

I Was a Baby Bulimic By Frank Bruni

Maybe not baby – toddler bulimic is more like it, though I didn't so much toddle as wobble, given the roundness of my expanding form. I was a plump infant and was on my way to becoming an even plumper child, a ravenous machine determined to devour anything in its sights. My parents would later tell me, my friends and anyone else willing to listen that they'd never seen a kid eat the way I ate or react the way I reacted whenever I was denied more food. What I did in those circumstances was throw up.

I have no independent memory of this. But according to my mother, it began when I was about 18 months old. It went on for no more than a year. And I'd congratulate myself here for stopping such an evidently compulsive behavior without the benefit of an intervention or the ability to read a self-help book except that I wasn't so much stopping as pausing. But I'm getting ahead of the story.

A hamburger dinner sounded the first alarm. My mother had cooked and served me one big burger, which would be enough for most carnivores still in diapers. I polished it off and pleaded for a second. So she cooked and served me another big burger, confident that I'd never get through it. It was the last time she underestimated my appetite.

The way Mom told the tale, I plowed through that second burger as quickly as I had the first. Then I looked up from my highchair with lips covered in hamburger juice, a chin flecked with hamburger bun and hamburger ecstasy in my wide brown eyes. I started banging my balled little fists on the highchair's tray.

I wanted a third.

Mom thought about giving it to me. She was tempted. For her it was a point of pride to cook and serve more food than anybody could eat, and the normal course of things was to shove food at people, not to withhold it.

But she looked at me then, with my balloon cheeks and ham-hock legs, and thought: Enough. No way. He can't fit in another six ounces of ground chuck. He shouldn't fit in another six ounces of ground chuck. A third burger isn't good mothering. A third burger is

child abuse.

I cried. I cried so hard that my face turned the color of a vine-ripened tomato and my breathing grew labored and a pitiful strangled noise escaped my lips, along with something else. Up came the remnants of Burger No. 2, and up came the remnants of Burger No. 1. Mom figured she had witnessed an unusually histrionic tantrum with an unusually messy aftermath. But I've always wondered, in retrospect and not entirely in jest, if what she had witnessed was the beginning of a cunning strategy, an intuitive design for gluttonous living. Maybe I was making room for more burger. Look, Ma, empty stomach!

It became a pattern. No fourth cookie? I threw up. No mid-afternoon meal between lunch and dinner? Same deal. I had a bizarre facility for it, and Mom had a sponge or paper towels at hand whenever she was about to disappoint me.

As I grew older and developed more dexterity and stealth and more say, I could and did work around Mom, opening a cupboard or pantry door when neither she nor anyone else was looking, or furtively shuttling some of the contents of a sibling's trick-or-treat bag into my own, which always emptied out more quickly.

I wasn't merely fond of candy bars. I was fascinated by them and determined to catalog them in my head, where I kept an ever-shifting, continually updated list of the best of them, ranked in order of preference. Snickers always beat out 3 Musketeers, which didn't have the benefit of nuts. Baby Ruth beat out Snickers, because it had even more nuts. But nuts weren't crucial: one of my greatest joys was the KitKat bar, and I couldn't imagine any geometry more perfect than the parallel lines of its chocolate-covered sections. I couldn't imagine any color more beautiful than the iridescent orange of the wrapping for a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

And the sweetest sound in the world? The most gorgeous music?

The bells of a Good Humor truck.

Every summer evening, just before sundown, one of these trucks would come tinkling down Oak Avenue, a narrow road near the shoreline in Madison, Conn., northeast of New Haven, where my father's parents owned an extremely modest summer house. I knew the options by heart. There was the Strawberry Shortcake bar, coated with sweet nibs and striped with pink and white. There was the cone with vanilla ice cream and a semi-hard

hood of nut-sprinkled chocolate over that. An argument in its favor was the way the eating of it had discrete chapters: hood first, ice cream second, lower half of the cone after that.

And then there was the Candy Center Crunch bar, which was vanilla ice cream in a crackling chocolate shell, with an additional, concealed element, a bit of buried treasure. When you got to the middle of the bar, you bumped up against a hard slab of nearly frozen dark chocolate, clumped around the wooden stick. You had to chisel away at it in focused bites, so that chunks didn't tumble to the ground – lost, wasted.

The eating of the Candy Center Crunch bar lasted longest of all. Almost without fail, that's the bar I got.

I remember almost everything about my childhood in terms of food – in terms of favorite foods, to be more accurate, or even favorite parts of favorite foods.

Age 6: homemade chocolate sauce over Breyers vanilla ice cream. Mom used squares of semisweet chocolate, along with butter and milk, and as the chocolate melted in a saucepan in the galley kitchen, it perfumed the entire first floor of our Cape Cod in northern White Plains, a 45-minute train ride from Manhattan, where Dad worked. Mom made chocolate sauce every Sunday night as a special weekend treat, and my older brother, Mark, my younger brother, Harry, and I got to eat our bowls of ice cream (three scoops each) and chocolate sauce in front of the TV set while watching Mutual of Omaha's "Wild Kingdom." I always volunteered to carry the empty bowls back into the kitchen, because Mark's and Harry's were never entirely empty. There was always some neglected sauce hardening – like fudge! – at the bottom. I would sweep it up with a finger en route to the dishwasher.

Age 7: I discovered quiche. Quiche Lorraine. Mom baked it in the upper of the double ovens on the south wall of the eat-in kitchen in our Tudor on Soundview Avenue in a section of White Plains that made believe it was part of ritzier Scarsdale, which it bordered. The quiche needed to cool for about 45 minutes before it could be eaten. I knew because I'd often kept count.

Age 8: lamb chops. Mom served them to us for dinner at the table in the Soundview kitchen about once every three weeks. I ate not just the meat but also the curls and strips of fat at the edges of the meat. Mark and Harry winced when I did that and merely picked at

their own chops, wishing aloud that it were steak night or hamburger night or pork-chop night. We were a meaty family, the chops, strips, patties and roasts filling a separate freezer in the garage. Wherever we lived, we had a separate freezer in the garage, a testament to Dad's belief, instilled in him by his Italian-immigrant parents, that an abundance of food – or, even better, a superabundance of food – was the best measure of a family's security in the world. Mom absorbed that thinking from him and made sure that wherever we lived, we had a separate freezer in the garage. She was mystified by, and censorious of, families who didn't. How could they be sure to have enough kinds and cuts of meat on hand, enough varieties of ice cream to choose from? Was that really any way to live?

All of us could eat, but Dad and I could eat the most. I took after him that way.

During the Soundview years, he frequently took Mark, Harry and me into the city to watch the Yankees play baseball, the Knicks play basketball or the Rangers play hockey. Mark and Harry loved those games. I loved the peanuts, pretzels, hot dogs and ice-cream bars with which vendors roamed the aisles, looking for takers.

“You're getting another hot dog?” Dad would ask when he saw me waving down one of these vendors. He wouldn't be opposed – just surprised. Mark and Harry would still be on their first hot dogs. Dad too. The game seemed to distract them.

I was only a year and a half younger than Mark. Harry trailed me by just two and a half years. And as in so many families with children of the same sex clustered so closely together, the three of us defined ourselves – and were defined by Mom and Dad – in relation to one another.

Mark was the charismatic and confident one, most at ease with his peers. Had there been fraternities in elementary school, he would have pledged the most desirable one and might well have ended up its president. He was also the agile one, adept at just about any sport Dad foisted upon us.

He ate steadily but boringly: plain bagels with butter, cheeseburgers with ketchup but no other adornments, slices of cheese pizza instead of the pizza with sausage, peppers and onion that Mom and Dad preferred. I ate both kinds of pizza and I ate Big Macs and I ate pumpernickel bagels with cream cheese. And for every bagel Mark ate, I ate a bagel and a

half.

Harry had an extraordinary ability to focus on one task or thought to the exclusion of all others, and could spend whole days putting together the most intricate models, whole weekends building the most ambitious backyard forts. As an eater, too, he fixated on a single object of interest and lost sight of much else. For a while his fixation was French fries, and if Dad was working late and Mom took us to Howard Johnson's or Friendly, he would get two orders of fries for dinner, then a third for dessert. He'd still be eating fries while I'd be eating the most rococo sundae or banana split on the menu. But if none of his special foods were around, he merely picked at what was in front of him, not so much disappointed as uninterested, never complaining of hunger or, as best as I could tell, experiencing it.

I was the one who got the best report cards and who preferred mental to physical activities, in part because I was so uncoordinated – the klutz, as Mom often called me.

“How's my big klutz?” she would say – tenderly – as she mussed my hair and investigated a bruise on my cheek that I had received from losing my balance on the way up the stairs and falling.

“Watch it, klutz!” she would yell – testily – when I plopped an empty plate on the counter in a way that made a plate already there plummet to the floor and shatter. “How can you be so klutzy?”

I didn't know, but I suspected it had something to do with my weight. That was the most obvious physical difference between Mark and me, between me and Harry. By the time I was 6, I was bigger than Mark: not just taller, but heavier, by a good 10 to 12 pounds, only a few of them attributable to the then-slight discrepancy in our heights. I wore pants with a waist size two to three inches greater than his, and I sometimes had to be taken to the husky section of boys' departments to find them. Husky: I knew that wasn't a good thing, a flattering thing. Other kids made sure of that.

They joked that my initials, F.B., stood for Fat Boy. Mom told me to ignore it, but there were moments when she herself reminded me that I was larger than I should be. Frustrated by my failure to fend off an older girl at school who regularly taunted and shoved me until I gave her my lunch money, Mom said, “Next time, why don't you just sit on her?” Mom had never seen her but made the safe assumption that I outweighed her.

Whenever I went to the doctor for a routine checkup, I hurried off the scale, trying my best not to hear him tell Mom, yet again, that I was more than a few pounds above the recommended weight for a child of my size. I could see, in the Christmas-card pictures that Mom took every year, how much fuller my cheeks were than Mark's or Harry's, how much broader my waist was, and I knew that in one of these pictures, I was holding Adelle – the last of us, born four years after Harry – because I had volunteered to, figuring that it was a way of obscuring the whole middle stretch of my body.

I wasn't obese. I didn't prompt stares or gasps. I was just chubby, and sometimes quite chubby, with a hunger that threatened to make matters worse and a gnawing, deepening self-consciousness that Mom picked up on and that she decided she might have a solution to.

Mom was a sucker for fad diets. Like Dad she was always heavier than she wanted to be, though her range was smaller – she'd be, at any given moment, between 5 and 15 pounds over her goal weight – and her resolve to do something about it was more frequently renewed.

She did some diet that required the consumption of a half-grapefruit at a half-dozen intervals during the day – it didn't work, as I recall, but it certainly kept her safe from scurvy. There was a popcorn diet, and for a while the sounds that most frequently escaped the kitchen were the vacuum-like whirring of an air popper and the crack-ping-crack of the kernels. My mother believed that somewhere out there was a holy grail of weight loss, and she would be damned if she wasn't going to find it.

But the diet I remember best, because I joined her on it, was Dr. Atkins's low-carbohydrate diet. People who became wise to it only in the 1990s tend to forget that it made its initial splash back in the early 1970s, which was when Mom and I first gave it a whirl. Here was Dr. Atkins, saying that someone with an appetite that wouldn't be tamed – an appetite like mine – didn't have to tame it. He or she just had to channel it in the right direction, away from carbohydrates.

Of course I had never heard the word "carbohydrate" before, but I was thrilled by all the

consonants and syllables in it. To me they meant that something terribly scientific – something nutritionally profound – was at hand. I interrupted whatever latest Hardy Boys mystery I was plowing through to crack open “Dr. Atkins’s Diet Revolution,” which Mom had bought in hardcover, anxious to get her hands on it, convinced it was a keeper. I read about blood-sugar levels and these chemicals called ketones and this charmed metabolic state in which you began to generate them or expel them or swirl in them or something along those lines. I didn’t exactly understand it but knew that my goal was to achieve this state, called “ketosis.” Ketosis was my preadolescent nirvana. It was what I wished for: ketosis, along with a new five-speed bicycle.

The Atkins diet prohibited certain things I loved, like pretzels and ice cream, but it let me have as much as I wanted of other things I also loved, like cheddar-cheese omelets with pork sausage at breakfast or hamburger patties – three of them if that was my desire, so long as I dispensed with the bun – at dinner. It allowed snacks like hunks of cheddar and roll-ups of turkey breast and Swiss cheese. I could even dip the roll-ups in mayonnaise and not be undermining the Atkins formula. According to Atkins, it was important to stay sated, because any empty crevasse of stomach was nothing but a welcome mat for a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup. So I left no crevasse unfilled. And I felt relieved – liberated. Silencing taunts and getting into smaller pants wouldn’t mean going hungry.

For lunch on most days I had tuna salad. Mom tried to make it seem more special and eventful by presenting it in geometrically interesting and colorful ways. She used the largest dinner plate she could find. She covered the plate with several overlapping leaves of iceberg lettuce. She molded the tuna salad – always Bumble Bee solid white tuna, never chunk light, never Chicken of the Sea – into three large scoops, which she put over the lettuce, within a ring of cherry tomatoes. Three scoops looked prettier than one or two. Besides, there wasn’t any doubt I would be able to finish that many.

“Aren’t you going to have some?” I would ask.

“Maybe later,” she’d say, and then I’d hear the crunch-whoosh of the metal peel coming off another bright pink can of Tab, the worst diet cola ever made, the diet cola Mom never betrayed, her diet cola, its distance from sweetness and its metallic taste a way of patting herself on the back. When it came to beverages, was anyone more virtuous and penitential

than she? Tab was her rosary, and she said it as many as eight times a day.

I drank Tab on Atkins. I drank Fresca too, and sugar-free iced tea of various kinds. I was concerned less with my choice and range of beverages than with the little paper strips in the medicine cabinet of the bathroom off my parents' bedroom. The strips went along with the Atkins diet, and they were clustered in a tiny, cylindrical container, the way toothpicks might be.

In the morning, in the late afternoon and just before bedtime, I would slide or shimmy one of the strips from the jar, hold it in my left hand and get ready to pee. Then I'd pass the strip through the stream of urine and wait to see if it changed color. If it changed color, Mom had told me, the diet was working. If it changed color, I was in ketosis, and I was melting the fat away.

It didn't change color on the second day. Or the third. But on the fourth, it did, going from white to pinkish purple. And after just a few more days, I noticed a loosening in my pants. A tightening in my stomach. I was shrinking every second!

I stayed on Atkins for close to three weeks, losing something like seven pounds: enough to land me on the slender side of stocky. Then .□.□. well, Mom hadn't really worked that out. The idea, I suppose, was that I'd be so encouraged by the change in my weight that I'd safeguard it with less gluttonous behavior, and I'd revisit Atkins for a tune-up from time to time.

As it turned out, I didn't have to, and Atkins wasn't what spared me the worst wages of my hunger. Sports did that. Through the swimming lessons that Mom took Mark, Harry and me to at the local Y.M.C.A., we all discovered that my clumsiness on land disappeared in the water, where I was faster and stronger than my brothers — than most kids my age. I started swimming daily, then twice daily, putting in nearly four hours in the pool on many days. By the time I was 12, that commitment made me one of the top-ranked swimmers nationally for my age in many events. It also meant I didn't have to confront and control my overeating the way I really needed to, because the swimming burned away so many of the calories I consumed.

It didn't burn away enough of them: I looked a bit curvier and lumpier than most of the other kids on the pool deck. Whether during a swim practice or at a meet, I kept my T-

shirt on until the moment I dove into the water, and I put it back on the second I climbed out.

In the kitchen, Mom would become fixated for short periods on certain dishes, ingredients or culinary tropes, and for a while her obsession was wrapping things in bacon. If something could be wrapped in bacon, speared with a toothpick and broiled, she did precisely that and usually served the results as canapés, disregarding the extent to which things wrapped in bacon might fill a person and diminish his or her readiness for the rest of the meal.

She wrapped chicken livers in bacon. Scallops too. She wrapped water chestnuts in bacon, though I never really saw the point. When you had bacon on the outside of something, why put a vegetable on the inside? It struck me as a crucial loss of nerve.

She became obsessed for a while with club sandwiches, layered with bacon. This was because of the pool that she and Dad decided to put in the forested yard behind our house in Avon, Conn., outside of Hartford, to which Dad's firm transferred him from New York just before I turned 13. It was a grand, ludicrous pool, out of sync with the family's usually sensible spending habits, a splurge exponentially larger than anything before it. It was 20 yards long, so that Mark, Harry and I could do meaningful laps in it if we wanted. It resembled a lake, its deck punctuated with enormous boulders that jutted toward, and hung slightly over, the water. Given all the money that went into it, Mom all but demanded, from mid-May to late September, that we get ourselves out there and enjoy it, and so she developed what she considered pool-friendly cuisine: guacamole with chips, *crudités* with dip. And club sandwiches.

The fact that the sandwiches had turkey in them allowed her to tell herself that she was making something healthier than hamburgers or hot dogs. She always bought freshly carved turkey or cooked turkey breasts herself and carved them. She carefully toasted the white or wheat bread (her choice depended on her mood and dieting cycle) so that it was firm and golden brown, discarding slices that emerged from the toaster too dark. Then she cut the sandwiches into triangular quarters, crucial to her insistence that this was just piddling poolside finger food. A person could have just a quarter sandwich — just a nibble. Who was she kidding? No one in our family stopped at a quarter or even two quarters, and

I usually didn't manage to put the brakes on before five or six.

I had more discipline and did better with other things: chemistry, American history, Steinbeck, Wharton. At Loomis Chaffee, the private school outside of Hartford to which Mom and Dad sent us, I got A's in my classes and had editing positions on school periodicals and was a star on the swim team. I was, as Mom and Dad had always prodded me to be, well rounded. Only, the rounded part, well, I felt that it applied to me just a little too literally.

I either had 6 or 7 or 12 pounds that wouldn't go away: I never knew exactly how many, because at a certain point I just stopped getting on scales. I didn't like what they told me. I was about 5-foot-10, only three-quarters of an inch under what I'd grow to be, and according to those rigorous medical charts of ideal weights at certain heights, I should have been 170 pounds. But I often weighed above 180, and I could blame only some of those extra pounds on big bones and a genuinely broad frame.

During physicals in doctors' offices, I averted my eyes from the scale and instructed the doctor not to tell me the number. Usually the doctor just chuckled as he wrote it on his chart. Sometimes he said, "I'd like it if you lost 5 to 10 pounds." He never said, "You're fine the way you are." I know because I listened for that – listened for some indication that I was wrong about myself.

Ten pounds: it wasn't a disaster. I recognized that. But it was aggravating. Maddening. It was the distance between me and some confident, enviable, all-American ideal that might well be mine if I could just turn away from yet another quarter of club sandwich, from the third buttered yam at Thanksgiving, from the second bowl of ice cream I carried up to my bedroom on a weeknight when I was up late studying.

The extra weight was the confirmation: once a fat kid, always a fat kid, never moving through the world in the carefree fashion of people unaccustomed to worrying about their weight, never as inconspicuous. It was the stubborn thing I seemed least able to control, and I often felt that all my shortcomings flowed from it – were somehow wrapped into and perpetuated by it. If only I could fit into pants with a waist size of 31 or 32 instead of my 33s and 34s, I could walk briskly and buoyantly into a crowded school party instead of hovering tentatively at the door, unable to decide whom to approach and questioning whether my approach would be welcome.

With 31s and 32s, I could wear whatever color and cut of shirt I wanted instead of the vertical stripes and the dark blues, browns and blacks that Mom said flattered me most. I could wear the madras sports jacket I'd tried on in a Hartford department store, the one she told me wasn't "particularly slimming," or the kind of red plaid flannel shirts that looked so good on some of my male classmates. My romantic thoughts turned to them in a way that clearly wasn't going to be fleeting, and while my realization of that didn't unsettle me as much as it does many gay teenagers, it aggravated my self-consciousness.

During my senior year at Loomis, I got to know a girl, whom I'll call Beth, who was also self-conscious and at war with her hunger. I sensed that instantly, and it was the main reason we became best friends. Like me, she was angry at her body, which didn't match her face and undercut the beauty of it. Due to genes more than sports or anything else, she had the broad shoulders and thick thighs of a football player. And though her stomach was flat, her waist was broad. She was on a constant mission to whittle it down. And I joined her, convinced that together we would reach what neither of us had reached alone: the wondrous Xanadu of the willfully emaciated.

One day she put a thin paperback in my hands.

"Read this," she said. "Then we'll fast."

The book talked about the evil that sweets did to blood-sugar levels, the spikes and valleys they created, the insatiable hungers they bred. It recommended a three-day cleanse — no food, only water — that would break the cycle, purify the body. It promised mental clarity in the aftermath, along with an ability to manage cravings, if they even returned.

"You're doing what?" Mom asked when I refused dinner on Day 1 of my cleanse.

"Fasting," I responded.

"That's ridiculous," she said. Even Mom had limits.

"This book Beth gave me says a person can last a really long time without food," I explained. "Longer than we think."

"If you want to diet," she said, "why don't you do low-carbohydrate?"

"I don't want to do Atkins," I said. "I need to purify myself." I imagined these little bubbles, each carrying a sign that said "Fat-Making Toxin," cascading from my body, oozing from my pores.

“We should go to Weight Watchers,” Mom said, my own madness pushing her closer to sanity. “I’ll pay for Weight Watchers. I’ll do it with you.”

“It won’t cleanse me the way a fast will,” I argued. I had gone without food for only about 18 hours at that point, but I was suddenly an expert. A messiah.

“I’ll broil you some chicken,” she said.

“No.”

“I’ll take off the skin,” she offered.

“I’m fasting.”

“Just eat the white meat,” she pleaded, “not the dark meat.”

“I’m only going to have some hot water with lemon. I’m allowed to have lemon.”

On Day 2, I struggled. The novelty of the experiment had worn off, and my stomach gurgled and seethed, like lava in an active volcano. I also began to feel lightheaded but chalked it up to euphoria, to the purge of those toxins from my sugar-racked body. I resolved to fast like this once a month. It would be the cornerstone of a thinner, better life.

At school I quizzed Beth. “You really haven’t eaten anything?”

“Nothing,” she said, but I wasn’t sure I believed her. She didn’t have the winnowed midriff that I was determined to believe I had already achieved.

I saw her steal a bite of a cuticle. Hmm. Was that cheating? Was it tasty?

At the beginning of Day 3, I slipped.

I snuck a few crackers around breakfast. I drank some milk around lunchtime, because my stomach-volcano was poised for its own Pompeii. At dinnertime I accepted that I’d strayed from the plan and rationalized that I might as well stray some more. I ate a burger. But I didn’t put the beef on a bun. I had to preserve some shred of dignity.

Although my clothes felt looser at the end of three days, I knew I couldn’t do this fasting thing again. It was too grueling. I told Beth, confessing in the process that I cheated a little, and of course she had a Plan B.

“Protein powder,” she said, producing a new paperback filled with recipes for fat-burning shakes.

Beth was like a mysterious witch doctor with a stock of potions that never ran out. Pills too. She’d found someone in her dormitory with a pipeline to amphetamines, these tiny pale blue

ovals with dark blue flecks. They looked like shrunken robin's eggs.

I swallowed them to stay up all night in advance of important exams. I swallowed them before some swim meets, along with capsules of bee pollen, which I'd decided was another energy booster. And I swallowed them to keep from eating. They did the job nicely. I was slimmer senior year than I was junior year.

But neither Beth nor her little bird eggs followed me to Chapel Hill and the University of North Carolina, to which I'd won a free ride called a Morehead Scholarship. And I decided before arriving there that I would abandon competitive swimming, which had become too monotonous and time-consuming.

So I had to find some other antidote to my eating, some other protection from my appetite.

To be a successful bulimic, you need to have a firm handle on the bathrooms in your life: their proximity to where you're eating; the amount of privacy they offer; whether — if they're public bathrooms with more than one stall — you can hear the door swing open and the footfall of a visitor with enough advance notice to stop what you're doing and keep from being found out.

You need to be conscious of time. There's no such thing as bulimia on the fly; a span of at least 10 minutes in the bathroom is optimal, because you may need 5 of them to linger at the sink, splash cold water on your face and let the redness in it die down. You should always carry a toothbrush and toothpaste, integral to eliminating telltale signs of your transgression and to rejoining polite society without any offense to it. Bulimia is a logistical and tactical challenge as much as anything else. It demands planning.

My preferred bathroom was in a back corner of the student union at Carolina, right above the office of the campus newspaper, where I spent most afternoons and evenings. It was a public bathroom with multiple stalls, but the stalls were a decent distance from the door, and the door opened noisily. Few people used this bathroom, anyway. I could walk to it in about three minutes from the university cafeteria, so neither lunch nor dinner had to sit in my stomach for long. I could get there even faster from the newspaper offices, where I sometimes ate a slice of pizza or half a tuna-salad sandwich too many. With a quick jaunt up

the stairs, these excesses could be erased.

I thought that I was clever – that I was doing something lots of other people would if they just had the nerve, the poise, the industry. I knew it was supposed to be dangerous: I read stories in newspapers and magazines about this behavior, always characterized as a disorder, an affliction. It was these stories that gave me the idea. From them I concluded that people who threw up their meals tended to get carried away with what was an otherwise solid, tenable plan, especially if they fell prey to anorexia as well, and I was an unlikely candidate for that. Even a fast of merely three days had foiled me. But if a person just threw up the occasional meal, the meal that had gotten out of hand, well, what was the harm in that?

And consider the benefits. My willpower could waver, I could gobble down more than I had meant to, and I wouldn't have to go to bed haunted by the looming toll on my waistline or wake up the next morning owing the gods of weight management even more of a sacrifice than I owed them the day before. Throwing up was my safety valve. My mulligan.

It usually happened like this: I would go to the cafeteria, begin to assemble my dinner. I'd get a salad, or something similarly virtuous. I'd pick at it slowly, hoisting the picayune cherry tomatoes and wan slices of cucumber into my mouth one at a time, in slow motion, and then chewing and chewing and chewing, as if there were some odometer rigged to my jaw and I could stave off hunger by pushing the numbers on it high enough.

There would be a few jagged cubes of feta in the salad, each one an event I would pause and savor for half a minute. They and the croutons, all four of them, were islands of excitement in a dead sea.

Upon finishing the salad, I wouldn't be anywhere close to satisfied. I wouldn't be in the same hemisphere as satisfied. And the sound of that dissatisfaction, like a drumbeat in the center of my brain, would grow louder and louder.

Pum-pum. I could have had a burger. I had seen the cafeteria workers cooking burgers on a griddle. There were burgers to be ordered. I could have had one.

Pum-PUM. Macaroni and cheese. There was macaroni and cheese. It looked sort of congealed and stiff at the edges. I love it when it's sort of congealed and stiff at the edges.

PUM-PUM. Remember the smell of the hot oil that still clung to the fried chicken on the food line? And the way the chicken seemed to have a palpable crispness? And yet .□.□. and yet .□.□.

the breading didn't look all that thick. Could one piece, a breast, hurt so much? Hadn't Mom always said that white meat was less caloric than dark?

I'd go back to the food line. I'd get a fried chicken breast. I'd eat it, and then I'd worry — no, I'd conclude — that I'd miscalculated. That I'd eaten too much and would have to get rid of some of what I'd eaten. This decision made, I'd get an ice-cream sandwich. And a cookie. Two cookies, actually. If I was going to empty my stomach — if I was going to go through all of that messy, beet-faced trouble — I might as well make the most of the buildup, might as well acknowledge and address all my cravings and satisfy them. That way, I'd be less tempted the next day. I'd be less likely to need to throw up.

Off to the second-floor bathroom in the back corner of the student union I'd go. I'd walk in, listen for the sounds of anyone else, bend down and glance under the stalls to check for feet, making sure the coast was clear. I'd stop briefly at the sink, turn on the water and moisten the index and middle fingers on my right hand, so that they'd slide more easily down my throat. Two fingers were better than one. They brought the gagging on faster.

Throwing up wasn't the first weight-management strategy I tried after I got to Carolina and realized how many pizza deliveries were made to the dorm every hour after noon and how many pints of Häagen-Dazs were scattered through convenience stores and snack bars and how irresistible the South's biscuits were, especially when cradling eggs, cheese and sausage.

First I signed up for a physical-education class, a twice-weekly regimen of calisthenics that had the additional benefit of fulfilling some requirement. But at the initial meeting of the class, the teacher talked about something called a body-fat index, then produced a contraption with pinchers to grab and measure any folds of fat around our waists. We had to roll up our T-shirts so the measurement could be made. I registered a higher body fat index than half of the other students. And dropped the class later that same day.

Then I became a vegetarian, figuring I wouldn't have to be vigilant about how much I ate if I limited the categories of food I allowed myself. When friends got hamburgers, I got grilled cheese. I ate plain pizza instead of pepperoni. O.K., so I sometimes ate five or six slices, but wasn't the food I was giving my body supposed to be easier to digest than meat, and wouldn't my body respond by digesting and getting rid of it more easily? I believed that for about four weeks, after which point it became clear that my particular approach to

vegetarianism wasn't making me thin.

One night about midway through the fall semester, I sat alone in my room – my roommate was away somewhere – and reeled from a night of too many and too much of everything: plastic cups of beer from a keg at some outdoor party, pizza afterward, ice cream after that. I was angry at myself for all that I'd eaten and felt slightly queasy. I worried that I'd throw up.

And then, a split second later, without any conscious transition, I hoped I'd throw up. It hit me: if I threw up, the evening's eating would be expunged.

I was already on the precipice of getting sick. With a little effort, could I get myself over the edge?

Yes, yes, I could.

By the middle of the spring semester, I was expert at it.

Freshman year, I often ate dinner with my closest friends, whom I'll call Abigail and Jared. Abigail was my stand-in for Beth, another looker adept at weaving an air of melodrama. Jared was the gay man I wanted to be: quick with a quip, confident in his charms, slight enough to wear plaids and horizontal stripes. He tended to pick at his food, while Abigail could go either way, eating a lot or a little, depending on her mood. I always started out determined not to eat much, but there was food and there were restaurants that foiled me, like the tuna salad at Sadlack's, a deli of sorts that we frequented.

"Be right back," I said one night when the three of us were there, as I clambered out of our booth and headed to the bathroom in the back.

I'd eaten too much: a whole tuna submarine, when half would have been more than enough. No way was I going to let all of that linger in my stomach. The bathroom at Sadlack's was for one person only, and it locked, so I had the privacy I needed. I ran water from the sink to camouflage any sound I might make. I got to work immediately. I kept getting speedier and speedier at this.

Within 45 seconds the sandwich was gone. I flushed the toilet, then went to the sink and scooped some cold water into my mouth to rinse it. I splashed some water on my face. I studied myself in the mirror. I needed to wait a bit longer before returning to the booth. I

was still too red.

After a minute, I made a fresh appraisal: pink now. Much better. Almost there.

Thirty seconds later, I was good to go. My eyes were still watery and faintly bloodshot. But how much of a giveaway, really, was that? Eyes could look the way mine did for any number of reasons. Allergies. Dirty contact lenses. Those were two reasons right off the top of my head.

Jared and Abigail weren't talking when I returned. And they were looking at each other in a puffed-up, purposeful way. Then they were looking at me.

"So," Jared asked, "did it taste as good coming up as it did going down?"

"What?" I asked, going through his words one at a time, twice over. Could they have a meaning other than the obvious one? Could he be asking about something other than what I'd just done in the bathroom?

I didn't think so, but I didn't cop to anything right away. I feigned confusion.

Jared rolled his eyes.

Abigail said, "Do you really think we don't know what's happening when you disappear into the bathroom the minute you stop eating?"

"When do I do that?" I asked, trying for a tone of indignation, because that's how the falsely accused were supposed to sound.

"Um, I don't know, maybe half the time we eat with you," Jared said.

"So I go to the bathroom!" I said.

"And come back looking like you've been hit by food poisoning," Abigail said. She emphasized and drew out the words "food poisoning." Abigail didn't just speak; she delivered lines.

I slumped. "You know," I said, "it's not such a bad thing."

"Tell that to Karen Carpenter," Jared said. She'd died that February. I'd read some of the articles. I'd actually taken a weird sort of comfort from them, because they included details like her possible use of ipecac to make herself vomit. I'd never even heard of ipecac before. The articles included pictures of her looking cadaverous. I'd need several three-day fasts or two weeks of protein shakes to close in on bony.

But, truth be told, the articles — or, rather, the accompanying sidebars and television

chatter about eating disorders – did spook me a little. They went through the effects this bulimia thing could have on your skin (bad), hair (worse), gums (eek!) and fingernails (nasty). For me the whole point of throwing up was to look better, and I was having trouble ignoring the prospect of looking worse if I kept at it long enough. A slim worse, true. A worse with – potentially – a 32-inch waist. But worse all the same. That wasn't my intent.

And now Jared and Abigail were telling me I wasn't even succeeding in keeping my throwing up a secret. If the two of them had figured out the truth, had others too? I apparently couldn't control that, and that wasn't O.K. A person known to be thin only by dint of regular vomiting would attract titters and jokes, not dates.

So I stopped, or vowed to, at first managing only to decrease the frequency of my purges, but soon abandoning them altogether. I succeeded, I think, because so many other extreme or warped weight-management regimens – including more Atkins and more fasting – took the place of bulimia as I struggled for decades to figure out how to answer my appetite without being undone by it and as I traced an unlikely route to the most implausible of destinations: professional eating.