

Duane Edwards

Fatty

Fatty was finally a man – at least he was twenty-one. “Strange,” he reasoned, “strange to be going home after four years and still to be fat. Strange to see time recede. And strange, too, to have changed so much and not to be changed at all.”

What Fatty meant, of course, was that no one would know he had changed. After all, subtle changes are lost in the density of two hundred pounds of flesh. So, as Fatty himself once said, “It’s not enough to be skinny on the inside.”

Fatty’s friends agreed with him, so they tried desperately to convince him to change. “Get skinny, Fatty,” they would coax, but Fatty ignored them most of the time. Or he would not take them seriously, so he sometimes replied, “I don’t want to change. I’m an archetype; I’m short and fat and bald.”

Yes, Fatty was bald too. However, he was not an archetype: he wasn’t jolly, at least not always. Try as he did, he couldn’t *remain* jolly. “Cheer up, Fatty,” his friends would say, but he would simply reply, “I’m sporadically jolly, Isn’t that enough?”

Apparently it wasn’t, for Fatty’s friends did not like him consistently. When he was depressed, they scurried away. When he wouldn’t laugh, they deserted him. So he pleaded: “Like me for my character. Ignore my outer self; ignore my bulk. I, too, am alive,” but his friends were unsympathetic. They laughed and replied, “Who could do that? There’s so much of you, we can’t love you.”

Discouraged by such remarks, Fatty tried gallantly to remain jolly, but the strain was too much. Temperament was against him. So, finally, he resigned himself to being an archetype who was misunderstood. And he wondered why he had turned out the way he did. “I must have had a

traumatic childhood,” he reasoned, but when he tried to remember his childhood all that came to mind was his mother carrying in a platter of food. She would say, “Eat, Fatty” (for she, too – Mother! – called him by that name). “But, Mother, no one will like me,” he would gulp. And she would say, “Mother will always love you. So eat. There’s chocolate pie in the refrigerator.” And although Fatty did not like chocolate pie he ate it because there was no other pie, and he did like pie.

So Fatty grew in all directions. But he made no sustained effort to lose weight. However, during the first weekend of his freshman year he avoided sweets and lost two pounds, but the effort made him ill. So he reasoned: “If a healthy body is necessary for a healthy mind, I will be senile soon.” And his eyes became misty as he drank his malt.

Then he was a sophomore and he read about heroes. And often he pondered elliptically, “Whom to emulate? Achilles is lean; Aeneas is tall and strong. Are any heroes fat?” But he did not know. So when he read that Hamlet was “fat and scant of breath,” his spirits soared. And he went to see two movie versions of *Hamlet* – only to be disappointed: Richard Burton was trim, Laurence Olivier very thin. So he lamented: “Of all the heroes of stage, screen, and literature, only Moby Dick is fat.”

Meanwhile, time afflicted Fatty. He saw the leaves of trees flutter to the ground. Fascinated, he watched snow become small rivulets in the gutters. One day late in winter he heard that Bob Cousy had retired, one summer day that Faulkner had died. And all the while Fatty saw himself as a fat man without the proper temperament.

Then it was spring again. And flies buzzing in drowsy lecture halls competed with the drone of a weary lecturer’s voice: “Thomas Hardy – born 1840, died 1928 – was endlessly aware of cosmic as well as personal or subjective time. While a century causes wood to decay and bodies to die and decompose, it makes no appreciable impression on the earth’s surface. Thus in one of Hardy’s early novels, *Under the Greenwood Tree*. . . .”

Spring’s tempo increased and soon flowers were in bloom. Walking along a lake shore, Fatty forgot to enjoy spring. He pondered. Small waves reached like thirsty tongues for the shore, melted into the sand. Wisps of clouds paled the blue sky. Fatty pondered, chewing on gum and, later, potato chips.

Time inched along. Then, one day late in sun-filled May, Fatty saw Mona. She filled him with joy. His body became a circus tent of happiness. He wanted to kiss Mona, but dared not. "If opposites attract," he thought, and thought, and thought. . . .

At night he dreamed of Mona, although she was frail. In the morning he thought of Mona while he buttered his toast. At noon he glanced covertly at Mona when she brought him his meat and potatoes. In the evening he longed to touch the bones of her famished hands, but she didn't know him. "I have a heart," he breathed, and all the lights went on in the circus tent; all the animals gambolled; all the people applauded.

Although Mona didn't know Fatty existed, he saw her often in the restaurant where she worked. Musing, he decided that she was no Helen of Troy, no Aphrodite, and added hurriedly that he was no Paris, no Apollo. "But isn't there love in her eyes?" he asked himself, and was convinced. But how could he meet her?

Then it was June: warm, golden, and — this year — seductive. Fatty's last exam was ten days away. "Oh, Mona," he crooned, "am I too fat to be a boy friend? Fed on food, I am starved for love. And yet I want no magic, no miracles. Simply let me, Mona, oh, Mona, warm your hand." Love was large within Fatty; the circus tent billowed.

Mona died that night. Her frail bird's body was struck by a car. The following morning Fatty wept on his eggs as he read the paper, saw the picture. Mona was dead. Her warm, white brain lay on the rain-drenched pavement.

"Will I love again?" he queried while the rain fell throughout the city, washing clean the pavement where Mona had lain, drenching the popcorn he held in his hand as he walked along Main Street. "Will I love again?" he choked as the tears raced down his tennis ball cheeks. But the clouds did not answer.

Each evening after that Fatty took long walks before he went to bed, but he saw few friendly faces. Then, one rainy night, he heard laughter and loud sounds coming from a bar. Peering through a window, he saw hosts of students pressed together. In the dim darkness their faces were obscure and their bodies collided randomly. So Fatty said to himself: "Where there's laughter there's love," and entered the dark room.

His rain-cooled skin welcomed the heat of perspiring bodies and his heart was immediately glad. Therefore, he pressed his huge body into

the crowd and hoped for love. "Although my body is a blimp," he said in his mind to youths and maidens sipping beer like sacramental wine, "I have a heart as well as you. Also, when the rain falls, it strikes me too — in abundance. See my wet remaining hair." And he wept because he was sad and happy both.

While tears mingled with rain-water on Fatty's tennis ball cheeks, he thought he saw love on the faces of people sitting in the booths. He thought he saw compassion and pity. And since his lashes were wet, he saw halos everywhere: in the air, above heads, over beer bottles. So again he was hopeful and glad. He nearly laughed as he ordered a glass of beer.

Sitting at the bar, Fatty watched the faces in the mirror behind the cash register. "Angel white is the color of the barmaid's blouse," he thought, pleased with his choice of words. He smiled softly to himself; the circus tent flapped gently in the wind. And Fatty longed to share his joke, but the heads to the right and left of him were bowed. So Fatty thought, "Too much sacramental wine," and smiled again.

Meanwhile, the hands on the clock over the cash register moved slowly. "I grow old. . . I grow old," thought Fatty, before it occurred to him that a clock lies. "It fools us," he reflected. "The clock fools us. At this moment it is 11:03 but again tomorrow it will be 11:03 — twice. And the hands move always in a circle: they go nowhere. Yet, 'while a century causes wood to decay and bodies to die and decompose, it makes no appreciable impression on the earth's surface.' Do wrinkles lie then? Or does the clock?"

At that moment the barmaid flitted by. Fatty watched her. Her hair glowed. Her skin was white, soft-looking. Her mouth was gentle. "Oh, Mona," thought Fatty, and the second hand on the clock above the cash register raced through another minute. Aching, Fatty turned his attention once more to the faces in the mirror. He thought for a moment that the mirror was covered with steam, but soon realized that the room was filled with smoke. "This, then, is what fills my eyes with tears," he muttered half-aloud so that the bowed head on his left was raised abruptly as if pulled by a string. Fatty glanced quickly at the faces in the mirror behind the smoke, but it was too late. "Why are you crying?" he was asked.

"It's raining; it rained in my eyes," blurted Fatty.

Such a statement from such a serious face caused the man to laugh.

He laughed softly at first — as if unsure of himself — but when Fatty blinked and forced two tears to roll down his tennis ball cheeks, he roared. Crescendo followed crescendo. Soon people began to stare. Then the man himself began to weep because he laughed so hard. Pointing at Fatty, he screamed, “What a character! What a funny guy,” so that people nearby became infected with the laughter which came at Fatty in small waves at first, but soon flooded him. “What a funny fat guy,” said someone in the crowd, “what a crazy guy.”

Finally, Fatty was surrounded by a sea of laughing faces visible in the mirror. Dozens of fingers pointed accusingly at him. Turning on his stool to face the crowd, Fatty was overwhelmed at seeing so many open mouths. When he raised his hand to protest, everyone assumed he was asking for silence. A hush fell upon the room so that the whirring noise of the clock above the cash register could be heard. The crowd waited for Fatty to say something funny. All movement was suspended. Even the smoke seemed to hang in the air.

Words would not come to Fatty. Soon, however, he became aware of the potato chips he held in his hand. Mutely, he offered the open bag to the crowd. All the people laughed; the circus tent sagged. Without warning the girl in the white blouse tapped him on the shoulder. He whirled, frightened now by so much attention, and nearly fell from his stool. A bottle of beer was on the bar. “It’s for you,” she said, “on the house. Just keep everyone happy.”

Bewildered, wet-eyed, Fatty asked, “What can I do?”

“Just be fat,” was the curt reply, and the soft lips curled slightly in contempt.

Fatty hurried into the street where the rain rinsed his hot, tear-stained face while lightning tore the sky apart. Deep in his bowels he was sick, but his senses remained keen. He felt the stinging rain, heard the branches of trees slapping one another, saw the dim streetlights, smelled odors coming from a restaurant. He entered the restaurant.

For some time, until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, Fatty was unable to see anything. Then lights shining dimly overhead lent direction to his bungling movement toward a table. From out of the shadows a voice accosted him with “May I help you, sir?”

“Yes, yes, I’d like a table.”

“How many of you are there?”

“Just one; me.”

“Where would you like to sit?”

“Anywhere, just anywhere.”

“We find our regular customers like to select a painting to be near. You see, from each table the customer can see a reproduction of a famous painting. In fact, just yesterday a customer waited an hour — although there were empty tables — so that he could sit alongside ‘Whistler’s Mother’. Perhaps you know it as ‘Composition in White and Gray’. Would you like to sit with ‘Whistler’s Mother’? No? Perhaps you prefer the ‘Mona Lisa’, also called ‘La Gioconda’. We have a customer who calls her Mona. Isn’t that cute? Maybe you prefer —”

“I’ll sit anywhere,” interrupted Fatty, and was promptly, coldly, led to a table deep in the shadows of the restaurant.

Once seated, Fatty had time to observe the few customers who were present. Several couples spoke in serious, subdued monotones. A party of four seated alongside “La Grande Jatte” looked sullenly at one another. Near Dossi’s “The Dream” a woman rested her hand — o, frail! — on her boyfriend’s thigh. Each group was locked within a tiny circle of light which seemed to emanate from a painting. Fatty was so intent as he watched these people bathed in soft light that the voice which asked him curtly, “What’ll you have?” startled him. Nevertheless, he ordered three hamburgers, an order of french fries, and a cup of coffee. “Feed your body, feed your soul,” he said to himself, although his lips moved.

One couple vanished. Without warning the light at their table went off, and they blent in perfectly with the darkness. Soon, however, they became shadows which were gray at first, and then black. “Welcome back,” said Fatty to himself, and smiled. “Welcome back,” he repeated, “but turn your light on again and see ‘The Dream’. In the darkness I see you, but do you see me in the light of day? Behold! I have substance — there is no question about that — but I think we are not wholly flesh.”

In the darkness Fatty saw the girl place her hand inside her boyfriend’s thigh. In a whisper he said, “I think we are not wholly flesh.”