

“Food is Love”
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It was the night before writing class, and as usual, I had not yet done the homework. As we talked about whether or not I was going to use the prompt, because I viewed it as less than inspiring, I recited it to my husband.

“What doesn’t kill me makes me . . . blank.”

“Angry!” he responded immediately. “Really, really angry!” I looked at him in disbelief, and he continued. “I should know. I’ve lived with it all these years.” His voice softened as he went on. “Just look at how you’ve responded to the low-sodium diet.”

We didn’t speak about it again, but I knew immediately I had my answer to the writing prompt, and I stewed about it half the night, writing in my head when I should have just gotten out of bed and written it all down.

What doesn’t kill me makes me angry. This is true in more ways than I care to admit, but it is especially true now.

A few weeks ago I spent the afternoon in the emergency room, my feet and legs swollen and my shortness of breath worse than before I had open heart surgery in 2019. Initially I was diagnosed with Acute Heart Failure, but after an echocardiogram and a visit with the cardiologist the following week, I learned that my diet was to blame. I thought back to my weeks in rehab after open heart, when my salt intake was restricted and I traded my sugar packets to the diabetics for their salt packets. No one can make me eat an egg without salt!

Now I am dealing with the aftermath of what didn’t kill me. Faced with weighing myself daily and wearing compression socks, I must also keep track of how much sodium I eat. Out the window goes most of the foods on our regular menu, Italian sausage quiche and casseroles bathed in cream of mushroom soup, pork sprinkled with Cajun seasoning and fried chicken breaded in my own secret concoction. All of these dishes contain too much salt.

We must also give up our monthly backup of pizza and wings when neither of us has remembered to thaw something from the freezer. I have a standing order for a large pizza and two orders of hot wings, enough to ensure leftovers for several lunches, or even pizza for breakfast when we are bored with toast and cereal.

I spent two days writing down everything I ate and adding up the sodium; in spite of drastically reducing my salt intake, my weight continued to climb. Finally, I realized I needed to count calories too, and a friend suggested I use an app in my phone to record my food intake.

I searched and searched and finally found an app which counted both sodium and calories. It was German and did not list most of the foods we eat in the U.S. It also required me to do a ton of math, converting the label information on every package to 100 grams, but none of the products were measured the same. Servings were measured in ounces or cups, and when I looked up familiar items, I got the craziest answers. Who knew that ‘asparagus’ is a type of bean in Germany! After three days and serious frustration, I gave up on the app and asked around for a different one. I settled on a different one, but after being bombarded with text emails, messages and other reminders, I got angry and deleted it.

I am reluctant to call this a diet, because I have a life-long history of failed diets, including at least three attempts at Weight Watchers, a plan which required me to write down everything I put in my mouth. Unlike my “morning pages,” which in spite of explicit

instructions, I never burned, I desperately wanted to burn the food diaries. I have never wanted anyone to know what I eat. This is because I grew up in a family where food was love, and since I often feel unlovable, I am a closet eater. I literally have boxes of cookies in my closet.

Cookies were always rationed in our house. I snuck as much cookie dough as I could while I was making them, but once they were baked, my parents took control of the cookie jar. If I snuck one, I was punished, and to this day, I look over my shoulder to see if anyone is watching when I eat a cookie.

Things got worse as I got older. In 4th grade, I began to grow. In 6th grade, shortly before school let out for the summer, our whole class was marched to the nurse's office where we were weighed and measured. I've never forgotten my numbers, nor the snickers from behind me when the nurse announced I was 5'3" and weighed 106 pounds. I didn't understand what that meant, but no one else in my class weighed over 90 pounds. To make matters worse, for the last couple of years I had been hearing adults comment on what a big girl I was. I was in my 30s before I realized that 'big' did not automatically mean 'fat.'

In September of 1962, I boarded the city bus to take me to my first day of junior high. I had grown six inches over the summer and the driver didn't believe me when I told him I was 11. He made me pay the adult fare, and I went to school worried sick about how I was going to get home; we lived 2½ miles from the school and my mother had only given me enough change for two child fares. I was fortunate that my brother found me crying in the school yard and gave me his bus fare, saying he would walk home. It was so refreshing after a day of being pointed at by the rest of the kids. At 5'9", I was the tallest person in the school, taller than the teachers and all the 9th grade boys. Those boys would catch up and surpass me in the coming months, but on that first day of school, I was a freak, and I never forgot it.

Things were complicated by my father, who never expected his little pixie of a daughter to become an amazon. All these years later, I can still hear his angry voice echoing in my head: "If you don't stop eating so much meat, you're going to be big as a barn!" I was hungry, and this was the response I got when I would ask for seconds.

Food was love, and I was being deprived of it because my father was worried that I would get fat. In fact, I spent most of my life thinking I was fat, even when I was at a healthy weight for my height. My brother and I were both deprived when there was a chicken for dinner. Our sister always got both drumsticks, while Tom and I were each given a wing and a thigh. Our father got both breasts, and Mom was left with the backs and the giblets. Even on Thanksgiving and Christmas, Ellen was given one of the turkey legs, which she struggled to eat because there were so many little bones. But Ellen always got what she wanted when it came to food, and Tom, our mother and I were left with the dregs.

I never questioned the idea that food was love. It was a reward—the only way to earn dessert was to clean our plates, no matter how nasty the canned peas tasted. Anything was palatable if it could be followed by some form of sugar. I learned to save the best for last, forcing down the milk and vegetables so I could enjoy the meat and Jello® "salad." When I came home from school to an empty house, whatever food I could scrounge provided comfort to hide the reality that I was sad and lonely.

I began learning to cook at a young age, it being my mother's effort to make up for the fact that she never learned to cook until after she was married. It was our father who taught her, a feat which gave him bragging rights, but also the right to criticize her every effort. I was a quick study and learned to follow recipes instead of deviating from them until I was sure what

the dishes were supposed to taste like. This adherence to rules enabled me to surpass my mother in ability, putting meals on the table that gained me a great deal of praise. Of course food was love if it was the only way to get my family to express their appreciation of me.

High school foods classes taught me far more than my mother ever dreamed of knowing. Not only did I learn to manipulate recipes to create my own dishes, I learned how to manage a grocery budget in ways that allowed me to get more food for less money. My skills led me to an unusual opportunity in which I became head cook at a summer camp when I was 19. I created menus, purchased food and supplies, supervised the parents who volunteered to be my assistants, oversaw kitchen cleanup performed by the campers, and turned out amazing meals day after day — turkey dinners with mashed potatoes and gravy for one meal, and Turkey a la King for the next day's lunch, serving both biscuits and pies made from scratch. I was a wizard in the kitchen and earned enough praise to last a lifetime at the same time I earned enough money for a semester's tuition at my out-of-state college. I also burned out on cooking and menu planning.

In later years, when our dad decided he was the one who was fat, he bragged about his simple weight-loss plan, which involved using a salad plate instead of a dinner plate and stopping when the plate was empty. He gloated about how easy it was to lose weight and made fun of us for not following his lead.

Today I see this long overdue need to keep a food diary as a punishment for not caring enough about what I eat, for allowing myself to get fat after struggling for years to keep it off by making sure I got enough exercise. Eventually I came to terms with the fact that I was taller than most women, taller even than my husband, and with the big bones of my Dutch ancestors, I was never going to be a small woman. I was strong and healthy and not afraid to look men in the eye, because when we stood face to face, I was on their level. It served me well when I was younger.

But now I am old. I have shrunk to 5'7" and I resent having to stand on a stool to reach into my top cupboards. After open heart surgery, my chest cavity decreased in size, and now my blouses fall off my shoulders or appear lower cut than they did before.

When arthritis prevented me from walking everywhere the way I used to, I went to the pool regularly and worked out there. But the pools have been closed for over a year, and the horror of having to weigh myself daily tells me that, just like the Freshman-15 I gained in college, I've gained the Covid-15 — more than once. Writing down my food intake reminds me to watch the calories as well as the sodium, but writing it all down just makes me so angry.

How do I grapple with this belief that food is love, when everything tastes wrong without salt? Blaming my parents only takes me so far, and they're long dead anyway. What do I do with all this anger which threatens to become self-directed because I have no one to blame but myself? The bottom line, at least today, is I've discovered I'd rather be hungry than record what I eat. And the problem with that strategy is, I have a serious case of 'hangry' whenever my blood sugar gets too low, which leads me to throw in the towel and eat whatever I want. I find myself in a vicious cycle of suffering from hunger, and when the hunger is satisfied, suffering from what I've chosen to eat.

This is not a helpful solution for someone whose open heart surgery was due to a massive aneurism in the pulmonary artery created by stress.