

The Slim Friend

Novel Excerpt

DIANE BRACUK

Intro

Gayle, a 50-something freelance healthcare writer is facing ageism for the first time in her career. So, when she gets a contract at a gastric band clinic writing weight-loss advice for a patient chatline after a particularly scary dry spell, she is thrilled, believing herself ideal for the job. After all, her father, an Olympic-calibre boxer, was an unapologetically fatphobic Adonis and an early advocate of fitness and health foods decades before they became mainstream. As she pens her posts, her father's voice ("*Put down that goddam fork!*") is always at the back of her mind. But she learns to cast aside her smug, clichéd assumptions about weight loss when the "bandsters" mockingly nickname her The Slim Friend, a name that represents the well-meaning but patronizing pal many overweight people must put up with. In this scene we meet Gayle (as 'Freddy the Fork') on the chatline encouraging the clinic's clients to try their new weight loss product: an electronic fork designed to control the pace of eating.

The Band

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They all seemed lightweight, their potential clients. At least Gayle rarely heard them as they glided by her office to the patient waiting room down the hall. Most were women in their mid-thirties carrying an extra hundred pounds—women who had tried every diet in the book and who were now considering a gastric band. Maybe it was because the weight of a very difficult—and expensive—decision had finally been lifted, but there was a lightness

to their step, as if they were plumped like a duvet, with the finest, freshest downy feathers. Just zip them open and all those excess pounds would fly out like fluff.

That wasn't the case, of course. Gastric band surgery wasn't a magic bullet. Unlike other bariatric weight loss clinics that promised dramatic weight loss, this one prided itself on being scrupulously honest with clients. To lose thirty percent of their body weight in the first year, they would have to make significant changes to the way they ate. They would be limited to three-and-a-half cups of food a day after surgery, and would have to chew each and every bite of their meager fare slowly. Painstakingly slowly. At least twenty times to induce satiety, that much-sought-after and ever-elusive feeling of being full.

To help them, the clinic provided coaches, dieticians, and diet and weight loss tools. The latest was an electronic fork designed to control a person's pace of eating. Embedded in its handle was a built-in sensor that could detect small changes in the intervals between mouthfuls. If a person ate too fast, the fork vibrated, giving the user what was termed an "aversive stimulus." The idea was that after a few weeks of using it, rapid eaters would learn unconsciously to avoid the vibration. Anyone who bought the fork would be automatically enrolled in an email program that featured a cartoon fork named Freddy.

Gayle was 'Freddy', or at least the voice of 'Freddy', hired on a three-month contract to provide content on healthy eating and encourage conversation on the chatline. Two months after she started, the number of people on the chatline had almost doubled. In a meeting last week, they had deliberated about the possibility of animating

'Freddy' and giving him a speaking voice. But what tone would motivate clients?

"How about we use my father's voice?" Gayle had jokingly suggested. "*Put down that goddam fork! You're GOBBLING your food! You wanna get fat?*"

Everyone laughed, including the clinic's new CEO Donald, who Gayle hoped would renew her contract. But on the subway home, she wondered whether it had been uneasy laughter, whether some kind of raw emotion in her voice revealed an unintended harshness that touched a nerve and made them feel badly for her.

A message came up on 'Connect with Freddy'. It was from one of Gayle's regular commenters, a woman she had christened 'Teeny Tiny' because of the way she used diminutives when discussing her negative emotions.

Today, Teeny Tiny was a teeny bit angry with herself because she had gotten up in the middle of the night and had eaten an entire jar of peanut butter. "You told me to get rid of the cookies in the cupboard and I did," she wrote. "And DON'T tell me to stop keeping peanut butter in the cupboards because I need it for my kids."

It took Gayle a moment to understand what she was talking about. Ah yes, the "Too Sweet on Sweets?" post, in which 'Freddy' had urged people to "ditch the doughnuts and can the cookies—get rid of anything in your cupboards that might sabotage your weight-loss efforts!" Before she could think of an appropriate response, a message from Miss Vicky, another regular commenter (whose moniker came from her ability to inhale a jumbo bag of *Miss Vicky's* potato chips in two seconds) popped up on the screen: "Don't feel bad. One time I was craving something sweet and the only thing around was frozen hot dog buns and maple syrup. So, I nuked the buns and ate them with the syrup. I was SO disgusted with myself."

Teeny Tiny replied instantly. "I'm a wee bit disgusted with myself as well. Yesterday was bad. I didn't feel like chew, chew, chewing with a vibrating fork. Something deep and primal took over, and I just bolted my food down. I had to have that comforting full feeling in my belly."

'Freddy's' icon flickered on the screen. He looked a bit like Gumby, his left thumb cocked up in a "you can do it!" gesture.

How my father would have loved a fork like this when he became concerned about my weight gain at thirteen, Gayle thought. He would have made it mandatory at every meal, meticulously recording how many bites she took, the intervals between them, and her eating speeds over the course of a week. Her progress (or lack of it) would then be discussed during one of those solemn conversations that always began with her mother announcing, "Your father wants to *talk* to you."

"Don't beat yourself up," she now wrote as 'Freddy'. "It

takes six months to change habitual eating behaviours, and it's perfectly normal to hit a few bumps now and then. Remember—studies show that most gastric band patients lose at least two-thirds of their excess weight in a year and keep it off."

A recent participant to the chat line, whose moniker was Polly Wolly Doodle, piped in. "You can do it. I've been keeping track of my data and I've definitely slowed my chews down."

"Did it result in weight loss?" Teeny Tiny wanted to know.

"Yes," Polly Wolly Doodle instantly wrote back. "This month I lost six pounds!"

"I am so tired of feeling different," Teeny Tiny went on. "Mealtimes are the one time we can get together as a family to discuss the day, and I can't contribute anything. All I can hear in my head is chewing, and I feel so isolated from my family. I just want to know if I can make it through a meal without a fork vibrating between my fingers."

"I felt the same way at first. It feels really weird. But then you do start slowing down and the fork doesn't vibrate as much."

A long pause ensued. Gayle imagined Teeny Tiny at her computer, could sense her frustration and self-pity, the suppressed rage of a big woman who had likely spent her whole life telling herself she was "a wee bit miffed" when she actually wanted to throttle someone. In one of the "Freddy's Corner" conversations, which had garnered over 1,200 comments, Teeny Tiny had revealed that she had—no surprise—a slim, narcissistic mother whom she could never please, who had given her a girdle at her thirteenth birthday party. "I had to hide my feelings in front of all my guests," she wrote. "I just stood there, smiling."

Gayle knew that kind of anger. Rage boiling over like a pot of porridge on the stove, oat flakes sticking to the elements, hardening to a crust you could never quite scrub off. With a different father, she might have stuffed herself to dilute that rage and make her feel like "a sweet little girl," every cookie, every cupcake, every chocolate bar sending a soothing surge of neurochemicals to the pleasure centres of her brain, wiring them to crave more.

Come on, Teeny Tiny, she thought. Don't give up now. Your brain circuits aren't permanently messed up. You can change the wiring. You've lost twenty pounds already and can lose more. At this point in the process, if it seemed as though the client was getting too discouraged, Gayle would consult one of the clinic's dieticians for advice. She stared stupidly at 'Freddy's' upturned thumb, as if that would help. To her relief, Teeny Tiny's message popped up.

"Thank you. I've been in a lot of obesity chat rooms, but this is the first time I've ever felt HEARD."

It was quiet in Gayle's office and she realized it was almost closing time at the clinic.

She was still fiddling over 'Freddy's' regular Friday

post, entitled “YES YOU CAN!” which gave people permission to (sensibly) indulge their weekend cravings. Lately, the post was provoking derisive comments, and when she half-jokingly suggested that we “can ‘YES YOU CAN!’” at the clinic’s Monday status meeting, everyone had laughed. But again, Gayle had sensed an uneasy undercurrent, because she had been hired to engage people as ‘Freddy’, not annoy them.

The old anxiety returned. Before getting this contract, she had had the longest, most frightening dry spell of her

“NEUROBOLLOCKS! Before anybody gets too excited about the gastric band, take a look at the science part of their website. There is no SOLID scientific evidence supporting the hypothesis that it can restrict food intake. This is based purely on anecdotal evidence and a collection of studies that have not been peer-reviewed. A new study shows that it does not restrict food intake at all. Like most diet aids that prey on the millions of desperate people like you who are trying to lose weight, it’s just a SCAM!!”

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freelance career. For the first time in her life, she had to cash in an RSP. Healthcare writing had changed dramatically since she started; content was king and could be accessed cheaply from the dreaded content mills or the hordes of ambitious 25-year-olds who were desperate to be in the business. Her contract *had* to be renewed. She couldn’t face the prospect of looking for work again at her age—the carefully crafted resumés disappearing into black holes, the feeling that she was just a speck of dust in a digital universe.

Money aside, she *loved* this job. With a father like hers, who could be more qualified to write about losing weight? Who *cared* as much as she did? Who excruciated over every word, trying to convince someone like Teeny Tiny that it wasn’t just about the physical, that having a sense of discipline over food could be deeply fulfilling, even pleasurable?

The janitor came into her office to empty her recycling box, reminding her that the clinic would be closed, and locked, in fifteen minutes. Clicking into the textbox under the ‘Freddy’ icon, she hastily wrote:

“When a weekend craving for a snack strikes, can you indulge it without sabotaging your weight-loss goals? YES YOU CAN! Just remember to eat smart! Have your treat in the morning so you can burn off the extra calories during the day. Nuts such as almonds are a good option because they contain fibre and heart-healthy fats. Just don’t go too nuts! A handful will do.”

Just as she was about to turn off her laptop, her email pinged with a new message. Who could it be? Teeny Tiny again? So quickly? But no, a new name came up. One she had never seen before, someone called Real Scientist.

BANDING TOGETHER

(This scene takes place a couple of weeks after the previous chapter, showing how the gastric band clients have ‘banded’ together online forming friendships and sharing thoughts and feelings. In this scene we also see how Gayle/aka ‘Freddy’ got her moniker “The Slim Friend.”)

THREE WEEKS LATER

EAT SMART! Four steps to healthier nutrition habits

We all have bad habits that we wish we could instantly change to healthier ones. But unfortunately, changing those deeply engrained habits can take time. But no need to turn your life upside down! Try these 4 steps to eating smarter:

Step 1: Take a good look at your food habits

Let’s say you automatically reach for a sugary doughnut on your coffee break. Picture all the empty calories and potential weight gain associated with that choice.

Step 2: Decide on a replacement nutrition habit.

Instead of reaching for that doughnut, why not try a healthier option that can satisfy your sweet tooth, such as crisp, juicy apple slices spread with protein-rich peanut butter?

Step 3: Be prepared!

Preparing healthy foods doesn’t have to eat into your time! Until your new nutrition habit becomes automatic, stock up on fruit or nutritious snacks so you won’t be caught empty-handed at home or on the go.

Step 4: Be patient.

Give yourself at least 6 weeks to make your new healthy habits part of your routine. By then, you should feel—and see—the benefits of eating smarter!

The comments had rushed in immediately, led by Miss Vicky.

“EAT SMART? Versus what? Eat stupid? No, I always eat stupid, ‘Freddy’. Eating stupid is what got me to this point where I spend hours talking to a fucking fork.”

“Apple slices on a diet. How original!” Go Go wrote.

“Who writes this crap?” Elaine asked.

“I bet it’s some narcissistic, slim woman who freaks out if she gains five pounds,” Miss Vicky posited.

“Yes, like my *slim* friend,” Teeny Tiny chimed in. “The one that knows what’s *best* for you.”

“Oh, the *slim* friend. I have one of those too! The one who believes that if a diet worked for her it should work for you too,” Go Go wrote.

“The one who only eats kale salads and tells you how much she LOVES them.”

“The one who’s always telling you that you have such a pretty face. The one who says they’re only bugging you about your weight because they want you to be *healthy*.”

“You have a friend like that?” Go Go asked.

“I have three. Aren’t I lucky? Actually, four if I count my sister Little Miss Queen Perfect who lent me the money for my surgery,” Elaine replied.

“Aren’t you lucky? I bet she goes around telling everyone how much weight you’ve lost and praising her own part in your success,” Go Go wrote.

“And I bet she secretly thinks it’s the easy way out,” Miss Vicky wrote. “As if eating just three cups of food a day is so easy.”

“I almost feel like gaining the weight back so my sister can stop congratulating herself on how much weight I’ve lost thanks to her incredible generosity.”

“For me, it’s not so much about looks,” Go Go wrote. “I want to lose seventy-five pounds because I want to be able climb a flight of stairs without getting out of breath. But what annoys me are the backhanded compliments I get, like: ‘You look so much better now.’”

“Hey, you want to know how to lose 120 pounds? Dump your slim friend.”

“LOL.”

“You know what makes me really unhappy? Being patronized and dictated to by someone who has no idea

who I am. I want to tell this person that any unhappiness I have is not a result of being overweight. Being fat may be a symptom of my feelings. But it is the symptom and not the cause.”

“I’m two hundred pounds which for me is a healthy weight,” Teeny Tiny wrote. “DON’T tell me what’s a healthy weight, I want to say to my precious slim friends.”

“I hear you, sister. The slim friend will never understand that you can be fat and happy.”

“I get so tired of reading the preachy, condescending crap on these posts,” Miss Vicky wrote. “Why don’t they hire someone who *gets* it?”

Diane Bracuk is a Toronto writer whose short stories and essays on body dysmorphia, family dysfunction and aging have been widely published in Canada and abroad. Middle-Aged Boys & Girls, her short story collection published by Guernica Editions in 2016, was nominated for a 2017 Evergreen Award by the Ontario Library Association and short-listed for a ReLit Award. Her essay “Doughnut Eaters” about a young girl trying to live up to her father’s impossible standards of perfection, won the 2015 PRISM international prize for non-fiction and was listed as a notable essay in 2015 Best American Essays. Her flash fiction story “Pert Posterior” was published in Guernica Edition’s 2022 flash fiction anthology This Will Only Take a Minute.

PENN KEMP

Gift for Granted

Big I swagger is more fun,
finding comfort in my own
skin. I celebrate belly
button, birthing, navel of
the world, all the more to
round this mound round.

The glitch is a gift, part of
a total packet offered—to
accept the flair of fat, of fun,
an immense and funny presence.