I didn’t glow. I wasn’t gorgeous. I was nine months pregnant. And after eating a baby-greens salad with grilled chicken for lunch, I rushed to the master bathroom of our apartment, stuck my finger down my throat, and threw it all up. I knew it was wrong. I knew I could harm the baby. But it happened with the deadly speed of a car accident—there was no time to react or stop.

All I cared about was that I was scared and that vomiting would make me feel more in control of a body that had drastically changed during pregnancy. Restricting what I ate always made me feel powerful. As a child, I had pushed my food around my plate to make it look like I was eating, and by my early teens, I was calculating every calorie crossing my lips. It was my source of strength for much of my...
I started bleeding and had a miscarriage. I was upset, then secretly relieved; the fear of getting fat haunted me. Plus, I never really thought I could conceive, due to my sporadic menstrual cycle (my period appeared every six months or so for a day or two of light spotting). And if I did, I was worried that my pelvis might break during pregnancy. A combination of heredity and screwed-up eating meant my bones were like those of a 70-year-old woman. Over the past dozen years, I’ve had 21 stress fractures. After an experimental, 18-month bone-rehab program, doctors said I should be able to carry a baby to term, but I wasn’t convinced. Neither were my friends, who demanded to know, “Why would you risk this? Why not adopt?”

Call it fate or carelessness, but before we were seriously trying, I was pregnant. As I watched the home-pregnancy test turn pink, I felt as if I were breathing through a cocktail straw. “I can’t be pregnant,” I panicked. It was as if the inevitable weight gain would be a betrayal of everything I’d worked so hard to maintain for so long.

Six weeks into the pregnancy, I started bleeding and had a miscarriage. I was upset, then secretly relieved; the fear of getting fat haunted me. And what if I screwed up the kid? If I could barely feed myself (dining out with me could be like a scene from When Harry Met Sally), how was I going to nurture a baby?

Overcome by his paternal urges, Greg wanted us to try again. I realized I envisioned our life including kids, so I agreed—and got pregnant immediately. My doctor warned me it would be a high-risk nine months. When she told me that I’d have to get frequent ultrasounds, refrain from vigorous exercise, and, of course, eat properly, an unexpected anger erupted from somewhere deep inside me. Her admonishments...
brought up a feeling of powerlessness I hadn’t experienced since the Louisville center. How dare she!

I listened politely, picking at my dry cuticles (dry skin was a chronic condition I’d developed from not eating enough fat). I knew what I needed to do, so I started a food diary and wrote down everything I ate each day—from oatmeal and a banana for breakfast to salad for lunch and even three almonds and a handful of raisins in the afternoon. I’d review it at night to reassure myself I was in control and eating enough, but not excessively.

By the second trimester, when I’d gained the recommended 10 pounds, my belly popped, and I spiraled out of control. I felt weak, vulnerable, and just plain bad about myself—I was too exhausted to exercise (and I had been used to doing a lot of it). I tried not to look in mirrors. Friends with eating disorders had warned me about weight gain, but no one had told me about the haunting feelings of being sucked into a tailspin as the scale spiked.

Desperate for a way to manage the chaos, I’d eat half of my turkey sandwich at lunch and toss the other half so as not to overindulge. I became more selective than usual when making a salad, choosing only super low-fat items such as veggies and grilled chicken, turkey, or tofu. I picked at bagels, ate a few spoonfuls of nonfat cottage cheese, and had limited bites of an energy bar. Since I’d dramatically cut back on my exercise, it seemed only rational to curtail my calories as well.

Ignoring the deep hunger that usually hit around 10 a.m. made me feel strong and secure. When I was ravenous, I’d nibble on baby carrots or a few almonds to take the edge off, biting them in half—an anorexic trick, like cutting food into tiny pieces, to make the rations last longer. It’s part compulsion and part fooling yourself and others into thinking you’re eating plenty. I kept trying to remind myself that this would be only nine months of my life, but these months were critical to my child’s development. Still, overeating often felt life-threatening.

By the last few weeks, I lost it. I was home alone on maternity leave, having gained 24 pounds. My doctor said my weight was acceptable, but I was so obsessed about getting bigger and bigger that I couldn’t focus on any activity—be it e-mail, bills, or even TV—for more than three minutes without getting interrupted by thoughts of how fat I was growing.

That’s when I purged. I couldn’t tell Greg. I knew pregnancy wasn’t supposed to be about me, and I knew I could have ruined everything.

Once I calmed down, I called my doctor and told her I’d thrown up—I didn’t admit how or why. She said not to worry but to call back if it got worse. It did. I made myself vomit a few more times that week and finally found the strength to call my old therapist for help. I saw her regularly for the remainder of my pregnancy.

We discussed strategies for staying focused on the health of the baby, such as thinking of this last stretch as the sprint at the end of a race (painful, but over quickly).

On March 1, 2005, we had a healthy 7.5-pound boy. Within a month, I lost the baby weight, thanks to postpartum yoga and long walks with the baby carriage in Central Park.

Ten months later, we tried for a second child. After three miscarriages, we saw a fertility specialist, and the insemination technique she used finally worked after two frustrating rounds. This time, I was vomiting so often from morning sickness in the first trimester that I could barely exercise. Surprisingly, it didn’t matter. I felt calmer, more in control, even after the nausea subsided. Maybe it’s because I lost the weight so quickly after our first child. Maybe it’s because I didn’t have time to worry about it, since I was busy with a child at home. Either way, I was relieved not to be freaking out when I ate a sleeve of Saltines.

Our daughter was born in June 2007. While my second full-term pregnancy wasn’t as rough, I know better than to think my food issues are over. Eating disorders never truly go away. You just learn to manage the food mania so it doesn’t take over your life. And you accept the lurking fear that you can snap back into your old habits at any time—or worse, pass them on to your children. Kids are born with natural appetite control; I hope my children retain that skill far better than I did. mc