I, Fatty

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Part One

Daddy Was a Custer Man

Daddy referred to my mother's reproductive organs as "her little flower."

In my earliest baby-boy memories, the man's either looming and glum—not drunk enough—or bug-eyed and stubbly after a three-day bender, so liquored up he tilts when he leans down to snatch me off the burlap rags my brothers and sisters piled on the floor of our Kansas shack and called our "sleepy blankets." I'd blink awake in the air, shaking cold, my face so close to Daddy's the rye fumes burned my eyeballs. He'd rattle me till my teeth clacked, then start ranting in that high, Hoosier whine he only got when he was blotto and wanted to hurt something.

"*You broke her little flower, pig boy!*"

—WHACK!—

"*Sixteen pounds of baby? That's just wrong!*"

—SLAP PUNCH SLAP—

If, against my better judgment, I'd speak up—"*Ouch, Daddy, please…I'm sorry!*"—it only made him more furious. He'd drop me outright—one blessing of fat, it's good padding—and strike a pose like John L. Sullivan, whom he liked to think he resembled.

"*I'll show you sorry, Jumbo! You broke Mama's little flower squeezing your sideshow keister out of her…If you'd never been born, she wouldn't have gotten sick!*"

That was Daddy. Willie Arbuckle. Born in Indiana, died in Kansas, California, Mexico, and anywhere else he tried his luck. In the magazines, I always called him a "gentleman farmer." The real article was a professional boozehound, gifted at going belly up in five languages. He married a churchgoing lovely, beat her senseless, then embarked on a life of leaving for glory and crawling home broke.

Daddy liked to say that his fondest wish was to have "gone with Custer." The general had perished four years before Dad moved to Smith Center—which, in 1880, was the geographical center of the continental United States. "*The boys in the Seventh U.S. Cavalry found glory at the hands of savages—and all I've ever done is pass out in Kansas*."

JUST A BIG LITTLE BOY

I was born three days ahead of schedule—always eager to get to the next date—so Mama had to make do without a midwife. When Daddy got word, he barreled in from the fields, took in my girth and my mortally exhausted mother, and let out a yowl. According to my sister Norah, who was bringing in boiled sheets, Daddy threw Mama's Bible against the wall and cursed. "*Goddamm it, Dee, that can't be mine. It's got the haunches of a hog!*"

He hated me on sight. Which does something to a boy. Knowing I caused so much distress for my mother and father by just *being me* made me want to eat. The more I ate, the more Daddy went Hun on me for how fat and stupid I was. I topped 100 at 5. When my mother died, Daddy told me I killed her. The old man got whirly drunk, belt-whipped me, and locked me in a steamer trunk for a week. I was 12. He kept screaming that after I was born, my mother "stopped being a wife." I had ruined her womanhood.

Ladies and their little flowers pretty much scared me from then on. Because you could break them without knowing it. Or somebody could say you did.

"*Jesus didn't need a penis!*" Mama liked to remind me. For as long as I can remember, she would quote the Bible to show me that sex was wrong. As I grew older, it seemed worse than wrong. It seemed impossible. After I married and suffered a

droopy honeymoon, a doctor in Los Angeles said that my girth had left me with a weakened nuptial muscle. "Heft problems. Nothing to be ashamed of," he explained. "Eat more bloodmeats."

Easier to just say I'd been drinking. Easier to just drink....I knew how to be affectionate, and relished a cuddle. But it didn't come up that often.

A CURIOUS PARALLEL

A funny thing—well not funny, but *funny:* when that DA accused me of forcing myself on poor, demented Virginia Rappe in San Francisco, I felt the same way I did when Dad used to stagger in drunk and beat the molasses out of me. I knew I was innocent, but I knew it didn't matter. Truth was whatever the person hitting you with a belt buckle needed to believe. Underneath the shock and heartbreak at how fast everybody chose to assume the worst—from Bigger Than Chaplin to Señor Dogmeat in less time than the Red Line took from Hollywood to Glendale—there was this feeling, too: *Dad was right*. I could almost see his sneering face floating just over mine, "*You broke that poor girl like you broke your mama*."

Even if I never touched Virginia Rappe, or any other female, people had their reasons for believing. For wanting to believe I'd done something worth hating me for. I hated the name Fatty, and I made a career out of being that name. (Buster Keaton said that to get people to love me, I became what I loathed the most. Buster was the one pal who stood by me through it all.)

So, before we really get going here, I just have to say this: Something strange happens when you lose everything. Something strange happened to me. All those years of being

lucky, being successful—first comic actor to direct his own movies, first to make a million a year—I never felt comfortable. I had to pay a bootlegger to feel even half-good, and after that, a croaker, for narcotics.

Once all my money—and all my luck—was used up, I could relax. I wanted to die, but at least the feeling was *familiar*. Does this make sense? Before the court lynched me, I was as big a success as Daddy was a failure, and I needed the hooch more than he did. Sometimes more. After the St. Francis fiasco, I didn't need the drink. I mean, I did, but not the same way. Thanks to Virginia Rappe, I had an excuse to feel the way I had always felt, but could never explain when things were aces.

But there I go, rushing the gag….

HELL ON THE PRAIRIE AND SANTA ANA

We—Dad, when he was sober and at home, my ailing mother, and a ragtag quartet of siblings—occupied a drafty one-room cabin with a sod roof. If Daddy hit me too hard, I'd bang off a wall and chunks of sod would fall off, which made him madder.

"*If you hadn't been born, Mama wouldn't've got sick, and your brothers and sisters wouldn't be huddled like pack wolves on the floor of a one-room shack in Kansas….*"

Like I say, that's all I heard as a young pudge. Daddy believed that every failure he suffered was on account of me. It was my fault he'd ended up some washed-up souse of a farmer and prospector. When he was really plastered, he'd even tell me that I wasn't his, and beat me harder, while Mom just shut her eyes and recited Bible quotes. If he was tired of punching, he'd drag me outside and make me haul wood off the ground until I had enough for a fire. He'd beat me in the head with branches, then start a fire and threaten to toss me

in. "*Time for sucklin' pig!*" he'd chuckle. It was the only joke he ever made. And he made it over and over.

When I was 5, Dad up and moved the family to Santa Ana, this broke-down cowboy town in California. (Though from what I could tell, every town in California was broke-down, and drowning in cowboys.) "Santa Ana is heaven for kids," Mom said. "Lots of open fields and space."

We were going to have a new life. Which we did. Except the new life had less money in it than the old one. Daddy couldn't find work, so he drank more while all us kids got jobs. Thanks to my bulk, I looked older than 5, so I was able to get a job doing cleaning up and light delivery for a grocery. Anything was better than being in our house, which was dark and damp, even with the sun scorching the ground outside. Then Mom enrolled me in school and things got bad.

School nearly destroyed me. I'd never been around anybody but my own family, so I couldn't talk to other kids. They'd call me Fatty and I'd get the clam-ups. So in second grade I just kind of dropped out. But I had to go *somewhere*, so every morning I'd ditch my brothers and sisters and duck into whatever theater left their stage door open. Right from the first, the theater was an escape from life. It was life, but better.

Santa Ana was what they called a low-end stop on the vaudeville circuit. There were lots of stock companies floating around. Back then, actors were pretty much nomads. Normal people saw them as whores and hoboes who couldn't get honest work. All these troupes would float through—like the first one I weaseled my way into, the Frank Bacon Stock Company.

I was always sneaking into theaters. I loved sniffing around backstage, eyeballing the costumes, running my fingers through the makeup dust on the battered trunks. What I loved most was eavesdropping on the performers. Off the boards they seemed even more exotic than on. Pirates and Gypsies rolling cigarettes and reading the funny papers.

If the manager didn't throw me out, I'd hide in the wings and watch the show. All that clapping! The first time you hear clapping, it's like firecrackers. A room full of firecrackers, all going off for some little shnip with a big Adam's apple doing Hymie dialect. Or for a couple of hoofers. Or a Chinee plate-spinner. Nobody could spin a plate like the Chinee.

When their run was over, I'd stay to watch the troupes pack up and march off to their next glamorous marquee performance. Everybody stared at them when they sauntered up Main Street to the train station. Shopkeepers came out and sneered. If a little kid threw a rock at an actor, his Dad would chuck him under the chin. If he hit one, he probably got a penny.

But the actors didn't seem to mind. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, being stared at, if you weren't the only one. Daddy used to tell me I should work in a sideshow, 'cause then I'd be surrounded by people just like me. Geeks and deform-os. Gosh knows I knew a little something about being gawk-fodder.

DADDY-FETCHIN'

Mostly, what I tried to do with my young life was not go home. My older brother and sister had moved out, and Mom was pretty much sick all the time. "Bedridden" is what my sister Norah called it. "Mama's bedridden, so don't be a strain." All I wanted was to help her. But I hated having to Daddy-fetch.

If Daddy was home, and he was drunk, he would "show me what a belt is for"—which was better than showing me "what a branch is for." Though not exactly a cupcake picnic either. Daddy'd see the welts next morning and apologize with tears in his eyes. Sometimes he would beg me to hit him in the face, and when I didn't—I couldn't—that would set him off all over again.

But I was talkin' about fetchin', wasn't I? See, if he wasn't home, it meant he was drunk somewhere else, and I was dispatched to get him before he landed in a ditch. "Roscoe, your father hath strayed again," Mom would croak from her daybed. Mother quoted the Bible all the time, and as her condition got worse, she even talked biblical.

I hated Daddy-fetch duty, as the activity was known in the family. With my older brother and sister gone, it fell to me to scour the bars. The worst part was, in public, my father would act like he didn't know me. I knew this, but I always thought if I just slicked my hair back, if I sucked in my gut enough, if I made a joke or sang the right ditty, he would look up and smile and tell everybody I was his boy. He might even call me Roscoe instead of Fatty. But it never happened that way. Boohoo and blubber just naturally go together.

When I spotted the old man, generally mumbling and disheveled at the end of a bar, I'd smooth my cowlick, tiptoe over, and tug his arm as gently as I could. "*C'mon, Daddy*…" I tried to be inconspicuous. But I was 150 pounds and 5-foot-5 before I was 9. People stared. I'd lean in and whisper in his ear, "*C'mon, Daddy, Mama's ailing*." But he'd act like he didn't hear me. I wanted to turn around but I never did. I knew what going home without him would mean: Mommy's tears, the crying that turned into coughing fits and blood. Daddy would make a big show of pursing his lips and brushing his coat where I touched him, like some kind of an aristocrat. As if I'd dirtied him.

"I ask you," Daddy would say, talking over my head to the bartender, or whoever else was handy, "does this young rump roast look like he has the blood of William Arbuckle in him? I think not!" Of course I would smile.

The longest exits I ever made were out of those saloons, with Daddy shouting jokes about my "canned hams" and the guys in shirtsleeves doing spit-takes with their beer while I

waddled toward the door fighting back tears.

When he was just a little drunk, but not too, Dad would wax rhapsodic about his plans to strike it big in oil and gold. "*Gonna do me some prospectin', and you ain't comin', Tubby!*" I didn't have to ask why. Dad said I wouldn't know how to live rough. He called me a "softy dolly."

Sometimes at night I put on little plays in my head where I'd be standing beside Daddy, in California, panning for gold, and I'd find a nugget big as a cauliflower. I'd hold up my shiny find, and the sun would make it glitter, and Daddy would smile. He would hug me. Maybe muss my hair. Then he'd hold out his hand, palm up, and say, "Give it here, boy. Make your old man rich!" In my little play, I'd just stare at him. I'd play the gag long. Then, finally, I'd say, "*Forget it, you drunken, good-for-nothin' bastard*." And leave him pawing in the dirt while I went off and lived like a fat pasha.

Years later, whenever I thought about Daddy in those bars, pretending not to know me, my cheeks still burned. (Not the canned ham ones—the ones on my face.) There's no loneliness in the world like your-own-daddy-don't-want-to-know-you loneliness. The bartender was always nice, though. He'd slip me a couple of Scotch eggs and whisper. "*I got a fatty at home, too. She's a big ol' sad peach just like you*."

That winter—our first in Santa Ana, and nothing like the numb-toes months we had to chatter through in Kansas—Daddy got a "business opportunity" in San Jose and left us. The idea was he'd send us money when his ship came in, but either they moved the harbor or it sank outright, 'cause we never heard from him. Once we got word he was pickin' fruit in Barstow. We'd done this as a family a few times on the trip from Smith Center. (I broke a ladder on a farm outside Lovelock, Nevada, and Daddy brained me with a crab-apple branch when he found he had to pay.) It didn't seem like all that great a business opportunity to me.

Despite everything, I loved Daddy and still believed he would round us all up when the time came. Of course, all us kids were already workin' before Dad left, but with him officially gone—instead of just gone to the bar—we all felt we had to chip in a little more. Mama had been dying for a long time and couldn't do much more than pray.

HAPPY IS AS HAPPY DOES

But happy is as happy does, and—here's a lesson for all you kiddies—opportunity knocks when you quit school in second grade. I was around 8 when the Frank Bacon Stock Company rolled into town for a festive production called *Turned Up*. Their first night a colored boy in the troupe went missing. Mr. Bacon was eating his arms trying to finagle a last-minute replacement. As I happened to be lounging around the theater, in my 8-year-old way, I offered my services. At first Mr. Bacon, an actor *and* impresario, pooh-poohed the idea. Then, reconsidering, he decided having a white chubby-cheeks in the role of a pickaninny might make for good chuckle-bait. I could greasepaint my face, he said. "But you have to go home and get black stockings from your Ma to cover up your gams. You also want to get some shoes. People ain't gonna pay cash money to see those stompers of yours."

Around that time, see, I pretty much went around barefoot, as getting shoes to fit feet as wide as mine was nearly impossible. Even if we had the money to send away, by the time the brogans showed up I'd be a quadruple E instead of a triple.

Well, I couldn't go ask Mom for stockings, I knew that. My mother was a pious woman. For all I knew, she was probably home quoting Revelations 12 that very moment. If I told her I was consorting with actors and needed her lingerie, she might think my Daddy's worst predictions for my future were

on the mark. "*I betcha*," he was fond of saying in the grips of rye whiskey and despair, "*you turn out to be some sissy-boy. Betcha you end up peein' with your knees bent…*"

Speaking of sissies, nobody wants to see a fat boy cry. So Mr. Bacon pulled me into a closet-sized dressing room full of half-dressed ladies—actresses—who stopped fussing with their own makeup and, at Mr. Bacon's direction, began to slather me in cold greasepaint. (Strange ladies were always undressing around me, even then.) They smeared my face, my arms, all the way from my stovepipe ankles to the tops of my giant, too-tight drawers. (We never had money or new things; I just wore the old ones until they burst.) I felt myself going fluttery. This was more affection in a single moment than I'd known in my entire eight years. I didn't know what to do, so I closed my eyes.

"*Oh, he's a big one!*" cooed an actress named Lil, who had a dime-sized mole painted due north of the cleft between her ample bosoms, like a doorbell. Those amples spilled over her corset inches before my face. It was like a candy dream, where I could have all the chocolate and peppermint snaps I wanted. But instead of candy it was Lil, and Miriam, and Madge O'Scanlon, a.k.a. "Shambina, Mistress of Arabian Dance." Madge, an Irish redhead in an Indian headdress with kohled eyes and a yellow lace brassiere, took me right in her arms and held me. "You're just a big butter pat, that's what you are. You're just a big fat butter pat and I'm gonna squeeze you until you melt and run down my tummy…"

Done blackening my flesh, the actresses—half a dozen of 'em, from waif of 18 to boozy matron of 35 or so—began to make carnival with me. They pushed my shirt up to my boy-breasts, a source of embarrassment from my first day in the schoolyard. They started giggling and pinching. They tickled me everywhere, stealing little kissy-bites of belly and paps until I couldn't breathe and laugh-tears burned out of my

eyes. I thought I was going to black out or pee from happiness. It was that unfamiliar.

One of the ladies planted a smooch on my mouth and made her own lips black from my greasepaint. Before she got sick, when Mama used to give me a hot bath on Saturday nights and wrap me in old burlap, it felt like this. Floating and loved deep down. I filled my nostrils with gardenia and baby powder and the olive oil the ladies used to keep their elbows smooth. I wanted to stay in that cloud forever.

Right then, I was smitten. I knew before I stepped onstage, this was the place for me. The home you get when you don't have a home you feel at home in. Mr. Bacon showed me where to stand and what to do with my arms. By the time I felt the stagehands' beefy palms on my buttocks, shoving me onto the boards for my debut, I thought that life had gotten as unlikely and wonderful as it was ever possible to get. Then I heard the laughing. A couple of barks from the back row. A few scattershot guffaws….

For one, hammering second, I thought: *I did something wrong*. My panic must have shown on my face, for when I turned to Mr. Bacon—now dressed like a buccaneer—he cracked a smile, which brought on still more chortles, along with howls and cackling and full-barrel *Har-Har-Hars*. So many kinds of laughs in the world. You don't know, till you hear them all at once. And then, after *that* happy cacophony, the applause. The clapping like firecrackers going off in your heart.

Mr. Bacon must have seen how I felt, because he leaned in, whispering so only I could hear: "*Like mother's milk, ain't it, Butter Bean?*"

People were standing up and pointing at me and roaring. It was no different than any morning in the schoolyard, but with grown-ups and clapping, instead of bullies and beatings. So that was show business—the place where everything that gets

you myrtilized in real life could get you adored.

I came back to the theater every night for three weeks. Mr. Bacon gave me 50 cents after the Saturday matinee and I dropped the coins in Mama's lap as soon as I got home. That was enough for a neck rub and a few minutes of affectionate Bible chat. Mama said she was proud. She thought I was sweeping extra at the grocery store.

This was the life I wanted before I even knew it existed. Everything else in the day was just stuff to get through before coming to the theater, before getting tarred up and tickled by ladies in brassieres. The ladies didn't just tickle me, either. They kept me supplied with sandwiches and other goodies backstage. It got them giggly to see me gobble down a ham-bun or a buttered roll. I always tried to get a little something for Mama too, but I was afraid of getting caught, so I shoved the booty down my pants. One time, Irish Madge, my favorite actress, noticed the bulge and made a crack. "Why, ladies," she tittered, "Roscoe likes me so much I make his pants tight." For some reason this entertained them mightily. Then she reached right down the front of my shorts and pulled out the crumpet that was making the pup-tent. After that they made sure to slip me a little package of snacks to take home, so I didn't have to walk around with crumpet-pants.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER WITH MARVO

After my auspicious debut as the Fat Little Moor, I made it my business to be in as many theatrical productions as I could. Though they weren't all in the theater. My next big money job was working for a man named McIvor Tyndall, who went by the stage name of Marvo the Magnificent. Marvo always galloped into town on a speeding carriage with a scarf over his eyes. He said he could tell the horses when to stop with pow-