

A VISIT TO FOOD HELL

Abby Thurmond, age 42, had not had a food binge for over 2 years when she flew from Miami to Chicago to attend the wedding of her friend's daughter. Single, independent, and devoted to her work, Abby had just sold her first screenplay. She was pleased, but she was also experiencing the "postpartum" letdown that always occurred when she finished a major project.

Despite knowing, from 2 years in Overeaters Anonymous (OA), that she needed to keep a safe distance from food, especially in emotionally hard times, Abby spent the entire day of the wedding rehearsal party in the company of food. She stood in her friend's kitchen for hours—cutting, chopping, sorting, arranging, and, eventually, picking at the food.

When night and the guests came, the flurry of activity made it easy for Abby to disappear—physically and emotionally—into a binge. She started with a plate of what would have been an "abstinent" meal (an OA concept for whatever is included on one's meal plan): pasta salad, green salad, cold cuts, and a roll. Although the portions were generous, Abby wanted more. She spent the next 5 hours eating, at first trying to graze among the guests, but then, when shame set in, retreating to dark corners of the room to take frantic, stolen bites.

Abby stuffed herself with crackers, cheeses, breads, chicken, turkey, pasta, and salads, but all that was a prelude to what she really wanted—sugar. She'd been waiting for the guests to leave the dining room, where the desserts were. When they finally did, she cut herself two pieces of cake, then two more, then ate directly from the serving tray, shoveling the food into her mouth. She reached for cookies, more cake, and cookies again. Heart racing, terrified of being discovered, Abby finally tore herself away and slipped out onto the terrace.

By now, in what she thought of as a "food trance," Abby piled her plate with bread, onto which she smeared some unidentifiable spread. Though the food tasted like mud, Abby kept eating. Soon, other guests

came out to the terrace, leaving Abby feeling she had to move again, which she did, stepping into the kitchen—and the light. When Abby glanced down at her plate, she was horrified; ants were crawling all over it. Instead of reflexively spitting out the food, Abby, overcome by shame, could only swallow. Then her eyes began to search the debris on her plate for uncontaminated morsels. Witnessing her own madness, Abby began to cry. She flung the plate into the trash and ran to her room.

That event marked the beginning of a 6-month relapse into binge eating—Abby's worst experience with bingeing since the problem began 15 years earlier. During the relapse, she binged on sugar foods and refined carbohydrates, returned to cigarette smoking to control the bingeing, and once again was driven to "get rid" of the calories by incessant exercise after each binge, walking 4 or 5 hours at a time, dragging her bicycle up and down six flights of stairs, and biking miles after dark in a dangerous city park.