

Born Round

A Story of Family,

Food, and a

Ferocious Appetite

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PENGUIN BOOKS



Five

To be a successful bulimic, you need to have a firm handle on the bathrooms in your life: their proximity to where you're eating; the amount of privacy they offer; whether—if they're public bathrooms with more than one stall—you can hear the door swing open and the footfall of a visitor with enough advance notice to stop what you're doing and keep from being found out.

You need to be conscious of time. There's no such thing as bulimia on the fly; a span of at least ten minutes in the bathroom is optimal, because you may need five of them to linger at the sink, splash cold water on your face and let the redness in it die down. You should always carry a toothbrush and toothpaste, integral to eliminating telltale signs of your transgression and to rejoining polite society without any offense to it. Bulimia is a logistical and tactical challenge as much as anything else. It demands planning.

My preferred bathroom was in a back corner of the student union at Carolina, right above the office of the campus newspaper, where I was first a movie and music critic, then the assistant arts editor, and then—toward the end of freshman year—an editorial writer. It was a public

bathroom with multiple stalls, but the stalls were a decent distance from the door, and the door opened noisily. Few people used this bathroom, anyway. I could walk to it in about three minutes from the university cafeteria, so neither lunch nor dinner had to sit in my stomach for long. I could get there even faster from the newspaper offices, where I spent many hours a day, and where I'd sometimes eat a slice of pizza or a half tuna salad sandwich too many. With a quick jaunt up the stairs, these excesses could be erased.

I thought that I was clever—that I was doing something lots of other people would if they just had the nerve, the poise, the industry. I knew it was supposed to be dangerous: I'd read stories in newspapers and magazines about this behavior, always characterized as a disorder, an affliction. It was these stories that had given me the idea. From them I concluded that people who threw up their meals tended to get carried away with what was an otherwise solid, tenable plan, especially if they fell prey to anorexia as well, and I was an unlikely candidate for that. Even a fast of merely three days had foiled me. But if a person just threw up the occasional meal, the meal that had gotten out of hand, well, what was the harm in that?

And consider the benefits. My willpower could waver, I could gobble down more than I had meant to, and I wouldn't have to go to bed haunted by the looming toll on my waistline, or wake up the next morning owing the gods of weight management even more of a sacrifice than I had owed them the day before. Throwing up was my safety valve. My mulligan.

It usually happened like this: I'd go to the cafeteria, begin to assemble my dinner. I'd get a salad, or something similarly virtuous. I'd pick at it slowly, hoisting the picayune cherry tomatoes and wan slices of cucumber into my mouth one at a time, in slow motion, and then chewing and chewing and chewing, as if there were some odometer rigged to my jaw and I could stave off hunger by pushing the numbers on it high enough. There'd be a few jagged cubes of feta in the salad, each one an event

I would pause and savor for half a minute. They and the croutons, all four of them, were islands of excitement in a dead sea.

Upon finishing the salad, I wouldn't be anywhere close to satisfied. I wouldn't be in the same hemisphere as satisfied. And the sound of that dissatisfaction, like a drumbeat in the center of my brain, would grow louder and louder.

Pum-pum. I could have had a burger. I had seen the cafeteria workers cooking burgers on a griddle. There were burgers to be ordered. I could have had one.

Pum-PUM. Macaroni and cheese. There'd been macaroni and cheese. It looked sort of congealed and stiff at the edges. I love it when it's sort of congealed and stiff at the edges.

PUM-PUM. Remember the smell of the hot oil that still clung to the fried chicken on the food line? And the way the chicken seemed to have a palpable crispness? And yet . . . and yet . . . the breading didn't look all that thick. Could one piece, a breast, hurt so much? Hadn't Mom always said that white meat was less caloric than dark?

I'd go back to the food line. I'd get a fried chicken breast. I'd eat it, and then I'd worry—no, I'd conclude—that I'd miscalculated. That I'd eaten too much, and would have to get rid of some of what I'd eaten. This decision made, I'd get an ice cream sandwich. And a cookie. Two cookies, actually. If I was going to empty my stomach—if I was going to go through all of that messy, beetfaced trouble—I might as well make the most of the buildup, might as well acknowledge and address all my cravings and satisfy them. That way, I'd be less tempted the next day. I'd be less likely to need to throw up.

Off to the second-floor bathroom in the back corner of the student union I'd go. I'd walk in, listen for the sounds of anyone else, bend down and glance under the stalls to check for feet, making sure the coast was clear. I'd stop briefly at the sink, turn on the water and moisten the index and middle fingers on my right hand, so that they'd slide more

easily down my throat. Two fingers were better than one. They brought the gagging on faster.

I'd enter one of the stalls and kneel down. I knew just how far down my throat to push the two fingers, just where and how long to tickle it. Once the food started coming up, I could pretty much will my throat to stay open and the food not to stop. Heaves built on themselves, one setting off another.

Sometimes I'd have to probe and tickle my throat a second time, sometimes not. I could tell when I'd purged enough, because I could taste the flavors of what I'd eaten in reverse. I could gauge whether anything was still left in my stomach.

Although I never persuaded myself that what I was doing was normal or meaningless, I was consoled by the fact that I seldom did it more than once every other day, and never twice on the same day. In a strange way I was consoled as well by my speed and efficiency when I did do it, by how undistruptive it was. It was a like a special talent, a nifty trick. I wondered: What other tricks might I try?

I'd read that bulimics sometimes took laxatives as well, and from those stories I'd wrung another unintended moral: managed correctly, this practice, too, could be useful. It could be smart—if deployed only in special circumstances, in emergencies.

An emergency came along. A big party was three days away, and the diet I'd vowed to start four days earlier hadn't quite come together. So I bought bars of chocolate-flavored Ex-Lax and took twice the recommended dosage. I knew that it would eliminate only waste—food already digested—but that meant there'd be less mass in my body. Wouldn't that make me look thinner? Or at least *feel* thinner?

It did, so I kept the Ex-Lax around for the next emergency, and then bought some more Ex-Lax for the emergency after that.

For this reason, too, it paid to know where the good bathrooms on campus were.

Before I'd arrived at Carolina, I'd vowed to stop doing one thing and start doing another. These twinned resolutions had a shared effect. My worry about my weight actually intensified.

What I was stopping was swimming. I just couldn't stare anymore through foggy goggles at that thick black line on the bottom of the pool. And while I promised myself that I'd find some replacement exercise, I wasn't sure what it would be, or how devoted to it I'd become. It certainly wouldn't absorb as many hours a week—and burn as many calories a week—as swimming had, so I'd have to eat much less.

Especially because of what I was determined to start: dating. In prep school I'd told myself that once I got to college, I'd be candid about what I felt—about who I *was*—and keep an eye out for other young gay men. I was sure I'd find at least a few at a school as big as Carolina. And I assumed that the chances of a romance with one of them boiled down to how heavy I was. It was Häagen-Dazs or love. I couldn't have both.

But in the first weeks at school, Häagen-Dazs wasn't easy to avoid. There was a Häagen-Dazs parlor on Franklin Street, the commercial stretch that ran along one edge of the university, and Häagen-Dazs pints were sold in freezer cases scattered around campus. Pizza was even harder to get away from: one or another student in my dorm got a delivery from Pizza Hut or Domino's seemingly every ten minutes after noon. On top of that there were fried-chicken biscuits, beer, egg and cheese biscuits, beer, pulled-pork sandwiches, beer, ramen noodles with jar tomato sauce, and beer. The freshman *fifteen*? By the end of two weeks of freshman orientation, I was on a pace to accomplish a freshman twenty-five, partly because the baseline of my post-Outward Bound weight was such an unusually slender one for me, but mostly because I was unsettled and anxious and seldom more than an arm's length from something tasty and filling enough to calm me down.

I signed up for a physical education class, a twice-weekly regimen of calisthenics that had the additional benefit of fulfilling some requirement. At the first meeting of the class, the teacher talked about something called a body fat index, then produced a contraption with pinchers to grab and measure any folds of fat around our waists. We had to roll up our T-shirts so the measurement could be made. I registered a higher body fat index than half of the other students. And dropped the class later that same day.

Then I became a vegetarian, figuring I wouldn't have to be vigilant about how much I ate if I limited the categories of food I allowed myself. When friends got hamburgers, I got grilled cheese. I ate plain pizza instead of pepperoni. Okay, so I sometimes ate five or six slices, but wasn't the food I was giving my body supposed to be easier to digest than meat, and wouldn't my body respond by digesting and getting rid of it more easily? I believed that for about four weeks, after which point it became clear that my particular approach to vegetarianism wasn't making me thin. The size 33 pants that were loose on me just after *Outward Bound* had worked their way to the far back of my dorm-room closet.

One night about midway through the fall semester, I sat alone in my room—my roommate was away somewhere—and reeled from a night of too many and too much of *everything*: plastic cups of beer from a keg at some outdoor mixer for Morehead scholars; pizza with a few of them on Franklin Street; ice cream (three scoops) from the Häagen-Dazs parlor where I'd gone by myself, on an eating roll that I didn't want to interrupt. I was angry at myself. I felt slightly queasy, the booze and the ice cream waging a little war with each other in my stomach. I worried that I'd throw up.

And then, a split second later, without any conscious transition, I hoped I'd throw up. It hit me: if I threw up, the evening's eating would be expunged.

I was already on the precipice of getting sick. With a little effort, could I get myself over the edge?

Yes, yes, I could.

By the time the semester was over and I headed home for the holidays, I was terrific at it.

Do you want lasagna?" Mom asked me on my first day back in Avon. "I don't really care," I told her.

"I bet Mark will want lasagna," she said. "Mark always wants lasagna." In fact Mom had begun making lasagna for the entire Amherst College swimming team. Anytime the team had a competition anywhere near Avon, she insisted that Mark, his teammates and his coaches stop by for dinner on the way back to school. She made lasagna for forty to fifty. By carefully mapping out the process and doing much of the preparation in advance, she was able to watch all but the last thirty minutes of the competition, race home ahead of the swimmers and have the lasagna ready for them within forty-five minutes of the team's bus pulling into our driveway. It was an impressive feat, and she knew it. She reveled in it.

"Lasagna's fine," I said.

"I'll make enough for leftovers," Mom said, "since you and Mark will be home for a while. What do *you* want? Do you want chicken divan? You must want chicken divan."

Mom had this ridiculous recipe for chicken divan—involving not just sherry and sour cream but also cans of Campbell's cream of mushroom soup and buttered Ritz cracker crumbs—that had an effect on me not unlike that of violin music on the Frankenstein monster. Whenever she made chicken divan, the rest of the family ate about half the pan. Over the course of dinner and then a snack two hours later and then another snack two hours after that, I took care of the rest. Chicken divan didn't have a shelf life in our house. I saw to that.

Since Mark and I were now in college and couldn't avail ourselves



*Me, my parents and my siblings during my college years.
I'm suddenly and magically the thin one.*

regularly of her food, Mom treated our holiday visits as Make-A-Wish Foundation moments, only all the wishes involved eating. She cooked anything and everything she assumed we wanted: lasagna, chicken divan, club sandwiches, chicken livers wrapped in bacon, scallops wrapped in bacon, and her newest experiment in bacon wrapping, *hot dogs* wrapped in bacon, which were arguably as close as she could come to wrapping bacon in bacon without being flagrantly redundant. Before she would wrap the hot dogs in bacon, she'd use a knife to carve grooves in them and fill the grooves with cheese. Her pig-on-pig action apparently needed a little cow. Something else, too, had joined her repertoire: homemade Egg McMuffins. One of the glories of Mom's approach to cooking was

that she could get just as excited by lowbrow dishes as highbrow ones, bringing as much passion and precision to a faithful, by-the-numbers replica of a fast-food classic as to something torn from the pages of *Julia Child*. Although her beef Wellington was superb, her *coquilles St. Jacques* estimable, and her manicotti so fluffy and light they were fit for angels, she felt no greater vanity about these dishes than about her chicken divan or her bacon-wrapped hot dogs.

Or her Egg McMuffins. She thought it was a kick on weekend mornings to have an electric warming basket—the kind used for dinner rolls—filled with the foil-wrapped egg and Canadian bacon sandwiches associated with on-the-run, on-the-road breakfasts of extreme convenience.

"Aren't mine better?" she'd ask my siblings and me or our friends—she especially liked to make Egg McMuffins if friends had slept over. She'd note that the English muffins on her Egg McMuffins were crisper than those on the ones at McDonald's, and the egg in one of hers was less flat and dried out, as if besting a fast-food chain were a laudable triumph. Sometimes she'd offer to poach the egg to order, so that it had a firm yolk or a soft, runny one: take your pick!

"You don't have to have one of the McMuffins from the warmer," she'd tell an overnight guest—overnight guests always got extra-special culinary treatment—as she gestured to the basket in which the already-made McMuffins sat. "I'll make a fresh one!"

While waiting for an answer, she'd tilt her head back and take a long swig of Diet Rite, from her third can in two hours.

Dad, overhearing the conversation from his desk in the nearby study, would shout: "I ate my McMuffin from the warmer!" He was shading the truth. He hadn't stopped at just one McMuffin.

Mom would pretend not to hear him. "Soft yolk or hard yolk?" she'd ask the guest, sometimes adding, gratuitously: "McDonald's doesn't give you that choice."

After the guest departed, as Mom tidied the kitchen, she'd say, "I bet your friend doesn't get McMuffins like that at home."

Dad, taking a break from his work in the study, would wrap her in a hug and say, "Nobody has a mom like your mom, huh? Nobody."

Then he'd ask her if she'd decided what we were having for dinner. It was already ten a.m., after all. How could he plan the day's eating if he didn't know?

On my winter break from Carolina, I ate whatever Mom made, because this was vacation, and because the bathroom that connected my and Mark's bedrooms was a very safe place. I'd lock the door on his side, so he wouldn't walk in. I'd turn on the stereo in my room and set the volume to a level slightly louder than usual, to conceal any gagging or choking, but not so loud that Mom would show up to complain. I'd heave to the strains of Duran Duran's "Hungry Like the Wolf"—the cheeky choice was deliberate—or Tom Petty's "Don't Do Me Like That."

At Grandma's house on Christmas Eve, she asked me if I missed her all the way down in North Carolina.

"Constantly," I said.

She put another cutlet on my plate.

Aunt Vicki asked me how I liked my roommate.

"He's OK," I said.

She gave me a tin of brownies for the road.

Aunt Carolyn asked me what I was going to major in.

"English, probably," I said.

She wrapped up an assortment of Christmas cookies for me.

Almost a month into the spring semester, by which time I'd almost forgotten about him, Scott called.

I had met him—sort of—just before the Christmas break, at a party in the offices of the *Daily Tar Heel*. He'd come with two of the women on

staff, and all night long we'd thrown looks at each other, but we'd never managed to talk. I'd subsequently learned his name from the women, and he'd apparently learned mine, along with my phone number. Because here he was, on the other end of the line, asking me if I wanted to come over to his apartment for a drink sometime.

I did, and made a point of setting the date a solid week into the future, so I could get ready for it. Every day leading up to it, I went to the track, and each time I ran more than two miles, pushing myself up to three, even three and a half.

I took Ex-Lax. One day I took too much—nearly quadruple the recommended dose—and a few hours later, while walking across campus, had to stop, steady myself against a tree and press every relevant muscle into the service of warding off catastrophe. This was crazy, I told myself. I had gone too far. I had to shape up. From now on, I pledged, never more than three times the recommended dose.

With the date approaching, I didn't just want to be smaller. I had to be smaller, because if I got my wish and got to see and feel another person's body in the way I wanted to, I'd have to let him see and feel mine. I'd be more exposed than I'd been in a Speedo; I'd have no floppy T-shirt or billowing towel to run to. I was as terrified as I was excited.

By date night I didn't feel as thin as I'd hoped to, so I wore a bulky black Windbreaker over my clothes.

"Let me take your coat," Scott said.

"That's OK," I said, insisting that I was cold.

We went into the kitchen to pour ourselves some wine. I kept the coat on.

We sat down on the living room couch to talk, me still in my coat.

We stretched out on the living room carpet and started kissing.

"Aren't you going to take off your coat?" he asked, maybe noticing the sweat along my hairline.

I mumbled something about being cold, though there was clearly

no reason I should be. We were indoors. The heat was on. Scott and his roommate weren't behind on their utility bills.

I willed him to stop asking about the coat. As long as I kept it on, he couldn't get a good sense of my body and possibly discover that I wasn't as trim as he'd hoped I was and as I meant to be.

He fumbled with the coat's zipper. I escaped briefly to the bathroom. He tugged at the coat's arm. I swatted his hand away. After an hour and a half I couldn't stand the heat and the awkwardness anymore. There was no alternative: I left. I figured I'd never hear from him again.

I did. We went back to his apartment and this time the coat came off, partly because I'd been better about eating and exercising in the interim, mostly because I was an eighteen-year-old male and my desire for sex won out over my desire to conceal whatever that calisthenics-class pincher had grabbed hold of and measured.

We dated for a month, after which I dated Joe for two weeks, then Mike for three. And the rapid-fire sequence of Scott and Joe and Mike meant that I ate less. I ran more. And in a pinch I threw up: sometimes every few days, sometimes just once a week. It depended on my excesses, and on how soon my next sleepover with Scott and then Joe and then Mike was. I believed—no, was *certain*—that a pound too many could change everything, and that some crucial junctures demanded a special effort. At those junctures, not throwing up would be nothing less than defeatist.

I often ate dinner with Abigail or with Jared, or with Abigail and Jared, my closest friends during freshman year. Abigail was my stand-in for Beth, another looker adept at weaving an air of melodrama around her. In her case, that skill was being honed for professional use: she planned to major in theater. She spent much of her time at auditions and rehearsals for campus productions. She spent much of the rest of it telling Jared and me about those auditions and rehearsals.

She had delicate moods and a way of making grand pronouncements about them. One night she pleaded for a change in our plans to go to a late-night movie, saying she would rather just drink some wine in one of our dorm rooms and talk.

"I'm just so *emotionally fatigued*," she explained, and the phrase strayed with me for months—for years—because I wasn't sure how emotional fatigue differed from garden-variety exhaustion, or a hangover, except that it was what people as sensitive and soulful as Abigail suffered.

So we talked: about how well her face, which was like a prettier version of Kelly McGillis's, photographed; about how lucky she was to have such long, dark, wavy hair; about how unlucky she was to have hips slightly wider and thighs slightly bigger than those of the scrawny blond graduate student who got an ingénue part that Abigail had gone after.

"I think she's sleeping with the director," Abigail said, parroting the plaint of frustrated actresses since the Stone Age.

Jared was the gay man I wanted to be: quick with a quip, confident in his charms, slight enough to wear plaids and horizontal stripes. I was too intimidated by him to want more than his friendship, but I wanted that desperately. I wanted his insight and inside knowledge: over the fall semester, he had learned and retained a library's worth of information about seemingly every openly and secretly gay student. He'd point to a waiter in a restaurant on Franklin Street and tell me about another waiter in a nearby restaurant who was sleeping with him. He'd point to an effeminate sophomore strolling across the main quad and tell me which black diva he'd dressed up as for the annual drag pageant at the gay bar near campus that I frequented—that *we* frequented, together. Jared had been the one to introduce me to it. Whenever we went, he made a dozen new friends and left with a half dozen promising phone numbers. I was lucky if I screwed up the courage to talk to the bartender.

Our dinners with Abigail happened about twice a week, usually somewhere on Franklin Street, where a meal could be cobbled together

almost as cheaply as in the student cafeteria. Whether we ate Chinese, pub grub or Mexican, Jared picked at his food. Abigail could go either way—eating a lot, eating a little—and always explained why she was veering in one direction or the other. There are unexamined lives and examined lives, and then there are actors' lives, examined in real time, out loud and ad infinitum, provided that there's an audience at hand. Jared and I were an obliging audience.

But it wasn't an obligation. It was a privilege, to be sitting in a booth at Sadlack's, a deli on Franklin Street that served gigantic submarine sandwiches, with Jared and Abigail, each so commanding, each so self-possessed. I felt bigger around them, but in a good way.

"Be right back," I said one night, clambering out of our booth and heading to the bathroom in the back of the restaurant.

I'd eaten too much: a whole tuna submarine, when half would have been more than enough. No way was I going to let all of that linger in my stomach. The bathroom at Sadlack's was for one person only, and it locked, so I had the privacy I needed. I ran water from the sink to camouflage any sound I might make. I got to work immediately. I kept getting speedier and speedier at this.

Within forty-five seconds the sandwich was gone. I flushed the toilet, then went to the sink and scooped some cold water into my mouth to rinse it. I splashed some water on my face. I studied myself in the mirror. I needed to wait a bit longer before returning to the booth. I was still too red.

After a minute, I made a fresh appraisal: pink now. Much better. Almost there.

Thirty seconds later, I was good to go. My eyes were still watery, and faintly bloodshot. But how much of a giveaway, really, was that? Eyes could look the way mine did for any number of reasons. Allergies. Dirty contact lenses. Those were two reasons right off the top of my head.

Jared and Abigail weren't talking when I returned. And they were

looking at each other in a puffed-up, purposeful way. Then they were looking at me.

"So," Jared asked, "did it taste as good coming up as it did going down?"

"What?" I asked, going through his words one at a time, twice over. Could they have a meaning other than the obvious one? Could he be asking about something other than what I'd just done in the bathroom?

I didn't think so, but I didn't cop to anything right away. I feigned confusion.

Jared rolled his eyes.

Abigail threw back her hair, all Rita-Hayworth-in-*Gilda*-like. "Do you really think we don't know what's happening when you disappear into the bathroom the minute you stop eating?" she asked.

"When do I do that?" I asked, trying for a tone of indignation, because that's how the falsely accused were supposed to sound.

"Um, I don't know, maybe *half the time we eat with you*," Jared said.

"So I go to the bathroom!" I said.

"And come back looking like you've been hit by food poisoning," Abigail said. She emphasized and drew out the words "food poisoning." Abigail didn't just speak; she delivered lines.

I slumped. "You know," I said, "it's not such a bad thing."

"Tell that to Karen Carpenter," said Jared. She'd died that February. I'd read some of the articles. I'd actually taken a weird sort of comfort from them, because they included details like her possible use of ipecac to make herself vomit. I'd never even heard of ipecac before. The articles included pictures of her looking cadaverous. I'd need another two Outward Bound courses and a week of protein shakes to close in on bony.

But, truth be told, the articles—or, rather, the accompanying sidebars and television chatter about eating disorders—did spook me a little. They went through the effects this bulimia thing could have on

your skin (bad), hair (worse), gums (eek!) and fingernails (nasty). For me the whole point of throwing up was to look better, and I was having trouble ignoring the prospect of looking worse if I kept at it long enough. A slim worse, true. A worse with—potentially—a thirty-two-inch waist. But worse all the same. That wasn't my intent.

And now Jared and Abigail were telling me I wasn't even succeeding in keeping my throwing up a secret. This was an additional problem. Not necessarily in terms of my relationship with the two of them: I suspected that at some level they found my bulimia interesting, and found me more interesting because of it. It was the kind of neurotic flaw in a person that amused Jared and the kind of personal mini-drama that mirrored Abigail's own tumultuous sense of self.

But if the two of them knew about me, who else did? I apparently didn't have full control over that, and that wasn't okay with me at all. No one was going to admire or want to sleep with a person known to be thin only by dint of regular vomiting. That person was destined instead to be the object of tittering, the butt of jokes.

"It's really pretty gross," Abigail said at one point, and I couldn't quibble. I'd persuaded myself that it was resourceful, but I always knew that it was disgusting. And at this point it was, indisputably, a habit. I hadn't planned on letting that happen.

So that was that: I'd stop. And I did, for the most part. Although there'd occasionally be a pig-out so preposterous that I couldn't let it be or an imminent event so skinniness-demanding that I had to draw on every skinny-making tactic available, I threw up less and less, until I wasn't throwing up at all anymore. I also stopped keeping a store of laxatives around. It was impossible to acknowledge the grossness of the vomiting without acknowledging that this other waste disposal project wasn't so pretty, either.

Six

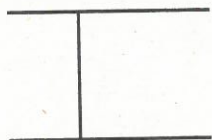
You could see the movie *Flashdance* and marvel at the moxie of the single gal, welding steel by day and stoking lust by night. You could see *Flashdance* and wonder at the ability of a Giorgio Moroder score and an Irene Cara theme song to hold together a threadbare, derivative plot: the distaff

Rocky, *Cinderella* with a blowtorch.

Or you could see *Flashdance* and think, *a bicycle! I need to get a bicycle!* That's what the Jennifer Beals character used to propel herself through smoky, gritty Pittsburgh, burning calories and developing muscle tone all day long. The movie didn't exactly present her mode of transit as a considered beauty regimen; what *Flashdance* was telegraphing was her scrappy determination to make do on a budget too tight for a two-door hatchback. But I detected an additional message—and a profoundly useful one at that. Jennifer looked that good and danced that well because of that bicycle. No doubt about it.

So I bought one toward the end of the summer between freshman and sophomore year, the summer when *Flashdance* ruled the box office. I saw the movie three times, in part to be sure I was fully processing

Seventeen



ere's what I did before that twenty-odd-course dinner at the French Laundry: went to the fitness room at the Marriott where I was staying, commandeered a treadmill and didn't budge. For forty-five minutes. The treadmill measured my run as nearly six miles long, and as I built up to that distance, pushing past the three-mile and then four-mile and then five-mile mark, I told myself, *Foie gras*. I told myself, *Coddled eggs*. *Lamb Petits fours*. In a few hours this and more would probably be coming at me, and I could eat it with a stab of terror about the way I'd feel in my clothes afterward, or I could earn it—could subtract hundreds of calories now so I could add these hundreds of calories later—and thus enjoy it. Stride after stride, mile after mile, I earned it. Or at least some of it, as much of it as I could reasonably manage on a treadmill in a Marriott with only an hour's free time and a thirty-nine-year-old body that hadn't always been maintained with care.

And here's what I did back in New York, not the first day back, because my flight arrived too late, but the second day: laced up my sneakers and set out for Central Park. I ran the whole six-mile road that

traces an ellipse just inside the park's rectangular outline, ending at the point where I'd begun and not taking any shortcuts, even though I was desperate to stop halfway through. I had to keep going. There were too many dinners ahead, dinners lined up all week long, some in restaurants where the norm was four courses and the food was relentlessly heavy. I couldn't afford to let up. I needed to get this exercise done now, and it had to be sustained, serious exercise. I inhaled deeply and pumped my legs some more.

From the moment I signed up for the new job, I'd been more virtuous than ever. More virtuous even than with Aaron. It started right away, with the family's annual Hilton Head vacation, which fell just before my April eat-a-thon in New York. On the island I ran daily, never less than four miles.

It continued over the weeks and months that followed. In Paris I took runs in the Luxembourg Gardens, anywhere from three to five miles a pop. Between lunch and dinner in Hong Kong, I would spend ninety minutes in the hotel gym: thirty on the treadmill, thirty doing mat work or lifting weights, thirty on the StairMaster.

In fact I was so faithful that by mid-May, when I landed back in New York for good, I was pretty sure I'd actually lost some weight. The first time I visited the studios of WQXR, a Times-owned radio station to which the restaurant critic contributed a short daily broadcast, the station manager looked at me and said, "Not another ectomorph!" She was referring to the beanpole thinness of Biff, who had seemed genetically incapable of gaining so much as an ounce. He certainly was an ectomorph, that slimmest of body types on the scale from ecto- to endo. I definitely wasn't. That she had tried to cast me as one, even half-jokingly, kept me smiling for hours.

I bought an apartment on the Upper West Side, near Central Park, drawn there largely by the park's alluring running routes. I joined the Reebok club, one of the city's tonier gyms, on the theory that the

better-looking and better-equipped the workout areas, the more likely I'd be to frequent them.

I tried to seize opportunities for exercise where they weren't immediately apparent. As a bit of a stunt for one of my early reviews, I ate two dinners in one night, the first at the restaurant under consideration, Wolfgang's Steakhouse, and the second at the historic restaurant that had sired it, Peter Luger. Although Wolfgang's was in the East Thirties in Manhattan and Peter Luger in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, I walked from one to the other, covering more than four miles. It was good copy, sure, but it was also smart weight management.

And after several months in the job, even though all was going well and I'd survived the one dinner at the French Laundry and six at Per Se without any noticeable expansion, I purchased myself an extra level of insurance, both physical and psychological. I called Aaron.

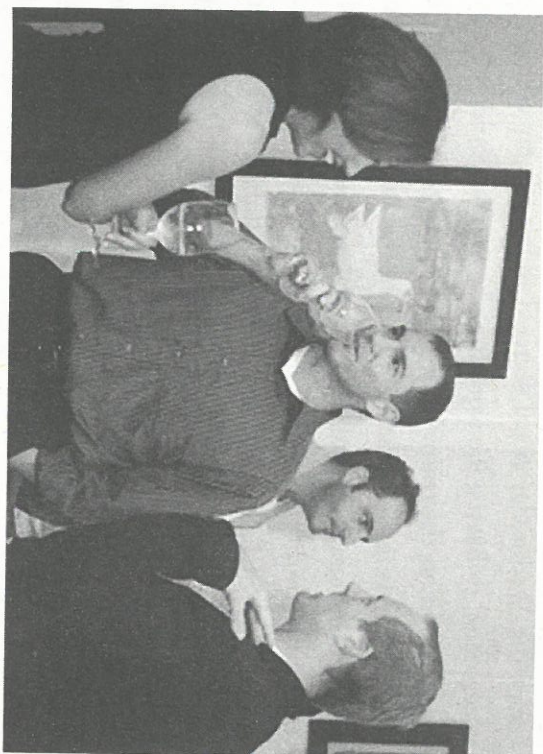
He said he had heard about my new job, and asked, "How fat are you?"

I was slimmer than he'd ever seen me, I told him, and I was determined to stay that way. To that end, I said, I wanted to set up a weekly appointment. Actually, two weekly appointments, one right after the other: contiguous hours. My idea was that I'd take the train down to D.C. on Wednesday mornings, do back-to-back sessions with him—or one with him and one with another trainer at his studio—and then take the train back.

"You're really going to do that?" he asked.

"I really am," I answered.

And I did, catching the eight a.m. Acela, arriving in Washington just before eleven, eating a moderate lunch (tuna salad sandwich, fruit cup) in Union Station, working out with Aaron from noon to one p.m., working out with a colleague of his named Chris from one to two p.m., catching the three p.m. Acela back to Penn Station in New York, arriving just before six o'clock and heading off to dinner at seven thirty or eight.



At a party back in New York, and staying in shape.

Every Wednesday. Week after week.

It was an expensive habit, especially for a newspaperman paying a mortgage on a two-bedroom apartment in a prime Manhattan neighborhood, but that was the point. The roughly \$280 round-trip train ride, on top of the \$160 for the two back-to-back sessions, was a statement about my priorities, made by me, to me. It was also a method of taunting myself: How could I possibly spend this kind of money and then go ahead and gain weight? How much of a fool would that make me?

The weekly twofor was less about what happened on that Wednesday than about what happened on the six other days of the week. I'd once again turned Aaron into my Weight Watchers check-in. And it was not only useful but comforting to have him harangue me about doing another repetition, to listen to him berate me about abbreviating the intended range of motion on a shoulder press. It served as a reminder of a time when working out had been a more desperate measure.

I kept the Wednesday ritual secret. I didn't tell my editors, who were accustomed to having me work from home and could still get me on my cell phone on the train. I worried that if I made them aware of my vigilance against any weight gain, they might start looking for it to happen, checking on my waistline, making me check on my waistline more than I already did. I needed to stay sane.

I didn't tell Adelle or Mark or Harry or Dad, because I knew that they were all scared on some level about my decision to take this job, and I didn't want them to think that the only thing separating the fit me from the old me was a regimen this extreme, or that I was having to struggle with all my might to hold back a tide of flesh. I was working hard at it, yes. But my visits to Aaron were preventive, not remedial. They were born of caution, not urgency.

I would surely have told Louis, if he had followed me to New York. But in the end he hadn't.

He hadn't really wanted to quit his job. He had long wanted to live in Southeast Asia, an opportunity now available to him. And his time in Rome, without work or a wide network of his own friends, had been tough on him. It had convinced him: he wasn't comfortable signing on to someone else's journey and deferring to someone else's agenda. I could certainly understand that.

But I was stunned, now, by how lonely I felt, given how thoroughly on my own and isolated I'd been for years before he came along, how practiced I was at it. This new loneliness was nothing like what I'd felt after Greg. It wasn't tinged with relief or overshadowed by the ugliness of the disentanglement. Louis and I hadn't picked at each other as we parted. We'd shed a few tears and shaken our heads: Why did it have to be so complicated for two people who love each other to be with each other? Why couldn't we have met in easier circumstances or had career paths that converged?

Over the next months the sadness subsided, mainly because there wasn't much time or space for it among all the new challenges I was facing, and because the exhilarating unfamiliarity of what I was doing filled the cracks in my life.

As a restaurant critic, I discovered, I needed skills beyond those of a typical journalist, and I needed to be more than just a gourmand. I had to become a concierge, a cruise director, a counselor, a covert operations agent.

I should explain a bit about how it all worked—especially about the intricate scheduling and elaborate arithmetic of the job. In a city as mammoth, as addicted to novel experiences and as filled with modest and immodest dreamers as New York, many hundreds of new restaurants opened every year. From their ranks and from the ranks of restaurants that had gone unexamined too long, I picked a weekly target for review, sometimes combining two targets in one week. I operated pretty much as I'd been told that my predecessors had, considering a new restaurant fair game for a published appraisal around its two-month mark; in its very first weeks, the thinking went, it might demonstrate a shakiness—or, conversely, a focus—that wasn't a reliable indication of what was to come. I planned most visits to a new restaurant during its second month and tried to separate each visit by at least a week.

For every visit to a restaurant I used a fake name and typically reserved a table for four. I needed three companions to order different dishes and help me cover as much of the restaurant's menu as possible. If I was making my first visit, I usually laid down only one rule for my tablemates: no duplicate orders. Four different appetizers. Four different entrées. Four different desserts. If I was making my second or third visit, I'd call out the dishes that had been previously tried and shouldn't be ordered this time around.

How to try a bit of everyone's food? There wasn't really any good way to avoid drawing a server's attention to the aggressive food sharing at the table and arousing suspicion that a critic was in the house. My companions and I could use bread plates to ferry food to and from one another, but some companions were less adept than others at making sure that the sample of salmon they provided was glossed with the sauce and accompanied by the ramps that the kitchen had included with it.

I preferred to have everyone rotate the plates, lazy Susan-style, even though it was just as attention-getting. At three- or five- or seven-minute intervals, determined by how quickly the fastest eaters at the table were going through their food, I'd chirp, "Let's pass!" At least I'd try to chirp this, in an upbeat fashion, to avoid seeming and feeling as much like a petty culinary dictator as I was. I'd decree a clockwise or counterclockwise motion for the plate passing, usually in accordance with whether I was most eager to try the dish to my left or the one to my right. And I discovered that people in midconversation and mid-Chardonay tend not to have the best sense of direction. Two people would pass their plates one way and two would pass the other way, the plates knocking against each other, arms entangling. What had been intended as a stealthy, fleet and efficient transfer devolved into a tabletop version of Twister.

How to remember what I ate and liked? At first I kept tiny pages of notepaper, along with a pen, in one of my pockets and paid frequent visits to the bathroom in order to scribble on the pages. Then I realized I could use my phone to send text messages to myself. Or I could step into the bathroom to call myself and essentially give dictation to my voice mailbox. Later that night or the next day, I'd transcribe the dictation into a computer file.

So that I didn't have to carry around hundreds of dollars of cash or pay at the end of a meal with a credit card with my name, I had many pseudonymous cards, acquired via a special arrangement between the

Times and American Express. I got more than one, and changed an old batch for a new batch every so often, because I'd been warned that restaurants that had figured me out might write down any and all details about my visit—including the name on the fake card—and pass them along to other restaurants.

In the very beginning, a few times, I used my own card when I was sure the restaurant was on to me, reasoning that the jig was up and I should at least safeguard the fake cards. But I stopped doing this when I realized how easily it could be misinterpreted.

That realization came after one of my first visits to Per Se, when a server offered me and my tablemates a tour of the kitchen. This was before the French Laundry visit, and I wasn't at all sure that the restaurant's staff had detected me, so I accepted the offer, as most diners would—I figured that turning it down would be the more suspicious response. In the kitchen, it turned out, Thomas Keller stood ready to greet us and shake our hands. When he introduced himself, I was the only one in my group who said hello without saying my name.

A few days later I got a call from a gossip columnist checking out a rumor: Was it true that I'd divulged my identity at Per Se by brazenly marching into the kitchen to meet and chat with Keller? Rather than go into the whole chain of events and spell out my thinking, I said no, it wasn't true, because it hadn't gone down that way—it wasn't at all like that. The columnist never published an item on the incident. But it taught me that I should never do anything, no matter how justified or innocent, that an uninformed onlooker might regard as a reckless surrender of anonymity. That ruled out paying with my own credit card, even if it was abundantly clear that the restaurant knew who was paying.

What I'd do, instead, was surreptitiously give one of the fake cards to a companion, hoping the restaurant would assume that the card actually belonged to him or her. It was a flawed ruse, because no matter how well the companion understood the game being played, he or she

almost always did this: held the card up high, stared at it long and hard, squinted and said, too loudly, "Who am I? Joseph Mazzone? Is that what it says? How did you come up with that name?"

Mazzone was Grandma's maiden name, Joseph just Joseph. For my first batch of five fake cards, I made the mistake of choosing only male names. This presented a problem if I dined with three women, none of whom could pass convincingly for Joseph or Joe or Gavin. For subsequent batches of cards, I threw some gender-neutral names into the mix. I had a card that said "Pat Reynolds," a card that said "J. T. Martinson," a card that said "Robin Parker." This solved one problem but not others. The fictive Pat or Robin or J. T. still held that damned card up and stared at it and then, after signing the check, handed the card and receipt back to me, at the table, rather than waiting until everyone was outside on the sidewalk, beyond the view of restaurant managers and servers.

There was a reason most people didn't go into the spying business. They had no aptitude for it.

And my own aptitude? It came and went, waxed and waned, serving me well with certain of my covert operations, less well with others. And it was attended, always, by the feeling that I was living a surreal life, which I found alternately exhilarating, exasperating, nifty and just plain silly. Not silly because it was unimportant: the job seemed to me very important, in terms of how seriously so many New Yorkers regarded restaurants, in terms of how seriously I myself regarded them. Silly because, by a quirk of fate and in a matter of weeks, I'd gone from political analyst and papal chronicler to gastronomic double agent.

I adjusted immediately to the reality of caller ID, making sure my number was blocked whenever I contacted a restaurant from home or from my cell phone. I adjusted immediately to the need, when the

restaurant asked for a callback number, to blurt out a plausible but imagined sequence of digits, so that there'd be no actual phone number that might be recognized as one I'd used before or that could be traced back to me or a known acquaintance. I tried hard to do everything possible to prevent restaurants from knowing in advance that I was going to show up.

I usually remembered to call the restaurant and to confirm my reservation before the restaurant tried to, because if the restaurant dialed the imagined sequence of digits I'd given them and got a nonworking number, a red flag might be raised. But sometimes a restaurant beat me to the punch, and when I contacted it the day before or the day of my reservation, the person on the other end would say, "What's your number? Because the one we tried wasn't right and we had trouble reaching you."

I was ready for this. I'd look in my schedule, where I'd written down the imagined sequence of numbers as soon as I'd imagined it. And if the sequence was 874-2576, I'd say, "874-2567." The person on the other end of the line would say, "Oh, we mixed up those last two digits!" Situational dyslexia would take the blame for the restaurant's unsuccessful call to me, and my cover wouldn't be blown.

But the tricky part for me, the part I kept screwing up, was coming up with the fake reservation name. It had to be a different fake name almost every time, because if a restaurant *did* spot me, it might put the name under which I had reserved on a list—for future reference and for other restaurateurs—of "tells" that I might be coming. For that same reason I could use the name and number of any friend who was a regular dining companion only once or twice. And I couldn't use one of the pseudonyms on my American Express cards, in case the restaurant had taken note and passed along those names, too.

But I could be Greg Jones or Bill Jones, Tom Johnson or David

Johnson, Michael Smith or John Smith, as long as I wasn't using those names over and over again. I could be Maladupa S. Dupamaladis if I so desired, though I'd be drawing more attention to my reservation than I'd ideally want to with a combination of letters like that. The point was that I had a boundless world of possibilities open to me, yet I repeatedly, by virtue of some odd and persistent tic, failed to decide on a fake name beforehand, then froze and went blank while on the phone.

I didn't do this every time I called a restaurant, because each episode of freezing and going blank would remind me, for the next three or four restaurants, to settle on a name in advance. But then I'd relapse. A voice on the other end of the line would ask me for my name, I'd realize I hadn't come up with one, and I'd panic, glancing frantically around me.

I was usually at a desk when this happened, and desks usually had reference books, so I dined out in these early days as Mr. Webster and Mr. Roget, Mr. Fodor and Mr. Frommer, Mr. Strunk and Mr. White. There were sometimes novels lying nearby: I dined out as Mr. Wharton and Mr. Eliot, Mr. Didion and Mr. Turow, though never as Mr. Naipaul, because I didn't want to present a face at odds with the ethnic suggestion of the name.

If there weren't books nearby, there were periodicals, so I dined out as Mr. Libby, with a first name other than Scooter, and as Mr. Manning, with a first name other than Eli or Peyton. There were movies in my head, so I dined out as Mr. Pitt, as Mr. Crowe and as Mr. Stiller, though I really screwed up on that last one. When the reservationist asked me for a first name, I blurted out what instantly came to mind, and what instantly came to mind was Ben.

What a way to avoid a red flag on a reservation! Go out to eat under a famous actor's name! But because I often ended up hearing restaurant world gossip about me, I later found out that this Ben Stiller gambit actually *did* throw the restaurant off my scent. Although the host and

servers thought the man who showed up for the reservation looked an awful lot like me, they assumed it couldn't be, because a restaurant critic would never reserve a table in a movie star's name.

For one week I happened to make most of my planned reservations using the Italian surname Gentile, pronounced jen-TEEL-ay, and I simply changed first names from one reservation to the next: Paul, Marc, Anthony. One of these reservations was for the restaurant Solo in Midtown Manhattan. It serves haute kosher cuisine and is, for the most part, run and patronized by observant Jews. Because I was thinking of the surname in terms of its correct Italian pronunciation, and because I said the surname that way on the phone, I didn't realize how it might look and read to a third party noticing it in the reservation book. So I was unprepared for the Solo hostess's tone of voice, at once skeptical and withering, when I showed up, mentioned a reservation for four people at eight p.m., and heard her fill in the remaining information by asking: "Oh, are you the *gentile* party?" Oy.

On occasion I lost track of things, what with all the different reservations and all the different names.

One Saturday night I walked into the Red Cat to meet three friends for dinner. Although Biff had reviewed the restaurant right after its opening years earlier and had given it a single star ("good"), I liked it more than that—thought it might deserve an upgrade to two stars ("very good")—and went there periodically with that possibility in mind. On this night I approached the host station, smiled at the woman standing there, opened my mouth . . . and froze. As I'd rushed out of the house on my way to the restaurant, I'd forgotten to look at the dining schedule in my computer and refresh my memory of the name under which I'd made the reservation.

I combed my brain, feeling like an idiot. I had some vague recollection that the reservation name might be Carlisle. I knew I had a reservation at some restaurant I was due to visit in this span of days under

Carlisle. Maybe it was this reservation. Without any other alternative, I gave the name a try.

"Carlisle party of four at nine forty-five," I said. That I had reserved for four and for nine forty-five was definitely the case.

"That's so funny," the hostess said, "because someone else checked in under Carlisle"—she motioned toward the bar—"but we don't have any Carlisle in the book." I looked in the direction she'd indicated and saw my friend Charles there. I'd apparently given him this same reservation name to use, and I'd apparently been as wrong then as I was now.

The hostess asked, "Which other names should I look for?" She obviously assumed that if I ticked off the people in my party, we'd trip across the right name. She assumed wrong. The reservation wasn't in the real name of anyone in this group of regular dining companions.

What now?

"Well," I said cheerily, sidestepping her question, "it must just be whichever party of four is in your book for nine forty-five!"

"Like Langston?" she asked, glancing at her reservation book. "Yes!" I said, not because I was trying to pull a fast one but because, as it happened, Langston sounded like a name I would use—or, in this situation, *had* used. It was the last name of a good friend's husband: that's no doubt where I'd gotten it.

"Langston," I repeated to the hostess. "That's me!"

She looked at her reservation book more closely.

"Mrs. Zoe Langston?" she said, noting the first name on the reservation.

I could have told her that I'd meant to say I was part of Zoe Langston's party, but, unfortunately, all my companions that night were men. So instead I stood in front of the hostess silently and glanced around idly, trying to buy time, hoping a hole might open up below me and swallow me. When I looked back at her, she shrugged her shoulders,

laughed and just went ahead and led Charles, me and our other two friends, who had shown up by that point, to a table.

I made other blunders, too.

In an Italian restaurant on the Upper East Side, I put, on the table, in full view of our server, a bag of prescription medicine with a label stapled to the outside. I didn't notice how clearly the label spelled out Frank Bruni for a good long while. In an Asian restaurant in the East Village, I left behind an issue of *The New Yorker* with the subscription information, including my name, on the cover. A server gave it back to me while I stood in the vestibule, zipping up my coat. He looked at me closely and smirked just a little.

A few months after I resettled in New York, I heard again from Scott: Scott, my first-ever boyfriend from Carolina, the one who'd found me when I was living in Washington. Back then I'd told him I was too busy for the two of us to catch up, when really I was just too fat. This time, when he told me that he and his partner had relocated to New York and that he'd love to see me, I said yes. I invited the two of them to join me for dinner. We had an effortlessly chatty, comfortable time, and soon afterward I made plans to meet Scott and a friend of his for drinks.

On the night in question, he gave me the time and place: nine thirty at Therapy, a gay bar in Hell's Kitchen.

I hadn't been in a gay bar in nearly a decade. In New York in my early thirties and then in Washington, I'd avoided gay bars on purpose, not wanting to subject myself to any visual assessments by men who might be looking for someone to date, men who might look right past me. But I wasn't so afraid now. Besides, I was heading out to Therapy at a relatively early hour on a weeknight. The atmosphere wouldn't be sexually charged.

At the bar Scott, his friend and I ran into two men that Scott knew, and the five of us grabbed beers and found an open table in a lounge area. The man I was seated next to, Paul, focused his attention on me, but I assumed that it was just a logistical thing, a matter of my being physically closest to him.

When I got up to leave around ten forty-five, he got up, too, saying it was time for him to head home as well.

As I set out on foot for the short-term rental nearby where I was living until the purchase of my apartment went through, he tagged along, talking all the time but never saying a word about what he was doing, where he was heading.

I wondered if his place was also just blocks from Therapy—if he didn't need to hail a cab or hop on the subway—and was in the same general direction as mine.

I wondered if he was some strangely gallant guy exercising an atavistic impulse to escort me.

Finally I accepted the most likely possibility. He was wordlessly hitting on me.

I went with it, letting him accompany me into the building, letting him through the door of my apartment, and never really pausing at all to ask myself what I was doing, or whether it was something I wanted to be doing with this man. I was too caught up in the excitement—in the relief—that I *could* do it.

I'd gone from romantic exile in that dingy upstairs bedroom in Georgetown directly to Louis, who had seemed to me like some sudden and random gift from nowhere, and quite possibly a fluke. Apart from him, there had been almost no dates and no kisses for the vast majority of my thirties. Now here I was, on the edge of forty, aware of my imminent slide into middle age, angry about how much of my youth I'd squandered. Could I make up for it now? Before it was too late?

There were months during my first years back in New York when

I went out to a gay bar as often as once a week, a frequency unusual for some other men but extraordinary for me. Even in Detroit, before Greg, I hadn't found myself in a gay bar more than once a month.

But in my current state of mind and need, I liked the terms and dynamics of a gay bar—liked knowing that the men who approached me or invited my approach did so without any knowledge of my job, which was considered unusually interesting by many people. These men were attracted by the way I looked. And for me that was an affirmation more powerful than it was for many others.

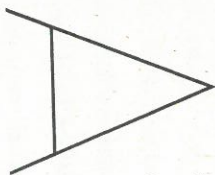
During the long period when I'd been sure nobody could possibly want me, I hadn't consciously asked myself: What if I never climb out of this? What if these size 40 pants are as good as it will ever again get? What if I can't lose more than 15 of the 268 pounds I've somehow managed to put on?

But I realized now that on some level, I had pondered and dreaded all of that, because my behavior and elation on the far side of fatness were those of someone living in a country he never thought he'd see, with privileges he never thought he'd have. And I saw that there might be something harder to repair than the physical damage Aaron and I had gone to work on a few years before.

Eighteen

fter about six months in the job, a friend e-mailed me one day.

"Had an excellent lunch at V Steakhouse," he wrote, "and I had a great meal at Bar Tonno, where the owner reports you have been spotted twice."



I shook my head, amazed. "It's very interesting," I responded, "that the owner of Bar Tonno says he's spotted me twice there. I've never been!"

The friend explained that he had asked the owner if many reviews of the restaurant had come out yet, and the owner said he was anxiously awaiting mine. "He said he wasn't there when you came in, but that 'everyone' spotted you instantly," my friend reported. "I love that! You are like a ghost!"

I wished.

With each passing month I got more of an education into just how much of a premium restaurants put on identifying me when I was there and just how much energy they put into being able to do that.

I turned one day to the Web site Eater, a gossipy report on restaurant

news and restaurantworld personalities, and saw an item headlined: "To Catch a Critic: The Case of the Kitchen Flyer."

It presented a snapshot and description of a piece of paper that apparently hung in many a restaurant kitchen and was meant to help the staff recognize me when I was dining there. At the top of the flyer was a fuzzy copy of the *Ambling* book jacket photograph. Below that was a list of six aliases and two fake phone numbers I'd been known to use. It was precisely the sort of compendium I'd been warned about, and I assumed it would be considerably longer if I weren't taking all the precautions I was.

And below that were some descriptions of me intended to be helpful to any restaurateur wondering if I was in his or her midst.

"He looks very young," said the first line of the description, and—I'll admit it—I paused happily after reading it, then read it a second time.

"His guests are very often female," the description continued. "He is extremely polite with staff." Here I paused again, this time for Mom. She'd always been adamant about proper etiquette. She would have been thrilled.

The flyer finished: "Questions about food are asked in a very casual, unassuming manner." This was true, and this was on purpose. For all that I messed up, I wasn't about to press servers for the specifics of a dish's cooking or ingredients in a rapt way that tipped my hand. I wasn't that clueless.

The flyer was only a part of it.

At Le Bernardin, I'd been told, the chef Eric Ripert insisted that his staff do more than merely round up whatever pictures of me existed on the Internet. A staff member also researched where I'd appeared on television during my political-reporting years, then went to those networks and acquired footage, so the workers could get a sense of my facial expressions and body language.

Sometimes I'd be sitting at a table near the front of a restaurant and

I'd notice someone walk in the door, huddle with a server or manager, look in the direction of my table, then loiter in the vestibule or bar area for just a few minutes, stealing second and third and fourth looks my way. Minutes later the person would leave, without having had so much as a glass of water. And days later I'd see that person again—standing at the host station of a new restaurant that critics, like me, were in the process of visiting. I was just starting to make sense of this when a friend in the restaurant industry explained it for me outright: managers at restaurants that had spotted me would instantly send word out to peers in nearby establishments so they could hustle over and see me in the flesh.

When it came to identifying critics, restaurants weren't in competition with one another; they were in cahoots. One night I stopped by a Midtown restaurant for a glass of wine with my brother Mark, who was visiting from Boston on business, before the two of us joined two friends of mine elsewhere. A manager at the restaurant recognized me and heard me say, as I paid the check, that I was off to dinner. She assumed for some reason that I was on foot and destined to eat somewhere nearby. So she called several prominent restaurants within a five-block radius to warn them that I might be walking through the door at any minute. They waited for me in vain. I was in a taxi headed to an Upper East Side restaurant some twenty-five blocks uptown.

The staff at Bar Tonno weren't the only twitchy, overeager bird-watchers convinced they'd happened upon their quarry even when they hadn't. The restaurateur John McDonald emailed me one day in regard to one of the places he ran, writing that he had noticed me in the restaurant the previous night and that I'd left behind a notebook. He said he'd sealed it tight in an envelope and was eager to send it back to me, calling it a "Pandora's Box that I prefer not to possess." When I sent him a response, I told him he should feel free to make like Pandora and let the mischievous creatures out to play. They didn't belong to me; I hadn't visited the restaurant in many weeks.

Eater posted the following communication from one of its readers, who apparently demanded certain redactions:

I just went to [redacted] for lunch and had a long conversation with [chef]. He told me a juicy Bruni tidbit. On one of his two visits to [restaurant], Bruni rode in on a scooter. Not a Vespa—a scooter. He was also wearing running shorts and a fanny pack. Is Frank just a sartorially weird scooter enthusiast, or was this an attempt at disguise? Note: if you decide to publish the scooter bit, [chef] doesn't want you to mention him or [restaurant]. Bruni still hasn't reviewed the restaurant and [chef] doesn't want to incur his ill will.

I hadn't been on a scooter since Europe in 1986. And someone who's worried that his ass, like his love handles, might be too big doesn't wear a fanny pack.

When I was legitimately spotted, I usually knew it. The table's server became awkwardly stiff or entirely spastic, while other servers did what those at the French Laundry had: drew close to the table for no good reason and studied me, no doubt because management had told them to take a good look so they could assist in my detection on any future visits.

If I was spotted ten or twenty minutes into a meal, the restaurant might swap out a less experienced server for a more experienced one. Or it might swap out a moderately attractive woman for the most attractive man on hand. The restaurant had done its homework. It wasn't going to leave any trick untried.

I was a magnet, when recognized, for extraordinary courtesy and extreme solicitousness. If it was raining out and I'd arrived at the restaurant unprepared for that, the manager, host or hostess would try

to shove a complimentary umbrella on me. On my way out of many restaurants, there'd be as many as a half dozen workers of various altitudes lined up like flight attendants to say "good-bye," "have a good night," "hope you enjoyed your evening," "good having you," "great having you," "so great having you," or "we look forward to seeing you again." I never believed that last line. It was contradicted by the audible gust of relief I'd hear as the door closed behind me.

At L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, in the Four Seasons Hotel, the staff went into a panic when I clumsily spilled some red tomato sauce on my white shirt and I began trying to undo the damage with a wet napkin.

Suddenly a manager was at the table.

"One of the advantages of being in a hotel," he said, "is that we have laundry services on the premises. We can launder that for you right now."

I declined, mainly because I didn't want to accept special treatment, but also because I wasn't about to sit in my white V-neck Banana Republic undershirt in the middle of a restaurant that served entrées between thirty and fifty dollars.

Toward the end of my fourth and final meal at Nobu 57, an Uptown successor to the Downtown standard-bearer, I returned from the bathroom with a dark splotch on the front of my tan shirt. Embarrassed, I explained to my companions that I had been klutzy with the soap dispenser.

A few minutes later, when our eavesdropping waitress brought the check, she announced that two glasses of white wine weren't on it. They'd been removed as an apology for the way the bathroom soap dispenser malfunctioned.

"But it didn't malfunction," I assured her. "I malfunctioned. I banged way too hard on it and was leaning too close to it."

"Well," she said, "you have our sincere apologies."

Not wanting to prolong the awkwardness, I didn't insist that the wine be added back and instead covered its cost with an extra-large tip. I got up to leave.

As I walked toward the door, a manager intercepted me.

"Sir," he said, "I want to apologize about our soap dispenser."

"What about it?" I asked, though I knew what was coming.

"Didn't it malfunction?" he said.

I corrected him. Exonerated him. Told him he really, really needn't worry.

He handed me his card. "Even so," he said, "if you have trouble getting the shirt clean, please contact me. We can pay for dry cleaning or for a new shirt."

At this point I felt the need to draw attention to a crucial detail that suggested that the splotch would come out rather easily.

"It's soap," I said.

To which the manager added, with audible pride: "And it is Kiehl's."

Being recognized meant that my experiences were—obviously—different from other diners', but there wasn't any good way around it, especially as I logged more and more time in restaurants. Managers and servers who'd figured me out over the course of four visits to one establishment sometimes wound up at another just a few months down the line, and they'd nab me there on my first or second visit. Like my pseudonyms and fake phone numbers, surreptitiously taken cell phone photographs of me circulated among restaurants—one of them even got posted on Eater—and gave them a less dated image of me than the *Ambling* picture or old TV footage.

But being recognized didn't mean that I (or the many other

frequently recognized critics) couldn't see a restaurant accurately and evaluate it skeptically, noticing its flaws. Most of those flaws couldn't be hidden at the last minute. A restaurant couldn't reinvent its menu or find a new purveyor of better ingredients just because a critic showed up. It couldn't retrain the kitchen staff: I got undercooked fish and overcooked pasta in places that knew full well I was there.

What it could do was deploy extra waitstaff to my table or have the manager keep a closer eye on me and my companions. So I took that into account and made adjustments for it. I never automatically assumed that the pampering I was receiving—or that the nervousness-induced flubs by servers dealing with me—extended to other tables. I looked around to see what was happening elsewhere in the restaurant.

And I kept a distance, as best I could, from the restaurateurs and chefs in my sights. Part of what had made me attractive to my bosses at the *Times* as a reviewer was my independence: I hadn't forged any relationships or crossed paths with prominent figures in the New York restaurant world. I didn't have friends I might not want to insult or people I owed any favors or special consideration. When invitations to restaurant-related parties came my way, I declined them. I didn't go to awards ceremonies. I didn't go to food festivals.

But that didn't stop chefs, restaurateurs and their emissaries from trying to influence me. No one ever tried to bribe me, something Biff told me he'd encountered when a restaurateur pleading with him to drop by for a visit kept repeating that it would be "worth your while." But publicists e-mailed me thapsodic accounts of meals just eaten in clients' phantasmagorical new restaurants, swearing that the praise was untainted by any professional connection. If I went on to write negative reviews of some of these restaurants, the same publicists would e-mail anew, as if they hadn't done so before, to tell me I was absolutely right and that they had given their clients unheeded warnings about the precise failings I'd pointed out.

Before one review appeared, a woman who identified herself as the mother of the restaurant's chef e-mailed me to fill me in on the life of hardship he'd overcome. "Sorry if I compromise you in your profession," she wrote, then went on to tell me about the recent grave illness of the chef's father, about his own health problems, about his fierce work ethic and about how little he slept. A day later the chef e-mailed me and I heard about his father's health problems again. Both e-mails arrived after I'd already written my review, which was mostly positive, and decided on a rating—two stars. I didn't know if that was a star less or more than the chef and his mother were hoping for. I tried not to think about it.

In one fancy restaurant, as my companions and I waited for our desserts, the owner walked right up to our table to talk to me. At first it wasn't clear that he owned the place, but it became obvious in the course of what he said.

"These are my four stars," he began as he held his iPhone toward me to show me images of children, presumably his.

Four stars? Was he making a reference to reviews, acknowledging what I did for work and what I was doing—and deciding—right then and there, in his restaurant?

He kept scrolling through the images, talking not only about how much the kids meant to him but also about how much he'd risked by pouring his money into the restaurant. He detailed the work that had gone into the restoration of the space the restaurant inhabited. He looked around the dining room, which was mostly empty, and bad-mouthed his publicist, who he said was doing a lousy job.

"No one even knows the place is open yet," he grouched.

Then, eliminating any doubt that he was trying to lobby me, to emotionally manipulate me, to *guilt-trip* me into praising the restaurant, he said, "We're really hoping for a positive review."

"Anyway," he concluded, "I hope you had a good time tonight."

We hadn't, not particularly. The steak had been sauced too sweetly

and lavishly. The pork chop hadn't been any juicier than a dog's chew toy. I winced inwardly, because I knew that I'd have to reflect that in whatever I wrote and that while he was likely aiming for three stars, I was about to give the restaurant one. My main obligation was to be honest with readers.

But at times like this I wasn't eager to be. At times like this the job made me feel a little sick.

Only occasionally did I hear from chefs or restaurateurs after a review appeared. Bobby Flay was the classiest, reacting to a review in which I demoted Mesa Grill to one star from two by leaving me a voice mail that thanked me for at least taking the time to visit the restaurant and assured me he wanted to fix whatever was wrong with it. Mario Batali, too, had a jolly way of rolling with the punches, even when I could tell he was ticked.

Another Italian-American chef, Cesare Casella, sent me a gift of sorts after I wrote a short appraisal, not a full review, of his restaurant Salumeria Rosi. In the article, which was a mixed bag of positive and negative remarks, I noted Mr. Casella's trademark habit of keeping a decorative clump of rosemary in his shirt pocket, and I observed that the clump had "mutated from the few sprigs he used to sport to a bundle of branches—to a shrub, almost. If he stays on this trajectory, he'll be clumping around his next restaurant with an entire tree slung over his shoulder." What arrived on my desk a few days later, with a card from him, was a large rosemary bush.

Few review targets complained, no doubt because the damage was done and they didn't want to risk alienating me—I might review that restaurant, or another with which they were connected, down the line.

But there were exceptions. One restaurateur wrote an actual letter, as opposed to an e-mail, to tell me that on the morning when his restaurant received two stars instead of the three he was shooting for, he'd been unable to get out of bed. Keith McNally, who owned the famed

Downtown brasserie Balthazar, publicly attributed my one-star rating of Morandi, an Italian restaurant he opened in Greenwich Village, to its employment of a female head chef and to my clear sexism.

And then there was Jeffrey Chodorow.

In the 1980s and 1990s Chodorow had opened a string of hit restaurants, including China Grill and Asia de Cuba, both of which continued to flourish. They weren't exactly critical darlings, but they'd never received the kinds of drubbings meted out to some of his subsequent efforts, which also didn't do as well commercially.

Chodorow had suffered two particularly big failures right before I became the *Times's* restaurant critic. One was a collaboration with Alain Ducasse called Mix; it survived just two years. Another was a collaboration with the chef Rocco DiSpirito called Rocco's on Twenty-second Street. It wasn't so much a restaurant as a stage set for a reality TV show, *The Restaurant*. And it died an even faster death than Mix had, though it lived on in a miasma of civil litigation between its principal players, including Chodorow.

So he wasn't riding high when I came along, and my responses to the restaurants he opened on my watch didn't make things any better. To his tricked-out Japanese restaurant Ono, in the Meatpacking District, I gave just one star. Then I gave a no-star rating to his Italian collaboration with the chef Todd English, goofily named English Is Italian.

I didn't formally review his next restaurant, the even more goofily named Brasserie Caviar & Banana, a Brazilian befuddlement. But in a brief write-up I warned diners that the décor evoked a third-grade arts and crafts project and that the thicket of long skewers on which grilled meats were served made the whole experience rather pointy and frightening, like dining with Edward Scissorhands.

Chodorow churned out new restaurants at a brisk clip, and not

too long after Brasserie came Kobe Club, named for an area of Japan where special *wagyu* cattle, known for their fat-marbled flesh, are raised. Kobe Club's conceit was to serve, and let diners compare, *wagyu* beef from Japan, Australia and America. The restaurant was an apt, colorful illustration of not only how popular steakhouses had once again become but also how the glut of them was prodding restaurateurs to fashion novel takes on the genre. So it warranted attention. I scheduled—and made—my customary series of visits.

In the review I subsequently wrote, I referred to Chodorow as a “gimmick maestro,” noting that Kobe Club served no fewer than four kinds of mashed potatoes and thirteen kinds of sauces for the steaks, which came with little toothpick flags planted in them, to designate which of the aforementioned countries the beef had come from. The décor included more than two thousand samurai swords hanging upside down from the ceiling, a menacing canopy that prompted a server to tell my friend and me that they were properly anchored and that we shouldn't be scared. (What was it with Chodorow and pointy objects?) The décor also featured rippling screens formed by hundreds of shoelace-narrow strips of leather. “If Akira Kurosawa hired the Marquis de Sade as an interior decorator,” I wrote, “he might end up with a gloomy rec room like this.”

I took exception in the review to the thirty-two-dollar price of a chicken entrée, to a rubbery pork chop, to limp iceberg lettuce, and to a clam with an alarming metallic taste. The review concluded:

On the night when the server assured me of my safety, as I put my coat back on and headed toward the door, I suddenly found that I couldn't leave. Something was pulling me back, but what?

A delayed appreciation for the restaurant's triple-decker crab cake? A yearning to retrieve a toothpick flag? A need to make peace

with the check, which had come pinned to a wooden board by a dagger?

No, it was one of those leather strings, which had wrapped like a tentacle around me. Scary indeed.

The review, admittedly, was snarky. My feeling was that a negative appraisal might as well be lively, since its readers weren't going to use it as a road map for the restaurant. And the rating surely displeased Chodorow. I gave no stars to Kobe Club.

A few weeks later, he sent a letter to the *Times*.

Not to me, and not just any old letter. It was addressed to Pere Wells, the editor of the Dining section, but written for the general public, a fact made clear by something else Chodorow reportedly did: paid a premium of forty thousand dollars for the letter to appear as a full-page advertisement in the *Times* in the spot of his choosing, opposite my weekly column.

I was shown the letter just a few days before it was published. In it Chodorow claimed that my review of Kobe Club was off base, mean-spirited and one in a series of “personal attacks” by me and a few other critics, motivated by the messy debacle of *The Restaurant*. And he maintained that the issue wasn't just my Kobe Club review but all of my reviews, and that I was flatly unqualified for the job.

It definitely rattled me, the thought that so many people might see his rant and that it might yield chatter—in blogs, maybe even in published articles—about how well or not I was doing my job. I was rattled, too, by the reminder that what I wrote often wounded people, and I asked myself questions I already asked myself plenty: How could I ever be 100 percent sure I'd given a restaurant a fair shake? How could I know I'd experienced and assessed it in the most accurate light?

Maybe, I told myself, his letter wouldn't draw much notice.

It did. There were articles about it by the Associated Press, the *Washington Post* and *The New Yorker*, among others. To my enormous relief most of them portrayed Chodorow as a hothead and took little or no exception to my review of Kobe Club or my performance as a critic. But I was nonetheless left with a problem.

During the many interviews Chodorow was giving to journalists and bloggers, he said that the next time I was seen in one of his restaurants, he would have me thrown out. He said he was even offering a free vacation to any employee who ousted me. And yet he was about to open a new place, Wild Salmon, in the old English Is Italian location. Wild Salmon was a project splashy enough to call for a review; if I didn't write one, it might seem that I was running away from him—that his pledge to foil me had successfully spared his newest restaurant an assessment. That wouldn't be a good precedent. I didn't want to let it happen.

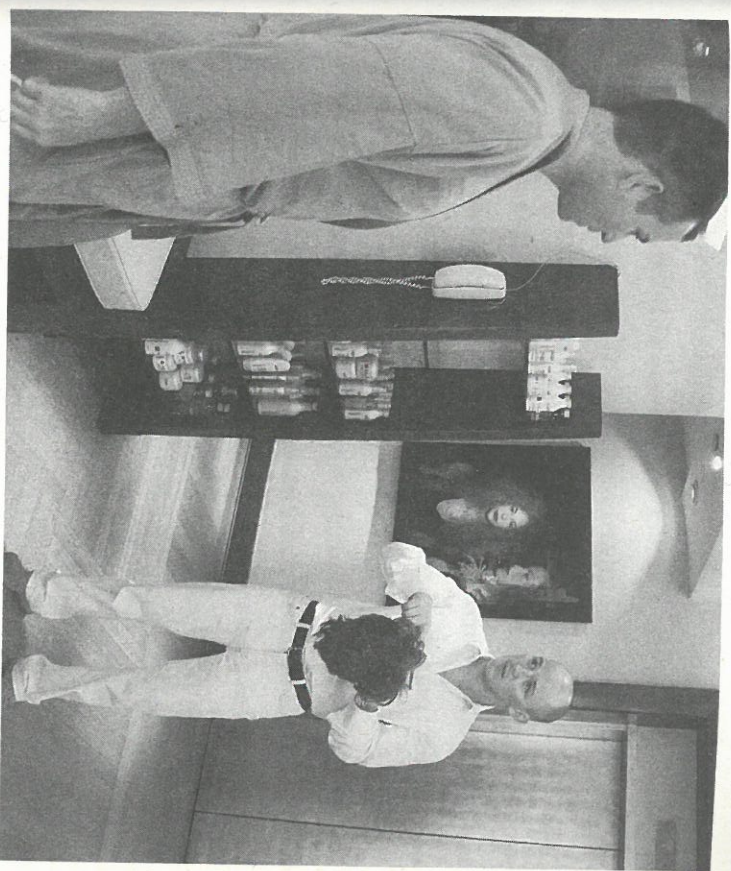
So I had to figure out how to dine repeatedly in a restaurant from which I had been officially barred.

"S it still, darling," John said to me, putting a hand on my shoulder and pushing down, trying to fix me to the bottom of the chair. "You have got to sit still."

I couldn't. Without meaning to, I kept swiveling my head to survey his salon and check whether the other clients were gaping at me. I kept squirming. I hated the way the wig that he had affixed to my head felt: itchy, sweaty, furry and wild, as if somebody had scraped a dead squirrel off a patch of hot pavement and slapped it onto my scalp. The wig sort of looked that way, too. I was on the leading edge of a whole new trend: roadkill chic.

"This is ridiculous," I told John. "Nobody's going to buy this."

"They will when I'm done," he said, his voice curt, as if I'd insulted him. I supposed I had. I told myself: Calm down. Lighten up. If you get



In the Bergdorf salon, I meet the wig I'll wear to Wild Salmon.

thrown out of Wild Salmon, you get thrown out of Wild Salmon. It'll be mortifying when it happens; a badge of honor by the next day. And the important part is that you'll have tried. If the story gets around, that's what it will prove. That'll be the takeaway. You tried.

The unruly mass of synthetic light brown strands was much thicker than my own hair, covering up my faint bald spot and receding hairline. John pushed it a few millimeters forward, then a few millimeters back. He rotated it slightly to the left, then to the right. And he snipped and snipped, cutting it as carefully as he would the real thing. I'd had no idea that wigs got customized this way. I'd had no idea they got styled.

Some of the clients in nearby chairs and some of the stylists

attending to those clients indeed stared at John and me, no doubt because we presented a mystery: Why were we taking such pains to put me into this wig when I looked infinitely better out of it?

"He's an actor," John said to everyone and to no one, answering a question that hadn't actually been articulated. "He's doing a small walk-on part tomorrow." That's how careful he and I were being. On the chance that someone in the salon might be connected to someone in the restaurant industry, we were guarding who I was and what I was doing there. I'd even checked into the salon under the name Frank Browning.

Before Wild Salmon, I had used disguises only twice, during my first months as a reviewer, and had concluded they were too unsettling and not effective enough, at least if they were anything less than seriously expert. And seriously expert disguises took too much time; they certainly weren't nightly options. Restaurant critics who touted their proficiency with disguises usually didn't mention that a night in costume was the exception, not the rule, and they either disregarded or truly didn't know that restaurateurs often recognized them anyway but were careful not to show it. Restaurateurs didn't want to spoil the disguised critic's fun.

My first attempt at a disguise was for my third visit to V Steakhouse, the shortlived Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant that the friend who had e-mailed me about Bar Tonno had also mentioned. I had sensed that I was recognized on my second visit to V Steakhouse and I wanted to recapture my anonymity. So I didn't shave for a few days. I used a shiny gel to slick my hair straight back; usually I wore it parted on the side, without any product. I put on little granny glasses. Did it work? I wasn't sure. But I felt awkward, my companions kept giggling at me and I had to struggle to stay focused on the meal.

My next attempt was at Per Se. For my third visit there, about a week after my trip to the French Laundry, I slicked back my hair. I sported a minor beard, the product of a full week without shaving. And I put on a bulky, flashy pair of purple-rimmed eyeglasses with clear lenses, which

I'd purchased solely to be used as camouflage. My companions couldn't decide whether I looked like a young Bob Evans, an over-the-hill porn star or the deranged subject of a forthcoming book by Oliver Sacks. Our waiter took one look at me and, despite an obvious struggle not to, broke into an enormous, you've-got-to-be-kidding-me smile. He was the same waiter who had spent four hours catering to Harry, Sylvia and me at the French Laundry. Facial hair, styling gel and purple eyeglasses weren't going to fool him.

But for Wild Salmon, a restaurant focusing on the Pacific Northwest (with Chodorow, there was always a tidy theme), I had no choice. I had to try a disguise again, and it had to be better this time around.

So I contacted John, a friend who owned the salon atop Bergdorf Goodman in Midtown and had many associates in the theater business. If anyone could be entrusted with the job of disguising me, it was him. He called some makeup artists and costume designers he knew and had them send over a few wigs and fake mustaches. He gave me an appointment in the salon ninety minutes before my first Wild Salmon reservation, so I could go straight to the restaurant from there. I showed up for it dressed for the meal after, in a semiformal manner that was deliberately uncharacteristic: dark blue suit, light blue shirt, solid green tie. And again I wore little granny glasses.

John had one wig in a dark brown color that matched my hair and one in a lighter shade. After putting each on my head, he chose the lighter shade. Then he went about tanning and sculpting it, spending forty-five minutes on that mission before leaving its completion to an assistant, Marco.

At some point I pressed one of the fake mustaches to my upper lip. It looked and felt like a dark centipede. I decided to skip it on this night and maybe use it for my second or third visit to Wild Salmon.

As Marco used a blow-dryer to finish styling the wig, I kept feeling it move, or imagining that it was moving—I couldn't tell. I was sure that

during the coming dinner, I'd tilt my head forward to glance into my chowder and the squirrel would drop from my head to the bowl.

"Are you sure this won't fly off?" I asked Marco.

"Maybe in a hurricane," he said.

I studied my image in the mirror. My face was tiny beneath this grand mane, which was indeed becoming more realistic by the second but still struck me as much too poufy and wavy. I no longer had to wonder what sort of offspring Andy Warhol and Farrah Fawcett might have produced. I was looking at him.

Wild Salmon was on Third Avenue near Fortieth Street. I'd told my companions for the night, Patty, Jason and Michelle, to meet me about two blocks away, at the Capital Grille, so we could coordinate our stories and go over our script.

I'd chosen Patty because she'd dined with me only once before, at an out-of-the-way restaurant that certainly hadn't spotted me: there was no chance her face was associated with mine. I brought Jason and Michelle along because they, too, were infrequent dining companions. Even better, they were in their twenties—younger than most of my eating partners—so they gave our foursome a different demographic profile than that of my usual groups. I told them that they'd be posing as a couple and I told Patty that we would be, too. And I invented a story line to guide our conversation whenever servers were near: Jason and Michelle were about to be married; Patty and I were already married and were friends of Jason's family. We were giving the newlyweds-to-be marital advice.

"What do I do for a living?" Patty asked me at the Capital Grille, as I prepped everyone.

"You're a veterinarian," I said.

"And you?" she said.

"I'm a pharmaceutical sales representative." I liked the idea of having access to good prescription drugs.

"How long have we been married?" Patty said.

"Too long."

We walked to the restaurant. I made the three of them enter just ahead of me, an advance guard. I kept my head low, looked toward the floor, tried to be inconspicuous. At the table I took a seat that put my back to the open kitchen. Whenever the waiter approached, I buried my face in the menu.

"All this fish: it's just too much like work," said Patty, the pretend veterinarian, as she perused her menu.

"But you don't treat fish, sugarplum," I mumbled, face deep in my own menu.

"I'm training," she said. "I just need to get my scuba certification."

When the waiter took our order, Patty couldn't remember what I'd told her to get, and had to look to me for guidance. "What do you think I should eat, honey?" she asked me.

I told her she'd seemed interested in the cedar plank salmon, which she then ordered. As the waiter gathered our menus, I said to Jason and Michelle, "Half of what makes our marriage work is that I remember for her what she does and doesn't like to eat."

"The other half," Patty said, "is the sex." Fortunately, the waiter had disappeared before the end of her sentence.

Patty, Jason and Michelle passed me bites of their appetizers and entrées quickly, and furtively: there was no rotating of plates. At the end Jason paid the check with his real credit card, as I'd told him to in advance, promising him a check as soon as we reached the sidewalk.

And we got away with it. We actually got away with it. The staff at Wild Salmon hadn't known I was there. I was certain not just because I hadn't been ejected, but because no one in the restaurant had paid an iota of extra attention to us and because our server, without a trace of irony or self-awareness, had recommended certain dishes by saying that

they'd been praised in early reviews of the restaurant. That comment and many of his others weren't the kind a server would ever make to a known critic.

For my second visit, I brought Joyce and Max, who were considerably older than my usual dining companions. I wore the same wig and, for variety's sake, the mustache, glued to the flesh between my nose and upper lip. I kept imagining that it was slipping and I couldn't stop poking at it to make sure it was still in place. Every time I did this Joyce frantically lifted a napkin to her mouth and swiped vigorously.

"Did I get it?" she'd say, thinking I'd been signaling to her that she had a smudge of food on her face.

I'd shake my head no and point emphatically to my fake mustache, and she'd interpret the gesture to mean she should swipe again—and even more vigorously.

"Now is it gone?" she'd ask.

My third time at Wild Salmon I had a different wig, darker and stippled with gray, purchased from a Manhattan wig wizard who often dealt with celebrities with cancer. I went to the restaurant in a group of four men of different ages and looks, all of us dressed in suits, the conceit being that we were colleagues fresh from work at the bank. Again the food sharing was done with special subtlety. And again the restaurant seemed not to notice us in any particular way.

I gave Wild Salmon one star. I took pains to say that the various kinds and preparations of salmon were appealing, but I couldn't ignore how uneven the rest of the food was, and I had to call Chodorow out on his stubborn penchant for gimmickry, which I flagged at the start of the review:

I wish I'd had Al Gore with me at Wild Salmon, where I stumbled across a new sign of climate change. It concerned dessert, and it might well have concerned him.

I ordered the baked Alaska, a frigid diorama in which the meringue is molded to resemble an igloo. And I noticed right away that something was extinct: a proud chocolate penguin, described in write-ups of the restaurant, that had once stood beside the frosty abode. In its place a few humble chocolate fish were adrift.

When I ordered the dish a second time, even they were gone, the ecosystem impoverished once more. The igloo looked smaller, and its ice cream interior was softer. A fluke? Maybe. But I wonder about global warming.

A week later Chodorow took out another ad in the Dining section. This one was small, squeezed into the corner of a page far from my column, and went largely unnoticed. It was also in the form of a letter, addressed this time to me.

"Dear Frank," it read. "The penguin has returned to the South Pole where it belongs. I'm contributing the money I would have spent on a larger ad to the fight against global warming. Really glad you loved the wild salmon at Wild Salmon. It is like no other salmon I've tasted. Regards, Jeff."