The Redemption of Tina Talbott
By Sharon G. Redden-Goebel

The scorching Arizona sun directed its lazer-red rays punishingly at the obese woman waddling across the campus grounds. She was bathed in sweat that trickled in great rivers from her forehead, her back, her armpits, her bosom—even from the backs of her knees. Huge, dark stains spread on her clothing under her armpits and down the middle of her back. Immense rolls of lopsided flab jigged unappealingly while polyester scritched uninvitingly from between her legs as she undulated unevenly along.

Emerging from the main hall was a woman who might have been the fat woman's Nemesis. This woman was willow-wand slim, and she looked cool and beautiful as she seemed to float effortlessly down the stairs in a fashionable white suit. The slender woman looked back at someone in the doorway and gave a soft, high-pitched, distinctive laugh.

At the sound of the laughter the obese woman's head jerked with startled recognition, and she scurried as fast as her bulk would allow her to catch up with the woman in white. "Do you know where the office is?" she asked the woman when she reached her side, although she knew perfectly well where the office was. She was buying time to study the woman, to make certain that this was indeed her old high-school friend.

The long face looked much the same; maybe she'd had a little bit done to her nose, or maybe she's just learned to play up other features (like her gorgeous green eyes)—it way hard to say. On the whole, the face was prettier. Perhaps the self-confidence it had lacked in adolescent days had dimmed its beauty. In those days Tina had recognized its potential, but others had not. Now, it was clear that she was no longer one of the few who could see that Julia was attractive.

A passing young man craned his neck around for a second look at the shining, sea-green eyes beneath winged brows, the high, clear forehead from which chestnut brown hair glistened back to tumble to a slim, belted waist, and the smile that showed even white teeth and the merest hint of a dimple. (He didn't even spare a look of disgust for Tina, the not-so-tiny.)

However, Julia's lovely smile was for Tina, not for him. She said, in answer to Tina's question, "I just came from the office myself; it's back that way, up those stairs and down the hall to your right."

That voice! It was Julia! No one else had a voice like hers in the world. For a few fleeting seconds Tina remembered....

A crowd of pubescent, gawky, gangling boys surrounded a sensitive, young girl, mocking her high-pitched voice, taunting her. The girl didn't say a word, she merely pushed her way out of the crowd, but Tina saw the pain that hovered like an aura around her.

Tina remembered, too, walking home from school one day with a bunch of her friends and coming around a corner to find Julia, all alone, crying. "You can walk with us, if you'd like," Tina had offered. Julia had looked at Tina with a hesitant, trusting smile, but then she had looked at Tina's circle of friends, and her smile vanished. Her dark eyes became shuttered, guarded, and she said, "No, that's okay, I just want to be alone right now." Tina had glanced back at Julia as they walked on and noticed how utterly solitary Julia seemed.

For a few, fleeting seconds Tina also remembered what it was like to be the popular, pretty one, the one who could afford to be kind to a girl on the outside.

Now, she said, "Julia! How are you?"

Julia looked blankly at Tina. It was clear that she did not recognize in the least the puffy-faced woman before her.

"Julia, it's me, Tina Talbott!"
What happened in the next instant seared itself like a hot-iron brand onto Tina's brain. She saw Julia searching for some remembered feature, saw the almost imperceptible flicker of shock in the green eyes as they took in the mounds of flesh, unable to find their old friend there. She saw Julia's barely masked look of pity when green eyes met brown and recognition finally dawned.

Tina caught Julia biting her lower lip, and she knew that it was to keep from asking, "What happened to you?" Julia, of all people, knew well how it felt to be less than perfect. Julia would never be so unkind as to ask the tactless question. So Tina answered that unspoken question without resentment. "I've got three kids now, and I started to gain weight when I had my first. Now, I can't seem to lose it."

Julia seemed at a loss for words. Finally, she said awkwardly, "It must be very hard for you, but I hope your children make it easier for you."

In a moment of terrible pain, Tina knew what it must have been like for Julia all those years ago when she, Tina, had tried to be kind. Until now, until this pain, she had had no idea that she had been a magnifying glass through which Julia's imperfection had loomed larger. Suddenly, Tina just wanted to get away from Julia, just as Julia had wanted to get away from her all those years ago.

"I've got to go, Julia. It was nice seeing you again. You look wonderful! Maybe I'll see you around campus." Tina's tongue tumbled over her words in her rush to have them said and done. She began walking away, trailing her words behind her.

"Sure, Tina!" Julia replied sincerely, "Maybe we can have lunch sometime."

Tina couldn't answer. It felt like she was choking on a mound of her own flesh. Julia started after Tina's slowly diminishing figure, feeling very sad, wondering what was hidden by that broad back, what had caused this to happen to such a lovely girl.

Upon reaching her adobe hut, Tina went inside and locked the door, then heaved herself across her king-sized bed. It groaned, as it always did, beneath her body mass. Tina groaned with it today. When had it all changed?

Tina lay in bed for the rest of the afternoon, sorting through the bits and pieces, trying to make some sense of what had happened to bring her to this moment of truth.

It wasn't high school—high school was a happy time for her. She was cute and popular, not too brainy, not too dumb, not too skinny, not too fat. She was "just right." She was so "just right" that she was voted senior class homecoming queen. It was her moment of glory.

It wasn't even in the years on her own that followed graduation. During those three years she had been happy too. Living alone was fun. She had had a nice job in an up-and-coming technology, as a receptionist in a computer lab, and she had lots of friends to invite over in the evenings when she wasn't busy with one of her numerous boyfriends.

No, she knew, darkly, exactly when the change for the worse had come. When Brian walked into her life, he had cast a long, black shadow over it. The shadow he cast had made her shiver, but she had stupidly mistaken that shiver for one of romantic excitement instead of fear.

They had married within two months of meeting, and within a year Tina had begun her awful metamorphosis; caught as she was in his confining cocoon, she was a butterfly who would turn into a lumbering, slimy caterpillar.

Brian spun his evil threads day by day ever more tightly around her. "You're pathetic!" "You have no style, no taste, no sense, no self-control, no"....Name it, and Brian would tell her that she didn't have it. He was powerful, so domineering, that she had no choice but to believe him. She had never had to amour
herself against anyone before Brian, and so her self-protective shell was non-existent. She was defenseless against him.

The more he put her down, the more she believed she was down. Contrarily, the more she believed she was down, the more she got down on herself for believing she was down. It was a vicious circle that she seemed to escape only with the comfort of food. Denied the access to old friends and family present before her marriage, she began to eat and eat and eat.

She became a shut-in, stealing out of her home only at night when Brian worked (midnight shift so he wouldn't have to touch her anymore) to buy doughnuts and Reese's cups and Pepsis.

The children had been born early on in the relationship, one after the other, like bullets shot from a repeating rifle, while Brian was still inclined to reach for her in a fit of lust. Tina was aware, before their first anniversary had been reached, that Brian did not love her. And, in trying, piteously, to win his love, she came to the point that she did not love herself, either.

Thus, for eight years she lay in the cocoon, developing into a larva of monstrous proportions, feeding greedily on her own self-destruction. She hardly had time for her own children, so intent on her metamorphosis was she.

Then, one day, the cocoon burst. She had become so huge that even Brian's evil power could not match the power of her hunger. When the cocoon exploded, Brian fled in cowering fright—never to be seen or heard from again. Even her children were afraid; they crept carefully around her and seemed glad to go off to school each day.

Tina was not sure what impulse had driven her to the college campus today. Perhaps somewhere inside of her a tiny butterfly's wings were still fluttering frantically to get out. She had thought, for a fragile, fleeting moment, that she could begin anew, go back to school. But beautiful Julia had unwittingly spoiled the dream, crushed the bug of impulse that for a moment had blossomed. Seeing Julia had made Tina realize that she couldn't just push her paunch under people's unsuspecting noses. She was just too disgusting to go to school, to get a job, to do anything.

Outside the locked door, small voices were clamoring to be let in. Tina yelled at them, “Put your books on the steps, and go play in the yard for a little while! I'll let you in shortly!” Instantly there was silence, evidence of the awe in which the children held her. Mother Monster. She reached for a Twinkie on the bedside stand.

As she started to tear the cellophane wrapper, she felt a strange sensation in her chest. The Twinkie fell from her hand to the floor, unnoticed. She listened intently, she started piercingly at a spot on the wall. There is was again, that strange feeling! And did she hear something, too?

It seemed to be a tiny thump, thump, thump in her chest. She felt dizzy, light, lighter than air—like she was (yes!) flying! And in her mind she saw the picture of a butterfly settling softly on Julia's shoulder. The butterfly had a face, and the face had brown, saucy eyes.

A year later, Tina returned to the college campus. The sun shone gently on her back. She walked into the office and asked the registrar if a Julia Gillette was still registered there and what class she might now be attending. She smiled at the registrar, a sunny, warm, homecoming queen smile and walked out of the office, out of the building, and north across the red clay ground to a smaller adobe building. There she waited.

Ten minutes later, people began to emerge from the building. A young man with blond, wavy hair smiled at Tina. She smiled back and waved, but her eyes quickly returned to scan the crowd coming out of the doors. A woman with chestnut brown hair and green eyes finally appeared. As she passed, Tina fell into step beside her. The woman turned to see who was walking with her, and for a second, only a second, her gaze was blank. Then her eyes lit up with joyous recognition, and she smiled her lovely white smile. Julia and Tina laughed and floated down the path together, two butterflies in the sun.