

CHAPTER ONE

Cheryl stared into the undersized dressing room mirror. Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring her vision and slowly sliding down her cheeks as she blinked. All five gowns she'd tried on might as well have been burlap sacks, not designer dresses.

Cheryl yanked off the last dress and stared angrily at the sweaty rolls of fat glistening in her reflection. She grabbed her sides as though she were wearing a spare tire, desperately trying to shed it. When the stubborn mass wouldn't budge, she started to sob aloud and collapsed onto the worn dressing room bench with her face in her hands. In utter frustration, she kicked one of the garments from underfoot, causing it to land in a heap in the corner of the tiny cell of a dressing room.

"Hey Cheryl," her friend, Teresa, yelled from a few stalls over. "Hurry up, we've got to get going. We're supposed to meet the gang in five minutes at Friday's. We're going to be really late. Cheryl! Hey Cheryl!"

Cheryl was unable to respond, trying to catch her breath and regain her composure. Suddenly, Teresa was banging on the dressing room door. "Come on, we're gonna be late!"

"You go ahead," Cheryl managed to choke out. "I'll catch up with you."

"Are you sure? I can wait."

"No, no, you go ahead. I'll be there in a bit."

"Well, if you're sure it's OK." Seconds later, Teresa was gone.

Cheryl sat for a while, drying her tears and trying to figure out what had gotten into her. She had never done that before. Hell, she'd been fat for almost fifteen years, why was today any different? So what if she was going to someone else's wedding and not her

own? That was nothing unusual. Thirty-two years old and still single, she'd watched most of her high school friends get married and had never reacted like this before.

Why bother buying a new expensive dress? Anything that didn't accentuate her big belly just looked like a tent on her. Why not just wear something old? Nobody'd know the difference. No one looked at her anyway. She thought about not going to the wedding, but Wendy had been a good friend for many years. It would be more work explaining her absence than going. Maybe she'd just treat herself to a new pair of shoes and handbag, and wear the dress from Carol's wedding party. That problem solved, she dried her tears, got dressed, and headed off to Friday's.

Cheryl hadn't always been fat. Up until age seventeen, she had been almost too thin. She'd always been active and loved to dance. With her bubbly personality, she was the life and soul of the party. Always up on the latest fashions, she really knew how to dress. With her then lithe body and athleticism, she was a shoo-in at cheerleading tryouts.

It was safe to say that she was probably one of the most popular girls at school—before tragedy struck. Cheryl's little sister, Joy, was hit by a car and killed. Cheryl had been babysitting for her one day after school while her mother was gone grocery shopping.

Cheryl had been sitting outside on the front stoop watching Joy play with a basketball. Joy had decided she was going to be the first famous female basketball player. She was practicing her dribbling. She experimented with direction and the way the ball bounced. She frequently uttered, "Cheryl, watch this!" or "I bet you can't do this!" The phone rang, and Cheryl jumped up and ran inside the house to answer it, thinking it might be Teresa calling her back. No, it wasn't her closest friend. It was an annoying telemarketer. Although she had only been in the house for a minute or two, as she walked

back outside, she heard an alarming screech of tires and a sickening thud. Joy was no longer on the sidewalk. Cheryl looked up just in time to see a nondescript car take off like a bat out of hell. She heard a shrill cry of pain, not realizing it was her own as she viewed the crushed body of her adored little sister lying in the middle of the street. She ran into the street in a desperate effort to save Joy. There was blood oozing from her ear, and her little body was lying at an odd angle to her head and neck. Her basketball was a few feet away under a car across the street from their house. Cheryl felt the sudden urge to vomit and instinctively turned away so she wouldn't throw up on her sister. She collapsed to her knees, puking and sobbing next to Joy. One of the neighbors saw what was happening and called the police

The police arrived at the same time that Cheryl's mother, Charlotte, appeared back from the grocery store. Cheryl had been so hysterical that she wasn't making any sense at all. Charlotte took one look at what was in front of her and became equally distraught. The police tried to calm them down, but that was not going to happen. An ambulance came, but everyone knew it was too late for Joy.

Although it was only seconds that Cheryl had seen the car take off, she had enough wherewithal to note the license plate number, which she related to the police between sobs. The police put out an APB with a description of the car. The car was found abandoned the next day in Chester, near interstate I-95, not more than twenty-five minutes from the house. Although they were able to get several good DNA samples from the stolen car from cigarettes in the ashtray, they never did find a match in any of the databases. It was still an open case.

In the months after, Cheryl tried to avoid thinking about Joy. But reminders of her were everywhere. She had begun avoiding friends. Their good-intentioned questions

about “How are you doing?” or “What’s new?” would simply cause her to burst into tears. Because she couldn’t talk about it, conversations became stilted. Every time any of her friends talked to her, they felt like they were “walking on eggshells,” which made them seem even more distant. No one, not even Charlotte blamed her for what happened, but Cheryl blamed herself. She found herself staying at home more and just watching TV. She’d spent many sleepless nights soothed by midnight snacks and many daytime hours in front of mind-numbing TV shows with bags of potato chips, corn chips, gallons of ice cream, and oooh, those Snickers. By the time she had started paying any attention to school again, she’d gained thirty pounds and had nearly failing grades. But she really didn’t care. Nothing was all that important.

Although very bright, she just couldn’t get interested in school during her entire senior year. Her friends tried to bring her around, but they finally gave up. Having turned what might have been scholarship grades into a mediocre high school career, she graduated weighing almost 200 pounds. Cheryl did go out on the occasional date, but as her girth grew and her wardrobe shrank, she stopped going out altogether, figuring that nobody would want her anyway, so why bother?

After graduation she looked around for a job. Having no particular skills, she started working at Wal-Mart. She really didn’t need to work since she still lived at home. Her dad had died prematurely at age forty from diabetes and heart disease, but he had made certain that they were well provided for financially. Cheryl had been devastated at the time, but her mom, Charlotte, did a reasonably good job filling the void. But now Cheryl was spending most of her time taking care of her widowed mother.

Unfortunately, Charlotte had smoked two packs a day for about forty years and was in and out of the hospital with obstructive lung disease and heart failure. She was tied to

an oxygen tank. Although her legs were capable of walking, her lungs wouldn't permit it. It was shortly after Joy's death that Charlotte had become disabled. Mostly, her mother was tied to a wheelchair, and Cheryl was tied to her mother. Charlotte ate next to nothing, and as a result, Cheryl never really learned how to cook. So it was mostly junk food, fast food, and the occasional "gourmet" TV dinner.

While at Friday's, Cheryl's mood gradually improved throughout the evening. She always had a good time with "the girls." Their friendship had forged itself in high school and was still as strong as ever, which was a testament to Cheryl's own worth. No matter how much she had rebuffed them during difficult times, they remained true. Though she was no longer the life of the party or a fashion plate, she was still their best friend.

By the time Cheryl returned home, she had a smile on her face, but she wasn't surprised to find her mother asleep in the wheelchair in front of the TV, snoring loudly. Cheryl wheeled her into the bedroom and helped her into bed. She gathered up the pillows to prop her up, but as soon as Charlotte lay down, a coughing fit ensued. Cheryl hated feeling so utterly helpless. Her mother would turn several different shades of colors that seemed humanly impossible before settling back down to a very pale white with tinges of blue. Cheryl was happy that at least she had never started smoking. *OK, she thought to herself. I may be addicted to Snickers, but that's a helluva lot better than cigarettes. At least Snickers can't kill me.*

Having settled her mother in, Cheryl began her nightly routine. As she put on her nightshirt, she avoided the mirror at all costs, hating to look at her naked body. Once between the sheets, she couldn't help thinking about her breakdown earlier in the day. Why so upset? She couldn't really come up with an answer, but began thinking that maybe she ought to give dieting one more try. The very idea of giving up her Snickers

bars though began to make her feel anxious, so in an effort to let those thoughts go, she concentrated on her mother's wheezy breathing in the next room and fell asleep.

Cheryl arrived at work a few minutes late. Just as she was leaving the house, her mother had had another one of her coughing fits, which delayed leaving. When her Mom was finally OK, she talked with their neighbor, Mrs. Curtis, to make sure she would check in on her mother a little earlier than usual. They usually had coffee together each morning and played a few games of gin rummy, but Cheryl was a little more worried about her today and didn't want too much time to pass before someone checked on her. Her mom wore one of those panic buttons around her neck in case of emergency, but she couldn't be too careful.

Cheryl's boss was a little annoyed at her late appearance because he was already well into his first procedure of the morning, and the new dental assistant didn't have nearly her experience. Cheryl quickly took her place on the stool opposite him, almost knocking over the instrument table in the process. The new girl, Janie, was actually quite slim, so the setup hadn't allowed for Cheryl's girth. Cheryl saw the look Dr. Weiner gave her and tried to ignore it. He had warned her just last week, after a similar incident, that if she continued to put on weight she might be out of a job. He had pointed out to her that he was unable to enlarge his procedure rooms to accommodate her.

"Adjust the light please, Cheryl," he said tersely.

"Better?" Cheryl asked. Dr. Weiner nodded. She picked up the suction rod, second-guessing her boss every step of the way, handing him just the right instrument before he asked. She was good and didn't want to be fired. She wanted to make him feel that she was indispensable, fat or thin.

Hours later Tina stuck her head into each of the procedure rooms, “I’m going to the deli, who can I get what?” Cheryl ordered a tossed salad. Tina looked at her kind of funny. “Is that all you want? Who are you kidding?”

Cheryl was thinking about maybe starting her diet, but looked at Tina and said, “Yeah, you’re right. Just kidding. Get me a corned beef special with a side of potato salad, and a large Pepsi.”

Sitting around the table in the all-purpose room over lunch, Tina looked at Cheryl quizzically.

“Are you thinking about going on a diet again?”

“I don’t know, one minute I think I should, and then the next minute I think it’s futile. I’ve dieted so many times in the past, and I lose some weight, but then I just put it all back on again and then some. But I don’t know, maybe this time it could be different. I was thinking of going to my doctor and getting some diet pills. Maybe if I could just get a jump start, I could do better. It’s just so hard, and I’m really not up for failing again.”

“I have a friend who went on that *South Beach Diet*, and she’s doing really well. She’s lost over thirty pounds already,” Tina interjected.

“I’m not sure I can face another diet.” Cheryl said forlornly. “I really hate being fat. I love eating. I’m just not sure I can do it. It’s so frustrating.”

“I know this guy, he’s a waiter, around food all the time. He used to be really big. About two years ago, he lost over a hundred pounds and started playing ice hockey again. Now he plays three and four times a week, he looks fabulous.”

“How did he do it? Do you know?” Cheryl asked, anticipating some other diet she’d already tried, and failed.

“Well, I asked him, and he told me it was because of his family doctor. I asked him if he had given him some pills or something, and he laughed. He said, “First of all, it’s not a he, it’s a she, and secondly, it wasn’t pills that did it, it was more of an attitude.” I really wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but maybe I could get his doctor’s name for you, if you’re interested.”

“That might be an idea. God knows I don’t have anything better to try.” Cheryl polished off her drippy corned beef special, licking the juicy mayonnaise sauce from her fingers as she thoughtfully considered seeing this doctor. Maybe she could provide some magic “pill” to help her succeed.

CHAPTER TWO

“Could you please follow me,” said the small black woman as she led Cheryl from the waiting room into the back exam area. “Please step on the scale.” Cheryl really didn’t want to, but she did.

“Do I have to look?” She managed to blurt out.

“No, that’s fine. I’ll just record it for the doctor.” Cheryl really didn’t want to look, but in the end she took a peek. *Egads, 235*. She had gained another five pounds since she had decided to schedule the appointment. She knew that she had really been overindulging. Ever since deciding to try dieting again, she had been on a relentless mission to consume all her favorite foods before putting herself in diet prison. Sort of like the condemned man’s last meal, only her last meal had lasted about two months.

Once she had decided to try this new doctor, it had taken her almost two months to get the appointment. First, she had to change her primary care physician through her HMO. They only let her do that on the first of the month. Then, it was recommended that she schedule a physical because she was a new patient. She had to wait another month before she could be seen. She hoped she liked this doctor after all she’d been through.

Cheryl sat nervously, waiting for the doctor. As if hospital gowns weren’t embarrassing enough, the one they had given her was too small. Or, she winced, maybe she was too large. She was already sweating, even though the air-conditioning was working very effectively. Her discomfort compounded when the medical assistant had to go in search of a larger blood pressure cuff because her arm was too big for the regular one. At least her blood pressure was 130/85, not as high it was the last time she had gone to the doctor six months ago. Her previous doctor had told her that it was “borderline,” but didn’t put her on any medication. She had breathed a sigh of relief at the time. She

hated to take pills. He just told her to decrease the salt in her diet and try to lose some weight. *Yeah*, she thought, *that really worked well*.

The doctor suddenly appeared with a knock on the door. “Good morning, I’m Nikki Lang,” she said, extending her hand in a firm grip. Cheryl’s hand was all sweaty, and she hoped the doctor hadn’t noticed. “I see you’re here for a routine physical. Are there any particular problems you wanted to discuss?”

Cheryl was nonplussed. The doctor standing before her was wearing blue jeans and docksiders. She did have a white coat on with ID, but she didn’t exactly look like a doctor. Her hair was long and smattered with gray. Cheryl really couldn’t tell how old she was. Dr. Lang settled down on a stool and began flipping through Cheryl’s medical chart, reviewing the history form she had completed while in the waiting room. She had been pretty healthy, so her medical history was actually rather boring.

Finally Cheryl got up the nerve to speak. “I wanted to know if I could get some diet pills or something. A coworker of mine told me about a patient of yours who had done really well with your help—plays ice hockey all the time now—and I wanted to know if you could do the same with me. You know, put me on a diet.”

“I don’t believe in diets,” was the doctor’s reply.

Tears began to well almost immediately in Cheryl’s eyes. That was the whole point of this visit. She had finally gotten up enough courage to ask about diet pills, only to be shot down. She had half a mind to walk right out of the office and demand her \$20 copay back. The only thing that stopped her was the fact that she was buck naked under a thin hospital gown.

“If you go on a diet, you’ll go off a diet, so what’s the point?” Dr. Lang continued. “What you have to do is change your eating habits.”

By this time Cheryl was hardly listening to anything Dr. Lang was saying. She was so angry and frustrated that she had wasted her morning.

“If you’re really interested in losing some weight, I’m willing to help you,” Dr. Lang continued. “But you need to be willing to work at it.”

The tears were trickling down her cheek by this time. Dr. Lang handed her some tissues. “I’m sure you’ve been on diets before, did they work?”

“Well,” Cheryl sniffed, “the one diet that really worked well for me was the Atkins diet. I lost nearly fifty pounds!”

“But it didn’t work, did it?”

“What do you mean? I lost fifty pounds.”

“So how much did you weigh after that?”

“One hundred and seventy pounds.”

“And how much do you weigh now?”

“Two hundred and thirty-five.”

“Look Cheryl,” Dr. Lang said after quickly checking her name on the chart. “I can tell that you really want to lose some weight. And, I’ll do what I can to help you. I truly wish there was a magic pill I could give you. But there isn’t. Take the Atkins Diet, you lost the weight, but then gained it all back and then some. So I ask you again, did the diet work?”

Cheryl began to get her point. Yes, she had lost weight. But not only had she put the fifty pounds back on after stopping, she had even added another ten.

“I guess it really didn’t.”

“Exactly my point,” Dr. Lang said more sympathetically. “Diets don’t work. You have to change your eating habits and changing habits takes a long time. What’s a habit anyway?”

“I guess it’s something you do that’s not good, like smoking.”

“Well, yes, that’s a bad habit. But what’s a good habit?”

“I don’t know,” Cheryl thought she was seeing the point. “Maybe like not eating junk food?”

“Yes, that would be a good habit, so is turning off a light when you walk out of the room, or saying thank you when someone does something nice for you.”

“So, I’ll ask again. What’s a habit?”

“Something you do all the time?”

“Exactly! Something you do without thinking.” Dr. Lang felt like a teacher grilling her student so she gave Cheryl a quick smile. “It happens almost automatically without effort. So how long do you think it takes to establish a habit, or for that matter, get rid of a bad habit?”

“I dunno, a few weeks maybe?”

“I see here on your history sheet that your mother suffers from lung disease and heart failure. Is she a smoker?”

Cheryl nods in the affirmative.

“Do you think if she stopped smoking for three or four weeks, she would have licked the habit?”

Cheryl shakes her head.

“You’re right. Habits take anywhere from six to nine months to make or break, some maybe shorter, some longer. The point that I’m making is that changing your eating

habits takes a lot longer than a few weeks. If you go on a diet for a few weeks or even a few months, how much headway have you made in changing your eating habits?"

Cheryl felt like she was beginning to comprehend what the doctor was saying. But at the same time, she could feel her eyes well up again in frustration. She knew that she just didn't have the willpower or the patience to do something for a whole nine months. She began feeling really hopeless again.

"Not only that, but eating habits comprise lots and lots of other habits," Dr. Lang continued, while at the same time handing Cheryl some more tissues. Cheryl smiled. It seemed incongruous. Dr. Lang was so busy rattling off information and asking questions, she didn't think she'd notice the tears.

"It's not just all the individual foods you eat," the doctor went on. "It's how you shop, what you keep in the house, how you store food, how often you eat out, how many times a day you eat, or if you eat when you're angry or sad. The list goes on and on."

Despite the attempt to acknowledging her feelings, Cheryl was really wondering why she'd bothered coming here. She had thought that this doctor was going to have some "magic" way to help her lose the weight. Now, she was feeling even more frustrated than before. The task in front of her seemed even more daunting than ever.

Dr. Lang realized from the look on Cheryl's face, that she wasn't getting through to her, so she switched gears. "Cheryl, I see that you're a dental assistant. I presume that you brush your teeth every morning and night?"

"Of course, but I don't see your point." Cheryl was starting to get really angry.

"Did you always brush your teeth regularly, even though your mother had told you to?"

Cheryl remembered letting herself go after Joy died. She'd stopped doing her hair and her makeup. Half the time, she hadn't bothered getting dressed. What was the point? She had even stopped brushing her teeth. As a matter of fact, she'd gotten the idea of becoming a dental assistant when she'd gone to the dentist to get several painful cavities fixed. It was all that junk food, she knew, but she hadn't cared. The cavities had reminded her that it wasn't all about appearances. Brushing was a good idea. By the time she was taking dental tech classes, she was flossing regularly. Returning to the doctor's question, Cheryl shook her head.

"Do you find it a great effort to brush your teeth every day?"

"No, in fact, I even floss every day."

"So that's precisely what I'm talking about. Once you establish a new habit, it sticks, and you don't have to think about it anymore. That's what you have to do with eating habits. Do it slowly, only addressing a couple habits at a time." Dr. Lang took a breath and continued. "The real problem, I find, is that you have to know which important habits to begin establishing and begin working toward that goal. It's really amazing to me that so many people go about the very important job of learning to eat healthy with so little knowledge. How proficient would you be as a dental assistant if you'd read one book, once, and then tried to be good at your job?"

"Not so good."

"Learning to eat right for your health might be one of the most important jobs in your life. Don't you think it might be worthwhile to educate yourself about doing it right?"

Cheryl nodded her head in agreement. Some of her anger had dissipated as she began to see some of the points the doctor was making. But she still wasn't convinced, it still seemed like too imposing of a task, and she wasn't really sure she could do it.

"Look Cheryl, let's start with one habit. What fluids do you drink during the day?"

"Black coffee with two sugars, Pepsi, and fruit juice."

"How many fruit juices, and how many Pepsis?"

"Two or three."

"Of each or both?"

"Probably three combined a day."

"Do you have any idea how many calories that represents?"

"A hundred or two?"

"Minimally 450 calories, and that depends on what fruit juice and how many ounces. If it's one of those sixteen-ounce bottles, then it's more than 550 calories. Take a guess at how many pounds that represents in one year."

"I dunno, ten maybe?"

"If you changed nothing else in your diet, but stopped drinking your calories, you could lose anywhere from forty-five to fifty-five pounds in one year!"

"Really? But what do I drink?"

"Diet drinks."

"But they taste terrible, I can't stand them."

"Look Cheryl, here are a couple of pages from a diet book that I'm writing on the topic of acquired taste. Why don't you read them, and when you come back on the next visit, we'll talk about it again."

Dr. Lang finished taking Cheryl's history, and then did the physical. When she was finished, she told her to schedule an appointment for one month hence, and then they would review her lab work at that time and continue their discussion.

The pleasant medical assistant returned to take Cheryl's blood and give her a tetanus shot that was due.

Cheryl left the office unsure of how she felt. She wasn't angry anymore, but she also wasn't very happy. She had thought that she would walk out of the office with a pill in hand ready to change her life, and instead she was actually a bit disheartened. As she walked to the deli to meet Teresa for lunch, she thought about all that Dr. Lang had told her.

Cheryl met up with Teresa for lunch at the deli across from work. Teresa managed a retail shoe store on South Street, so she was able to skip out for forty-five minutes for lunch.

Teresa was full of questions, wanting to know how Cheryl had made out with the doctor.

"Not so well," Cheryl responded. "I thought I'd get some great diet, but all she talked about was changing habits, how hard is, how long it takes, and how much you had to learn to eat right. Basically, I think it was a great big flop."

"Didn't she ask you to do anything at all?"

"Well, she said I should drink diet instead of regular soda and fruit juice and put Splenda in my coffee. She said I could lose up to forty-five or fifty-five pounds in a year even if I did nothing else."

"Wow, forty-five or fifty-five pounds. You know I drink diet soda."

"Yeah, but you like it. I hate it. It's disgusting!"

Teresa looked across the table. Cheryl's eyes were beginning to water. "Cheryl, you look like you're about to burst into tears. Was it really that bad?"

"Oh Teresa, I'm just so frustrated. I really had my hopes up. I wanted to do it this time, but it just seems so . . . impossible. You know how hard I've tried in the past, but nothing ever seems to really work." Tears started trickling down Cheryl's cheeks yet again.

Teresa reached over and grabbed her friend's hand and squeezed it. "Is there anything I can do?"

"What can you do? I mean, geez, it's up to me, isn't it?"

"Well, I dunno. Maybe there's something I can help with. Tell me what else the doctor talked about. Maybe I can learn something."

"You're thin. What do you need to learn?"

"Maybe about how not to get fat. You've seen my mother. Is that what I have to look forward to?"

Cheryl smiled. She couldn't imagine Teresa looking like her mom, who was nearly as large as Cheryl, but had bony knees and small boobs. Teresa smiled with her. "You know my mother was once my size. I really don't want to become my mother, so help me out here."

Cheryl dried her tears and began discussing with Teresa the concept of habits that she had learned.

Teresa looked at her watch. Their food still hadn't arrived. "If our food doesn't come soon, I'm going to have to take mine with me back to the shop."

"You're not the only one! I don't know why we come here. Their food's good, but the service always stinks."

“Yeah, you don’t want to come here when you’re really in a big hurry.”

“Getting back to what the doctor said. Does it make any sense to you?”

“It all makes sense,” Cheryl replied. “It’s just that . . . that, I dunno.”

“It’s just what, Cheryl?” Teresa prodded. She really wanted to help her friend.

“It just seems like it will take forever. I mean nine months to establish one stinky habit!”

“Yeah, but remember what the doctor said about you and flossing. Once you learn a habit, it sticks. God knows you certainly bug me about it enough!”

Cheryl grinned. She could be really annoying about getting other people to floss.

“I know, but it just seems like it will take eons to lose any weight.”

“What have you got to lose? Why not at least try? If you don’t try, you’re still going to be the same size a year from now.”

“I’ll think about it, Teresa. Oh, look our food is finally coming.”

Just as their food arrived, Cheryl noticed a few of the papers that Dr. Lang had given her sticking out of her purse. “I almost forgot these,” she said as she extricated the papers from her purse’s innards. “Dr. Lang gave me a couple of chapters on something about taste.” She looked at the title. “‘Acquired Taste,’ that’s it. Maybe you’d like to read them?” She handed the pages to Teresa.

Teresa laid them down next to her plate and started reading while she ravenously took large bites of her sandwich. As she finished each page, she handed it back to Cheryl. Having nothing better to do, Cheryl read them too.

After finishing the first chapter, in between mouthfuls, Teresa said, “Well, it kinda makes sense, don’t you think? I used to hate beer, but when I went to those wild frat

parties on Penn Campus, I didn't want to feel like a real loser, so I drank it anyway, and now I really like it. What about you?"

"Ugh, I can't stand beer, never could, it tastes terrible."

"Isn't there anything that you eat or drink now that you didn't like when you were younger?"

"No."

Teresa sighed. She really adored her friend. She was kind, thoughtful, witty, and smart. She could have gone to college. She had the smarts and the money. But ever since her sister's death, her self-worth had been so shot that she just never tried. Dental assistant school was such a breeze for Cheryl. She barely had had to study. She could have been a dentist if she wanted to, but she just took the path of least resistance.

Teresa really felt for her friend. She wanted so badly to help her, but she just didn't know how. She knew if she pushed this conversation any further, Cheryl would just push back, so she let it go.

They finished their lunch quickly with some momentary idle chatter about Wendy's upcoming wedding. Cheryl told her she would stop by her store at the end of the day, to see if she could find a new pair of shoes she had promised herself, and then they both went back to work.

Before moving on with our story, let's review the important points that

Cheryl has learned thus far.

HOW TO GET STARTED!

STEP #1: Stop drinking your calories!

Calories that you drink do absolutely nothing toward satisfying your appetite. If for example, you drink a soda with your meal, do you eat less food than if you hadn't had the soda? The answer, of course, is no. You're still going to eat the same. Your meal then contains an additional 150 calories. If you do this at lunch and dinner every day, you are consuming an additional 300 calories without any further appetite satisfaction. You may be thinking, "But I like soda." Over the next several chapters, we will discuss this extremely important issue about your present likes and dislikes, but for the moment, let's put this thought on hold.

So here you are drinking an extra 300 calories (in soda, fruit juice, or milk) without any further appetite suppression. Let's review what that mean in pounds? Since there are 365 days in a year, and there are 3,600 calories in one pound, then ten calories a day times 365 equals 3,650 calories, or approximately one pound. Every additional ten calories ingested per day for one year represents ten pounds; therefore, an additional 300 calories daily equals thirty pounds in one year. Mind-boggling isn't it? For every one hundred calories less per day ingested, you could stand to lose as much as ten whole pounds per year.

Very small changes over time can make huge differences.

So let's address other things you might drink on any given day, coffee or tea for example. If you drink your coffee or tea black, then you are drinking nothing more than flavored water (with regard to calories), so there are no calories to consider. However, if

you use cream, sugar, or both, then you have calories you must count. As an example, if you use two rounded teaspoons of sugar in two cups of coffee or tea per day, you have two tablespoons of sugar each day (three flat teaspoons = one tablespoon). There are forty-five calories in each tablespoon of sugar, which means that the two tablespoons of sugar equals ninety calories per day or nine pounds per year. If we add all this up so far, by eliminating two sodas and two tablespoons of sugar (use artificial sweetener instead) each day, you could possibly lose thirty-nine pounds in one year.

Very small changes do add up!

Another interesting way to really appreciate small incremental changes is to create a warehouse in your mind that is going to house all the food you won't eat for the next year. So, if you were to visit the part of your warehouse that housed the soda (or juice) that you didn't drink in one year, it would presently contain sixty-one cases of soda. If we looked at the shelf that held the sugar, we would find approximately five five-pound bags of sugar, and one two-pound bag of sugar. We will revisit this warehouse concept in the future, just to drive home the importance of small changes.

So Step #1 in this journey to eat better and be slimmer is to stop drinking your calories. We won't address alcohol consumption at this point, except to say that fewer calories are better, light beer is superior to regular beer, and less is always an improvement.

ACQUIRED TASTE

What Is It and How Does It Work?

When we talk about acquired taste, we are referring to the concept of learning to like something that you've never liked before. One of the simplest illustrations is that of the beer drinker. I'd be willing to bet that very few people liked beer the first time they tasted it, and yet today we have millions of people who love beer. Are they forcing themselves to drink it? Obviously not, they have learned to savor the taste in spite of their initial aversion. Why did they acquire a taste for beer? Well, maybe when they were younger they thought it was "cool." Or perhaps, they just wanted to fit in with their peers. Or, although they didn't particularly like the taste, they liked how it made them feel, or they liked the "buzz." Whatever the reason, by repeating the experience over and over, they learned to like what they initially thought was awful. They are no longer forcing themselves to drink it; they truly enjoy it, want it, and think it tastes great. How does this happen?

Remember initially, I mentioned that we human beings are not terribly fond of change and find it very difficult to do so. Well, that "shortcoming" can also be an asset, depending on how we approach it. We love and crave what is familiar to us.

Anything that we do every day becomes desirable, comforting, or relaxing. Whether it's taking off our tie or shoes at the end of a day, having our first cup of coffee in the morning, or the feel of freshly brushed teeth or clean hair—sameness breeds comfort. Do you remember how much fun you had on your last vacation, but also how good it felt to

be home in familiar surroundings? Well, the only way that something can become familiar and comfortable is through repeated exposure. The more we experience a particular activity, or food, or environment, the more comfortable it becomes, and generally the more we like it.

Acquired taste requires a great deal of repetition.

So regarding our discussion about drinking water or diet drinks instead of regular soda or juice, you need to learn to like one or the other or both.

Now there are some little tricks at making the process easier. Our palates, that is to say our taste buds, are also reluctant to change, so it's often necessary to blindside them. Say you are a Pepsi drinker, and you've tried diet Pepsi in the past, and thought it was awful. Since your palate was expecting regular Pepsi and that's not what it got, it says "yuk." Although you might be a vodka or gin drinker, just think how awful it would taste if you were expecting natural spring water—double yuk! Expectation plays a very important role in how good something tastes. So to avoid that issue when switching to diet drinks, pick a flavor of soda that you rarely drink. Your taste buds will not remember what it's "supposed" to taste like. It may not taste great, but it will taste okay. Continue to drink these other diet-flavored drinks for several months and avoid all cola for at least three months. If you basically have a preference for cola, after a three-month hiatus, Diet Pepsi will taste pretty good. Continue to drink Diet Pepsi for the next three to four months (without ever drinking a regular Pepsi), and you will find by that time a regular Pepsi will not taste particularly good, in fact it may actually taste too sweet!

You have now acquired a taste for diet soda. It has become your preference, and it actually tastes better to you than a regular Pepsi. Don't believe me, ask other diet soda

drinkers. Better yet, put this book down for the next several months and begin the experiment. Many of my patients over the years have reported back to me after our discussions that it was easier than they had expected to acquire a taste for new foods and drinks. And, many who had already learned to drink diet soda, but had not yet applied the concept to food, agreed that they no longer even enjoyed regular soda. So perhaps, you too can begin to understand the reality of acquired taste. If you are like Cheryl in the novel, you need to stop digging in your heels and avoiding change. You have to begin to open up to the idea that changing your taste buds may not be as difficult as it first seems—it's crucial to your future success.

ON ESTABLISHING HABITS

The dictionary defines habit as, “a recurrent, often **unconscious** pattern of behavior that is **acquired** through frequent **repetition**.” So when discussing how to acquire a taste for diet soda, you will realize that once you have done so, you have now developed a **good habit**. Obviously acquired taste and habits are very much overlapping concepts, but it is important to make some distinction. As Cheryl learned there are many different habits (where, how, and when) that are involved in eating, apart from **what** you eat.

So what do you do? How do you go about changing your eating habits successfully? The simple answer, which I’m sure you’ve already figured out, is addressing only a few habits at a time. Trying to change hundreds of habits simultaneously, like you do when you go on a diet, is totally unrealistic. The chances of success are minimal. So why not give yourself a fighting chance, and gradually change just a few habits at a time, instead of all of them all at once?

So, if Step #1 is the only habit that you try to change initially, you will still begin to lose weight. By doing just this simple step, you will also learn the very important concept of acquired taste. You will learn what establishing a good habit is all about and that, if you are patient and take it one step at a time, it doesn’t have to be nearly as difficult as it first seems.

I don’t want to leave this discussion of habits just yet, as there are still some important aspects of habit changing that need to be reviewed.

Establishing a new habit, as we have said, requires repetition. The more often you do something, and the longer you do it, the sooner it will become an unconscious

behavior. The good news is: Even if you don't do it every single time without fail, you can still be well on the road to establishing that habit. The bad news is: The more frequently you don't do it, the longer it's going to take.

Do you remember your basic biology class with Pavlov and his dog and the concept of positive and negative reinforcement? Well, Skinner came along some time later and established the concept of intermittent reinforcement. Let me give you an example. He put a mouse in a cage with a simple lever that dispensed food. Every time the mouse stepped on the lever, it received a food pellet. After a while he stopped giving the mouse any food. The mouse would continue to push on the lever, but after a relatively short time, when it consistently received no more food pellets, it stopped stepping on the lever. Next he did the same experiment, but instead of giving food every time the mouse stepped on the lever, he gave it food every third or fourth time. Now when he stopped giving it food entirely, the behavior persisted far longer.

It works precisely the same way with negative reinforcement. If he had given the mouse small electric shocks every time it stepped on a certain grid of the cage, it would have taken a much shorter time for the mouse to avoid that grid than if he only shocked the mouse every third or fourth time.

Let's apply this to humans. Let's say that you develop significant heartburn every time you have a cup of coffee. How long do you think it would take before you stopped drinking coffee? How much longer do you think it would take before you stopped, if you only developed heartburn every third or fourth time you drank it?

So how does this apply to developing good eating habits? If, as I advise, you were to begin trying diet sodas, and every fourth time you were to drink a regular soda, then it's

going to take much longer before that change takes place. Likewise if I were to advise you to eat breakfast every morning, and you were to only eat it some mornings, how much longer do you think it will take to establish that behavior as a habit?

The good news is, however, that it will still become a habit and that all is not lost if you occasionally slip up. Just get back into the routine as soon as possible.

Remember repetition of any behavior adds up to change!

Let's continue with our story and find out how Cheryl deals with change.