

Twice the Life

One hundred and seventy-one pounds later, what is actually different.

For ten chapters, this has been a book about what I did - what I ate, how I moved, how I slept, what I logged, how I thought. This chapter is about everybody else. Because here is a truth nobody tells you when you set out to change your body: no one changes in isolation. A transformation like this does not stay inside your skin. It ripples outward, through your marriage, your children, your job, your friendships, and out into rooms full of strangers - and then, in ways I never saw coming, it ripples back in and changes what the whole thing meant.

So, this is the chapter about the people. The one who saved me. The ones who cheered. The ones who drifted. The ones I could not reach, no matter how hard I tried. And the man in the old photographs - because he is a person in this story too, and I owe you an honest accounting of what became of him.

The title of this chapter is a simple arithmetic problem. I once weighed three hundred and ten pounds; I now weigh a little over a hundred and forty. I am, very nearly to the

pound, half the size I used to be. But that is not the number that matters. The number that matters is the other one - the one you cannot put on a scale. Because what I got back is not half of anything. What I got back, in every direction I look - at my wife, my kids, my grandkids, my work, my friends, my future - is at least twice the life I had. Maybe more. Let me show you where it all came from.

Debbie: The Innermost Ring

Every ripple starts at a center, and mine is Debbie. I want to tell you what she was carrying in the years when I weighed three hundred and ten pounds, because almost nobody ever saw it, including - to my shame - me.

Debbie is an empath. It is not a figure of speech; it is her nature, and it is even her profession - she has been a massage therapist for fifteen years, and those people - those who work with people the way she does - literally feel what their clients feel, not physically but emotionally. She will put anyone and everyone ahead of her own needs, every time. And in those days, the biggest and neediest person in the house was a three-hundred-pound "feed me" machine with a big personality and a variable schedule. My workdays ran ten hours, sometimes sixteen; a customer walking in five minutes before close could keep me until midnight. And whenever I came through that door -

eight-thirty, eleven-fifty, whenever - dinner had to be ready to go and be on the table, because that is how we had both been raised, and because I was a demanding S.O.B. who just wanted what he wanted. She knew one serving of anything would never be enough. Hamburger Helper came in four servings to the box; she would plate me most of the box and set the rest in a little bowl beside my plate - to save me the walk when I wanted to go for more. She kept my worn-out work clothes alive, the trousers I rubbed through from the inside, the white shirts straining down the front. She took care of me like nobody's business. I never asked for most of it. I never appreciated any of it. I just wanted more. And she never once said, Joe, you are a self-centered S.O.B., and I cannot take it anymore - which she would have been entitled to say every single day.

And here is the part that gets me, all these years later: she was quietly protecting me the whole time. Debbie read the labels on my food because she knew I never would. And if something was really bad, she just fixed it without telling me. For the last seven or eight years of my old life, the "hamburger" in my beloved Hamburger Helper was ground turkey. She swapped it, said nothing, and let the seasoning carry the lie, because it was healthier and because she loved me. I had no idea. For years. That is who was living with me while I was busy feeding myself to death.

Then there is the fact that this entire book exists because of her. When I was stuck at two hundred and ten pounds, banging my head against a plateau I could not move for months, it was Debbie who walked in the door holding the twenty-five-dollar photocopied program from her boot camp - the Little Black Dress plan - that flipped me to plant-based eating, broke the plateau, and kicked off everything I now know about food. She brought it home. I would never have found it. It would never have existed for me. I would not be here if it was not for her. She deserves all the credit, Full stop.

Now, I promised you honesty in this book, so here is the honest part: my transformation was not free for our marriage. It came with a bill, and the bill had two lines. The first was envy of the very humankind. As I thinned down while she was still fighting her own fight, it aggravated her - she told me, more than once, you aggravate me because you lose weight so easily - and on the day of her Little Black Dress finale, I wore a T-shirt that said, "Please don't hate me because I lose weight like a man." We laughed. It was also not entirely a joke for her. Just recently, she pulled one of my new work shirts out of the laundry basket, held it up, looked at me, and said, it aggravated me that your shirt is smaller than mine. I stood there like a man holding a live grenade. What I finally said is what I believe: don't

compare yourself to me. Your time is your time; my time is my time. Compare yourself to nobody but yourself. Nobody else matters.

The second line on the bill was worse, and it was entirely my doing. Because I was losing faster than she was, my brain decided I was the expert in the house. I'd say things like, "You're not losing weight because you are not doing what I tell you to." I did the unsolicited coaching, the corrections, the little lectures - for probably a year or two. Let me save every married reader some pain: do not ever tell your wife you know better than she does. You are a dead man right where you stand. What ended it was a night I was on the floor with a foam roller, lecturing her about a spinal condition - mispronouncing it, no less - when she finally said, "It's called kyphosis. I straighten them out with people all the time. Can you stop telling me my business?" She was right. Her certification is practically a mini-medical degree; she knows more about the body than I ever will. I stopped that night, for good. Some time later, she told me that a particular trainer at the gym uses almost nothing but compound exercises in her training sessions, and it bothers her that there are almost no unilateral, single-muscle moves. She just doesn't like the workout style of this trainer. The little guy inside me knows combination moves are better - and I keep my mouth shut,

because she is a big girl, it is her choice, and being right is worth exactly nothing next to being married to Debbie. What we have now are two people who talk about this stuff as equals, each on our own level, with new boundaries - and it is one of the changes I am happiest about in this entire story.

Your transformation happens to the person who loves you, not just in front of them. So, retire from the job of being the expert in your own house - nobody hired you. Give advice only when asked for, love them at whatever pace they are moving, and say compliments out loud. Being right is worth nothing next to being married.

I will tell you one more Debbie story, because it says everything about what she is to this journey. She is the only human being alive who has seen every crack in my armor. I talk about a good game in this book - I will make you believe I never waver. That is crap. Of course I waver; I am human. One night not long ago, well past six-thirty, well past my eating window closing for the day, a craving got into my head and bored a hole in it. I got up off the couch, walked to the freezer, came back with the open package of my little raspberry bites - seven, eight of them left - and woofed the whole thing down in about two bites while she sat there and watched me. She did not say a word. She just looked at me, and then she smiled, and that was the end of

it. The next morning, I logged every one of them, got back on the pony, and moved on. Nobody else on this earth ever sees that. I don't cheat often; I don't cheat in public; I don't crack in front of my kids. Debbie sees every slip I have ever had-and she has never once used a single one of them against me. If you ask me about my cheating moments in a court of law, I will deny everything. But it happened, and she knows, and that is what the innermost ring is for.

The Family Ring

Move one ring outward, and you find my family - and the first thing to say about them is strange and wonderful at the same time: almost none of them have ever known me small. I married Debbie at twenty-one, weighing a hundred and thirty-five pounds, a slender, muscular kid with red hair. Then the children came, and the weight came, and it never left. So, my daughter Keri grew up with a big father and then watched him disappear by half, and the only thing she has ever really said about it has stayed with me ever since: we never knew this you. She had one reference - the wedding photos, a younger, prettier, red-haired stranger - and then me. My grandchildren flip through the old family albums, land on a picture of the big man on the boat, and ask, "Who's that?" That's Papa. No! Yep. That's me. None of them has any clue. My younger brother Michael - the only brother I have left - last saw me at this size when he

was ten or eleven years old. The next time I see him, I will be taking him all the way back to his childhood. I am genuinely excited for that.

Then there was my aunt Barbara. This was at my younger brother Bill's memorial service, which was held on April 14th, 2018. I was in a room with a hundred other people who had not seen me since I was a big man, and all of them were telling me how fantastic I looked, except one. Barbara was my mother's sister and my favorite aunt, I grew up just calling her "auntie" and she had been married to my uncle Okie - my favorite uncle, my surrogate dad, a man exactly my height who carried over three hundred pounds, the happiest and kindest man you ever met - and she had watched cancer take him from three hundred pounds down to less than a hundred and fifty before it took him entirely. Barbara sat down next to me, looked at me, and said, "You look so gaunt." Out of a hundred compliments, hers is the only face I can still pull out of that crowd. Because she was right. I was deep in my skinny-fat years then, thin and hollow and quietly unwell; I appeared as frail and fragile, and she had seen that silhouette before on a man she loved. She was the one I should have listened to. It took me years and a DEXA scan to learn what my aunt saw across a room in five seconds.

I carry a family tree that reads like a warning label, and I

want to include it in this chapter because it is the soil from which this whole transformation grew. My grandfather - a slender, fit man - died at fifty-five, which is exactly the age I was when I finally looked at a photograph of myself and was terrified into action. My father had bypass surgery and then went right on eating salt, sugar, and fat three times a week and saying things to us like - I'm an old man, I'm going to eat what I want, it's all I have left - until it killed him at eighty-one, years earlier than it should have. My uncle Jack's heart quit on a diet of processed food. My cousin Susan's husband of twenty-six years, Scott - a bigger eater than even I was, and I was a monster - seized up suddenly and unexpectedly one night at a younger age than fifty-five with a widow-maker so obvious they barely needed the autopsy; his numbers were off the charts. And my tiny grandmother went out the other door: a stomach stapling in an era before anyone said the words "eating disorder," years of eating like a bird and disappearing after meals, an ulcer, a heart attack. At both ends of the spectrum, the same lesson is written in the same handwriting. In my family, the food did the killing. Nobody talked about it - in those days you whispered that somebody "got the cancer" and passed the potatoes. I am done whispering. This book is me saying it out loud.

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

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