

WHEN FOOD IS YOUR BEST FRIEND (& WORST ENEMY)

by Jan Johnson

Chapter 1

Hungry for Something More

Some people do not understand what I mean when I say that food was my best friend, but perhaps you will. Meet Nancy, Kathy and Brenda.¹ They understand.

Nancy, Hungry for Comfort

It was prom night, and everything seemed magical for a few moments. My date was a nice boy who was also funny. We enjoyed each other at the dance but on the way to an after-prom party, he pulled out a bottle of beer. When we parked at the house where the party was, he leaned over and began pulling at my dress. I screamed, and he yelled at me.

We hurried into the house, where I hid in the laundry room. I tried to think of whom I could call. Not my parents, that's for sure. I opened the door and wandered over to the snack table. I saw my date dancing very close with another girl, so I retreated to the laundry room, grabbing a bag of chips as I went. I remember smearing the salt and grease from my hands across my face and hoping my face would break out in pimples.

A little later, the mother of the girl who was having the party came into the laundry room and asked if I was OK. We talked for a few minutes and she offered to take me home.

“Oh, no, you don't have to do that,” I replied.

“I have to buy more soda anyway. I'll drop you off,” she said. So I agreed.

The next morning my parents asked how it went and I told them that everything was fine. My mother suggested that the boy might call again, but I assured her he wouldn't. She didn't ask why.

That wasn't the first time where I felt as if the word, “victim,” were written on my forehead and some sharp person read it. I could barely remember, of course, but it was there, standing between my parents and me. When I was about five, my father began visiting me in my bedroom at night and playing sexual games with me. I hated it, but I didn't know what to do. He told me not to tell my mother, but why didn't she hear? He would laugh and yell so loud!

When I was about nine or ten, he stopped. Then I became afraid he would start molesting my little sister. One time he looked as if he were coming after her and I grabbed the biggest kitchen knife we had. I stood in the bedroom doorway and yelled at him. His eyes got big and he left the room. He must have told my mother about the knife because she came in and scolded me for having it. I looked at her with disgust and put the knife away. Later, I took another one and kept it under my bed for years. I think my father knew that touching my sister would be the one thing that would make me defy the pet name my parents had given me, "Mouse."

At home, I spent most of my time zoned out in front of the television hugging a bag of cookies as if it were a teddy bear. I made friends at school, but I never felt close to anyone -- or rather I never let them get close to me.

I ended up marrying Clint, a nice guy who didn't bother me much about anything. I knew he wanted me to enjoy sex, but be real, how was that supposed to happen? I did enjoy the closeness, however, so I did my "sexual duty."

I liked my job. I supervised a busy office and we used any excuse to have potluck lunches. I saw the weight coming on, but I wasn't too heavy, so I didn't worry.

My problems began when a friend who attended support group meetings told me that she depended on food. Listening to her made me realize how much I loved food -- my only friend and companion. I went to meetings with her, but when I would try to stop eating, I was filled with fear and anger. I became obsessed with what my father had done to me, so I wound up eating before and after every meeting.

I decided to go into therapy, which baffled Clint. But he came with me and we talked about my anger toward my dad (and toward my mom, whom I'm sure knew and refused to protect me). As I progressed, I went back to the compulsive overeating support group and it wasn't so scary then.

Clint came with me to therapy the day I confronted my dad in an imaginary way. I shouted, "I am not a bad person and I don't want to..." Shortly after that, my parents came to visit. My dad criticized my new stylish shoes and suggested I throw them away.

I whirled around and the same words came out: "I am not a bad person and I don't want to... throw these shoes away."

My father flinched and looked offended. I could feel Clint standing behind me, as if he were going to catch me if I fainted. This gave me the courage to confront my father about the abuse. He stood there for a while, and then said to my mom, "Shall we be going?"

My parents pretend that the talk never took place, but it made a big difference in me. I acknowledged the truth and it's easier for me to see the truth in myself too. I wrote a Twelve Step inventory (a history of my compulsion and character defects) and realized that I've used the abuse as an excuse to feel sorry for myself all my life and that I've distanced myself from people.

I have confessed to my support group that I have been mad at God and everyone else for years and that I am finally willing to surrender it. I feel that I can finally trust people, and God too. I'm trying to turn my need for food over to God and allow him to comfort me. Now no one holds power over me unless I give it to them, and I'm giving God more of that power every day.

Kathy, Hungry for Control

I sat in the lobby watching the people walk into the auditorium for the therapists' convention. No one I knew had arrived, and since that was my first year to attend, I wanted to sit with someone who knew the ropes.

I looked at my watch: twenty-five minutes until the program began. I found the snack bar and ordered a large diet soda. Then after checking to make sure none of my colleagues had popped in, I grabbed a candy bar. As the cashier rang up my purchases, I threw two more candy bars on the counter. I rushed into the women's bathroom, stood in a stall and scarfed down two of the candy bars and gulped my diet soda. Then I came out, checked my face in the mirror for chocolate smudges, brushed off my suit and stuck the other candy bar in my purse. *I may need this later*, I thought.

I strolled back to the auditorium, trying to appear relaxed as I sipped my diet soda. By the time I saw a colleague, I felt confident and ready to face the world.

That's how my life used to be -- all the time. Food became my best friend when I was twelve. My overweight parents fought constantly. Sometimes I buried my head in my pillow and cried; other times I sat on the stairway and listened as if I were the scorekeeper at a ball game.

After my parents went to bed, I used to sneak downstairs and get a snack. I especially liked to make tuna fish salad. (There was no junk food in our house, thanks to my mom who dieted constantly.) Then I'd take my bowl of tuna fish upstairs and eat it all. Soon I would be calm enough to go to sleep. In a month's time, candy wrappers, assorted plates and several bowls of dried tuna fish would collect under my bed.

I comfortably absorbed the extra calories until I was in college. Then I saw that I was gaining weight so I went on my first diet. I counted calories and lost the weight. Control was no problem for me.

It wasn't as easy after I got married. Trying to get along with someone meant I had to keep my refrigerator stocked with things that pacified my bad moods. Every fall I gained fifteen or twenty pounds and dieted it away in the spring, so I could look decent in a swimsuit. I joined health spas and diet clubs. Over the years I built up an entire library of diet books and I could make any recipe using non-fat milk, lo-cal sweetener, or half as much oil.

It got more difficult to lose the weight each time and I felt more grouchy, as if my life were in a holding pattern of emptiness until I finished the diet. I became moody and critical of my husband, and after several years he left me. I was working through that when I heard about a support group meeting for overeaters at a church near my office. But, how could I, a therapist and a leader at my own church, join those people?

Still I kept dieting until, one time in a fit of anger, I yelled at a client. The client left and never came back. Then I realized that I picked on everyone I knew -- friends, family, even the pastor. The worse I felt, the more I ate. I knew I was out of control.

After a few therapy sessions for myself, I decided to try the support group. On the way, I stopped for a hamburger and fries and then I changed into some old sweat clothes. I put my hair

in a ponytail and washed off my make up. No one would ever recognize me! I even used my full first name, Kathleen.

I heard people talk at the meeting about their love affair with food and I thought, *At last I'm home!* I tried what they called abstinence, but I binged every time I was upset or lonely.

I heard about “sponsors” and laughed at the thought. I was a therapist -- how could I have a sponsor? Besides, no one seemed good enough.

Finally, I went out for coffee afterward with a crusty older woman named Margaret. I didn't like her that much, but she was tough and honest. As we talked, I felt as if she saw right through me. But she had a tender side too. She talked about surrendering and I found that hard.

“If I quit controlling my eating, I'll binge like crazy,” I told her.

She laughed. “You've been controlling it and you still binge anyway.”

Cheap shot, I thought.

After that I started devouring literature on compulsive eating and it seemed like a strange approach: become empowered by letting go.

After that, I called Margaret whenever I was mad. We went round and round. “Who says you have to be so wonderful?” Margaret cornered me one time. So I spilled it: “Nothing ever satisfied my mother. I remember filling a bucket with weeds, like she said, and then she mashed them down and told me to pull more. She always made it clear that I wasn't good enough.”

The next morning, I realized I'd made an error in my checkbook and I flew into a rage at myself. I saw how I put myself down as much or more than my mom ever had.

I finally wrote an inventory, which I read, to Margaret. I couldn't look up as I read, but I could hear her crying.

“I've had all these feelings and I've done the same things, Kathleen,” Margaret said. “I'm glad you wrote about them.”

The next day I called the client I had yelled at. I told him that I had been wrong to yell at him and that I was working some things out for myself. He seemed confused, thanked me and hung up, but I felt much better.

The next time I tried to become abstinent and failed, I dived into despair. Margaret only replied, “I'm still proud of you. You have three days of healthy attitudes and normal eating.”

As I accepted this gentleness, I trusted Margaret and the others in the support group. I quit masquerading as Kathleen, the sweat clothes frump, and began sharing my feelings, digging through them for the truth, and giving them back to God. I began a continuing abstinence that helped me quiet those condemning voices in my mind.

Brenda, Hungry for Approval

I felt demeaned standing before the doctor in that backless white gown. It was obvious my fourteen-year-old frame was not budding into the designated shape of charming young lady.

“You know you're overweight, don't you?” the doctor said and he gave me a diet plan. My mother looked at the floor -- she must have felt humiliated too. She was also overweight and I was her pride and joy. I got decent grades in school; I was the only teenager who was asked to work in the church nursery; I helped Mom out at home with the cooking and cleaning. People used to say, “Brenda has such a cute face and a bubbly personality. If she'd only lose a little weight...”

I attacked the diet, making sure Mom bought the food I needed. I still made popcorn for my little brothers, but I didn't put butter on a special bowl of popcorn for me. I eventually lost the extra pounds that summer. Even my dad, who drank a lot and barely noticed anything, commented on how cute I looked.

Then when school started, boys started noticing me. I mentioned this to my mother and she seemed troubled. No wonder -- relationships with men weren't her strong point. My father never noticed her, even though she did everything he asked. Yet I liked being noticed by boys, especially by Seth, a basketball player. He began walking me home when he didn't have practice.

But Seth was only a normal fourteen year old and he soon became interested in another girl and I felt like nothing. I remember standing in front of the candy machine in the cafeteria after school. I didn't want to go home and cook and clean and do my homework. So I bought a candy bar and started to eat it.

“There's Brenda, at the candy machine,” I heard a girl whisper.

“I wonder if she'll get fat again,” snickered another.

I ran off with the candy bar and cried. After that, I kept up my decent grades and my responsible “roles” at church and home, but I ate like crazy.

I decided it didn't matter that I was overweight because I did have some good friends and they were overweight too. In junior college, a smart, quiet guy noticed me and he began calling me. He seemed intelligent and I wanted to get married -- I couldn't stay with my mom forever. Besides, I wanted to raise a family.

After I got married, I gained even more weight. I ate bedtime snacks to numb me out so I wouldn't be receptive to my husband's advances. Sometimes my lack of interest inflamed the quiet rage he carried inside him, but I didn't care because I had three beautiful children that I loved. I protected them from their father's coldness and I gave them everything they needed. I helped out at a day care center and eventually became the assistant director. I couldn't move up until I got a credential, but I didn't have enough confidence to go back to school.

Besides, I knew they wouldn't hire an overweight person like me. So I tried dieting a few times, and I was miserable. I decided I'd rather be fat and happy.

When my older son started skipping school and taking drugs, I blamed it on my husband and his coldness. But when my daughter followed the same path, I panicked. What was wrong? Hadn't I created the perfect world for them? Why weren't they as loyal to me as I had been to my mother?

I felt so defeated that I ate even more. I found myself doing gross things like licking spilled ice cream off the freezer door. Once my daughter caught me picking food out of the

garbage. I fired back at her in anger. That's when I called a woman who attended Overeaters Anonymous meetings. I went with her during the day so no one in my family would know.

A lot of people there weren't as heavy as I was, and I didn't like that. But they thought about food just the way I did. I could tell it was the most important thing in their lives. I heard them talk about getting well, even though their marriages were breaking up and their kids were running away.

I wanted the people in the group to like me so I tried to impress them -- I was funny one week, mature the next, pathetic the next. I felt uncomfortable, but I kept coming back. One day, my husband called me from work and told me I was lazy -- me, the hard worker. I flew off to the OA meeting and I dumped all my anger. Wow! Everyone talked to me afterward! Honesty had never helped me win friends before.

After that, I tried to be more real and I began reading the literature. I eventually got a sponsor, a woman who was doggedly determined that I didn't have to please her. Every time I'd say, "Am I doing OK?" she would reply, "You're doing fine. It's progress, not perfection."

I discovered that I had my own thoughts and feelings that weren't so dumb after all. My family is very uncomfortable with my new self-respect. I believe that God loves me the way I am so I don't pretend to be "little miss Christian" to try to get him to love me.

I've lost some weight, and I'm still not slender, but I respect myself. I can now admit when I'm wrong, but I don't have to take the blame when I'm not wrong. I see the changes in myself mirrored in the way my younger son talks to me. He is the only person in my family who treats me with respect, but that's today.

I'm still losing weight (very slowly), I'm still looking at my character defects, I'm still allowing myself to grow.

Food: The Center of My Life

Nancy, Kathy and Brenda would now identify themselves as compulsive eaters. There's no predictable mold for those of us who wear this label. Some compulsive overeaters are named Chuck, Grant and Ron, and they're stockbrokers and machine operators.

Some of us who are compulsive overeaters don't even look overweight; we aren't typically lazy; very few of us are fat and jolly. But we have one thing in common: we all use food to manage the pain in our lives. That feeling of a full stomach numbs our hurt and anger. Food is our major source of comfort, celebration and companionship. Some people eat to sustain life; we eat to face life. We eat because of "what is eating us."

Eating "nourishes" us, so to speak, because it becomes a substitute for tenderness, affection, excitement and even sexual fulfillment. We may feel that life owes us those things but since we're sure we aren't going to find them, food makes up for them. Food becomes our best friend, and without realizing it, we build our lives around it.

As our compulsion progresses, our will power disintegrates. We eat when we're not hungry. We eat in secret, not wanting others to see how much we've eaten. We make excuses for why we have to eat -- I have a headache, I feel nauseous. While others eat to live, we live to eat.

We become disgusted with ourselves and food becomes not only our best friend, but our worst enemy too. Many of us become compulsive dieters as controlling our weight become a driving force in our lives. It dominates our conversations, our choice of reading material and our choice of friends. We can't live with food, but we can't live without it either.

Only a compulsive eater . . .

- misses part of a conversation at a party because the chips and dip were just served;
- licks a bowl of brownie batter so clean that another person could hardly tell if it needed washing;
- wonders: When will I ever be at peace with food?

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¹All names in this book have been changed to protect the anonymity of fellow strugglers.