the phone like a punch in the ear. “Right here, officer!” said the other voice. “Here’s the fucking child stealer. Kidnapper. Filthy fucking pedophile.”

“Stop it!” Trix finally screamed. “I’m hanging up!”

She put the phone down and looked out at the room. Heat crawled up her back, hot water poured from her armpits, her heart clapped its muscular walls to a fire dance inside her chest.

The voices of two cops rang out. “You try to abduct this kid, lady?” She remembered their taunting faces, smirking like a toddler holding a knife.

“No, there’s been a misunderstanding,” she said, her voice brittle. “Please, you’ve got to listen to me.” She looked up, searching the room for an exit.

“You’re going to jail, lady!” screamed a voice that felt a foot away. “You hear me? Jail! And they gonna have a great time with the old kidnapper in there.”

“I don’t like the look of you,” one of the police officers said. “You got crazy eyes.”



“Crazy eyes!” someone shouted. “Crazy eyed child stealer!”

Now the other cop joined in: “We’re gonna take you down to the station and put you in a cell with the rest of the crazies.”

Trix banked sideways, knocking over a planter as she fell to the floor, squeezing herself as small as she could get. She could smell the backseat of the police car, hot vinyl and a stale air freshener. She could see the policemen staring at her in the rear view mirror, their perky, taunting eyes.

“What are your friends going to think about this, Beatrix?” said the woman on the phone. “They’re never going to want to speak to you again.”

Trix thought of Betsey, Frances, Natalie, Diane, all lined up on the couch. They had no idea. “I didn’t tell them,” she sobbed.

“Then wait till we tell them!” came the other voice.

Trix went to speak, but her throat felt pinned to the ground.

“That’s right, put her in cuffs,” a voice said. “And throw away the key.”

“There goes the pedo lady!” A knife storm of laughing voices.

“They’re taking you out in cuffs now, Beatrix. Everybody is shaking their head at you. And that little girl you tried to steal—“

Trix whimpered, but the woman kept going.

“She’s on the top of the jungle gym, pointing at you and laughing.”

Lying on the floor, the phone wet with tears and sweat, Trix snaked her body behind the sofa, pushing it across the carpet as she filled the dusty crevice.

“Keep your hands off our kids, lady! If I ever see you in this park again I’ll kill you!”

“You hear me? You stay away!”

The entire crew of voices erupted into smears of laughter, and Trix thought again of the four women sitting like porcelain dolls on the sofa. She was about to scream when the voices stopped. One of them cleared their throat, and all noise fell away. Trix eased herself



against the wall, sputtering as she tried to catch her breath. A moment later the woman came back with her original warmth. “That’s the end of our first session, Beatrix. You did very well. We’ll talk again next Wednesday at the same time.” She hung up.

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Trix stayed where she was, caged in between the sofa and the wall, where she felt hidden and pursued, breathing hard but trying to make as little noise as possible. She stayed until her sweat had grown cold, until she felt the grain of the carpet boring into her skin. Exhausted by the session, she’d fallen into a half sleep, half fugue state, and when she finally opened her eyes, the space around her had grown dark. A car passed in the street. Her husband would be home soon, if he came home at all. Still, she had to get dinner on the table just in case.

Her body broken, syrupy with sweat, her muscles sore as though she’d survived a beating, Trix recalled her husband that day, his face at the police station. How he didn’t look her in the eye, like he was one of the cops that’d been assigned to take her home. How he didn’t say a word the entire way. How he hadn’t talked to her the way a husband talks to his wife in the two years since. She looked up, up at the curtains, at the back of the sofa, and pushed herself onto her hands and knees and sat back in the corner, staring out as the room returned piece by piece in the dim dusk light. Once her breathing had settled, she crawled to standing and brushed herself off. Her face was stiff with dried tears and it hurt to inhale, but she cleared her throat and made her way into the kitchen.

When 9:00 rolled around and her husband still hadn’t turned up, Trix covered the pan of roast and carrots and onions and potatoes and put it into the fridge. Her stomach grumbled as the warm food passed beneath her nose, but her throat stiffened when she contemplated making a plate for herself.

She took a shower in the dark, afraid to see even her shadow in the mirror. As she lathered up, she thought what it would be like to slip and hit her head. She spent the night in

bed with the light on, picturing her husband with another woman, her dark skin like a copper penny, her thick, teenage makeup cracking under the light of whatever budget motel he'd brought them to. Each time a flame of anger would lick its way up inside her Trix swallowed it back, her voice shrunk to the head of a pin. An emotion as moving and as freeing as anger had no place in her broken, guilty body.

In the morning she waited until her husband left before getting out of bed. For a while she just lied there, tracing the marks on the ceiling with her eyes, remembering such a morning just after they'd moved in. Finally, she slid out of bed, got out an outfit for work and made herself a cup of coffee. She took a sip and spit it out, her gag reflex springing up as though stopping poison. She coughed until there were tears in her eyes and took another sip. This one made it further onto her tongue, where it tasted of rancid motor oil, rather than her favorite Colombian mountain roast, before she gagged it up and out. Then she recalled what Betsey had said: 'Don't get caught up in it,' and felt sick at the sight of Betsey in her mind. She saw the reflection of her messy hair in the surface of the coffee, and the memories of the phone call began to move in on her, flashes of shouting voices and a stiffening feeling of shame. She dumped the coffee out in the sink and called work and told them she was sick. She spent the rest of the day cleaning the house.

The next day and the next, coffee and gagging, coffee and gagging. The dinners she'd made for her husband in the fridge, untouched, became covered with an oily glaze. When she finally did go back to work she kept to herself, afraid of what she'd say if someone asked her what was wrong or why she wasn't eating. At lunchtime, when the office filled up with the smells of microwaved leftovers, she'd go out for a drive and listen to the AM radio station. One day she watched a coworker eat an entire bag of doughnuts while her own stomach sat as still as a rock.

On the morning of the fourth day Trix hovered over a plate on which sat three quarters of an intact banana next to a tiny pile of banana cubes. She stabbed one of the cubes with a

fork and stared at it for a moment before putting it into her mouth. She gave it five quick chews and washed it down with coffee, swallowing rapidly to stave off her gag reflex. “One down, three to go,” she said, and continued until she’d finished off all the banana cubes. She wrapped up the rest of the banana and put it in the fridge next to a pristine beef wellington, the crust of which had grown dull as concrete. Then she reached for the phone.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she said as soon as Betsey answered.

“Excuse me?” Betsey said. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” Trix lowered her voice. “How could you do this to me?”

“Trix, are you feeling OK?”

“No, I’m not feeling OK. I haven’t been able to eat in five days. My body rejects the very idea of food.”

“Oh,” Betsey whispered, “the diet. I told you, we’re not supposed to talk about it.”

“Well, we need to talk about it. I can’t eat, I can’t even sleep. This isn’t a diet, Betsey. It’s torture.”

Betsey sighed. “Have you weighed yourself lately?”

“Weighed myself? I can’t even look at a mirror. I’m so disgusted with everything.”

“I told you not to let it get to you. I *did* warn you, Trix.”

“Betsey, how could you do something like this?”

“Because it works.”

“But why this?”

“I’ll tell you why. Because the *Flab to Abs* video didn’t work. Because jazzercise didn’t work. Because *Dangerous Curves Ahead* did nothing but give Alan more reasons to call me things like ‘pleasantly plump’ and ‘big boned’ in front of our friends.” She paused, sighed.

“Look, I know it’s a bit out there—“

“Do you have any idea what they did to me?” Trix said.

“We’re not supposed to talk about it,” Betsey said, gritting her teeth.

“I have to talk about it!” A sob made its way up her throat. “I have to tell someone about this. I don’t have anybody else.”

“It doesn’t work if you talk about it, Trix. You have to keep it all in.”

“But I can’t!”

“You just have to stick with it—“

“Nope, I’m done,” Trix said. “I’m canceling my next appointment. This is sick.”

“Don’t cancel,” Betsey said. “Just give it more time. Trust me, Trix.”

“Trust you? How could I trust you if this is how you want your friends to feel?”

“It’s already working for you, Trix,” Betsey said. “Go weigh yourself. You’ll see.”

“No, I won’t validate such sick behavior. Look, I gotta go.” Betsey started to say something but Trix hung up.

For a while afterward she sat at the kitchen counter, looking at the black marble and white tile, trying to remember when life in this room had color. Back when her husband would bring home huge cuts of beef and pork from the butcher’s and the two of them would sit at the bar and drink wine as it crackled in the oven and make plans to take vacations to Bora Bora or pick out seeds to plant in the garden in the spring or discuss whether to buy a BMW or a Mercedes-Benz. Now the room sat bland and forlorn, as though it’d been abandoned after a natural disaster.

*Go weigh yourself* said Betsey’s voice in her head. Trix decided then and there that those four women weren’t worth it. She needed new friends. Maybe her weight wasn’t the problem, she thought, maybe it was the company. Still, as her eye caught the single coffee cup sitting in the dish drainer, her primary source of sustenance for the last few days, she figured stepping on the scale might not be such a bad idea.

She went to the bathroom, emptied her bladder, took off all her clothes, and approached the scale. She thought back to her last bowel movement—the previous morning,

and barely worth the effort—and placed both feet on the L and R markers. “No way,” she said out loud. She threw her clothes back on, not bothering to step back into her underwear, and called Betsey back.

“I lost five pounds!” she said.

“I don’t want to say ‘I told you so,’ but…” Betsey said.

“I can’t believe it,” Trix said, her voice on helium.

“So you’ll stick with it?”

She dropped back to earth. “No. Absolutely not. I can’t face it again. It was too humiliating.”

“But it works, Trix. And, I shouldn’t be saying this, but it won’t be that bad forever.”

“How do you know how bad it was?” Trix said.

Betsey sighed. “I just understand, OK? Please believe me when I say I know exactly what you’re going through.”

“You keep saying you understand. How do you understand, Betsey? Tell me what you know right now or I’ll call the police on the whole operation.”

Betsey laughed. “No need,” she said. “Two days a week I work at the police station doing filing. I needed the extra cash after the divorce.”

“But what—“

“I saw the arrest record,” Betsey said.

Trix tried to speak but barbed wire caught in her throat and only a croak came out.

“It’s all there. But don’t you go worrying now, because—“

“You knew?” Trix said, her voice trailing a sob.

“Trix, honey, look—we’ve all done something awful that we’re ashamed of. Things we’d rather die than face, and we spend our whole lives living down that shame. This is a chance to turn it into something good. Think of it as a *tool*.”

“But—“ Trix contemplated denying it or trying to defend herself.

“It doesn’t matter,” Betsey said. “We’re all in the same boat. You, me, Frances, Diane. Even Natalie. Even perfect, you-look-fabulous-for-fifty Natalie.” She slowed down her voice. “All in the same boat.”

“You looked at their records too?”

“I didn’t have to. It all comes out in the sessions.”

Trix took a deep breath and stood up. “Are you telling me they’ve all done this too?”

“We’ve all played a role, in a way,” Betsey said. “Like I said,” she slowed down her voice, “We are all in the same boat. And now you’re here with us.”

“I don’t understand,” Trix said, but she had a whiff. She thought back to the voices on the phone, how they’d stung.

“Stop thinking about it,” Betsey said. “I know you are. I can feel it.”

Trix began to panic. “I can’t look them in the face ever again.”

“You can, and you will.”

“How?”

“Let’s see. A DUI, ran over a five year-old girl who ended up losing an arm and almost died. Did five years in state pen. Here’s another: got caught fucking her boss in his office by his wife and ten year-old son, who took pictures and sent them around to the whole company. That’s how, Trix. These are your friends.”

“Who...”

“I can’t tell you who did what. Maybe you’ll find out for yourself someday, but that’s how you’ll look them in the eye. Because we’re all the same.” Betsey sighed. “Look, it’s going to be OK. You just need to hang in there. See this thing through, OK?” Trix stayed silent. “I’ve got to go now, but you’ll be fine.”

“Don’t leave me here like this,” Trix said. Her eyes fell on a block of knives, and warm ideas seeped into her mind.

“Well talk again soon. Wednesday, at 3:00, I believe,” Betsey said, and hung up.

Trix held the phone in her hand and squeezed it until the plastic edge made a painful indentation in her skin. She thought of smashing it on the counter, hitting it against the hard marble until it became shards of plastic and sparking wires, then going out and getting a new phone and telling her husband she'd had enough of the old phone. Would he have seen enough initiative in that to look her in the eye again? Would he respect her newfound authority? She threw the phone into the sink, stared at the block of knives for a moment, and headed for the bedroom.

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As she passed the full length mirror in the hallway, Trix thought of the number on the scale and got an idea. She went into her bedroom and came out wearing her favorite dress. Standing in front of the mirror, she clipped up her hair with the set of mother-of-pearl barrettes her husband had given her for Christmas years earlier, and dabbed her lips with bright red lipstick. She stepped back and studied herself closely, and immediately noticed a fold in her dress that wasn't there before. She moved her body from side to side. Something else was off. The bunches of flowers on the fabric seemed loose, as though they'd wilted. And then she saw it was because the dress no longer hugged her hips, causing the fabric to warp and fold as it moved. The top of the dress gapped slightly around her breasts, and the part where the zipper ran was no longer taut. Trix turned to the side and cupped her breasts with both hands. Did they seem smaller? She stepped back and allowed the overhead light to pour onto her face, where two slight caverns had formed in her cheeks, their shadows wrought deeper by the red of her lips.

Trix stood back, pinching in the fabric of the dress here and there around the waist, making note of where it hung loose. She took it off, turned it inside out, and went to the kitchen. There, she inserted pin after pin along the seams, drawing the folds of fabric together with deft fingers. She took the dress to her sewing machine and ran it through, inch by inch. As she worked, she fought off memories of the phone call, which had begun to surface after



she spoke to Betsey. When she'd made it to the bottom of the dress on both sides, she flipped it right side out, slipped it back on, and stood in front of the mirror again. She moved her new body through the air with severe, ravenous motions, devouring the space around her. She raised her arms up in the air, then brought them down behind her head, clasped together. She struck a sensuous pose and smiled and allowed a tiny plum of a laugh to escape.

She wore the dress for the rest of the day, driven out of the house by a new sensation of lightness and motion. She pushed her cart through the supermarket, where she half-hoped to run into Natalie, Diane or Frances. She had no idea what she'd say to them, but Betsey's words had helped her see them in a new light. She got her hair washed and set, her nails done, then she took the car for an oil change and a wash. The man at the mechanic's smiled at her before she left, and she smiled back. Before getting into her car she thought of going back inside for another, but laughed and drove away.

Later that night, still wearing the dress, Trix was putting another tray of untouched dinner into the refrigerator when she heard her husband's car pull into the driveway. She stood upright and shuffled through the last few hours and each item she saw was to her liking: she was still wearing the dress, every hair was still in place and shiny, and not so much as a pea had passed through her perfectly rouged lips. She felt around her waistline, running her fingers over the fresh stitching, and wondered if he had noticed that the car had been washed. As the sound of his footsteps grew nearer, she moved herself so she was standing in front of the sink, imagining she was back in front of the mirror, her back facing outward, and posed herself so her right hip jutted out. She arranged her face into an expression that was somewhere between coy and seductive, even though there was no chance he'd see it. The door from the garage opened and her husband walked in and muttered something, but then his footsteps stopped. Trix closed her eyes and felt her skin prick and dampen as her husband's gaze lit up her back like a hot spotlight. The sound of his breath entered the silence of the room. In the blackened window she watched his shape behind her rock from side to side. He

cracked his knuckles and took a deep breath. A tiny lamp switched on deep inside her, triggering a temptation to say something, to meet his mutter with a version of 'good evening,' but she stayed silent. She knew how the light from the hallway would appear on her bare shoulders, turning the tops into little setting suns, so she remained perfectly still, a wax figure of the woman she was before all this. She heard him open his mouth, take a slight inhale, then clear his throat, before walking out of view and up the stairs.

After a moment Trix opened her eyes and, in the low light, saw only her silhouette in the window. She focused on her black face and smiled.

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The following Wednesday at 3:00 the phone rang. Trix stared at it, took a deep breath, and answered.