



EXCERPT

THE HUNGRY YEARS

One of Britain's best-known journalists turns an unblinking eye on the mysteries of hunger and addiction. In this excerpt from *The Hungry Years*, William Leith gives us a glimpse into his world of food, fat and addiction.

Wake up on the fattest day of my life, 20 January 2003. I am just over 6 feet tall, and weigh . . . how much? I step on the scale and off it very quickly, to limit the damage. 236 lbs. At best! My bathroom floor slopes slightly, and I have positioned the scale carefully to ensure the smallest possible reading.

236 lbs. Waist size: 36. This is how I feel: light-headed, shaky, with a raw sensation, almost a pain, just below my ribs. I can feel the acid wash of heartburn in my gullet and the gurgle of juices in my guts.

Hunger.

I splash water on my face.

Hunger is the loudest voice in my head. I'm hungry most of the time. I also feel bloated most of the time. I am always too empty, and yet too full. I am always too full, and yet too empty. Last night I ate three platefuls of mash and gravy. I also had chicken and vegetables. I can barely remember the chicken or the vegetables. The mash was fluffy, starchy. I could not relax until it had all gone. Then I licked my plate clean. I picked the plate up and licked the starch residue and congealing gravy. It tasted delicious, vile, shameful. People sometimes ask me why I have crusty stains on the lapels of my jacket or the bib area of my shirt.

My girlfriend said, "I hate it when you do that."

"I thought you thought it was funny."

"No, I hate it."

"It's a tribute to your cooking."

"No, I hate it."

Now it's early, and I want toast. God, I hope there's some bread in the kitchen. God, I hope there's some sliced bread in the kitchen. I really don't want to do any slicing. In the morning, with low blood sugar, it's like slicing a stone with a long, bendy razor blade. I could easily have an accident. I swing myself out of bed, my belly tight and sore under my T-shirt. When I was slim, I slept naked, but now I dress for bed, or rather don't fully undress; I wake up damper, hotter, hungrier. My hunger frightens me. The fatter I get, the more I want to eat. The fatter I get, the more comfort I need. Right now, I want thick slices of warm white bread, crispy on the outside, with butter soaking into the middle.

My girlfriend is sitting on the sofa, smoking her second cigarette of the day. This is seven-thirty in the morning. She has a serious addiction. She hates the fact that she smokes. She knows how hard it is to quit, but that's not the problem. She's quit before. But when she quits, she always goes back to smoking. In some deep psychological place, she needs to be a smoker. It's about her childhood, about protesting, about punishing herself. It's all mixed up with her identity. As a non-smoker, she feels like someone else, and that scares her.

"First of the day?" I say, even though I can see there's already a butt in the ashtray.

"Unfortunately not."

In the kitchen, there is most of a loaf of sliced bread, and—yes!—the butter has been left out all night, so it will be soft enough to spread. When I was a kid, when I had my worst hunger, I hated cold butter. Later, it didn't bother me so much—I was patient enough to pare off thin slices, which I would arrange carefully on the toast. Then I would wait until the butter had melted, something I can't imagine now.

Now I'm in a hurry. The bread is brown. Damn. Still, I put two slices in the toaster, and, while I'm waiting, I take another slice from the loaf, butter it, fold it over, and eat it in three bites. I pop the toast, to see if it's nearly done, but it's not—nowhere near—so I butter another slice, and try, and fail, to eat it slowly. Now, when I pop the toast, it is slightly crisp, and slightly warm, so I take a slice, butter it, eat the disappointing, mushy result, and put another slice in the toaster. And then I realise I should have put the second slice in the toaster before I ate the first. As usual, I am falling behind.

I am in a toast frenzy. I have an urge, like in the Burger King ad, in which 'urge' is an integral part of the word 'Burger'.

Although, of course, ‘urge’ isn’t an integral part of the word ‘toast’. But I am aching for toast. It’s like a Mac Attack. (I have actually suffered from Mac Attacks.) It’s like a nicotine fit. It’s like the feeling you get in a coke-snorting frenzy, when you say, “Shall we, um, do another line?” and the reply is, “We’ve just done a line.” Please believe me when I say that I am not a coke fiend, have not been one for years. I know about willpower. Looking at the toaster, glaring at it, listening to the buzz of its little engine or whatever, I stop for a moment to make a cup of instant coffee, and ask my girlfriend if she wants any toast.

“No thanks,” she says. She never eats breakfast.

I open the fridge. Nothing for me in here. Tomatoes, bacon, eggs, salad vegetables. On the worktop next to the fridge, there is fruit in the fruit bowl. At the moment, I am not interested in any of these things. I am like a gay man looking at a girly magazine. I want bread, cereal, croissants, bagels. I could eat a baked potato, or some pasta, or some fried rice left over from a Chinese or Indian takeaway.

This actually crosses my mind. Might there be fried rice in the house? Cold fried rice, the grains clumped together, sitting on a bed of congealed fat? In a silver takeaway carton? Once I saw a show, possibly an episode of *Trisha*, in which a man had got fat because he ate leftovers from Indian meals with his toast in the morning. I love *Trisha*.

In any case, there is no fried rice in the house. In my heart, I already know this. (Some famous addict once said that a true coke addict knows when there is cocaine in the house, always, and cannot stop snorting until all the cocaine has gone. Well, I always know when there is fried rice in the house.)

And now, my breakfast is ready. Two slices of buttered toast. No plate. I eat standing up. These days, I do a lot of eating standing up. People seem to disapprove. Perhaps that’s why I do it. I take a sip of my instant coffee—my girlfriend’s brand, a brand which is supposed to give more money to the growers, although I’m not absolutely convinced. It is ‘ethically sourced’. It scalds my mouth. I eat the first slice of toast, munching through it like a praying mantis eating a leaf. Then I eat the second slice. And, for a moment, I’m in a bad place—already bloated, but not yet sated. Too full. Too empty. Clouds of self-disgust are gathering on the horizon.

At least I haven’t got a hangover. All I have is a slight memory of the hungover state—a phantom. My head still feels slightly fuzzy and sore when I

wake up. This is the morning of my twentieth day without alcohol. I used to have a drink problem. Now I might and might not have a drink problem. We’ll see. Apart from soft drugs, I am drug free. I am in a monogamous relationship, so I do not feel a constant urge to flirt with women. In any case,

I’m too fat for this kind of behaviour. That’s all in my past,

I think. When you get fat, these sorts of opportunities are no longer open to you. When you get fat, people find you a lot less attractive.

What happens to me is this: I get fat.

Then I get fatter and fatter, over a period of years, until I’m fatter than I’ve ever been.

Then I get slim again. But when I get slim, I’m never as slim as I was the time before. And when I get fat, I’m always fatter than I was the time before. Right now, at 236 lbs, I am close to obese.

Another month, I’d say, and I’ll be obese.

Perhaps there will come a point, perhaps quite soon, when it is just too late. Perhaps when I cross the border from fat to obese I will be stuck, never again able to claw my way back to slim. I’ll be a lifer. Might this happen? It happened to Orson Welles, to Sidney Greenstreet, to Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle. Big sad men, communicating their pain slowly, silently, pound by pound. It happened to John Belushi, to John Candy, to Chris Farley. It looks like it’s happening to Marlon Brando, to John Goodman, John Prescott, Johnny Vegas. It’s almost certainly happening to Robbie Coltrane. Coltrane, a decent actor, who, by being fat, has ruled himself out of contention as a top-dollar leading man, who could never be James Bond, but who was, instead, a fat, smirking James Bond villain, and who ended up as Hagrid, the fat wizard in *Harry Potter*, gained an average of 14 lbs a year for the best part of a decade. What was he trying to tell us? I once tried to interview Coltrane about his weight gain, and it was one of the most difficult interviews I’ve ever done. Did he talk about his weight? A little bit, maybe. Did he want to say how

he felt? Much, much less. The feelings were locked up in an oubliette deep inside his brain. Fat people are not like coke fiends or alcoholics, who sometimes like nothing better than talking about their problems. With a fat person, there is an elephant in the middle of the room, and nobody’s allowed to mention it. **R**

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