Fall 2000

Dieting For Heaven and Hell

Stan Pollakoff
Mom was going to diet again. With feeling. With purpose. And, as it turned out, with a nod towards heaven. We sat at the dining room table for supper.

“What goes up and never comes down?” Dad asked.

“Mom’s weight,” Paul answered.

“Not funny,” Mom said.

“What defies the Law of Gravity?” Dad asked. He buttered his fourth dinner roll and swallowed it whole.

“Mom’s weight,” Paul answered.

“You’ll see,” Mom began. “This time I’ll reach my goal.”

Mom was always dieting or she was always thinking about dieting. She had devoured every diet that had been promoted, pushed, and published in the Western world. None had worked. Her weight refused to go below two hundred and twenty-five pounds. It had been like this for most of the fifteen years of her marriage to Dad, which he always reminded her when she was in her dieting mode. We all appreciated Mom’s effort, though. Every time she embarked on a new diet, she armed herself with the tools that were needed to track and regulate her calories, or fat intake, or protein consumption, or carbohydrate ingestion. She’d buy recipe books, scales, measuring cups, and cooking utensils. And she would take hours in the supermarket spending hundreds of dollars on juices, fruits, vegetables, spring water, and low-fat foods. She would always start her diet on Monday, which meant, on the Sunday before, she would indulge herself on her favorite foods. None, naturally, were low in calories.

“Yes, dear,” Dad said. “We know you’re going to try—you always do—but it never seems to work out for you, does it? But that doesn’t mean we don’t like you.” Dad, now beginning on dessert, cut an enormous piece of chocolate-chocolate cake and nearly swallowed it whole. “This week you’ll be good. You’ll watch all your meals and all your snacks. You’ll measure out all your portions. And you’ll do this the whole week. Then you’ll go to your weight-loss group, on Sunday, and get officially
weighed. You’ll probably lose five pounds. Maybe ten pounds. Then you’ll hit the wall next week. And you’ll get into that dis­
couraging, debilitating cycle of yours. Up a pound. Down a pound. Even. Up two pounds. Down a quarter. You’ll try harder. You’ll re-focus. Then you’ll go back the following Sun­
day to get weighed and you’ll be up five pounds.” Dad scooped two huge helpings of ice cream— cookies-n-cream— and then passed it around the table. “Before you know it, you’ll be off the diet for good.”

Mom stood up. Her puffed-out face was red; her double­
neck jiggled like gelatin. She pointed her finger at Dad, then at Paul, then at me. “You’re all wrong! I’m going to do it this time! I’m not stopping until I’m at my goal.”

“That’s heroic of you, dear,” Dad said. “Did I tell you I lost another two pounds?” Grabbing the belt loops on his jeans, he pulled them out to show Mom how loose his pants were. “Isn’t it something, dear? I’m not even trying to lose weight, and I do.” He licked his fingers tipped with chocolate icing.

“That’s wonderful,” Mom said.

“Aren’t you happy for Dad?” Paul asked.

Mom tucked in her shirt, which had popped out of her pants. “Honestly? No. I think it stinks, and it’s totally unfair.”

“You’ll just have to stick with the diet this time.” Dad said. “I don’t see what’s so hard about doing that.”

“I hate you skinny people who can eat anything and not gain weight.”

“Fast metabolism.”

“No kidding. And I got fat metabolism!”

“In Heaven it won’t matter, dear.”

Mom stared at Dad. The sweat, which was like huge rain drops, rolled down her face and along her neck. Her breathing was difficult, as if she had just finished running a mile. She pointed her stubby pinkie at Dad. “You’re totally wrong.”

“About?” Dad asked. He cut himself a second piece of cake, picked it up with his bony fingers, and took a huge bite. The chocolate icing created a mustache. He licked it off.

“In Heaven it will matter if I’m fat or skinny!”

“What?”

Mom took out a thin paperback book from her pocket and
waved it like she was a preacher with a bible. “See this? *Fat People Go to Hell.*”

“Where did you get that?”

“At a garage sale.” She turned over the book and tapped the back cover with her finger. “This extraordinary book is based on erudite interpretations of the Kabbalah, which if you don’t know has been around for thousands of years. And the book proves, in chapter after chapter, that fat people don’t make it to Heaven.”

“Because there isn’t enough room for fat people?” Paul asked.

“Let me have that!” Dad tried to snatch the book from Mom, but Mom pushed his arm away. “I’ll take it to Rabbi Levine. Let him read it and get his opinion on—”

“No, you won’t. This book says it all. Ever see a fat angel? Huh? Ever see a fat soul tiptoeing through the clouds? No, you haven’t! Ever see God depicted with a fat body? No, you haven’t! And you won’t! Ever see a movie about Heaven with fat people in it? Huh? Tell me! You know you haven’t! Just admit it! Okay? Fat people just don’t go to heaven!”

“You can’t be serious!” Dad said.

“I’m dead serious! Fat people go to Hell and spend eternity chewing on the bones and flesh—”

“What? Of the dead?”

“Who knows what! Who cares! But it’s not going to be me!”

“Suck it up, Mom!” Paul said. “Mom’s gonna lose weight and go to Heaven!”

“This is all nonsense!” Dad said. Dad picked up the cake server, covered with chocolate icing, and licked it.

“Do you think I’m going to take a chance and blow my afterlife on being fat! No way, Jose!”

“Give me that book!” Dad said.

“Fat chance,” Mom said, and she waddled out of the kitchen.

Mom spent the week obsessed with her diet. Nothing deterred her from maintaining her intake of healthy, low-fat, low-calorie foods. In her weekly planner, she wrote down everything she ate. She brown-bagged her lunch to her part time job at the pet store. At a neighborhood barbecue she refused the succulent hamburgers, potato salad, soda, and beer. Instead, she ate low-fat yogurt, watermelon, and drank a gallon of spring water.
She left motivational notes (LIVE THIN, DIE THIN) around the house—on the refrigerator, on the kitchen cabinets, on the bathroom walls. By the time Saturday night came, she was too weak to climb the stairs to go to the master bedroom, so she settled down on the leather couch, in the family room, to sleep for the night. Dad didn’t object. We were proud of her dedication and commitment, even Dad, so he claimed. He congratulated her with a buddy-like slap on her back for maintaining her diet for the week. Dad still was skeptical about the inspirational book that had been the catalyst for Mom’s latest assault on her weight. We went upstairs to bed and left Mom, snoring, on the couch.

Mom slept until ten o’clock the next morning. She skipped breakfast, got dressed, and drove off to her weight-loss group where she was going to be officially weighed. Two hours later, Mom shuffled back into the house. Watching a video, we were seated in the living room. We munched on taco chips. Mom’s expression didn’t reveal the results of the weigh-in.


“Mom’s going to Heaven!” Paul said. “Mom’s going to Heaven!”

Mom plopped down on the love seat; she occupied most of it by herself. “I don’t get it! I’m so discouraged I can’t tell you! I followed the diet religiously. I didn’t cheat all week. I hate my body!”

“So you lost two pounds,” Dad said. “That’s a good start in the right direction.”

“I didn’t lose two pounds.”

“One pound?”

“No.”

“You stayed even?”

“No.”

“Well?”

Mom folded her hands and placed them on her belly. “I’m beyond being discouraged. I don’t know what to do.”

“What happened?”

“I gained three pounds!”

“I can’t say that I’m totally surprised!”
"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, dear." Dad placed the bag of spicy taco chips down on the coffee table.

"I don't know why it's so hard for you to lose weight. I don't have a problem, so honestly it's hard for me to relate to it. But don't give up."

Mom slapped her belly. "I'll never lose the weight, and it's my fault." She tapped her belly with her fingers. "But I have to be honest. Last night, after you guys were asleep, I ate some double-dipped chocolate covered pretzels. I swear it wasn't more than three or four."

"That probably explains it," Dad said.

"Mom's not going to Heaven!" Paul said.

"How could those damn pretzels make such an impact? I don't get it. I ate three or four goddamn pretzels and I gained three pounds!"

"I don't know, dear. I can eat a pound of them and not gain an ounce." Dad stood up, walked over to Mom, and rubbed her belly. "Dear, I think we probably still love you."

"Skinny people don't love fat people."

Dad patted her head. "I think it's a matter of will power."

Mom grabbed the bag of chips and crumpled it up. "See? I'm not giving up! I'm not surrendering my soul to the Fat God. I'll do better this week! I promise! This week I'm taking my first step towards Heaven."

If it was possible, Mom's commitment to her diet was greater than the first week. Not only that, she began to exercise. She bought equipment she saw on the home shopping channel: ab-crunchers, video tapes, free weights, a stationary bicycle, and a machine called The Butt Beater. Mom hated exercising, but her desire to lose weight motivated her. Dad thought she was overdoing it, and he discouraged her from buying exercise clothes. Besides, Dad never exercised, and he didn't have an ounce of fat. So if he was skinny without exercise, what was the point of Mom exercising?

When Sunday came, Mom couldn't wait to get weighed. The night before, she had unofficially weighed herself on our scale, and the scale said she had lost four and a half pounds. So when
Mom rode off to the weigh-in, she was convinced her Herculean efforts had paid off.

Two hours later, Mom returned. We were in the kitchen enjoying a late morning breakfast of buttermilk pancakes, sausage, bacon, and chocolate milk.

“How much?” Dad asked.

“Nothing!” Mom said. “I lost nothing. Not one pound! Not a half of a pound! Not a quarter of a pound! Nothing! Absolutely nothing!”

“That’s impossible,” Dad said. “Our scale said—”

“Our scale is wrong!”

“But I weighed myself this morning, and it’s right for me.”

“Don’t tell me you lost more weight!”

“Just a pound.”

“I hate you,” Mom said.

“Well, I hate you, too.”

Mom didn’t eat anything the rest of the day. She went to bed early and got up on Monday and had a piece of oatmeal bread and an orange. That night, however, Mom had one chocolate chip cookie for dessert, and although she swore that she was still committed to her diet, we had our doubts. Her verve and vigor was gone. Her brown eyes, the color of chocolate syrup, betrayed her.

By the next morning, Mom was eating less of her high-fiber, low-calorie food and more of the high-fat food she usually ate. And that’s how the week progressed. Each day she slipped further away from her diet. Nobody said anything. We could see by her twisted smile and tortured expression that she could no longer maintain her diet. The first two weeks of gaining weight had undermined her commitment, and Dad didn’t try to help her recapture it.

On Saturday morning, Mom got up later than usual. She came down in her baggy sweat pants and XX-large T-shirt. She plopped down on her chair at the table and grabbed a handful of muffins, croissants, and doughnuts that were in a basket in the center of the table.

“Give me a double order of French toast and bacon,” Mom said to Dad, who was standing at the stove, cooking breakfast.

“I’m glad you’re making breakfast.”
“Are you sure, dear?” Dad asked.
“I’m sure,” Mom answered.
“Another diet bites the dust,” Dad said.
“Mom’s fat and that’s that,” Paul said. “Live fat, die fat.”
Mom stuffed her mouth with a blueberry muffin. “Anybody see my book? *Fat People Go To Hell.* I thought it was in the study.”
Dad flipped over the French toast. “I have it.”
“You?”
“It’s kind of interesting.”
“Really?”
“Why are you surprised?”
“I just didn’t think that kind of book would interest you.”
“It does.” Dad turned off the stove and brought the French toast to the table and dumped all the pieces onto the serving platter. Then he sat down at the table. A small piece of cantaloupe was on his plate.
“I can’t believe how much I missed your wonderful French toast!” Mom said. “I don’t care how many calories each piece has.”
“Too many.”
“Who cares,” Mom said. Mom pointed to Dad’s plate. “What kind of breakfast is that?”
“A healthy one.”
“What’s your point?”
“I’m starting a diet.”
Mom took a bite of her French toast. “Actually, I’m starting a new diet, too. Something totally diffe— .”
“Dear, I’m serious. I need to lose a few pounds.”
“You’re not kidding, are you? If you were any skinnier, you’d be declared a skeleton.”
Dad reached into his pants pocket and pulled out *Fat People Go To Hell.* “I’m glad I’m reading this book.”
Mom put her fork down that had a speared piece of French toast. “So you think it’s true?”
Dad scooped out a piece of cantaloupe, nibbled on it, and said, “I do.”
“You really think fat people don’t make it to Heaven?”
“Yes.”
“And skinny people do?”
“Yes.”

“Dad’s going to Heaven!” Paul said. “Dad’s going to Heaven!”

Mom stared at Dad for a moment, then she ate the piece of French toast on her fork. She then took the six pieces of French toast on the platter and dropped them onto her plate. She grabbed the bottle of maple syrup, emptied almost a quarter of the bottle on top of the French toast, and began to eat. She attacked the food—the French toast, the bacon, the muffins, the croissants, the doughnuts. She couldn’t eat the food fast enough. She stuffed piece after piece into her mouth. Finally, she picked up the gallon of whole milk that was on the table and chugalugged nearly half of it. At then end, she belched.

We watched in amazement. When Mom was finished, Dad pointed at her and said, “I hope you’re satisfied with yourself.”

“Why shouldn’t I be?”

“You damn well know why!” Dad said. He smacked her arm with Fat People Go to Hell. “Look at you! You’re fat! F-a-t! Not just fat, but obese. Fat! Disgustingly fat! So fat it makes me damn angry!”

Mom calmly swallowed a corn muffin. “And you’re skinny!”

“That’s right!” Dad said. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, honey.”

“That’s right! There’s nothing wrong with being skinny!”

Mom picked up a chocolate frosted doughnut and gulped it down. “Yes, honey.”

“And you know where skinny people end up?”

“Heaven.”

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

Mom picked up a croissant in one hand and a doughnut in the other. “Not in the least.”