

# Fat

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Arlene and Pappy spill out at the usual booth. They're still trying to get up to three hundred. Ruffuls is empty except for Brad at the counter and Lois in her spot on the other end. Those two drink their coffee and have things to say about President Clinton. Arlene and Pappy, trying to get up there, feed leftover Danish pastry to each other. Arlene uses a wet napkin to get the jelly from Pappy's beard.

"Honey," Pappy says. "Honey, this Danish is something else, isn't it?"

"It is, isn't it, though? I like the plain strawberry here but I know you like the blueberry and cheese best, Pap," says Arlene, using the wet napkin. "Misfortunate that today there's only the strawberry."

Brenda is pouring more coffee for them. "More creams?" she asks.

"More creams, please," Pappy says.

"Yes, more creams," says Arlene.

Pappy opens up Arlene's creamer, and then Arlene tears one open for Pappy. They dump the cream into each other's mugs, and then they open up the rest of the creamers Brenda has left. They go to work shaking down about a dozen sugars. They tear at the tops of these as well and sweeten the coffees. They roll the empty packets between their fingers and add the paper to the pile around the stacks of jellies.

"Is there more Danish, Brenda?" Pappy asks.

"Honey, you and Arlene got the last of it till tomorrow," Brenda

says from the kitchen.

"Will there be blueberry Danish tomorrow?" Arlene asks.

"You know Pap's got to have his blueberry from time to time. That blueberry and cheese variety."

"We get what we get and it goes when it goes and you know that," says Brenda. "Why don't you two come in early for a change, and then you can have the pick of the lot."

Brad and Lois follow the conversation. There is nothing else to follow.

"They can't come in any earlier," Brad says. "They're trying to get up to three hundred."

"And so they are!" says Lois.

Pappy and Arlene share a menu. They discuss what looks good. What they're in a mood for and what they're not in the mood for. What they feel like. Pappy asks Brenda about the specials again and Brenda describes a nice chowder that gets Arlene thinking about chowders in general. Because the place is mostly empty, Brenda doesn't mind that it's the second time Pappy has her run down the specials.

In the booth, Arlene and Pappy always sit side by side and never across from each other. Brenda once told Ricardo, who washes the dishes, that this is because of gravitational attraction. She had laughed at the remark. Like that manzana falling on Isaac Newton's head, Brenda had said. Big bodies move equally towards other weights, she had explained to the dishwasher.

"So, what looks good, honey?" Pappy asks.

"Oh, I don't know. What are you in the mood for?" asks Arlene.

"Oh, anything, I guess. What do you feel like?" Pappy asks. He

rests an arm across Arlene's shoulders. It lays flush with her wattles. Arlene's shoulders remind Brenda of the pork chops her Ma cooks up on Sundays. (She's told Ricardo this bit as well.) Now and again with his free hand, Pappy raises his cup of coffee or spoons up sugar from the bottom. Arlene holds onto the menu with both hands. Her eyeglasses need a cleaning, and it's difficult for her to see through them.

"That chowder sounds tasty, don't you think?" Arlene asks.

"That chowder sure does sound tasty," Pappy replies. "But will it fill you up right?"

"No," Arlene says. "You know, I'm not sure as though the chowder would hold me over till dinner."

"I can't see it being enough. What about a nice sandwich with the chowder? What about pastrami?"

Arlene thinks about it: red clam chowder and pastrami. The sandwich hot, of course, and maybe have it with sauerkraut and Swiss and some Grey Poupon. Extra mustard on the side, too, for dipping.

At length Arlene asks her husband what he feels like having.

"I'm just going to get some wieners for now," he answers. He has been thinking about the way the scale sits on the linoleum floor in their bathroom. "Then I'll see how I feel after that," he adds. He's been thinking about how they'll climb up onto the scale when they get home, to see how close they are. And about the goal they share and about his vision of them up there at three hundred. They're close. He knows this. But that's just the rub – what then? What else is there after they get up to it? What happens next?

Arlene has her mind made up. Brenda takes the order, and a few minutes later she brings the food to the table. Pappy pushes a half-

smoked butt into the ashtray, but he makes a bad job of it and sets the other stubs to smoldering. Smoke is still rising up from the ashtray when Brenda comes over to see how the food is.

"Good, good," Pappy says, "It's all good." His mouth is full. He's busy working through the wieners.

"Yes, everything's good," Arlene says. But she doesn't really think so. Her chowder has been a disappointment because the potatoes have been cubed too small. She says what she says to avoid Brenda's bad side.

Pappy had brought on that side of Brenda two weeks ago – the very morning they'd decided to try to get up to three hundred. They were lying in bed talking. They talked about maybe getting up. They were talking about things, too. They talked about the benefits, about how the clock was ticking down on those. They talked about Arlene maybe looking for something. Maybe something part-time.

"We need to make a move, I think," Pappy said abruptly. He sensed the need for a change, for something new, something else for them to set their sights on. A task, an activity – a goal – to get them going. Something to spirit their souls from the doldrums of joblessness. From sitting around the house days and nights.

"It's this ennui that's killing us, you know," Pappy said.

Then came the idea of it. "More like a vision of things. Kind of religious-like," he explained to Arlene. They sat up in the bed. It was no bother persuading Arlene that, for the moment at least, the goal was clearly there. It stood neatly before them, radiant in its evenness and simplicity.

So they got themselves out of the house before their baths –

before coffee even – and marched straightaway into Ruffuls, the neighborhood diner that had been revealed to Pappy. Standing at the register, Pappy asked for silence and then declared his intentions.

“O, Fortuna!” he began, invoking this and that. He announced to the open-mouthed crowd the course of steady action upon which he and his wife had set themselves. He asked for the prayers of the people and he sought aloud the assistance of the Almighty. He then asked Brenda to seat them promptly.

Pappy’s speech and petitions and then the way he had bossed her around to a degree when he asked for the table did not – none of it – sit well with Brenda. She was fuming, really, and she thought to let Pappy have a piece of her mind. But the place was jammed, and she thought instead she might like to take the high road in this particular situation. She spoke coolly to Pappy, telling him he’d have to wait for a booth just like everybody else.

While they waited, Pappy and Arlene got hungry surveying the menu. Not just a general hunger, either. They stood ready – ravenous to begin their climb up to three hundred.

They watched a young couple in the far booth chatting it up. Two kids from Brown fresh from late-morning sex with nothing better to do, Pappy thought. He grew impatient. But then the Brown kids made like they were going to leave, splitting the bill and so forth, and Pappy calmed himself.

Pappy said, “Let’s order right now Arlene. Let’s get this thing started. Let’s just do it.” And so they did, ordering their food right there at the register so it would be ready when they sat down.

But the couple in the far booth didn’t leave for another fifteen

minutes. This was frustrating, especially for Pappy, who was raring to follow up on the morning's vision and the new decisions about goals and such that he and Arlene had made.

Finally seated, they reminded Brenda they'd already put their order in. Brenda brought it right out. But by then Pappy's corned-beef hash and the food on some of the other plates had gone cold.

"Brenda.... Oh, Brenda! Yoo-hoo-toodly-doo!" Pappy was waving his hand and tapping a spoon on the table. "Could you bring over please another Hash Smash Special? This one's not hot at all. This one's gone cold."

That's when Brenda dropped the notion of the high road, and so Pappy and Arlene got to see that bad side of her. Maureen had to wait on them for the rest of the day. After a second shift of food, Pappy and Arlene left Ruffuls, admiring the good start they'd made in trying to get up there. They arrived home and, during a rest between flights, Pappy warned Arlene about Brenda, about how they needed to stay away from that side of her.

"Just let's give that mood a wide berth, okay?" Pappy said. He had his weight on the landing's rail, and he mopped a hand across his forehead. He pulled through his beard to dry his fingers. "In the future, nothing inflammatory need be said. Remember this much – we're still trying to get up there, so let's just remember that."

After this first day, Pappy and Arlene go in for the late lunch. It's never busy after two o'clock – only Brad and Lois, and what do they matter? The service is better without the crowd and more often than not the morning's pastry is free for the afternoon regulars, which Pappy and his wife are now.

So Arlene keeps herself mum about the cubing job. She makes certain to lap up the last of that red chowder. Pappy's wieners are gone, too. He's pressing at some minced onion. When the onion sticks to him, he licks his fingers. He likes that part about eating the wieners. He likes it that the celery-salty onions stay on his plate afterwards.

"Did the wieners fill you right up there, Pap? Or will you have something else?" Arlene asks.

Pappy takes his time to consider this.

"What do you think we're up to now?" he finally asks.

"Well, we're not there yet, I don't think. I don't think we could be. We weren't there this morning. But... maybe."

Pappy pictures the bathroom's linoleum again, and the scale. He's drawing wheezy little breaths. He is thinking about their goal and, truthfully, Pappy is getting anxious about things.

"Let's go see. Maybe we're up there right now," he says.

He asks Brenda for the check. He pays, and they leave. Arlene waves to Brad and Lois, but Pappy seems not to think of them. Outside, they move themselves along towards the apartment. Arlene takes her husband's hand and states her case against the potato cubes and the chowder overall.

Pappy listens for a little while. But soon his attention wanes.

He thinks about how close they might be to getting up there. How they must certainly be getting up there. They will soon enough, at any rate. This much he knows. If not today – he knows this much – if not today, then tomorrow or maybe the next day after that. □