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Written by Stephen Fry

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by
Stephen Fry

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Work is more fun than fun
Noël Coward

I really must stop saying sorry; it doesn't make things any better or worse. If only I had it in me to be all fierce, fearless and forthright instead of forever sprinkling my discourse with pitiful retractions, apologies and prevarications. It is one of the reasons I could never have been an artist, either of a literary or any other kind. All the true artists I know are uninterested in the opinion of the world and wholly unconcerned with self-explanation. Self-revelation, yes, and often, but never self-explanation. Artists are strong, bloody-minded, difficult and dangerous. Fate, or laziness, or cowardice cast me long ago in the role of entertainer, and that is what I found myself, throughout my twenties, becoming, though at times a fatally over-earnest, over-appeasing one, which is no kind of entertainer at all, of course. Wanting to be liked is often a very unlikeable characteristic. Certainly I don't like it in myself. But then, there is a lot in myself that I don't like.

Twelve years ago I wrote a memoir of my childhood and adolescence called *Moab is My Washpot*, a title that confused no one, so clear, direct and obvious was its meaning and reference. Or perhaps not. The chronology

took me up to the time I emerged from prison and managed somehow to get myself accepted into university, which is where this book takes up the story. For the sake of those who have read *Moab* I don't mean to go over the same ground. Where I mention events from my past that I covered there I shall append a superscribed obelus, thus: †.

This book picks up the threads and charts the next eight years of my life. Why so many pages for so few years? It was a late adolescence and early manhood crowded with incident, that is one answer. Another is that in every particular I fail Strunk's *Elements of Style* or any other manual of 'good writing'. If a thing can be said in ten words, I may be relied upon to take a hundred to say it. I ought to apologize for that. I ought to go back and ruthlessly prune, pare and extirpate excess growth, but I will not. I like words – strike that, I *love* words – and while I am fond of the condensed and economical use of them in poetry, in song lyrics, in Twitter, in good journalism and smart advertising, I love the luxuriant profusion and mad scatter of them too. After all, as you will already have noticed, I am the kind of person who writes things like 'I shall append a superscribed obelus, thus'. If my manner of writing is a self-indulgence that has you grinding your teeth then I am sorry, but I am too old a dog to be taught to bark new tunes.

I hope you forgive the unedifying sight of my struggle to express some of the truths of my inner self and to measure the distance between the mask of security, ease, confidence and assurance I wear (so easily that its features often lift into a smirk that looks like complacency and smugness) and the real condition of

anxiety, self-doubt, self-disgust and fear in which much of my life then and now is lived. It is a life, I suppose, as interesting or as uninteresting as anyone else's. It is mine and I can do what I like with it, both in the world in the real plane of facts and objects and on the page in the even more real plane of words and subjects. It is not for me to be so cavalier with the lives of others, however. In much of my life from 1977 to 1987 people appear who are known in the public world and to whom I cannot give convincing pseudonyms. If I told you, for example, that at university I met a man called Lew Horrie and that we embarked on a comic career together it might not take great insight or too much Googling on your part to know that I was writing about a real person. It is not for me to go blabbing about his life and loves, personal habits, mannerisms and modes of behaviour, is it? On the other hand, were I simply to say that everyone I met in my journey through life was darling and gorgeous and super and lovely and talented and dazzling and sweet, you would soon enough be arcing streams of hot vomit all over the place and in every probability short-circuiting your eBook reader. I don't doubt for a minute that my publishers have already made it clear in the small print of the contract I signed with them that I, the author, am responsible for all lawsuits appertaining to, but not restricted to, emetic and bodily fluid damage to electronic reading devices in this and all territories. So I am sailing between the Scylla of protecting the wholly reasonable privacy of friends and colleagues and the Charybdis of causing you, the reader, to sick up. It is a narrow course, and I shall do my best to steer it safely.

These pages deal with some of the C-words that have dominated my life. Before the chronology of the chronicles commences, let me catalogue a couple more Cs. To put you, as it were, in the mood . . .

C is for $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$

. . . for Cereal
. . . for Candy
. . . for Caries
. . . for Cavities
. . . for Carbohydrates
. . . for Calories

Shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy
William Wordsworth, 'Intimations of Mortality'

To care about my body would be to suggest that I had a body worth caring about. Since my earliest years I felt nothing but shame for the useless casing of flesh I inhabit. It couldn't bowl, bat or catch. It couldn't dance. It couldn't ski, dive or leap. When it walked into a bar or club it didn't attract lustful glares of desire or even faint glances of interest. It had nothing to recommend it beyond its function as a fuel cell for my brain and a dumping ground for toxins that might reward me with rushing highs and reasons to be cheerful. Perhaps it all comes down to breasts. Or the lack of them.

While it is true that I was once a babe I was never, I think, a suckling. I have no memories of being clamped to the nipple and believe myself to have been bottle-fed from the beginning. There are psychologists schooled in this tradition or that, whether Kleinian, Freudian, Adlerian, Jungian or Insertnamehereian I cannot say, who hold

that the Tit or Teat issue has a significant, even crucial, bearing on human development. I can't recall whether the theory suggests it is the denial of mother's milk or the over-abundant supply of it that stores up problems for later life. Possibly both. A lot of bosom pressed into your face at a tender age and you could grow up with a Russ Meyer or Jonathan Ross breast fixation. Nothing but bottle to suck and you develop a horror of bosoms. Or a propensity towards drink in general. Or perhaps the other way around. All absolute poppywash, of course. False mammary syndrome. There are plenty of brothers and sisters, identical twins even, fed on the same infant diets, who have turned out different in every particular – except the irrelevant one of physical appearance. My brother and sister were treated just as I was in infancy, and we could not be, fortunately for them and the world, less alike. So let us suppose that the vices and weaknesses that I am going to tell you about now are peculiar to me and were bestowed upon me at birth along with the moles on the backs of my legs and the whorls on the pads of my fingers. Which is not to say that I am uniquely alone in the possession of these weaknesses. Far from it. They might almost be called the failings of my generation.

Once we get beyond milk, whether breast or formula, we move on to the hard stuff. Solid food. Pappy spoonfuls of apple sauce and beef casserole are pushed into us until we can wield cutlery for ourselves. One of the first and most forcible ways in which a child's character begins to express itself is through its attitude to food. In the late 1950s and early 1960s food meant breakfast cereal and sweets. I was one of the first wave of infants to be exposed to child-targeted advertising. Sugar Puffs were born, as was I, in

1957. That cereal, which no one could pretend had any ambition to be eaten by adults, was represented, a decade before the arrival of the Honey Monster, by a real live bear called Jeremy. He led a busy life being photographed for the carton and filmed for television commercials until he was finally retired into private life, ending up, after a short period at Cromer Zoo, in Campertown, Dundee, where he died peacefully in his sleep in 1990. I visited him at Cromer, the first celebrity I ever saw in the flesh, or in the fur, and believe me, what the A-listingest Hollywood babe or pop idol is to a child now, Jeremy the Bear was to me then. You have to understand the passion, the love, the greed and the need.

Sugar Puffs were pellets of wheat that had been puffed up under heat and coated in a syrupy and slightly sticky fructose and glucose glaze. All you had to do to enjoy their glory was to pour on cold milk. Hot milk was possible for winter days, but it created a soggy bowlful closer to soup than cereal. Besides, hot milk that approached boiling point could form a surface skin, and a skin on milk caused me to vomit. To this day the sight or smell of boiled milk makes me keck and puke. I am put in mind of the cock tales they tell of Cocteau's cocktail parties. They say that Jean Cocteau, to amuse his friends, could lie back naked on a table and bring himself to full ejaculatory orgasm without touching himself, through the power of imaginative thought alone. I have a similar gift. I can make myself vomit by picturing skin on hot milk, custard or coffee. We can both make hot fluids spit and spurt from our bodies. I can't but feel that Cocteau's party piece is always likely to be more in demand than mine.

The breakfast table was where the seeds of my sorrow

were sown. I am sure that I am right in locating my first addiction here. Sugar Puffs were the starting link in a chain that would shackle me for most of my life. To begin with, as you might imagine, they were a breakfast habit. But soon I was snacking on them at any time of day until my mother began to sigh at the number of packets she was forced to buy. I would eat the sweet pellets loose from the box. One after the other, without stopping, into the mouth they would go. I was like an American at the cinema with popcorn: eyes glazed, hand rising and falling pack-to-mouth, pack-to-mouth, pack-to-mouth like a machine.

'Eyes glazed'. Is that important? A child at the breast or bottle has that look. There is a sexual element to such unfocused fixity. Until I was about eight or nine I sucked the first two fingers of my left hand. Almost all the time. While twiddling the hair on the crown of my head with the fingers of the right hand. And always with that glazed, faraway look, with parted lips and laboured breath. Was I giving myself the breast treat that I had been denied? These are dark waters, Watson.

Cereal-packet lists of ingredients and serving suggestions were my literature; thiamine, riboflavin and niacin my mysterious invisible friends. Sold by weight not volume. Contents may have settled during transport. Insert finger under flap and move from side to side. They're Gr-r-r-r-r-r-r-eat! We like Ricicles, they're twicicles as nicicles. And so they were. In fact, as I liked to say, they were *thricicles* as nicicles. Certainly much nicicler than their staid, unsweetened parent, Rice Krispies, the cereal that said, if you listened carefully, Snot, Pickle and Crap. To have Rice Krispies when you could have Ricicles, to have Cornflakes when you could have Frosties. Who

could imagine such a dull life? It was like deliberately choosing to watch the news on television or preferring to drink unsweetened tea. I lived for one thing and one thing only. $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$. Perhaps this is why I should have been American, for they have sugar everywhere in the United States. In bread, in bottled water, in beef jerky, pickles, mayonnaise, mustard and salsa. Sugar, sugar, sugar.

My relationship with this beguiling and benighted substance is complicated. I should never have been born if it weren't for sugar, and yet it came close to killing me too.

I told elsewhere† the story of the role of my mother's father in bringing sugar to Britain. I latterly found out more as a result of taking part in the BBC's genealogy programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* My grandfather Martin Neumann came to Bury St Edmunds (not to praise him) all the way from the land of his birth, which was originally Hungary, although the 1920 Treaty of Trianon later absorbed his home town of Nagysurány into the newly expanded Czechoslovakia. For the purposes of history, however, he was from Hungary. A Hungarian Jew, as he liked to observe, is the only man who can follow you into a revolving door and come out first.

He came to Britain at the invitation of the Ministry of Agriculture in Whitehall, whose more far-sighted functionaries realized that if there was, as seemed increasingly likely, to be another world war the Atlantic would almost certainly be cut off, as it so nearly had been at the height of the German U-boat threat of 1917. The West Indies and Australia would be out of reach, and there would be no sugar for the British cup of tea, a

disaster too horrible to contemplate. Britain was entirely without native sugar capacity, its farmers never having grown a single beet, its industrialists never having refined a single ounce. Back in Nagysurány, now Šurany, my grandfather had been the manager of what was then the largest sugar refinery in the world, so he seemed like a natural candidate for British recruitment. In 1925 he and his brother-in-law Robert Jorisch came to build Britain its first sugar beet refinery in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, where it stands to this day, emitting a rich and bitter pong faintly reminiscent of burnt peanut butter. Had Martin and his wife and family remained in Šurany they would, being Jews, have been exterminated in the Nazi death camps, as were his mother, sister, parents-in-law and the dozens of other family members who stayed in Europe. I should never have been born, and the paper or digital display technology that has gone into the production of the book you are now reading with such unalloyed pleasure would have been put to other uses.

So sugar gave me life, but it exacted a price – slavish adherence. Addiction to it and an addiction to addiction in addition.

Sweetened breakfast cereals were one thing, and relatively harmless at that. Weekly boxes of Sugar Puffs, Ricicles and Frosties would be ordered by my mother over the telephone and delivered along with the rest of the groceries by Mr Neil, who always called me 'young man' and who drove the van for Riches, the little store in the village of Reepham, which lay some two or three miles away from our home hamlet of Booton. Men like Mr Neil no longer exist; little stores like Riches no longer exist.

As a result of Mr Neil's weekly deliveries, I could eat almost as much breakfast cereal as I wanted without having to spend any money. My sugar hit was free. Of course it was. Why wouldn't it be? I was a child who lived in a house where there were always Sugar Puffs in the cupboard. Perfectly normal and natural. All this changed when at the age of seven I was sent to a Gloucestershire preparatory school almost exactly 200 miles from our Norfolk home.

My introductory morning at Stouts Hill, for such was the school's name, presented the first in what was to be a long line of disappointments. After a night of homesick weeping and lonely hiccupping I had awoken to the bumptious din and frightening mystery of an alien institution going about its daily rites.

'You! What are you doing? You should be in the refectory,' a prefect shouted at me as I caromed panic-stricken down random corridors.

'Please, what's a refectory?' A picture of some kind of medieval punishment chamber arose in my terrified mind.

The prefect grabbed me by the shoulders and steered me down a passageway, and down another and finally through a door that led into a long, low dining-room crowded with loudly breakfasting boys sitting on long, shiny oak forms, as benches used to be called. He marched me to one, prised two boys apart, hoisted me up and wedged me into the space between. I sat there blinking with frightened embarrassment. Timidly raising my head, I saw that there was cereal available. Cornflakes or lumpy cooked porridge. Of Sugar Puffs, Frosties and Ricicles there was no sign. I might make the claim that life was never the same again, that trust, faith, hope, belief and

confidence died in me that day and that thenceforward melancholy marked me for her own, but perhaps that would be pitching it a touch strong. Nonetheless I was shocked. Was there now to be no sweetness in my life?

The school did have one institution that counterbalanced the troubling deficiencies of the refectory. 'Tuck', as you may know, is an old-fashioned English school slang word for sweets. What Americans call candy. While I had encountered sweets before, of course I had, they had usually come in quarter-pound bags scooped from large glass jars in Riches or Reepham Post Office. Pear drops, sherbet lemons, toffee eclairs, humbugs and fruit bonbons: all rather dowdy, respectable and pre-war. The Stouts Hill School Tuck Shop offered wilder excitements in this, the rising golden age of confectionery. Cadbury's, Fry's (hurrah!), Rowntree's, Nestlé's, Mackintosh's, Mars and Terry's were still individual independent manufacturers. From Mackintosh's came Rolos, Caramac and Toffee Crisp, from Fry's (hurrah!), Turkish Delight, Crunchie bars and Chocolate Cream. Cadbury's gave us the Picnic and the Flake as well as their signature Dairy Milk wrapped in delicate purple foil. The Bournville giants were even then preparing to launch within one year of each other the legendary Curly Wurly and the Greatest Chocolate Bar in the History of the World, the Aztec. Nestlé's meanwhile offered us the Milky Bar, Rowntree's had the Aero, KitKat, Fruit Pastilles, Fruit Gums, Smarties and Jelly Tots, Mars had the Milky Way, Mars bar, Maltesers and Marathon. Bless my soul! I never noticed till now that the Mars products all began with M. Marathon would many years later be rechristened Snickers, of course (and I would help launch the new name by recording the

voice-over for its advertising campaign: if I had known such a thing might happen back then I might well have exploded), just as Mars' Opal Fruits would one day become Starburst. Doubtless they had their reasons. They also produced Spangles, the square boiled sweet that has become shorthand for just the kind of lazy, overwrought nostalgia in which I am now wallowing. But hang in there if you will; there is a point to all this beyond the mere fevered recitation of brand names.

The Stouts Hill Tuck Shop was open for business on different days for each of the four houses into which the school was divided: Kingfishers, Otters, Wasps and Panthers. I was an Otter, and our tuck day was Thursday. First you queued up for cash. Whatever pocket money your parents had allocated you was kept in trust and doled out in instalments by the master on duty, who recorded the withdrawn sum on your individual page in the pocket-money ledger. As the term wore on I watched in dismay as my capital dwindled away. Desperate letters were written home begging for a ten-shilling note to be sent as soon as possible. 'Please, Mummy, please. All the other boys have got enough money to last them for *ever*. Oh *please, please, please . . .*'

And so it began.

Glorious as the Stouts Hill Tuck Shop may have been, it was but a John the Baptist to the messianic radiance of the Uley village shop, unworthy to tie its red liquorice bootlaces or lick its sherbet dabs. The little post office and general stores was just half a mile from the school gates, and we would pass in crocodile formation on supervised walks through the village, turning our heads in unison towards its inviting windows like cadets honouring

their monarch with an eyes right. On the shelves of that shop gleamed, glistened and twinkled the most exotic, colourful and sugary-sweet treasure I had ever seen or had ever dreamed of. Jamboree Bags. Trebor Refreshers. Fruit Salads and Blackjacks a farthing each (that's four for one old penny). Foam shrimps. Rice-paper flying saucers filled with sherbet. Swizzels Matlow Twizzlers that fizzed and popped in the mouth like fireworks. Love Hearts. Chewy sour cola bottles and rubbery white milk bottles. Chocolate buttons sprinkled with hundreds and thousands. Strips of Wrigley's Juicy Fruit and Spearmint, boxes of Chiclets and Pez, loose cubes of Bazooka Joe and packs of Beatles- branded bubblegum, each one with a card inside that offered a picture and priceless biographical information: 'John hates marmalade but Ringo is very fond of lemon curd!', 'George is the tallest Beatle, but only by half an inch!' and other devastating and valuable secrets, all finished with the exclamation marks that remain a characteristic of fan literature to this day. On other shelves there were gobstoppers, aniseed balls and everlasting strips. Sherbet fountains, dabs and dips. Wine Gums, Wagon Wheels and Walnut Whips. Forgive the accidental rhyming. There was the much-prized Spanish Gold, pouches of yellow waxed paper with a picture of a red galleon on the front packed with strands of shredded coconut browned with chocolate powder to make it look like rolling tobacco. Liquorice curved into a Sherlock Holmes pipe, complete with bowl and stem. White candy cigarettes with red ends and rice-paper-wrapped chocolate cigarettes presented in a fake Chesterfield's carton.

All the elements were now in place. Sugar. White powder. Tobacco. Desire. Lack of money. The forbidden.

Yes, forbidden. The village shop was out of bounds to all boys. The extra sugariness of the sweets, the blindingly bright cheerfulness of the wrappers and the loutish American informality of chewing-gum and gobstoppers offended the mostly military sensibilities of the staff. The produce was all somehow just a bit vulgar, just a bit . . . well, frankly just a bit working class. Heaven knows what those same poor schoolmasters would have made of Haribo Starmix or the Kinder Happy Hippo. It is perhaps as well that they predeceased such unpleasantnesses, for I'm sure their hearts would have given out.

Seven years old, 200 miles from home and a deprived addict. There are plenty of stories of children younger than seven who are already full alcoholics or were born addicted to crack cocaine, crystal meth and Red Bull, and I am fully aware that my sugar dependency reads as tame by comparison. The fact of it is an indictment of nothing and a lesson to nobody. Nor is it satisfactorily explicable. I have given you the outline of it but that does not suggest necessary or sufficient cause for so compulsive and all-consuming an addiction. After all, my contemporaries were subjected to the same advertising, had available the same cereals, candies and comestibles and were compounded of the same organs, senses and dimensions. Yet from my very earliest consciousness I sensed with savage unswervable certainty that other people were not seized by the same rapacious greed, insatiable hunger, overmastering desire, shivering lust and terrible, hurting need that had me in its grip almost every hour of every day. Or if they were they had levels of self-control that entirely shamed me. Perhaps, I wondered, perhaps everyone but me was

strong, characterful and morally assured. Perhaps only I was so weak as to succumb to appetites that others could control. Perhaps everyone else was equally gnawed by equally keen desires, but had been granted by nature or the almighty an ability to master their emotions that in my trembling desolation I had been denied. We should consider that the atmosphere of my school, like that of any given private school in those days (and many today) quivered with righteous religiosity (today's schools quiver with righteousness without the religiosity, which is only just an improvement). You might be able to imagine then something of the spiritual torture that accompanied my more corporeal agonies. The Bible is crammed from end to end with stories of temptation, interdiction and chastisement. A forbidden fruit hangs from a tree on the very first page, and as we go through we are given more terrible lessons on how greed is punished and lust accursed until we reach the full, final and insane damnations and ecstasies of St John's Revelations, having passed through wildernesses and desert trials, locusts, honey, manna, ravens, sores, boils, plagues, scourges, tribulations and sacrifices. Lead us not into temptation. Get thee behind me, Satan. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay.

In such an atmosphere, with a physiological craving already in place, it is little wonder that guilty connections came to be made in my mind between sugar and desire and satisfaction and desire and satisfaction and shame. All this years before the even fiercer terrors and torments of sex were to make themselves known to me and carve in my heart and bowels the same pattern; gouging it, of course, with deeper and crueller cuts. I say, I *am* a self-dramatizer, aren't I?

Since 90 per cent of my schoolfellows appeared immune

to all this trauma, introspection, shame and temptation I still wonder, looking back, whether I was especially weak, especially sensitive or especially sensual.

To pay for sweets I stole from shops, from the school and, most shamefully of all, from other boys. These acts of theft were conducted, like the eating, in an almost trance-like state. Shallow of breath, eyes glazed over, I would ransack the changing rooms and desks, my insides churning with fear, elation, dread and passionate self-disgust. At night I would raid the school kitchens, homing in on a cupboard in which were stored great catering-sized blocks of raw jelly that I tore with my teeth, like a lion tearing an antelope.

I chronicled in *Moab* the occasion when I was found by a prefect to be in possession of contraband sweets, bubblegum and sherbet fountains that could only have come from the village shop.† I persuaded a good-natured little fellow called Bunce, who quietly hero-worshipped me, to take the rap. I had been guilty of so many prior transgressions that one more would result in a severe caning, whereas Bunce, who had no form and no record, would be let off with a warning. It all backfired, of course, and the headmaster saw through our little stratagem. My reward was an extra special beating for having been so wicked as to lure an innocent like Bunce into my web of sin.

The real-life Bunce and I have been in touch since the publication of *Moab*. He was very good-natured about it and reminded me of an event I had entirely forgotten.

Very early on in my school life I had told Bunce that my parents were dead.

'How terrible for you!' Bunce, always kindly, was deeply moved.

'Yes. Car crash. I have three aunts that I get handed around during the school holidays. You must swear not to tell anyone, though. It's a secret.'

Bunce nodded, a look of stout defiance on his downy face. I knew that he would sooner cut out his own tongue than say a word to anyone.

Towards the end of term, I asked Bunce what plans he had for Christmas. He looked uncomfortable as he confessed that he was off with his family to the West Indies.

'What about you?' he asked.

'Derr . . . in Norfolk with my parents, of course. Where else?'

'B-b-but . . . I thought your parents were dead and that you lived with aunts?'

'Ah. Mm. Yes.'

Damn. Busted.

Bunce looked hurt and confused.

'You mustn't mind me,' I said, staring at him fixedly, 'You see . . . I . . .'

'Yes?'

'*I say these things*.'

We never spoke of it again. Not until Bunce reminded me of it forty-five years later. He remembered the incident with absolute clarity. 'I say these things,' were, he maintains, my exact words.

Regularly caned, always in trouble, never stable, never settled in or secure, I left prep school a sugar addict, thief, fantasist and liar.

The pattern continued at my next school, Uppingham in Rutland. More stealing, more sweets. By this time

the sheer quantity of sugary food I had gorged upon was beginning to take a real and painful physical toll. Not in the waistline, for I was as skinny as a pencil, but in the mouth. Caries, cavities and cankerous ulcers were constant companions. By my fourteenth birthday I had lost five of my back teeth for ever. The need for sugar was destroying me. The rush of excitement as I stole and the rush from the sugar as I sat and feasted on my kill inevitably ended, such is the way of passion, in the crash of guilt, melancholia, nausea and self-disgust that follow all such addictions . . . sugar, shopping, alcohol, sex, you name it.

More stealing resulted in a rustication, which was the public-school word for being sent home for a few weeks: 'suspension' I suppose one would call it now. Finally the school could put up with me no longer, and I was expelled.† I had gone to London on an officially sanctioned weekend away to attend a meeting of the Sherlock Holmes Society of London, of which I was an enthusiastic member. Instead of being in London for just two nights, as agreed, I stayed away for a week, blissfully locking myself into cinemas watching film after film after film. Enough, as parents and schoolmasters never tired of saying, was enough.

Tobacco's bitter juices will soon take over the story. Once that loveable leaf had me folded in its fond embrace, sugar never had quite the same hold over me again. But there is a little more yet to tell of my troubled relationship with $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$.

As I grew to late adolescence and early manhood my loyalty to Sugar Puffs was little by little replaced with a passion for Scott's Porage Oats, made with cold milk,

but generously sprinkled, to be sure, with spoonfuls of granulated sugar. At the same time, my childhood adoration of sherbet and fizzy chews gave way to a more adult preference for that altogether more sophisticated confection, chocolate. And of course there was coffee.

It is 1982, and I am in a shabby set of rooms in London that belong to Granada Television. Ben Elton, Paul Shearer, Emma Thompson, Hugh Laurie and I are gathered there to rehearse for the first series of what will later become a TV sketch show called *Alfresco*. The title of this first series is *There's Nothing to Worry About*. I wanted it to be called *Trouser, Trouser, Trouser* but was, perhaps rightly, overruled.

We are in our early twenties and have left university eight months earlier. Everything should be wonderful in our lives, and I suppose it is. Hugh, Emma, Paul and I have won the first Perrier Award at the Edinburgh Festival for our university revue; a tour of Australia has followed. We have just come from filming that revue for the BBC and now we are about to create our very own television series.

Big sticky tins of Nescafé and boxes of PG Tips teabags stand on a trestle table at one end of the room. There is something about rehearsal that encourages the consumption of great quantities of tea and coffee. This morning, as a sketch is being run through that everyone is in except me (it involves music and dancing), I make coffee for them all and realize, as my hand goes towards the teaspoon, that I am the only one who takes sugar.

There I am, teaspoon poised over an open bag of Tate and Lyle. Suppose I were to give it up? I have always been told that tea and coffee are infinitely better without it. I look across at the others and vow there and then that

I will go sugar-free for two weeks. If, after a fortnight of unsweetened coffee, I have failed to acquire a taste for it, I shall return to my two and a half teaspoonfuls none the worse off.

I light a cigarette and watch the others. A rather splendid swell of proud elation surges up inside me. Perhaps I can do it.

And I do. Ten days later somebody hands me a coffee to which sugar has been added. I leap and start at the first sip as if I have been given an electric shock. It is the most wonderful shock of my life for it tells me that I have succeeded in giving something up. It is far from the greatest tale of triumph over adversity you ever read, but that memory of myself staring at the bag of sugar and wondering if I really could quit never left me. It was to be the one faint whisper of hope in the bottom of Pandora's box. I can still smell that rehearsal room and hear its piano. I can still see the packets of biscuits on the trestle table and the Tate and Lyle bag, some of the sugar gathered into translucent crystalline lumps from the repeated insertion of a wet teaspoon.

I saw and smelt and relived that scene once more twenty-seven years later in a room at the Hotel Colbert in Antananarivo, Madagascar. It was very, very hot and very, very humid, and I was wearing nothing but boxer shorts. An approaching thunderstorm growled menacingly, and the hotel's internet connection, flaky at the best of times, failed. As I stood up from the desk to go to the bathroom a terrible sight caught my eye.

An enormously fat man with gigantic drooping bosoms and a vast overhanging belly was crossing the

room. I checked, turned back and stared in horror and disbelief. There he was again, filling the wardrobe mirror, a comically overweight middle-aged man, as grotesquely obese as anyone I had seen since I had filmed in the American midwest the year before. I inspected the bulk of this disgusting mountain of blubber from tip to toe and began to weep.

I had spent the last quarter-century seeing myself on large and small screens and photographed in newspapers and had never been under any illusions concerning my physical appearance. But for some reason on that evening in that room I saw myself as I was. I did not shudder, cover myself up and move on. I did not pretend that everything was fine. I did not say to myself that I was tall enough to carry a little extra weight. I cried at the terrible thing I had become.

There were scales in the bathroom. One hundred and thirty-nine kilograms. What was that in old-fashioned English? I had an app for that on my phone. Twenty-one stone and twelve pounds. Holy imperial hell. Twenty-two stone. Three hundred and six pounds.

I remembered that rehearsal room in 1982. I had managed to give up sugar in tea and coffee. Now it was time to give it up in all its manifestations: puddings, chocolates, toffee, fudge, mints, ice-cream, doughnuts, cakes, buns, tarts, flans, flapjacks, jelly and jam. I would have to exercise too. It could not be a diet, it could only be a complete change in the way I ate and lived.

I won't claim that not a single grain of sugar has passed my lips since that moment of epiphanic horror in Madagascar, but I have managed to avoid such tempting patisserie, puddings, candied fruits, chocolates, ices, *petits*

fours and *friandises* as waiters present to one at the sort of restaurants in which me and my spoilt kind hang out. Combined with a regime of daily walks, thrice-weekly gym visits and the general avoidance of starchy and fatty foods, this steadfast forbearance has allowed my weight to drop to something below sixteen stone.

I have not the slightest doubt that I could easily balloon again and find myself hurtling back up past the twenty-first, twenty-second, twenty-third, twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth floors like a cartoon character in an express lift. Constant vigilance is the watchword. It is no part of my business with you to maintain that I now fully know myself, but I think I can profess convincingly that I do at least know myself well enough to be nothing but doubtful and distrustful when it comes to any claims of solutions, cures and arrivals at final destinations.

Take smoking, for instance . . .