

- Calorie Counters

“Now ladies, let’s have a look at you today then.”

The plump woman stood up out of her chair and faced her captivated audience. Clipboard in hand she quickly scanned the sheet of paper in front of her and nodded her head in self approval as she made her decision.

“Marjorie, let’s start with you.” She pointed to a woman on the front row, dressed in a large yellow dress, hiding loosely from her body in an effort to hide her actual shape.

“Let’s have a round of applause for Marjorie please.”

The other four women in the group duly complied, clapping their hands together in support of their co-member. Marjorie eased herself out of her chair and took the few steps up to the front of the room, turning to shyly face the other members, clasping her hands in front of her stomach in an unconscious motion that her conscious mind would never willingly pick up on.

“Now then,” the group leader said, again consulting her clipboard, though more in an effort to appear professional than actually needing to read the information there.

“Last week we had you down at 15 stone and 3 pounds, a 2 pound reduction on the week before, let’s see if you can keep that great record up. Step onto the scales please my dear.”

Marjorie took a tentative step forward, resting her weight on the scales in front of her. She watched the numbers rise and fall, going from success to disaster, her heart lumped in her throat in anticipation. She watched the digital display finally settle on a decision.

“Well then,” the leader started, adjusting her glasses as she bent down for a closer inspection of the screen, her pen scratching a note upon her paper as she did so.

“Looks like we have another week of success, I’m pleased to tell you that you’ve managed to shed another pound, putting you at a slimful 15 stone 2, well done Marjorie, let’s have a round of applause to congratulate her.”

The group responded accordingly, each face beaming a smile that held the intention of looking sincere. Marjorie accepted her praise with a blushing grin, shrugging her shoulders modestly as if to say that she had no idea how she had achieved her success. She sat back down in her plastic chair, breathing a sigh of relief that her turn was over and that it had gone well. She looked around at the others, wondering who would be next and if they would better her.

“Right then,” the leader said, moving her pen down her sheet to another name, let’s see how Flo has done this week, come on up Flo, let’s see if we can build on Marjorie’s success.”

A woman in a tight black top and grey, soft trousers stood up and walked to the front, her body jiggling from the movement, accentuated by the tight fit of her clothes around her curves.

“Up you pop petal, let’s see how you’ve done this week.”

Flo stood on the scales, bending forward slightly so that she could see the LCD display.

“We’re looking for an improvement on last week, because you did admit that you had a little slip up with the diet last time we all met and you did actually gain a few little pounds.”

Flo shot an annoyed look at the group leader and then turned her attention back to the scales, like Marjorie, watching the numbers flicker back and forth.

The leader bent down again and read the screen as the numbers settled.

“Well that’s a vast improvement there Flo, well done you’ve gone from 14 stone 7 last week back down to 14 stone 4 which is where you were the week before last so well done! Let’s have another round of applause for Flo.”

Again the group clapped like a pack of amused seals, talking amongst themselves as to how well Flo had done and didn’t she deserve it after last week’s little set back. Flo sat back down, a huge grin of self satisfaction on her face, looking around at the others, basking in her success.

The group leader studied her chart again and called up another member and then another, marking down their new weights accordingly, noting how both of them had managed to lose a small amount of weight, secretly annoyed at the group’s overall success so far, as she knew that she herself had put on weight this week. She decided that she would just overlook her own weigh in at the end of the session this week and hope that no one would notice, or at least not mention it. She looked down to the last name on her list.

“Right then ladies, last but certainly not least it’s Esther’s turn to come up to the front.” She smiled at the woman sitting on the back row of chairs, trying to appear friendly and inviting.

“Let’s have another big round of applause to welcome Esther up to the front.”

Esther stood up out of her chair, her clothes baggy and hanging loosely off her breasts and hips, her long sleeves of her red top loosely batting against her hands. As she walked up to the front, the applause became peppered with whispered comments amongst the seated women and as Esther reached the front, the leader furrowed her eyebrows at Esther’s appearance. She shook off her wonder and brought back her smile.

“Right then Esther, on you get please.”

Esther moved forward somewhat reluctantly, hesitating before finally putting her feet on the scales.

The leader came over to stand next to her.

“Right then, last week you’d done very well indeed, going from 13 stone 11 down to 13 stone 5, and you were our super slimmer of the week because of that great effort. Let’s have a look at you today.”

The leader bent down to look at the scales while Esther stood above, her eyes staring at the ceiling. The leader adjusted her glasses and then looked again, her pen remaining motionless.

“Can you just step off the scales for a second dear; I think they might just need a tiny little adjustment.”

The leader squatted down, the hems of her dress stretching at the strain. She played with the buttons below the display, resetting the counter.

“Ok then, sorry about that Esther, let’s have another try shall we?”

Esther stepped back on the scales and again the leader bent down to look. There was no mistaking it, the scales had to be right, she had doubled checked them now.

“Well,” she said, standing back up straight, raising her eyebrows and wiping her sweaty palms on her skirt.

“It looks like Esther is our slimmer of the week again this week. Congratulations Esther, now if you’d like to take your seat again.”

“How much did she lose this week?” Kay shouted out, her head held quizzically to one side.

“Yeah, how much did she lose?” Came another request.

The leader pretended to look down at her clipboard to reaffirm the weight although she had no need to. Esther stood next to her, looking decisively uncomfortable.

“Well, Esther now weighs,” he voice dropped to nearly a whisper, “12 stone 6.”

There was a unified gasp from the group; Esther averted her gaze down to the floor.

“You mean she’s lost nearly a stone in a week!” Asked Flo incredulously.

There came no congratulatory round of applause for Esther, instead each of the women, including the group leader all stared at the star dieter who was fumbling with her hands nervously. There was an air of silence that lasted several minutes as the women took in the information, trying to decide what to say next. They had all been trained to praise their fellow group members whenever they had any varying degree of success, no matter how minute, but to lose nearly a stone in a week, that was criminal, more than that, it just wasn’t fair. What were a few measly pounds, which in reality could quite easily be a loss of excess water, or more likely from taking an extra large dump, compared to something that drastic? Each woman mulled over her choices, trying to decide whether to suppress the jealousy or embrace it.

The leader spoke first.

“Well I hope you’ll all join me in congratulating Esther and as that’s everybody, I guess we’ll meet the same time next week.

As the week went by each one who had not reached the giddy heights of being named star slimmer of that week, mulled over and contemplated their position and ultimately their weight. They had one of two options. One was to work extra hard at their diet and try to compete with the super slimming woman, maybe even try their hand at a little bit of exercise to help shed those pounds, or there was another way. The easy way. Despite their non contact during the hour outside of a Monday evening in St. Michaels Church hall, each member managed to come to the same decision as the other, creating a unanimous vote as to how the next meeting would go.

“Welcome back ladies to another week of Calorie Counters. And a very special welcome to Esther again, I’m sure I’m not the only one who can’t wait to see what your achievement this week will be.” The leader’s sugar sweet smile unable to fully disguise her sneer.

“In fact, Esther, why don’t you come up to the front and help get this week’s class underway.”

Esther looked around at the other members, her eyes searching each of their faces, trying to decide whether they would lend her any support. For some unknown reason to herself, Esther felt threatened, feeling the eyes upon her, recognising that not one of them was sending good thoughts her way. She slowly got to her feet, feeling her hands shaking at her side. She was always a little nervous when she had to go up to the front each week but this week felt different somehow. The group had not embraced her success in any way, shape or form and it worried her, perhaps leading to her nervousness.

She walked to the front and performed the usual parlour trick of standing on the scales and waiting for her weight to be decided by the miniature glowing digits below her. She raised her eyes to the ceiling again, not wanting to see her result. She never weighed herself at home, always waiting until she came to class, leaving a little surprise for herself, but this week she did not want to know at all. In fact, she wished

that she'd actually put weight on this week, maybe she wouldn't feel such an outcast. But she knew that was impossible, it was inevitable that she had lost more weight, unless it had suddenly decided to stop working.

The leader looked down at the scales and calmly made a note on her chart, not looking once at the woman standing next to her. Esther breathed a sigh of relief. She knew that she could not have put weight on, but perhaps the weight loss had only been minimal this week, inconsequential enough for her to scrape by without causing any more upset.

"Well then, Esther," the leader said, looking up from her clipboard to focus on Esther, adjusting her glasses as she did so, "it seems that the last couple of weeks were no fluke. Congratulations."

Esther's heart sank as there came a long pause, a stop gap of silence. The leader spoke again.

"Ladies."

With that one command the four other women shot out of their seats, as quickly as they could manage, and lunged towards Esther. Their hands shot out, grabbing in front of them and Esther felt their hands all over her body, grasping at her flesh. Several pairs of hands grasped at her shoulders and elbows, securing her in a collective grip as they led her back towards the row of chairs. They thrust her into one of the chairs on the front row and held her there, the group surrounding her, holding her secure. The group leader stepped forward, having quite enjoyed watching the man handling spectacle and stood directly in front of Esther.

"Once again, congratulations on your success," she said, the sneer appearing clearly on her face now.

"The thing is Esther," she continued, "there can be such a thing as too much success. Your weight loss of these last few weeks has been quite significant, probably the most radical I have seen in my three years of running the Calorie Counters Class."

She paused dramatically for an intake of breath, trying to call to mind every instance of interrogation she had seen on all the police dramas on T.V.

"You've done so well in this class that to be honest, it makes me think that you've doing something other than sticking to the very well researched and controlled diet plan that we provide for your £3.50 a week. What is it, a new radical diet from the states? Are you bolieamic? Have you joined a gym, just what is the secret of your success Esther?"

"Is it the bean and cabbage diet that Renee Zwelleger is on?" Suggested one of the women.

"A new form of Atkins?" came another.

"Those diet pills off of Watchdog?"

"Controlled Carbs?"

"The take away take-out diet?"

"What Esther, what is it?" Sang a chorus of almost desperate voices.

Esther trembled under the pressure that was being bore down on her. The faces of the women were only inches from her own now, their differing smells all congealing together to form a forceful stench that was threatening to overpower Esther's stomach. She could see ever pore on each of their faces. The smudged lines of make-up, the thick layers of powder, the beads of sweat, the wrinkles that were trying to fight their way out past this cosmetic prison. Despite all this though, in spite of the fear that was currently gripping her heart, there was a voice deep down inside of her that told her not to tell, that protested that the secret was her's and her's alone.

She had been the one to find it, not them. Why should she give away her find, tell them what had taken her so long to find out?

“I...” she began, her brain defiant not to give the secret away but still struggling to think of a plausible substitute.

“I’ve... stuck to the diet like the rest of you,” she protested, realising that this alone would not be enough, “and I’ve started to go jogging in the evening, that’s all.”

Every part of her body was giving away her lie, her body language betraying her, but her lie had made them stop and think, a vacant expression having come over each of the women’s faces as they contemplated the information.

It was Flo who spoke first.

“With those chubby tree trunks, I don’t think so,” she argued, “you may have lost some of that budda belly but your legs are just as fat as before, I remember that much about you when you first started. Tell us another one, pinnocho, let’s watch your nose grow.”

Esther let out a sigh of coming exhaustion. She could only fight them for so long and was it really worth it? Her secret had at least lasted a short while and there was no way it was going to stay a secret forever anyway, it was just too damn effective to keep hidden away.

“Magic Meat,” she said, letting the statement hang ominously in the air, “it’s all down to Magic Meat.”

The women had initially scoffed at her revelation, but she had quickly rallied them around when she was allowed to explain. Six weeks or so ago, desperate to actually start losing some weight, Esther had enrolled at Calorie Counters, but her first couple of weeks had been a complete failure, somehow managing to actually gain weight. Her desperation growing and having previously been on every diet conceived by man, she turned to the internet, googling in extreme weight loss and searching through the results. She was initially looking for some kind of diet pill, as despite the heavy risks involved, both financially if they failed to work, or physically if they decided to work in a completely different way than they were supposed to, she was close to breaking point. Her husband had lost all interest in her sexually and she suspected that he was sleeping around behind her back and her children had begun to come home with comments from school regarding their ‘equator belt wearing mom’.

After four days of solid searching, basically trying to find the diet pills that least likely looked like they would make your hair fall out or your stomach explode, she had stumbled on a small website, minimal in its presentation and content, advertising a new extreme diet, that involving no points, no calorie counting and no pills. It was based around eating one particular, specially manufactured food type, lovingly labelled ‘Magic Meat’. This meat was low in everything that could cause weight gain and full of all the nutrients and vitamins needed each day. Just one meat strip three times a day was the equivalent of three square meals, it was manufactured to taste amazing and best of all, it was actually supposed to be filling. A little dubious, but still desperate, Esther had bought a box, paying a price that she warned the others was on the wrong side of cheap. To her surprise she actually received her package five days later and by only the second day of trying them was addicted. They did everything that they promised, they tasted great, kept her full and she felt great all day after eating them. A few days later and the weight loss part of the deal also proved to be true. She had found her salvation and by the time the class was supposed to have finished that Monday evening, she had shared it with the group.

The following two weeks created more success in the Calorie Counters club than any preceding months had yielded. Every woman in the class, including the group leader, had dropped a significant amount of weight and each now walked into the Monday evening session with a huge grin upon their face, and a size smaller dress clinging to their body. In a matter of weeks, each had become a sexier and more stylish woman, clinging to her womanhood, embracing her now illustrious and alluring curves. The weight loss had been dramatic, but it was the mental boost that each member had received, that really stood out. All except one. Esther found that she could no longer revel in her previous success. She had too much competition now; she had lost the thing that had given her individuality, that had made her stand out from the rest of the nobodies. She had never really considered herself to be elitist or even that competitive, but as much as she dreaded coming to class on a Monday evening for she knew that she would have to stand up at the front and parade herself for a few moments, she had secretly enjoyed how inadequate she had made the other women feel with her weight loss. Now that was a thing of the past, they had all blended back into one ordinary group, just with one extra-ordinary thing in common.

But then it happened. An answer came along to Esther's prayers. Sort of. The Magic Meat website shut down.

"How could this of happened, they must have doubled their business since we all found out about this."

Kay had gotten out of her seat and was almost shouting out in frustration.

Flo got up and joined her.

"I've had my husband check everywhere for this god damn site and he can't find anything. It's fucking disappeared."

Marjorie now got to her feet.

"What are we going to do? I've only got a few days supply left, I order mine weekly. What if we can't find anymore of them?"

"Well have you checked around any other websites, to see if they've got any?" Offered Sharon, remaining seated.

"There's nothing out there. I've been looking for days, nobody knows anything about them." This time it had been the group leader who had spoken, sitting at the front of the class, her eyes transfixed to a spot at the back of the room while her lips moved, her mind uninvolved in their movement.

"I've even checked all the wrappers and packaging, there's not even a list of ingredients!" Shouted someone.

This remark sparked off a heated debate as the women argued and shouted amongst themselves, scrambling to try and make sense of their situation, their crisis. Amongst all this, Esther sat at the back of the class, a smirk forming on her face as she watched the antics of her fellow members. She had at least two weeks of bars left, more than enough for her to carry on losing weight. It may only be temporary but this was the opportunity she had been waiting for. She knew that these women could never revert back to the idea of diet and exercise now that they had tasted the easy option. On the other hand, she was determined to do just that. Once her supply had run out she was going to carry on her success but the old fashioned means. She had found her motivation to do so now and it wasn't her cheating scumbag of a husband or even her kids, it was the thought that she could come to class week in and week out and watch as these women gradually started to put their weight back on as she continued to shed the pounds. At this thought, her smirk turned to a wide grin that she had been careful to hide behind her hand in case any of the others saw. It was going to be a fun few weeks.

Over the commotion and arguing came a shrill whistle that cut through the air. The women looked around to see the group leader standing at the front of the class, her seat discarded and a stony stare of determination now filling her eyes.

“Ladies, now is not the time to panic.” She paused for effect, making sure that she had their complete attention before carrying on.

“I know our situation looks dire but there a way out of this.”

At this each woman returned to her seat and settled down quietly to listen, hope having been raised by their faith in the leader.

“I take it that each of you has a least one of these bars left.”

There was a nodding of heads to confirm the leader’s statement to be true.

“Well they have to be made out of something and I know that there is no ingredients list anywhere for them, but we are women and what we excel at is our excellent sense of taste. Therefore, this week I am giving you each a homework assignment. You will all go away and try and find at least one, if not hopefully more, of the ingredients that you think these bars may contain. I know it may seem an incredible task but have faith in yourselves and when we meet next week we will pool our resources and see if we can perhaps create our own version of the bar or at least a new diet plan based on some of its ingredients. Now one thing is clear, the main ingredient seems to be some kind of meat, as evident in its taste and sustenance. I suggest you work from there. So chins up and I’ll see you the same time next week.”

Weeks went by without a solution. As the women became more desperate, the pounds started sneaking back on, as the stress from the Magic Meat search reduced the already questionable resolve of the calorie counters and many of them resorted back to their old ways of chocolate and fry up binges, the huge calorie intake feeling like that first puff on a long given up habit of smoking, or that first sip of alcohol after 6 months of drying out. The women’s moods deteriorated, their families baring the brunt as the women fell into a depression that had never taken hold of them even before they had begun to lose any weight. The meat had created an addiction in all of them, all but one. Even with her supply gone, Esther took secret pleasure in watching the other women struggle. She had actually managed to stick to the ‘calorie counters prescribed diet plan’ religiously, something she had not even managed when she first started and had even taken up swimming twice a week. As the other women ballooned back, heading towards their old weights and beyond, she continued to shed the pounds, so much so, that she was glad that they no longer weighed anyone in class anymore, spending their time going over everyone’s various food experiments that week instead, in the hope that someone had managed a miracle.

Even Esther began to become worried about the now frantic women. Each week the women came in looking more dishevelled, their clothes shabby and bulging from the gained weight. Their make up, for those that bothered with it anymore, was always smudged and uncoordinated, their body odour a sickening mixture of sweat and cheap soap, that the expensive perfume had previously managed to conceal. Each meeting descended closer to a form of obsessive madness as the weeks rolled on. Even the food combination experiments had become worrying, ranging from a unhealthy mega mix of different of meat types, to the degree where one women admitted to cooking her son’s hamster in the rationalisation that the magic meat had come from a foreign country, and that this mysterious country “could be somewhere like Korea, where they eat dogs for God’s sake!”. This logic was taken to the extreme the following week, where one woman candidly stood up and confessed to killing and

trying to eat her neighbour's dog in the hope that it had been Korea or some similar country where the meat had been shipped from.

It was the fifth week into the search that the true madness of this addiction was proven. The meeting went ahead as normal, starting with the usual hurried greetings that was quickly followed by a short interrogation of each woman to see if they had managed to find anything. Esther took her normal seat towards the back row and had just settled down when Marjorie came running into the room, her body rippling with the pull of gravity, her face red and looking ready to burst.

"I've got!" she shouted, her voice hoarse from her lack of breath but loud none the less. "We all need dick!"

At this remark there was a hushed silence, but disturbingly not one caused by shock or repulsion, but by actual curiosity. The women rushed around the panting figure, who now stood with her hands clasped on her thighs as she bent over trying to suck in as much oxygen as she could to try. The leader stepped forward.

"Ok Marjorie, what do you mean, there's no time for you just to shout out something like that and then just stand there."

Marjorie tried to stand up but was forced back down by a stomach cramp that suddenly attacked her, leaving her to speak from her hunched over position.

"It's like I said. I think I've found out what the Magic Meat's made out of."

She paused to take another deep breath. The leader walked up to Marjorie and grabbed her shoulders, looking as if she was going to start shaking her at any moment.

"Well, what is it? Spit it out!"

Marjorie held her hands up in surrender, motioning for the leader to release her. She tried to stand up again but upon failing, decided to move over and collapse into one of the plastic chairs instead.

"It all happened last night," she said her mouth gasping, still hungry for air.

"My husband came in late from the pub, staggering about drunk as normal. He came upstairs, undressed and got into bed with me. I lay there, awake, but pretending to be asleep, knowing that otherwise he'd keep me awake with his drunken banter. But this time it was different, he cuddled up next to me and started touching me..."

Marjorie looked up at the women standing over her, suddenly embarrassed as she realised what she was about to describe, but deciding to carry on as she saw the impatient look on their faces.

"Well he doesn't usually show me any affection anymore, since I put on the weight anyway so I was quite surprised. Well..."

She looked up again but quickly put her head back down as she saw the leader's scowl.

"Well we started making love, but I'm afraid that my husband was a little bit too drunk and well, he couldn't quite perform. But this was such a rare occasion lately that I didn't want to miss out on it so easily. So to help things along, I put his..."

She made an unusual hand gesture.

"His you know, in my mouth to try and get him excited again. Well as soon as it touched my tongue I recognised the taste, it was the same taste that we have all so enjoyed in what seems so long ago. The Magic Meat."

There was a unified gasp around the room.

"Of course it wasn't the exact same taste because it wasn't cooked. But it was so similar that I knew at once."

At this Marjorie dropped her head into her hands and began to sob.

“I don’t know what happened to me, I just couldn’t help myself. It was just so similar and after all these weeks I had to be sure.

The women all backed off a step as they realised what Marjorie was going to say, their faces contorted in a mixture of horror and intrigue.

At this Marjorie sobbed harder, her tears falling through her fingers and dropping silently onto her dress.

“What did you do Marjorie,” the leader prompted her curiosity still stronger than her sense of revulsion. “We need to know.”

“I cooked it!” she cried, her sobs rising to an almost deafening level.

“I was just so excited to have finally found the ingredient that it didn’t seem to matter how outrageous or wrong the solution was. Anything is possible in this day and age, especially over the internet. I went into some kind of auto pilot mode and when I came too I was standing at the foot of the bed, a carving knife from the kitchen in my hand and splattered with blood. My husband was lying on the bed screaming, grabbing at his groin, he was covered in blood.”

Marjorie burst into another fit of crying, eventually composing herself again, raising her tear streaked face to look at her fellow members.

“The children were knocking at the bedroom door, crying out, wondering what was going on. Thank God I somehow had the sense to lock the door. I shouted out some made up excuse about him having stomach pains or a nightmare or something else, I can’t remember. He just kept screaming though, I had to do something, the children would never have gone back to bed anyway.”

At this Marjorie’s resolve broke and her head fell back into her hands.

“I used the pillow. I…” she started, her eyes clouding with shock, “’til he was quiet. He’s still locked in there now, I had to tell you all first, I need your help, I don’t know what to do,” she implored.

The group didn’t gasp this time, they were just silent. Again the leader stepped forward.

Marjorie was still muttering under her breath but the other women had lost interest in her, busy digesting her story, until a unified thought penetrated the group’s musings.

“What did you do with his dick?”

Marjorie looked up at the woman standing over her, not sure how to react to this question, whether to be offended or to answer it.

“I cooked it.”

“And.”

“It tasted exactly the same now.”

There was an ominous quiet in the room as each woman ingested the news. Could it really be true that such a horrific turn of events had led them to at last find the real ingredient behind their magic weight loss bars. Had they really been devouring human flesh all this time. The thought was incomprehensible, a pure flight of fantasy. But Marjorie’s eyes had displayed her sincerity, they beheld the horrible truth. Were they all really such monsters, such cannibals? Each woman in turn mulled over their morals, considered what it was that they had done. They had potentially consumed the remains of other human beings, so caught up in their success, so wrapped up in their miracle as to not consider the reality behind it, the consequences. Their next course of action was what they needed to decide on, as a group. Should they inform the police, as surely there was the very real possibility that people had been harmed, were being harmed to produce these wondrous bars? But

would they even be believed, it seemed out of the bounds of acceptance. Did they know that for sure and how could they report this without implementing pure Marjorie's story? They were a collective group; they were responsible for one another and the well being and safety of each other.

These thoughts flooded Esther's mind as well, a knot of guilt working its way up from her stomach, threatening to devour her whole body. She couldn't believe what she had been a part of, of what lengths they had all gone to in their endeavour to slim down, the insane lengths that Marjorie had gone to, possessed by some manic drive to re-create these God damn bars that had so taken over all of their lives. She could feel her passion welling up inside her, desperate to break out, to take action to right these wrongs. She had never felt so confident, so driven as she did at this moment.

Without realising what it was she was doing, she stood up.

"We have to do something about this," she pleaded, her voice strong, her eyes searching those of the women who were now turned towards her.

"We have to make amends for what part we have played in this."

"And what do you suppose we do, who will even believe such a, frankly ridiculous story?"

It was the leader who had spoken, slightly annoyed that some other woman in the class had seen it fit to speak first and try and to control the situation.

"I'm not sure," Esther replied the guilt and the passion combining inside her, urging her to continue, to find a solution.

"But we have to tell somebody, make somebody believe us."

"And what of poor Marjorie," the leader had now stood up to address Esther, trying to regain the balance of power.

"How can we explain this without including her, telling about her actions? She would surely be arrested, have to go to prison and then what would become of her children. No, we must tell no one of what has happened, of what we know."

The leader smiled as she said this. What we know. It was only at this moment that she realised the enormity of the secret that they all shared. As immoral as it was, it was still a huge breakthrough, it was important news even.

Esther sensed the tone of the leader and was tempted to shrink away. There was something in her eyes, in her smile that betrayed the inner workings of her mind. It was then they she realised the notion that not every woman in the room possibly shared her sense of morality and justice. She suddenly felt very alone. As if sensing her fear, the women's eyes now glared back into Esther's. She felt like prey caught by a pack of starving predators. She felt her bladder threaten to loosen.

"In fact," the leader said, taking a step towards a now trembling Esther, "I think that we haven't thought of the potential of Marjorie's discovery. As unappetising as it may sound, we still must realise that we have finally found what we have been so desperately searching for. We have our ingredient; therefore we have our bars back. In theory of course."

A smile swept across her whole face.

"We can get back on track with our targets ladies. We can continue the club as before, we can revitalise our success."

There was a murmur of agreement, the women's eyes still fixed on Esther. Even Marjorie had lifted up her head out of her hands and was staring at the woman.

"We should be celebrating not beating ourselves up. Our hunger for this food was born out of ignorance, and now that we have tasted this success, is it really our fault if we can not help but continue to feed this hunger?"

All of the blood drained from Esther's face as it contorted in horror.

"Really, you can not think of using what we know, of continuing with this madness?" she said, her face incredulous.

The leader laughed a shrill, cold sound that reverberated around the room.

"Use what we know," she mimicked, "what a good idea. But not only can we continue in our interrupted process of making our bodies beautiful, we can also help others."

The murmur rose almost to a unanimous cheer of approval.

"We can start our own website," cried out one of the women, her voice almost hysterical with excitement.

"No one needs to know what's in the bars!" cried another.

"Exactly that," the leader agreed, her head tilting to one side, still staring at Esther.

"We can be thin and beautiful and rich. We can use our secret to change everything we hate about our lives. The possibilities are endless."

"Madness," said Esther, her voice almost a whisper now.

"Of course, let's not get ahead of ourselves," the leader said, quietening the group. "We still need to conduct our own experiment first, just to be sure."

The women smiled in unison as each experienced the same idea, in an act worthy of telepathy. Each then rose to their feet and advanced towards Esther, who began to back away, only to find her progress halted by the wall behind her.

"Come on Esther," the leader said as the group crowded around the cowering woman, "at least this way you won't have to ever worry about getting fat again."

Word Count: 6499