

Her Chee-to Heart

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recently *Life after Life*. Several of her stories have been chosen for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories* collections. She teaches creative writing in the MFA Program at North Carolina State University and is a faculty member of the Bennington College Writing Seminars. In this essay, published in the collection *We Are What We Ate* (1998), McCorkle offers vivid memories of life as a "junk-food junkie."

If I could have a perfect day of eating, this would be it: I'd begin with pancakes and sausage patties drenched in Log Cabin syrup. Then I'd visit my grandmother's kitchen, where my sister and I used to watch ravenously as Gramma made her famous pound cake (a real pound cake—a pound of butter, a pound of sugar, egg after egg after egg swirled in Swans Down cake flour). We'd each slurp batter off the mixer whisks and then split what was left in the red-and-white Pyrex bowl. My grandmother also made chicken and pastry (her pastry was more like dumplings) and homemade biscuits (the secret ingredient is lard), which might be dipped in redeye gravy or covered in butter and Karo syrup (doughboys) and eaten as dessert. She made homemade apple pies (the fruit part of our diet) fried in Crisco and filled with sugar.

If I couldn't have homemade food, then I would settle for what could be bought. A foot-long hot dog at the B&R Drive-In, for example; french fries limp with grease and salt from the bowling alley; a barbecue sandwich (Carolina style—chopped fine and spiced up with hot sauce); a triple-chocolate milk shake from Tastee-Freez. Banana splits and hot-fudge sundaes. Maybe a frozen Zero candy bar or a Milky Way, a Little Debbie snack cake and a moon pie, too.

I am a junk-food junkie and always have been. My college roommate and my husband both blame me for their slides into high-fat, preservative-filled meals, like the frozen Mexican TV dinners that my roommate and I ate all the way through college, or the microwavable burritos I now stash at the back of my freezer for desperate moments (desperate meaning a craving for Tex-Mex or a need to drive a nail and not being able to find a hammer). Forget meals, anyway; the truly good treats for a junk-food junkie get served up in between: colorful Ben & Jerry's pints, natural in an ethical way (the money goes to good places, at least) that makes me feel healthy; names—Chubby

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Hubby, Chunky Monkey, Wavy Gravy—that make me laugh. Good Humor is what it's all about and has been since childhood: kids trained to respond to the ringing of a bell, to chase alongside trucks in neighborhood streets like so many pups for a Nutty Buddy. Ice cream is near the top of any junk-food junkie's list to be sure, but I haven't even begun to mention the Chee-tos, the Pecan Sandies.

There's something about unnatural food colors that has always attracted me. What tastes or looks better than the frosting on grocery-store-bakery birthday cakes? Hot pink or blue roses that melt in your mouth. The fluorescent brilliance of a crunchy Chee-to. Not too long ago my children (ages four and seven) were eating at a friend's. They

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were served a lovely meal of homemade macaroni and cheese, white, the way something without any additives and preservatives should be. I was on the other side of the room, helpless to defend myself when I heard my daughter say, "But my mom's macaroni and cheese is bright orange." Well? What can I say? I also love that fuchsia-colored sweet-and-sour sauce

that you often find on Chinese food buffets.

At the last big dinner party we had, my husband bought Yodels to throw out on the dessert table along with a fresh-fruit concoction, which had taken me forever to cut up, and little cheesecakes. At the end of the night, there was not a Yodel in sight, but very few people had openly indulged. These scrumptious lunch-box treats (creme-filled chocolate rolls, 140 calories and 8 grams of fat each, which means, of course, that they are good) had instead been slyly tucked away into pockets and purses for the ride home. Yodels, Twinkies, Hostess Snoballs. They make people nostalgic for elementary school, those wonderful years when we were advised to eat beef and pork. Children thriving on sloppy joes and Saturday T-bones. Pork chops with applesauce. Sausage gravy over homemade biscuits. A good green vegetable in the South, where I grew up, was a green-bean casserole in which the beans were camouflaged in Campbell's cream of mushroom soup and canned fried onion rings. All the recipes in my favorite cookbooks begin with Campbell's cream-of-something soup.

I was enamored of a boy named Michael in the first grade who licked Kool-Aid powder from his palm whenever the teacher wasn't looking. He moved away before the end of the year, and yet thirty-

one years later, I still remember him with a fond mixture of repulsion at the sticky red saliva that graced his notebook paper and admiration for the open ease with which he indulged his habit. I loved Pixy Stix straws, which, let's face it, were nothing more than dry Kool-Aid mix poured right into your mouth. Sweetarts. Jawbreakers. Firecrackers. Mary Janes. Any item that I was told was *very* bad for my teeth.

Maybe it's an oral-gratification thing. I'm sure that's why I smoked for fifteen years. When I quit nine years ago, I rediscovered my taste buds. I found flavors I had forgotten all about: Sugar Babies and Raisinets, that thick mashed-potato gravy that is the *real* secret ingredient at Kentucky Fried Chicken. I found flavors I had never had before, such as cheese blintzes and latkes smothered in sour cream. I found that wonderful, all-natural, fortified cereal Quaker 100% Natural Oats Honey and Raisins. I need oral participation, oral gratification. Despite what they will tell you on television, a little stick of Juicy Fruit is not going to get you there if you've been lighting up for years. But M&M's? Junior Mints? Those diablo-style peanuts thoroughly doused with cayenne pepper? Now, that's chewing satisfaction. A Coke (or diet Coke for the figure-minded, Jolt cola for the desperate-to-start-the-day-minded) chaser.

I could do a taste test. I can recognize all the sodas. The soda wanna-bes. I drink a good two to three cups of coffee when I get up, and by the time I drive the kids to school, I've switched over to diet Coke. People say, "Doesn't it keep you awake?" I wish! During one of my pregnancies I lost all taste for Coke. I couldn't believe it. I'd been drinking Coke for as long as I could remember. It was so sad, filling myself up on Hawaiian Punch (which is very good in its own right), Pop-Tarts, and ice cream, ice cream, ice cream. But I missed the Coke cans rolling around under the seat of my car. I missed the whoosh and zap of buying a Coke from a vending machine. And one day, like magic, it returned, this desire, like an old love resurfacing.

There are ways a junk-food junkie can feel less guilty about all this food, if indeed you ever do feel guilty. Did I mention caffeine? It's like air—essential for full enjoyment. And it burns calories. If that doesn't work, there are always things like the NordicTrack where I hang my clothes at the end of the day and the Suzanne Somers Thighmaster I keep in my closet for decoration.

Besides, I consider myself a purist; I don't like substitute 10 things—like these new clear sodas. Who cares? I went into the all-natural health-food grocery store not long ago only to discover that there are a lot of things in this world that are foreign to me. The produce

section had products you might find growing in a neglected basement. There were name brands I'd never heard of, certainly they don't buy airtime on television. There were cereals without colored marshmallows or prizes in the box. They boasted of having no sugar (as if this were good). It did not take me long to get back to the familiar aisles of the Super Stop & Shop, the red-and-white Campbell's soup labels, the chip-and-cookie aisle (nothing there sweetened with fruit juice or carob imitating chocolate), and the candy bars at the checkout.

One of my fondest junk-food memories is of a rare snow day in Lumberton, North Carolina, when I was in the sixth grade, a wonderful age at which, though I liked boys, they were not nearly as exciting as the ice cream store nearby that served up an oversize cone called a Kitchen Sink. But that day, I sat with a couple of friends in the back of the Kwik-Pik (the South's version of the convenience store) and ate raw chocolate-chip-cookie dough while drinking Eagle Brand sweetened condensed milk straight from the can. My friends and I waddled home feeling sick but warmly nourished, our stomachs coated and glowing with sugar. I mean, really, there is no cake or cookie on earth that tastes as good as dough or batter.

My favorite food in the eighth grade was Slim Jim sausages. For the uninformed, these are the miniature pepperoni sticks usually found near the register of convenience stores, where you might also find the beef jerky and pickled eggs. When I was growing up, there was usually a big jar of pickled pig's feet too, but this was not a treat that ever caught my eye. No, I lived on Slim Jims, spicy and chewy. I kept them with me at all times, getting a good chew while at cheerleading practices. They reminded me of being an even younger kid and getting a little bit of raw, salty country ham from my grandmother and chewing it all day like a piece of gum. (Sorry, Juicy Fruit, failed again.)

My husband, a doctor whose specialty is infectious diseases, is certain that I have been host to many parasites. Maybe, but what I'm certain that I have been host to are the junk-food parasites who refuse to admit that they indulge, but they do. Just put out a bowl of pistachios and check out the red fingertips leaving; chips, M&Ms. Ah, M&Ms. It was a sad day long ago when they retired the red ones. I had spent years being entertained by a pack, segregate and then integrate, close your eyes and guess which color. I was thrilled when the red ones returned, and now blue! Lovely blue M&Ms. I love the pastel ones at Easter, along with those Cadbury eggs, and my own personal favorite: malted Easter eggs. These are actually Whoppers (malted-milk balls covered in a speckled candy shell. Sometimes they are called robin

eggs and sometimes simply malted, but a Whopper is a Whopper. I like to bite one in half and then suck in. When the air is pulled out of a Whopper, what's left is more like a Milk Dud.

Of course there is also the Whopper from Burger King. Once, after a Friday night high-school football game, I sat down at a table with a bag of food that looked similar to those of all the guys on the team. I had a Whopper with everything, large fries, an apple pie, and a chocolate shake. Our cheerleading adviser told me that I wouldn't always be able to do that.

Thank God I didn't know she was right. It would have ruined the next four years as I continued to down cream-filled Krispy Kreme doughnuts and my own special high-protein omelette that was filled with mayonnaise and cheese. I loved Funyuns, too, except that nobody wanted to sit next to me on the bus when I ate them.

After all these years, I've made some adjustments. I now buy He-brew National for things like hot dogs and bologna. I figure the kosher laws probably serve me well in this particular purchase, and try as I might to dissuade them, my children love bologna with an absolute passion. They can smell the reject turkey substitute from fifty paces. They don't like *real* mac and cheese. They like the microwave kind. My niece (at age four) once invited me into her playhouse for lunch. She said, "Would you like a diet Coke while I cook lunch in the microwave?" So maybe it's a family thing. Maybe it's the potassium benzoate.

I would love a diet Coke and a cream horn right about now. Some salt-and-vinegar chips. Onion dip and Ruffles. Smores. I like to get in bed to read with a stash of something close by. I have found that I am especially drawn to things with a high polyglycerol-ester-of-fatty-acids content. It makes me feel *happy*. I think maybe this is the key to a true junk-food junkie's heart: happiness. Just as Proust bit into his little madeleine and had a flood of memories, I bite into my Devil Dog, my Ring-Ding, Twinkie, Ho-Ho, Yodel. I bite into my Hostess Snoball and retreat to a world where the only worry is what to ask your mother to put in your lunch box the next day or which pieces of candy you will select at the Kwik-Pik on your way home from school. Ahead of you are the wasteland years: a pack of cigarettes, some Clearasil pads, a tube of Blistex, and breath spray. But for now, reach back to those purer, those sugar-filled, melt-in-your-mouth, forever-a-kid years. Who cares if there is a little polysorbate 60 and some diglycerides, some carrageenan, some Red 40 and Blue 1, some agar-agar? I have a dream that somewhere out there in the grown-up, low-fat world there is a boy named Michael licking his lips and getting all the fumaric acid that he can.