

Chapter One

A Day in the Life of a Fat Man

Twenty-four hours, four hundred pounds and one Big Apple

I've read that people who lose a leg or an arm can sometimes feel a phantom pain in the missing limb. I had all of my parts thankfully, but there it was again, the faint memory of a crippling leg cramp from almost two decades ago. I remembered the pain, the extreme fatigue and, worst of all, the memory loss. . . a nearly complete blackout.

Standing on the south rim of the Grand Canyon with my wife, Mary, the memories came back, even as I took in the wonder of the canyon. Beneath the gathering clouds of an approaching storm, a sea of fantastic rock formations in brilliant hues of amber and crimson rolled to the distant horizon like an ocean of petrified waves. My eyes followed a mule train as it wound its way up the steep and twisting trail from the depths of the abyss. The trail plunged more than three thousand feet to the edge of a plateau that lay in the hazy distance a little more than six miles off. Six miles, a short distance relatively speaking, but six miles down and six miles back, into and out of the canyon, represented a level of difficulty that was an order of magnitude greater than the pleasant strolls we enjoyed back home, among the paved and gently rolling hills of suburban Virginia.

The last time we made this trip was 1986, eighteen years earlier. I was three years out of college and just twenty-six years old at the time. Newly married, I was ready to take on the world. Although I had already started to put on weight, I still had the physique of one accustomed to

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strenuous exercise. In those days, I could run for miles, cared little about what I ate and felt as though I would live forever. I had no idea what a tragic turn my health would take in the coming decades.

By May of 2003, I was a dead man walking. At more than four hundred pounds, I suffered from a toxic mix of obesity-related ills that included shortness of breath, sleep apnea, hypertension, aches and pains in my joints, depression, a frail immune system, asthma and other ailments too numerous to list here. Simply standing was painful, and walking more than a short distance, even on flat turf, was exhausting. Every part of my body complained of one ache or another. Bloated and ill, I had become an old man long before my time, and was haunted daily by the specter of an untimely death. I had long since mothballed dreams of hiking the canyon again.

And yet here I stood in February 2005, less than two years later, completely reborn and ready to take on one of the most challenging day hikes found anywhere in the lower forty-eight states. At two hundred fifty pounds, I was still a big man by most estimates, but the body that once carried over one hundred sixty pounds of excess fat now sported hardened muscle and an astonishingly slimmer physique. This transformation left me with the belief that given the right motivation, I really could move mountains. My new life owed much to a year's worth of newly acquired knowledge about nutrition. During the period of weight loss—all one hundred sixty pounds of it—I enjoyed some of the most delicious meals of my life. I also discovered that regular exercise isn't supposed to hurt and that the post-workout pain I suffered in college was really an early indication of a poor diet and my declining health.

Mary experienced a similar transformation, shedding fifty pounds while regaining her youthful figure and zest for life. Tomorrow we would be heading down the south rim's Bright Angel Trail for the first time in eighteen years. We had been preparing for this challenge for well over a year, but were we ready? Would we make it? Winter in the canyon is no joke, and snow was in the forecast for tomorrow. The question, "Would we make it?" kept repeating itself in my mind. As I stood there and looked

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out over the unforgiving landscape, I felt like an explorer about to embark on a journey into a harsh and uncompromising world. I had been to such a place before, trapped in my old life as a fat man. For those who have never been there, let me give you some idea of what it was like.

What does it feel like to be really fat? If you've never been there, it may be difficult to comprehend. A complex series of factors, both physical and emotional, combine to create an experience quite unlike anything else. You might say that the reality of being fat is so unlike anything else that fat people live in an entirely different world.

Theirs is a world where the pull of gravity exerts a greater-than-normal toll on the body. The sun is hotter, even in winter, and the air is always thinner. In a twist of bitter irony, everything is smaller in this world: cars, bathrooms, restaurant booths, even clothing seem designed to create the maximum amount of discomfort.

The chief preoccupation for the inhabitants of this world is the never-ending search for contentment. It is a search forever thwarted by an unfulfilled hunger and an unquenchable thirst. Self-control is non-existent in this part of the galaxy.

This world is littered with the corpses of failed dreams and missed opportunities. Humor comes at the price of personal dignity. Self-doubt and insecurity are constant companions, as are pain, illness and the ever-present shadow of premature death. Only the stout of heart can survive here, but no one really survives for very long. When death comes, for many it comes not a moment too soon.

6 A.M.

The buzzing in my head is the perfect accompaniment to the dull pain that throbs just behind my temples. The two sensations fuse to create an image of a large mechanical insect with a long, syringe-like stinger, drilling deep into my skull. The buzzing comes from my tormentor, a small alarm clock perched on the bedside table just beyond my reach. Like a lot of things recently, it is a new and unwelcome addition to my life. The pain in my head is quite a different matter. For the past month or so, it

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has visited me nearly every morning. I can't say whether it's the stress in my life or the high blood pressure that is causing the headaches, but I've grown quite accustomed to them. I lash out at the alarm clock, my arms flailing, until by accident more than aptitude, I hit the snooze button.

As I lie quietly in the half-dark of my room and still humid air, I can feel the emergence of a thin film of sweat. I try to drift off to sleep again, but my circadian clock is no less aware of the time than the clock on the table. I begin to notice other sounds now: the steady hum of the ice machine down the hall, and the beating of my own heart. Last night had been a blessing. Though I had not slept well, I had slept long enough to achieve something akin to a night's rest. Still, the knot of tension in my neck has not abated; worse, it has spread tendrils through my shoulders and down into my back. The ritual sadism of too-rich hotel food and the stress of working in the Gulag that is my job, have sucked the life from me. I am a corpse on a slab, bloated and ripe for dissection.

My brain feels like an old computer running on an outdated operating system. It's not uncommon, as I move from the unconscious world to the waking world, to experience a moment of confusion before all the details of my life are properly loaded into my short-term memory. Like a pilot preparing for take-off, I run through my own personal checklist. I am in a hotel room in New York City, lower Manhattan to be exact. Check. I am on the tenth—no, that was last week—the twentieth floor of a downtown hotel. Check. I am on a temporary assignment to work on a large software development project. Check. Temporary is a relative term, as it has been well over four months since I began making the three-hour Monday morning slog up the northeast corridor from my home in Virginia. Today is Tuesday, the morning of our weekly project status meeting. My heart sinks at the very thought of it. I wish I were someplace, anyplace, other than here. Double check.

I lie in bed on my back, feeling just as tired and used up as when I lay down the night before. Morning light begins filtering past the thin veil of my eyelids, forcing me to squint. An inner voice whispers faintly in my ear with the subtlety of a serpent's tongue, "Another day in the factory."

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Just then, the clock starts its incessant buzzing again. “Get up, get up!” I roll onto my side and reach for it; then, with much effort, sit up and pivot to the edge of the bed. I slump here for a moment and wait for the room to stop spinning and the headache to subside. It takes effort to do a lot of things these days. Many feel aches and pains when they first wake up, but for me, a middle-aged man of forty-three, beset with asthma, high blood pressure and an astonishing body weight, they represent just the beginning of another twenty-four hours of humiliation and misery.

Amid grunts and audible popping sounds coming from my joints, I rise from the bed and stumble past the clothes strewn about the floor to the window. Aches and pains ricochet through my body, from my ears to my ankles and back again. I feel like I’ve been hit with a blast of buckshot from point-blank range, and yet, I am so accustomed to feeling this way, I hardly notice it anymore. My only concern on this late spring morning, as it has been every morning recently, is just figuring out how I will make it through another day. I part the curtains and squint into the full light of a New York morning. I’m looking south across Battery Park. The view of the Hudson River is obscured by an apartment building directly in front of me. To the left, a fortress of buildings obliterates the horizon. Here and there, I can see morning ferries and tug boats crisscrossing the grey waters of the Hudson and beyond that, a swath of the Jersey shore. Twenty floors down, West Street bustles with early morning traffic.

I have what some might call a dream job: a high-profile position on a major corporate project, company-paid expenses and one of the greatest cities in the world at my feet. And yet I can’t get past the simple fact that I’m not enjoying any of it. Certainly my weight is a factor, but is it the primary factor? Before writing this book, I would have been unsure of the answer to that question, but I now know that the two hundred extra pounds I carried with me everyday were like a thick, opaque lens through which every thought and every experience of my life were filtered.

As I stand here, I wonder what Mary and the girls are doing back home in Virginia. At six o’clock in the morning, they’re probably still asleep. The separation has been difficult for all of us. I should feel good,

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after all, because I am fulfilling the chief duty of manhood, which is to provide for one's family. As the sole breadwinner, I am doing just that. In fact, I take a certain masochistic pride in the fact that through it all, I am still holding up. But this is just testosterone-induced bravado. The fact is, I feel as though I am letting them down. By my own estimation, I have fallen far short of the goals I had set for myself as a husband and father.

My relationship with Mary has suffered because, when I get right down to it, I don't really like who I am. My weight and the associated health problems make me feel weak, a failure; it's hard to give love when you don't have any to spare for yourself. Mary has her own problems: a fifty-pound surplus of body weight and an even deeper emotional scar she has carried since childhood. The two of us are like speeding cars on a collision trajectory, our combined problems magnifying the force of impact. Worse still, I perceive that our joint failure at setting a good example is priming our daughters for a lifetime of pain and suffering.

I shower and dress quickly. I always do, because being fat means that your wardrobe is severely limited, making the decision of what to wear most mornings a no-brainer. I pull on a pair of dark pants and tuck in a white dress shirt. A light-weight tan sweater goes over the shirt. I choose the sweater even though the weather is warming up. When you're my size, sweaters tend to soften the contrast between the mound of belly fat and your lower body. On this day, I will wear a heavy leather coat over my sweater, as the evenings in New York are still quite cool.

I look in the mirror and unconsciously sneer at the man who returns my stare. My face is puffed and swollen, with the beginnings of dark circles forming around my eyes to complement the darkening splotches on my cheeks. At six feet tall, I am above average height, but the overall effect is ruined by the rolling mounds of flesh that pour down from my chest, ending abruptly in a great orbital ring of fat around my midsection. The once-youthful shimmer of my skin is gone, replaced with a flat and ashen mask, reminding me of the last glimpse of my father as he lay in his coffin.

Between my waist and my neck, I'm almost round. My clothes

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always fit poorly. Sometimes they are too large, sometimes too small. I am always out of fashion. This isn't because of a lack of availability of stylish clothing. The fashion industry caters rather well to the ever-expanding waistline of the American male, but given the exorbitant prices for big-sized clothing—almost a penalty for being overweight—many simply cannot afford to buy better clothes.

I can feel swelling in my hands. My feet, with their poor circulation and blackened toenails, thankfully hidden in my shoes, look like something from a B-grade horror movie. The specter of diabetes that has shadowed three members of my immediate family haunts me daily.

The tired, dull eyes that stare back at me are hardly recognizable as my own. Although I still retain a memory of what I used to look like, I do not recognize this man in the mirror.

The circumference of my waist, being nearly equal to my height, requires me to wear my pants farther down, around my hips. I never liked wearing suspenders, because hitching my pants high up on the waist makes me look too much like the Pentecostal preachers who shepherded the churches of my youth. When I do wear a belt, the weight of my overhanging stomach rubs against the buckle, creating a painful abrasion that sometimes breaks the skin and bleeds. Some days it is so painful I have to go to the restroom at work and stuff a wad of tissue paper between my stomach and the belt buckle.

It occurs to me that life with obesity is like my belt, an ever-tightening cord that is slowly cutting me off from everything and everyone I know. Some days are worse than others, but these days, it seems there are no good days left. As bad as this morning is, it is about to get worse.

7:30 A.M.

I go down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. I am usually still full from my evening meal and often skip breakfast, but being full and being satiated are two different things. I order from the buffet menu and have an omelet, large helping of grits,—I was amazed to find grits in New York City—orange juice and sausage. Eating in public carries with it a special

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risk and countless opportunities for humiliation. I try to ignore the stares, the sidelong glances and the way some people's eyes dart briefly to take in my stomach before reestablishing eye contact. The hostess is an attractive young woman who is all smiles and kind words, but I know or think I know what she and everyone else in the restaurant is thinking: look at that fat guy stuff himself with food.

8:00 A.M.

The walk to the office is difficult. It's only a few blocks, but it feels like miles to me, even though it's mostly downhill. I know I'll have to come back this way in the evening and do not look forward to it. New Yorkers have seen it all, so I'm almost relieved to discover that I don't draw as many stares as usual. I don't see many children on the street in lower Manhattan during morning rush, but on this day a mother and child about five years old rush by. The kid is wailing for something, but stops mid-wail to gawk at me. Mom glances at me for a moment then pulls him forward and the wail picks up again. I imagine he's probably begging for sweets and can hear, if only in my mind, his mother warning him that if he eats too much candy, "You'll wind up like that fat man."

Even though it is cool in the mornings, my size and poor condition cause my internal furnace to heat up quickly. By the time I get to my building several blocks away, I'm almost out of breath. I nod to the security guard as I make my way to the elevators. The lobby is nearly empty. As I step onto the elevator, my mind is preoccupied with the coming events of the day, so I am unprepared for what happens next.

One moment I'm in mid-stride with one leg raised above the threshold of the elevator. The next, when my foot comes down and touches the elevator floor, my left knee gives out. For an instant, I'm in danger of crashing to the floor, but I catch myself and stumble against the wall. This isn't the first time this has happened, but I note with a sense of disquiet that it is happening with greater frequency. Joint and mobility problems are common complaints of the morbidly obese. I wonder how long will it be before I can no longer walk without aid?

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I finally make it up to my floor where I collapse at my desk. I'm sweating profusely and breathing heavily. I wipe the sweat from my brow, but more pours out of me. The white shirt beneath the sweater I'm wearing is soaked through. It takes several minutes for my breathing and my racing heart to return to normal. It will take twenty minutes or more for my shirt to dry out. For those people who say the obese should "just get out and exercise," I have this to say: try walking in my shoes for a day.

9:00 A.M.

I work as a software design liaison between my company and an outside contractor. I spend most of my day sitting in meetings or at a desk. This is the blessing and the curse of modern technology, which makes possible enhanced productivity through the use of computers, while exacting a heavy toll on our health.

Like the animals on a modern day factory farm, I feel trapped, unable to direct the course of my own future. The vending machine down the hall spits out soda for twenty-five cents a can—such a deal. High-calorie, low-nutrient donuts, bagels, pizza and other goodies are regularly supplied by my employer. My coworkers and I often eat hurriedly at our desks, barely tasting the food. We are like beef on the hoof, fattened up on a high-grain diet and crowded into a feed lot awaiting slaughter at the whim of our corporate masters. Sometimes when I close my eyes, I can almost hear mooing.

The hours are often long, and due to the complexity of the work, problems—or should I say, "challenges," the politically correct corporate euphemism—are legion. Along with these "challenges" comes a super-sized helping of stress. I am about to get my first serving at our morning meeting. The room in which the meeting is held is ridiculously small for the number of people attending. I get there early so I can pick a seat at the table that's easy to get to and doesn't require others to squeeze past me. Other people begin streaming into the room. Everyone looks as though they've enjoyed a better night's rest than I did. They look crisp and freshly attired; I look worn and feel worse, and the day has only just begun. I try

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to keep up with the discussion, but find that I'm having a difficult time concentrating. This is a growing and more frequent problem. When it's my turn to report, I stumble through my script in a lifeless monotone, not sure whether I'm making any sense and hoping no one asks any questions.

10:00 A.M.

An unexpected meeting comes up that is located in another building a couple of blocks away. This is bad news because it means that not only will I have to go walking, but I won't be alone. When I'm walking by myself, I can walk at my own pace, stopping now and then to rest, but I know I'll have to keep pace with the energetic young man who will accompany me to the meeting. We start out along Broad Street and head toward the end of the block, not far from the Stock Exchange. A left turn takes us up a long incline toward Broadway. My heart is pounding. Pride prevents me from admitting that I need to rest. The leather coat makes me feel like I'm wearing a portable sauna, and my breathing is barely under control. Talking is difficult. By the time we arrive at the meeting, I am drenched and exhausted. For the next ten minutes, so much sweat pours from my head and face that I look like a fountain in a park. I certainly feel as though I weigh as much. The only thing missing, I muse, is the pigeons.

12:00 P.M.

There are problems—there always are—with the project. Another unscheduled meeting comes up. I've barely returned from my last appointment when I have to go out again, this time for a lunch meeting with one of the project's principal clients, as well as a group of managers from my company. The restaurant is close by, but small. I find that I have difficulty negotiating the narrow passages between tables to get to my seat. The shirt beneath my sweater is still damp and as I sit there, I can sense that a few buttons have come undone and that my shirttail has crept up out of my pants.

One of the problems with being obese is that when you sit at a table, your stomach forces you to sit much farther away from the table

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than normal. Food has to travel a greater distance from the plate to your mouth. Spills occur often. I'm careful to order the salmon as it is relatively easy to control, unlike spaghetti or a salad, which would have been a disaster. I thank God that at least we're at a table and not a booth. Booths have no equal in the amount of physical discomfort and public humiliation they offer to the obese. They are the modern-day equivalent of a medieval "iron lady," designed to force fat people to choose between talking and breathing.

Just as I'm beginning to settle into the conversation and forget about my personal troubles, disaster strikes. Because I jut so far out into the aisle, one of the waiters, balancing a tray of coffee cups and cream, bumps into me and spills cream all over my back. I can feel the cold, viscous liquid creeping down my shirt. The waiter grabs a towel and between apologies begins sopping up the cream as best he can. He implores me to remove my sweater so that he can have it cleaned at the restaurant's expense.

Everyone at my table and the tables around me is staring. I am now faced with a difficult choice: remove my sweater and reveal my sweat-stained, ill-fitting, partially unbuttoned shirt and the mounds of flesh beneath, or refuse the offer to have my sweater cleaned and look like the village idiot in front of the entire restaurant. I choose to be an idiot and lamely try to laugh off the incident, declining the waiter's offer.

I think this scene can't get any worse, but I am wrong. Now the restaurant manager, a young attractive woman, comes over and again insists that I remove my sweater so the restaurant can have it cleaned. It isn't often that strange women demand I undress in public, so I find I'm at a loss for words. I tell her I'm from out of town and she counters that she'll have the sweater sent to wherever I live. The restaurant is nearly dead silent as I struggle for a response.

"No it's OK, really," I mutter.

My table mates are looking at me now as though I really am from another world. It feels like ages before the hum of normal conversation picks up again and people return to their business. Whatever opinion my coworkers at the table had of me when we entered the restaurant,

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I'm now sure it is markedly different when we leave. In a final stab of humiliation, as we're leaving the restaurant, the manager asks me once more whether I would like to have my sweater cleaned. I thank her and reply that I'm staying just a few blocks away and will go change clothes after lunch. To add a final insult to my injury, I tip the coat girl far more than she deserves. No one mentions the incident on the walk back to the office. I step across a large metal grate in the street through which the sound and the fury of a passing subway train can be heard. I find myself wishing the grate would give way and swallow me up.

2:00 P.M.

I spend the rest of the day hiding at my desk. I need a shower and feel sticky in clothes that have been twice dampened by sweat and once by cream. It's starting to rain outside.

Usually at about this time, I get drowsy and nod off. I try to stay awake by keeping busy making phone calls and attacking my to-do list. These episodes of midday sleepiness usually pass in about an hour.

3:00 P.M.

Another meeting. I have a phone call and arrive late. There's no place to sit, so I stand. My lower back is killing me. Someone leaves early and I grab his chair. Halfway into it, I discover that it's too small for me. I'm wedged between the armrests. If I try to stand up, the chair will come with me, so I squeeze into it. Everyone pretends not to notice my predicament.

4:00 P.M.

Andy, one of the guys in the office, invites me to come along to dinner with a group of programmers. I pretend to consider the offer before declining. I've learned that a dinner invitation means strolling aimlessly for blocks until the group discovers a restaurant that looks interesting. The last time I accepted a dinner invitation, the exhausting walk to the restaurant killed my appetite while the walk back, as difficult as it was

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on a full stomach, only made me hungry shortly after I returned to my room.

Every day I vow to accept the dinner invitations from the New York staff and accompany them to one of the many restaurants in the area. Every night I find another reason not to. The reasons typically fall into one of three categories: work, family or illness. Tonight was “illness” night. I tell them that I must be coming down with something and need to get to bed early. Andy smiles and says something about “the next time then.”

There’s always a next time when you’re obese. The next diet will be the one that works for me, or next week I’m really going to try harder to exercise more. We spend most of our working day in hopeful yet hopeless anticipation of the next this, the next that, which never comes.

By the end of the day, I’m drenched and exhausted. At least today, I’ll actually get to leave at a respectable hour. On some days, people stay here all night. The glamorous world of software development isn’t so glamorous for me.

5:00 P.M.

Rain has been falling in a light, steady drizzle ever since the early afternoon, creating puddles everywhere. The evening rush of foot traffic pours out of the buildings and surges into the street. People walk with heads down, eyes forward, rushing past me as though I am a large stone in the midst of a great silent river. I lumber up a long wide alleyway that inclines toward Broadway. The hotel is still several blocks away, but it feels like I’ve already walked several miles. The trauma of walking uphill after a long day of meetings intensifies the pain in my lower back. It grows worse with each step. I can feel the eyes of the crowd all around me, can feel the suffocating waves of pity and disgust that threaten to drown me.

As I step off a curb, my foot sinks into a puddle of water. After months of walking through dirty snow and water, my shoes are ruined and now they are soaked through to the socks. I heave myself forward, dodging a cab before reaching the opposite curb.

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5:20 P.M.

I sit on the edge of the bed in my small sterile room, my sweater lying crumpled behind me. Slumped and lifeless, I resemble a large pile of dirty laundry. The bedding is violently disturbed where I collapsed soon after arriving. The excruciating pain in my lower back and joints give me little choice. Some nights on the walk back to the hotel I barely make it to the privacy of the lobby elevator before collapsing in pain against the wall. I am tired inside and out.

6:00 P.M.

Recovered from my evening walk, I decide to order dinner in my room. I almost always eat dinner in my room. The hotel restaurant is more than adequate, but after previous visits there, where the hostess seated me so far toward the back of the restaurant I could smell the dish washing liquid in the kitchen, I took the hint. New York probably has more restaurants per square mile than any other city, but going out is just not realistic for someone like me. I shift from the bed to a tight-fitting desk chair, and absentmindedly flip through the pages of the room service menu. This is just a formality, as I have it practically memorized.

“Hello Mr. Morris, this is Paul. How may I help you tonight?”

The voice belongs to the guest services manager. It is overtly pleasant to the point of flatness. Paul and the room service staff like me. I keep them busy, tip well and am conscientious about placing the service table outside my room and phoning the desk to have someone pick it up. If the old maxim “you are what you eat,” is true, Paul knows me better than he does most of the hotel’s guests, as he has taken my calls many times before. Thus our familiar conversation begins.

“I’d like to order some dinner.”

“Excellent Mr. Morris. Would you like to hear our special tonight?”

The line is silent for a moment. “Sure,” I respond. It really doesn’t matter what the special is, I’ve had a hard day and I need a heavy dose of comfort to put it behind me. I already know what I want.

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“We start with a spicy tomato bisque soup followed by the main course, a fillet of mesquite grilled sea bass infused with truffle oils.” As he works this culinary aria, the pitch and tenor of Paul’s voice changes, rising in melodic refrain phrases. “That comes with seared asparagus spears on a bed of wild rice with fresh scallions and hand-picked mushrooms.” A breathless pause follows as Paul gathers himself for the climax of this mini-opera. “For dessert, this meal includes your choice of honey-glazed baked apples in a red wine sauce or poached pears in a fragrant hibiscus-scented syrup presented in a delicate web of spun sugar.”

Then I hear the abrupt sound of a breathless exhalation as Paul cools down from the exertion. I rock back in the ill-fitting chair and wait for a moment to lend the impression that I am actually considering the special.

“Uh no, I think I’d like to go with the steak tonight.”

A disappointed silence follows, then having recovered, Paul replies, “Excellent. Is that the house steak or the porterhouse?”

The house steak is a dainty seven ounces of meat, while the porterhouse weighs in at over a pound of gut-busting Colorado beef, bathed in butter and herbs.

“I’ll have the porterhouse.”

“How would you like that?” The color has deserted Paul’s voice.

“Medium well.”

“That comes with a seafood chowder or garden salad. Which would you prefer?”

“Salad.”

“Dressing?”

“Ranch. And could you put some chicken on that salad?”

“Of course. Would you like fries or mashed potatoes with your steak?”

“Fries.”

“Something to drink?”

“A Coke.”

“Would a Pepsi be OK?”

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“Sure.”

“Dessert?”

It goes like this for a moment more. The conversation is familiar to both of us. Like two actors with a well-rehearsed script, we speak our lines with the conviction of an opening night performance. I hang up the phone and reach for the television remote, then pause and reach for the phone instead. Dinner is a half hour away. I wheel the chair around and open the in-room snack bar and smile when I discern that the cache of Snickers candy bars has been replenished.

6:30 P.M.

A room service attendant brings dinner on a table tray. I sit in the ill-fitting desk chair and watch TV while I eat. Except for the prehistoric dinner rolls, which would need to be carbon-dated to determine their age, the food is neither good nor bad. It simply does what all my meals do, which is to fill the hole in my belly. But never, ever do my meals leave me satisfied.

8:00 P.M.

I spend the rest of the evening sprawled uncomfortably on the bed, watching TV and flipping through the pages of a magazine. Despite the bloated feeling in my stomach and the general sense of unease that always comes after eating, I eventually attack the snack bar. In a half-hearted attempt to watch my fat intake, I skip the cookies this time and choose a can of sickeningly sweet, but stale, peanuts. They taste as though they've been languishing in a warehouse since the Reagan administration.

The willingness to eat just about anything, whether we like it or not, is one of the puzzling mysteries of the overeater. In retrospect, I realize that my insatiable cravings were the result of chronic malnourishment. This is why my meals never left me satisfied.

Before bed, I take my blood pressure medication.

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2:00 A.M.

My eyes snap open. I sit up abruptly in bed, although with difficulty. I'm choking and there's a burning sensation in my throat. Acid? I cough violently, trying to clear my airway. It takes a moment to remember where I am. The chunk, shush, chunk of the ice machine fills in the blanks for me. I was dreaming that I drowned.

Dreams of drowning are not uncommon for obese people suffering from a life-threatening disorder known as sleep apnea. Obstructive sleep apnea, the variant from which I suffered, is a condition in which the airway at the back of the throat becomes temporarily blocked. The sufferer can experience frequent (as many as sixty per hour) moments of interrupted breathing. These episodes can persist throughout the night, inhibiting access to the kingdom of deep and restful sleep. Snoring, daytime sleepiness and an inability to concentrate are all potential consequences of sleep apnea. Heart attack, high blood pressure and stroke are also associated with this condition.

The pressure on my bladder cannot be ignored; disoriented, I fumble through the darkened room to the toilet. I don't trouble myself with the light switch, as my aim is no better in the light than it is in the dark. My habits have grown steadily more piggish. The longer I'm in New York, the worse I feel, the more I eat and the less I care. It is a familiar pattern that I recognize and fear, but I feel helpless to stop it. I exit the bathroom, stopping to retrieve a Pepsi from the snack bar, then step gingerly over the growing pile of clothes on the floor to the faint outline of the window across the room. Parting the curtains, I look out on a city not quite asleep.

In the pale light of a pastel moon, New York takes on a ghostly radiance, like a canvas in translucent hues of white. In the distance, I can see the Jersey shore, loosely sketched by rows of yellow and white lights. A lone tugboat, lit up like a Christmas tree, moves silently across the water. Below me an occasional car passes, heading south, toward the West Street terminus.

A Life Unburdened

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6:00 A.M.

I wake up early, squinting into the dawn light that invades the room. At some point in the night, I stumbled from my uncomfortable bed and collapsed into the uncomfortable easy chair, where I managed to sleep fitfully. The heavy meal from the previous evening leaves me dazed. I feel as though a weight greater than my own is pinning me to the chair. My mouth is parched, and thirst gnaws at me despite the evidence of several empty Pepsi cans on the desk, which I have only the faintest memory of drinking. On my first attempt to rise, my joints and unused muscles groan and protest with the effort. I fall back and contemplate what lies ahead.

Looking back, I cannot say how I managed the burden of morbid obesity for as long I did. Perhaps as my mother used to say: "It was my faith that brought me." Faith can be a wonderful thing, a powerful motivator that sees us through the dark hours when our lives seem hopeless and full of bitter discontent. But faith is a double-edged sword. Applied in the wrong way, for the wrong cause, blind faith can be an anchor that pulls us down into the murky depths of self-destruction. It was blind faith that nearly destroyed me, and continues to destroy the lives of millions.

One: A Day in the Life of a Fat Man

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Above: Here I am just before relocating to the East Coast. Leaving our family behind in Arizona was a tough decision, but as I said to Mary, "This move will be an opportunity for us to recreate ourselves." Little did I know how true were those words.

Right: Here I am today.

