

"The diary I wish I had kept ... the adventures of her family, the roadblocks they encountered, and the sheer daily difficulty of overcoming a national obsession."

—from the foreword by David Gillespie, author of *Sweet Poison*

EVE O. SCHAUB

YE  AR

 OF

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 SUG  AR

A Memoir

YEAR OF NO SUGAR

A Memoir

EVE O. SCHAUB

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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections of her experiences over a period of years. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

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*To Steve, Greta, and Ilsa,
without whom nothing is sweet*

“It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route,
and make a beaten track for ourselves.”

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

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FOREWORD

Ten years ago my wife, Lizzie, did a very annoying thing. Without any consultation and without seeking any of the proper approvals from management, she decided to turn our fifth child into twins. One day, she was pregnant with baby #5, and the next, our world was turned upside down. We were about to add twin babies to our other four children (all under the age of nine at the time).

I was ninety pounds overweight and barely coping with the four we had, let alone chucking twins in. I was apathetic, moody (or so people tell me), and had just enough energy to stay at work until after the kids were in bed. Twin babies were not going to be fun. Unfortunately, pregnancy is one of those nonnegotiable forces of nature. There would be no extensions; come September 2003, we would be the parents of six children. I decided I needed to do something about my health, and in particular, I needed to stop being so fat.

I hadn't woken up one morning and discovered ninety extra pounds hanging off my waist. It had been a slow and inevitable accumulation. I had been working on that spare tire for the better part of three decades. Every now and then I would decide that enough was enough. I'd see a cabbage soup diet on TV or read about [insert name of very famous and inspiring person here] going on this or that diet. So I'd break out the cabbage or the bananas or delete the carbs or <gasp> go to the gym. And then it would all work. I'd drop a pound or two a week for exactly as long as my willpower would hold on (usually about two weeks—what can I say? I'm weak). Then I would stop, and the weight would come back, usually with interest.

But this time I was determined. I decided I needed to understand how my body worked. I needed to understand why humans (and the animals they feed) were the only species on the planet that required willpower to control their weight. I needed to know why there were no tigers joining Weight Watchers and why there were no gyms for monkeys.

I was (and am) a lawyer, so I assumed it was just my lack of acquaintance with biochemistry that was ensuring I misapplied my various weight-loss techniques. I decided I needed to read deeply on the subject and not stop until I had the answer. Fortunately, I am related to approximately half the medical profession, so I had plenty of people telling me where to start (and stop) reading.

Once I got my head around the mind-bendingly arcane language, I discovered that scientists knew an awful lot about why I was fat. They knew that sugar was the cause. They knew that fat was the least worrying aspect of consuming sugar. They knew it caused type II diabetes and fatty liver disease and hypertension and chronic kidney disease and even Alzheimer's. And worst of all, they knew it was highly addictive and (because of this) being added liberally to the food supply. It didn't matter whether the sugar was made from corn (HFCS) or grass (cane sugar) or beets (the sugar they sell in Europe); it all contained the molecule responsible for the damage—fructose.

I didn't know any of this because it seemed that, rather like the tobacco companies, the folks making money out of pumping our food full of fructose were working very hard to ensure we looked at everything other than sugar. They told us it was our fault we were fat. We were lard buckets because

we couldn't exercise self-control or because we didn't have the willpower to go to the gym every day. We had a character defect, and under no circumstances was it anything to do with the sugar.

I decided all I needed to do, if the science was right, was stop eating sugar. So I did. And magic happened. After a few weeks of ugliness involving intense cravings, some headaches, and staying well away from the soda fridge at the supermarket, I was suddenly not drawn to sugar. People would offer me chocolate, and I would say no without a cringe of regret. Willpower no longer seemed necessary. I was applying just one rule: if it's sweet, don't eat. But other than that, I ate whatever I wanted. And the truly miraculous thing was that I was losing weight. Every week the scales would drop another couple of pounds, but I was doing all the wrong things. I wasn't exercising, I was eating as much fatty food as I wanted, and I was even eating cheese! Magic.

A year or so later, I was ninety pounds lighter. I can't tell you exactly how long it took or exactly what the process was. I can't tell you precisely when Lizzie decided to join in my little sugar-free party or when she decided to bring the kids along. I can't tell you any of these things because I wasn't writing it down. I wasn't a blogger (was anyone in 2003?) and I wasn't a writer. I was a lawyer with a day job who was obsessing about medical studies at night, and I certainly didn't have time to record what I was doing (as if anyone would be interested anyway).

Five years later, I did write a book about the science that had spurred me to action (*Sweet Poison*, Penguin Australia 2008), but I did that simply because it was clear that the science that I had read was not making it past the food industry PR filters, and something needed to be done about it. A book was the only medium I could think of that could not be influenced by the needs of advertisers or sponsors. But *Sweet Poison* is not a diary. It is a translation of the science. It doesn't have the detail which every prospective sugar quitter craves. It can't tell you if it's normal for your kids to despair at the parents' insane obsession with food. It can't tell you how to deal with a school system pumping your neighbors' kids full of sugar as a reward. It can't tell you how to be sugar free in a society obsessed with sugar. But this book can—and does.

I first discovered Eve's online diary of her sugar-free adventures about a month into her journey. By then, I was terribly famous in Australia (no, really, I was), and the sugar quitting concept was becoming quite mainstream there. So I was used to discovering blogs written by people who were quitting sugar. But Eve's blog was different. The detail was exquisite, and I loved her down-to-earth, we-are-just-plain-doing-this approach. I loved reading about the adventures of her family, the roadblocks they encountered, and the sheer daily difficulty of overcoming a national obsession. It reminded me of so many of the situations Lizzie and I had lived through but that I had never written down. It was the diary I wish I had kept.

Now, that blog has become this superb book. Background details have been filled in. Even more color and nuance has worked its way into the story, and Eve has shown herself to be a spectacularly good writer when she takes off the shackles of fitting it all into a weekly blog post. I am certain you will enjoy Eve's story but, even more importantly, I am certain it will provide all the motivation you need to take you and your family down the sugar-free road to a better (and longer) life. Enjoy!

—David Gillespie, author of *Sweet Poison*
The Sweet Poison Quit Plan, Big Fat Lies

I LOVE SUGAR

Sugar and me? We go way back.

I love sugar. LOOOOVVVVVE it. I love everything about it: how it makes little occasions special and special occasions fabulous. How it performs hot, bubbling magic on sour fruits, like rhubarb and gooseberries, to make the most succulent, mind-blowing pies and jams. How it crunches with perfect granulation in the best cookies and how a single cube of it adds fairy-tale perfection to a real Italian cappuccino.

And don't even get me *started* on chocolate.

I've known about the power of sugar for a long time. When I was in seventh grade, we were given an English-class assignment: create a "how-to" presentation on a subject of our choosing. Although I was awkward, painfully shy, and *terrified* to stand before the class, I still knew exactly what I wanted to do: a demonstration of different methods of cake decorating using a standard two-layer I had baked as a prop. Easy peasy.

The day of our presentations arrived, and I was petrified but excited—after all, I thought, how could I go wrong with a topic like *cake*? Then it came to be my turn and I, decked out in my best Esprit sweatshirt and ribbon barrettes, proceeded to inform the class how they could make their cakes more beautiful and interesting, which I'm sure had my preadolescent classmates simply *riveted*. This was 1982, mind you, before Martha Stewart did for homemaking what Edward Cullen did for being alarmingly pale. Making cakes and cookies wasn't even remotely cool; it was what grannies did when they weren't crocheting throw blankets in shades of mustard and avocado.

Nonetheless, everything seemed to be going along fairly well until I got to the part about making designs in the frosting using the tines of a fork. After chocolate shavings and shaking powdered sugar through a doily, this was pretty much my Big Finish. It was then that I realized—with horror—that I had *Forgotten. The. Fork.*

Oh.

This was one in a series of moments in seventh grade when I fervently wished I had a shell which to curl up and disappear, but lacking that, I instead turned a lovely shade of beet and attempted to *mime* the fork part. Worse public speaking debacles have happened, I imagine, but you couldn't have convinced me of that then.

However, despite the Fork Faux Pas and my appalling lack of public speaking skills, all was not lost. My English teacher *liked* the speech, but she *loved* the cake. I have a distinct memory of her pinched round face beaming as we all dug into our slices.¹ I received what was in all likelihood a wholly undeserved A. That was proof enough for me in the power of sweet.

As far back as I can remember, I've *always* loved to bake. Once, when I was perhaps seven or eight

years old, I created a carefully hand-lettered menu and invited everyone in the family to my “restaurant.” Forensic analysis of that menu now reveals that I let Mom worry about the incident entree of steak and baked potato (yeah, whatever), while I focused on what was *really* important: *apple cobbler for dessert*. The menu even featured a fanciful illustration of the *pièce de résistance* on the cover. As far as *I* was concerned, I had made dinner.

Like most kids, I knew dessert was something special, something magical. Every once in a while my mother would handily transform a pile of fruit into a pie, handing us down the pastry scraps, which my brother and I would roll into little balls and eat raw while we climbed trees in the backyard. I pined for an Easy-Bake Oven in which to make my very own magical concoctions, but sadly, Santa ignored my culinary aspirations (also, my request for a Barbie Styling Head and Wonder Woman Underoos). So I pestered my mom to let me use the *real* oven until she finally relented.

I made box cakes from the time I could reach the kitchen counter. I remember my shock the first time flour exploded high into the air because I turned the mixer on too high, too fast; my cavernous disappointment the first time I tried to make a recipe without a key ingredient (baking powder, perhaps? I mean, how important could that half a teaspoon *really* be?), and it came out like warm over mud.

Still, I would bake at the drop of a hat—for our family, for the neighbor, for the neighbor’s dog, for anyone. Everyone always loved it when I baked, with the possible exception of Mom, who patiently cleaned up after me. After all, who doesn’t like dessert? Dessert to me was, and is, an ultimate expression of love—it is beyond a meal; it is beyond sustenance. It is something extra, something special that is made because someone simply wanted you to have it... More than being fed, they wanted you to be *happy*. I made the connection at an early age that sugar *is* the food equivalent of love.

I also learned that the withholding of sugar is a mighty punishment. Once, when we had a rather unobservant babysitter, I had the idea to bring a pocketful of the sparkly doodads from Mom’s jewelry box to the playground and use them to decorate my sandbox creations. Of course, once I ran off distractedly to play elsewhere, the jewelry disappeared, and suddenly I found myself in big, *huge* **ENORMOUS** trouble.

Abject, tear-stained, I waited like an inmate for my sentence. At last it came down from the powers that be: no dessert. For a *month*.

This may not sound like much to you, but believe me, it was the most effective punishment they could possibly have dreamed up. I was open-mouth *horrified*. A *month*? That was like, *forever*. I might *expire* first. Couldn’t they just cane me instead?

But watching my family eat the occasional Entenmann’s slice of yellow-sheet-cake-with-the-frosting-that-comes-right-off-in-one-piece wasn’t the worst part. The *worst* part was that this, *this* was the month of a very special event: the Indian Princess Make-Your-Own-Sundae Party.

Oh. My. God.

I had never been to a Make-Your-Own-Ice-Cream-Sundae Party, but at that time, it only sounded to me like the Best Thing in the Whole World. I was more than horrified; I was in shock. “Indian Princesses” was a YMCA-sponsored activity (and, obviously, a pre-politically correct era one at that). It was not unlike Brownies or Girl Scouts in that there were lots of craft projects and we marched

together in local parades. But the main idea of Indian Princesses was that it was a father-daughter bonding activity, so I knew it was Dad who would be taking me. Would he break down? I wondered. Wouldn't he cave just a little at the sight of so much potential happiness just beyond his adorable little Indian Princess's reach?

The answer to that, actually, was no. Although my dad is known to be a bit of a softy, I'm guessing my mother prepped him in advance: no dessert means...No. Dessert. End of story. I sat and watched all my friends *and* their dads pile bowls high with what seemed to me at the time to be just about the most delicious combination of ingredients I had ever witnessed—not *just* ice cream and sprinkles, but M&M's, hot fudge and butterscotch, even *whipped cream from a can!* AARRGGH!!!!!! I was in Hell.

Let me just tell you, I *never* touched my mother's things *again*. Ever.

Since then, a lot of time has passed; over my teenage, college, and early adult years, I continued to bake and even became interested in actual meal cooking as well. No one I knew in college seemed quite as interested in these things as I was. Most everyone I knew was content to be spoon-fed whatever was trucked in to the myriad dining halls we had on campus. I insisted on going off the meal plan and doing my own food experimenting in the dorm mini-kitchen across the hall. While my floor mates were discovering Jell-O shots or arguing over their Dungeons and Dragons powers, I was making hummus in my room, buying bulk quinoa at the co-op downtown, and trying to figure out how to devein shrimp on top of my bedspread. When the apple pie I had baked from scratch for a friend's birthday was stolen from the communal fridge, I was beside myself. Stolen!! Pie tin and all—*gone*. Pinching money I could almost understand, but food? *Dessert?* *A birthday* dessert!?! Did the barbarians have no *humanity*?

Of course they didn't. We were talking about young adults whose idea of gourmet cuisine was mozzarella sticks from the Hot Truck. From an early age, I was long out of step with my peers when it came to my passion for food.

At the same time, I've been extremely lucky in life never to be in real need of losing weight, so all the food fads have come and gone without my feeling the need to pay much mind. The Low-Carb Diet, the Low-Fat Diet, the Atkins Diet, the South Beach Diet, the Blood Type Diet, the Eat All the Liver and Pistachios You Want Diet...I ignored them all. The only one that grabbed my attention in the late nineties was the popular Sugar Busters diet, which dictated that followers give up refined sugar and white flour.

"Why not just give up eating!?!?" I would scoff to myself whenever an acquaintance would profess to have lost "a ton" of weight on Sugar Busters. I was annoyed. I was *offended* at the suggestion that my cakes and pies—*my* cakes, *my* pies—made from scratch, with *love*, could be harmful. Harmful! "That is all going too far. What, are we never supposed to have *fun* anymore?"

Seriously. What harm could possibly be done by enjoying *dessert*?

¹Wait, what did we eat our slices with? 'Cause that was the crux of the story—I had no fork, right? Honestly, I have no idea. Maybe we used spoons? Our fingers? Chopsticks?

OUT OF THE OPIUM DEN

“How did this thing, this spice, sugar, become a staple? How did something that ought to be like saffron, a rare thing to add, become the thing we build on? How did a whole way of cooking creep up from sweetness?”

—White House Pastry Chef Bill Yosses²

The morning I watched the YouTube video “Sugar: The Bitter Truth,” my brain caught fire.

“Hey, Eve, come watch this! You’re gonna want to see this!”

My husband was calling to me from upstairs. There was a video posted on Facebook with some doctor droning on about sugar and health. *Well, how compelling can this be?* I thought. But Steve had watched several minutes of it and was transfixed.

So we watched it together for about twenty minutes. My husband left to go to work while I stayed and watched it to the end, ninety minutes total. Ninety minutes, as it turned out, that would change my life, and the life of our family, forever.

Dr. Robert Lustig is an unassuming-looking fellow with a medium build, gray hair, and a laser-like focus. He’s good with PowerPoint and is comfortable throwing about phrases like “multivariate linear regression analysis.” As “Sugar: The Bitter Truth” opens, he stands at a lectern in an anonymous-looking hall, looking every bit like that professor whose chemistry lectures put you to sleep every time. You’d never suspect that a ninety-minute educational lecture from this man could generate some three and a half million hits, but that’s just what happened.

“I’m going to tell you, tonight, a story,” Lustig begins. “By the end of the story, I hope I will have debunked the last thirty years of nutrition information in America.”

In the first seventeen minutes, Lustig calmly drops facts like precision bombs:

- As a society, we all weigh *twenty-five pounds more* than our counterparts did twenty-five years ago.
- The world is now experiencing an epidemic of obese *six-month-olds*.
- Even as our total fat consumption has gone down, our obesity has continued to *accelerate*.
- The combination of caffeine and salt in soda is purposefully designed by soda companies *make you drink more*.
- Simply drinking one soda per day is worth fifteen and a half pounds of fat gain per year.
- Americans are currently consuming *sixty-three pounds per person* of high-fructose corn syrup per year.

But it isn't until minute twenty that Lustig throws down the gauntlet:

“My charge before the end of tonight is to demonstrate that *fructose is a poison.*”

That's right—a *poison*. And fructose is in sugar—all kinds of sugar.

I was hooked. I was astounded. High-fructose corn syrup is bad? Well, sure. We all suspected that anyway. Table sugar too? Um...*okay*. But *honey*? Maple syrup? Agave? *Fruit juice*? Yep. Yep. Yep.

What the hell was going on here? Why, with his charts and graphs and soda company conspiracy theories, was this guy seeming to make so much *sense*? And if it made so much sense, why hadn't we ever heard this information before? Fruit juice is *poison*? What happened to “fruit juice is *healthy food*”? And “honey is good for you because it's *natural*”? Why not just tell us everything we've ever been told about nutrition is fundamentally *wrong*? It reminded me of that part in the movie *Sleepy Hollow* when the guy who's been asleep for two hundred years starts requesting wheat germ and organic honey, and his doctors remark that thinking those things were healthy is “precisely the opposite of what we now know to be true.” Could it be that our entire culture has become one great big Woody Allen joke?

Was it really true, as Lustig put it in one interview, that our culture was the modern-day equivalent of an opium den? Everywhere I looked, I realized, people were sick; they were overweight, they were obese, and they were unhappy. Everywhere I looked, I realized, there was sugar in all its myriad guises. Could it be that we were really all just addicts sucking away at our soda-straw hookahs, never making the obvious connection between our “drug” of choice and our rapidly declining health? Most of all, the question I couldn't let go of was: in a society as awash in sugar as ours, how *do* you escape from the opium den? Is it even *possible*?

And then I got an idea. An awful idea. Right then, I got a wonderful, awful idea.

What would happen... I wondered.

If.

I thought about it. And thought about it. I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was as if someone had spilled seltzer on the keyboard of my brain: it was sizzling and spitting and making very strange humming noises that only I could hear. Forget a lightbulb above my head; this was an acetylene torch. I realized I had better talk to Steve.

If my husband thought I was completely out of my mind, he hid it well. Instead of being horrified or dismissive, he seemed intrigued if a bit apprehensive.

“A *whole year* without sugar?” he wondered aloud. “Hmm.”

Yes. This was my idea: the whole family—myself, my husband Steve, *and* our two daughters, ages six and eleven—we would not eat added sugar for a *whole year*. The more I thought about it, the more sense it seemed to make. Why *not shun sugar*, specifically fructose? Find out how hard it really would be?

I was a writer, after all, and I had been looking for a new project to focus on. I had seen *Super Size Me*, and I had read *Animal Vegetable Miracle* and *Julie and Julia*—all projects by people who might not have been experts per se, but who had an overwhelming desire to do something unusual, something out of the mainstream—and perhaps, in the process, come to some unforeseen conclusion.

about themselves and the culture we live in. They all involved food. They all involved a proscribed time period. That was key: I knew I'd never get everyone on board for this project unless the experiment had a definitive beginning and a definitive ending. A yearlong timeline was long enough to really *mean* something, to represent a true commitment and shift to a whole different way of doing things. Maybe even long enough to see some potential changes in ourselves develop. Would our temperaments change? Our waistlines? Our blood work? Our palates? And yet, still, it wasn't *forever*.

At that point, I knew we didn't go so much as a single day in our house without having some form of sugar or other, perhaps not even a single meal, so this experiment was pretty much guaranteed to wreak all kinds of unpredictable havoc with our lives. I loved it.

I would start a blog and write about what happened, the day-to-day events that were bound, I thought, to be interesting or surprising, or frustrating or funny. The writer in me loved the idea of searching out the answers one by one like a kitchen-cupboard Sherlock Holmes. Not just for ourselves but for others as curious as I was. Had anyone done this before? Could we really do it? What would actually happen? Would we all be abjectly miserable for twelve months? Would we all grow thin and haggard for lack of cheerful sweetness in our diet? Would we develop superhuman levels of health and agility, able to leap tall boxes of Bran Flakes in a single bound? Would we secretly hoard candy in our shoes and cupcakes in our sock drawers? And oh, God, what about *Halloween*? And *Christmas*??

Well, I reasoned: *There's only one way to find out.*

Now I can hear you saying, "But wait a minute! That was quick. Didn't you put up a fight for your beloved sugar? Didn't you go for at least a *dip* in the river of Denial?"

Well, perhaps I should back up.

Up until the year of the experiment, we—myself, my husband, and our two daughters, Greta and Ilsa—were a *fairly* normal family when it came to food, I think. Perhaps a bit on the liberal, organic-dirt-worshipping side, but nevertheless, still *fairly* middle of the road. We ate meat. We liked snacks. We liked desserts. When the circus came to town, we'd throw caution to the wind and purchase big fluffy balls of electric-pink cotton candy despite all our better judgment. Life is short, I reasoned, and although I have my requisite worried-Vermont-mom concerns, (hormone-free beef? GMO corn pesticides in the potatoes?), I tried to keep them in check. I didn't want my kids growing up being afraid to *live*.

We had come to this particular, carefully balanced point after a fair amount of dietary experimentation, especially before the kids were born and we had time for such nonsense. I had been a steadfast vegetarian of varying shades and colors over a period of two decades, and my husband had dabbled in the vegetal arts as well, although rumor has it he did it to impress a certain girlfriend who turned out to be me.

Once we were good and married, Steve began, over time, to reveal his carnivorous side. I did most of the cooking around the house, so vegetarian still remained the house rule, if not always that of its inhabitants.

What I didn't realize when Steve and I wed was that I was inheriting a family nutrition expert as well: Bill, Steve's father. Perhaps *expert* isn't quite the right word for someone who changed his mind

so frequently, and sometimes radically. *Obsessive* might be closer. He was a man possessed by the idea of superior health and the use of nutrition as a means to that end.

Bill, who passed away a few years ago, was a vegetarian before people even knew what that was back when health food stores were fringe operations frequented and operated by folks who still thought communes might be a really good idea. But Bill Schaub was no long-haired hippy; he was trim, clean-shaven lawyer who rose over a period of decades to become Regional Director of the National Labor Relations Board and be conferred the rank of Meritorious Executive in the Senior Executive Service by President Bill Clinton. I try to picture him walking into the Toledo-area granary shop in his fresh-pressed suit, his aftershave clashing with the smell of patchouli and wheat grass.

In one favorite Bill Schaub story, he grew a mustache. (Of course he did! It was the seventies.) This development coincided with the peak of his interest in the nutritional value of mangos and his decision to import boxes of the fruit himself, which of course resulted in his brown mustache turning bright orange from the sheer volume of fruit that passed his lips.

There are lots of Bill Schaub anecdotes like this, illustrating not only his passion and single-mindedness when it came to the subject of nutrition and food, but also his mercurial nature—one year it was mangos, the next it would be something else. When we had Greta, while other people were sending us *The Poky Little Puppy* and *There's a Wocket in my Pocket!*, Bill sent us *Disease-Proof Your Child: Feeding Kids Right*. He had a subscription to *Dr. Shelton's Hygienic Review* and *The Chinese Study* was his idea of some light evening reading. The first time I heard about the Atkins diet was when Bill went on it. After thirty years as a vegetarian, he woke up one morning and would suddenly eat nothing but meat, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Steve is his father's son and inherited from him not only an attentive attitude toward food and nutrition, but also the ability to endure strange and restrictive diets. He is also a former marine, and that generally means he can be his own best drill instructor. I've watched him try water diets, egg and meat diets, vegetable diets, various vitamin regimens—you get the idea. So far I've been able to talk him out of fasting, which Bill turned to also—once for a distressing period of over two weeks (albeit in a supervised setting).

The one diet Steve and I tried together was the MacDougall Plan, which, as I recall it now, was comprised primarily of eating brown rice with brown rice on top. I wandered around all day dreaming about grilled cheese sandwiches and yogurt. "Have an apple!" Steve would cheerily suggest when I complained of feeling hungry in between meals. I lasted about two days.

So, between Steve and his father, I now knew more than I ever wanted to know about food fads and nutrition crazes. I was tired of extreme eating that was supposed to be The Answer to everything from having more energy to curing cancer. I wanted my family to eat healthily but in a way that was psychologically sustainable.

FEAR OF FOOD

Food and I have always had a very complicated relationship, in part due to my father's obsession with diet and health, so when Eve began talking about *A Year of No Sugar* for our family, it sent my mind and emotions into a bit of a dark flashback to my own confused childhood with regards to food.

My father was a very intellectual man and always looking for the perfect diet that would provide a life of good health free of disease, most of all cancer. Some of my earliest childhood memories of my dad are of him fasting, eating LOTS of lettuce, and taking my brother and I to the local health food store for fresh fruits and vegetables. The time he took us to see *Star Wars* at the movie theater, I wasn't very excited at first, because I figured he was probably taking us to a lecture on the virtue of broccoli or something. He bought reverse osmosis water in enormous jugs and talked about the benefits of shark cartilage. He tried weird hobbies no one had ever heard of like yoga and organic gardening. Over the years, his diet slowly ranged the entire map of food extremism as he read new books and nutrition literature: one day he'd be eating only vegetables and standing on his head in the living room, the next he'd be eating only meat and talking about Russian strength training. This was my dad.

My mother, on the other hand, loves snack foods and always worked very hard to be a buffer from my father's sometimes-obsessive dietary diatribes. While Dad did his own thing, for the rest of us she cooked regular, Midwestern meals: meat, vegetable, starch. Her chocolate pudding desserts as an after-school snack were loved by both my brother and me, but we knew they needed to be finished, without a trace of them in the fridge before my father was home from work. Don't get me wrong, my father was not some food-controlling tyrant, but rather he felt he could save us from all the bad stuff out there, from the health consequences a poor diet would create in our lives. It was love in the form of carrots and lettuce.

So when my father was diagnosed with cancer at age fifty-nine, I could not help but feel that so much of his life had been built on a belief that had betrayed him. Good food makes you healthy. The sacrifice of not eating a particular snack or type of food would be outweighed by a better quality of life and longevity. Had he been wrong? Despite all his efforts, all his studying of nutrition and all the dedication to one plan of eating or another, he nonetheless came down with the one disease he feared most.

Even after the diagnosis, though, my father refused to give up on his belief in the power of nutrition and extreme eating, which was probably very important, since his belief in the healing power of modern medicine was shaky at best. He listened to his doctors to a point but put his true faith in what he ultimately decided was the perfect anticancer diet: a grueling regime of liquefied lettuce, large slices of watermelon, and the occasional plain, baked sweet potato.

Perhaps it really did help prolong his life—after the initial diagnosis of stage four non-Hodgkin's lymphoma he would live another five years—but if so, it was at a tremendous cost. This new diet would require an effort beyond all the others which had preceded it and would alter our relationship with him for the rest of his life. During these years, visits were difficult. Meal preparation took a significant portion of every day: shopping for, washing, drying, and finally juicing fields of fresh lettuce into kryptonite green drinks. Traveling and eating out were all but impossible. We supported his need to have a sense of control over his own life and made the best of a very difficult situation—what else could we do? We loved him.

In the end, like so many who suffer cancer, my father died a horrible death. I will always feel sadness thinking about the separation from his family members and friends that his relationship with food created throughout his life.

So it was with this history rooted deep within me that I heard my wife's suggestion with a sense of both curiosity and panic. Eve is a very, very levelheaded woman. I knew for her to suggest such a radical idea, especially with her knowledge of my father and his longtime history of food fears, meant that this was terribly important to her. We have had a strong marriage—at that point thirteen years and counting. For even longer than that time, she has been my best friend, my partner, and my greatest advocate for my work as an artist. How could I not support her now?

After weeks of talking and conferring with professionals that we were not going to wreck our children's childhoods or create a fear of food in their lives—as still exists to some degree in mine—I cautiously gave my vote to do the project. Eve was already full-steam ahead.

Meanwhile, we nonetheless found ourselves members of a larger community increasingly rife with dietary restrictions, both voluntary and otherwise. Unlike when I was growing up, when it seemed my kid-eyes as if pretty much everyone ate pretty much everything, these days we have many, many hyphenated friends: we have gluten-free friends for whom I never remember to leave the noodles out of the soup. We have organic-only friends who raise and slaughter fifty-two chickens every fall—once for every week of the year. We have vegan friends and local-only friends and nut-free friends and lactose-intolerant friends. We have friends for whom I can't figure out what is left for them to eat beyond cardboard and paste. Sometimes it's voluntary, other times decidedly not, and most often the necessity of such restrictions falls murkily somewhere in between, as in, "No, I haven't been diagnosed with celiac/lactose intolerant/digestively opposed to purple, but I just *feel* so much better when I avoid wheat/cheese/eggplant and grapes." You can understand why all the etiquette experts are repeatedly queried by anxious hostesses about how to deal with so many different potential guests who

1. can't eat
2. won't eat
3. would rather be boiled alive than have it suggested they consider eating

...so many different things.

And did I mention we live in Vermont? Home to back-to-the-landers, experimental-living arrangements, and more massage therapists than you can shake a stick at? I have seen more god-awful things put forth on plates in the name of healthful sustenance than I care to recount here, but suffice to say that the jicama-and-zucchini salad is *never* as good as you hope it will be. I'll never forget when Greta was little and a fellow mother was incidentally describing how her kids were playing with the regular breakfast of "tofu and carrots," and I had trouble listening to the rest of the story. *Seriously?* I thought. *Tofu and carrots* for breakfast? Should we all just have our taste buds commit hara-kari *right now?*

Then again, because Vermont is still part of America, the *other* side of the spectrum is also everywhere around us too; you could call it modern-day Caligulanism. Greta, at age eleven, regularly came home from school regaling me with tales of her classmates' trips to Pizza Hut and McDonald's and ice cream for dessert every night. I myself had been dismayed to witness kids bringing armloads of Lunchables and Snackwell's and whole liters of Mountain Dew on school field trips. One day at the supermarket, I stared in open-mouthed horror at the cart of the woman in front of me who was buying nothing but sugar in a variety of different colorful packages: soda, sports drinks, Kool-Aid mixers, pudding cups, frosted cereals. Though we lived in the same town and she had a small child in tow, just like me, I marveled at how different our two carts could possibly be, as if we came from two different *planets*. Or species.

So, long before the fateful day when I sat down and began to watch Dr. Lustig's medi-mercial, I had already given the question of how one should best eat a considerable, really *inordinate*, amount

thought. What is the best path to follow, in between eating everything and eating nothing? Where do our family fall, between the McDonald's folks and the tofu-and-carrots-for-breakfast folks? Between worrying all the time and never worrying at all? Many was the time I had felt that there were so many different parameters that I felt morally, ethically, and nutritionally compelled to obey that following them all at once would likely mean making our family's diet a full-time unpaid job. Organic? Free range? Hormone-free? Local? Eco-friendly packaging? Non-genetically modified? Free of laboratory-born, unpronounceable ingredients? And what about pasteurization versus raw? Were we even allowed to *care* whether it tasted good? The more we know, the better off we are *supposed* to be, but the unvarnished reality was that the more I knew, the more frustrated I was guaranteed to be at the supermarket.

I had been looking for the Occam's razor solution (to badly paraphrase, "The simplest answer is usually the correct one") to the problem of modern eating. After reading Michael Pollan counsel with Zen-like simplicity, "Eat Food. Not Too Much. Mostly Plants," I decided this was the closest I'd heard to something sustainable that made sense. From that point on, I positioned myself as a concerned mom who cares about what her family eats *within reason*. If the supermarket didn't carry free-range meat, I'd grudgingly buy the regular chicken. If I couldn't find nice-looking apples that were organic, I'd buy the local ones that weren't. I'd visit the farmer's market and try hard to buy local, but I would surely buy a jalapeño from Mexico if it meant I could make my turkey chili that night. You couldn't be Mary Practically Perfect Poppins all the time, so I gave it my best shot and then let it go. You might call it the "happy medium, dammit" approach.

And then, one day, I became aware of a disturbance in the natural order of things.

I distinctly remember the first time it came up. We were planning Greta's fifth birthday party, and one of the mothers had asked about the ingredients of my cupcakes. I rattled them off easily, confident there would be no objections to my from-scratch home baking: flour, sugar, baking powder, vanilla—

"Oh, *vanilla*," she stopped me. "Ariella can't have vanilla. It has corn syrup in it. It makes her *crazy*."

"Corn syrup?" *Really? What an odd thing to bother worrying about*, I thought. Although the mother assured me that it was in "*everything*" and that her daughter became erratic and hyperactive anytime she consumed anything with this ingredient in it, I was silently skeptical. After all, this was not some Day-Glo impostor from the "bakery" aisle at the supermarket; this was *home* baked! Made with *love*. As far as I was concerned, homemade food was health food. Period. Wasn't that what Michael Pollan had effectively said?

Later on, I came to realize that what my friend had been talking about was, in fact, *high-fructose corn syrup*. And about three milliseconds after making that connection I began to notice that, well, yeah, HFCS was everywhere, actually. Pretty much every time I read an ingredient list on a box, *there it would be*, like an annoying ex-boyfriend who can't take a hint already. *Huh. Well, that is a little weird*, I thought. And then suddenly, out of nowhere, high-fructose corn syrup was coming up in conversations, people were talking about it in wide-eyed, "Oh, but haven't you *heard*?" tones. HFCS, it seemed, was fast becoming the Area 51 of the food world: prone to controversy, conspiracy theories, and eventual dismissal by most of the couldn't-be-bothered population at large. Yet, right then, at that moment, it seemed that the "couldn't be bothereds" were shrinking, and the conspiracy theorists were

gaining. Overnight, commercials and magazine ads appeared featuring attractive moms duking it out over whether containing high-fructose corn syrup *meant* anything. Suddenly, products began tout their lack of it on packaging: “Made with Real Cane Sugar!” which really meant: “No Mysteriously Chemically-Sounding Potentially-Maybe Bad Stuff!” Entire websites cropped up devoted to promoting high-fructose corn syrup’s nutritional evil or innocence.

It seemed that the reason people were so quickly and easily freaked out was based exclusively on the fact that we had suddenly—as a culture—all come to the simultaneous realization how *everything* this stuff was. Americans can put up with a *lot* of stuff, as long as they have at least the illusion of a choice in the matter; here, the supermarket illusion of choice had been revealed to be no choice at all—there was no escaping demonic-sounding “HFCS.” Ooo! It was as if the food industry had made our decisions for us, overnight, at some questionable warehouse on the outskirts of town, and we were all waking up the next day realizing it after the fact. They seemed to be saying to us: *or so you want to buy bread at the supermarket? Crackers? Salad dressing? You say you’re too busy to make these things yourself at home? Well, we’re businessmen; we can be reasonable. Listen—we’ll gonna make you an offer you can’t refuse...*

I was skeptical, though. Just like acai berries are magically *good* (never mind why), high-fructose corn syrup is magically *bad* (never mind why)? Yet, like many concerned consumers, I just didn’t like the *sound* of it. What the hell *was* it? Why was it everywhere? Why was it so hard to find crackers or cereal or even *bread* without it? How much of this stuff were we eating, anyway, without ever having realized it? And what was wrong with using sugar or honey or something, you know, more *natural*? So, based on this oh-so-highly-scientific analysis of the facts, our family abruptly stopped buying products containing high-fructose corn syrup. There were still plenty of other things to buy, and it only entailed a *bit* more label reading. Michael Pollan advised buying food products with no more than five ingredients anyway, so we tried to stick to that too. We made our bread at home with local honey; we bought raw sugar for homemade cookies and pies. And once again, we felt like good people who cared about what our family ate.

For a while.

²Adam Gopnik, “Sweet Revolution,” *The New Yorker*, January 3, 2011, 51.

A SWEET POISON

And so it came to pass that our author watched the ninety-minute video by Dr. Robert Lustig. And the words of the prophet burned with the light of truth in her eyes. She was not blinded, nay, but she was truly perturbed. And she saw with a new vision, that the vile substance which, yea, had brought pestilence and disease in its wake, was indeed everywhere. And she was totally freaked out.

Here's the thing. I'm never going to be confused for a doctor or a nutritionist, or anybody who has credentials of any sort, really. I'm pretty much *not* the person you'd ask to explain any medical theory of any kind. It's okay—I *know* I'm not the next Sanjay Gupta, and I can live with that.

But our family had decided to *not eat added sugar for a year* (the parameters of which I promise to explain in detail in the chapters to come), and it's important to understand that this wasn't simply whim or a fun, kicky idea or even a masochistic challenge. Rather, it was really and truly the result of being *convinced*, in a fundamental way, that **sugar is everywhere, it's making us all fat and sick, and almost no one realizes it**—and then wanting to do something about it. Something *real* that would demonstrate to us, and others, what it entails to get away from sugar.

You know the commercial where the one smart, concerned-looking mom is making the other moms feel really stupid for avoiding high-fructose corn syrup? “Whether it's corn sugar or cane sugar, your body can't tell the difference” is the industry tagline. The funny thing is, they are right.

In “Sugar: The Bitter Truth,” Dr. Robert Lustig explains that, contrary to popular opinion, high-fructose corn syrup is *not worse* for you than ordinary table sugar; it's simply *equally bad*. The reason? Because of the *fructose*. And here is where the argument becomes tricky. When you stop talking about sugar and start talking about *fructose*, and bringing out words like *ghrelin* and *leptin* and *antidisestablishmentarianism*, people start to glaze over and get fidgety. Tell them that *fat* makes you *fat*, or *carbs* make you *fat*, or foods that are *beige* make you *fat*, and people listen, remember, and believe. But tell them that fructose fails to suppress ghrelin? Not so much.

Consequently, what follows is my best attempt to summarize the not-always-so-very-straightforward argument as to what sugar (fructose) does in your body (bad things) and why it is such a scary thing (it's killing us). As our project began to unfold, I would come to rely heavily on the arguments of two important no-sugar advocates who understand biochemistry a lot better than I ever will: the aforementioned Dr. Robert Lustig, professor of Pediatric Endocrinology at UC San Francisco and David Gillespie, author of a very interesting book published in Australia titled *Sweet Poison* (Statistics from other sources such as the CDC or JAMA are cited.)

So without further ado, let's unveil our Handy Dandy Cheat Sheet:

How Fructose Makes You Fat and Sick

1. *All sugar contains fructose.*
2. *Fructose does not satisfy hunger, so you eat more food than your body needs.*
3. *Fructose may not be used by any of the cells in our body, except the liver.*
4. *In processing fructose, the liver produces bad things: **uric acid** and **fatty acids**.*

Too much **uric acid** causes:

5. Gout
Hypertension

Too many **fatty acids** cause:

6. Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD)
Cardiovascular Disease (CVD)
Insulin Resistance & Type 2 Diabetes
Obesity

The clustering of two or more of the four conditions above is called **Metabolic Syndrome**. Virtually unheard of only a few decades ago, *one in five Americans* suffers from it today.

8. *Additionally, circulating **fatty acids** have been proven to speed the growth of cancer cells.*
9. *Consumption of fructose has risen 341 percent in the last century and continues to climb.*

So what do you call something that our body has no need for and that, when we take it in, creates toxic by-products in our bodies resulting in debilitation, disease, and untimely death? Well, doctors call that a *poison*.

That's a lot to swallow all at one time, isn't it? But let's take it point by point:

1. All sugar contains fructose: Name a sugar, any sugar: table sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, maple syrup, molasses, agave, evaporated cane syrup, honey, fruit juice, powdered sugar, brown sugar, crystalline fructose, and so on. In each, the sweetness has been extracted from the original sources, be it fruit, beets, maple sap, honeycomb, or sugar cane.

In most sweeteners, the sweetness comes from a combination of both glucose and fructose. Percentages of fructose in sweeteners vary: both table sugar and HFCS are roughly half fructose, half glucose, whereas supposedly healthy agave contains up to 90 percent fructose. Now here's an important part: Glucose is Good. Glucose is what your body, and all living things, use to transport energy through the body and is what Lustig refers to as "the energy of life." It is the inability of the

body to access that *good* glucose that results in diabetes, but more on that in a minute.

2. Fructose does not satisfy hunger so you eat more food than your body needs. Once upon a time our bodies only encountered fructose in tiny amounts from seasonal fruit. Not only was that fruit fairly hard to come by, but lots of fiber and micronutrients necessarily came with it, thereby helping to balance any potential negative effect of that small amount of fructose.

Problems would only begin to arise about seven thousand years ago, when humans got a bright idea. One day, after enjoying sucking on stalks of sugar cane for centuries, people decided to start *extracting* the best part. The resulting sweet sap became wildly popular of course, so much so that folks who didn't have ready access to the sugar cane began experimenting with other things toward a similar end, such as extracting the juice from a particularly sweet variety of beets. Nonetheless, these were labor-intensive processes and sweeteners would remain prohibitively expensive for some time. It wouldn't be until the industrial age that sugar would suddenly and irrevocably begin a downward spiral in price, and correspondingly, people began adding it to more and more things. Finally, in 1970 HFCS arrived on the scene as the ultimate cheap ingredient—made from government-subsidized corn and used as filler in everything from lunch meats and soup to baby formula.

Unfortunately for us, however, fructose does a very funny thing biochemically speaking, something we couldn't have begun to notice until huge volumes of people began consuming huge amounts of this stuff over long periods of time. Fructose, as it turns out, exploits a loophole in your body's carefully orchestrated ballet of hormones: fructose does not suppress ghrelin (the hunger hormone) *nor* does it stimulate insulin or leptin (the full-feeling hormone). You get the fructose's *calories*, of course, but *you are still as hungry as if you hadn't eaten them*. So you keep eating.

Here's a scary instance of what this really means in practice: studies have shown that a teenager who drinks a soda before a meal *will eat more* at that meal,⁴ not less—and in our culture, of course, that likely means you will eat *more sugar*. Talk about a vicious cycle.

Now imagine if our country's food system were dominated by eating, say, cardboard. We all found cardboard unbelievably delicious, so we crushed it up and put it in *everything*. Only trouble being that cardboard isn't something our body needs or wants, so it doesn't register with our hormones—it doesn't make us feel full. So we keep eating it and eating it. Our bodies have to do something with all that cardboard, so we all start growing “cardboard bellies,” all the while wondering why we are always so hungry, why it is always so hard to lose weight. This is what fructose is like.

Except it's worse. Because—

3. Fructose may not be used by any of the cells in our body, except the liver. Another key indicator that our body wasn't built for lots of fructose consumption is the fact that we have no receptors for it—no cells have “Welcome, Fructose!” mats on their doorsteps...quite the contrary. Most of them have hand-lettered signs reading: “Fructose Not Welcome Here” and “We Don't Speak Fructose.” Consequently, while only 20 percent of calories from glucose end up in the liver, the rest having been absorbed and used along the way in our digestive system, *all* fructose—100 percent of its calories—must go to the liver to be processed, just like those of toxins. And just like with toxins, there in the liver, many things happen—all of them bad, as we shall see.

Lustig compares the effects of fructose to those of a toxin we know and love: ethanol (alcohol). A comparison of the symptoms of chronic alcohol consumption to those of chronic fructose consumption reveals that they share *eight out of twelve* disorders, fun things like pancreatitis and dyslipidemia. He concludes that “fructose is ethanol without the buzz” and asserts that giving your kid a soda—or juice—is the metabolic equivalent of giving your kid a *beer*. So, how scary is that?

4. In processing fructose, the liver produces *bad things*: uric acid and fatty acids. As with toxins when the liver has to process fructose, it creates some not-so-terrific things to have in your body. In great enough amounts, those not-so-terrific things cause specific, identifiable problems that get progressively worse over time. For example...

5. Too much uric acid causes:

Gout—Characterized by attacks of acute inflammatory arthritis, gout used to be known as the “disease of kings” or “the gentleman’s disease” because primarily the wealthy suffered from it. Remember: sugar was expensive up until only about one hundred years ago.

Hypertension—Uric acid blocks an important liver enzyme that is your body’s in-house blood pressure lowerer. According to a 2010 report by the CDC, *25 percent* of the total U.S. population over age eighteen is diagnosed with hypertension.⁵

6. Too many fatty acids cause:

Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease—Cirrhosis of the liver: it’s not just for alcoholics anymore. NAFLD,⁶ just like the alcoholic version, results from the accumulation of fatty tissue in the liver that creates inflammation and scar tissue. Previously unheard of, *nonalcoholic* fatty liver disease was identified and named in the 1980s,⁷ yet it is estimated that *up to 24 percent* of the U.S. population now suffers from it.⁸

Cardiovascular Disease—Hypertension, Angina, Heart Attack, Stroke...know anyone with one of these? Unfortunately, CVD is all the rage these days, accounting for *one out of every four* American deaths in 2009.⁹ Heart disease is the leading killer in the U.S. today.

But here’s a counterintuitive news flash: *fat doesn’t cause heart disease*. Sugar does. In one particularly illuminating moment in “Bitter Truth,” Lustig explains that there are not one but two forms of what we call “bad” cholesterol or LDLs (low-density lipoproteins): “large buoyant” and “small dense.” When your LDLs are measured, they measure both kinds together, but in fact, it is *only* the small, dense LDLs that get stuck in the walls of our blood vessels, beginning the formation of plaque and causing cardiovascular disease. Guess what raises the large buoyant LDLs, the *good* LDLs? Dietary fat.

On the other hand, the small dense LDLs? The *bad* guys? Those are raised by carbohydrates. When the low-fat craze of the 1980s hit, and food processors began coming out with low-fat versions of all their products, what carbohydrate did they use to replace the great taste of fat? Why, sugar, of course. So in addition to all the obvious sugar—the soda, the candy bars, the Hostess Fruit Pies—we also have an entire universe of hidden sugar, in things that aren’t even sweet and in places you’d never suspect—sugar in our gravy, salad dressings, sauces. Sugar in our tortellini and chicken broth and baby food.

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