

The Bowling Ball

The photograph, the measurements, and the first lie: that you can see yourself clearly.

October 24, 2015. The photograph that started everything.

There is a photograph of me standing on the deck of a boat, taken on October 24, 2015, somewhere around my fifty-fourth birthday. I am wearing a blue hoodie. I am smiling at the camera, completely at ease, because in that moment, I had no idea anything was wrong. I looked, and I mean this literally, like a big blue ball. A blueberry. A bowling ball with a face drawn on it.

That was me then.

I almost did not see this photograph at all. My habit, in those years, was to avoid cameras. I was always the guy taking pictures. I was rarely in one. This particular photo exists because I was on a fishing trip for tautog, a local fish that hides in the rock piles along the Rhode Island coast, and I was there as a member of a fishing club I belonged to, and I was tasked with documenting the day and writing it up for the club newsletter. The camera in someone else's hand at that moment was mine. They were using it to take a

picture of me because they had to. Otherwise, the person writing for the club newsletter would not have been in his own article.

I didn't look at the photograph until I sat down a few days later to write the piece.

When I did look at it, something cracked open in me, just for a second. I want to be exact about what happened, because I do not want to dress it up. I sat there at my kitchen table, scrolling through the day's images, and I came to that one. I stared at it. And I heard, in my own voice, in the back of my own head, a sentence I had managed to keep quiet for years.

DAMN, YOU'RE BIG. YOU'RE GOING TO DIE SOON.

And then, almost immediately after:

YOU NEED TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS.

Then I closed the laptop. I finished the article without looking at the picture again. I sent it in. I didn't think about it for a long time, not in any real way, not in any way that changed a single thing about the day in front of me. The thought went down somewhere I could not reach, and I went back to my life. It would be months before something I didn't know was connected to it - a glass of iced tea, of all things - brought it back up.

I am five feet five inches tall. On my best day, gravity gives me a break, and I stand up straight and claim the whole five-five. And in that photograph, at five-five, I weighed 310 pounds. My waist was fifty inches around. Do the math. My body was sixty-five inches tall and fifty inches around. That is not a man. That is a sphere. That is geometry that should not exist in nature, and yet there I was, grinning on a boat, perfectly convinced that I looked just fine.

I want to start there, because before I tell you anything else about what happened to me - how I lost 165 pounds, reversed four serious medical conditions, and learned to train every morning before most people are out of bed - you need to understand something that took me a very long time to understand about myself. I did not know how bad it was. I didn't let myself know. I walked around inside that body for years, and I looked at myself in the mirror every morning, and I genuinely told myself, You still look pretty good, buddy.

I was 310 pounds. I was not good. I was a load.

The first lie you tell yourself is that you can see yourself clearly. You can't. Not when you're inside it. That is the whole problem in one sentence, and it is the reason this book exists.

A Day in That Life

Let me walk you through a typical day, the way I lived it back then, because I think its ordinariness is what most people miss. I wasn't a monster or a glutton sitting alone in the dark eating cake with my hands. I was a guy. I was a regular American guy with a job, a wife, a couple of kids, a mortgage, a paycheck, and a whole lot of very normal habits that were quietly killing me.

I worked in the car business in those days. I was a sales manager. That meant I got to the dealership around 8:30 in the morning and, on a typical day, stayed for 13 to 16 hours. Sometimes longer. Sometimes a twenty-hour day. Six days a week. That was life. If you have ever worked in the car business, you already know. If you haven't, trust me - it is a world designed from top to bottom to wreck your body without you noticing.

On the way in, I'd stop at Dunkin' Donuts. Extra-large decaf iced coffee, regular - which in New England means cream and sugar. Two cream, two sugar. Along with that, a bagel with cream cheese, or if I wanted something more substantial, a sausage, egg, and cheese on a bagel. And some mornings, and I am genuinely embarrassed to say this out loud, I'd get a hankering for something sweet, so I'd

order a box of twenty-five Dunkin' Munchkins. Donut holes. Twenty-five of them, which is more or less equivalent to a dozen full donuts. I'd tell myself I was bringing them to the guys at the shop.

They never made it to the shop. Not once. I'd eat the entire box by myself, in my car, on the drive to work. Breakfast sandwich in one hand, coffee in the cupholder, Munchkins in the passenger seat. Chewing, sipping, driving, steering with my knee, and pulling into the dealership at 8:30 with nothing but crumbs.

Then I'd walk inside, sit down at my desk, and light a cigarette.

At 10:30, the horn would beep in the shop. The coffee wagon - we called it the roach coach - had arrived. Everyone at the dealership came running, me included. The roach coach was not really a coffee truck. It was a mobile snack cart selling honey buns, bear claws, fried pastries, candy bars, sodas, chips - the whole inventory of American convenience-store food, rolled up right to your door twice a day. I was not there for the coffee. I was there for the sugar.

I'd grab whatever looked good, walk back into my office, and eat. Then a cigarette. Then another. Then lunch, when the roach coach came around again at 12:30.

After work, most nights, I'd meet up with my friend Jimmy at the local sports bar. We had a standing arrangement with the bartender, Tommy. We'd order a pitcher of beer and two dozen chicken wings. The deal was this: if Tommy could make the wings so hot we couldn't eat them, we'd pay for the beer. If we could eat the wings, he'd pay for the beer. So naturally Tommy made them hot, and naturally we'd drink more beer to cool our mouths, and we'd keep eating and drinking until the wings were gone and a couple of pitchers were empty, and we called it a night and went home.

Home. Where my wife had made dinner. A whole dinner. A real one. Because I was an American man eating the standard American diet, which is to say I ate everything. Meat, bread, pasta, cheese, ice cream, whatever was on the table. And I'd eat a full third meal of the day, sitting in front of the television, and then I'd fall asleep on the couch.

By 10:00 p.m., I was in bed. I slept badly - I had severe sleep apnea, and I'd stop breathing and start again, stop and start, loud enough to keep my wife awake for hours. She would lie there beside me, listening to me gasp, and she was genuinely afraid I wasn't going to wake up.

I never thought about any of that. I would wake up at 7:30, shower, dress, and drive to Dunkin' Donuts.

That is the part people misunderstand about how a body ends up at 310 pounds. It does not happen in one decision. It happens in ten thousand ordinary decisions that feel like nothing. The breakfast. The cigarette. The coffee break. The wings. The dinner. The couch. Repeat for thirty years.

And here is the strangest part of it, the part I still have a hard time explaining, I was having a great time. Or at least, I believed I was. I had a good job, made good money, had friends, and went out for a few laughs a few nights a week. I was in my forties. That was the life I lived. I thought I was in control. I thought I was the guy at the head of the table - the one people turned to when there was a problem to solve. And in a lot of ways, I was. People have always handed me the pencil. I was the chief, not one of the Indians, as my dad used to say.

What I didn't know, and wouldn't have heard you say even if you had told me, was that the chief was dying.

The Pen on the Floor

I want to tell you about a moment. It is small. It is silly. It didn't make me change my life. And yet, of all the things that happened to me in those years, this is one that will never leave me. If you want to understand what it actually

felt like to live inside a 310-pound body, skip everything else I say and just read this.

I had taken a job selling granite and marble countertops. Home improvement. It was a smaller showroom, a nicer environment than the car dealership. The owner's wife, Denise, was the boss. I ran the sales floor. My desk was up at the front of the showroom, by the door, and Denise's office was about ten feet behind me and to the right, in another room.

Denise had a superpower. She had ears like a bat. I swear to you, she could hear a pin drop from three rooms over. I don't know how, but she could.

One afternoon, I was walking across the showroom from my desk toward the front door, and I dropped my pen on the floor. It made one of those distinct, crisp clicks - the sound of a pen hitting a hard tile floor in a big, quiet room. You know the sound. You've probably heard it many times yourself. You barely register it.

I registered it. I stopped walking. I looked down at the pen on the floor, maybe six or seven feet away from the nearest wall, and I did the math in my head that I was doing too often in those years without anyone knowing: How am I going to get that pen back? You see, bending down to pick something up from the floor when you weigh that much

and have a waistline that large isn't an option.

Here is what getting that pen back looked like for me. I could not bend over. I couldn't. My waist was fifty inches around, and there is no version of picking something up off the floor that involves a fifty-inch waist bending toward its own toes. So, I had to walk over to where the pen was. I had to lower myself down onto all fours - onto my hands and knees. This meant I needed a chair, a wall, or something to hold and help lower myself to my knees. Once I was on the floor, I could grab the pen. But then I had to get back up. And getting back up again required a wall, a doorframe, a chair, or a desk edge. Something solid, something I could press one hand against and haul myself up with. So, my process was: crawl to the pen, grab the pen, then crawl another five or six feet to a wall, brace, push off, stand up.

That was my plan. I had executed this plan many times. I wasn't proud of it. But it was the plan.

So, I started walking toward the pen.

And then I heard it. Click. Click-click-click. Click-click.

Denise. Coming across the tile floor, in her little heels, at full speed. She sounded, and I am not exaggerating here, exactly like the Wicked Witch of the West in The Wizard

of Oz when she comes clicking down the hall.

Click-click-click-click. Getting closer. Getting louder.

She came flying past me, practically pushed me out of the way, bent over - and I am going to say that again, because the whole point of the story is this: she bent over - and she scooped up my pen like it was nothing, like it was the most ordinary thing in the world to do, which of course for most people in the world it is. She straightened up, turned, held it out to me, and said, "Here you go."

I said, "Thanks, Denise."

She clicked back across the floor into her office.

And I stood there, five-foot-five and 310 pounds, holding my own pen that another person had just picked up for me, and I felt something I had not let myself feel in a very long time.

Shame.

Not embarrassment. Not frustration. Shame. Bone-deep, quiet, burning shame. Because Denise was my boss, she wasn't my wife. She wasn't my daughter. She wasn't my girlfriend. Those people doing this for me, fine. I'd be okay if those people picked something up for me, and I wouldn't have thought twice. But Denise? The woman who signed my paychecks? The professional woman who had to see me

at my desk every single day? That woman knew, without me ever saying it, that I could not bend over to pick up a pen. That she had to come running to spare me the humiliation of trying.

And she had known it long enough to have a system for it.

Because after that day, she never stopped. Any time I was near her and something hit the floor - a pen, a piece of paper, a brochure, a business card, a dropped folder, anything - the moment she heard something hit the floor, there was Denise. Click-click-click-click. Out of the heavens. Sweeping it up, handing it to me, smiling, and moving on.

It happened maybe five or six times over a year. Each time, it was the same. Each time, she acted like it was nothing. Each time, I thanked her, walked away, and thought, "Oh, crap." I have to do something about this.

And then I didn't do anything.

The body keeps a record long before the mind is ready to read it. You'll know something is wrong for years before you admit you know. That gap, between knowing and admitting, is where the damage accumulates.

The Adjustments

Shoes. Let me tell you about shoes.

I wore Velcro-fastening sneakers. Not because I preferred Velcro to laces. Not because of some eighties fashion nostalgia. I wore Velcro-fastened sneakers because I could not tie my laces. Literally could not.

Here is what tying a shoe required when I was 310 pounds. I would stand on my left foot. I would put my right foot up on the edge of a chair or a stool. I would try to bend forward to reach my shoelaces. My stomach was so large that there was no angle at which my body could fold. I couldn't get my hands anywhere near the laces. So I would swing my leg out to the side, pushing my knee as far to the right as I could, trying to open a channel between my belly and my thigh, so that I could snake my right arm down toward my foot. Then I'd try to reach my left hand around my stomach - which, remember, is a fifty-inch circumference of flesh - and meet up with my right hand somewhere in the general vicinity of my shoelaces.

I almost dislocated my hip trying this.

I tried it more than once before I accepted what it was telling me.

So, one day I made a conscious, deliberate decision. I went

to the store and looked for shoes. I said to myself, I need shoes I can put on without bending over. And I found Velcro closures. I set them up like slip-ons - opened the straps wide enough, left them permanently at a size that would accept my foot - and from that day forward, I slid my feet in like I was wearing slippers, and I never bent down to a lace again.

That was the wrong decision. I knew it was the wrong decision when I was making it. I was not solving the problem. I was solving around the problem. And when I talk to people now about their own version of this, I tell them:

Every time you engineer a solution that lets you live comfortably with the thing that's killing you, you have made the problem bigger, not smaller. Velcro shoes are not a solution. Velcro shoes are a confession.

I had a closet full of confessions.

I could not clip my own toenails. My wife clipped them. I could not see my own feet. When I went to the bathroom, I could not see down my body past my belly. I had to learn, and I am not being funny here, how to aim by instinct. Sometimes I missed. I would hit one of my shoes. This is what 310 pounds does to the dignity of an adult man. It strips it, piece by piece, in ways nobody ever talks about.

And then there was what they call a pannus - the medical word for it - the apron belly. It is exactly what it sounds like. A flap of skin and fat that hangs down from your abdomen like an apron, starting somewhere around your belly button. If you don't keep the underside clean - the place where it folds over your abdomen, skin against skin - it accumulates moisture. The skin chafes. It can grow mold. It can crack and bleed. You are constantly negotiating with it - tucking it, powdering it, making sure your belt doesn't cinch it into a second waistline below the first. I had been carrying that flap, in one form or another, since I was a teenager. By the time I was in my thirties, it was an actual, living, second layer of me that I had to maintain.

In the summer, things got worse. New England summers are humid - ninety-plus degrees, ninety-plus percent humidity. If I took three steps in any direction, I was drenched. Sweat through the shirt. Sweat down my back, between my shoulder blades. Sweat running down my chest. Sweat pooling under what I'll go ahead and call them what they were: man-breasts. I had breast tissue I did not want. It showed through shirts. It bounced when I walked.

Today, looking back, I believe my favorite color during those years was invisible. I didn't want to be noticed, so I wore black. Always black. Black was the color of hiding. Black made me less noticeable, more invisible. Black hides

sweat marks; black hides bulges; black makes the outline of you less legible in a room. I wore black suits, sweatshirts, T-shirts, jeans, and shoes. I wore slip-on loafers for dress shoes. No laces. And I never, ever, in any weather, took my suit jacket off. It could be a hundred and five degrees, and I would keep the jacket on, because if I took it off, you would see the full topography of what I was. The sweat. The chest. The stomach. The whole situation.

There are not very many photographs of me from those heaviest days. I would hide behind other people. I would prefer to avoid cameras altogether. I was always the guy taking the picture, never in it. The photo of me on the boat that opens this chapter exists by accident - and now I am grateful, in a way I was not at the time, that it exists at all. Without it, I am not sure I would have ever started looking.

I don't think about any of this every day now. But I remember it. I remember exactly what it cost me - not in calories or pounds, but in presence. In the amount of my own life, I was willing to show up for.

Obesity is not just a physical condition. It is an accumulating strategy of avoidance. You stop going to the beach. You stop singing karaoke. You stop doing the roller coaster with your kid because the safety bar won't come down across your belly. You stop sitting in restaurant

booths because you don't fit. And every avoidance feels like a tiny, private, harmless adjustment - until one day you look up and realize you have quietly edited yourself out of your own life.

The Hill at Gloucester

If the pen on the floor was a private humiliation, Gloucester was where I thought I was going to die.

For years, my wife and I went to a jazz and blues festival up in Gloucester, Massachusetts, every August. It was around her birthday, so we made a weekend out of it. The festival is set up in a field near the water. You park up at the top of a hill in a big lot on elevated ground, and then you walk down to the stage with your folding chairs, your cooler, and your whole day of supplies. It is about a third of a mile. Maybe a little more. Downhill the whole way in.

The walk-in was easy. The cooler was full and heavy, but it was all downhill, and I was going toward a day of food, music, sun, and beer. Motivation helps.

The walkout was a different story.

By the time the last act finished, I had been in the sun for six or seven hours. I was carrying my folding chair and my

wife's. I had the empty cooler. Everyone else in the group - my wife, our friends Nancy and Smitty - was moving at a normal pace. A healthy-person pace. Up the hill. Toward the cars.

I made it maybe a hundred yards before I realized I was not going to make the hill.

My chest felt as if a hand were inside it, squeezing my heart. My breathing had gone from deep to shallow to strangled. I could feel my heartbeat in my temples, in my teeth. Sweat was coming off me in a way that was not normal sweating, not even for a 310-pound man in August. It was an evacuation - my body fluids and the beer from earlier in the day all coming out at once. My body was trying to get rid of something.

I stopped. I put the chairs down. I leaned on them, bent forward as best I could, and tried to breathe. My friends had already walked on ahead. They had no idea anything was wrong. They were talking about the music.

I stood there for a long time. Long enough that when I started again, I made it maybe another thirty or forty yards before I had to stop a second time. This time, I put the cooler down too. I remember the colors of things getting strange around the edges - too bright, too sharp, like somebody had adjusted the saturation on the world. I

remember thinking, very clearly and very calmly, This might be it. This might be the moment.

I was not being dramatic. I genuinely believed, standing on that hill, that my heart was about to stop or burst. And more than anything else, what I remember from that moment, more than the fear, was the embarrassment. Because even in the middle of it, even when my body was clearly telling me something was deeply wrong, my first instinct was: Don't let anyone see you like this. Don't let Nancy and Smitty come back and find you sitting on a cooler.

I caught my breath. I picked up my chairs. I made it to the car. I did not tell anyone what had happened.

I got in the car. We drove home. We had dinner.

I did not go to the doctor. I did not call my wife in from the kitchen to say, "Honey, something happened today." I did not, in any way, name what I had just been through.

Your body is the most honest thing about you. It will tell you the truth long before your mouth will. Every time you ignore it, you are training yourself to ignore it harder the next time - until one day it will tell you the truth in a way you cannot ignore, and by then you may not have a choice about what comes next.

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

This free preview covers the first 18 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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