

FAT: The Story of My Life with My Body

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I wasn't trying to get thin. Not this time. It happened accidentally. What I was trying to do, actually, was to prove that, short of anorexia, some people, me included, could not be made thin. When my body started to change I was embarrassed, angry, and deeply afraid.

The other time I *was* trying, oh yes, teenage girl, not a social success, not pretty, bad skin, flat chest, no boyfriend, but firmly convinced that somehow my excellence lay locked up inside me, needing only the right combination, or enough determination, to be released, blaze forth and amaze the world. Mostly As in school, outran most other girls in PE, but I wasn't the *best* at anything. Therefore, I must not be trying hard enough. Other girls, round-faced, bosomy, clear-complected, self-deprecating, talked in the bathroom about their clothes and makeup and diets, how difficult it was to lose weight. No, it was simple, I knew: stop eating! I was unlike other girls, simpering, weak, seeking the herd's approval. Seven years, more or less, spent trying to mold my body in secret. Five years of failure, followed by two years of "success." Underachiever, eh?

Last year I wrote to my mother, I thought it was irresponsible not to. What if she keeled over from shock at the airport? *...think I should warn you in advance that I've gotten significantly less fat...* I couldn't bear to call myself thin, partly because I wasn't, being still up around size 18 then, partly for other reasons. *Surely you must know that I love you and have a high opinion of your judgment...* But. *We are unlikely to*

agree on this subject. Can we please not talk about it, for now? I worked on the letter for weeks, scrubbing it clean of the suppressed anger in the first draft, and the second. 40 years old, all that should be behind me. My two best friends, one woman and one man, previewed the final version. Nobody could read this as punitive in its intentions, right? No, no, they said, it sounds honest and kind. "What did I ever do," my mother said on the phone, "to deserve an uptight, defensive, *pissy* letter like this?"

For some years in my 20s I thought of myself as a fat activist. Black pride, gay pride, why not fat pride? I did research in the library, I met with other fat libbers, I proselytized. The body is not designed to lose weight, the body is designed to resist starvation. For most people, efforts to get thin end up making them fatter. Fat people that you see on the street have probably endured more hunger than you can imagine. By the time I was 30 I gave up. You cannot convince people. It a truth universally accepted that we sculpt our bodies by our behavior.

For the five teenage years, fat was the central mystery of my life. I had been a picky eater as a child. Always had trouble finishing things, never wanted to try anything new. Never was much *interested* in food. Often skipped lunches in elementary school and junior high, pocketed my parents' money instead, felt guilty of course for the theft, but that was only my morals, the physical side was no big deal, I never felt deprived in the slightest. Why now, suddenly, when all my self-esteem rested on not eating, was food so irresistible? What I had done without thought or effort to earn a quarter or two I couldn't do anymore to save

my life, not long enough, anyway. At age 14 I could make myself fast for a day or two, at 17 for three or four. Why was I so much fatter at 17 than 14? I must not be trying hard enough. My personality must have changed for the worse, my willpower radically eroded. And yet I felt that I was still the same person, still held that secret core of brilliant achievement inside me somewhere. Only deeper now, under a thicker layer of fat.

In the fat-pride days, one of the things I was proudest of was working out. I bicycled, swam, roller-skated, skied. I trained and passed the test to be an aerobic-dance instructor. I was active for the same reasons anyone else might be: pleasure, health. But in the back of my mind there was also the idea that I was using my own body to refute stereotypes. Proving fat people were something other than mere sloths and gluttons.

There are things I could cite against my mother, what she did to deserve. But to deliberately build up a case that would really convince her would cause her more pain than I could bear to be guilty of, so I have no choice but to leave her wounded innocence intact. And she is innocent. She forgets the occasional comments she's made—like the one about the milk—or she never meant them unkindly in the first place.

I love my mother. I know my mother loves me. You must understand this.

When I was 19 I weighed more than 200 pounds and I was in dire straits. All the feeble efforts to free my inner self had only made me more disgusting. Perhaps the fat was the true me after all, emerging more and more clearly the longer I lived, the more independent I was to make my own choices.

All the hundreds of times I had dieted or fasted, I had never pushed hard enough, and every time I had returned to my shameful vice of eating. By now my debaucheries had made me something less than human. My body was utterly obscene. I stopped eating again, and I continued to eat little or nothing for most of two years.

Throughout my thirties, periodically, my mother gave me unsolicited advice about eating. Not that often. More infrequently than most mothers, perhaps. You should switch from 2% to 1% milk, she said. Well, I'd already tried and rejected it. It's just as tasty when you get used to it, she said. I don't *care* about that, I said, since I eat for hunger, not entertainment. 1% was palatable, but I found myself drinking twice as much of it to get satisfied, so there was no advantage and it cost more money. Buy skim milk, why don't you, my mother said, and hold a stick of butter between your teeth while you drink it.

Innocent fun. Certainly. Only how funny could a joke like that be to a woman like me, not far short of 300 pounds? She repeated it half a dozen times over a few years. Where's your sense of humor? What kind of person would hold a grudge for something so trivial?

This is what my mother saw me eat: bread, pasta, oatmeal, rice, potatoes. Tortillas and refried beans, or bean soup that I cooked with salsa. Fresh fruit, vegetables, frozen berries. Yogurt, raisins, peanut butter, other nuts sometimes. Eggs, not many. About half a pound of meat per week, and slightly more than that of cheese. Cheese was the one thing I ate much of that might be considered luxurious, but it was a great convenience. With breakfast I'd drink

juice with protein powder, which is how I managed to get along with so little meat. Meat is a nuisance and I didn't feel like bothering with it much. Yes, I cooked with oil, sometimes, canola or olive. At bedtime I drank a glass of 2% milk, but only if, on assessing my stomach, I felt I was running a deficit. Certain foods I never ate at all: soda, candy, dessert. Certain foods I ate only at someone else's house, for politeness: bacon, butter, white rice, chips, anything artificial. Fast foods? Only in rare and desperate emergencies. In short, considerably better than the American average, I figured. How come the people closest to me didn't see me that way?

Doctors couldn't, or wouldn't, believe that my habits were good. Why should they, when my own mother didn't? Look, I wanted to say, I love exercise. I don't enjoy food. Neither would you if you had lived my life. I don't eat junk, and I only eat the amount I need not to feel continuously hungry. If that's a lot, too bad, maybe something got messed up in my regulatory systems during the starvation years. My body is in a state of equilibrium, as healthy as I can make it.

During those two lean years—the first time, when I was 20—nobody ever called me anorexic, diagnosed an eating disorder. I tried barfing a few times, but never got the knack, for which I count myself very, very lucky. My periods didn't really stop, just became uneven. Got thin, but not *cadaverously* thin—after all, I'd started pretty fat. I fainted a few times, but not where anyone saw.

There was a month or so during which I ate nothing but the milk or cream in my coffee, then many more months of a

banana in the morning, a salad in the evening, patterns like that. But by the time I was getting close to the magic number, the secret goal I had been trying to get back to since age 14, sophomore year in high school, my cross-country running weight—by that time I had already switched my main focus from starving to exercising. A mile and a half every day, then two, three, five. Then, since a day without running was unthinkable, and something might happen to interfere, I started going out twice a day, just to be safe. Obsessive, my mother said. Plenty of complaints about my failure to cooperate with my family's special-occasion meals. But no interventions, no shrinks, no hospitals.

So perhaps I was never a “real” anorexic. Then again perhaps the gap between anorexics and regular women is thin, vanishingly thin.

In surveys, people who have been very fat and then managed to stay thin for a few years overwhelmingly say they would rather lose an eye or a limb than be fat again. Among all people who have been fat and become thin, 90-something percent (the figure is controversial) return to their original weight or heavier within a few years. Think none of them were trying hard enough? When leptin was discovered in the mid-1990s—a hormone produced exclusively by fat tissue, a clue (perhaps) to the mystery, an answer (perhaps) to the problem, of obesity—fat people by the hundreds called up laboratories begging to be allowed to be guinea pigs in clinical trials. I will inject it into my eyeball if necessary, one man said.

FAQs, age 21: I'm thin, how come I'm not happy? Why does sex seem so uninteresting to me now, when being sexy

was my original motivation? Why does my body get hurt so easily, how come my feet, ankles, knees, iliotibial band, never seem to heal? How come it takes me forty minutes to run five miles when I could do it in 37:30 in high school? Why do I crave food constantly, how come breakfast-lunch-dinner doesn't satiate me? Why don't I reach my goal, am I *still* a weak-willed glutton, even now? Why doesn't a weeklong fast make me lose more than a couple pounds, when in high school it could be a pound or two a day? Is there something wrong with me?

I made a deliberate decision, at 22, to stop trying to control my body. I did hope I wouldn't refatten. But if I do, I told myself, I won't be like other women. I won't diet, won't weigh myself, won't see myself as ugly and bad. I will change my eyes instead of my body.

This time it started with the tofu. The idea came to me one day last year while I was running—yes, I never quite shook that addiction.

—that is, if it's not a misnomer to call a 300-pound woman's fastest form of locomotion "running." My pace per mile was 16-18 minutes, and I could maintain it for an hour or more with pleasure. "Traveling," I called it in my workout diary. My hips had to swivel, more than a normal person's would, to let my big thighs swing past each other, and I didn't pick my feet up high, but when I got going it felt fluid and powerful, my favorite workout, done on dirt or turf trails to spare my body, never hard surfaces like sidewalks, and always, always in private. When you are fat, you live with the knowledge of how you look to other

people. I could not change other people's eyes.

Oh, said a thin friend, you used to be a distance runner? Why'd you stop? Injuries, I said, tight-lipped. I'm always so careful about stretching, she said. I want to run for my whole life—have you ever thought about maybe walking to school instead of driving? Walking is really good exercise to start with.

Have you tried walking, said the sports-medicine doctor. I went to this guy because my wonky ankle, the one I broke roller-blading a few years ago, was interfering with some of my activities. Exercise is central to my life, I told the guy, but he couldn't quite take that in. Peeking in my chart when he stepped out of the room: "Patient is very overweight," he wrote. "She has recently started doing some aerobic exercise." Recently!

It started, as I said, with the tofu, which popped into my head all of a sudden as I was running—traveling—one day. I was thinking about a book I had to review.¹ The author was smart, generally compassionate, and very neatly laid out what is known about the physiological regulation of appetite, proving that fat people weren't "sloths and gluttons." But his tone kept slipping into nasty insinuation: "Nobody can honestly say 'My leptin levels made me eat that cheesecake'." The statistic that diets failed 95 percent of the time was "a convenient excuse." My mother haunted my mind too. She's never far from my thoughts.

Picture Mom smiling, catching the author's eye in a sideways glance: "Nobody can say my leptin levels make me eat cheese.

¹ *Fat: Fighting the Obesity Epidemic*, by Robert Pool.

Or drink 2%.” Fine! Fine! No more milk for me. Ever. If I needed more fat at bedtime, I’d eat bread with oil. And instead of cheese—tofu, with about the same protein, equally convenient. Tofu tasted vile, but so much the better, to prove them all wrong. I assumed these minor changes would have no effect on my life.

There are things my mother could cite against me. At 20, trying to make sense of my vastly different physical incarnations (but I didn’t feel like a different person!), I suggested there was too much “moral pressure” about wasting food in my childhood. Just wait until you’re paying for all the food yourself, she said. Jean thinks nobody should ever have asked her to try a bite of squash, she laughed at family gatherings over the next few years. Her air of good-natured humor: she would remain jovial through any amount of misguided criticism. And so I felt sure I had hurt her feelings very much.

The first time the shrinkage was bliss, the desired outcome for which no amount of pain and labor was too much to trade. This time it was a rising horror. Was it my imagination that I wedged less tightly into the bathtub? My pants loose, looser. Not imagination, but maybe nothing much. A minor adjustment to the absence of saturated fats in the nutritional environment. Only the “10%” that everyone agrees is relatively “easy to lose.” New smaller pants, then newer even smaller pants, and then it was my own skin hanging on me like oversized clothes.

My fat didn’t stay firmly in place like it used to, but flowed around, liquid. When I bent my neck forward, deep creases formed, and soft layered curves squished out

under my chin. Like a meat pudding. I looked like something badly wrapped, barely contained, oozing. I thought of jellyfish, of fleshy fungus slowly creeping, of magma sloshing over the edge of lava pools. Like puberty again but with the video running in reverse. My shrinking breasts were a pair of balloons saved from a party, a few weeks later, that most of the air had seeped out of. The limp skin looked simultaneously stretched-out and deflated. The skin of a sixty-year-old woman. It pleated on my neck, arms, thighs, buttocks. If I swung an arm or a leg up in the air, flesh rolled in a wave along the limb.

Oh, you look so *good!* Everybody in the English Department had to say it at least once. I knew the intention wasn’t to harass me but I bristled anyway. If my mother could see me she would really have let me have it, for not considering other people’s feelings. What do I owe to other people’s feelings and what do they owe to mine? My shame and fear. My anger.

Avoiding scales like I used to avoid food. Alone in the locker room at the university swimming pool, fierce temptation to weigh myself. Easy and quick, and no one has to know, it must be much more than 10%, floating so low in the water these days. No. No. I will *not*. The portcullis slamming down in my mind, just like the olden days, clenched teeth, nothing shall pass, no, no matter what. But that was different, a delusional mindset. I’m not like that now, am I?

The excruciating compliments continued. If I deserve to be complimented now then I deserve it for my entire adult life, all the years I’ve been fat, an abstemious, vigorous fat person.

My woman best friend, Laura, said, hesitant, You're not letting yourself go hungry? I don't *think* so, I said. Hard to be certain, more than one type of sensation signals appetite in the body. There's a clearcut, gut-centered satiety that I no longer feel since eliminating animal fats. But hunger has also become much more diffuse, taking forever to manifest itself in the stomach, my blood sugar staying high from all the complex carbohydrates. My jaw feels tight, though, some of the time, as in the old not-eating days. Perhaps there is a boundary I'm pushing. More than I should? More than I pushed when I was fat? When have I ever not pushed myself hard?

FAQs, last year: Why is this happening? Am I hurting myself? What if I've merely stumbled into a relatively comfortable form of anorexia? Am I different now, or the same? What if there's no equilibrium waiting on the other side, and I come to a point where it's either suffer all the time or bounce back fatter than ever? What if I'm setting a time bomb in my bones, osteoporosis when I'm old, like my grandmother? Is there something wrong with me?

My man best friend kept his mouth shut.

The second time I saw my mother, I said nothing in advance. I figured, so she didn't like my letter, she can be a little surprised this time. I was down to size 10, looking, indeed, fairly gaunt. Oh, my God, she said, dropping her suitcase.

Maybe you should go ahead and eat cheese sometimes, Laura said. But I'm not uncomfortable, I said, and I'm reluctant to change anything. But you could always stop again, if... If what? If you started to

gain weight. No, I said. Then I really would be dieting. Besides—you know?—I was still pissed off at the author of that book. And not just him. You don't admire me? You won't see me as disciplined, an achiever, the best little girl in the world? Fine. Then I'll *hold my breath until I die*.

You look awful, my mother said. Thank you, I said, I am not under the misapprehension that I look good, despite much testimony to that effect. Stop losing weight, my mother said. I'm not trying to lose weight, I said. Try to gain, she said. You know I don't believe in either of those things, I said. Bodies do what bodies do, it's not in my control. Then go to the hospital, she said. I'll pay.

She calmed in a day or two, seeing me eat volumes of oatmeal, rice, tortillas, and beans, just like always. We were conciliatory. Oh, mothers and daughters! Like marriage, but with no divorcing. You don't think well enough of me. So unfair, it's *you* who don't think well enough of *me*! How could you not recognize my hard work, my good intentions?

Look, Mom, I don't blame you for anything. Hah! she said.

You understand that I love my mother very much?

Everyone assumes I'm healthier now; I don't feel any different, though I can run a mile faster. I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing, or *a* right thing, or something dangerous. One thing I'm sure of is that if I was anorexic at 20 then I was anorexic as a fat teenager too, only less successfully. Another is that if anything is admirable about me now, I had just as much of it at 300 pounds, if not more.

Am I unusual? Few women have been as fat as long without trying to change, fewer still have gotten as thin without meaning to. But fat or thin has colored every aspect of my life since puberty, when I first accused myself of being five pounds too fat. And so, I suppose, after all, I'm just like everyone else.

Contributor's Note

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