



'BEING BANNED FOR BEING SIZE 0 SAVED MY LIFE'

Last year, model Charlotte Carter hit the headlines when she was banned from the London catwalks after Milan forbade size 0 girls from appearing at its Fashion Week. As the fashion pack disperse for another season, the 24-year-old tells *Grazia* how it felt to be at the centre of the storm

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Main photo: Robert Brady

'TINY THINGS MAKE ME REALISE HOW FAR I'VE

come in the past year – like a friend telling me how well I look. For me, it's a monumental step to take those words as a compliment, not a slight. A year ago, all I'd have heard was the word "fat" instead of "well", because even when my story made worldwide news, I couldn't see how ill I was. After suffering from an eating disorder for eight years, my thinking was totally skewed and it's only now I can say I'm grateful someone stepped in, because otherwise I might not be here. But as models disperse for another season after some of the most pressured weeks of their year, I wonder how many others are suffering in silence like I once did.

'It seemed like an ordinary day when I went to a London Fashion Week casting last September. The size 0 debate was raging after a Brazilian model had starved herself to death, and underweight models had been banned from appearing in Milan. I suspected that I too was an American size 0 but thought nothing of it. When I took off my cardigan to be photographed by a Models 1 agent, it didn't surprise me to see her face tense with shock. I'd seen people react like that before – it meant I'd lost weight again. "We can't take you on," the agent said softly as the picture she'd taken developed, showing my collar bones sticking out and my clothes hanging off my skinny hips. "You need to go away, address your health issues and come back."

I was shocked. But that night I weighed myself and could hardly believe it. At 5ft 9ins, I weighed less than seven and a half stone and finally realised what was happening to me. I'd always been slim but now I'd lost too much weight. Worse was ▶



Charlotte was shockingly thin in her modelling days – she is now two sizes bigger and is looking healthy again (left)



BY THE TIME I WAS 20, I TRULY BELIEVED THAT EATING A PIECE OF TOAST FOR BREAKFAST WAS OVERINDULGING

Charlotte never struggled to get work until a model agent told her she was too thin for London Fashion Week last year



to come, though, because the story of my being banned was soon splashed across the newspapers and even Naomi Campbell commented on it, saying it showed the industry was taking care of girls. I just wanted to hide away as I struggled to understand how it had come to this.

'My problems began at 15, when I started modelling part-time. I was soon travelling the world as a full-time model and found myself in a new city meeting new people every week. So many girls would have killed to be in my shoes – I felt so lucky.

'BUT THERE WAS A DARKER SIDETO modelling which I refused to acknowledge.

As time went on, it helped disguise a growing preoccupation with food which had begun with the odd diet in my early teens. I came from a middle-class home where the highest standards were expected of me. My mother was a beautiful, highly intelligent woman who had a successful TV career, so there was a lot to live up to – I became a real perfectionist. But it moved to a whole new level when I started modelling and, constantly surrounded by beautiful girls, I felt increasingly insecure. All my worries became focused on food – being the best for the job meant being the slimmest. I wasn't unusual. Many of the other girls were committed competitive dieters. Like me, they regularly skipped meals because they were too "busy". As Kate Moss recently said, it's easy not to eat when you're on the move between castings, fittings and auditions. At

first, I restricted what I ate to "healthy" foods but soon began cutting out meals altogether. Slowly I lost touch with reality and, by the time I was 20, truly believed that eating a piece of toast for breakfast was overindulging. I was so hungry I felt dizzy all the time but got used to the sensation. When I went home, people would comment on how much weight I'd lost, but I'd just brush it off. Then I'd eat normally for a few weeks, put on weight and be even more restrictive as soon as I went away again.

'EVENTUALLY, I STOPPED GOING HOME altogether and avoided seeing my family because I didn't want anyone to challenge me. Instead I hung out with other models where the difference between my own weight and theirs was smaller. I knew it was wrong but, to me, being thin equalled being more beautiful and, as the work kept coming, it validated my behaviour.

'By last year, things were out of control. Each day I ate just a chocolate bar for breakfast, a fruit salad for lunch and an undressed salad for dinner. But even though my bones were poking through my skin, I was convinced I could be slimmer. I'd wake up worrying about what I was going to eat and stare for hours in the mirror at what I felt was my "curvy" body. In fact, I was eating so little that I woke up exhausted every morning and felt constantly weak. I was pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable to their limits. I still wasn't forced to confront what was happening

because my work didn't dry up until the day I went to the Fashion Week casting and was turned away. It felt as if my life had ended when I heard those words. I was devastated. Modelling was my world and now it had disappeared overnight. In those first few days I sat at home avoiding everyone. All I could do was force myself to eat, because I knew I had to get well again.

'WHAT LITTLE NEWS I DID GET FROM the outside world only made me feel worse. There were whispers from within the fashion industry that I was just courting attention and I felt totally betrayed. I couldn't bear to see anybody for weeks and felt so victimised when I saw other skinny models still working. Why had I been singled out? 'But gradually I realised I had to start living again. Of course I didn't change my life around overnight and I've had to slowly get used to eating properly once more. But over the past year I've totally re-educated myself about my health and consciously made a decision to look after it. I have no idea about the long-term health effects of my problems on my body but, after seeing a doctor, I'm finally eating properly: oats with honey for breakfast followed by carbohydrates like brown rice and potatoes for lunch and dinner. I've also begun exercising to build up my strength and energy levels.

'I decided to leave the modelling industry altogether and change my life. I still love fashion – I know other girls can work successfully without getting ill. But I've also realised it's not good for me. Last autumn, I went on a documentary course and have since made several short films. While filming my first project, I still remember the moment I realised how much energy I had. I felt strong both emotionally and physically for the first time in ages. I miss the money that comes with modelling, but I'm more excited about making documentaries highlighting issues affecting women's lives, or about AIDS victims in Africa. 'Old habits die hard though and, as the weight crept on and my clothes became tighter, I had to fight my instinctive desire to restrict my food again. But people began telling me how good I looked and I believed them. I'm now two sizes bigger than last year – there are still days when I wake up and wish I was thinner. I know I'll never be totally free of my illness and have had to accept there will always be a small part of me that still likes the body I used to have when I was a size 0. But ultimately I know I was ill when I was modelling and now I have a job that I love and that relies on me being alert, active and, most of all, well.' ■