

Our Enormous Fat Man

by Steven Gowin

How did we get so hard, and beyond that, mean? Dad didn't know. Neither did I. We'd no history of it, no record.

Hully Palmer, at 390 pounds, could barely walk and slept nights upright, painfully and without peace, in his Dodge Power Wagon. Lying prone would have crushed his heart, would have killed him.

Oleaginous folds, arm and belly and thigh, fat over fat, always wet, chapped red, burning with itch, vexed him constantly. His face glowed bright red, blood pushing hard on his arteries, blood too close to the skin's surface.

Pity would have been appropriate. Yet, townsfolk whispered behind his back. Shouldn't he do something about it. So lazy. A gluttonous swine. Hadn't his mother kept him too long at tit, breastfeeding 'til four? Look. Look at him now. A fat man. Our enormous fat man.

We savored the idea of Hully as something inferior, someone who must remain other, lesser, a perverse measure of our own worth. Surely no mirror could reflect the disgust of the whole, no bouquet mask the pervasive reek of adiposity.

Dad, more charitable, blamed the big man's glands. It wasn't Hully's fault. Besides, hadn't Hully taken Mike Harmon's mangy dog Gloria, when Mike passed away? Nobody else had done. Yup. Glands run amok.

When the end came, most of us cared about Hully's death only insofar as we'd miss reviling him. But that didn't seem right, and Dad agreed. He said I should find out what had happened, get the facts, record the accident. So, I did.

I asked the redneck Basset brothers, and I questioned the Palmer and Stump, cousins. I talked to Ladies' Aid ladies and the volunteer firemen who'd been there. Unversed in subterfuge and convinced of their innocence, they all talked.

It began South of town in a shallow valley below corn and soybean fields at Madison Pond. A victim of modern agriculture,

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fertilizer runoff had transformed the spot into a three-acre scum hole, a fetid verdant cancer, an infection.

Our community, too cheap for a cleanup, nevertheless met there yearly for an August picnic of undercooked pork, fatty hamburger, hot mayonnaise-heavy salads, and beer drinking to excess.

Hully'd arrived at noon and pulled the Power Wagon into the weeds near the picnic tables the better to hear our endless backbiting. Someone brought him a bright pink hot dog and a runny jello-cream dish. He'd left them on the dash, untouched, before falling asleep.

About two in the afternoon though, as the sun beat hard, Hully, now drenched in sweat, got himself up and out of that hot pickup cab, rolled up his pant legs, pried off his shoes, and toddled off on tiny ivory feet toward the Madison Pond dock.

Halfway to the end of that rickety pier, still the gargantuan baby, he'd dropped to hands and knees, and splintering his palms as he went, crawled to dock's edge.

There, he'd pushed himself up from the elbows to peer into a break in the scum. And twisting his crimson head side to side to side, he beheld his own greasy reflection.

When the pier creaked, and crackled and gave way, Hully Palmer followed it down, down, into five feet of slimy glop. Face underwater now, he did flounder hilariously, flapping his arms, fighting for breath above the muck.

Most of the picnickers simply stood by laughing at this new comedy, but as Hully's struggle subsided, they began wondering, worrying maybe, if all were well. Finally, Hully's cousin, Ike Palmer, inebriated and hooting, stumbled into the scum to rescue the big boy.

But with the mud that sucked at the drunkard's heels and the victim's enormity, Ike could not budge Hully. Four volunteer firemen finally waded in and dragged Hully out. But whether from drowning or heart failure (no one believed in autopsy), Hully'd perished in the water.

So as not to address our own shortcomings, neglect, and chosen lack of compassion, we now only dimly acknowledge Hully Palmer or any complicity in his death. And in a few years, most here will have forgotten our enormous fat man completely.

But Dad and I remember. We know the story. We talked about it. We got it down.

