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The Fat Man Skinny

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Fat Man Skinny

Lee Martin (bio)

Years ago my wife's aunt was in the hospital awaiting foot surgery, and the evening before the operation she phoned our home from her room. My wife answered the call and then motioned for me to pick up the

extension.

"The doc was just here," her aunt said.

"What did he have to say?" my wife asked.

"He told me I was a big old beast."

"A big old beast?" My wife gave me a quizzical look. "Are you sure he told you that?"

"Yep. That's what he said. 'Mrs. Garvin, you're a big old beast. You could stand to lose a few pounds.'"

Aunt had a habit of mangling words. Once, when straight-line winds swept through Evansville, Indiana, where we all lived at the time, twisting trees from the ground, shattering windows, pulling down power lines, she called and said, "Lord, I thought Arvin Getty had come."

Armageddon, I wrote on a note pad and showed it to my wife.

Like Sheridan's famous character, Mrs. Malaprop, Aunt had a knack for choosing imposter words—deceiving, devilish words masquerading as the true ones that they had murdered and whose clothes they had stolen. They were all wrong for the context, and the results were, of course, hilarious, a fact that usually escaped Aunt. For the most part, she thought she was saying exactly what she meant. Even on those rare occasions when her errors came to light, she laughed at herself. That was the way she was: bold and saucy and jolly. Despite the fact that she was now a widow, her husband having recently died after a long illness, she was a brassy, fun-loving woman who was, as the doctor chose to put it, "a bit obese."

One night, in a Sheraton Inn lounge, where she and my wife and I had gone to dance and drink Cokes spiked with the Jim Beam whiskey from **[End Page 67]** the pint bottle Aunt hid in her purse, she found out that the couple at the table next to ours was celebrating their wedding anniversary.

"I'll drink to that." She lifted her glass. "This is a memorable occasion." She looked at me. "That's a word, isn't it? Memorable?"

"It is now," I told her. "You just made it up."

She laughed her big, booming laugh, and she swatted my shoulder hard enough to jostle me.

"Play 'Rocky Top,'" she shouted at the band, and she started to sing her version of "Rocky Top": "Good old Rocky Top. Rocky Top, Tennessee."

Now I imagine what the other people in that lounge must have thought of her—loud, quick to laugh, drinking those whiskey and Cokes, doing a rendition of the song she used to perform at her country club's annual talent show, *Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women*. She could sure stomp and dance. Oh, lord. A big old gal, but man, she was having fun.

Now, over twenty years later, I'm having a cup of tea with a friend at a bookstore cafe where the sign behind the counter says, *Your muse awaits in dancing spirals of steam*. It's a sunny, early summer afternoon, and business at the bookstore is slow. Louis Armstrong's "A Kiss to Build a Dream On"—a sleepy, bluesy tune—plays faintly over the in-store sound system, and the sunlight comes through the plate-glass windows. It's a perfect afternoon for tea and Louis Armstrong and leisurely conversation.

My friend and I are talking in quiet voices. I'm telling her that my next project is an essay that has something to do with fat. A former student who's putting together an anthology asked me if I could write something on the subject, and I told him I'd try.

I should say here that my weight is average for a man my height. I'm six-foot-one-inch tall, and I weigh one hundred and seventy-five pounds. So my friend, a slim woman, gives me a slightly skeptical smile, as if she doesn't think there's a chance in...

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