

Bring Home the Fun

Some people measure depression by the medication they take or the number of times per week they see a therapist. For me, it was different. I measured my depression with baked jalapeño-and-cheddar-cheese poppers, the brand that advertises itself with the slogan “Bring home the fun.”

I’d love to meet the person who came up with that line and ask him a question. Is it really *fun* to see yourself blow up three dress sizes?

I suppose they -wouldn’t sell as many if their slogan was “Pack on the pounds.” On the other hand, they may do OK with a promotion that said “Forget your ex-husband” or “Eat these instead of having sex—since nobody wants to see your fat bare ass.”

During the cold winter months of 2002–03, when I was making *Touched by an Angel* in Utah, those jalapeño-and-cheese poppers were my Prozac. I was on a significant dosage: at least nine a night and sometimes more. At the grocery store, I saw other women looking at me when I loaded the boxes into my cart from the frozen food case. I could almost hear them thinking *Oh my gosh, -that’s Valerie Bertinelli. And look: -she’s on those jalapeño poppers.*

It was true. There were nights when I -OD’d on those poppers. My mouth burned because I -couldn’t wait for them to cool down after taking them out of the oven. Other times I savored the taste with tiny, almost sensual bites, drawing out the feeling of comfort and escape I got from eating. The bright smile that served me well for so many years went into storage. So did my size 8 jeans. And my 10s. And my 12s. And my—well, my weight soared past 170 pounds, the highest it had ever been outside of my pregnancy.

Those were some of the darkest days of my life, and I was eating my way through them. By 2001 my marriage to Eddie Van Halen was over after more than twenty years of competing with his rock-and-roll lifestyle for attention. Our fights about his drinking had taken a toll. Discussing and solving our problems used to bring us closer, but now it wore us out. Ultimately, when he failed to help himself by giving up cigarettes after mouth cancer had threatened his life, I knew, sadly, that one way or another I was going to end up on my own.

By then I was working and living in Utah eight months of the year. Full of anger and frustration, I spent at least three nights a week on a plane so I could see our ten-year-old son, Wolfie, who stayed home in Los Angeles to be in school with his friends. That -wasn’t the way I wanted to live or the type of person I wanted to be. But instead of helping myself, I did the opposite. I ate my misery and turned my misery into a reason for eating.

Overweight, alone, and horribly depressed, I kept eating poppers and everything else in my path. After *Touched* went off the air, I returned home and became a hermit. I hid from the world, hoping no one would see that I’d gotten fat. In reality, I was hiding from the one person who could help solve my problems: me.

That was hard to believe. Over the years, I'd tried every diet on the bookshelves—from the grapefruit diet, to Weight Watchers, to the lemon juice and cayenne pepper fast—and all of them had worked as long as I stayed on them. But once I stopped, the weight came right back, and, unfortunately with a little extra. While I hate to admit it, I was on the verge of giving up and accepting that I was never going to look the way I wanted to—or feel the way I wanted to either.

I used to say half-jokingly that I was going to give up, move to the mountains, and be the quirky old fat lady down the street with forty-some-odd cats.

I'm glad I -didn't. Instead I ended up outing myself on the cover of the April 4, 2007, issue of *People* magazine by declaring, "I know what -you're thinking—I'm fat." Publicly, it was the start of a diet where the stakes were total humiliation and embarrassment if I failed to reach my goal. Privately, it was, as my fellow Jenny Craiger Kirstie Alley promised, not just a diet but really the start of a journey. She was right.

By any standard, I've enjoyed a charmed life. Even though I gained notoriety by working on TV, I shunned the spotlight in favor of a normal life, driving carpools, volunteering in my -son's classroom, making dinner, and trying never to miss my monthly book club get-togethers. Of all the roles I've undertaken, none has been more satisfying than motherhood. I'm as much of a regular gal as people seem to expect—and I like it that way.

If you walked into my house right now, -you'd find my cat Dexter lounging on the sunny floor in the kitchen, a large bowl of fruit on the counter, delicious-smelling vegetable soup simmering in a tall pot on the stove, the recycling trash can ready to be emptied, and paperwork and schoolbooks spread across the dining room table. -You'd also see my boyfriend Tom on the phone in the backroom, and me working the crossword puzzle, as is my daily routine.

Creating this happy picture was a puzzle that took my entire adult life till now to solve. By the time I went public as a size 14, I'd already done the hard work: confronting the fears, insecurities, disappointments, and frustrations that accounted for the three different sizes of dresses and pants I needed in my closet for my constantly changing weight. After that, it was just a matter of portion control, exercise, and self-discipline.

Since going on Jenny Craig in March 2007, I've surpassed my original goal of 30 pounds and set new targets for myself. But the weight I've lost -doesn't compare to what I've gained—or regained—in my life. The weight loss and renewed zest for life go hand in hand. Kirstie had promised as much when she said, "Valerie, -it's not about the weight. -What's going to happen is -you're going to quit hiding and discover the real you."

She was right. My relationships have never been healthier, including the one I have with myself, and I've finally found a joy that seemed beyond my grasp when I was reaching for those jalapeño-and-cheese poppers. Physically and emotionally, I'm a different person. -It's like I'm hitting my stride. These days I really do bring home the fun.

In this book, you -won't find me professing to have all the answers to -life's problems. Hey, I'm still trying to figure out most of those. Instead this story is about the choices I've made, good and bad, and how I've grown and learned from them. There are also exciting times, emotional moments, and life as it happened. Through it all, -you'll get me uncensored and unfiltered—the good, bad, stupid, stubborn, size 14 and size 4. -It's nothing more complicated, though as -you'll see, it was complicated enough for me. -Isn't it always that way?

If -you're starving right now because -you're on a diet, ask yourself if your hunger has anything to do with food. I know the answer to that question. Look, -we're all human. We go through the same things. If -you're in a dark place over some problem in your life, I hope that reading my story will help you feel less alone when you see that someone else has made the same mistakes and gotten through them. I hope -you'll relate to my story, learn from it, and, as I finally did, find the courage to change, shed any unwanted pounds, and gain all the good things you thought impossible.

Now where did I put that bag of chips?

Just kidding.

Valerie Bertinelli

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132 pounds

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