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Fatty O'Leary's Dinner Party

Written by Alexander McCall Smith

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ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

FATTY O'LEARY'S DINNER PARTY



Polygon

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This book is for Hugh Andrew, at last

STARTER:
A Tight Squeeze



I

Cornelius Patrick O'Leary had been known as Fatty O'Leary from the time he was twelve, which was in the early 1950s. People were less sensitive then to the feelings of people around them, and many of the nicknames they gave to others were thoughtlessly unkind. Yet in those more robust, not to say careless days, those to whom disparaging nicknames were given sometimes appeared to accept the situation. Or so it seemed on the surface: people suffered in silence then, enduring things that today people simply would not bear, while all the time they smarted under the casual cruelty of a derogatory nickname. Cornelius O'Leary, though, was not like this: he never objected to being called Fatty, and even signed himself as such.

He was a good man, and a kind one. If those who first called him Fatty – those childhood friends, the boys in the boy scouts, the slightly simple man who served sodas in the drug store who delighted in inventing a nickname for every customer – had done so with the intent to belittle or provoke him, then he forgave them; forgiveness came easily to Fatty – it was easier, he thought, to like people than to dislike them, however they behaved towards you.

Dislike required energy and a good memory for slights; geniality was so much less demanding, and at the end of the day felt better too.

He was indifferent to the embarrassed surprise that people sometimes showed when he used the name of himself. "It's simpler than signing Cornelius," he said with a disarming smile. "Two syllables rather than four. It saves time." And then he added, "And I could do to lose a bit round the middle, I suppose – but who couldn't?"

Fatty lived in Fayetteville, Arkansas, a pleasant college town on the edge of the Ozarks. He was the son of a comfortably-off local businessman who owned a small furniture factory, a warehouse, a motel, and a bar that was popular with students from the university. Those were the profitable parts of the family business, but not the interesting bit. That was an antique store that Fatty ran personally, leaving the other concerns in the hands of a manager. Fatty knew a great deal about antique furniture; he had a good eye for it and had even written the occasional article in a furniture magazine published in Boston. He was particularly proud of those articles, which were framed and hung in prominent places round the house.

Fatty's wife was called Betty; she was the former Miss Elizabeth Shaugnessy, of Mobile, Alabama. They had met

when they were both at the University of Notre Dame. Betty had fallen in love with Fatty the first time she saw him – and he with her. They were ideally suited, and while most married couples cannot say with complete honesty that they had never fought with one another over anything, Fatty and Betty could do just that.

Fatty's two closest old friends in Fayetteville were Tubby O'Rourke and Porky Flanagan. Tubby was an accountant with an interest in model railways; Porky was a dentist who ran a dental practice set up by his father and his uncle. He did not really enjoy dentistry and had complained to Fatty on more than one occasion that it was his uncle, in particular, who had leant on him to go to dental school.

"All he thinks about is teeth, Fatty. Mention a name and he says, *I know that guy's teeth*. He went to Washington once and came back and complained that there were no statues of dentists."

"He's got a point," said Fatty. "Dentists deserve a few statues. Maybe a few statues to dentists who fell in foreign wars."

Tubby looked thoughtful. "They probably weren't right up there on the front line," he said. "They were fixing teeth back in the field hospitals."

"Yes," said Fatty. "Maybe they were. But we still need dentists."

"We sure do," said Tubby. "Thank God for dentists."

"Okay," said Porky. "We need dentists, but not everyone has to be a dentist, right?"

The three friends used to meet every other week to play poker. Fatty had also taught them Mah Jong, and they occasionally played that, although Tubby did not enjoy it as much as poker, which he almost always won. This was, in fact, a potential source of tension, as Tubby won so often that Porky began to suspect him of cheating. Fortunately he never made a direct accusation to this effect, as Tubby would never have done anything dishonest.

Betty thought Tubby the most handsome man she had ever met. She said that if Tubby had gone to Hollywood, he would almost certainly have been snapped up by the movie people. She once told Tubby this, at a party, and he laughed and said, "You've had too much to drink, Betty. I'd never have got far in the movies: those guys in the movies carry a bit less weight than I do."

Joan O'Rourke, Tubby's wife, said, "Tubby can't act, anyway."

2

This is the story of the events that took place round Fatty's fortieth birthday in the summer of 1979 when Fatty paid his first visit to Ireland. This trip was Betty's birthday present to her husband, who had long talked about an Irish holiday but who had never seemed to find the time to organise one. Like Betty, Fatty considered himself every bit as Irish as he was American. His credentials for this identity were impeccable: not only was there his name, which was quintessentially Irish, but he could also point to the exact identity of the Irish forebear who had decided that enough was enough. This was his grandfather, also called Cornelius Patrick O'Leary – or Corny P. O'Leary, as he became known – who had emigrated from an obscure corner of County Tipperary to establish the family home in Fayetteville four years before the outbreak of the First World War. Arkansas, with its abundant supplies of timber, was an ideal place for the furniture factory that Corny set up. He had gone to America to get away from everything that he regarded as being wrong with Ireland – persistent rain, congenitally arrogant Anglo-Irish gentry, and a legion of squabbling relatives. Freed of Ireland, he became enthusiastically more Irish than ever before, and set to the

establishing of a modest dynasty of O'Learys, centred upon the rambling double-storey house, Tipperary View, that he built in the centre of Fayetteville. It was not at all clear why he should have called the house this. It never had much of a view, and certainly not one of Tipperary, from which it was separated by three thousand miles of ocean and a considerable slice of the American continent; but, as Fatty once remarked to Betty, we see what we want to see in this life, and it was undoubtedly true that if his grandfather had dreamed of seeing anything, it would have been those soft and distant Irish hills.

As Fatty's birthday approached, a visit to Ireland had not been the first possibility Betty explored. She had looked into the feasibility of a week or two in Honolulu, but had decided that Fatty would probably dislike this. Neither of them particularly took to crowds and busy hotels, and she was sure that they would find both of these in Hawaii. Besides, she knew that a trip to Ireland would enable Fatty to seek out the ancestral farm from which the original Cornelius O'Leary had set forth on the fateful day in July, 1910. It was possible that there were still O'Learys there, and to locate some distant relatives would be a bonus. Fatty was proud of the O'Leary family, and would be delighted to make contact with any Irish cousins who might still

be lurking in Tipperary. Betty was more cautious: she wondered what sort of unenterprising people would choose to remain in Ireland when they could easily have left the country, even if only to take the ferry to Liverpool. Well, they would soon find out, and if the Irish relatives proved to be at all … at all embarrassing they could be left right there. If, on the other hand, they were promising, they might be persuaded to emigrate, as Betty assumed that all sensible Irish people had either already emigrated to America or were at least actively contemplating doing so. Indeed, it was quite surprising that anybody remained there at all, other than those few needed to act as curators.

Fatty was enthusiastic when he heard that Betty had booked the flights. They were to fly to Dallas and from there they would continue their journey to Shannon. There they could hire a car and drive the short distance to Tipperary.

"How do you picture Ireland, Fatty?" Betty asked dreamily. "Do you have a clear image of it?"

"I certainly do," replied Fatty. "A lush green landscape, dotted with tiny white-washed cottages. And a patchwork of fields."

"And rain?" prompted Betty.

"Oh yes," said Fatty. "Lots of rain."

"Marvellous!" said Betty. "Except perhaps for the rain."

"Gentle rain," went on Fatty, "barely noticeable, Irish rain – quite different from the rain we get out here. A little bit like whiskey, I think. Very weak, but still with the taste of the barley on it."

Betty laughed.

Fatty shook his head fondly. "Oh, Betty," he said, "you're a genius to have thought of all this!"

They had only three weeks to wait. Then, on the morning of their departure, they closed up the house and were driven to the airport by Porky Flanagan. There they caught their plane to Dallas and were eventually herded through to the waiting room for the departure of their flight to Shannon. When he saw the name Shannon on the departure board, Fatty grabbed Betty's arm in excitement.

"I feel we're really on our way now," he said. "Shannon! That's Ireland, Betty! That's Ireland!"

Betty planted a kiss on his cheek. "You've worked hard for this,' she said. "Forty years of hard work."

"Well hardly," said Fatty. "I didn't start working the day I was born. Nobody does. Twenty years perhaps. Seventeen if you don't count college."

"Well that's still a lot of work," said Betty.

Fatty smiled. Betty was quite right: he did deserve a bit of leisure. He had been successful. Indeed, if he wanted to stop working even at forty, he could do so and live very comfortably for the rest of his days. Perhaps a condominium in Florida and a fishing boat for him and … and something or other, a refrigerator perhaps, for Betty. But could he fish? He had never fished before, and he had never played golf. All he knew about, when one came to think about it, was antique tables and the like; if he wanted to busy himself in retirement, then he would have to try to broaden his interests. Betty would be able to amuse herself by putting things in the refrigerator and then taking them out. He wouldn't even have that.

Of course forty was far too early to be thinking about retirement. Some people started a second career at that stage, or even married again and began a family. Fatty could not imagine himself doing that. He and Betty had not had children, but that was just the way things worked out and they had been perfectly happy by themselves. He could not imagine himself ever marrying anybody other than Betty. We've grown forty together, he mused, wondering whether that could ever be made into a song: *We've grown forty together/ We've put on a bit of weight/ We've grown forty together/ But, darling, it's never too late.*

Never too late for what? Fatty was uncertain. The lines certainly had the makings of a popular song, and perhaps one day he would show it to Tubby O'Rourke, who composed songs in his spare time. Tubby had never met with any success with his compositions, but perhaps they could make a team, rather like Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Gilbert and Sullivan. Leary and Rourke sounded quite professional. The new musical by Leary and Rourke: *Forty Years On*. Or perhaps they could have a clever title such as *Forty Years O' O'Leary and O'Rourke.* Possibly, but one should not try to be too clever, he thought.

Fatty looked at his watch. The plane was due to leave at ten p.m. and it was now nine forty-five. If they did not start boarding the passengers soon, he imagined that there would be no possibility of taking off anywhere near the flight's allotted time. But did it mater? They were on holiday and they were going to Ireland, and Ireland was the sort of place, he suspected, that didn't mind when you arrived. You could be a year or two late and they would still welcome you. *Yes, we expected you last year, but the important thing is that you're here, to be sure …* As he was considering this, the public address system crackled into life.

The airline much regretted it, they were told, but the plane was overbooked. Fortunately it was only over-

booked by one passenger, and they were therefore asking for a volunteer to offer to stay behind until tomorrow evening's flight, in return for a cash reward. The passengers sat stony-faced. Nobody stirred.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said a disembodied voice. "We must again ask for one passenger to offer to stay behind. An aircraft has a finite number of seats and we cannot take off with somebody standing." The announcer laughed nervously. "So we need one passenger to step forward."

Fatty looked at his shoes. He was certainly not going to volunteer. They had arranged reservations at the other end and, besides, he was now forty. Younger people could give up their seats more easily than middle-aged people – everybody would recognise the justice of that.

There was a knot of discussion at the desk. One of the passengers had approached and was talking to an official.

"Look," said Fatty to Betty. "The volunteer. How good of him. Now we can get on our way."

But the volunteer had now half-turned round and was pointing in Fatty's direction. He said something to the official, who nodded and started to make his way over to Fatty.

"Excuse me, sir," the official said. "It has been suggested to us that you might care to volunteer."

"Good idea!" muttered somebody from a seat behind, to be greeted with a glare from Betty.

"Me?" said Fatty indignantly. "Why me?"

The airline official looked slightly embarrassed. "Well, sir, it appears that you are the … the largest of the passengers and that most weight would be saved if you were to stay behind. The aircraft really is very full and is up against the weight limit for our fuel load. Almost over it, in fact. If you stayed we would probably be all right. You wouldn't want to be responsible for the aircraft not making it off the runway, would you?"

Fatty's eyes opened wide with outrage. He glanced sideways at Betty, now glaring at the official with an anger matching that of her husband.

"How dare you suggest such a thing!" Fatty exploded. "How dare you pick on me like this!"

The official held up his hands. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I don't mean to give offence. I was merely being practical."

"So it's practical to insult your passengers, is it?" blurted out Betty. "Is that the way you treat all stout people, may I ask?"

The official backed away. "I'm terribly sorry," he said.

"Let's leave it. I had no idea you people would be so hypersensitive about being so …"

He glanced behind him. One of his colleagues was signalling from the desk.

"Ah," he said. "They've sorted it out. Somebody else has taken up the offer. Please excuse me."

Fatty settled back in his seat.

"I can't recall when I was last so insulted," he muttered to Betty. "I'm going to write to the airline about this."

"You have every right to do just that," agreed Betty, reaching across to touch Fatty on his still-offended arm. "Still, let's not allow it to spoil our holiday. Things will be different in Ireland."