

Fat

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Extract

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It's unclear precisely when it became illegal to be fat.

Of course, technically it's not, even in this day and age. Even with the blatant persecution of all tubbies, there's no official legislation on any statute book that comes right out and says fatness is against the law.

But it is.

It started slow, as these things do. It just gradually became increasingly uncomfortable to be overweight. Just inch by blubbery inch, less and less acceptable. It probably truly reached a critical mass with the airlines. They began charging by body weight. And how could you argue? It costs more money to lift a fat person off the runway than a thin one, no question. Fuel-to-weight ratio. Simple arithmetic. Oil crises. Fuel prices through the stratosphere. Somebody had to pay. Why not the fat?

Of course, there were protests. But nobody took them seriously. Fat people are fat because they're lazy, weak-willed or stupid, or all of the above. They could stop being fat if they really wanted to. Who's going to listen to that kind of pressure group? Let them eat lard.

So there it was: your airline ticket was priced according to your body mass index, and that was that.

But it was never going to stop there, now, was it?

Because now it was tangible. The slow and swirling loathing that had long been churning in the undercurrents and eddies of public prejudice had been given form. Fat people were subnormal. Fat people were less than acceptable. Fat people were second class.

And so they started paying extra on all transport. On Tube trains. On buses. An extra little fuel duty when they filled their cars, because, hey – fuel is precious, and they use more of it than the rest of us to get their cellulite-pocked backsides from A to B.

And then some Health Authorities who were facing swingeing budget cuts had to make some harsh decisions. And they decided they

would not carry out certain operations on the obese, such as hip and knee replacements. If fat people wanted to punish their joints by forcing them to bear excessive loads, why should the rest of us pay for the repair work? And why should they take up valuable operating room time with heart bypasses when they were only going to clog up their new arteries with all kinds of saturated fats anyway?

And because one Authority got away with it, it spread. It spread to the whole of the National Health Service. If you're fat, and sick, don't even think of calling an ambulance. Don't waste your time sitting in a doctor's waiting room. Here's the prescription, you dummy: Lose Weight.

And you couldn't call it persecution, in truth. Not even when fat suits became commonplace props for comedians. Not even after the odd street-kicking, or the wave of fat attacks videoed on mobile phones. Not even when the Government brought in the fat tax, nor when they set up the euphemistically named 'Well Farms', optional at first, but soon, of course, not so optional.

Because all of this, all of it, really, was for the fat person's own good. The ridicule, the humiliation: it just might help fat people to buck their ideas up and become more desirable people. Which is to say: thin people.

It was in their own best interests.

Well, here's a little tip. When somebody does something you don't like, and then tells you they did it in your own best interest: run. Run, my friend, till you drop. And don't look back.

PART ONE:

March 1st

BREAKFAST

Menu

Carrot Juice

*Some Sort of Shitty Muesli Pot with Yoghurt
and Honey*



*A Double Sausage & Egg McMuffin[™]
Another Double Sausage & Egg McMuffin[™]
(Both with Hash Browns)*



Absolutely Nothing At All

'I had to fast. I can't do anything else,' said the hunger artist. 'Just look at you,' said the supervisor, 'why can't you do anything else?' 'Because,' said the hunger artist, lifting his head a little and, with his lips pursed as if for a kiss, speaking right into the supervisor's ear so that he wouldn't miss anything, 'because I couldn't find a food which I enjoyed.'

(Franz Kafka: *A Hunger Artist*, 1924)

ONE

Grenville Roberts got out of bed. That was no mean achievement, by any means. The effort left him breathless and slightly dizzy, and he had to sit down again for fear he'd faint. Then he'd have to lift himself up off the floor, which would be a substantially more gruelling enterprise, even assuming he sustained no major damage from the fall.

Of course, now he was sitting on his bed once more, and sooner or later he'd have to stand up again. What if that left him equally breathless and dizzy? Would he be condemned forever to stand up and sit down on his bed, like a victim of some mythological Greek torture? That would be a fine thing, to spend eternity helpless as a gigantic jack-in-the-box. He supposed it was only a matter of time before things would get that bad. Before he could no longer leave his bedroom without the aid of an elephant-rescue winch and the coordinated efforts of the Air-Sea Rescue Team.

But his dizziness passed, his breathing eased and he stood, this time successfully, and made his way to the bathroom.

He performed his ablutions efficiently and without relish. He took a shower, of course. He couldn't remember the last time he'd taken a bath. He did, however, remember that he'd barely got out of it alive.

He dried himself, again, no meagre challenge. There was a lot of him to dry, and vast expanses of it were harder to reach than the hidden jungles of Papua New Guinea. For all he knew there were nomad tribes concealed in inaccessible creases in his back.

Now came the really hard part: getting dressed.

He selected his clothes. Not too difficult. He had very few that still fit him. And today the choice was dictated for him anyway.

He paused at the dresser drawers where he was sifting through the vast expanses of black cotton that constituted his underpants these days, and caught his reflection in the mirror. It always shocked him to

see his face, even though he'd seen it not fifteen minutes earlier, when he'd shaved. It was nothing like the image of himself he still carried around in his head.

How had this happened to him? How did he get here? It wasn't as if he'd entered cow-pie-eating competitions on a daily basis. It wasn't as if he chewed through his own weight in beef dripping every morning, or sat down to lavish banquets every dinner time, the table creaking and groaning under the weight of suckling pigs and roasted swans.

Some are born fat. Some achieve fatness.

Others have fatness thrust upon 'em.

And so it had been for Grenville.

He wasn't born fat. He had been, for most of his life, actually quite slender. In fact, when he'd suddenly noticed he'd acquired a slight belly in his late twenties, he'd been quite shocked. Horrified, even. He'd assumed it was a consequence of his happy love affair with beer, a beautiful relationship he'd regretfully abandoned. It had become clear he could no longer indulge himself with whatever comestibles took his fancy and remain trim. Furthermore, it seemed inevitable he would have to start consciously taking, God help him, some kind of *exercise*.

Exercise.

Dear oh dear.

But he did it. He sucked it up, and he did it. He endured the mindless boredom of lifting up weights and putting them down again in expensive gymnasias for a while. He tolerated the moronic repetitiveness of Healthclubland, with its vile liniment smells mingled with brutally over-applied aftershaves, and the casual fashion display of depressing male genitalia in the changing rooms, and the eye-gouging chlorine in the swimming pool, and the six-hour wait for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. He put up with it all until the very prospect of dropping a coin into the slot of a gym locker filled him with such dread, he could no longer face it.

But by then, the rebellious belly had been pounded into submission.

Or so he thought.

It crept up on him slowly, with all the relentless patience and irresistible brutality of tectonic plates. His trousers started getting

tighter, cutting a bright pink band of pain around his midriff, which he didn't even notice until he unbuttoned them at night.

He finally, with some reluctance, gave up the morning wrestling match, lying flat on the bed, trying to tug two-and-a-half-feet width of material over three feet of waistline, and moved up a size.

Thirty-two inches. Thirty-four. Thirty-six.

After that, things started to get harder. He spent many a Saturday on his hands and knees in obscure corners of department stores and tailors' shops, desperately seeking out a stray pair of Wranglers in the inexplicably, unfairly and unforgivably rare size of thirty-eight inches.

He still remembered the glorious day he had chanced across a pair of branded khaki slacks that measured an insanely generous forty-two inches. Forty-two inches! How had they come into being? Were they discarded props from *Land of the Giants*? Had they been part of a clothing consignment bound for Texas that had been caught by the wind and somehow wafted all the way across the Atlantic to land in this very store? Whatever mysterious magic brought them there, they were Grenville's now. True, they were *slacks*, but Gren had long ago given up even dreaming of making a stab at dressing fashionably. Simply being able to dress at all was ambition enough.

They were slacks, but they *fitted* him. They fitted him easily. And for a while, Grenville enjoyed the bliss of sartorial comfort again. Experienced the indescribable delight of owning a pair of trousers that zipped up without a struggle. A pair of trousers that didn't force his testicles to grind together like Tibetan worry balls with every step. He wanted to seek out the magnificent seamstress who had constructed those ingenious pantaloons, smother her with kisses, shower her with gifts and propose marriage.

And then, one day, and all too soon, even the forty-two-inchers could no longer accommodate him. True, he'd worn them virtually non-stop for the best part of two years, and they were all but falling to pieces, but his drifting girth had outgrown them anyway.

He went hunting again, but after five consecutive Saturdays of crawling through obscure piles of stock to no avail, he had to face up to the terrible truth.

It could no longer be blamed on the moronity and short-sightedness

of all clothing manufacturers, their suppliers, their buyers and the bastard parents who spawned them all.

Grenville Roberts was no longer Off The Peg.

Somehow, he had fallen outside the accepted limits of human dimensions. He was no longer a member of the category labelled 'normal'.

In a curiously insane twist of logic, the only sort of apparel he could reasonably expect to buy in a regular clothing store that might actually fit him was sportswear. Drawstring jogging bottoms, jogging tops and offensively coloured plastic shell suits.

Now, just exactly who, along the clothing supply and demand chain, took the imprisionably lunatic decision that the only clothing that overweight people might ever be allowed to purchase should be ugly exercise gear? That all fat people really yearned for was unsightly neon-orange and lime-green jogging suits. Did this madman look out of his window one day and say: 'You know what: all you ever see these fat people doing is running and exercising. If we could only cater to that market, we'll make a mint.' Whoever he was, the man was a fucking business genius. You have to take your hat off to him. Though, let's face it, it will probably be a pink and purple baseball cap.

But you mustn't get the impression that Grenville stood idly by and allowed all this to happen to him. That he just let the weight pile on and on without trying to get on top of it, to wrest back control of his body from his mad metabolism. He did not go quietly into that dark night.

He dieted. Of course he dieted. He dieted to Olympic standards.

He gave up fats. He gave up sugars. He gave up dairy. Red meat? Forget about it. He even, Lord have mercy, gave up *alcohol*. He gave up any food that was in any way remotely pleasant. He ate bread the same texture and flavour as sandpaper-encrusted cardboard smeared with the merest hint of fly duty posing as tasty yeast spread. Then he gave up wheat altogether. He found himself eating tiny garam-flour pancakes smudged with a tiny suggestion of Fuck Me If That's Not Butter. And then he read a terrifying article about the carcinogenic properties of chickpeas and had to relinquish even this pathetic balm to the appetite. He became sitophobic: from being a sensual delight to anticipate with

pleasure, food now seemed to belong in the same category as weapons of mass destruction. The fat content of nuts made them as deadly as bullets. An avocado pear started looking as lethal as an anti-personnel fragmentation grenade.

He joined clubs. He had red days and green days. He lived only on Speedslim shakes. He followed Rosemary Conley's advice for his hips and his tum. Then he stopped combining proteins and carbohydrates. Then he gave up carbohydrates altogether. Then he gave up proteins *and* carbohydrates. He never snacked. He would sooner have shot his own mother than have eaten a chocolate bar. He stopped eating altogether after one o'clock in the afternoon. He tried living on raw fish and rice. Then he even gave up the rice. He ate *kelp*. Kelp and only kelp, Lord have mercy.

And each new effort, each new push, would produce the same results. For the first few weeks, he would lose weight. Then he would stop losing weight and tighten up his regimen. He would lose a little more weight, and plateau out again. Then he would be starving, eating only nonsense, and still not losing weight, and he would give up. Then, in a few short weeks, he would be back at his original size, and then some.

And one day, he found himself standing in front of a salad bar and realised there was nothing in there he was allowed to eat, that he'd ingeniously managed to negotiate himself into a position where pretty much all he thought about was food, and yet he could not eat any of it.

So he gave up giving up.

He decided that if he'd never started any of this diet nonsense, he'd probably be about four stone lighter than he was right now. Enough was enough. Or rather not enough was enough. He would eat what he wanted, within reason.

And that worked, in a way, for a while. His girth stopped growing. It wasn't going away, but it wasn't getting any bigger.

Result: happiness. After a fashion.

And then he met The Girl.

He'd imagined all that was behind him, that he'd never have to go through all that dating palaver again, and he'd settled into his fairly comfortable and happily successful routine, was almost cruising

through his slightly lonely life, when *Blam!* she'd walked through the door of his life, and he was, to all intents and purposes, sixteen again.

And he'd gone back to the diet drawing board.

It was hard to find one that hadn't already failed him at least once. He managed to boil it down to the GI diet and the Paul McKenna 'I Can Make You Thinner' regime. Paul McKenna sounded quite interesting, but Gren had serious doubts about employing mesmerism as a dietary aid, so he plumped for the GI, which seemed like an almost sane version of Atkins. Once again, he'd stripped out his kitchen cupboards and stocked them only with acceptable fare. Once again, he'd studied the diet guides, not that they were called diets any more. All new diets nowadays started off with 'This is *not* a diet', for some reason. And, once again, he had to face up to the advice that exercise was an essential prerequisite to success.

Which meant but one thing.

It meant he had to swallow his pride, having first assessed its calorific value and Glycemic Index, of course, and go back to the gym.

Gren laid out the hideously coloured jogging suit on the bed and sighed a long, weary sigh of acceptance.