Food for Thought, Please

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At the grocery store yesterday, I had three elderly women ask me if I ever ate anything. This, I thought, was the most reasonable and polite inquiry one could make to a complete stranger in a grocery store. I myself, hours earlier at the library, asked a gentleman in the periodicals section if he had ever heard of the concept of reading. He looked at me funny. I guess not. Maybe that was why he was in the periodicals section.

Why is it old women have this obsession of whether or not I get enough to eat? They never offer to feed me, regardless on how I answer. I once told one of the old ladies that I had spent all of my food money on my little brother’s leukemia medicine, hoping to gain her pita, I meant pity. She told me

I shouldn’t spend all of my cash on drugs.

I wasn’t skinny all of my life. When I was born, I weighed over eleven pounds, and even now, I weigh at least three times that amount. However, by elementary school my lack of weight problem started to get the attention of my classmates.

In first grade, I was surprised to find out the social hierarchy of Mrs. Kenzlie’s class was not determined by who could spout off the most trivia about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or even on who knew how to read. Rather, much to my dismay, I found out that popularity and football skills were synonymous. And even though I could tell you Michaelango’s favorite pizza toppings (pepperoni and mushrooms), I couldn’t name a single player on the local squad. Not to mention the fact most of the footballs my classmates used weighed more than I did.

Nevertheless, I was determined to win the favor and admiration of my classmates. I would become the best football player in the school, I thought. My scrappiness would actually serve as an advantage on the field. Not only would it help create a false sense of confidence in my opponents, my diminutive size would allow me to squirm out of tackles and grabs. I figured the best strategy would be to imitate a squirrel as much as possible, not only because I didn’t know anybody who has ever caught a squirrel, I figured it could also frighten my opponents out of tackling me. I didn’t want to be tackled. It looked painful.
When we were dismissed for recess, I lined up by the wall with the rest of the boys, sizing them up. One of my classmates, aptly nicknamed “Beef” stared back at me menacingly. I chittered back as fearsome as I could, and spit out one of the nuts I had stuffed in my cheek pouches at lunch. It landed near his feet. He stared at me before moving to the far end of the line. My plan was working already, and we hadn’t even stepped onto the grass. This football thing would be a snap.

I was picked last. But this didn’t bother me at all; I mean, they always saved the best for last, right? Why else would they pick the kid with crutches before me?

The grass was still wet from the morning dew as end zones and boundaries were declared. The two trees on the one end of the field would serve as end zone boundaries, and for the other team, the space in between the delicate gymnasium windows would function as the goal. This arrangement was fine by me, although it made me believe for the next seven years or so that football was always played on a trapezoidal field and that one team was forbidden from kicking field goals for fear of breaking the goal posts.

The kickoff (which was, confusingly enough, thrown) actually ended up coming my direction. I twitched my whiskers and prepared to scamper up the nearest tree. Were rabid squirrels feral or tame? I couldn’t remember. In any case, I caught the ball effortlessly. It was the grand piano that came soon afterwards that was harder to catch.

Beef had decided to take it upon himself to personally teach me why the other skinny kids in our class were usually found anywhere else than the football field during recess. Like in the infirmary, where I planned to stop by as soon as I dug myself out of the pile of anvils I swore toppled on my frail body. The football slipped out of my hand and I slipped out of consciousness, leaving me to dream about rodents and running backs.

Beef’s tackle may have ended my football career prematurely, but it certainly didn’t provoke me into any heavy lifting or cause me to “eat all of my greens” growing up. As a result, I was still the skinniest kid in my class by the time middle school rolled around. In elementary school, watching the kids play football from high up in a tree, I had longed to be in a place where trivial matters such as height and weight meant little. I wanted to live in an intellectual community, where I could discuss literary classics such as “Maniac Magee,” “Ender’s Game” and “My Teacher Fried My Brains” with my peers. Middle school, I thought, would be the answer to all of my prayers. Plus, I would get my own locker.

I soon found out middle school wasn’t the utopian society I had made it out to be in my head. There were more kids to deal with, and the vast majority were of the “I can punch anyone I want” type rather than the “Sure I will help you get your lunch money back, Alex” type. There were girls, of course, but they too were different. They never wanted to play Ninja Turtles anymore. Come to think of it, nobody aside from myself wanted to play Ninja Turtles (which was a travesty, for who would rid the world of the evil Shredder?). In addition, having
your own locker wasn’t so hot when you were locked inside it, as I often was.

Being locked inside your own locker is kind of like what I imagine solitary confinement to be like in prison; if you don’t focus on the positives you’ll go mad. Just as death row convicts probably think to themselves, “finally, some time alone to focus on my poetry!” I found myself trying to portray my scrawniness in a positive light. “At least the coat hook isn’t digging into a fat roll,” I mused to myself. And I got to miss class, which was usually nice. Unfortunately, I was missing P.E., where we were in the middle of a ping-pong unit. I liked when we played ping-pong because my small hands were useful for retrieving the balls when they went under bleachers or down the various grates in the gymnasium. The joke’s on them, I thought in the darkened locker, they won’t last twenty minutes without me. They’ll be back, begging for my combination, pleading for my skilled hands. “We are sorry!” they would cry, beseeching me for forgiveness, “How can we get our table tennis fix without you?”

Unfortunately it was not a teary-eyed, snort-ridden jock who let me out, but rather my mother, who worked as the secretary for the disciplinarian’s office. After hearing suspicious breathing noises in the hallway, a student had reported the incident to her. “Why were you stuck in your locker?” she asked me accusingly, as if I had accidentally wandered into the coffin shaped enclosure looking for drugs or something. “I was taking a nap,” I lied, hoping to convince her that I was merely a slacker, not a wimp. “I was tired. We are in the middle of a very grueling and aggressive ping-pong unit in P.E.”

In any case, soon enough, my time in purgatory ended and I was a freshman in high school. Most people I talk to now hated their freshman year of high school, but as for myself, I loved it. First off, the lockers were much smaller and I had grown somewhat, and while I was still the smallest kid in the class, I would be hard pressed (literally) to fit into a locker. Also, freshman year marked the year of my very first date with a willing female.

Her name was Laura Neuder and she was a friend of the family. Sure, she had two feet on me on every axis, X, Y and Z, but her hair was pretty and she was nice and most importantly of all she didn’t circle the “no” option on the note I had my friend give her after homeroom one day. We agreed to go to the homecoming dance together with a couple of our friends. I was determined to show her a good time.

Since we were fourteen, her parents had to drive us around on the night of the big dance. Dr. Neuder’s (perhaps the most aptly named veterinarian in the world, with the exception of one Dr. Ihelpssickanimals) giant Suburban and daughter made me feel very small, and I had forgotten a telephone book to sit on or stuff down my shirt. I could see why girls stuffed their bras. Having a barrel (or a telephone book) for a chest helps self-confidence. And judging on how nervous I was listening to her father speak of my apparent lack of eating habits, it was clear not only did I lack a barrel for chest, it would be hard to convince Laura that I even had a moderately sized cup down my collared shirt.
and vest combo.

"You eat anything ever, boy?" Mr. Neuder's thumblike head rotated necklessly on his shoulders. "I mean, you're awful skinny."

"Awful" skinny? Why not "awesome" skinny? You would think being saddled with such an unflattering noun would at least justify a pity adjective. Awful is, well, awful.

"Yeah, I'm pretty skinny," I replied, not elaborating on my eating habits, partially because I didn't think it was any of his business, and partially because I would prefer him staring at the road instead of me. I could just imagine the cop at the scene of the accident. His eyes would be a steely blue and he would be shaking his head sadly as the flames from the wreckage provided a dramatic backlight. "It appears there were two of them; and we also found what we think is an arm or something in the back seat, resting on a charred phone book. Such a terrible waste."

At dinner, I made it a point to eat as much as possible, in order to convince her my skinniness was more attributed to my hamster-like heart rate rather than a lack of food intake. Spaghetti, fish, bread, chicken fingers, I ate the weight of my head in food. And I had a big head. This meant that most of my contribution to dinner conversation was limited to the phrases "mhmmm," "glrrrhph" and "how come they only give you one napkin?"

At the dance, the additional food weighed down my already clumsy body. On top of that, I did not have any previous dance experience. Dancing (if you could call it that) next to Laura, I resembled an injured grasshopper hopping around a molehill. It was ridiculous. It wasn't as bad as the slow dance, where a casual observer could have mistaken us for a girl hugging a stuffed animal. At the end of the evening, I wanted to give her a kiss goodnight, but unfortunately I hadn't had the foresight to bring a stepladder with me. She hugged me and that was that.

I am in college now, and I am still skinny. But, unlike my traumatically bizarre years growing up, college isn't so bad at all. Sure, I get some angry glances from elderly women in the grocery store from time to time, but much to my surprise, I get some not so angry at all glances from young women elsewhere. Somewhere along the line, pop culture went insane and has embraced skinny guys in recent years. Women appreciate my default six pack, which I've had since middle school, due to my lack of fat. Maybe my body is finally trying to apologize for years of causing me abuse.

I feel that being thin has defined a large part of my personality and sense of humor. Maybe if I wasn't stuck in that locker, I wouldn't know any good locker jokes. Well, scratch that, I still don't know any good locker jokes. But, regardless, as I look in the frozen food aisle for something to eat for dinner later tonight, and old Mrs. Gunther scowls at me from across the freezer, maybe I will pick out something low fat, just to see what she will say. Hey, I'm just going to throw it up anyways, right?