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Chapter 3 – The Devil Brings Pasta . . . Meat Sauce, too

“I can do this.”

I had entered every single diet with a strong, positive attitude. Another New Year’s resolution or maybe a promise to my loved ones and I would start off like a house afire. For months at a time I would use my treadmill or Nordic Track daily, keep detailed records of my

food consumption, exercise time and weight loss. Pounds would come off, belts would loosen and there would be smiles all around.

Family members, always hopeful that I was trying to diet again, would be the first to notice.

“Hey, Mickey, you’re looking better. Are you trying to lose weight?” my significant other/mother/daughter/in-law/sister/brother/niece/nephew/cousin would ask.

I would give them an “Oh, shucks” look, as if to say, “Thanks for noticing. I’m really going to do it this time.” Sometimes I would even foolishly say that out loud.

On those occasions when it lasted for more than a few months and the total loss would be getting into the twenty-five plus range, acquaintances would notice.

“Lookin’ good, Mickster.”

“Keep it up!”

“Whatcha doing? Countin’ carbs? Cause my brother swears by carbs.”

And on and on.

The moral support was nice, the loose clothes were nicer. I felt better, my step had a little more spring in it, stairs were easier to climb and I should have been content but I wasn’t. I would tell myself I wasn’t hungry even as I was planning to binge at my first opportunity. That’s right. As wrong as it was to harbor that forbidden self-defeating notion, and believe me, I knew it was wrong, that thought never left me. Like the self-delusional alcoholic paying lip service to his first month at AA, I knew that there would come a day that Brother Pizza and I would be reunited. Maybe not as often as before, but some day, soon.

The willpower could initially hold back the hunger for long stretches at a time. I would count calories fastidiously and compare the totals to my daily metabolic needs. (See Chapter 4) I kept tally on graph paper and plotted my weight loss in detail. In future years, I would use a computer to record everything on spread sheets. It became a game of sorts, trying to hold down the calorie count from day to day and building on the success gradually.

**But in the back of my mind, the eventual binge was always there,
and sooner rather than later.**

The failure would creep in deviously. As the treacherous little voice in my head told me how well I was doing, it was also reminding me I owed myself a little happiness, too. It didn’t matter what dieting technique I was using at the time. Eventually I would succumb to the urge that was always lurking in the back of my mind, just waiting to happen:

The inevitable temptation to cheat.

Every dieter knows about the craving to cheat. You are cruising along on your latest diet, losing globs of weight in the first few weeks and you’re proud of yourself, thinking this time is different. This time you are going to go all the way. You start figuring how fast you have been losing and project some wildly unlikely end date for when you will be close to normal again.

Then it hits.

Maybe you passed your favorite pizza place. Or you saw that box of pasta in the closet with its little friend, the jar of Extra-Chunky Super-Tasty Meat Sauce, sitting next to it. You take a close look at the nutritional details listed on the back of the box of pasta and see that it is two hundred ten calories per serving. No sweat, you say. I can handle that and you take out a serving’s worth.

Nuh-uh. Doesn't look like much, that small handful you have grabbed. It seems so puny and you think that it will not last nearly long enough. So you do some refiguring and realize that you have been so good today you can have two servings! After all, that's only four hundred calories plus a few more. You reach for a pot to start boiling water and munch a few carrots while the water is getting hot. Carrots are good. Almost no calories in them. See how disciplined I am? This pasta is fine. I deserve it. Just as you are about to throw the still-meager portion of pasta into the pot, another thought comes to you. If two servings is four hundred calories then four servings is only eight hundred calories and after all, you have been so, so very good over the last few weeks. Why not? So you carelessly grab some more of the raw happiness and chuck that into the pot.

As it is cooking you begin to wonder how you are going to eat just plain pasta. It needs something else, you decide. Back to the cupboard and there sits Mr. Extra-Chunky Super-Tasty Meat Sauce. "Huh! Just three hundred calories for the whole jar! No sweat, I can handle that, too," you decide. "After I add that in, I will still be only a little bit over my allowance of calories for the day."

True, you will only be a little over for the day and no harm will be done. But, and this is a very big but, you will be okay only so long as you don't eat anything else for the rest of the day. Nothing. The problem with that is that you know you aren't done with dinner yet.

You grab another pot and start heating up the sauce. As it is cooking a remarkable thought pops into your head: There is a decent bottle of pinot noir wine in the basement that you hid from yourself on last year's diet. Wouldn't that go great with the pasta? You conclude with appropriate righteousness, "After all, who can have a good pasta dish without a little wine?" Not to mention some buttery, garlic bread which you hastily throw together.

When the feast is ultimately finished, if you stop to add it up, you have gone twelve hundred calories *over* your limit for the day. But you notice that you finally feel *full*. For the first time in weeks, your belly is stretched to the limit and gosh, if that doesn't feel awfully good! Over the next few hours, you have to swig down a lot of water because you have just eaten more salt than you have in the last few weeks; of course all that food you ate needs plenty of extra water to process it as well. By the time you are ready for bed, you notice your belly is really distended and you are feeling pretty bloated.

A little guilt creeps in.

Maybe I shouldn't have had all that food, you think. But I have been so good over the last month. I deserved it, didn't I? After all, isn't everyone entitled to a little binge every now and then? As you try to resolve this internal conflict, you might even convince yourself that you didn't do anything that drastically wrong.

And here is the important thing: It *was* sort of okay. No long term damage has been done. It was just one night off and though you overdid it, most diet plans do call for the occasional holiday.

For the next two days you redouble your efforts as you get back on your program. Maybe you even do an extra session on the treadmill for good measure. The binge from two nights earlier was just that: a temporary thing. You encourage yourself that you are still on the right path, a good path. A good week or two at this rate and that bad night will become a distant memory.

Except another few days go by and you have a lousy day at work, or the kids are fighting and raising your blood pressure, or the dog is sick, or you had a fight with your wife, or . . . then you start remembering how good that pasta tasted and how nice it was to feel full. You take a

look at your carrot sticks and celery hearts and say, screw it, I'm gonna take tonight off, too. You check the box of pasta and sauce and see that there is enough for another round.

Congratulations.

You have just started down the slippery slope of failure and you can bet that within two more weeks you will have abandoned all pretense of a successful diet.

Along the way you will have more pangs of guilt and introspection about how you are doing the wrong thing. But in the end the pasta and meat sauce will win out. They always do.

That is why we are obese.

Let's try another scenario that can lead to failure. Let's say that instead of falling for the temptation of pasta and his friend Extra-Chunky that you slam the door closed on the cupboard, you forget the pinot noir and you retreat to the safety of another few Melba toasts or frozen sugar-free ice bars to get your mind off the temptation.

Voila! It worked. You passed the crisis with flying colors and did not surrender to the temptation. Tomorrow you will hail this victory and you will realize you are on the path to true success in your diet. "This time I'm going all the way. By next spring, I'll be down another fifty pounds. I can keep this up. No sweat."

Or can you?

Can you truly tolerate the thought that you will not be able to eat pasta again, at least the way you used to? If you are on a low carb diet or some other restrictive food diet, is this something you can truly do forever? Sure, you will get your weight down now, perhaps for months, but when push comes to shove how will you handle the box of pasta and meat sauce in the future? Even if you threw them away, their spot in your cupboard will always be full.

So you begin chanting "one day at a time," even though that is a different addiction-religion's mantra and swear that if you can just get through today you will start tomorrow all over.

But in your heart, you know as you think about these things that at some point, your diet will fail.

Do you know why it will fail?

Because you are going to get bored and then cheat.

Cheaters never prosper; they just gain weight.

You object to that?

Think about it. Think about how you have tried to lose weight in the past. You used a trick of some kind to get yourself to eat less. Exactly how long do you think that trick will last? 'Cause after that it is going to be all willpower or behavioral modification of some kind and we know that doesn't work. Go ask Dr. Small at Yale. You still have the issue of your broken satiety-thermostat setting to deal with.

Is it hopeless?

No it is not.

You just need a different trick that will answer the satiety issue and in a way that you can be satisfied forever, with smaller portions of what you like to eat.

If you want to see that answer, skip the next chapter. However, I believe it is important before we move on to the future that we re-explore the past. Check out our old diets and see why they didn't work. Only then can we move on in earnest.

Tip 3: If you have a broken satiety thermostat, then all of the dieting tricks in the world will not be enough. You would need a lifetime supply of willpower. That isn't going to happen either because you can't buy willpower at Wal-Mart. I've checked.

