



## Weighting Game

by Terry Barr

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“You’ve lost too much weight! You look...GAUNT!”

The anxiety in my mother’s voice shakes my confidence. It’s amazing the power she exerts over me. How can one remark reduce me to that emotionally stunted boy I thought I had shed years ago? I walk away from her, retreating to my bedroom bath. I shut the door and breathe deeply. Then I face myself in the mirror, seeking the new me, the slimmer me. The me that I like. But what I see instead is a wasted face with hollow cheeks. Is there more wrong with me than I know? Despite the disease that I have, that she knows I have, is it my weight that my mother is most focused on? I turn away from the mirror, unable to resolve the discrepancy of our perceived images.

I’m on a 60 mg daily dosage of prednisone, a course of action I’ve adopted reluctantly. I have kidney lesions that allow protein to seep into my blood. No known cause or exact cure. Without the steroid, I retain water in my legs and ankles and can feel the heaviness rising up the length of my body when I don’t remember to keep my legs propped up. If I wear regular socks, their tight elasticity leaves my legs looking like geometric patterns etched into a mashed potato canvas.

Over a year ago, at the start of my journey into health-decline, I learned that I’m a victim of the vast gluten-conspiracy saturating our culture. My weight ballooned to an all-time high of 208 lbs. I had been coasting before that at a reasonable 192—still overweight but acceptable. But my rising weight slowed down my metabolism; I tired easily when I walked up steps. My seventeen-year old daughter teased me when I couldn’t catch my breath on a college walking tour. Before the onset of any symptoms of disease, sweat used to pour off me during my high impact workouts. But at 208, I barely glowed after hitting the elliptical walker at interval-conditioning levels of nine and ten. My family doctor originally diagnosed me as “hypothyroid” and put me on my first long-term pill. Though some of my energy returned, the foot-swelling persisted.

Next came a statin, because my cholesterol skyrocketed to 400.

“Not the sign we were looking for,” my doctor noted. We have to get this under control.” Soon blood pressure meds were added to combat the strain of my weight gain on my heart. Finally, after weeks of testing they discovered the kidney problem. In a year, I went from someone who could honestly answer “Nothing,” when asked what medications he’s on, to someone who now had to list five, counting the prednisone, the vitamin D to help counteract the side effects of possible loss of bone density, and the water pill to help flush me out.

I began drinking at least sixty-four ounces of water a day to help my body flush out toxins and to stay hydrated given that I also consume five cups of coffee a day. I stubbornly refused to give up that blessed caffeine high—the ritual that makes me happy to get up every morning and sees me through my mid-afternoon depression. I’ve been in therapy for almost twenty years. But I know that my “low” feelings started farther back, maybe as far back as I can remember, since I seem to have always been fearful of something: leaving

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home; getting in someone's way. I had "accidents" in bed, in kindergarten, at friends' homes. As an adult, my depression manifested itself in excessive sighing, irritability, and weight gain. One pair of friends started calling me "Eeyore." They think I'm just naturally gloomy. Though I've felt it most of my life, this feeling can't be "natural."

In the early days of my journey through kidney disease, I'm afraid of what lasting damage has already been done. Are dialysis, transplants, complete failure in my future? I'm depressed, full of seeping protein, and my pores have completely checked out of this experience like they want nothing more to do with me. Like they're blaming me for all that I've done to my body—all that I've put into it over the years. But am I the one blaming myself? Isn't it my voice I hear? Or is there another voice behind mine, speaking for me as if I'm a wooden, controllable, marionette?

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For several months I resist my nephrologist's recommendation of prednisone, claiming as my wife does to fear the possible side effects to my bones and my liver. My true concern, however, is the potential weight gain. I follow my wife's advice and consult a naturopath, putting the western medical community on hold, rejecting my mother's fervent entreaties that I do as the "regular doctors" say and ingest my steroids like a good boy.

I take my naturapath's recommendations, try her dietary supplements, her digestive enzymes, her stem cell enhancements, hoping that they will heal my inflamed kidneys. I also go off gluten, and my weight begins dropping dramatically, down to a low of 175, something I haven't weighed in thirty years. My waistline—a thirty-six for decades, had expanded to thirty-eight before the drugs. Now, I'm a thirty-five. I feel good, happy. I actually like my body—like looking at myself stripped down in the bathroom mirror. I have an attractive physique, words I never thought I'd say about myself. This is the person I thought I could be. Looking at myself feels strange and new, but as I look, I wonder if I'm finally developing that ego I've seen in others. How long can I admire myself before feeling uncomfortable? I turn away, feeling ashamed of feeling good. I check in with my naturopath every month. She feels confident that "we're" on the right track. But my swelling persists; the amount of protein I'm leaking continues to climb. My kidneys are not getting better, though, as my check-ups with the nephrologist clearly show. So I have to face the western model. I put my organs in their hands—a heavy decision that I swallow with as much grace as I can.

At first, the prednisone gives me more energy than I've felt since adolescence. I move furniture willingly, create prose that seems inspired beyond my capabilities. I don't tire, arise at three am, brew a big pot of coffee and then sit at my computer submitting essays to various literary magazines. Exhausted by nine in the morning, I power nap, and stay awake until eleven at night. My life is rich, full, and clearly quite manic.

"That's prednisone," my nephrologist laughs. "Sadly, the energy won't last."

Christmas comes, and my mother arrives with it. She focuses her disapproving eyes on me, proclaiming for all to hear: "Doesn't he look gaunt!" And then to me, "You just don't look healthy." Her words and tone trump my doctors. Her conviction sounds final, as if she and she alone can see inside me with her very own x-ray eyes. I try not to let her words sink into me, but

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when my beloved cat Alice dies that week, I spiral down a long and bottomless tunnel. I'm afraid, alone, weightless in this free-fall. I'm losing loved ones, love itself. Is the only way to stop this fall—to hold onto myself and love again—dependent on obeying my mother? I listened to her all my life. I tried to follow her advice in most things, and she's been right about so much: that I should use only certain essential food products and brands, that I needed to venture out in the world to have "adventures." But she's also been wrong many, many times. While she makes defiant and definitive pronouncements on everything, her world has always been quite limited. She has only a high school education. I've never held this against her. But then, I've never examined what this means to either of us very closely.

If I continue to let her words sink into me, where will they stick? To my belly or love handles?

To my colon, kidneys, or liver?

In my heart? My soul?

These words might live forever inside me and mark me as the person she wants me to be, the one she can have power over. I was the only one she could have power over since my Dad was overpowered by his own mother, and since my brother quit listening long ago. She tried to give him advice. But whatever she ordered, he did the opposite. And while his decisions sometimes backfired, at least he is not fat. He works out daily, watches his calorie intake. But he, too, has thyroid issues and a high-strung nervous system.

I realize that he'll have his own story to tell one day.

But in my story, I believe that my mother's words are taking me back to an image of myself that I hate. She's telling me that Gaunt equals Unhealthy, and therefore Fat equals Healthy. A five foot, eleven-inch man should be able to weigh 175 and look healthy. Can he at 192 or 208?

I don't know how healthy I am, but I do know that I'm not at peace with myself. I've always been the image that others say I am. I've never had the courage or will to look in the mirror and believe that I am the only one with the power to recognize my potential, make my own decisions, and shed all the vestiges of my past image. The image that weighed me down and damaged me. Is my mother's desire more for me to gain back my lost weight than it is for my kidneys to improve? Is it only the fat me that she approves of? That she loves? Does she believe that when I ingest her food that I am ingesting her love?

For most of my childhood, she overfed me. She made me fat and kept me that way. It was a controlling love, and it reduced me to a weighted object that couldn't hold anything down or back.

Like my depression.

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As a child, I had to shop in the "Husky" section of clothing stores.

The kid down the street, an Eagle Scout, used to call me "Butterbean" when

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I'd come over to play ball with his little brother.

My family has baby pictures of me standing naked beside the bathtub, the rolls of fat on my arms, legs, and backside, making me look like a vanilla-flavored tootsie-roll child. When I was a baby screaming with colic, they'd stick a milk bottle in my mouth.

"It was the only way to keep you quiet," my mother says.

I know that these times came with a mixture of joy and pain. She almost died having me and was so sick afterward that she couldn't breast feed. And then I was always crying. I upset the balance of home. Both my parents, and my mother's mother who lived with them, carried a high-strung anxiety. They worried about my health, needed reassurance that all was orderly and well, and apparently chose the milk bottle as their weapon to ensure their sense of well-being. Despite the colic, they finally found a formula that worked: goat's milk, and I'm told that I "just couldn't get enough."

And so my life-pattern began. Food: a quieting remedy, an order-restorer. A substitute for love.

As I grew, my mother prepared balanced meals according to the times of my youth. Naturally, as a Southern cook, she fried many main dishes—chicken, country steak, pork chops--and even most vegetables including eggplant. Each meal had at least one starch: potatoes, rice, corn, and always white bread. I had sugar in vast quantities, too. In my iced tea; in all the Cokes I consumed between meals; in the prepared jellies, sauces, peanut butter treats.

And the cookies. Though I was limited to two cookies at any given time--Oreos, oatmeal-raisin, Chips Ahoy which I loved dunking in Coke--they were so accessible! Right in the first-level kitchen cabinet, they made sneaking a third or fourth no hardship at all.

There were white flour confections every weekend: lemon ice box pie, pecan pie, apple cake, peach cobbler, and my personal favorite, pound cake, often with whipped cream or maybe even a scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream.

Pound Cake: pound of butter, flour, sugar. What's not to love? Often after Sunday lunches or full weeknight suppers, when I'd be lying virtually comatose on the den couch watching a football game or situation comedy, I'd hear my parents conferring: "Why is he so lazy? He needs to get off that couch and do something! Go outside and be active!" Sometimes I would, and maybe my doing so absolved them for a time of their worries that I wasn't healthy or normal. I couldn't see the contradiction in their behavior toward me, though. When I cleaned my plate my mother knew that she had succeeded again in nourishing me, in providing what she couldn't when I was an infant. Maybe my eating did grant her some peace. Still, five hours later, she needed the same reassurance, the vindication and control, all over again. When I gained even more weight and failed to actively "play" it off, I risked their disapproval, their worries and blame. And so whatever they "fed" me, I absorbed. Feeling the burden of this powerful weight, and given that we kept no scale at home, I began weighing myself on Sunday evenings on the bathroom scales at my grandmother's apartment. Trying to be helpful, my grandmother advised: "You have to allow for your clothes and shoes. They

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add five pounds at least.”

“Whew,” I’d say, “so I really still weigh just 89 pounds!”

What a game that was! I consistently busted through my clothes. I’d hear about all the extra shopping bills caused by my weight, and I knew that my parents’ arguments were my fault.

I couldn’t find the right path. While their words directed me in absolutes—no more cookies!; clean your plate!; want seconds?—they failed to give me a workable solution, a plan of reasonable action. They abandoned me to my conflicting desires of pleasing them, indulging myself. I never stood a chance of even knowing what was best for me, what I wanted for me. Or how to find a me that was all my own.

It didn’t help, of course, that I loved standing in the kitchen while my mother cooked—loved helping her grate cheese, cut out biscuit dough, shave carrots. I’d hand her pots, cans, openers. She’d let me sample her latest concoctions, lick the batter from the cake spoon, or from the mashed potatoes stuck to the Mixmaster blades.

Being in the warm kitchen with her felt like a form of heaven to me. Safe. Cared for.

Nourished.

Until one spring evening.

I’m standing by her side, waiting to help. I don’t catch that something is amiss—that something has gone awry in this cozy world of comfort.

“Can I have a piece of Velveeta, Momma?”

I’m seven years old. My desire for cheese, for the tasty processed blend of saturated goodness, blinds me to my mother’s mood. She slams down her knife, turns on me with eyes dark and blazing:

“Get away from me you fat little pig!”

I can’t comprehend what has happened.

What I’ve done, and now, what I am. My grandmother hears everything and follows me out of the room: “Your mother didn’t mean that darlin’. She’s just tired. I know she’s sorry.”

My mother doesn’t follow me though. She doesn’t apologize then or later on.

When she calls me a pig, I weigh over eighty pounds. I know I’m fat, and I’m used to my friends teasing me about it.

I know I’m not a pig. But for that day and many after, I feel like one.

Fifty years later, I still see myself as a pig. I don’t know what to do about it, how to shake its hold.

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When I'm eight, a new girl enters our community: Karen Fenstemacher. She isn't hard to spot or forget because she's very fat, weighing at least 140 pounds.

Though at almost 90 pounds I'm a "husky," a "Butterbean," and a "little pig," she is a "Fatso."

My grandmother tells stories about Karen and the weekly fellowship youth suppers at church on Sunday nights. I don't attend those suppers because I'm stuffing my face full of kosher bologna/salami sandwiches slathered with cream cheese at my other grandmother's apartment. To complement the sandwich, I eat Golden Flake Barbecue chips, a whole kosher pickle, and for dessert, a cinnamon roll and/or an individual cup of Barber's ice cream with nuts, chocolate sauce, and cherry topping. Of course, a King-size Coke washes it all down.

Does anyone try to contain me? Did they want to? Is that even possible?

Karen, however, is "contained": "Her mother told me not to let her have more than one helping of whatever we served," my grandmother continues. "One hot dog or plate of spaghetti. But the poor child would eat hers so fast that she'd be back in the kitchen before we finished serving the other children. She'd beg for more, and it just broke my heart to say no."

"Do you ever let her have any more?"

"No, I promised her mother! Oh, the poor thing would cry...but she's so fat!"

I pity Karen, but only momentarily, for then my grandmother adds with a wink: "And you know what else? She always asks about you, where you are! I think she likes you!"

So Fatso likes Butterbean!. My grandmother isn't the only one who thinks so either. Everyone teases me: "Isn't Karen your girlfriend? Don't you want her to be?"

The truth is that Karen is sweet and smart. Yet I don't want a girlfriend in third grade. No guy I know does.

Especially not a fat one.

What if she weighed half of what she does? Or even three-quarters? Would I take a chance then?

But then, if she were skinny, "normal," why would she like me?

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As I work my way through adolescence, I start "leaning out." My hair grows past my shoulders; I talk my mother into buying me one of those skinny-ribbed, zip-up thin cotton shirts. I pretend that my stomach doesn't poke out from its confined space—that I'm not a victim of "Dunlop's disease," an affliction that my best friend's daddy explains to me as "when your stomach

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dun-lopped over your belt.”

I suck mine in, hold it tight.

And though she buys the shirt for me, my mother can't hold back her assessment: "It won't fit you right. You just don't have the physique for that shirt!"

It's too hippie-ish for her taste anyway. She'd prefer me in a blue Oxford button-down, or a half-sleeve white linen dress shirt. Something classy; something "Southern." Something that will contour to my flabby torso. Of course, she serves these remarks with a large portion of fried chicken, brown gravy, homemade rolls, and mashed potatoes. Of course, I eat it all, with seconds on the chicken. Of course she's right about the shirt, as the sad pictures from my life then will forever attest.

What is in my stomach? What gets stuck there? It will be decades before I am enlightened about the body and its spiritual ties. Before I remember that my default position whenever I felt fear, blame, or humiliation was to cower in my room, and when asked "What's the matter with you," to whimper, "My stomach hurts."

I realize now that it has been hurting all my life. That the food I put into it doesn't satisfy. That my stomach's shape focuses all my attention. That my stomach has never been mine anyway. No doctor or nurse or daddy detached it. Detached us. And while I have been sustained by the food my mother gives me, she's never fed me the pure emotion of love. No wonder that for all the years I lived at home, I just couldn't get full no matter how much I ate.

Casting aside my skinny-ribbed short forever, I adopt a flannel shirt, which I wear for all occasions, along with ragged jeans and thick-soled boots. I'm living my Neil Young hippie dream, certain that my wardrobe and sense of style will compensate for any vestige of weighted shame.

I hold onto a 34-inch waist throughout high school, but during my first year of college, I grow into a 36. That year, the constant cafeteria food abuses me, as do the late night jaunts to Pizza Hut and IHOP. After the blandness of college food, when I go home I relish vegetables that I've never even considered smelling before: collard greens, sweet potatoes, squash, field peas. My jeans are still bell bottoms, so the pounds of flesh I'm adding aren't so noticeable at first. But when straight legs come back in style, I can no longer hide my newly-padded identity.

I keep covering my body, hiding it. I don't know who I am and refuse to look for or at myself, as if I'm scared of what I might find or see. What I might discover about what's happened to me.

So I begin skipping breakfast, walking everywhere. I refuse late-night runs for pizza or barbecued chicken sandwiches. Soon, I'm able to fit a 34-inch jean again, just barely. When I look at myself in the mirror, I know I'm a fake-34. I know the degree to which I suck in my stomach, and when I crave humiliation, I let that stomach sag for all it's worth.

And then I pinch the extra inches until I wear red blotches below my waistline.

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My stomach-suck carries me safely through college. I graduate academically, but my body lags far behind my mind. The following fall, my parents move me to my grad school life where I know no one. Before they leave me behind in a sketchy studio apartment, they take me to A&P, my mother's grocery store of choice. She selects food items that I don't begin to know how to cook, stocking my tiny, non-frost-free refrigerator with meatloaf ingredients, chuck roasts, breads, and Stouffer's lasagna. I see how full my poor refrigerator is—how its whirring gears are working too hard for its age and health. I also see that soon, the straining stuffed appliance will be me.

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Being far away from home actually proves good for me. My new campus is nestled in the foothills; my Teaching Assistant duties are so far-spaced that I get much of the exercise I need just rambling from class to class in the ten minutes I'm allotted. My food budget straps me, disciplines me; I avoid pizza joints and delis. My clothes hang more comfortably, and my dating life soars.

But I'm still self-conscious about romantic relationships. I believe girls still see me as fat, even when, after a few weeks of dating, one girl insists, as we're sitting at a bistro sipping red wine, that I unclasp the third button down on my white linen shirt.

"I love looking at your chest!"

Is this really me?

Though I obey her, I reject her soon after. I don't believe any positive physical attention paid to me can be genuine—can come without some buried weight. I have no history for this positive reflection. And if I believe it, where will that leave the years of food and nourishment? The years I ingested love, supposedly, through my mother's cooking?

Then I meet someone who seems very ready for my challenge, and maybe my own instincts, deep within my body, are ready for her too. She is cheerful, optimistic, always happy. Fearless. She's on her own, too, far away from home and family. A few months after we start dating, she gives me a trial membership to an exercise club. I try that workout world a few times. The exercise itself feels good, but after my trial period ends, I balk at committing to a three-year membership and paying forty dollars a month to a corporation that wants me to believe that they believe in me.

I am not a fitness whore.

"But it might be good for you," my girlfriend says. "Being active and healthy, you know?"

Her metabolism is the exact opposite of mine. She's a doer: loves kayaking, hiking, rock climbing, playing tennis and volleyball. Being active will bring us closer, she believes.

In the several weeks I take to decide this issue, I grow shapeless again. And heavy. Heavy, heavy me. I could walk out on this relationship. I could conform to past images and reflections. But I don't. I choose not to. Her voice, her optimism and interest in me—an interest with no heavy baggage

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attached—beckon me.

So I join the club. I walk on ellipticals for forty minutes. I use Nautilus weights, and take aerobics classes several times a week. I begin feeling...good, hopeful, about my weight, about my girlfriend, about our future. Has anyone ever shown this much concern about me? About the picture of a healthy me? A me who can be loved for himself and not as compensation for or absolution from guilt?

A few months later, we get married. We are in love, and I think I've overcome my insecurities, my feelings of shame about all that I used to weigh.

One night, waiting on her to come home, I violate my own principles. I see her journal lying open on our bedside table. I move closer. I see my name, and then I see myself as she saw me "back then." I don't remember anything else that she wrote, just my name and the word "FAT" next to it. It hurts to know the truth, even when I feel past it all. I say nothing about my transgression and vow to stay fit and trim.

I continue working out faithfully. I shape, sculpt, and trim my body, but however hard I work, I can't fit into the European-styled briefs she buys me. She accepts what I can't change, doesn't criticize me when I indulge in frozen yogurt. She knows I'm working on me, and she encourages me, always.

I think about her journal, that word, but I see how she looks at me now. I believe in our growing intimacy, and I refuse to let one word control me: control what I choose to believe about me.

But naturally, our world isn't always a family menu just for two.

In the early years of our marriage, for health and ethical reasons, my wife and I give up all red meat. This in itself proves a challenge for my mother to digest.

When my parents are visiting, my mother insists on cooking while we're at work. I come home one evening to a very concerned wife, a not-unfamiliar aroma, and a beaming mother: "They had pork tenderloin on sale at the Fresh Market today. There's nothing like a good pork tenderloin!!!"

My wife is Iranian, though she wasn't raised Moslem. Still, most Iranians don't eat pork no matter who they are or what God they believe in.

So when we sit down to dinner, my wife serves herself a generous portion of potatoes, stewed vegetables, and bread. She then looks right at my mother and says, "Jo Ann, I just can't eat that meat. I know you worked hard and meant well, but I can't eat pork."

My mother sinks a little then. And then she looks at me.

"Uh, I really don't think I can eat it either," I say.

"Well, just don't eat it then. I guess I can't do anything right!"

Later, my wife suggests that we all go out for ice cream. There's a Swensons

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in town, and hoping this will lift everyone's spirits, she and I lead the way out.

Seated in the festive Swenson's air, we pour over the six-page dessert menu. My mother finds a tempting item and points it out to me: "You ought to get that! Why not?"

I look at the picture of this "dessert." For a moment, I waver. It's the most enormous ice cream sundae I've ever seen. They call it "The Kitchen Sink." Would eight scoops of vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate ice cream smothered in whipped cream, chocolate, caramel, and butterscotch syrup, nuts, cherries, and God knows what other forms of sugar, be enough to compensate my mother for a neglected porkdinner?

I look at my wife and then at our waitress.

"Just a scoop of vanilla with pecans, please."

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I don't know what lies ahead for my health condition. I am responding to prednisone, which has reduced my protein seepage dramatically. I have also gained ten pounds in the past week. I face myself again in the bathroom mirror. My stomach is sagging, all added weight accumulating there. For a moment, that old word returns. For a moment I feel it. Yet, I refuse to say it. I refuse to be it. For there are new words, too: words like "responding," and "healing kidneys."

Words like "You're good, healthy," and "I love you."

I keep looking. And then I see what I've been searching for, what this journey has been for. My mind relaxes. I smile. I am healthy. The voice I hear is my own. For the first time, I feel like I'm "me."

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