

A Walk and a Wager

Movement arrives without a program, and a small bet keeps it in place.

When I came home from Williamsburg ten pounds lighter - down to two seventy-five, with the second "hmm" still ringing in the back of my head - I did not sit down at the kitchen table, write out a plan, and say to my wife, Honey, I am going to lose a hundred and fifty pounds. Not even close. I came home, I unpacked the suitcase, and I went back to work the way I always had.

But something had moved.

It was a small shift, and I want to describe it accurately, because if you are reading this and waiting for the moment when a fat man finally puts his foot down and announces a transformation, you are not going to find it in this chapter, or anywhere in this book. There is no foot. There is no announcement. What there is, instead, is a man and his wife driving home from a vacation, neither of them saying the thing out loud, both of them quietly rearranging the furniture inside their own heads.

For the first time in my life, I was thinking about every

meal.

Not just dinner. Not just what are we doing for dinner. Every meal. Breakfast. Lunch. The snack at four o'clock. The thing on the screen porch at nine. Each one was now a little decision, and each little decision had a small audience inside my head asking whether the thing on the plate was going to push me toward the man on the boat in the blue hoodie or away from him. I had never thought about food that way before in my life. I had thought about food the way most American men think about food, which is to say I had thought about food when I was hungry, and I had stopped thinking about food when the plate was empty. That was the whole transaction. There was no audience. There was nobody asking any questions.

Now there was.

A change in your life is almost never the moment you announce it. It is the moment a question that was not in your head before is suddenly in your head, all the time, and you cannot remember how it got there.

The Quiet Summer

It was the back end of summer. New England summer, which is short and bright and worth every dollar of property

tax we pay to live here. Debbie and I had a rhythm we had been following for thirty-some years, and on the surface, that rhythm did not change much. We woke up. We went to work. We came home. We made dinner. We watched a little television. We went to bed. The frame of the day was the same.

But inside the frame, almost everything was different.

We started shopping for groceries together. That alone was new. For most of our marriage, Debbie had run the kitchen, and food had appeared in the refrigerator the way mail appears in the mailbox - because somebody handled it, and that somebody was usually her. Now I was tagging along. I wanted to look at the meats. I wanted to look at the vegetables. I had become, almost overnight and without quite admitting it to myself, someone who was paying attention to ingredients.

We started going to different stores - not the big chain supermarket, but a couple of places that were a little farther, a little more expensive, and a lot better. The produce was fresher. The meat looked different. Even the air in the store was different. We bought a chest freezer for the basement, which changed how we shopped: we could buy in bulk when something was on sale and plan meals for the week or sometimes for weeks instead of a single trip.

You stop shopping for tonight, and you start shopping for the next ten days. That is a different kind of thinking.

And we started planning meals. I had never planned a meal in my adult life. Meals had happened to me. Now Debbie and I were sitting at the table on a Sunday morning, sometimes with a piece of paper, writing down the week. Monday is a fish thing, Tuesday is chicken, Wednesday is a vegetarian night, and Thursday is the leftovers from Tuesday made into something else. If you had told me a year earlier that I would be the man at the table writing the week down on a piece of paper, I would have laughed at you, and then I would have eaten a box of Munchkins.

The food itself started to shift. We had always been big red-meat eaters - steak, burgers, pork chops with the fat still on. The American working-man's plate. Three meals a day, every day. That had felt to us like the law. It was how we grew up, and so it was what we knew how to do. Now, in the warmer months, we started to ease off on it. Maybe meat at two meals. Maybe at one. Maybe at none, with a vegetarian night thrown in just to see what happened. We were eating more fish. More chicken, leaner cuts, baked instead of fried. When we did eat pork, we picked the leanest cut on the shelf. Nobody had told us to do this. We were just doing it.

And we started to look at vegetables.

I want to flag that, because looking at vegetables sounds like nothing, and for a man who had spent fifty-some years on the standard American diet, looking at vegetables was an event. My wife is a gardener. Years before any of this, she had grown vegetables in the yard - she canned them, pickled them, put them up in jars, and we lived off the jars in the winter. But canned and pickled is not the same as fresh, and the fat-and-sugar-and-salt, the actual ingredients, the math on a jar of pickled anything is different from a fresh head of lettuce or a basket of fresh cucumbers or tomatoes. Now, for the first time, we were looking at the fresh part of the produce section. The summer corn. The tomatoes off a stand by the side of the road. The first lettuces and the late-season greens.

We learned a phrase I had heard people use at parties for years and never paid attention to. Eating the rainbow. Buying produce in colors. Red things, orange things, yellow things, green things, purple things. I had been eating primarily beige food for fifty years - bread, pasta, potatoes, cheese, gravy, beer. Now I was eating in colors. Debbie would come home from the store, lay everything out on the counter, and the counter would look like a paint store.

I cannot tell you how many pounds of green salads we ate

that summer. Lots and lots and lots of it. And not because we had to, but because we figured out how to make a salad that was actually interesting. Different vinegars. Different herbs. A piece of fish, a handful of nuts, some berries, and a little bit of cheese as a treat. A salad you actually wanted to eat, instead of one you choked down because it was good for you and you should just eat something green. We were eating salad because WE LIKED it, and it was really good and flavorful.

Our taste buds were changing. The same way they had changed with the iced tea, they were changing with everything else. We had stopped using salt at the table and had mostly stopped using it in cooking. And once you stop laying salt on top of food, you can taste the food itself, and the food itself turns out to taste like something. I had been eating the seasoning, not the food, my entire adult life.

The evenings on the gazebo were the picture of it. We built that gazebo on top of our deck years ago. It is screened in to keep the bugs out, and it has a little table and a couple of chairs. That summer, what we ate, in there, was a salad. Or a bowl of fruit. Or some grilled fish with a vegetable. Maybe a small glass of wine if the day had earned it. A year earlier, on that same porch, in that same wooden chair, I had been eating burgers and fries and baked beans - the whole American summer plate, loaded with fat and sugar

and salt before you even put the food on top of it. The chair didn't change. The man in the chair was changing.

A lifestyle does not change in a thunderclap. It changes in the small, repeated decisions about what goes on the plate, what goes in the cart, what goes in the freezer, and what gets cooked on a Tuesday night when nobody is watching. By the time you notice the change, you have been making it for months.

The Body Catches Up

The scale started to move. Not slowly. Fast.

I had come home from Williamsburg at 275 pounds. By the middle of the summer, I was somewhere around 265. Then 260. Then 255. I was not logging any of this yet. I was just stepping on the same scale, in the same spot in the spare bathroom - a scale I have used for twenty-eight years - and watching the number come down.

I would understand what was happening later, and I will save the full explanation for the chapter where it belongs. The short version is this: when you stop sending your body the fuel it has been running on - when you cut the bread, the pasta, the potatoes, the sugar - your body looks around for something else to burn. And what it finds, sitting all

over a 280-pound man, is thirty years of stored fuel. Fat is fuel. My body started burning the fuel that was already in me. It turned out to be good at it; my body knew what to do. It adapted and began to use all the fuel I'd stored all over it for decades, and stopped making more fat.

I did not know any of that, exactly, when it was happening. I just knew the scale kept going down. And there is a moment in this, the kind of moment most people miss, and I want to call it out specifically because I think it matters.

There is a moment when your body realizes the emergency is over.

You have been overfeeding it for thirty years. You have been carrying it around like a man hauling sandbags. And then, one quiet morning, you do something a man in a sandbag body cannot do, and you realize the sandbags have been coming off, and you didn't notice.

For me, that moment was a pair of shoes.

The Velcro Comes Off

In Chapter 1, I told you about the Velcro shoes. I want to bring them back here because they are the bookends.

For years - and I want you to remember this, because it is one of the most quietly humiliating things I have ever told

another human being - I had not been able to bend over far enough to tie my own shoelaces. The belly was in the way. There was no angle at which my body would fold to put my hands near my feet. I had solved that problem the wrong way, by buying shoes with Velcro and never bending over for footwear again. The Velcro shoes were sitting in my closet that summer, the way they had been for years, and I had a couple of pairs because I went through them.

One morning, I was getting ready for work. I sat down on the bench at the foot of the bed to put on my shoes. I leaned forward to grab the Velcro strap. And what I noticed - not all at once, but in a slow what-the-hell-is-this kind of way - was that I had leaned forward. Not just a little. Down. All the way down toward my feet. My hand was at my shoe. My belly was not in the way, well, not as much as before, not in the same way.

Wait a minute.

I sat back up. I looked down at my body. I leaned forward again, slowly, and this time I undid the Velcro. My fingers were on the strap. I could feel my own fingers, on my own foot, doing a thing I had not done unassisted in something like ten years.

Happy birthday to me.

That was the phrase I said in my head. The man who had let his wife clip his toenails, the man who had aimed at the toilet by guesswork because he could not see down past his own stomach - that man was bent over his shoe, looking at it, with no help.

You will know your body has changed, not when the scale moves, but when something you used to be unable to do becomes ordinary. The first time you do it, you will notice. The second time, you will not. By the third or fourth time, you will have forgotten you ever could not do it, and that is when the change has begun to live inside you.

A few weeks later, the Velcro shoes themselves stopped fitting. My feet had been so puffy with retained water, inflammation, and plain fat for so long that I had been wearing a shoe two sizes too big. I had to go get new shoes.

I went to the store. I walked the aisle looking at men's sneakers. And I picked up a pair of laced shoes.

I sat down on the bench. I put my foot into the new lace-up shoe, leaned forward, and tied the lace. I tied a knot. I made a bow. With my own hands. On my own foot. While breathing normally and not bracing against a wall. I didn't need to contort my body in strange and freakish ways to tie my shoe. I didn't dislocate any body parts bending strangely to make this work; it just worked.

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

This free preview covers the first 10 pages of the chapter. The rest is in the book. To order Volume II - From 310 to Thriving, email metabojoe@gmail.com.

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