FATMAN

 Stanley Steefel weighed 9 lbs., 12 oz. at birth, and he acquired a staggering amount of weight as he grew.

 He lived with his parents in the Brighton Heights neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA. His father, Rudy, was a butcher at the local supermarket, and his mother, Gertrude (“Gerty”), was a housewife. Stanley was an only child. His mother gave birth to a daughter, but baby Anna died shortly after birth. Afterwards, Gerty and Rudy sadly abandoned thoughts of having any more children. All of their focus consequently fell on Stanley.

 Being German, the family diet was heavy and traditional, with lots of meats and sausages from Rudy’s workplace, along with butter-ladened potato and noodle dishes, thick gravies, breads, and rich desserts. Both Rudy and Gerty were large eaters and were getting larger as they aged, now each near 275 pounds. Stanley was surrounded by mounds of food at every meal. So he ate and ate like his encouraging parents.

 At John Morrow Elementary School, Stanley weighed 120 pounds by age eight. As his weight grew, his physical activity dwindled. He grew increasingly depressed at being called Fatso, Blubber Butt, Blimp, and Jumbo by his classmates. He was always chosen last for P.E. class teams, along with the shy, the small, the skinny, and the other forlorn students. As a result of almost daily humiliation and rejection, Stanley habitually ate more to simply console himself. He had no real friends. He was trapped in a spiral of lonely bewilderment. His parents were at a loss too, unaware of his inner struggles. “You are just ‘big boned’, and will grow out of it,” they preached, while loading his dinner plate with an extra helping. But the family doctor was alarmed. “You are killing him with his fork, knife, and spoon,” Dr. Kevlik warned. Stanley’s parents tried to cut back on the calories somewhat for a time, but soon their old habits resumed as the whole family continued to get fatter.

 Rudy got transferred to a branch supermarket in the Beechview neighborhood, so the family moved and Stanley was enrolled at Brashear High School. By age fourteen, he weighed 223 pounds. As at his elementary school, Steefel was an outcast. New, cruel nicknames tormented him: Lard-Ass, Sumo, Two-Ton, even (incongruously) Tiny. Stanley tried to compensate by being a class clown and a class disruptor, desperately attempting to make people like him. He was especially good at making an explosive fake fart sound. Thus, when a teacher’s back was turned in class, Stanley would occasionally let loose his unique, trademark, noisy blast. When the teacher spun around in annoyance, everyone looked innocent – especially Stanley. He was never caught in the act. At the hallway lockers between classes, other classmates would sometimes say, “Good one, Sumo!” Yet he was never accepted by any of the many cliques. There were other overweight, clumsy, unattractive, and isolate students at Brashear, but even they kept to themselves out of fear of further disappointment, rejection, and emotional bruising.

 Stanley’s grades were average, and he really had no idea what he was going to do with his life after graduation. His sole fantasy at school was watching Trudy Elson, a quiet and shy but sweetly poised girl who was in two of Stanley’s classes – English and Social Studies. He looked at her with longing, which he assumed was what love felt like. He adored her brown eyes, her honey-colored hair, her clothing outfits, and the sound of her voice. He worshipped her from afar, gazing at her without her ever knowing. He was petrified of ever speaking with her, but he daydreamed constantly about holding her and kissing her and confessing his love. More than anything, he wanted to do something spectacular to get her to notice him.

 One day, in Social Studies class when discussing American History, Mr. Nelson talked about the Progressive Era and the 27th President, William Howard Taft, and how he was our largest president, weighing in at an enormous 340 pounds. “There were times when it was rumored that Taft was so fat that he got stuck in the White House bathtub,” Mr. Nelson chuckled as the class guffawed. “Taft did actually order a new larger bathtub installed later in his term, so maybe the stories were true.”

 One of the students yelled out, “Hey Stanley, did you ever get stuck in your bathtub?” Stanley turned beet-red at the taunt, but stayed silent as the errant student was ejected by the teacher from the class for the disruptive insult.

 On the bus home after school, Stanley always sat alone, mostly because his girth spread across two seats. Once at home, he rushed to the kitchen. Gerty loved to cook and bake, so there were always cookies and cakes and pies and strudels available to satisfy the Steefel family sweet tooth. Stanley would often help himself to several donuts, and eat ice cream out of the half-gallon carton with a large spoon until it begin to melt, while nestled in his room cruising the internet on his desk-top computer. Food was his companion, his comfort, his one true god who never abandoned him. He would similarly load up on Cheetos and Doritos and popcorn, all of which satiated him until he sat down to a typically massive dinner with his parents. Sugar, salt, and fat were like narcotics to Stanley – he had to have them each and every day.

 By age sixteen, he tipped the scales at 274 pounds. Unfortunately, his bulk was not muscular. It was soft and gooey. The folds of fat sweated and caused rashes. He began to waddle when he walked, his inner thighs chaffing as they rubbed. He had difficulty bending over to tie his shoes. His mass caused him to move slowly, and he huffed and puffed with even minor exertions. After a while, he stopped weighing himself on the bathroom scale. He had resigned himself to a losing battle.

 Back at school, Stanley continued to fantasize about Trudy. He visualized himself trim and fit and handsome, and pictured that they got married and moved far away from Pittsburgh, and raised a family in a nice suburb on a tree-lined street. He thought he could try and become a real estate agent, because he figured that college was unattainable.

 Mr. Nelson’s American History seminar was now studying World War Two and the ending of the war with Japan after the U.S. dropped its two atomic bombs.

 “The Hiroshima bomb was nicknamed ‘Little Boy,’ and the bomb dropped three days later on Nagasaki -- August 9, 1945 -- was called ‘Fat Man,” Mr. Nelson lectured soberly.

 Well, the class cracked up at the mention of “Fat Man,” and one of the boy students called out, “Hey Stanley, you helped end World War Two!”

 “That’s enough of that talk!” Mr. Nelson barked angrily. “Carson, I want you out in the hall until the end of this period!”

 Stanley felt like crawling into a hole and dying. But then suddenly he got furious instead and yelled, “I can’t stand this anymore! I am a person just like you! I have feelings! You have no right to keep insulting me. Any of you! I hate you! I hate this school! I know I’m fat and ugly! Why can’t you just leave me alone?” His now breathless face was crimson with both anger and embarrassment.

 His outburst caught the class and the teacher off-guard. Students either looked down in shame or stared with smirking, cruel satisfaction. Only one student had a look of sincere sympathy and understanding. It was Trudy Elson.

 Mr. Nelson called the office and sent Stanley to the vice-principal’s office to cool off and have his mother notified to pick him up for early dismissal.

 Gerty arrived within the hour and drove him home in helpless silence. Once in the house, Stanley grabbed a large bag of Chips Ahoy cookies from a cabinet and a 2-liter bottle of Mountain Dew from the refrigerator and fled to his room, slamming the door in frustration.

 Stanley thought he should simply end his life, as he packed his mouth with food, chewed, then guzzled the fizzy beverage until both the cookies and soda was gone. Better yet, he thought, maybe I should get a AK-47 semi-automatic rifle somehow and do a Columbine massacre at Brashear. That would show all of them! The town would remember me forever! No more fat insults to anyone anymore after that!

 Fortunately, Steefel calmed down and did neither drastic action. The months went by, and soon it was June and Graduation Day. Stanley – with nothing to lose – boldly approached Trudy after the class received their diplomas and said, “Good luck, Trudy. Maybe I’ll see you again someday.” Trudy, somewhat surprised, simply smiled shyly and wished Stanley good luck too.

 At age eighteen, Stanley Steefel, now 5’10” tall, weighed 313 pounds. Now what should I do? Stanley wondered. His father, Rudy, suggested he become a butcher’s apprentice. “It’s a steady job, and it pays well. Good benefits too. You don’t need a college degree. I could put in a word to the Union for you. People always need to eat meat,” he reminded Stanley. But his son was not convinced that such a career track was for him.

 Soon it was July, with its usual heat and humidity. Stanley liked to take the bus from Beechview and go downtown to Pittsburgh’s Union Station and sit on the indoor benches and watch the trains and people come and go. The impressive terracotta and brick structure was built in 1903 after a design by famed architect Daniel Burnham. It featured a detailed front rotunda and a massive glass dome. This was the entrance area where Stanley got off the bus. It was just before noon, and crowds of dropped-off people were hurrying inside to either purchase their Amtrak tickets or catch their train on the lower levels.

 That’s when it happened.

 Security at train stations in America is cursory at best. No metal detectors or X-ray screenings or TSA scrutiny like at an airport. True, you need to show a photo i.d. to purchase a ticket from an agent, but you can anonymously buy one on-line or from an Amtrak station kiosk. There are railroad police --both uniformed and plain-clothed -- but they are few and far between. And perhaps the area of greatest vulnerability is near the drop-off entrance points near major urban train stations.

 Stanley noticed at the entrance -- about ten feet away from him -- that a tall, thin Middle Eastern-looking man was oddly wearing a long tan trench coat on this hot summer’s day. Suddenly the bearded middle-aged man yelled, “America, you are the harlot of the world! You are all filthy infidels. You must be destroyed. Allahu Akbar!” He then opened his closed trench coat to reveal a wrap-around body vest of what appeared to be explosives connected with various wires. He was a suicide bomber determined to kill as many innocent bystanders as possible.

 Stanley reacted without thinking. He lunged a few steps forward and grabbed the crazed man from behind in a bear-hug, then hurled him to the pavement, pinning the stranger with his massive 313 pound bulk. They lay entwined, the Middle-Easterner crushed under a sweating, huffing Stanley.

 Bystander cell phones were quickly whipped out, and 911 was alerted, with station patrolmen and police squad cars arriving within moments. Mercifully, no explosives were detonated. A Pittsburgh bomb team arrived and directed Stanley to slowly get up, then they carefully removed the body vest from the terrorist, handcuffing him, and finally leading him away in an armored police van. The man stared one last look of hatred and disbelief at Stanley, and was quickly gone with the authorities.

 The bomb deactivation team proceeded to question eyewitnesses and asked Stanley for his account of the dramatic events. “You are a hero, young man, and you saved the lives of over 40 innocent people. There was enough C-4 strapped to that maniac to kill everyone in a radius of 150 feet of the station entranceway. Lucky for you, and for everyone, that the vest detonator misfired,” the team leader explained with relief.

 Local Pittsburgh media vans were next to arrive. Stanley was put before a battery of TV cameras, and one at a time, he told his identical version of the excitement. Stanley Steefel, newly honored city hero, was soon on the nightly news and being interviewed on morning radio via the phone from his Beechview home. His parents were bursting with pride at their brave son’s actions.

 In the days to come, Stanley’s fame skyrocketed, as the nation hungered for some good ‘hero news’ to offset the horrific and deadly and sadly escalating instances of radical Islamic terrorists murdering innocent civilians around the globe. The fact that Stanley was such an ordinary person who stepped up to the challenge fascinated the country, even if he was morbidly obese and frankly not very photogenic.

 Soon, Stanley was invited to appear and be interviewed on both the Today Show and Good Morning America. He was awarded first-class airline tickets, and was put up in a smart hotel in mid-town Manhattan. He had earlier shaved his wispy beard for the first time for the special occasion, gotten his sandy-colored hair cut, and he and his parents had gone to a Big and Tall men’s clothing store in downtown Pittsburgh and purchased Stanley his first suit -- a dark brown light wool pinstripe, worn with a solid burgundy tie loaned by his father.

 The culmination of his fame at this point was perhaps his invitation to the White House for a photo-op with the President. The mutually grinning picture of the two went viral on the internet, and was also featured in a larger photo-spread in People magazine. After all the hubbub cooled off by September, Stanley was surprised to hear from a lucrative, national weight-loss company called W8-OFF. Like Weight Watchers and other such companies, W8-OFF specialized in safe, gradual weight reduction protein shakes, coupled with diet modifications and regular exercise. They had a high, estimated 75% success rate, according to their advertisements. “Lose that fat forever!” was their slogan.

 “Stanley, the whole nation is still singing praises about your bravery and your patriotism,” the company president explained. The fact that you are obviously in need of losing a major amount of unhealthy weight makes you the perfect candidate to represent our fine product. Therefore, I am in a position to offer you, right now, the tidy sum of $250,000 if you become our exclusive spokesman over the next two years, at which time -- by using our product, exercising, and severely modifying your diet – we predict you will lose 40% of your current unwanted weight. You will, naturally, appear in our product’s media advertisements during those two years. Well, son, what do you say? Is it a deal?”

 When Stanley’s parents were told of the deal, they were dumbfounded. Needless to say, Stanley got on board and signed the W8-OFF contract. He was awarded his check immediately afterwards. He stared at the number, which seemed unreal -- $250,000 – a quarter of a million dollars! Through slick but legal juggling, the company also saved Stanley from a hefty income tax bill on his windfall.

 The first step, at the company’s suggestion, was to get Stanley out of his parent’s house and away from those overeating temptation opportunities. So Stanley was offered a company-subsidized condo in Harrisburg -- PA’s capitol city.

 The two years were very difficult – changing one’s habits and lifestyle, sticking to a proscribed diet by a professional company dietician, daily exercise with a company trainer, the seemingly endless protein shakes, the daily weigh-ins and careful monitoring and ‘result reporting’ back to various medical staff at W8-OFF headquarters. Some days were sheer agony -- of gnawing food cravings, exhaustion, and sore muscles. But the merciless regimen worked. The weight gradually went away and -- more importantly -- didn’t come back. Stanley could buy regular clothing sizes for the first time in his life. When he visited his parents, they were proud and amazed. Stanley also rather enjoyed making the various W8-OFF commercials. He was the center of attention, yet in a positive way! He next turned to taking classes in the evenings to obtain his Pennsylvania real estate license. His self-confidence was on the upswing. And after two years, he weighed an incredible 180 pounds – a loss of more than 130 pounds! He had solid muscle mass at last, and a 32" waist.

 Now, at age 20, Stanley Steefel was on a personal mission of further self-redemption. His energy level was the highest in his memory. His confidence and optimism was too. He had important goals to achieve, and he would succeed, no matter what. He had actually done what looked like the impossible...

 Over the next six years, while still living in Harrisburg, Stanley first passed his real estate license exam, and then went to work for Coldwell Banker Realtors. Because of his earlier fame, and his recognized face on the weight-loss TV commercials, Stanley discovered that he was both well-known and well-liked, and even in high demand. Hence, he was soon selling a lot of homes in upscale neighborhoods, which in turn led to hefty selling commissions for himself and handsome profits for Coldwell Banker. His supervisors said he was a living, breathing ‘gold mine’.

 Stanley then took the radical step of changing his name. He legally became Brad Stanton, which initially confounded his parents. He next started taking dance classes to appeal to young women at clubs and work on his social skills, for he was now regularly going out at night – well dressed, well-groomed, and driving a silver Lexus. He even went to a plastic surgeon to have his sagging skin reduced where his fat had once resided. While not exactly movie star handsome, Stanley-as-Brad was pleased with his actions and his accomplishments and especially with his appearance. Plus he had a rewarding financial future.

 But Brad was still missing something emotionally. He was still alone. Sure, he met and danced with many different attractive women at the bars and clubs he frequented, and many wanted to go home and sleep with him, but Brad always put them off by saying he wanted to “save it for the one true love I will marry someday.” So his atypical virginity stayed intact for the time being, bewildering many disappointed ladies.

 It was, of course, thoughts of Brashear High School and Trudy Elson that obsessed Brad. So relying on internet searches over a six-month period, Brad eventually tracked down Trudy. She was divorced and still living in Pittsburgh. Brad discovered that she worked downtown as a retail clerk in women’s clothing at Kaufmann’s Department Store. He also discovered her apartment address and phone number, but didn’t want to appear as some kind of ‘stalker’ and utilize that information, so he left Harrisburg for a week's vacation and instead went back to his old Pittsburgh environs.

 At lunch hour downtown, Brad stationed himself outside Kaufmann’s to try and get a glimpse of Trudy, who he had not seen in over eight years. Sure enough, he discovered that she ate at the same restaurant, Stouffer’s, for 45 minutes every work day. The first time he saw her, his heart swelled with familiar longing and emotions. She was even prettier now than he remembered. He decided to eat near her table for a few lunch times, then casually walk up and introduce himself – “Hi, Brad Stanton…haven’t we met before?” then ask her out for coffee after work, and hopefully dinner soon down the line. When they first talked, Trudy naturally never recognized him as her old, fat former classmate Stanley Steefel. Brad was thankful and relieved, as his romantic plans seemed to fall neatly into place.

 Brad had to return to Harrisburg after the week and resume his real estate work, but he returned to Pittsburgh on the weekends. Soon, he and Trudy were bonding as a couple as the months went by. She tearfully told him about her abusive former husband, and why she filed for divorce. They had no children during their three-year marriage. She later took a few community college business classes at night, but never graduated with any kind of degree.

 Before long, Brad felt the time was right to propose to Trudy. She was initially unsure if she could quit her job at Kaufmann’s and move to Harrisburg, but gradually Brad convinced her to marry him. If she wanted to work as well as raise a family, Brad gently suggested, she might explore getting her own real estate license and joining with him as a pair of house sellers at Coldwell Banker.

 The happy marriage took place in a simple civil ceremony at the State Capitol building, along side Trudy's parents and her older brother. (Brad sent pictures to his parents, assuring them that the new couple would visit when the time was right.) The Stantons honeymooned in the Bahamas. There, they talked about having children in about two years. When they made love for the first time, Brad was in heaven! It had been well worth the wait for the right person, he realized with gratitude, again and again. When questioned in bed about the several small, thin scar lines on his trim, muscular body -- where the sagging skin folds had been excised through plastic surgery – Brad lied and dismissed them as ‘something that was done when he was younger, something he hardly even remembered now.’ A month after they returned to Pennsylvania, they moved out of Brad's townhouse and bought a fine home (through Coldwell Banker, of course) in an attractive neighborhood suburb right outside of Harrisburg.

 The year when Trudy and Brad both turned twenty-eight, they realized that their ten-year high school reunion was upcoming. Earlier, Brad had concocted an entirely fake life history, adding that his high school was in Philadelphia and that he had no curiosity in going back. But Trudy wanted to see some of her old girlfriends back at Brashear, so the couple decided to go. In truth, Brad was very eager to attend the Brashear reunion, because he had an intriguing secret plan…

 When the couple arrived at the reunion the following Saturday night, they put on the requisite name tags – Trudy (Elson) Stanton and Brad Stanton – and mingled in the crowd of attendees. The old school looks the same, Brad thought ruefully. He shoved to back in his mind all the bad memories of being relentlessly teased. He was frankly amused how most of his formally trim and active classmates had gotten lazy and pudgy, and how many hairlines were now receding, and how many pot-bellies were hanging over pants belts. (Wow, Brad noted, there’s even old Mr. Nelson, not looking any better either.) Brad Stanton was proud of how he had transformed himself, both outwardly and inwardly, and how he knew people were remarking behind his back about 'the handsome and well-dressed and well-built man that Trudy had gotten!' It was an evening of deep delight and silent triumph…

 It was then that a boorish group of former class bullies walked up to say hi to Trudy at the refreshments table, where she was getting herself a glass of punch. Trudy introduced Brad all around. After the small talk quickly lagged, one of the bullies off-handedly remarked, “Hey, you know who’s not here tonight? Stanley Steefel! You know, old Lard-Ass. God, what a ton of blubber! I wonder whatever happened to him? He’s probably dead of a heart attack, dragging all that fat around, day after day. He ate like a pig in the cafeteria. What a whale!”

 Another spoke up. “No, I bet he's still around somewhere…Hey, remember when he tackled that Arab bomb guy at Union Station a long time ago? Then he did all those dumb weight loss commercials. I guess he lost a lot of weight then, but I bet he gained it all back. They all do. Yeah, I wonder whatever happened to him?”

 There was a long pause. Brad cleared his throat, which got everyone’s attention.

 “You’re looking at him, you stupid losers,” Brad announced. Then – as Stanley Steefel for one last time in his life – he cupped the heels of both hands over his mouth, took a deep breath, and made his trademark ‘explosive fake fart’ sound. It was so loud that the whole auditorium heard it and reeled around, stunned. “Remember?” he asked, with innocent upraised eyebrows.

 Trudy caught Brad's gaze at that instant, gasped, and dropped her punch cup...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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