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# Saving my father's life

*He was always the big guy in the room. Could he shake the deadly weight without shaking his outsize personality?* **By Pari Chang**



**Before**  
My father's weight put his health at risk.

**After**

**m**y father was

always fat. Not sloppy fat, not lumpy-puddle-of-brownie-mix fat, not the fat that causes whispering at all-you-can-eat buffets, but fat nonetheless. At 5'10", he weighed 300 pounds and was dignified by his size, like an emperor. His weight centered in his round belly, as though he'd swallowed a beach ball. As a child, I thought his largeness made him playful. Still, I wrote a letter to God in my diary when I was 12. "I have a bad feeling," it began. "Please don't let Daddy get sick. I know gluttony is a sin, but he's a good man, God, and I need him."

In my teens, when I learned which foods are fattening, I urged my father to watch his weight the way I watched mine. I wasn't overweight, and neither was my mother or younger sister, but on top of my concern for his health, I believed my father's obesity threatened my own chances for thin womanhood. He needed more than weight watching, though. He needed a diet. And dieting was anathema to him—he comes from a line of fat Brooklyn-born meatpackers. My grandfather dealt in "delicacies": pigs' feet and brains and bulls' balls. He left his family after a divorce, but not before imparting to his son a hankering for red meat.

The cookouts by our pool in New Jersey were serious business. My father grilled rare cheeseburgers, sausages and skirt

steaks and wanted everyone to have seconds. (In an attempt to curb the foodfest, my mother would lie about how many franks were left in the freezer.) Dad once even vetoed one of my sister Marni's boyfriends because "the kid liked his meat well-done." Marni's idea of teenage rebellion was going vegan.

When his doctors determined that my father had diabetes in 1991, during my senior year of high school, they said weight loss could suppress it. We hoped he'd finally change. He prided himself on protecting his "three girls"—my mother, my sister and me—but his diagnosis left us vulnerable. His size put our whole family at risk.

**"Be brave," I wrote to my father in a letter I stuck to the fridge. "Choose salad. Don't duck the fight of your life."**

We bought him a treadmill that Father's Day, but it groaned to a halt when he stepped on it. "That's our strongest machine," the woman at Sears said when we called to complain. "Holds 250 pounds, guaranteed for life."

"But my father weighs 300."  
"Is he thinking of losing any weight?" she asked.

"With respect, ma'am," I said, "why do you think we bought the treadmill?"

My father turned the incident into an excuse not to exercise. He was too big for the treadmill—even Sears said so! So he shot insulin with one hand, forked prime rib with the other. The laws of medicine did not apply to him, he believed. He was

macho all the way, a former Marine, forever invincible.

Macho might have worked in 1960s Brooklyn, but I, his *Iron John*-reading, yoga-going daughter, knew the truth: Macho is for wimps. I launched an attack on his manhood via letters stuck to the refrigerator. "Be brave," I wrote. "Choose salad. Don't duck the fight of your life."

By the time I graduated from college, my dad and I couldn't share a meal without arguing. We had a screaming match at Joe's Pizza because he ordered extra cheese. "Cheese isn't fattening," he maintained.

From my apartment at law school, I sent home healthy cookbooks and a gift certificate for visits to a nutritionist. After his first appointment, the nutritionist gave me my money back and said, "He's not ready." Though I swallowed my anger and tried to live with my father's choices, I daydreamed about climbing inside his body for six months to get it in shape.

Ironically, it wasn't a weight-related problem that finally motivated my father to make a change, at least not directly. It was cancer. In 2000, doctors removed one of his kidneys and the tumor inside it.

"We got it all out," he says the surgeon told him, "but your size made the operation challenging. You'd add 10 years to your life if you'd lose weight and force your diabetes into dormancy." My father was ashamed of himself, afraid for his life. Still, he overate.

He wore a tuxedo to my wedding two summers ago and felt, he said, like a bloated penguin. During "What a Wonderful

World,” our father-daughter dance, I wondered if he’d live to be a grandfather.

By fall 2001, he desperately wanted to lose weight, but he couldn’t control himself.

As a last resort, he investigated Lap-Band surgery. Through a tiny hole in the abdomen, he explained, a surgeon places an adjustable silicone band around the top of the stomach, making tail-to-tail funnels of it, like an hourglass, to filter food. The patient digests normally but feels full earlier, when the top part of the stomach fills. The band forbids overeating under risk of nausea and vomiting. It seemed to me like cheating; I felt disappointed that my father couldn’t commit to a diet, sad that he needed help.

The first time I saw him after the surgery, he was in disguise, dressed as Santa Claus for a Christmas party for underprivileged children. I assumed he was kidding when he touched his belly and whispered, “I’ve got three pillows in here.”

**When he was fat, in a small corner of myself I pretended my father was safe in his padding—larger than life, Superman.**

After the party, we met for takeout at a deli across the street. I nearly dropped my knish upon seeing him minus the suit. He looked like the guy from his dusty Marine Corps photographs, standing barrel-chested, sporting a waist and a neck.

My father had lost 45 pounds in two months. Inside, he was muddled in transition. He still sat like a fat man (legs open, belly out) and craved like a fat man, lingering by the deli platter. Yet he ate, slowly, just half a sandwich, a trained puppy before an electric fence. Part of me wished he was still the king of corned beef, the prince of pastrami piled high. I worried that his big-man’s personality would deflate with him.

My father now weighs a stable 192, having lost more than 100 pounds. The surgery got him started, but discipline and daily exercise sealed his success. He used to go to restaurants in a T-shirt and shorts and fun-lovingly joke with the waitresses.

Now he’s lost that fat-guy’s license—he’s more formal, lest they take him for a dirty old man. He charms people today by sharing stories of his new, insulin-injection-free life. For the first time in 30 years, he can wrap a towel around his waist. He brags that our treadmill is no longer a coat rack. He misses eating big portions but copes by stuffing my poor husband. “Have another frankfurter,” he says. “For me.”

My father recently came to pick me up at the airport, and I could not find him in the crowd. Sometimes I worry that he is melting. I can see my face now when I look at his, but his skin is loose. I can feel the bones in his shoulders when I lean on him. When he was fat, in a small corner of myself I pretended he was safe in his padding—large, larger than life, supersize, Superman. Now I sometimes miss his beach-ball belly, but I’m relieved to finally think he’ll live until old age. My children may one day see their faces in his. He has become a new kind of superman, one who changed into someone else to save himself. ©

*Pari Chang is a writer in New York City.*