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How *the* Terrible, Insufferable Six-Day Water Fast Made Me *a* New Man

What if there were a cure-all treatment for high blood pressure, migraines, chronic pain, arthritis, and, oh yeah, fatness? The catch: You'll be really, really hungry. **BEN MARCUS** spends a long and profoundly satisfying week on a strict diet of absolutely nothing but H₂O



DAY ONE

"HORIZONTAL IS YOUR FRIEND"

→ On my first morning at TrueNorth Health Center, the only medically supervised water-fasting clinic in America, a Dr. Michael Klaper shows up to check my vitals. He is tall and lean, with white hair and the glowing young face of the little brother I never had. He is either 75 years old and absurdly youthful or 30 with a case of premature white hair. A hunger artist? I want to see health and wellness on these premises, impossibly fit bodies with a blinding glow. Something post-human, to prove that fasting works. Dr. Klaper will do fine. He makes me think I can fast my way back to childhood. Maybe infancy. I could return home a smooth, cooing baby and see if my wife will still have me.

It's the first day of my six-day fast at TrueNorth, an anonymous-looking cluster of buildings on a quiet street in Santa Rosa, California. A water fast is not a juice fast or a honey-lemon-cayenne fast or any of the body-hacking protocols or superfood regimens, sometimes rich in calories, that are mistakenly called fasting, however cleansing they might be. This is hard-core, a diet of nothing, a full-body reboot. Dr. Klaper and his colleagues tout their regimen as a potent balm for not only weight and digestive problems but a litany of ailments that plague mankind. Detractors, including my wife, liken fasting to starvation, because without food we turn into ashen little wastrels, crying for help in tiny voices. Right?

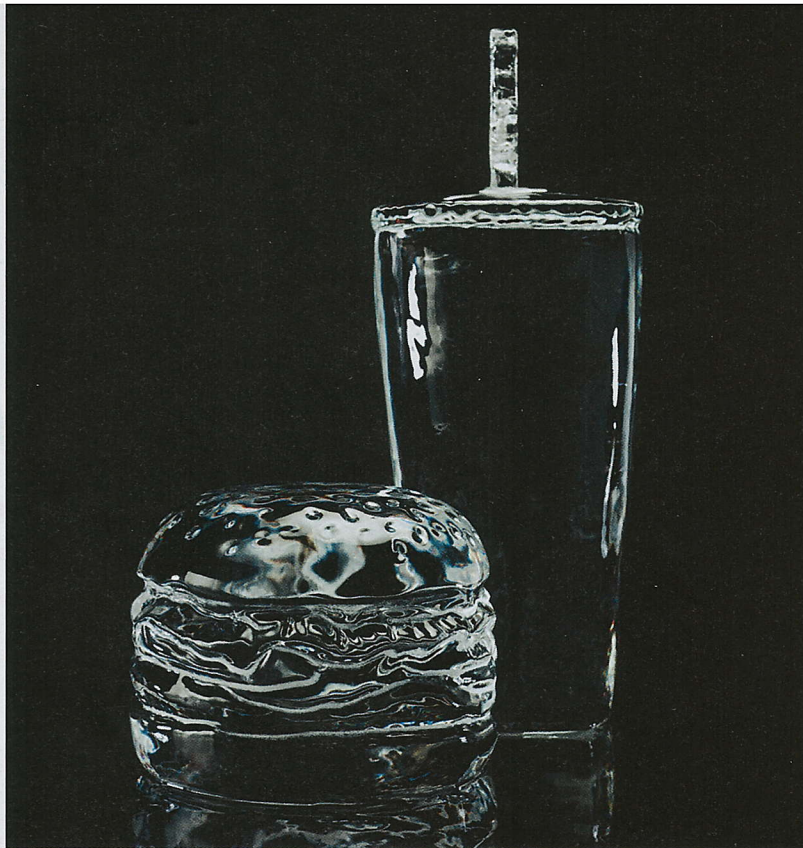


The Longest Fasts Ever

♦ **13 years.** Indian hunger-striker **Irom Sharmila** (above) has been periodically force-fed in prison since her first arrest in 2000. She is protesting paramilitary brutality.

♦ **382 days.** An obese subject from a 1973 Scottish study, referred to as **Mr. A.B.**, lost 276 pounds.

♦ **66 days.** Irish inmate **Bobby Sands** died while protesting Britain's treatment of political prisoners; is later played by **Michael Fassbender**.



Dr. Klaper tells me the rules. No leaving the grounds. I might get confused, or I might fall down. It turns out you get dizzy without food. "Horizontal is your friend," the doctor advises me. Also, no toothpaste, no lotions or creams. And no showering. Not because they want me dirty, but, again, because I might slip and fall down.

Dr. Klaper takes my pulse and pronounces it "lovely." He thumps my chest, sounding the cavity, and says my heart is normal-size. I shudder at either alternative.

A technician draws my blood. They're testing lipids, vitamin D, inflammation markers. I ask if they'll test for allergies, because I've always suspected I'm allergic to animals, plants, people, maybe even myself.

They can do that, Dr. Klaper says, but after hearing my description of the nose faucet I wake to every day, and the leaky, bloodshot eyes, he smiles and tells me not to bother with a test. Those symptoms will be gone after my fast.

I like this man.

The good doctor dismisses me, and I stroll outside to sit in the sunshine, waiting for hunger, watching the other fasters come and go. Some are here not to fast but to eat clean for a while, to see the doctors and maybe get some treatments. But the water fasters stand out, because they cling to the wall when they walk. They take the stairs slowly.

TrueNorth lacks the warehouse comforts of a spa. There isn't even a pool, which seems to violate some central tenet of California apartment complexes. It feels more like a scientific-research center. There are daily lectures and cooking demos, and the guest rooms are stocked

with DVDs of slightly NSFW health documentaries. Today at the clinic they showed a grim video called *The Pleasure Trap*, an unflinching lecture on why we eat, and eat, and fucking eat, what isn't good for us. Salt, sugar, and fat, combined with chemicals in processed foods, trick the brain in the same way as cocaine, and the brain flushes our bodies with dopamine, perhaps the most blissful, and addictive, homemade chemical we have. Once we find a way to trigger it, we kill ourselves to get more. Literally.

That evening, with no dinner to cook, eat, and clean up, I prepare my water smoothie, made of nothing but distilled water, and turn on the Food Network. If I can't eat food, I'll watch some. On TV, pre-scandal Paula Deen and her son are making corn dogs, fried okra, croissant-dough muffins with caramelized pecans. These things look gorgeous and obscene, like the invented genitalia of a new species. But after watching *The Pleasure Trap*, it seems wrong to refer to this stuff as *food*. More like recreational drugs for the mouth, with nasty side effects like diabetes. Still, I'm drooling. I *love* these recreational drugs. I go to foreign countries just to try exotic versions. I'm a user. I do food.

Just not today, and, if I survive, not for the next five days.

DAY TWO

WHAT WOULD GANDHI DO?

→ When I first called to arrange my stay, the co-founder of TrueNorth, Alan Goldhamer, cautioned me about the difficulty of water fasting: "It can be an intense, miserable experience, but when people are successful they forgive us." →



On my second day of fasting, I wake up at 4 A.M. in an unforgiving mood. Rise and do not shine. Rise and moan. It's dark and cold. Once you take digestion out of the equation, you save tremendous energy, which can make you restless at all the wrong times. Like the middle of the night. I take my sad glass of water and weigh myself in the kitchen. I'm down three pounds from yesterday. And then I notice that there is something seriously wrong with the air.

Guests are asked not to use scented cosmetics, because fasters have, I'm told, heightened smell. This morning that fact hits hard. I smell breakfast. Maybe miles away. Down the road someone is whipping eggs in a bowl, touching them off with cream and herbs. Butter sizzles in a pan, and when those eggs seize in the hot fat, the smell hurtles up the street. Gandhi said to chew your water, but mine keeps sliding out of my mouth. I guzzle it instead.



The Most Dubious Characters in the History of Not Eating

♦ Alternative-medicine guru **Herbert M. Shelton** helped thousands of "patients" fast; went bankrupt when one died in 1978.

♦ In 2003, **David Blaine** (above) fasted for forty-four days in a suspended glass box. Onlookers pelted him with eggs.

♦ From 1942 to 1955, Portuguese mystic **Alexandrina Maria da Costa** lived exclusively on the Eucharist.

♦ In his 1997 book, *A Hunger for God*, Baptist pastor and fasting advocate **John Piper** wrote, "The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie."

Over lunch with Alan Goldhamer—his lunch, my water—he refers to water fasting as "doing nothing, intelligently." Some of our most common diseases, he claims, including diabetes, hypertension, some forms of heart disease, asthma, arthritis, and certain autoimmune conditions, are diseases of excess, not deficiency. They used to be called the diseases of kings, since only the wealthy could afford to shovel down ultra-rich, low-nutrient food in banquet quantities. Peasants did not get diabetes. Of course, this was before processed food, which is often the cheapest thing to "eat" now, and also the most damaging. Too much of this toxic stuff overloads our livers and kidneys, whose job it is to get rid of waste. As this material accumulates in our system, it can lead to inflammation and sickness. Fasting, the theory goes, treats these diseases by purging the excess. The digestive system gets a rest.

But how do we survive without nutrients? Some doctors argue that fasting is a counterproductive detox tool, robbing the body of the nutrition it needs to effectively cleanse itself. But our bodies are designed for scarcity, or at least well prepared for it. We store fat, and store it, and store it—sometimes renting a whole bunch of extra storage space inside our backs and bellies and asses—precisely because our bodies might need it someday, when the food is gone.

There are, of course, downsides to relying solely on your natural larder. So far they include vicious headaches, dizziness, and a sad, hollow feeling that water does not soothe. But I still want this, mostly for what might wait for me on the other side, when I get my food back. I don't have diabetes, and I'm not fasting to lose weight. I played contact sports in school, and now, in my middle forties, it hurts. I have a ripped-up knee, a trick neck, toes that feel stiff all the time. Sure, I wouldn't mind losing a few pounds, but mainly I'm fasting to relieve my chronic pain, a body ruled by arthritis and a paralyzing nerve disorder that coldcocked me a couple of years ago.

One morning back in 2011, I woke to searing pain in my arms. A flamethrower directed at my arms is what it felt like. The hospital offered morphine, but one shot did nothing. A second and then a third shot only made me sob more quietly. Finally Dilaudid, at ten times morphine's strength, cooled off the pain. Several doctors and hospitals later, I was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease in which the nerves that branch from the neck and power the arms are bulldozed by the immune system. There's no cure, just a blitz of medicines to blanket the suffering. So I embarked on a grisly medical protocol: monster doses

of steroids, antiseizure agents for nerve pain, and a lot of craft beer, ice cream, and chocolate for the larger problem of what it now felt like to be me.

I've since weaned myself off the steroids and quit the nerve-pain drugs. But a disease like that, out of nowhere, coming on hard and weird, makes you wonder not just what the hell happened but what exactly you can do to stop it from happening again. I'd tried the brutal meds, and now it was time to try the absence of them, the absence of everything. I was ready, or so I thought, to take the nothing cure.

DAY THREE BED, BOREDOM, BATHROOM

→ *Fruuuuuuck.*

Life without food is darkness and headaches and restlessness. I can't sleep. I can't read. Music—even soft, ridiculously washy music—seems jarring.

My wife calls and asks how it's going at Camp Starvation: Am I dead yet? Not dead, but pissing the day away. Pissing on the hour and the minute and the second. If all else goes bust here, at least my man-Kegels will be super ripped.

I hadn't bargained for so much bed rest, and if you can't sleep or have sex in a bed, it's just a slightly softer floor, and you're lying on it in the middle of your room, starving, wondering when they will come and find you.

DAY FOUR PROGRESS? MAYBE?

→ I wake up feeling slightly better, if hollow and weak. My headache is nearly gone, and I've lost another three pounds. My stomach growls so slowly I can almost pick out words. Weirdly, though, I am not hungry. Shouldn't my body be tweaking with hunger right now? Apparently it should not. This is just the physiology of fasting at work. Even though I'm eating nothing, I am feeding very well, thank you. On my own damn self.

DAY FIVE DRAWING THE LINE AT SALT

→ I've lost twelve pounds. They say it's mostly water weight. Why am I carrying around all that water? Dr. Klaper lectures me on salt, a piece of nutritional apocalypse he clearly enjoys sharing. When you eat too much salt, your blood gets saltier, so your brain tells your body it's thirsty. So you drink more water, diluting your salty blood, and with more blood pumping through your system, you get high blood pressure. Boom.

I blink at him hopefully. There must be a loophole. Please? My wife packs a little Ziploc of Maldon sea salt whenever

we leave the house, and we litter it over even perfect bowls of food, like ice cream. Klaper and I will have to disagree here, even though he has decades of credentials and experience over me.

DAY SIX

I WAS FAMISHED BUT NOW I SEE

→On my final day without food, I wake up at 5 A.M. I slept in! And all of a sudden, I feel tremendous. Light, energetic, unreasonably cheerful. This is maybe the runner's high of fasting, and it's hit me just as my fast is ending.

Throughout my stay, a six-day fast has been regarded with amused smiles. Pathetic amateur, they don't say. One doctor says everyone should do a long fast at least once in their lives. What's long, I ask. Twenty-one days. Maybe thirty. Now I see the appeal. Once you get over the misery of the first few days, things start to look up and you get this feeling that something profoundly necessary is happening inside you. I've lost sixteen pounds, and a deep bend at the knees is surprisingly pain-free. My hands no longer ache. My skin is clear. The whites of my eyes look Photoshopped.

Dr. Klaper comes by to discuss my food plan going forward. A water fast is pointless if you kill it with a cheeseburger. In the morning I'll have a juice of watermelon and celery, some grapes and melon at lunch. For dinner I get something they refer to as sloppy, wet greens. Perhaps they did not want to use the word *watery*.

Then we discuss what I'll eat when I get home and, ideally, for the rest of my life. It's pretty clear now what's really being promoted at TrueNorth. Fasting is not the star but just a tool to get you to radically change the way you eat. They call it a plant-strong diet. I call it vegan minus joy, where joy equals salt, sugar, and oil. Processed foods are out, and so is anything scooped from an animal's body, however local or hand-groomed the beast was. Some people would rather die than eat this way. Actually, if you believe that the diseases of kings are nutritional diseases, diseases of excess—some do. In ever increasing numbers.

DAY SEVEN (AND BEYOND)

→On my first morning among the eaters, down seventeen pounds, it takes me an hour to drink my juice. The mouthfeel of this liquid is superior. Why even swallow? But when I do feel that juice roll down my throat, it's killingly decadent, as delicious as anything I've ever tasted, and the calories hit me like a jolt. I feel brand-new.

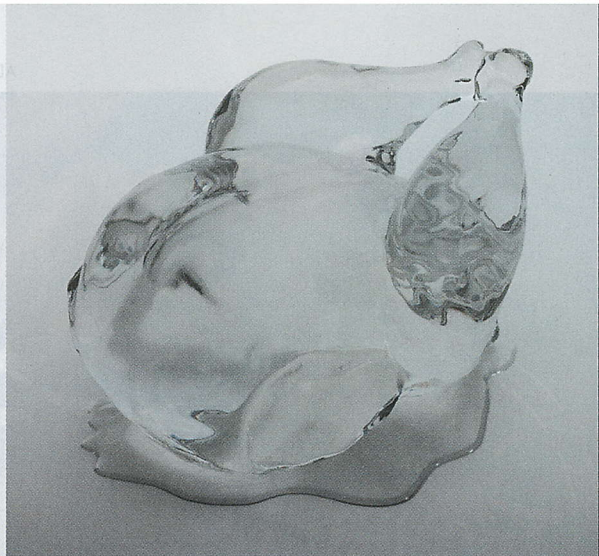
I re-feed slowly, as advised, but it takes me days to feel deeply hungry again. That ache and itch I used to have in my mouth,

only to be soothed by salt and sugar and fat, is gone. My arthritis has eased up, too. My blood pressure, usually around 125/80, is now 95/69. Dr. Klaper says I have the stats of a teenage boy. Not quite the infant I was shooting for, but it's close.

It's time to go, and what I feel most strongly is that I could have fasted longer.

A week more, maybe two. On the flight back my ears pop, easily, and the noise rushes in. My ears have never popped well in the air, and the pleasure of this effortless head-clearing is nearly sexual. It feels like someone has Hoovered out my sinuses.

When I get home, I'm still pecking lightly at food, suspicious. Every meal looks like my undoing. Salt looks like lye. Oil looks, well, really oily. We eat that why? Oh yeah, because it's a thick golden pleasure-delivery system. I take the stairs down to the street, and something is

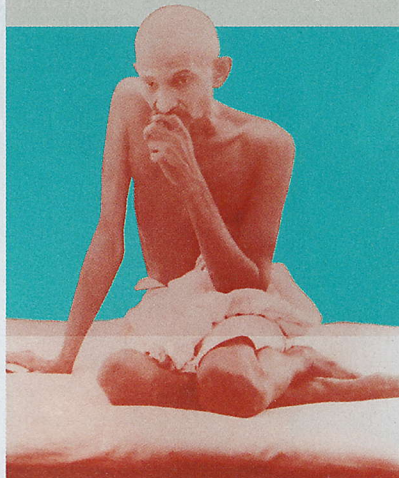


Three Fasts That Actually Accomplished Something

◆ **Henry S. Tanner** skipped food for forty days and inadvertently cured his depression; repeating the stunt for a crowd in 1880 made him fasting's poster child.

◆ **Mahatma Gandhi** (below) starved, successfully, to protest the British rule of India (among other things).

◆ **Jesus Christ** proved he could avoid Devil-provoked temptation for forty days; was rewarded with angels bearing food. See also: Moses; David; Elijah.



different. They've redone the steps in my building. They're easier, almost horizontal. But of course they aren't. It's me who's easier. I have no pain in my toes or knees, and I can make a fist, no problem. It's days after my water fast ended, I've been eating solid food again, and it would seem that my arthritis is really gone.

But it's hard to believe this sudden absence of pain will last. Maybe the fasting spooked my system, scared me out of pain. Check with me after the extreme reverse fast I face now that I'm home: the summer-barbecue months. And that's the problem. If there's a downside, it's not with the fasting itself. It's that the diet required to sustain the tremendous effects of a fast is rigorously difficult and, for many, probably unrealistic. The challenge in the kitchen is how you get to delicious—or maybe how you learn not to care, which is too grim to contemplate. Fasting helps kill your cravings, and it stokes your passion for fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nuts. To a certain degree. But what I notice is that I start to look at food as medicine, and the decisions I make at mealtimes have to do with what kind of medicine I want to be taking: the clean, bland kind with maximum benefits and zero negative side effects, or the lowly delicious bad medicine with too many side effects to name?

There's a deep canyon between the real world, or at least my real world, and the spartan ways of the plant-based whole-foods diet. If I lived alone and shopped and cooked for one and had no life, this would be a cinch. If this sounds like I'm blaming my friends, I probably am. For now, I'm going to see if that old, sad approach called moderation has any sway here. It's never worked for me before. I tend to want my cake and your whole family's cake, too. But if I feel the pain coming back, seizing my joints, I know now that I won't be reaching for pills. Particularly when doing nothing at all seems to work so much better.

BEN MARCUS's next book, a story collection called *Leaving the Sea*, comes out in January. This is his first article for GQ.