

FAT

A NOVEL

By

Rob Grant

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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.

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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.

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Part One:

March 1st

BREAKFAST

Menu

Carrot Juice

Some Sort of Shitty Muesli Pot with Yoghurt and Honey

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A Double Sausage & Egg McMuffin™

Another Double Sausage & Egg McMuffin™

(Both with Hash Browns)

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Absolutely Nothing At All

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‘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

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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 gymnasia 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-foot 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

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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

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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

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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.

Two

Jeremy Slank woke with an erection so towering, it would have required all four of the valiant marines from the Iwo Jima monument to prop it upright. He enjoyed that rare and blissful pleasure of waking from a wonderful dream to an even more wonderful reality. This had every chance of being the very best day of his life. The Groundhog Day he would choose, if ever the option arose, to live over and over again for the rest of eternity.

His eyes and his memory still being a little sleep-fogged, he blindly patted the bed beside him in case there was anyone there with whom to share his random engorgement. The chances, these days, were about 70-30 in his favour. But there was no flesh within his reach. Oh, well. Not too much of a disappointment. He often found a dream-induced stiffy had very little to do with sexual desire, and had oftentimes had a good deal of trouble coaxing it into something more purposeful once he'd initiated a grappling session. Besides, morning sex was not his favourite pursuit. All that avoiding each other's bad breath and bad hair and stale perfume tended to put a dampener on desire.

He rose and slipped on his dressing gown. His penis protruded from it comically, like a pink Dalek's eye. He swaggered around the bedroom for a few moments, exclaiming 'Exterminate! Exterminate!' till his erection began to wilt and it was possible to contemplate peeing.

For Jeremy, hygiene, both personal and domestic, was a necessary evil, to be performed in the shortest possible time, and preferably whilst simultaneously doing something else more useful. During the brief, weekly scamper over the living room carpet with the vacuum cleaner, for instance, he would be listening to a podcast or an audio book on his iPod. He would wash the pots – again, once a week – whilst making his obligatory parental phone call with his Bluetooth headset on.

In this spirit, his morning ablutions had become fine-tuned to an almost ritualistic routine. He would lay out his clothes for the day on the bed, stacked in reverse order, so his suit jacket would be on the bottom and his socks and underpants on the top. He would click on the shower room light and enter. He would then load up his toothbrush, which lay on top of his cistern, in precise order next to his toothpaste, his can of shaving foam, his razor, mouthwash, deodorant, aftershave and cologne. He would turn on the hot tap in the sink, then sit on the loo, simultaneously evacuating his bodily waste whilst cleaning his teeth. By the time he'd performed both of these functions, the water would be warm enough for his shave. He would turn on the shower and then shave, swiftly, if not comprehensively, then rinse off the razor, the toothbrush and the sink, before pouring himself a capful of mouthwash and moving the bath towel from the back of the door to the radiator by the shower cubicle, where it would be convenient for the wetly blind post-shower grab. The shower would now be warm enough to use, and he would shower and gargle at the same time. The shower routine was rigidly observed: wash hair, then armpits, then crack, sac and penis, and let the rest of the body take

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care of itself. Rinse off, step out. Dry hair, back and armpits, wrap towel around waist, apply roll-on deodorant, then aftershave, then cologne. He would sit on the bed and drag his socks on his clammy feet, which very act would dry his bottom sufficiently for the application of underpants.

He would be fresh and dressed, if still a little damp, within seven and a half minutes from rising. He had striven to improve this time, but any attempts at short cuts had led to minor disasters, including unsightly shaving cuts, dried soap stains around the neck or the omission of one or more odour inhibitors and a subsequent perceptible drop in office popularity.

All of which meant he now had a small window (thirteen minutes) before he thrust himself into commuter bedlam. Time for a coffee, of the instant kind, and a phone call, of the subtly bragging kind.

But to which friend might he best flaunt his latest success? Why, obviously the one who was currently failing most. As Gore Vidal said: it is not enough to succeed: others must fail. Derrian, then. Derrian did something naff in the City, and, rumour was, had been doing it rather badly of late.

Derrian didn't quite qualify onto Jeremy's cellphone speed-dial. He was, in fact, Jeremy noted, the thirty-fifth entry in the handset's phone book. As the call connected, Jeremy wondered where he ranked in Derrian's contact list. Probably in the top twenty, if not in the speed-dial list itself. He was, after all, in Government now. More or less.

'Yeah, mate. All right?' There seemed to be a lot of shouting where Derrian was. The Exchange? Christ. Did he start work before eight o'clock? Barbaric.

'I'm good, my friend.' Jeremy adjusted his tie in the mirror and wondered if a blob of hair gel might be called for. 'Long time no powwow.'

'Yeah, mate. What's happenin'?' 'Mate', again? He'd been spending too much time with those barrow-boy traders, had old Derrian.

'Wondered if you'd like to hook up for lunch some time?'

'Sounds good. When?'

'Well, let's see. Can't make it today, I've—'

'Not today, mate.'

Damn! *Boastus interuptus*. Maybe he could still squeeze it in. 'Well, obviously not today. I've got a—'

'Not this week, mate. I'm in Brussels.'

'Brussels?' Bloody hell. Jeremy struggled not to sound interested.

'Yeah, mate. Then next week, bloody Amsterdam.'

Brussels? Amsterdam? Jeremy was bugged if he was going to ask why. 'Cool. Just call me when you get back.'

'No problemo, mate. Catch you later.' And Derrian disconnected him.

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Disconnected *him*. The pikey bastard. No opportunity, no gap at all, to drop his proud little bombshell.

Can't make it today. Got a big yawn of a meeting with the bloody Prime Minister. Mate.

Jeremy grabbed his breakfast from the *Prêt À Manger* by the Tube. A carrot juice and some sort of shitty muesli pot with yoghurt and honey. Given a choice, he'd rather have tucked into a full greasy spoon café fry-up. In fact, given a choice between the shitty pot of yoghurt muesli and a blender full of used French letters, he'd have opted for the condom smoothie, but he was briefing on health; he was, to all intents and purposes, a health expert, and he really had to show willing.

In the Tube, he was crammed between a disgustingly fat woman and the rest of the disgustingly fat woman. She really was enormous. Herman Melville could have written a book about her. When the train lurched off, he was seriously worried he might trip and fall into her voluminous bosom and suffocate before a rescue team could winch him out again. How did they live with themselves, people that gross? How did she find time to travel on the Tube? Surely you had to spend every waking minute eating pure hydrogenized saturated fat to maintain those dimensions. He noticed with revulsion that there was something glistening greasily on the woman's chin, no doubt a remnant of the pint of melted lard she'd quaffed that morning, doubtless to wash down the whole suckling pig she'd consumed for breakfast, and her breathing was laboured and unpleasant. He began to feel nauseous. Then he was suddenly struck by a terrible vision of him puking up all over the seated commuters, and the woman falling on them greedily to lap up his vomit, and he had to get out.

He fought his way out of the carriage at the next stop and crammed himself into the adjacent one. As the train moved off again, he caught a glimpse of the blimp woman in the next carriage through the intersecting windows. She'd spotted him. She'd realised why he'd moved carriages, and a look of deep, resonant sadness filled her eyes before she cast them down at the floor.

A brief, a very brief, pang of guilt stabbed him, but he dismissed it easily. Yeah, well. She should do something about it, the weak-willed cow. Nobody was forcing her to eat whole herds of animals on a daily basis. No one put a gun to her head and made her devour the entire Irish potato harvest at every sitting. She needed educating. And educating fat people was what Jeremy was about to get famous for.

He joined the flow out of the Tube station and paused for a few minutes at the Emporio Armani window, his second-favourite shop, suppliers of the very nice suit for which he'd stretched the plastic especially for today's meeting. Of course, he'd like to have a full-blown regular Armani suit, but that was out of his reach, just for the moment. Soon, very soon, he would be able to crank up his spending a gear or two, restock his wardrobe with full-on Armani, and his treasured Emporio suits would be gracing the racks in his local Mencia shop.

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He moved on. Now here was his favourite shop. A high-quality lingerie store. La Perla knickers. Welford stockings and tights. The stuff that drool is made of. He was amazed how thoroughly aroused he could become looking at these items adorning lifeless mannequins. Christ, they didn't need to have arms or legs to turn him on. They didn't even need *heads*. What did that say about the male libido? What did it say about him?

He bounded up the steps to the office, thinking he'd definitely need a shag tonight and thumbed through his phone's contact list in the lift, looking for his most likely prospect.

Three

Hayleigh knew the alarm was coming. Her hand was hovering over the stop button for several minutes before the first hint of a buzz, and she managed to snap down on it before it had a chance to disturb anyone else in the house. Wednesday. Crap. Wednesday was just about the cruddiest day imaginable. Possibly, it was worse, even, than Monday. Because here you were, adrift and becalmed, slap bang in the middle of the week, the last Saturday morning long gone, and next Saturday so far off in the distance, you could hardly make it out on the horizon.

She swung out of bed and tucked her feet into her novelty kitten slippers. It was cold, of course. The heating wouldn't go on for another half an hour, and Mum refused to leave it on all night because it was unhealthy. They could be stuck in a snowdrift in the middle of the Ice Age and Mum would not keep the heating on overnight.

She shivered into her oversized dressing gown and padded into her bathroom. She felt around for the string dangling from the ceiling and tugged on it. The sudden shock of light stabbed into her eyes and she winced and squinted. It hurt a lot. Tears were actually forming. Her eyes seemed to be getting more and more sensitive to intense light. Photophobia, it was called. She'd looked it up on Wikipedia.

When her eyes adjusted she looked up. To her absolute horror, her towel had slipped from her bathroom mirror and she was face to face with her own reflection. She stood there, frozen in shock and disgust, before she managed to gather her wits, grab up the towel and tuck it back in place.

My God. What a pig she was. Hideous, hideous, hideous. She looked exactly like Napoleon in *Animal Farm*. The bit at the end, where he was all bloated and drinking and smoking with the humans. *'And she looked from pig to Hayleigh, and from Hayleigh to pig, and she couldn't tell the difference.'*

Her heart was thumping from the awfulness of it all. She couldn't afford to hang around too long, though. The parents would be up in, what? Twenty-three minutes. Move it, girl. Shake that giant booty.

She scooped up her toothbrush and ran it under the tap until the water was just cold, rather than actually so far below Absolute Zero it would actually snap your limbs off.

Even so, it was still a shock when the wet bristles hit her gums. Even her gums were getting more sensitive these days. She'd have to see if there was a word for that in Wikipedia.

Her mouth tasted bad, really bad, as if bugs had been queuing up all night to poo in it. She would have liked to use toothpaste, but she did not dare. How many calories were in toothpaste? A hundred? A million? Who knows? They didn't put it on the packet, which Hayleigh thought was probably illegal. Millions of people all over the world brushing their teeth every day, in complete

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ignorance of the calorific values they were inadvertently ingesting. She shuddered involuntarily.

She washed her hands and face in cold water. Not that she was worried about the calories in warm water, silly. No, first thing in the morning, the pipes started banging if you used the hot tap, and the heater whooshed on noisily in the main bathroom, and she couldn't risk disturbing her parents.

She did *not*, however, use soap. Definitely not. She'd seen *Fight Club* at a sleepover at Fabiola's one night, and discovered, to her gobsmackment, that *soap is made from fat*. Totally made from *fat*. In the movie, scrummy Brad Pitt made it out of human fat, but Hayleigh assumed most soap was made out of regular animal fat. Appalling or what? Here you are, madam: rub this block of beef dripping all over your body. Let it seep in through the pores. Watch the pounds pile on. I think not, girlfriend. No way.

She dressed as quickly as she could, back in the dark of her bedroom. Her clothes were all laid out in distinct, discrete piles so she could find them easily without having to turn the light on, and there was less chance of catching a glimpse of the rolls of fat that wobbled around her hips and belly. She tugged on her black woolly tights, trying not to touch the gruesome cellulite that pocked her thighs. She hated wearing tights precisely because they were exactly that: tight. She liked all her clothes to be loose. As loose as possible. But it was very cold outside, and school uniform was school uniform, there was no getting around that. She could, of course, have opted for trousers. But picture this scenario: she comes out of school and Jason Black from Big Boys Cry drives past in his limo with all his posse and sees her standing outside the gates in *boy trousers*. Nightmare! Would he stop the car and invite her in? I think not, girlfriend. Would he whisk a girl in boy trousers off to his Wembley Stadium gig, so she could sit backstage, or, better yet, just slightly in view so all her friends could see her there, with Jase looking over every few seconds in total love with her? Not going to happen. *Cela ne se produira pas*. Tights were really the only option.

The skirt, though, was absolutely voluminous, and that was good. It was pleated, which made it almost twice as bulky as a regular skirt. The shirt was loose and billowy, and the cardigan was practically a Girl Guide tent. Excellemoso!

She cracked open her bedroom door and took a large stride over the two creaky floorboards that lurked under the carpet just outside her room. She also had to avoid the third, eighth and ninth steps on the stairway. She crept down to the hall with as much stealth as her elephant frame could muster, then paused, still as a deer, and listened, wide-eyed and alert. She was rewarded with the gentle hum of a snore from her mum and dad's bedroom. Fantabuloso. She'd made it. She exhaled and the tension oozed out in her breath.

Now was a tricky bit. There were two major obstacles in the hallway.

They were mirrors.

The toughest one was in front of her on her right, just by the front door. It was huge. It was

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virtually impossible to walk past that mirror without catching a glimpse of your disgusting wobbly self in your peripheral vision, and *believez moi*, she had tried. She had campaigned long and hard against that mirror. It was far too big for the tiny hall. But that was the point, Mum had said. It creates the illusion of space. Uh, no, it creates the illusion you're a woolly mammoth in a school uniform. She had even, in desperation, seriously smashed it to total pieces. But it was a poorly thought through plan. It had been difficult to explain how she had managed to accidentally swing her hockey stick no less than five times at the mirror ('I was wearing ear muffs, and didn't hear it') plus, of course, her parents had simply replaced it with, if anything, a slightly larger mirror. Genius.

But that was not the problem mirror right now. She could easily avoid its accusatory glare by hugging her huge bulk tightly to the stair pole as she turned right to face the kitchen. The other mirror ran along the hall parallel to the stairs. Again, we're creating the illusion of space, here. Here's a wild, crazy thought, Mum: try creating the illusion of space by moving to a bigger house. That ought to do it for you.

This mirror was bad because it was long. Seriously long. Two metres. Maybe more. Fortunately, it was not very tall, and it was hung quite high up, so all you had to do was duck below it. Of course, that caused its own problems if anybody else was around and caught you walking down the hall as if you were scurrying through a low tunnel, as that could start Mum off on one of her Famous Lectures, so you had to check there would be no observers before you could brave the trip to and from the kitchen. Sometimes you could be trapped in the kitchen for aeons, which could be an exquisite torture all of its own when that was positively the very last place on Earth you wanted to be.

She ducked down and ran the gauntlet to the kitchen.

Another tricky bit.

Nothing was easy in this house, and that was a fact.

First off, the door handle was noisy. You had to turn it very, very gently. Second, the upper half of the door was paned with glass. In the daylight, no problemo. In the morning half-light, it was pretty much another mirror, and you had to keep your gaze just in front of your porky little feet so you could just see the door handle on the edge of your vision. Again, she'd campaigned against the glass, on the grounds that it was (a) dangerous and (b) the kitchen, nice as it was, did not constitute a sufficiently engaging view to warrant a window, and nor did the hallway, so what the heck was the window for? For light, of course. It created the illusion of light. They were creating so many illusions around this place, they must have thought David Copperfield was moving in.

She got the door open almost silently, and closed it behind her with the same intense concentration. Again, she exhaled. She looked at the digital clock on the cooker. Nineteen minutes to go.

She crossed to the kitchen window and made sure the shutters were closed as tight as they

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could go. The kitchen window was, technically, in view from Mum and Dad's room, though you probably had to be standing at a very strange angle with the curtains open to glimpse any light spillage. Still. Who knew what they got up to in there? It could very well involve striking strange poses for curious reasons with the curtains open.

Satisfied the shutters were as sealed as was humanly possible, Hayleigh flicked on the kitchen light. She had an easy, well-practised routine now, and she could just about do it in her sleep.

Switch on the grill, fill the kettle and put it on. Take the bacon and eggs out of the fridge. With the kitchen tongs, put the bacon on the grill pan and slide it under the heat. Get out the frying pan and put it on the hob. Turn the gas on. Put some olive oil in the pan. Get the slices of bread out of the cupboard and pop them into the toaster, ready to hit the on button just after the eggs have started frying. When the kettle boils, warm the teapot and empty it out. Put the tea bags in and fill up the teapot. Check the bacon. When it's ready to turn, turn it with the tongs and crack the eggs into the frying pan, then turn the timer on the toaster to just less than two. Put the glass lid on the frying pan, so the eggs cook without having to splash them with oil. Lay the breakfast table.

Now, check the timing. This was the crucial part. Seven twenty-seven precisely, put the bacon and eggs on the plates. One egg for Mum, one for Jonny, two for Dad, one for her. Three rashers of bacon for Dad and Jonny, two for Mum, one for her. At the ping of the toaster, remove the toast to the rack and put another load on, this time with the timer set just above one because the elements are already hot.

With the tongs, smear the single rasher of bacon around her plate, leaving as much greasy residue as possible. Then, with a knife, break the egg and smear some of the yolk around the plate, and then – great touch, this one – just dab a little of the yellow goo on yourself. Could be on your sleeve, on your shirt, wherever. Just so long as it is discreetly visible. This morning she does a daring one: she pats a tiny blob just by the corner of her mouth.

Now, with the tongs, lift up the egg and drop it into the waste disposal, then do the same with the bacon. You don't want the plate to look like it's been scraped, thank you so much. Leave the plate by the sink. Put a slice of toast on a side plate and cut it with a knife to leave a convincing number of toasty crumbs. Put the toast in the waste disposal, fish the tea bags out of the pot and pop them in the waste disposal on top of everything else. Now, with one hand on the waste disposal switch and the other on the tap, a combo that is probably potentially lethally dangerous, you wait.

You wait until, on the stroke of seven thirty, Mum and Dad's radio alarm blares into life. You turn on the tap and switch on the waste disposal and, *voilà* – your work is done, and you can finally chill. Just pour yourself a cup of hot water and kick back with your magazine, drooling over piccies of Jase, and wait for everyone to slouch into the kitchen with their silly hair and sleep-confused expressions. Same old same old, every day.

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Only this time, it didn't work like that.

This time, when Maroon Five blasted down the stairs with 'This Love' from her parents' radio alarm, Hayleigh hit the tap and water cascaded into the sink, and she flicked the waste disposal switch and nothing happened.

OK. No panic. She flicked the switch off and back on again. Still nothing.

This had happened before. Not to Hayleigh but to her mum, and there was some kind of button you pressed under the sink that made it work again.

She flung open the cupboard doors and crouched down low. There were so many bottles and packets down here you could hardly see anything. She certainly couldn't see a switch.

She heard the floorboards creaking upstairs, and somewhere, a toilet flushed. She felt around under the waste disposal, but found nothing remotely button-like. Her hands darted frantically over every exposed part of the machinery. Was this dangerous? She gave up, closed the doors and straightened.

In round about thirteen seconds, a parent was going to come into the kitchen, spot the charade and Hayleigh's life, as she knew it, would effectively be over.