

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Dad Is Fat*

JIM GAFFIGAN



❧ *Food* ❧

• A LOVE STORY •

ALSO BY JIM GAFFIGAN

Dad Is Fat

FOOD

A LOVE STORY



JIM GAFFIGAN



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DEDICATION & ACKNOWLEDGMENT



If you read *Dad Is Fat*, you know that I do everything with the help of my wife, Jeannie. She is my writing partner, eating buddy, and best friend. I would not be an author, father, successful comedian, or the man I am today without Jeannie. She was by my side while I struggled through writing this book, and she helped turn my incoherent blurbs into something readable and much funnier. This book would not be a book without Jeannie. Jeannie believed in me even before people were yelling “Hot Pocket” at the airport. She was the first person I convinced shellfish were bugs and bacon was candy. Making Jeannie laugh remains one of my greatest accomplishments.



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WHY FOOD?

As many of you know, I am a comedian who, with the immeasurable assistance of my wife, Jeannie, wrote a book called *Dad Is Fat*, which chronicled my life as the father of five young children in a two-bedroom apartment in New York City. The book enjoyed some success and changed how people raise their children! Well, okay, fine, the book enjoyed some success.



Here's me and my basketball team.

Anyway, I was approached about the possibility of writing another book. I thought long and hard. I knew if I did a second book, I wanted it to be as good or even better than *Dad Is Fat*. (I know, impossible, right?) I didn't want only to be known as the really good-looking guy who wrote one terrific book. So, like a good author, I spent some time reflecting while I rewatched all six seasons of *Lost* on Netflix. I thought about who I am and what I know. Then I had a breakthrough. In the comedy world, what was I known for? What was my comedy associated with? Obviously I'm known for and associated with ... you guessed it ... being good-looking. But what else did my comedy say about me? Boom. I was a good-looking comedian who talked about food. This, of course, led to a brilliant idea. What if I wrote a book that was edible? I pitched it to my publishers, who were so trapped in the old publishing model that they got caught up in how bookstores don't have refrigerators, how to deal with digital delivery, and a bunch of other book-nerd stuff. Whatever! It was at that point that I decided to do the next logical thing. I ate a ham sandwich. Then I decided to write a book about food.



CURRICULUM VITAE

What are my qualifications to write this book? None, really. So why should you read it? Here's why: I'm a little fat. Okay, to some I might not be considered *that* fat, but the point is, I'm not thin. If a thin guy were to write about a love of food and eating, I'd highly recommend that you do not read his book. I'm not talking about someone who is merely in good shape. I'm talking thin. Skinny. I wouldn't trust the skinnies with food advice. First of all, how do you know they really feel passionately about food? Well, obviously they are not passionate enough to overdo it. That's not very passionate. Anyway, I'm overweight.

I'll admit it. I consciously try not to take food advice from thin people. I know this may not be fair, but when Mario Batali talks, I always think, *Well, this is a guy who knows what he's talking about.* He actually has experience eating food. This is why some sportscasters *wonder* what's going on in a player's head during a tense moment in a game, but the sportscaster who was once a player *knows* what's going on in a player's head. When I talk about food, I like to think I'm like one of those sportscasters who used to play professionally. I'm like the Ray Lewis or Terry Bradshaw of eating. I'm like the Tony Siragusa of eating. Well, that's a little redundant.

When a thin person announces, "Here's a great taco place," I kind of shut down a little. How do they know it's so great? From *smelling* the tacos? If they only ate one taco, the taco could not have been that great. Or maybe it *was* great, but the thin person cared more about the calories than the taste: "I had to stop at one taco. I'm on a diet." A taco that won't force you to break your diet just can't be that great. Fat people know the consequences of eating, but if the food is good enough, they just don't care. Overweight people have chosen food over appearance. When a fat person talks about a great place to get a burger, I lean in. *They know.*

Speaking of thin people, another person it makes no sense to take advice from is the waiter. Why do fancy restaurants always hire thin, good-looking people to be the waiters? "I'll have the hamburger, and I want someone who is at least an 8 to bring it over to me. Can I see some headshots?" Why would we care what the waiter looks like? Even if we did, why would we take the waiter's advice? We don't know him. He is a stranger. "Well, he works there." Does that make him have similar taste in things you like? Does that make him honest? Not to sound paranoid, but the waitstaff does have a financial incentive for you to order something more expensive: "Well, I highly recommend the 16-ounce Kobe Beef with Lobster and the bottle of 1996 Dom Perignon."

What restaurants really need is a fat-guy food expert. Many fine-dining establishments have a sommelier—a wine expert—to assist in wine selection, but if a restaurant really cares about food, they should have a "Fattelier."

FATTELIER: Well, I'd get the chili cheese fries with the cheese on the side. You get more cheese that way.

ME: Thank you, Fattelier.

Although they can't be thin, the food adviser can't be *too* fat. If they are morbidly obese, then you can conclude that they will probably eat everything and anything and do not have discerning taste. This is not to say that they won't have valuable views. I'd still trust an overly fat person over a skinny one any day. The best adviser would have a very specific body type: pudgy or just a little overweight. This makes it clear they have a somewhat unhealthy relationship with food, but not a clinical problem. They are eating beyond feeling full. Sure, I am describing my own body type, but that's why I am qualified to write the book about food. What other credentials do you need, really? Stop being a snob. Read the book already.



AN EATIE, NOT A FOODIE

Now that I've convinced you to read this book, I should clarify something. I have strong opinions about food, but I am not a food expert or a "foodie." I couldn't name more than three celebrity chefs, and I've never posted on Yelp. I have five young children and work nightly as a stand-up comedian, so I rarely go out to dinner. What I have is a general and very personal knowledge of food. I know which food I enjoy, I know which food I hate. I know how food makes me feel. I realize that because of my food obsession, the fact that I am writing a book about food could mistakenly give some people the impression that I think of myself as a "foodie," but I don't. I think of myself as an "eatie." I don't have anything against foodies. I appreciate their love of food and I envy their knowledge and culinary escapades, but I'm generally satisfied with what I've been eating. Foodies seem to be on a never-ending search for new restaurants and interesting dishes. I don't have an insatiable desire to discover what *makes* something taste good or to find exotic combinations. I guess I'm not that bored. This is not to say that I don't appreciate today's chefs trying to expand the horizons of the culinary arts. I just don't need a Japanese taco or cranberry sauce on my steak. There is plenty of *regular* food I still want to enjoy. I wish it were more complicated than that, but it's not.



I am also way too lazy to be a foodie. Foodies will travel for miles in search of the perfect hamburger. “There is this place in Greenpoint that’s only an hour by train and a forty-minute walk from the subway that has the best burger in town!” It can’t be better than the burger I can get across the street. Mostly, I just want the *closest* best burger in town.

The reason I know about so many great places to eat all over the country is not because I traveled to those cities and towns to seek out those restaurants. It’s because I was in those cities and towns to perform stand-up comedy. All I have to do is ask a food-loving follower on Twitter where to eat in that particular city, and *bam!* Shortly thereafter I am cramming my face full of the best food in town. Yes, I’m lazy, but I’m resourceful.

I travel a lot and I like to eat. Besides asking my followers on Twitter or approaching strangers in cities I visit about where I should eat, I do no research. Most cities have at least one food place that locals recommend with pride. “Well, while you are here you have to eat at this place.” Unfortunately, this is not the case everywhere. Once I was in Rapid City, South Dakota, and asked a cab driver for a local restaurant that was unique to Rapid City. He replied in a very matter-of-fact manner, “There’s nothing. You should go to Outback Steakhouse.” Nothing? I didn’t believe him. So I pressed on. “Well, where did you go before chain places like Outback Steakhouse were here?” “Nowhere,” he replied. Is it possible the fine people of Rapid City did not eat outside their homes prior to the arrival of chain restaurants? Of course not. Well, hopefully not. I don’t know. I didn’t do the research. I asked another two people in Rapid City, and nobody had suggestions. Therefore, in this book there is no reference to some local Rapid City food specialty. This isn’t meant as a slam on Rapid City. This is a commentary on my research method or lack of a research method. If your favorite local food place isn’t referenced in this fine book, it’s because I didn’t go to your town or the local stranger I asked didn’t suggest it or someone didn’t mention it on Twitter. It is also possible that I’m too dumb and lazy to remember the place. After all, I’m an eatie, not a foodie.



WHY DAD IS FAT

I can't stop eating. I can't. I haven't been hungry in twelve years. Once a writer at *Entertainment Weekly* described me as a human garbage can, which I think he meant as a compliment. Last night I had the following train of thought: *Ugh, I'm so full. I guess I'll have some cheese. Hmm, I don't even like this cheese. I guess I'll finish it.* I know it's not right. On more than one occasion while eating something, I've thought to myself, *Maybe this will make me hungry.* It's either that or feel my feelings. Jeannie likes to point out, "You know you are only eating your feelings." I always respond, "Yeah, but these feelings are delicious." Especially the ones at night. I wish I had more feelings." Have you ever eaten so much that you feel sick? Well, I love that feeling.

I treat my body like a temple. A temple of doom, but a temple nonetheless. I often find myself thinking about what I will eat at my next meal while I'm in the middle of eating a meal. I always eat like I'm on vacation or about to begin a period of fasting. I've eaten things and not noticed that they tasted horrible until I was taking the last bite. Afterward, that horrible taste only leads me to want to eat something else to cleanse my palate. I'm a stand-up comedian, and I've contemplated ways that I can incorporate eating while onstage into my stand-up routine. If other comics bring a beer up with them, why can't I bring up a cheeseburger? Comedians with a drink onstage usually wait for an applause break and then take a sip. I could do that. "I support the troops!" Crowd applauds. I take a bite of my Baconator.



Always conducting research.

When I don't want to eat something, I assume I'm sick and most likely dying. I try to stick to three meals a day and then an additional three at night. The only time I stop eating is when I'm sleeping. I'm not really comfortable watching television while not eating—it's just too weird. I don't know what to do with my hands. As a result of all this behavior, I'm always full. When the instructions on medication say "Never take on an empty stomach," I think, *Not a concern of mine*. I'm sure your mother told you to not go swimming until an hour after eating. This is a virtual impossibility for me. Technically, I should never go swimming. Thank God this hour rule is not actually against the law, because if you ever saw me in a pool you would think, *Arrest that man and ask him not to wear a Speedo*. And, in this hypothetical scenario, if I went to prison because I ate too soon before swimming and I wanted to protest the injustice of my sentence, a hunger strike would not be an option. I'd cave after fifteen minutes. Yes, not having food for a short time compromises my principles. If I went to a shaman for help with this problem, he would never tell me what my spirit animal was for fear I would eat it. My wife thinks I'm eating myself to death, and I am, it's taking longer than I thought.



I like to have my name baked into my food.



NOT SLIM JIM

As a result of my constant eating, I'm not thin. Sure, my beard probably hides none of it, but at least I know why I'm not thin. When most people gain weight, they rarely admit that it is due to the food they constantly shove into their mouths. We blame external forces. "Well, work has been stressful." "That was a brutal winter." "I have young kids, which makes you more hungry, right?"

I'm not in denial. I realize I could lose half an ounce or two of weight. I take full responsibility for the reality I've created, even if at times I feel like I'll never lose this baby weight. That's the price of being a father.

The truth is that it was I alone who caused my weight gain. Luckily for me, most of my girth is intentional. I don't mean to brag or anything, but I'm preparing for a very big role. Sure, it's a cinnamon roll, but I don't want to look like I can't finish it. Or spell it. Some people lie about their age. I lie about my weight. Sometimes I catch myself telling total strangers that my belly is not real. That I actually had to get stomach implants to ward off female suitors. This strategy generally fails, because I've caught women staring at my gut. I usually point to my eyes and say in a very condescending tone, "Hello, I'm up here." After all, I'm not some piece of flab for anyone to ogle.

Once, after a show, a woman told me, "You're not *that* fat." Like it was a compliment. I held myself back from answering her, "You're not *that* polite." I'm not sure how overweight I am, because you are supposed to find out this information by calculating your BMI. Once I found out that did not stand for "Big Men Included," I stopped trying.

There was a time when I was thin. Sure, I was six years old, but I'm confident I can get back into those clothes. Actually, around the age of seven it became very obvious that I had the body type of someone who would have to work out twice a day just to look out of shape. I struggled through my twenties and thirties and then one day I looked in the mirror, saw my belly, and said, "I give up. It's all over." It wasn't defeat as much as it was acceptance. I figured, *I got a hot wife. If she leaves me for getting fat, that means she's shallow.* "Honey, do you think looks are important? No? Good. Now pass the gravy."



A lifelong passion.

Around the time I tricked Jeannie into marrying me, I lost a primary motivator for staying thin. Additionally, my career as a comedian was never affected by my waist size. Even my occasional acting roles were as a character actor. “Character actor” is, of course, entertainment industry code for “not attractive.” It became clear that being thin was never going to put me in competition with Brad Pitt. By my thirtieth birthday, I’d auditioned to be Matthew McConaughey’s unattractive friend in three movies. I didn’t get any of those parts because I wasn’t “cute-unattractive” enough. The other reasons to be thin just seemed downright esoteric: “You’ll feel better and have more energy.” Next. “You’ll live longer.” Next. Then the reasons just get silly. There’s an old *Weight Watchers* saying: “Nothing tastes as good as thin feels.” I find one can think of a thousand things that taste better than thin feels. Many of them are two-word phrases that end with *cheese* (Cheddar cheese, blue cheese, grilled cheese). Even unsalted French fries taste better than thin feels. Ever eat fries without salt on them? I always think, *These could use some salt, but that would mean I’d have to get up and move. I guess I’ll just imagine there’s salt on them.* Eating fries without salt feels like sacrifice. “What am I, a pioneer?” When I have to eat unsalted fries, I often feel like I should be a contestant on *Survivor* or something. I look forward to telling *Survivor* executive producer Mark Burnett, “Once I had fries without salt on them, so I could probably live anywhere.”

I realize weight is a serious issue in America, but I also believe some people *should* be fat. We all have that friend who has lost tons of weight, and whenever you see them you secretly think, *You looked better fat. Go back to being fat. You’re thin, but you look exhausted. Even looking at you makes me want to sit down.* Obvious. Losing any amount of weight is an accomplishment. Obesity is a big problem in our society. This is a well-known fact. Another fact is that there seems to be a general insensitivity to our obese fellow citizens.

seems once a week there is a news segment on American obesity. They always show some big person walking. They don't show their face, but that person has to know that's them. They are probably just sitting at home watching TV. "Well, that shirt looks familiar—oh crap! Looks like I can't wear that again. That poor guy probably gets to work and is greeted by a coworker, "Hey Fred, I saw your fat ass on the 6 o'clock news."

Now it seems like obesity is an industry. At this point the countless number of documentaries on obesity just makes me hungry. I feel like the insensitivity toward obesity reached its peak with the television show *The Biggest Loser*. The show seems to be an elaborate insult masked by stories of inspiration. The following is what I think occurred in the meeting when the show was pitched.

PRODUCER: Hey, I got an idea for a show. We get really, really fat people to lose weight, and everyone watches them struggle and fail.

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: That's good! Ha, ha, ha. I'm laughing already.

PRODUCER: So wait, wait. So we make these really, really fat people run around. Jump up and down. More or less torturing them.

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: Funny. So we get to abuse them. Love it.

PRODUCER: Just thin people get to yell at the fat people.

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: Of course.

PRODUCER: So there will be these thin, attractive judges, and we will have the fat people weigh in on national television.

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: Do they have their shirts off? That would be extra humiliating.

PRODUCER: Fine, no shirt. Now, here is the kicker. Whichever fatty loses the most weight wins the title—wait for it—*The Biggest Loser*. Get it?

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: Because they are all losers, because they are fat, right?

PRODUCER: Of course. But the winner is the *biggest* loser because he or she has humiliated themselves the most on national television and, I suppose, maybe lost some weight.

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: We could probably pay them in Twinkies and Ho Hos, right?

PRODUCER: Sure, some kind of food, of course. While we are torturing them, we make them wear these huge insulting T-shirts that say ...

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: The Biggest Loser!

PRODUCER: Their big fat bodies will serve as slow-moving billboards for the show.

NETWORK EXECUTIVE: Ha, ha. I love it. I have to go. I have a Pilates class now.



PROUD AMERICAN

If obesity is an epidemic in America, then what caused it? I can only speak from my own experience, but I will just go out on a limb here and guess it was caused by American eating. I'm very American. I don't mean that in a boastful way. I'm just saying my habits and passions surrounding food are those of a typical American. Not to generalize, but generally most Americans have an unhealthy relationship with food. Unless, of course, they are damn Commies! Maybe it's the exposure to a lifetime of McDonald's commercials. Maybe our country couldn't handle the post-World War II financial boom. Maybe we are just better than all the other countries at eating. In any case, consuming food of any kind feels a little more important in the United States. We seem to always be eating. If aliens studied Earth, they would come to the conclusion that the United States is somehow consuming food on behalf of other countries. In America we have gone way beyond sustenance. Eating is an activity. "Why don't we get lunch, and then we'll grab some pizza." Most Americans eat constantly. And when we're not eating, we're chewing gum. We are literally practicing eating. We chew gum with a swagger and purpose that says, "Yeah, I got a big meal coming up. I'm training for Thanksgiving."

There are many elements that make up the American attitude toward food, but some are consistent. There always seems to be an unending dissatisfaction with, and constant need to improve upon, the status quo of food. Americans are never satisfied when it comes to a food item. The hamburger could never remain just the hamburger. "You know what would be good on this hamburger? A ham sandwich. Instead of a bun, let's use two doughnuts. That way we can have it for breakfast. Look out, McGriddle, here comes the Doughnut Ham Hamburger." I came up with this silly concept for my 2006 comedy special *Beyond the Pale*, and then in 2012 Dunkin' Donuts made me a sort of food prophet by introducing the very food item that I had hyperbolically predicted. I wasn't surprised, really. Dunkin' Donuts is only responding to the ongoing public desire for innovation and variety in our food. It's the new American Manifest Destiny. We are the ones who for some reason needed a potato chip that tastes like steak and Jim Beam Jalapeño flavored sunflower seeds. The variety of flavors is only matched by the speed at which we need them.



This makes perfect sense.

Of course, when the word *fast* is associated with American eating, it is the opposite of the word *fast* as it relates to abstinence from food. When people in other parts of the world hear the term “food fast,” they envision a time of spiritual and physical cleansing. I hear “food fast” and I envision a drive-thru. I like things fast. I don’t like lines. Whenever I find myself in line for an ATM behind two people, I always think, *What is this, Russia?*

Americans want our food fast. That’s why those fast-food value meals are so successful. It’s less the value and more the speed. You just have to say a number. “Two!” and your food is on its way. Soon you won’t even have to speak a word. It will just be a noise—“Eeeyah!”—and your meal will be placed in front of you. Fast and easy is the American way. We start indoctrinating our children into this mindset at a very early age. My children eat this yogurt that comes in an astronaut tube that they just squeeze and the entire serving of yogurt is expelled into their mouths. We don’t want them to waste their time lifting up a cumbersome spoon. They are even starting to package baby food in a squeeze bag. I hear soon they are coming out with a variety of kid foods where these squeeze bags come with an elastic strap so they can just put them around their heads and walk around all day wearing a squeeze feed bag. Why should they even have to lift their hands to their mouths? What a waste of energy. Let’s keep it fast and easy.

I am a fast eater. I normally am the first one to finish eating my entire plate of food at a restaurant, and then I have to just sit there and stare at everyone who has barely unfolded his or her napkin. I never know what to say. “Do you think they’re gonna bring back that basket of bread?”

My wife likes to pause before the meals with our kids and say grace. While I think this is a great opportunity for our children to learn to appreciate the gifts that God has given them, I view grace as kind of the “On your mark, get set ...” and the “Amen” as the “Go!” I am pretty sure that’s the way God

intended it.

~~The faster we eat, the fatter we get. Statistics show that the amount of money spent on weight loss programs in the United States alone is much larger than the amount of money it would take to solve the world's hunger problem. The answer to this dilemma seems perfectly simple: Americans should just start eating people from starving countries.~~

When you watch late-night television, it becomes abundantly clear that as a culture we are struggling with our weight and have little desire to make any real effort to remedy the situation. The exercise equipment and weight loss techniques sold late at night emphasize painless alternatives to actually eating less. Machines and routines that only take moments out of our busy lives between meals are constantly touted. I have even seen a late-night commercial for a pulsating belt that works your abs while you watch television. All these weight loss techniques point to the fact that we can't stop eating. There are diet programs where all your meals are mailed to your home. How absurd. We can't even be trusted to go out and buy the food we know we should eat. "You'll just screw it up! I'll do it!" We are totally out of control. We're a country that loves to eat so much that instead of learning how to eat less, or honestly exercising, we find ways around it, like wiring our mouths shut and undergoing surgeries in which our stomachs are stapled smaller. "I don't want to do something barbaric like exercising, so I'm just going to have someone vacuum the fat out of my body."

Instead of eating less or spending money on get-thin-quick schemes, I have just accepted the fact that like most Americans, also have a totally unhealthy relationship with food and, therefore, as a result, I'm overweight. As I mentioned earlier, the meal isn't over for me until I feel sick. Instead of food giving me energy, I am always tired after I eat, which explains why I am always tired. I go to the gym just so I can stop eating for an hour, which, I believe, is the American form of fasting.



THE BUFFET RULE

If anything defines American eating, it is the quantity of food we consume. This would explain why the “All-You-Can-Eat Buffet” is such an American phenomenon, and it makes perfect sense that it started in Las Vegas. Some of the most amazing restaurants in the world are in Las Vegas, but the real local special is the All-You-Can-Eat Buffet. Buffets are as common in Vegas as glitter and regrettable behavior. The Vegas casino buffets are expansive and ridiculous. In other words, completely American. You can get sushi, mac and cheese, and doughnuts all in the same meal. God bless America. One of the main reasons that the all-you-can-eat buffet is a perfect fit for casinos is because the all-you-can-eat buffet is the food equivalent of gambling. And like all other forms of institutional gambling, it’s rigged for the house.

The all-you-can-eat buffets always feel like a challenge. “All-YOU-can-eat.” The unspoken rule of the all-you-can-eat buffet is that you must eat the food value of more than the cost of the buffet. My wife, Jeannette, finds this approach ridiculous, but then again she married me, so she doesn’t have the best judgment anyway. If the buffet is twenty bucks, you must eat at least twenty dollars’ worth of food. If you eat twenty-one dollars’ worth of food, you make money, right? It’s a rule everyone knows. Eating your money’s worth at the buffet is a rule that should be known as the “Buffet Rule,” but apparently this term was already used for some tax theory proposed in 2011 that has absolutely nothing to do with buffets. I mean, where are our government’s priorities, really? I’m not saying my interpretation of the Buffet Rule is a wise one. I’ve never learned my lesson. I always approach a buffet with the same bluster. “All I can eat for twenty dollars! Ha, ha. This place is going to lose so much money.” Unfortunately, after half an hour I am always uncomfortably full and mumbling, “Let’s get out of here. This place is trying to hurt people. Why did I do this to myself?” It’s the overeating equivalent of losing your shirt at the craps table. It’s dangerous.

The all-you-can-eat title is especially hazardous for someone like me who likes to follow directions. When I approach a buffet, aside from seeing it as a challenge, there is a compliant part of me that hears “all you can eat” and says, “Okay, I will try my best. I don’t want to let you down, buffet.” The assumption is that I can control myself, that I understand self-restraint and portion control, and that I am some kind of nutritional scientist or an adult. There is something very American about the term “all-you-can-eat.” “Do you love your country? Prove it. Let’s see all YOU can eat.” Sometimes I hear other words in the phrase emphasized. It’s all you CAN eat, not all you WANT to eat. There’s part of me that is relieved that the CAN part is never enforced. I could see trying to leave a buffet, only to encounter some big bouncer. “Hey, hey, where do you think you’re going? Get back up there!” “But I don’t want any more food!” “Look, chubby, no one said this was an ‘all-you-want-to-eat’ buffet. It’s ‘all-you-CAN eat.’ Read the sign. I’ve seen your stand-up. You can eat more.” Really what most of us need is an all-you-*should*-eat buffet. “Wait a minute there, fella. Here’s your brunch. One apple and fifty sit-ups.”



CUP OF GRAVY

I suppose I've become desensitized to the level of unhealthy eating in America. An 80-ounce soda, all-you-can-eat buffets, and a Wendy's Triple only seem like logical options to me. I love the rare moments when I'm truly surprised by American eating.

A while ago I was back in Indiana in my hometown walking around the Kmart, or, as we called it, "the mall." You can typically find just about anything you need in one of these "big box" stores like Walmart and Kmart. What I especially love about Kmart is the ambience. I always feel like I've entered a store that was just attacked by a flash mob. Everything always looks and feels a little disheveled. There will be some random empty shelf. There's always a huge corner display tower of sale products that looks like it will collapse on you if you breathe on it. There will be a broken jar in one aisle and an abandoned sock in the next. The selection and layout suggest that this might not be the ideal place to buy a suit or use a public restroom. Anyway, on this fine day I was looking for diapers when I saw a seventy-year-old man walking around the Kmart drinking something I realized later was a cup of KFC gravy.

Now, in full disclosure, I love gravy. Who doesn't, really? It's *gravy*, after all ... but I've never considered gravy a beverage. Even in my most private moments with gravy I've never contemplated taking a swig. This is coming from someone who drank a product called Yoo-hoo on many occasions as a teenager. The thing I found most impressive was that not only was this stranger drinking gravy, he also wasn't even trying to hide it. When I first spotted the stranger, I saw the KFC Styrofoam cup, saw him take a drink, and assumed ... well, obviously this guy is *not* drinking gravy. Then I encountered him again standing in front of me in the checkout line. It was at that moment I saw the thick brown liquid in the cup and confirmed that it was, in fact, a cup of KFC gravy he was drinking. And then, almost as if to prove a point, he turned around and took a sip right in front of me. Our eyes met, and he gave me a warm Midwestern smile as if to say, "Hey, how's it going?" I nodded and said hello and was only a bit more than slightly tempted to exclaim, "You realize you're drinking gravy, right?"

I don't know what the events were that led up to this stranger drinking the cup of gravy in that Kmart. I like to think he walked into KFC with the intention of drinking gravy. Maybe his order was simple.

"Yeah I'll have the large mashed potatoes and gravy. And hold the mashed potatoes." Maybe in order to avoid judgment or scorn, he ordered the mashed potatoes, got the gravy on the side, and just threw the mashed potatoes away. Or maybe he really could have cared less what anyone thought, which is more likely, since he seemed like a proud gravy drinker greeting the cashier while she scanned his head for medication.

I'm no health nut, but I can only imagine what this guy's next medical checkup was like. I picture a doctor in a white coat glancing down at a chart as he walks into an examination room with our gravy drinker sitting on the examination table. The doctor would then tilt his head to the right, perplexed by the results on the chart:

DOCTOR: Mr. Jones, I've got your cholesterol levels here. (*beat*) Okay, you are aware your blood is not moving?

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