

On January 15th, 2004 the following headline appeared in newspapers around the world, thanks to an Associated Press article: “Bill Clinton sheds pounds on ‘The South Beach Diet’”

I have not seen any pictures of the ex-president looking thin and happy, but according to news accounts he has succeeded in losing weight on this trendy new diet. Inspired by his success I decide I am going to try the South Beach Diet. I figure, he’s not exactly known, for his self-restraint. If he can stick to it, surely I can.

After convincing my husband to join me in my quest to lose 30 pounds, I buy the book. I am careful not to break the binding though, or mark it in anyway. If things don’t work out I can always return it. I may be fat, but I’m certainly not stupid.

Together we begin Phase I. Phase I is the embodiment of virtuous eating: no caffeine, no alcohol, no sugar, low fat and low carbs.

It is sheer hell.

If everyone in America ate like this, we would, as a nation, all be thinner and healthier.

Our healthcare costs would plummet. Cardiologists would be put out of work and Krispy Kreme would be trading at 1 cent per share.

But most of us would no longer be married.

Day 1

This is easy, I think, as I enjoy my first celery stick adorned with one single wedge of Laughing Cow light spread cheese. With the bravado that comes with any new health regime, I am suddenly a convert. I convince myself that I feel better already and I suggest to my husband that we should continue this first phase for three weeks rather than the recommended two.

I am in what will later be remembered as the “honeymoon” phase. Like all things termed “honeymoon,” this phase will end far too soon and leave in its wake another phase characterized by bitterness, resentment and longing for a former life.

My husband is acting like a hamster on crystal Meth, rushing around the kitchen chopping stuff – lots of green things into little pieces and cleaning lots of leafy things and putting it all in tiny containers for the rest of the week.

“When are we going to need all this? I ask, with a tinge of regret already seeping into my voice. “Why are you chopping stuff for Days 5 and 6? Let’s just make it through tomorrow,” I say optimistically and wonder silently if produce is returnable.

Day 2

I feel hungry, but not deprived. I think I can go on.

Day 3

I *cannot* go on. I am going to die. I have no energy. I am cold. I am tired.

I wake up at 10:00 a.m. I lay down again at 4:00 p.m. thinking I will take a short nap. If it is possible, I have so little energy that I can't even sleep. I just lie there and wait for death or a mistaken pizza delivery. If I could reach for my cell phone I would facilitate the latter and end this misery, but alas, I don't quite have enough strength to reach for the phone *and* continue to breathe all at the same time.

I decide I am going to eat more tomorrow.

I develop a newfound respect for anorexics. They are starving but at least functional. I am a mess.

Day 4

I cheat.

I eat the prescribed breakfast of one poached egg over steamed spinach, sandwiched between two small slices of Canadian Bacon. The Canadian bacon is what I now refer to as a "treat".

I eat my afternoon snack of Laughing Cow cheese spread on celery sticks. This, by the way, lost its charm after the very first serving. "How innovative," I thought, when I first

tried it. I never would have thought to put spread cheese on anything so healthy. I call my husband at work and tell him that the Laughing Cow stuff is much better on a baguette.

He hangs up on me.

In the afternoon, when I should be reaching for things to chop in order to sprinkle them over my chef's salad, something comes over me. I recognize it as desperation. Perhaps it's the snow that is falling outside my window or the long johns under my jeans or the fleece jacket I wear around the house in order to stay warm. Whatever it is, I am not inspired to eat like those who are presently enjoying the white sand and bright sun in South Florida. I am in Boston and it is January. I make a cup of steaming hot chocolate - with milk - both forbidden during Phase I. I sit down and drink it slowly – spoon it really – and I savor every last drop. I lick the inside of the mug and then stare at it longingly, wishing it would refill itself. When I sadly realize it will not, I quickly wash everything that touched the chocolate for fear I will be found out.

I then eat the chef salad.

Day 5

Ricotta Cheese is the only dessert allowed during the first two weeks of this diet. They have cute names for it, like “Lemon Zest Ricotta Crème,” with an accent over the e as if

it were some fine French dessert prepared by a pastry chef. It is a bowl of ricotta cheese with a lame attempt at flavor.

At first glance, I was deluded into thinking that this might not be so bad. After all, I mused, isn't ricotta cheese the stuff they put in cannolis? I *love* cannolis.

After a quick recipe search on the Internet – because that is EXACTLY what every hungry person should do – type “cannoli” into Google and see what comes up, I find out that “The South Beach Cannoli” (what I call it) is not anything like a real cannoli. There is no sugar, there is no pastry shell and no matter how hard I try to convince myself that it is, it is *not* a cannoli. It is a bowl of ricotta cheese called Mocha Ricotta Crème. You can't fool this fatty.

Day 6 Don't Ask Don't Tell.

My husband has not complained about the types of food, the lack of food, the monotony of the food or the overwhelming lack of energy.

He either has the willpower of a saint or he's cheating too. I don't want to know. We have an unspoken understanding. We don't discuss the diet – except to prepare meals or discuss what has to be chopped, steamed or broiled in order to survive tomorrow.

I assume it's the South Beach version of the slogan: what goes on in Vegas, stays in Vegas.

Day 7

I've been chewing sugarless gum whenever I'm hungry. My jaw hurts.

I have become a sugarless gum crack whore. But instead of used syringes, there are tiny little gum wrappers everywhere in my house. I have chewed through 25 packs of gum in six days. There is gum carnage on every flat surface where I have sat, walked or even leaned.

In my wake I have left endless ribbons of ripped foil wrappers, tiny little red strings and mounds of used gum, all re-wrapped, back into their tiny wax papers and laid to rest wherever I may have been when it lost its flavor and I lunged for a new piece, unable to control my addiction.

Day 8

The only way to watch TV on a diet is to tape or Tivo everything and thus be assured you can fast forward past any sort of food ads. We don't have Tivo, so we begin judicious use of the VCR. Every night is now a waiting game: waiting until the little red "RECORD" light goes off on the VCR, so that we can watch the show that just ended, without the commercials.

It is important to not even *see* the offending carbohydrates being featured in the ads so one must be very dexterous with the remote. When one of us is too slow with the trigger

and we stop, by accident, in the middle of a tollhouse cookie commercial, it leads to a horrible fight.

The next day my husband prices Tivos.

Day 9

My husband has nothing but good things to say about the diet. He has lost weight, he feels great, he has not cheated, he is sure he can continue. I am beginning to hate him.

I also want to hate this diet, but I have lost 5 pounds already. I would jump for joy, but I am trying to conserve my energy.

Today my husband called me from work to tell me that someone brought in a homemade chocolate cake and he is struggling not to have a piece. Chocolate is his favorite. I think for a minute about the appropriate words of support to help him through this moment of trial. I can think of only one thing. "Bring me a piece too," I say and hang up the phone, ashamed.

Day 10

This is the point in the diet, where I should report how much weight I have lost and how great I feel, but I haven't and I don't.

My husband and I have started having lengthy discussions about whether or not women can lose weight at the same rate as men on this diet. I am sure he's trying to make me feel better, but it's not working.

I hate the diet and I hate the man who created it. In the past day or so I have become obsessed with the idea of meeting Dr. Arthur Agatson, the creator of the South Beach Diet.

I want to visit him in Miami where it is warm and everyone is beautiful. I want to spy on him and see if he eats sandwiches made with actual bread, instead of rolled cold cuts wrapped in Romaine lettuce leaves. I want to force-feed him pasta. I have lost my mind.

After spending the morning pricing flights to Miami, I officially break my diet.

As I chew my third pack of gum this morning, while searching for low fares to Miami, I suddenly recall that there was a diet doctor killed in Beverly Hills many years back.

I hope the shooter got off, I think to myself as I reach for my bowl of mac 'n cheese.