

## The Plus Side to Having Dirty Fingers

My brother Peter has a Halloween pallet; the foods he enjoys are either orange or black. And while some bullies would have you believe that “Orange fingers are the first sign of a fatty,” Peter’s orange fluorescent fingertips, which connect to a 6-foot frame that supports some 135 pounds of 20-year-old flesh, do nothing if not defy this assumption, all while pushing away any food with nutritional value.

Peter is a person built entirely of “Chee.” This is not a misspelling of “Qi” or “Xi,” but instead to say that he is a devotee of Chester the Cheetah. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Chester’s philosophy,<sup>1</sup> pat yourselves on the back, for he is none other than the face of “Cheetos” – one of the more popular cheese dusted snack morsels our time.<sup>2</sup> These babies are actually *chemically engineered* to convince those fool enough to eat them that they aren’t, in fact, consuming anything at all.<sup>3</sup> This is done (presumably) to ensure that people will keep eating Cheetos well after they’re full, which will in turn lead to the purchase of more Cheetos, and this process will, presumably, repeat itself until the person eats his or herself into a gigantic, cheeto-filled blob -- simultaneously overstuffed and starving.<sup>4</sup>

Peter is also a fan of Cheez-its, whose name seems to be a cautionary tale, given that the poor soul who munches on them with any frequency runs a very high risk of breaking out like me before any and every school function I ever attended.<sup>5</sup> He also digs Kraft Mac n’ Cheese, with its packet of cheese dust of an unsettling orange hue I know cannot be found in nature, save for on the toxic flesh of poison

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<sup>1</sup> “It’s not easy being cheesy.” While catchy, this slogan is ostensibly false. Like most hyper-processed crap, Cheetos are dirt cheap (I can purchase a fun-size bag for seventy-five cents from my school’s vending machines), and readily available to the vast majority of Americans (between my apartment and our campus library, there are approximately six places I know to sell Cheetos. SIX!). The only people I can imagine not having easy access to Cheetos include the asleep, and even that isn’t a guarantee.

<sup>2</sup> And, for a time, one of Saddam Hussein’s favorite foods. Apparently, during his prison stay, the former dictator was visibly “grumpy” any time his caretakers ran out of Cheetos. Don’t believe me? Google it.

<sup>3</sup> How do our evil overlords achieve this? Cheetos, which are little more than corn puffs with a dusting of faux-cheese and miscellaneous preservatives/seasonings, melt in one’s mouth so quickly that the human brain does not register it as an item of caloric value. This phenomenon is referred to as “vanishing caloric density” by food scientists, and has been used as a guiding principle in the design of other highly processed, unsatiating (though somehow still crave-inducing) “foods.”

<sup>4</sup> Now that I think about it, perhaps introducing Saddam Hussein to Cheetos was part of a grand plan for revenge. Maybe this was the intended plan for his execution. Seems plausible.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between diet and skin clarity is, in my view, anything but clear (no pun intended). I’ve had dermatologists tell me that the idea that chocolate and/or sugar makes a person break out is a myth, and yet every time I read about the latest “superfood” (eyeroll) or a trendy new diet, dozens of people are eager to share about how the new food/diet magically cleared their complexion. That said, I have found that whenever I eat a more processed diet, my skin ends up looking duller, and I sometimes get a pimple or two. That’s enough evidence for me to suggest some connection..

dart frogs.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these marvels of modern food science<sup>7</sup>, Peter's diet also includes French fries, toast, and chicken tenders, so long as they are all (lovingly) burnt to a crisp. Try as I might, I have never been able to wrap my head around this particularly quirky taste preference, but I suppose that it doesn't matter. I also don't completely understand the appeal of lardo<sup>8</sup> or IPAs,<sup>9</sup> but that doesn't stop other people from enjoying them, either.

My brother's dichromatic taste preferences worry me for obvious reasons,<sup>10</sup> and his diet isn't his favorite topic of conversation. Because of this, it's difficult for me to find ways to help him short of sprinkling flax seed in his macaroni or trying to force-feed him kale<sup>11</sup> leaves while he sleeps, and neither of these approaches has ever proven fruitful.

However, I had a rare opportunity one day after picking him up from school; I had just read about how the upcoming edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) will include what psychiatrists are calling, "Selective Eating Disorder," which, unlike Cheetos, is exactly what it sounds like<sup>12</sup>. I thought I'd slide this in to our conversation subtly and see if he had any thoughts.

I was first met with silence, occasionally punctuated by the crunch of Peter slowly putting Cheez-it after Cheez-it into his mouth.<sup>13</sup>

And then (in a truly me-ish maneuver), I gave up on subtlety and asked him point-blank, "Why do you eat the way you do?"

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<sup>6</sup> And -- in the case of the frogs -- the color is meant to be interpreted as a warning sign, a non-verbal "STAY AWAY!" to potential predators. If only my brother would take the hint.

<sup>7</sup> Food Science -- a new field.

<sup>8</sup> It's just fat. That's all it is. Strips of animal fat. What does it taste like? Fat. Just fat.

<sup>9</sup> They taste like soap! SOAP!

- <sup>10</sup>1. Nutrients are vital to staying alive, and my brother doesn't really eat "do" food with nutrients in it. I would like my brother to stay alive.
2. Charred, burnt food is thought to have carcinogenic properties.
3. Peter's diet is completely devoid of fresh produce, which has been shown to have all sorts of wonderful health benefits such as reduced risk of cancer, improved heart health, lower risk of diabetes and hypertension, etc.
4. How does someone like this approach dating? How will he be able to build meaningful relationships over burnt toast and fake cheese?
5. I can't imagine how terrible he must physically *feel* all the time. And I don't want to.

<sup>11</sup>For the record, I hate Kale. I fucking hate it. It's like Spinach's weird cousin who loves to ruin breakfast dishes. I know it's supposed to sustain us or whatever, but at what cost?

<sup>12</sup> A "first-world problem" if ever there was one, selective-eating disorder is the clinical term for being a picky eater. I think that its designation as a medical condition is less a sign of its validity than it is proof that there are, at present, a significant number of rich picky people on the planet, and a number of medical professionals know an opportunity when they see one.

<sup>13</sup> What a punk.

He responded with a true little brother maneuver of a shrug and continuing to play his Gameboy.<sup>14</sup>

“Do you think you’ll ever try other foods?”

Shrug #2. And then:

“I dunno. I kinda like the way I eat.”

And in a truly non-big sister maneuver, I shut my mouth and considered what my little brother had just said to me. After all, wasn’t his answer the best reason to do anything? Liking it even though everyone tells you it’s weird? And isn’t it truly amazing that despite his growing up with an bossy, overbearing older sister, this kid grew up with a enough self-esteem to say “Step off, world. I do what I want!”?

I realized then that I’m a little jealous of my little bro. And that I need not feel guilty about my secret box of cheddar snack crackers (Whole Foods’ answer to Cheez-its and the like) that I keep stashed away in my cupboard behind the bulk jars of quinoa, chia seeds, and chickpeas. Because while I eat to live, I also live to eat.

And besides, no one with clean fingers ever has any fun.

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<sup>14</sup> There has to be a connection between the mindless eating Peter does and his addiction to video games. Maybe being so focused on the screen keeps him from noticing how lackluster the crap he eats truly is.