

White Man, Fat Man

By Elaine Rosenberg Miler

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He tore the page off the desk calendar. It was no longer October twenty-fourth. His pale fingers crumpled the paper into a ball. He switched on the overhead lamp. A circled red "X" was written on the next date.

"Mr. Burke!"

He looked up. "What?"

Gladys stood beside him her heavy speckled arms folded across her chest. She cracked her chewing gum. "I have been standing here for five minutes. Are you asleep? Joy, tell him how long I been standing here."

Joy shut the file cabinet and laughed, her eyes crinkling in her brown face. "I wouldn't know." She lowered herself into a swivel chair and shook her head.

Gladys sighed. "Here's the checks for Mr. Fleigler to sign. God only knows," she muttered as she passed the other woman, "what he does behind that desk."

He raised his blotter and withdrew a pamphlet labeled BASIC NUTRITION REQUIREMENTS. He examined the contents as he munched a doughnut.

"Mr. Burke! Your PHONE IS RINGING!" Gladys sang above the clatter of the typewriters.

"Where?" he asked.

"On your DESK," she responded. "Looks like Christmas is early this year, Joy. Sanny Claus brought us a real fruitcake."

He picked up the receiver. "Yes, sir," he said. "Right away, Mr. Fleigler. I'll be right in." He gathered the checks. Refolding the pamphlet, he placed it under a calculator. He leaned forward on his toes and clasped his hands as he walked past the office machines and personnel.

"Wowee," Gladys cried. "What a loser! Is he or is he not a case? Tell me."

He ground his heels into the orange carpet. "Mr. Fleigler, I'm leaving."

Mr. Fleigler peered over the rims of his glasses. "But Burke, Meyer, you're my Accounts Receivable. What's the matter? Haven't we treated you nice?"

"I'm leaving. Sir."

"But why, Meyer?"

"I'm leaving, today, Mr. Fleigler. Sir."

Mr. Fleigler put his party on hold and his cigar in his ashtray. Leaning back in his leather chair, he hooked his thumbs in his vest pockets. "Leaving? No. You're not leaving, no. You, Burke, are not leaving. YOU'RE GETTING KICKED OUT. YOU'RE FIRED! GET OUT! GET OUT!"

Meyer told no one of his impending departure. At noon, when most of the staff had gone to lunch, he taped a list of departmental operating instructions to the calendar and then clipped grocery coupons from a newspaper. He left the office as they were returning. Children ran back and forth along the cobbled streets, fighting playing, shouting. He wondered why they were not in school. All children should be in school, he thought. He entered an A&P supermarket. Its windows were boarded and bricked, its doors reinforced with steel bars. "Love..." a voice trilled over the store intercom "Is A Many Splendored Thing". He rolled a cart down the aisle. Berry, apple, cherry. He gathered the pies in his arms. He picked up a carton of ice-cream.

"Mister! Would yuh look out for crissakes?"

Meyer disentangled his cart and pushed on. Rolls. Raisins. Crackers. Cookies.

He completed his shopping. Carbohydrates, he had read, consist of sugars and starches, Starches become sugars. Unused sugars, fat. It was simple. Consume carbohydrates, conserve energy, cultivate fat. He handed the cashier his money.

The iridescent traveling clock on the coffee table ticked rhythmically. Meyer lay down on a plastic covered sofa beneath a set of lacquered portraits. He lived alone in three small rooms in one of the buildings of a government built complex called "the projects". The buildings were identical. The only differences among them were the alternating olive green and pink colors of the interior hallways.

Meyer's apartment was adjacent to the incinerator. Its proximity would help. He removed his shoes and placed them in the closet in his bedroom. An empty birdcage was perched on a stack of magazines beside his bed. The bird had helped him, too. Each day he had fed it more and more grain, added supplements to its food, left treats hanging on its wooden perch. One morning he awoke to find the bird dead. The glass water cups in the cage glistened. He reached inside and pushed the swing. The kettle whistled in the kitchen. He rose and closed the blinds.

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He began.

He made an entry in his log under the heading "Week One".

In upright letters linked by crescent strokes, he wrote "Approximate Gain Over Actual Gain".

He hoped to achieve net profit of five percent on his predicted goal of five sixteen.

He kept the apartment clean, dusting daily, disinfecting and polishing the floors weekly. He saw himself acting in concert with great historical figures he had read about. They, like he, had undertaken difficult tasks and through their extraordinary courage, above and beyond the call of duty, had been able to surmount huge and numerous obstacles. He considered himself to be on a journey. He had stocked rations and had arranged for regular delivery as supplies diminished. His task did have its tests, its rigors, its demanding discipline of six meals per day. But he would face them one at a time, according to schedule. He recalled the words of the television minister. "Who are we," he had shouted, "to stand in the way of the Lord God? We plead and beg for time when it is time for us to die, for peace when we cry and pity when we transgress. Who are we to interfere in the way he rules the earth? He did ask us when he created the cosmos and set the galaxies spinning. He did not ask us when he rested. How does man attempt to change the ways of the Lord. Why," he demanded, raising the arms of his striped robe to the heavens "does man presume, presume to challenge the word of the

Almighty? Because, because man is so meaningless, is of such infinitesimal value that he does not recognize his own nothingness.” Meyer would persevere. He would succeed. He had a plan. He had worked as a clerk for fifteen years, anonymously, had dealt with people who disliked him, had been ignored and surrounded. Here in the apartment, eating most of the day, sleeping most of the night, he was content, at peace.

By the end of the second week, he could feel the changes. The abdomen he had seen expanding was joined by softening, spreading hips. His ribs disappeared. His arms felt solid.

By the end of the month his round face was supported by a thick neck and barrel shaped torso. Dimples appeared on the backs of his hands. But he had only gained eighteen pounds. He would relax more, only think of pleasant things. His book, the man. It has been his most valuable possession. He purchased a cover to protect it, a brown one that said “School Days”. His mother threw it away. She said it was an accident. He didn’t really believe her. It had been a collection of outstanding statistics, such as the longest river, the most precious gem. There had been one listing that had especially impressed him. Isaiah Octavius McKinley of Macon, Georgia, while working in a circus, gained the most amount of weight in the shortest amount of time, three hundred and twenty-five pounds in six months. He had been the Fat Man exhibit and one season, as part of a promotional stunt, had been fed superhuman amounts of food. Towards the end of his life, he ceased performing. He was no longer mobile. His skin had lost its elasticity. When he died, they were forced to cut open the top of his trailer and lift him out with a crane. Meyer could visualize his being retrieved. Suspended in mid-air, gently lowered to the ground, grieved for by the acrobats, midgets and clowns. They wept, acknowledging the passing of one of the best. He was unique. He had set a record.

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He wondered where the snow had gone. The day before, torrents of snow had fallen from the gray November sky. Where did it go? He reread his old magazines and listened to his seventy-eights. How long would he remain undiscovered if he took ill? What is someone

became suspicious or he was seen on an early morning foray? He would let them in if they tried to enter and pretend that their intrusion was meaningless. He would invite them to stay. He would not be too gregarious. He would be busy, active in some activity, cooperate but not volunteer.

Time was his enemy. He observed his six month calendar faithfully. His body grew. His clothes no longer fit. He roamed the rooms in a sheet, wrapped toga-like around his body. His eyes became slits in his face, his hair matted around his ears. When he positioned himself on the sofa, his knees facing in different directions, his belly reached over his thighs. He could not cross his legs. He stopped cleaning the apartment, the exertion weakened him. December and January passed. The pages of the log were half filled.

The walls in the apartment allowed sounds to filter through. Meyer could hear the crying children and violent arguments of his neighbors. On Lincoln's birthday, while playing Danny Kaye's recording of "Molly Malone", he heard six explosive pops. Jefferson Tyler, in the unit below him had shot his wife. From his window Meyer watched him being led to a squad car. He swung at an officer and caught him on the jaw with his handcuffs.

Sitting in his kitchen, Meyer could listen to the conversations of people arriving and departing the elevator. If they were alone, there was just a pneumatic hiss.

One day, while he was treating a nosebleed, the doorbell rang. Once. Twice. Three times. Meyer did not move.

"Yoo-hoo, Mr. Burke!"

It was Mrs. Rossi. She was a dangerous woman. She could notify someone. She knew he lived there. Why was she coming to his apartment? The few times they had met she would chatter, standing in her tent-like housedress and furry slippers, about the Negroes in the neighborhood. One of them had even tried to call up her Cecilia, disguising his voice. But you could tell. They never learned to talk like normal people. It was also a matter of biology. Her mah jong group had resolved it. You had to stop feeding them with welfare checks. It was actually the kindest way. In China they even knew enough to leave babies to die on a hill in the

country. Meyer would say that he was expecting a telephone call to get away. Sometimes, she didn't understand him. She was partially deaf. He would wave to her as he backed down the hall. But she would continue to talk.

He heard a rustle of paper, a tearing of tape.

He heard the clank of a chain lock, then the police lock and the tumbler lock.

He waited.

Finally, he walked up to his door and opened it.

A blue lined sheet fluttered with the motion.

He grabbed it and pushed the door shut.

"Neighbor. There has been a great deal of garbage around the incinerator lately. It is dangerous to our health Please place your things in the chute. Don't leave your garbage around for everyone to vomit. Please join in. There are ways and means to find you if you think you are getting away with it. Very Sincerely Yours, Fourth Floor Cleanliness. Mrs. Virginia Rossi."

How could she accuse him? It was anyone but him. It was that young black dancer down the hall. All he ever did was play loud music and have parties and never go out to work.

Meyer placed the needle in the groove of a vinyl record.

"A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody," a man crooned.

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"--March 28, the world premiere of 'Where Giants Stood', a revolutionary new feature film about the destruction of the dinosaurs. Starring Awa Usilin and Gars Telbrecht. Directed by the award winning Icelandic director, Nimsey Edjqyck. Now at your local --"

Meyer shut off the radio.

It was going to be cold that evening. There was great risk. The rent was due and Meyer would have to ride the elevator before dawn and go to the mail drop in the windy first floor vestibule and deliver his payment. The sheet he was wearing was stained with sweat and grease of countless fried meals. His protuberant lips rested on a wiry brown beard. He could

feel his cheeks touch the top of his eye sockets. He felt detached from his body. He felt as if he could abandon it at will.

Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in “Gay Divorcee” was listed for four-thirty. It was one of his favorites. In one dance number dozens of people dressed in black and white changed partners and costumes with each new movement.

Meyer heard a siren and went to the window.

A crowd was gathered in the courtyard. Their voices resounded.

“Maaa! Throw me down some money!” a child cried. “I want to go to the candy store!”

Women in hair curlers, boys in mud streaked football jerseys and girls hugging dolls stood around a concrete bench. Stretcher bearers divided the group.

Meyer could see the figure of a black man, knees drawn to his chest, hands pressed against his abdomen as he rolled from side to side. The attendants grasped his ankles and his wrists and swung him onto the canvas sheet.

Meyer entered the kitchen and ate a pastry. He licked the chocolate off his fingers and then ate another. The sight of the man had struck him. He took a roll out of the breadbox. He had been helpless. Meyer wondered, as he peeled a banana, at his own success. Nothing came between him and his actions, no second thoughts. He finished a cream pie and laughed in high pitched chuckles as he tore open a bag of marshmallows. Stabbing several with a serving fork, he roasted them over the gas burner. As their white surface blackened, they emitted a brown flame. Reheated bacon fat began to sizzle in the caked trays on the range. Meyer supported his elbow with his palm and began to sing, waving the utensil in time to the beat.

“We Were Sailing Along, down Moonlight Bay. We could hear the voices singing, they seemed to say.” He bit into the marshmallows and dropped them with a shout. Ice in his mouth, he ambled into the bathroom. He searched among suppositories and band-aids until he found a tube of ointment. His finger rested on his bottom lip. He would miss the movie if he didn’t hurry.

A board creaked.

Meyer turned off the faucet.

The linoleum squeaked.

A man stood at the kitchen entrance.

“Put up you hands!” he hissed, pointing a pistol at Meyer.

His legs were bent at the knees. His eyes shone in his wide, dark face. “You move now!”

The movie must have started, Meyer thought. He hoped that it was just a commercial.

Million Dollar Movies. His favorite series.

The man ran a hand through his oily hair. A jagged cut glistened beneath his open shirt.

“Do you want some help?” Meyer asked.

The man gestured towards the hall. “Out!”

“Are you sure?”

“Get out!”

Meyer faced the door frame and edged out. As he made his way, leaning on one limb, then the other, his stomach heaved and his legs vibrated. Pushing a side an empty cereal carton on the floor, he entered the living room.

“Now, look, mon, you doan move or I gonna hafta keel you. Unnerstan?”

Meyer nodded.

“Christos,” the man muttered. “Look, you gotta give me you money, now. No funny bizness. I not afraid to keel you. Unnerstan?”

“Yes. But I have no money,” Meyer said.

“You doan unnerstan! I doan keer if you get keeled, mon. I doan keer. Han over the money. Now!” The man put the gun to Meyer’s temple.

“Yes. I understand. But I have no--.”

The man cocked the trigger. “Hey Fat Man. You wanna die?”

He pressed the muzzle into Meyer’s skull. “You see the spook inna fron? You gonna catch his cole. From me.”

Meyer faced the man.

Writing Raw

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How to end this? There was nothing of value in the apartment. He could take the appliances. They had only been stamp redemptions. And the magazines and three suits. There were some supplies in the bedroom and his seventy-eights. The man removed a knife from his pointed toe ankle boot. Their heels were worn. One boot had a hole beside the big toe. He held the knife in the air.

“You crazy sonofabitch!” he cried.

The knife descended. It was double edged and had an ivory handle.

Somewhere around his navel, Meyer estimated, the blade entered his body.

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Had the patriarch felt this way? He was the patriarch and he was his son. He was God. But why had his hand not been stayed? He certainly must have known what was going on. He is all knowing. There must be a plan here somewhere.

To market, to market, to buy a new kid.

Home again, home again.

Did it. He did.

Meyer whispered.

“Watch the monitor for arrest. It’s not uncommon for cardiacs to repeat while in the hospital.”

“But Nurse Phillips. I’m just a first year student. I have never--.”

“That’s all right. He’s almost gone anyway. Unbelievable. Have you ever seen anyone so fat?”

“Uh-uh!”

“It’s enough to make you give up dessert.”

The End

Writing Raw

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