

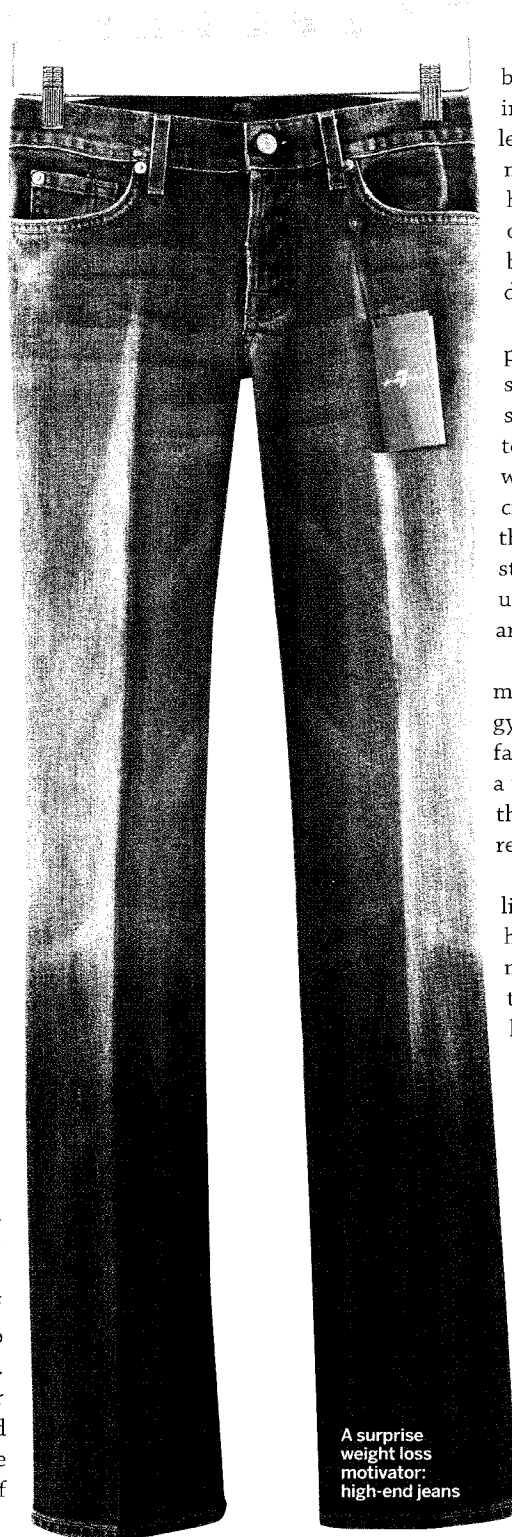
The jeans of my dreams

Designer denim once seemed out of reach. Then I got serious about losing weight and found my ideal fit. **By Erica Jamieson**

Thirty pounds ago, I could shop. I knew where to go, what to buy and how to make the most of last season's styles. Mostly, I picked my way through markdowns at the Gap and discount department stores. I was adept at draping myself in garments that could pass as fashionable or, at the very least, would hide my fleshy excesses within folds of cloth or behind Lycra panels. I wore a lot of black.

I hated black. What I really wanted was to be small enough to browse and buy in tiny and outrageously overpriced boutiques, the kind that stocked high-end denim with cool brand names and three-figure price tags. It killed me that while I was busy pulling the size 16 mommy jeans from the bottom of the sale pile, my slimmer-waisted friends were luxuriating in—and talking about—designer jeans, as in, “Are those 7s or True Religion?” I hungered to have the devout-sounding labels sewn across my rear end, too.

So I hired a nutritionist, a cranky, 89-year-old woman whose first words to me were, “Well, you’re just big all over.” Boy, was it good to hear such honesty. My secret was out! That was me—big all over. She didn’t waste time with niceties. She told me I was fat and I didn’t have to be. That losing weight was hard work, there was no magic pill and she couldn’t fix me. I would have to do that myself by staying true to her old-fashioned fruit, vegetable and balanced carbohydrate and protein plan. So I did. I replaced my normal two bowls of cereal in the morning with half a cup of oatmeal and a cup of strawberries. I learned to like it (and a lot of other things) without sweetener. I weighed my chicken before adding it to the salad I made daily with two cups of



A surprise weight loss motivator: high-end jeans

premeasured vegetables topped with salsa instead of dressing. I rewarded myself by taking baths at night instead of sneaking into the kitchen in search of my kids' leftover sweets. Eventually, I even gave up my twice-daily, monster-sized, two-pump hazelnut lattes and replaced them with one tall, nonfat double cappuccino. I drank black coffee the rest of the day. I wrote down everything I ate. And I didn't cheat.

In six months, I'd lost my first 30 pounds, in time for spring shopping. And I sorely needed an incentive; I'd made a great start, but I still had more than 30 pounds to go. So I did something I thought I never would: I crossed the threshold into a deliciously chic denim haven. Once I got inside, though, I couldn't do anything but look. I stood in front of the stacks and stacks going up to the ceiling, bewildered, overwhelmed and intimidated, with no map to guide me.

I was now a person who didn't comfort myself with chocolate, who went to the gym three times a week and parked in the farthest space away from the door to get in a few extra minutes of walking. As I stood there in that little shop of denim horror, I realized I didn't know who I was anymore.

The truth is, I still felt big all over, not like someone who could pull off a pair of hip-huggers. But I needed new clothes—my old ones were falling off me—so rather than bolting, I stood my ground, wondering how I'd find the brands I'd been coveting without dislodging the seemingly impenetrable wall of this fabric fortification. I didn't even know what size I wore.

Soon, a very young, very thin saleswoman wearing an incredibly cool pair of dark-wash jeans approached me and asked if she could help. As I struggled to answer, all I could think about was the restaurant with the great brownies down the street. Instead of diving into the deep blue world I'd wanted to be a part of for so long, I panicked. When Miss Skinny asked again if she could help me, her words sounding snappish and belittling to my ears, I didn't say, “Yes, I've lost



>> 30 pounds and I'm here to find a great pair of jeans." Instead, I lied to her. I said I was looking for a gift for a friend. I explained that she was close to my size, but a little bigger here, a little smaller there. What I actually said was this: "Would you mind if I tried on a few pairs of jeans, you know, just to make sure I get the sizing right for my friend?"

We're talking jeans that cost more than \$200; for that price, I should have been allowed to take them out for a test-drive. While the saleswoman nodded her assent, looked me over judiciously and began pulling out pants, I crammed myself into the minuscule dressing room and prayed that one of them would fit.

The first pair was too small, the second a tad too low for my comfort level. But soon, I found myself standing in front of the mirror, turning sideways and back, stretching to see my behind not simply draped in, but wearing, a pair of medium-washed, straight-leg, 7 For All Mankind jeans. I liked them, despite the fact that

they were a bit too low, a bit too expensive and a bit too tight. Even 30 pounds thinner, I had to buy the largest size available. But I could pull them up, button them and close the zipper without ripping it from its seam. To me, that felt like the perfect

Wearing something that accentuated my body felt boastful, possibly indecent.

fit. I handed them to the waif and proudly said, "I'll take them." I had my first pair of brand-name denim and the credit card bill to prove it. I was elated.

I wore them every night in front of my mirror for a month, tags hanging. I tried them with T-shirts. I tried them with my husband's sweatshirts. I walked around the bedroom attempting to convince myself that the reflection in the mirror was me, *my* body, in these skinny jeans.

Wearing something that accentuated my body felt decadent, boastful and possibly indecent. Until now, dressing myself had been all about hiding my figure. My 7s and I were getting used to each other or, rather, I was getting used to the idea of wearing them in public, shoring up my courage. I knew I wasn't going to wake up one morning and once again find myself big all over. But I was afraid of being laughed at in these new jeans. I had to get accustomed to them slowly.

My first excursion was to a rock-and-roll bowling alley famous for its fried macaroni-and-cheese balls. I went with my kids. No one noticed my jeans or (I hope) how I kept tugging at the waistband for the extra centimeter of coverage. What I noticed was that I wasn't huffing every time I swung the ball and that I could easily bend down to tie my shoes. I wasn't the heaviest woman in the place, either. I didn't have any fried macaroni-and-cheese balls, not a one, and I didn't miss them.

Personal shopper

I felt great in my 7s, great in the body that was wearing them. Even sweeter was the knowledge that I was someone who could make the huge change necessary to become a person who could wear designer denim. There was an implicit promise in the weave of my new pants, a promise to myself I felt inclined to keep.

I've now lost a total of 65 pounds. Those inaugural 7s hang in the back of my closet; I smile every time my hand accidentally grazes them. They've been replaced by a smaller size, in addition to a pair of True Religions and a couple of Levi's.

My 7s are only a pair of jeans. They don't even fit anymore, but I can't quite bring myself to relegate them to the donation pile. Maybe it's something in the stitching, but they gave me an edge when I really needed one, when I still had more than 30 seemingly impossible pounds to go. Wearing them, I could stroll past the restaurant with the really great brownies, past coffee shops with hopes and promises disguised as hazelnut lattes—and I wouldn't cave.

DENIM DECODED

Ready to invest in primo jeans? SELF fashion market editor and denim guru Lindsay Huggins loves Anlo Heather Flares (right). They are built-to-last classics and boast all the features below.

—Francesca Castagnoli

Superior fabric
Premium denim is softer but holds its shape well, so it won't bag at the tush or knees.

Flattering fit
A flared boot cut balances out curves on the top, so it looks slimming on all kinds of body types.

The right rise
Whatever your age, a midrise cut (it should hit an inch or two below your navel) is always appropriate.

The best hue
An even, medium blue from top to toe is the most versatile pick; pale blues can look too casual for evening.

Plain pockets
Embellishments or big logos date your jeans; bare is best.

