

Sweeping ordeal of loss — and gain

Rachel Epstein

is a writer in New York

The recent announcement that Nestle will purchase weight-loss empire Jenny Craig Inc. for \$600 million highlights the underweight/overweight split in America's love affair with body size. On a less expensive scale, so does my personal life.

After a five-week trip to Paris brought me back a *grosse* 10 pounds heavier, I needed motivation to fit back into my clothes. I made a bet with my boyfriend, John, who is 6-foot-2 and 145 pounds: If he gained more weight than I lost in two weeks, I owed him a sweeping and Swiffering of our 600-square-foot apartment. I dreaded the decision as soon as our handshake cemented the deal. The prospect of lemon scent all over my fingers as I dug into dust-filled corners nauseated me.

I was never a health nut. My gym membership would go unused for months until I'd stumble upon my sports bra while tidying my bedroom (also a rarity) and get a short-lived adrenaline surge. My daily intake involved three meals, three snacks, and at least three desserts. I hadn't heard of Dr. Atkins until he died.

Even fruits, a seemingly pleasurable item, were a problem. They occasionally made their way into my diet in one of two ways: (a) They were dipped in chocolate; or (b) They were baked into a cookie or cake, and I couldn't get them

out without damaging more than 50 percent of the treat.

John's tactic for winning the bet was simple: eat fatter, more often, and in bulk. He pushed his weights underneath the bed to make room for value-size packages of weight-gain shakes and candy bars, soda bottles, and sour-cream-and-onion chips.

My options were dizzying: the South Beach Diet, the cabbage diet, the lemonade diet, the Zone diet. I could eat carbohydrates but not natural sugars, or I could eat natural sugars but not fats, or I could eat fats but not calories. Or I could not eat at all.

I settled on South Beach. Dr. Arthur Agatston looked convincing on the back cover of his book, his lab coat assuring me that I needed to find the right carbohydrates and the right sugars in order to lead an improved, more productive life. His gleaming, white teeth mesmerized me in a Gilderoy Lockhart fashion.

John and I went to the grocery store to stock up. I rushed off with my list, a beat in my step as I thought about all the zippers and buttons I would no longer have to tackle. I grabbed fat-free cheese, lean chicken breast, prechopped peppers, and a half gallon of skim milk.

John browsed the Entenmann's display, tossed a box of oatmeal raisin cookies, a moist-looking pound cake, and eight beautifully dipped chocolate doughnuts into the cart and called it a success. I held back tears as I wheeled

toward the checkout counter.

The days following were the worst in my sans-tragedy life. I ate egg-white breakfasts, bland salads, and breadless poultry concoctions. I drank a lot of water, stayed away from caffeinated beverages, and eliminated ice cream as an after-dinner necessity. Anything off my diet — even items I didn't like such as yogurt and raisins — seemed all too tempting. Though I didn't follow the regimen perfectly (there was one mishap involving a coworker's birthday and a chocolate cheesecake from Junior's), I was proud of my self-control.

John, in turn, was proud of his indulgence. He usually couldn't find time for meals; now, he couldn't find time for much else. He ate from his plate, from my plate and, if I hadn't stopped him on several occasions, would have eaten from several strangers' plates. We never had leftovers.

Fourteen alcohol-free days later, it was time to step on the scale. The digital screen revealed I had lost six pounds, confirmed by the no-suck tactic employed during the zipping process. John also had a change in weight — a loss of three pounds. His metabolism cared about the bet far less than his pride.

As winner, I asked for John's adherence to a mutually beneficial request: we send Dr. Agatston a Swiffer mop and a spare key.

Contact Rachel Epstein at Rachel.Epstein@tiffany.com.