

How To Lose Weight and Remain Italian?

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Marc's Lenten Promise: Since I am overweight, and unwilling to give up bread and pasta, I find myself stuck. How do I lose weight and remain Italian? Step one: give up candy bars for Lent. Step two: start taking long walks across a suburban, strip-mall filled Staten Island Landscape. Step three: avoid the mentally ill people who are the only other ones who live in the suburbs and don't drive.

Probably the most fun part of any family reunion is that one glorious moment when a relative you haven't seen in years does a double take when he sees you and lets you know in no uncertain terms just how fat you've gotten since the last family reunion.

"Whoa! I guess they've been keeping you well fed back home, huh?!?"

My great Uncle Rocky was the DiGiorgio relative who most loved to inform people just how



poorly they were doing on his personal fitness barometer. As it happened, Rocky was always in solid physical shape, so it was hard to find a good rejoinder whenever he zinged you. It was always easier to get back at my mom's friend Mario, who would constantly inform people they were fat when he was not exactly svelte himself. But Rocky's "observations," on the other hand, could be deadly.

On one memorable occasion, Rocky told my Cousin Anthony, "Anthony! When are you gonna start losing some weight already, here?"

"I did lose some weight since the last time you saw me," Anthony replied.

Rocky was incredulous. "You lost some weight? Must have changed scales!"

Rocky got my brother really good during one family reunion six years ago. Brian has never quite forgiven him.

I was at my heaviest during the time I graduated with my master's degree from the College of Staten Island. I had not been monitoring my weight, and had been eating a lot of chicken quesadillas out with friends at Perkins and Applebee's at 10 or 11 o'clock at night, not thinking of the consequences. So I was in for a rude awakening when I got my graduation photographs back from K-Mart only to discover that I no longer had a photographable neck and that all the features on my face seemed to have disappeared.

My worst fears were confirmed not long afterwards when I went to the movies with my friends David Litvinov and Griffin Reilly. I had to get up during the film to go to the bathroom, and I had trouble squeezing past David to get to the aisle. Annoyed that I was blocking his view of the film, David complained, "Marc, I came here to watch Eyes Wide Shut, not My Big Fat Italian Stomach."

A week later, I still had the phrase "My Big Fat Italian Stomach" in my head. I was furious with David, but I knew he was right. I was too heavy. I needed to do something about it. But what?

The Atkins Diet craze was not yet in full swing, but it was gathering enough steam that a few of my friends were on it. Griffin, for example, had lost something like twenty pounds on Atkins. Then he gained it all back. My friend Smiley [his real name was Demosthenes Margaritis, which was too hard to say] lost thirty pounds on Atkins, and gained it all back. So Atkins didn't seem to work. It certainly didn't work well for me. For one thing, I've never been as big on meat as other men. So the idea of eating a plate of bacon every day for every meal didn't sit well with me. For another, I had been a bread, rice, cheese, and pasta man all my life. That's all I like to eat. I am the carb king. But one thing all the fad diets seemed to have in common was the elimination of all breads and pasta as step one. Since they all shared this feature, I decided that fad diets were, in essence, anti-Italian. And the last thing I would do is embrace a diet that was prejudiced against my Mediterranean ancestors.

So I decided to start small. Instead of eliminating all carbs as step one, my first step on the Marc diet was to eliminate all candy bars.



This was surprisingly hard to do.

To make it easier, I gave up candy bars for Lent, so if I happened to cave and get a candy bar, I was not only hurting my waistline ... I was hurting Jesus.

I lost two pounds during Lent.

After Lent ended, I decided I would give up eating after dinner. And, if I got hungry at 10 o'clock at night, I would have a small cup of tea, but no food. This was difficult to do, as I often liked to make myself eight ravioli at 10:30 each night as I sat down to watch a DVD.

But, three months later, I had grown accustomed to step two. I was getting used to disciplining myself. And I had lost five pounds.

I was very excited about this, and told my friends Smiley and Griffin that I had lost five pounds.

Smiley, who was at least as fat as I was, if not more so, was unimpressed. "Five pounds! That's nothing to celebrate. I lose five pounds every time I take a crap."

"That's a revolting thing to say," I grumbled.

"The most revolting thing about it," Griffin cut in, "is that he's probably not saying that for effect. He's probably telling the truth."

For step three of my diet, I decided that I needed a little bit of exercise, so I signed up for a once-a-week tennis class with Griffin as my instructor. I wound up being respectably mediocre at tennis and Griffin was a wonderful tennis instructor.

I lost another five pounds.

Then I remembered a diet that I could actually embrace. I hadn't heard about it much lately, but a few years before the Subway franchise had made a name for itself by hyping the Subway diet. Apparently, a really heavy dude named Jared Fogle had taken it upon himself to walk several miles to Subway each day, eat a Subway sandwich with no fixings or mayo, and then walk home. After a decent interval doing this, he wound up super thin. He told Subway his story, and they were so delighted that they made him their spokesman, and he became rich and famous. (I think this is what happened. I haven't done extensive research on the Subway Diet, so I might be wrong.) Anyway, as an added bonus, I hadn't heard anything scandalous about him gaining all the weight back. So I decided that I would do a Marc variant of the Subway diet. It wouldn't be exactly the same, because I decided that I hated wasting money eating out. And I wouldn't want to do it every day. And,



knowing me, I would need to bribe myself to give myself incentive to do all that walking.

This is what I came up with ...

Three times a week, I would walk five miles to the nearest Blockbuster Video, buy a DVD, then walk home and make myself a bowl of Cheerios without adding any sugar. After Cheerios, I would read one of the books required for my next comprehensive exam, and crawl my way ever closer to a PhD in English literature from Drew University. It was Marc's Blockbuster Video diet. It worked very well for a while. I would walk in the dead of winter, in the freezing cold, up steep hills, grunting all the way, to get the opportunity to buy *A Bronx Tale*, or some other such film. If I was ever feeling lazy, and wanted to drive to Blockbuster instead of walk, I would punish myself by not allowing myself to buy a film. One time, when I was feeling particularly reluctant to walk, I drove to Blockbuster Video. Then I realized that a digitally remastered special edition of *Roman Holiday* had just been released on DVD.

But I couldn't buy it because I hadn't walked to Blockbuster.

I hadn't earned it.

So I drove home, put on my hat and scarf, walked back to Blockbuster, and bought the film.

After three months of this walking to Blockbuster, not eating candy bars or eating after dinner, and playing tennis once-a-week, I had lost thirty-five pounds. And I was still eating pasta like there was no tomorrow. So I had my pasta and ate it, too.

Unfortunately, by the time the following spring had arrived, my enthusiasm for Marc's Blockbuster Video diet had died down considerably. First, there was the monotony of it. I was getting really tired of Woolley Avenue

. I tried to vary my route, but, unlike Rome, there were only so many roads that led to the Forest Avenue Blockbuster. And I couldn't find an alternative destination that was as appealing. And Blockbuster itself was losing its luster, because, by that time, I had purchased all the movies they kept in stock that I liked. I was now faced with either buying a film I didn't like, like *The Matrix* – which I felt that I should consider buying just because it was widely loved and I should have it in my collection as a landmark American film – or buying a film that was pretty good, but not a must-own – like *Spinal Tap*. There was a period of time when I kept walking to Blockbuster, picking up the *Spinal Tap* box, feeling its weight in my hand, considering whether or not it was worth \$14, wondering if it would ever go on sale, putting it down, and then walking home, without having purchased anything. I looked at that box on many a day. And I have still, to this day, not purchased *Spinal Tap*. But I may at some point.

It was not long afterwards that I finally stopped doing my long walk. And the last straw was that, now that the weather was getting better, I was starting to bump into other people who were on foot. You see, I had done most of my walking during the fall and winter months, and no one ever



walked anywhere during wintertime in the suburbs. If they had to walk one block to the deli to get a morning coffee and a bagel, it was too far. High gas prices be damned. They were not walking to that deli in that cold. But, come springtime, other pedestrians started to appear. And, while that might sound like a potentially good thing – like I would finally have an opportunity to make new friends and to be social – it wound up being a bad thing, because the warm weather brought all the crazy people out of hiding.

The first crazy person I met was a wide-eyed dumpy woman selling plastic crosses and cologne outside of Dante Tuxedos. As I walked past her, she yelled after me: “Do you wear cologne?”

“Yes, but I have plenty right now.”

“Would you like to buy some cologne?”

“No, thank you.”

“Have you taken Jesus Christ into your heart as your Lord and Savior?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to buy a plastic cross, then?”

Something about this woman bothered me, so I hurried away. I realize that she might not come off as particularly crazy in this narrative, but trust me, she was a nut-job.

I was horrified when I saw her stationed outside of Blockbuster Video the following week. It was bad enough seeing her in front of Dante Tuxedos. There she was, guarding my favorite destination. I really didn’t want to see her any more.

The following week, I decided I would choose a completely new destination. On my new route, I discovered a florist on Victory Boulevard I hadn’t noticed before. I was enjoying the outdoor display of carnations when a burly man with an unbuttoned shirt marched up to me, waving his fist in the air. “You! Never speak to me again! Never!” He stared at me for a long moment. He drooled on himself. And then he marched away.

I was getting concerned that I had two bizarre encounters in a row and complained to Griffin about them.

“I’m just trying to get some exercise, you know?”

“There’s a reason people stay indoors all day watching tv and never go outside,” Griffin said.



"But it can't be that bad. There can't be that many crazy people running around. Why me? Why are they picking on me?"

"The crazy people like you, Marc. You're the only one who listens to them. No crazy person would ever try to talk to me. They'd take one look at me and know that I wasn't interested in buying any cologne or plastic crosses."

I thought I would try walking one final time. And I would return to my original route, undeterred. I walked to Blockbuster, poked around, bought nothing. Then I started home. It was a lovely day, sometime around noon. A Tuesday. I walked past a 7-11 with a gas station attached to it. A slim blonde woman standing near one of the gas pumps waved to me as if she knew me well. I couldn't recognize her from that distance, but I assumed she knew me and I stopped to greet her. She approached me quickly. By the time I realized that she was a glassy-eyed stranger, it was too late. We were about to have a conversation.

"Driver!" she yelled. "Driver! It is you, right?"

"Um, no," I said.

"You're the one who's driving us to the Catskills, right?"

"No," I said. "Really, I'm not."

She pulled close to me and said in a hushed, fearful voice. "They're in 7-11. They don't know that you're here yet. They don't know that we're talking. They think I'm waiting in the car."

"Oh," I said. "They are?" I was beginning to participate in the conversation. At this point, Griffin would have already begun walking past this woman, so he probably has a point about me.

"There's two of them," she said.

"Oh."

"And they have a syringe with them."

Now I was kind of scared. "Really? A syringe?"

"They're going to wait until you get in the car, and they're going to inject you with a juice that will knock you out," she said. "Then they'll tie you up and take you away with them. And you won't be able to stop them from dissecting you. Or killing me."



"Well, then I better get away before they come back out." I started to walk away.

"Take me with you!" she pleaded.

"I really have to go," I said.

"We can steal the car and drive off together."

While I must admit to finding the romanticism of the film *Bonnie and Clyde* appealing, there was nothing remotely titillating about stealing a car with this particular woman and driving west with her.

"And while we're in the car, and we make our getaway, we can drive away from here on the New Jersey Turnpike," she continued. "And we'll get hungry. And we'll need to stop at a rest stop. And there'll be a Burger King there. And I won't have money for a Whopper. So, can you give me five dollars for a Whopper meal now so that I'll have the money ready to buy it later when we get there?"

So that was it. She was a panhandler. Like ones I'd met during my adventures in Manhattan. Only they didn't provide such elaborate back stories. They just got right down to it and asked for "fifty cent."

"I don't really know," I said.

"Please."

I took my wallet out, careful to keep it some distance from the woman. I had three dollars on me, which I reluctantly offered to her. I said, "This may not be enough for a whole meal, but you can order three things off the Dollar Menu."

"Thanks, driver."

Then I walked away.

"Driver!"

I kept walking.

"They want your spleen, driver! They want your spleen!"

After that day, I stopped my regular constitutionals. Somehow, the fun had gone out of it.

By the end of the year, I had lost a total of forty pounds, and was reasonably in shape. But I



had also gained a great many DVDs, suggesting that I had only replaced one out-of-control-appetite with another. So, despite my newfound physical health, my financial health was in jeopardy and my immortal soul remained destined for Dante's Circle of the Gluttonous in Hell.

Still, the experience, overall, was a positive one, and I remain proud of my achievement. I even managed to keep the weight off for a year-and-a-half before gaining it all back. So I stayed thin for longer than my friends on the Atkins diet.

Unfortunately for me, once I gained the weight back, I started to hear the running commentaries again. David, Smiley, and Griffin sometimes remark sadly on the fact that I used to be thinner, but they aren't quite as rude about it as they had been in the past. But my friend Ursula let me have it recently. When my wife Stacey and I met her for dinner last Christmas, Ursula looked at me and clicked her tongue.

"Marc, remember a few years back, when you were thin ... and you wore contacts ... and you dressed well ... and you looked good?"

"Yes," I said, wincing at her significant use of the past tense.

"You know, I think you should revisit that."

As with last time I was a bit heavy, and David complained of my big stomach, I have had Ursula's words in my heads for months now.

Maybe I should revisit that.

Maybe I should find a new version of the Marc Blockbuster Video diet.

I'm still unwilling to give up pasta, but there are steps I can take. I've taken them before.

Or maybe it is too much to jump right to stage three of my old diet plan. Too soon to start up with long walks. Maybe I can start simple. A decisive, non-overwhelming first step.

I can give up candy bars for Lent.

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