

Forbes

Howard Firkin

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Forbes, who had been a buyer and sales assistant in the menswear department for over seventeen years, who had been employed in the same store for close to twenty-five years, who had been married since he was twenty-one, who had never had children, woke up needing a piss. He lay in bed a few minutes not wanting to leave and hoping he would fall asleep again. Eventually he convinced himself to get up, and throwing back the covers he lifted his legs out of bed and sat upright. He stood up unsteadily, straightened his twisted pyjamas, and walked as quietly as he could out to the bathroom, his bare feet sticking noisily to the wooden floor. His wife turned over in the bed.

In the bathroom the light stabbed his eyes so harshly that he stumbled as he made for the toilet. The tiles beneath his feet and the cold night added urgency to the pain in his bladder and he fumbled hastily over the toilet. Only then did he notice how grossly distended his belly was. It swelled out in front of him, white and grotesque in the hard light, as taut as a balloon skin, with the thin cord of his pyjamas cutting into the flesh. Worse still, he found that he could not relieve the pressure he felt. He couldn't do more than shoot out little ineffectual squirts which splashed so noisily he was afraid of waking his wife. He placed his other hand on the swelling and explored it gingerly with careful prods. Perhaps, he thought, it's the guts, not the bladder. He turned and let the pants fall around his ankles, and landed heavily on the seat. He leaned forward, his stomach pushing against his thighs, and strained his bowel muscles. It seemed that nothing would shift. Then a small fart and the first hard olives of shit came. Forbes still couldn't understand how his stomach had come to be so swollen.

Forbes' physique had always been ordinary; neither good nor bad enough to have ever caused thought or comment. At school he had played cricket for the seconds, a medium pacer, and once played footy in the firsts when most of the team went down with glandular fever, having all drunk out of the same bottle at training. He felt the soft layers of fat that covered his bloated stomach. How could that happen overnight? He wondered if he should call a doctor as he strained his bowels again. He had always enjoyed sport, not that he had ever doubted that his ability was anything but ordinary. It seemed strange to him now how completely he had

renounced it after he left school. Employment seemed to have denied it, though he couldn't say how. But school, which he thought had been meant to prepare him for his life after it, had simply filled in his time until a proper occupation could be found for him. Straining over the toilet, his absurd stomach still pressed to his legs, he wondered why it had taken him so long to wonder what had become of the History, the Geography, the baffling Chemistry, and the hated Latin, especially the hated Latin. Had there ever been a reason? *Amo, amas, amat...* something. The long, serious hours spent as a child that the man should have the capacity to read the papers on the journey to work and then to fill in the daylight hours adding up the cost of purchases and returning the correct change. Why, he thought, hadn't he noticed when he had just left school?

Forbes leant back against the cistern and rolled his weight from one buttock to the other and held his stomach in two hands, experimenting at lifting it up as if it were not a part of him. It began just above the end of the rib cage and surged out like a soccer ball swaddled in blankets of soft fat, nestled in the hairs of his lap. It was disgusting. It had the same look and feel as the flesh of dead fish found ragged and floating up against the shore. He remembered coming to the department store after three years as a junior despatch clerk for a hardware manufacturer, mainly shovels and rakes. He tried to recall the excitement. Because of his experience, he was initially placed in Hardware and one of his first duties had been to unpack a shipment of shovels he himself had despatched - and handing old Grey, Mister Grey then, the Packing Advice & Invoice written in his own handwriting. He tried out as a sales assistant in a couple of other departments before finally settling in Menswear. In Stationery he had worked beside the woman who was to become his wife after a party and a clumsy seduction he never bothered to remember now. They married soon after her tearful announcement that she was pregnant and set up home in a flat. She left the store to avoid embarrassment and he was transferred to Menswear. It hadn't turned out as badly as it might have, except that her condition had never developed beyond the tearful announcement. The one time he had asked her about it, some months after the marriage, she had dropped the frying pan onto the floor, spilling the dinner she had been cooking, and shut herself in their bedroom and cried. To his knowledge there had been no other pregnancies. With no children and no expensive habits they had fairly soon arranged finance for a small house and occupied themselves by paying for it.

Forbes leaned over to the left, folded four sheets of tissue into a square, and wiped carefully at his arse. The paper was almost unmarked, but he repeated the wiping twice, then reached down and held onto his pants with one hand, and stood up. He tried to convince himself that he should wash his hands, but was defeated by the thought of the cold water. He flicked off the light before he had opened the door and was blinded for a moment.

He crept back to the bedroom more noisily than he had left, and as he closed the door behind him the handle slipped from him and cracked uncomfortably in the still bedroom. He edged around to his side of the bed, sat down, and as he turned into the bed, something, he thought at first it was his wife's hand, caught him in the eye. It turned out to be the seamed corner of the quilt which he pushed back and tried to straighten. He lay in bed a few minutes, having forgotten his stomach again, and then unknowingly began to fall asleep. His last, improbable thought in that filmy darkness that divides wakened from sleeping was to wonder if it hadn't been his wife's hand after all.