Badlands was hungry. And by hungry I don’t mean peckish, or pleasantly empty, or that he had that faint grumble you get an hour or so before dinner. No, this was a different breed of hunger altogether. It was a murderous, desert island hunger, the kind you feel deep in your eyeballs, when all of your rational faculties have atrophied and your brain feels like it’s dribbling out of your nostrils and the only thing you desire in this world is FOOD, any kind of food, RIGHT NOW.

Let it be said that Badlands is not accustomed to this kind of hunger. Normal hunger, sure. He’s usually hungry. In fact, a satiated Badlands is a rare creature indeed. But tonight was different. Tonight it was as if a small mammal, say, a badger (those most capable burrowers of the weasel family), had crawled down his gullet, hollowed out his stomach, and lay there growling and scratching away at his insides.

You see, Badlands does not usually fast before contests, as he believes this can lead to “shrinkage” of his stomach, thereby reducing his intake of food. He’ll eat a normal breakfast the day of an event, sometimes lunch, and maybe even a snack shortly before the start whistle. All of which sets Badlands at ideological odds with the vast majority of competitive eaters, called “gurgitators,” who generally hold that an empty stomach equals increased stuffing capacity. Physiologically speaking, both theories are half-baked. But for some reason a few acolytes of the fasting school have had recent success on the circuit, so tonight Badlands was experimenting, and it was clear from the look on his face that the experiment was killing him.

To make matters worse, George Shea, the brains and impeccable hair of the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE) that organized the contest, had asked gurgitators to arrive well ahead of time as insurance against start whistle snafus, which are routine at these gatherings. Tonight’s event was the second annual World Pelmeni Eating Championship (pelmenis are a Russian pasta—think tortellini crossed with pierogi), one of the year’s biggest contests, with a modest media presence and a semi-respectable cash prize, and George wanted everyone present mega-early and ready to cram.

So Badlands had driven the hour from his house in Copiague, Long Island, in wrist-slitting rush-hour traffic and by successive miracles had found a parking spot two blocks from the Atlantic Oceana Ballroom in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, parallel-parked his mammoth SUV in two beautiful, for-the-record-book turns, and lumbered through the Oceana’s clouded glass doors, slightly out of breath and major-league agitated, right on time.

That was at six p.m. Now it was eight, and it had been early morning since he’d last eaten. Nothing all day, not even a Slim Jim.

After a circumnavigation of the Oceana’s sprawling insides, I found Badlands slumped in a chair near the kitchen, its swinging doors divulging an anthill-like scrum of waiters while offering a glimpse of the boiling madness inside, a war zone of grease-strewn men and crashing metal. Badlands looked sedated. His eyelids sagged; a meaty sliver of tongue was clamped between his teeth; and his hands were clasped across his broad belly. A 420-pound, six-foot-five-inch semivegetative Black Goliath.

I revived him with a knuckle punch to the bicep. SMACK! His eyes shot open; his size fourteen’s flew off the floor; and his massive body lurched forward.

Blinking, frowning, he struggled to his feet.

“You alright?” I asked.

“You looked half-dead.”

“Aw man, I was visualizing.”

One of Badlands’ precontest rituals entails visualizing the eating of whatever food is at hand, like a skier might imagine slipping through a slalom course prior to a race. It’s akin to meditation: a cleansing of the chakra bowels to achieve unobstructed intestinal harmony.

Badlands’s jeans rode low off his waist, hitched up his thick shanks, and his 5-xt black Sean John jersey had an
ironing board look to it, the sleeves coming to points at the shoulders like a kite. He also wore a matching baseball cap, the brim flattened and flipped to the back. Despite his fervent attempts to keep the jersey clean, in about thirty minutes it will be streaked white down the front from the soupy extract of pelmenis.

“I guzzled a half gallon of water before I left home,” he said. “Just a little something to keep myself stretched. I haven’t had anything to eat since breakfast, and I’m worried how that’ll affect me. Plus, my bladder is about to go, man.”

A few days earlier, Badlands had explained to me one of the pillars of his gurgitational philosophy, namely that with every food comes an ideal strategy for attack, a strategy to be measured against an eater’s individual speed and capacity.

Over the past couple of weeks, Badlands had been searching
for his pelmeni strategy, guzzling gallons of water and plowing through bowls of ravioli and pierogi at his kitchen table while his eleven-year-old son, Brandon, timed him on the microwave. “Pelmenis are a relatively easy food to speed-eat because they’re soft,” Badlands had told me, “but the pasta gets tough after a while and is hard on the jaws.” To address this problem, he’d been chewing a wad of Big Red—twenty-one sticks at a time—for an hour a day. “You gotta have strong jaws in this game,” he’d said. “You cannot come to the table with weak jaws and expect to go the distance. A lot of people don’t realize that, and they try to take short cuts.”

The grand prize at the Pelmeni Championship was fifteen hundred dollars, and Badlands hoped tonight would be the payoff for all his Chef Boyardee workouts. The standing record, held by Oleg “the Russian” Zhornitskiy (who’s actually Ukrainian), was 244 pelmenis in six minutes. Badlands thought he could do at least 250.

“I’m through with this fasting stuff though, man,” he said, rubbing his stomach and arching back on his heels. “It’s wrecked my energy level.”

A few other gurgitators milled around nearby—Ed “Cookie” Jarvis, “Hungry” Charles Hardy, “Gentleman” Joe Manchetti, Sabatino “the Great” Manzi, “Krazy” Kevin Lipsitz—all of them big, big dudes. Sabatino had a cartoonishly oblong gut, like a yoga ball held in suspenders, and a swinging, bovine double chin. Cookie packed most of his extra weight in several intimidating saddlebags fore and aft of his waistline. And Hungry seemed to hold his spare pounds primarily in his neck and shoulders, which appeared as solid as armor. Despite this awesome display of flesh, Badlands could easily claim Fat Bastard supremacy over them all.

In fact, Badlands’s sheer bulk is a little intimidating at first. On instinct I tend to be wary of people who are taller than me, let alone 250 pounds heavier. And Badlands not only looms over me, he looms around me. When I hug him (we always greet each other with a soul brother handshake) it’s a little like being in the arms of a grizzly, except, I imagine, gentler. But his liquid brown eyes, pugdy shaved head, and cylindrical jowls give him the sublime and placid mien of the Buddha. It also helps that he’s possibly the nicest person I’ve ever met.

From the looks of them, none of the other gurgitators had eaten much that day either. That is, aside from Cookie, who was inhaling a sweating pastry he’d boosted from a passing tray. The tables around us were swamped with steaming platters: smoked fish, roasted chickens, mystery-meat patties, and what looked like some sort of eggplant-squash hybrid. All of which was off limits. The gurgitators had only a short while till the Pelmeni Championship got underway, and they’d all apparently resolved to channel their hunger into the competition.

George Shea materialized, perspiring liberally in a black tuxedo, a clipboard jammed in his armpit, his hair moist and delicately slicked back in the Pat Riley manner. He started barking instructions.

“We’re going to introduce you individually! Remember when you come out to space yourselves! Don’t bunch up! And make a little show for the crowd!”

From what I could gather from George’s harangue, gurgitators were supposed to emerge single file through a cloud of dry ice at the top of the stage, which was set in the back of the ballroom, and then descend a short, deceptively steep flight of stairs to a narrow platform, which would maybe (maybe not) hold all twenty of them shoulder to shoulder—an imposing phalanx of whodding flesh and bone—before they again had to descend another short flight of stairs to a large U of banquet tables assembled along the periphery of a parquet floor. In other words, what sounded like a catastrophe in the making.

George wrapped things up—“Everyone backstage, pronto!”—and then sprinted off into the darkness. Gurgitators dispersed slowly, knocking back drinks and rubbing out cigarettes. I turned to Badlands and swung a crisp right hook through the air, bringing it down squarely on his wide shoulder.

WHACK! He feigned injury, stumbling backwards. I went to find a seat. A few minutes later I looked over and saw him standing right where I’d left him, talking to a newspaper reporter. He’d once told me that interacting with the media used to terrify him. He’d get tongue-tied, worried about saying the wrong thing, offending someone. Now he craved the attention. Everything about contests—the cameras, the hot lights, the revolted audience—he found totally irresistible. Here, sprung from the anonymous masses, Badlands was a star, and he absolutely lived for these moments. Now he was lingering, however, and George reemerged from the shadows to give him a last pleading look to get a move-on.

Competitive eating has gained a small measure of notoriety in recent years almost entirely because of George Shea and his younger brother Rich, who together comprise the ifoce, which they formed in 1997 to promote eating contests, half tongue-in-cheek, as “the sport of the new millennium.” Today the ifoce oversees more than 150 events a year and has over 3,000 registered gurgitators. The sport’s pinnacle is the Nathan’s Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest held on Coney Island every July Fourth, which is attended by thousands and carried live on ESPN. The five-time Nathan’s champ and undisputed gurgitational hegemon is...
twenty-seven-year-old Takeru Kobayashi, a 132-pound Japanese eater who holds the record of 53.5 hot dogs and buns in 12 minutes and who is said to earn around $150,000 a year from contests in Japan and the United States.

Badlands, by comparison, is the number-five-ranked gurgitator in the world, with major victories in burritos (15 in 8:00 minutes), corned beef hash (4 pounds in 15:8 minutes), peas (9.5 one-pound bowls in 12:00 minutes), onions (8.5 ounces in 1:00 minute), and hamantaschen (50 traditional Purim cookies in 6:00 minutes), among others. While his winnings are nowhere near Kobayashi's, he earns enough from contests to make occasionally lavish upgrades to his home entertainment center. The pelmeni cash prize would help in this regard, and the three-foot-high trophy would be a welcome addendum to the glinting metropolis of gurgitating honors already buckling his mantelpiece.

The Oceana was jammed to fire-hazard capacity that night, mostly with Russians from the surrounding Brighton Beach neighborhood, which is just down the road from Coney Island. Everybody looked related, or at least as though they shared a tailor. The men all wore Soviet-era double-breasted suits and had moustaches like fat caterpillars, while the women labored under mountains of hair and wore sequined evening gowns, all thighs and wilting cleavage. It was like a politburo reunion from the class of 1979. The fifty-dollar cover bought you a Pantagruelian smorgasbord and several stage performances, of which the pelmeni contest was the finale. There was way too much food, an unfathomable amount of food, in fact, and whole tables of it went untouched.

After the cabaret acts, George and Rich Shea appeared onstage. Rich is a half-foot shorter than George, his hair almost reflective, like George’s, from the generous application of hair products, and his bottom lip is held permanently in an almost reflective, like George’s, from the generous application of it went untouched.

Oleg the Russian had come first (given pole position as defending champ), followed by Cookie, Hungry, Krazy Kev, Crazy Legs, Sabatino, Dale “The Mouth from the South” Boone (who claimed to be a descendant of Daniel Boone), Gentleman Joe, Don “Moses” Lerman (carrying replica cardboard tablets), two guys wearing military-style ushanka hats and black leather boots who Rich said were members of the Ukrainian National Eating Team, and a few others.

Badlands came out second to last, waving a white hand towel in circles above his head, his underarm flesh wagging like a hammock. He appeared to be growing. An arc of spit flew from his mouth and was briefly illuminated by the backlighting, flickering out like a dying sparkler. As Axl Rose squealed, “Feel my…my…my serpentine!” Badlands paused at the foot of the stage between George and Rich and, with the hand towel clenched between his teeth, flexed Mr. Universe style. The audience ate it up. When the applause reached its crescendo, Badlands’s scowl vanished, and his face blazed into a quarter moon of teeth: his signature entrance.

A couple of weeks before the Pelmeni Championship, I met Badlands for lunch at a diner in lower Manhattan. A gray slab of sky hung over the city. Rain was coming down like sprayed buckshot and created little rivers that spilled along the curbs, overflowing the drainage grates at the corners and forcing people to leap over the sprawling puddles. Despite the weather, Badlands was in a good mood, and before we’d even sat down, he launched into a monologue on his favorite topic: the future of competitive eating in the United States.

“It’s a sport. I definitely think it’s going to be in the Olympics one day, if not as a main event then as an exhibition sport. I mean look, right now you got ballroom dancing as an exhibition sport. What the hell is that? Some guys twirling ladies around? C’mon, man! The thing is, everyone can relate to eating. There’s a fascination there. Rich Shea calls competitive eating ‘the sport of the everyman,’ because in America we’re big eaters, and everyone likes to pig out once in a while. Eating contests have the same things that people look for in other sports. Mainly, they’re fun to watch, and they also make you wonder, how can that guy or girl eat so much, so fast?”

Badlands looked formidable across the small Formica table. I imagined it was how Gulliver appeared to the Lilliputians, and I wasn’t inclined to disagree with him just then. Besides, his logic sort of made sense. Americans do like to pig out. I could personally attest to that. Plus, adding ballroom dancing to the Olympic pantheon did seem to
widen the criteria for how you defined “sport.” Chess was an exhibition event at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, and the mind-numbing Japanese board game Go was being promoted as a possible addition to the 2012 games. Where, after all, do you draw the line with this sort of thing?

Our waitress arrived, and Badlands ordered the ten-ounce “Colossal” hamburger with onion rings and a Sprite. Not wanting to seem abstemious, I got the Colossal too, with bacon and cheese, plus fries and a Coke. Badlands flipped open his wallet and pulled out a wrinkled photo of himself and his wife, Gina, on their wedding day. They got married right out of high school and now have three sons, ages eleven, fourteen, and seventeen (the oldest is from Gina’s previous marriage). In the photo Gina is wearing a cream colored gown and holding a bouquet, her hair in a spire of curls that tilts slightly over her forehead. Badlands is in a black tux with a white corsage, a high-top fade, and a thin goatee cut around his lips. He’s thinner by probably 150 pounds.

When our waitress returned, she dropped our plates on the table with a heavy clunk. My Colossal, which stood a little taller than my soda glass, looked as if it had been buffed and polished. Gleaming curls of bacon jabbed from its sides, the twisted fat resembling entrails. The burger leaned against an arc of fries that seemed to have been strategically positioned to prevent it from tipping over and spilling its contents on the table.

Before we dug in, I asked Badlands if he ever worried what effect, if any, his hobby might have on his health. “My doctor says as long as I don’t eat too much during the off-season I’ll be okay,” he said.

“When is the off-season?” “Whenever there’s no contest.” As we laid siege to our Colossals, I was tempted to ask whether he considered today part of the off-season, but I chickened out.

“There’s a theory that says the skinnier you are the more food you can eat,” Badlands went on, “because your stomach can stretch more.” He held his hands out in front of his stomach to illustrate this. “I want to see if that’s true. I’m planning on losing some weight. It sounds crazy, but you really have to be in shape to be competitive in these contests. I mean, I want to be around for my kids, too, you know? But secondly, I want to be in top form for contests.”

With an onion ring poised to slither through his lips, Badlands said he’d been trying to cut red meat and fried food out of his diet.

I let Badlands ramble as we ate, and ramble he did, a great meandering tangent that eventually wound back, as most things do with him, to competitive eating. Born in 1969 in Jamaica, Queens, Badlands attended high school in Brooklyn, where he played basketball and football and got decent grades. Later, he dreamed of making it as a rapper, and in the early 1990s he recorded a rap album in a friend’s basement. Nothing came of that, but in December 2004 Badlands self-released the album Hungry & Focused, his autobiographical ode to competitive eating.

“I wanted to do something positive and with a competitive eating theme, like the Fat Boys,” Badlands explained, “But more about what I do and how I got into this and where I am in the sport.”
Twelve years ago, Badlands landed a job as a subway conductor with the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Five nights a week he rides the Number Seven train its twenty-one stops from Flushing, Queens—one stop past Shea Stadium—to Times Square and back again, three round-trips total. He has to stand the entire shift crammed into the conductor’s booth, a coffin-like space in the center of the train from which he flips a switch to open and close the doors. Seeing Badlands’s haunches roll off his chair in the diner, I guessed that the conductor’s booth couldn’t be too cozy—all 420 pounds of him stuffed into that airless, shuddering closet, hurtling under the East River and through the bowels of Queens and Manhattan in near pitch blackness, inhaling the tunnels’ horrid stench while the squeal of the train’s brakes broke his eardrums apart.

I started to ask him if he ever got tired of his job, but he didn’t want to talk about work.

“In Japan, competitive eating is huge,” he said. “It’s like baseball or hockey is here, and the eaters make a pretty good living from it. Look at Kobayashi. It’ll be like that here eventually. Just watch.” Badlands jabbed the tabletop with his finger for emphasis, rattling the ice in our glasses. “It’ll get to the point where the type of money that’s available to Japanese eaters will become available to us. It’s just a matter of time.”

He amended an apologetic smile to the end of this sentence and then ripped away another bite, his jaws opening menacingly and clamping down on his Colossal like Jaws on Robert Shaw.

“Why put yourself through this?” I asked. “Why compete in these contests for other peoples’ amusement and for little or sometimes no pay?”

Badlands paused, eyes skyward and head askew, as if considering this question for the first time. “I just loved it from the first day I tried it,” he said. “Just being able to know that I can eat this food faster than anyone in the world, it’s a great feeling.”

This wasn’t exactly the response I was after, but it would have to do for now. We’d finished our Colossals, and Badlands had to go.

“I used to feel the aftereffects when I first started,” Badlands said. “Basically, a lot of gas and stuff, but my body has gotten used to the rigors of the sport. Now I feel like a person after a big Thanksgiving meal. I get back into shape by taking a laxative the night after a contest, and I’m back to normal by morning.”

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As we were getting ready to pay, a boy of about thirteen approached and said he recognized Badlands from the Nathan’s contest, which he’d seen on TV. He asked for an autograph. After the kid scurried off, Badlands said to me, “That happens more and more. People recognize me in the subway, in the street, wherever. When they appreciate what you do, it’s really something. And you gotta show them love.”

The pulse at the Pelmeni Championship had flat-lined through the cabaret acts, but by the time the contest rolled around, most people were out of their seats and swarming around the parquet floor, armed with DV recorders.

Gurgitators were spread out along the U of banquet tables with large white oval plates of pelmenis in front of them, waiting for the start whistle. Badlands was seated in the middle of the U. He draped dishtowels across his lap and tucked a few in his jersey and even laid them under his chair. He was doing some precontest rituals: neck rotations, arm and jaw stretches, a massive cracking of knuckles. This routine varies depending on the circumstances. At Nathan’s, for instance, where gurgitators stood at waist-high tables, he warmed up by pumping his arms like a sprinter, arcing invisible hot dogs into his mouth in mock eating motion. Tonight, he would use his hands to shovel the pelmenis into his mouth, and when he’d finished his warm-ups, he sat with his face inches away from his plate, his hands twitching beside it like a gunslinger.

His mental approach is always the same, though. “What I do is I try to get a rhythm going and not worry too much about my speed or what other eaters are doing,” he’d told me. “You’ve got to stay focused. If you let yourself get distracted and start worrying about the guy next to you, you’re in trouble. The main thing is to concentrate.” To help him concentrate, Badlands listens to his MP3 player during contests. The style of music varies, though recently he’d been leaning toward techno.

From my seat I caught sight of Rich Shea on the other side of the tables, waving for me to come forward. When I’d snaked through the crowd to Rich, he said he’d volunteered me, along with three others, as a judge for the contest. With the lights from DV recorders winking at us, Rich had us raise our right hands and swear to uphold the rules and regulations of the TFOCE, so help us God. We’d be responsible for counting the empty plates of pelmenis as they left the tables, he explained, and for monitoring the gurgitators to ensure there was no cheating.

“Be especially vigilant with urges contrary to swallowing,” he said, employing his euphemism for puking. “That’s an automatic disqualification.”

Onstage, George was itching to go. He bobbed back and forth on his toes, pursing his lips and lobbing a microphone from hand to hand. Then suddenly he screamed, “Gentlemen! Start your engines!” And before I knew it, they were off.

Right away, Rich started jogging among the tables, delivering color commentary with one hand held aloft, an index finger pointing to the rafters, screeching into his microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Oleg Zhornitskiy has just finished his first plate!” “Ladies and gentlemen! Dale Boone is positively RAGING!”

I’d been assigned a table with Hungry Charles and the two guys from the Ukrainian National Eating Team. The Ukrainians started strong but slowed about midway through their second plates. Hungry lost steam around his third. I’ve dubbed Hungry’s eating style the “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Cram,” because he bends his body over and folds his arms around his plate, almost concealing it completely, and then shoves the food into his mouth hand-over-fist until he is spent. Occasionally, this is a deadly technique, and early in his career it earned Hungry a string of impressive victories. But tonight he’d reached his limit far before the rest of the field, and he looked devastated, leaning with his elbows on the table and shaking his corn-rowed head, his gold crucifix dangling in his plate.

A couple of tables away, Dale the Mouth and Badlands were setting the pace. A mass of crazed Russian youth mobbed their table, shrieking and waving their arms, and a few leaned over to shout encouragement/obscenities at the two gurgitators. One commented to Dale the Mouth, who had his face mashed into a plate of pelmenis, his jaws pumping like pistons, that he was eating like a mad dog.

Badlands’s eating rhythm was predictably cadenced as he nodded along to his music and swayed his body laterally. He didn’t seem to notice the swarm across the table or Dale frothing next to him. He ate deliberately, not particularly rushed, pausing occasionally to take sips of water. Yet by the looks of it, he was consuming a staggering amount of pelmenis.

Finally, George blew the whistle and called for the gurgitators to cease and desist. As the turmoil subsided, the audience members lowered their cameras and gazed blankly about. The crowd had worked itself into a frenzy during the contest, yowling, thrashing, dispensing with any pretense of restraint. But everyone quickly recovered themselves and began filing sheepishly back to their tables.

Once the dust had settled, a sobering scene emerged on the parquet floor. Twenty panting, corpulent men, slathered jowl to jowl in butter and pasta fragments, stumbled around in a daze. The Shea brothers scurried from table to table, sifting through plates, sorting leftovers, hurrying to count the remaining pelmenis and declare a winner. The Pelmeni
Championship has a history of controversy. Almost every year someone demands a recount or alleges fraud or protests a disqualification. So George and Rich were anxious to have the results decided as quickly as possible before things got ugly. We judges stood aside as the Sheas did all of the tallying, scribbling on scraps of paper and conferring with one another at the foot of the stage.

Then George trod up the stage steps and, a little hoarsely, declared Dale the Mouth the winner with a total of 274 pelmenis. Badlands was second with 271, and Oleg the Russian, with 267, was third. Sure enough, Oleg’s brother, Alex, who bore a striking resemblance to Peja Stoyakovich of the Sacramento Kings, pulled George aside to argue for a recount. But after a long night, George wasn’t having it, and the results stood.

Dale the Mouth, clad in a coonskin cap and denim overalls, received his winning trophy onstage, a delicate dribble of pelmeni stuck in the corner of his mouth. Overcome with emotion, he grabbed the microphone out of George’s hand and screamed, “This is for the victims of September 11 and for New York City!” George wrenched the microphone back and, with just the slightest touch of irony, said, “Ladies and Gentleman, we are in the midst of competitive eating’s best. And Dale Boone, my friends, is a true athlete.”

Badlands received a trophy, a bouquet of pink roses, and a check for one thousand dollars. A horde of kids and little old ladies converged on him, clamoring for autographs and pictures, to which he happily obliged. A few days earlier he’d confided to me that there were a lot of big egos in competitive eating but that he wasn’t one of them.

“I know the same way I got these fans I can lose ’em,” he’d said. “If you don’t sign an autograph for somebody and treat ’em like you don’t have the time, it’s the same thing like if you’re a musician, and they’re not gonna buy your record. Besides, I’m not like that. I’m not conceited. I just try to stay grounded and be myself.”

Dale Boone, my friends, is a true athlete. And Dale Boone, my friends, is a true athlete.