

The Fatta the Lan'

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The Salinas River rises in the coastal mountains half way between Los Angeles and San Francisco, and flows to Monterrey Bay, now a national marine sanctuary. The river valley is also the location for John Steinbeck's 1930s tragedy about people and the land, *Of Mice and Men*. It begins in an apparently empty land, where, *"on sand banks, the rabbits sit as quietly as little grey, sculptured stones. And then from the direction of the state highway come the sound of footsteps on crisp sycamore leaves. The rabbits hurried noiselessly for cover. A stilted heron laboured up into the air and pounded down the river. For a moment, the place was lifeless, and then two men emerged from the path and come into the opening by the green pool."* They are George and Lennie, wearing black shapeless hats, one small and sharp, the other large and lumbering, and they make some sort of living as itinerant farm hands, harvesting barley, driving cultivators, filling grain sacks, and living off the land as best they can.

But they have a secret dream, which always seems unlikely to be fulfilled. It is an idea about a quiet rural idyll centred on a small farm that threatens no one, but which seems to be the very essence of freedom itself. Sitting by the fire of brushwood by the dark pools of the river, the sun long gone, Lennie begs George to *"tell about how it's gonna be"*, and George says, *"OK, someday, we're gonna get the jack together and we're gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an' a cow and some pigs and__"*... *"An' live off the fatta the lan'"*, Lennie shouts. Later, they expand on their dream at a ranch where they have temporary work, and all the listening farm hands want to join them. George again says, *"we could have a few pigs. I could build a small smoke house like the one gran'pa had, an' when we kill a pig we can smoke the bacon and the hams, and make sausage an' all like that. An' when the salmon run up river we could catch a hundred of 'em an' salt 'em down or smoke 'em... When the fruits come in we could can it – and tomatoes... We'd jus' live there. We'd belong there"*. Lennie again whispers softly, *"we could live offa the fatta the lan'"*. In the flickering light in a corner of a large barn, they all wistfully agree, and one says, *"Everybody wants a little piece of land, jus' something that was his"*.

Later, though, Crooks the horse hand is scornful. *"I see hundreds of men come by on the road an' on the ranches... an' that same damn thing in their heads. Hunderds of them... an' every damn one of 'ems got a little piece of land in his head."* He concludes, *"An' never a God damn one of 'em ever gets it. Just like heaven."* Crooks is right, and it does all end in tragedy, which is what happens for the likes of these poor farm hands with no more than dreams. He says, *"ever'body wants a little piece of lan'... nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land"*. And so it proves to be true in this story. The fat of the land, with its peace and bounty, is no more than distant hope and a dream of freedom for these boys. It is a dream common to many, and we have long used the phrase, the fat of the land, to indicate what was good about the food acquired, raised or grown on our places in the land. And yet today, so much has changed. We have lived off the fat of the land, but the land has now become thin, and we have become fat. Extraordinarily, in the short period of success of modern agriculture, those of us in industrialised countries now consume such an abundance of calories that dietary ill-health, combined with sedentary lifestyles, has become a leading cause of morbidity and mortality. How could we have taken so many steps backwards, and at the same time ruined George and Lennie's dream?

In the past two generations, the diets of most people in industrialised countries, and of an increasing number of those in developing countries, have changed enormously. We have undergone what Barry Popkin calls a nutrition transition – choosing diets high in refined cereals, sugars and saturated fats, and generally low in fruit, vegetables and fish. Large numbers of people now consume more food calories than they burn, along with too many simple sugars, saturated fats and an excess of salt. Ironically, just as food shortages had been largely conquered in industrialised countries, so has come a

recognition that ill-health arising from food is now a major public health cost. We seem to know that diet and physical activity are critical determinants of physical and mental well-being, and can substantially increase life expectancy, yet seem strangely unable to do anything about changing an inevitable slide into deep trouble.

Let us pause for a visit to a fast food outlet, and see what is being eaten. You do not need to go far to find one. In every town in industrialised countries, and increasingly in developing countries too, there are many choices in every high street or shopping mall. What will you get for your money? A large cheeseburger contains 1000 kcal of energy (and 75g of fat), and large chips/fries add another 590 kcal (and 28 g of fat). A soda adds 400 kcal, and a deluxe desert another 435 kcal (and 18 g of fat). This is one single meal, a max choice, but not the largest supersize, and it gives 2400 kcal and 120 g of fat in one dose. And how do you feel two hours later – in need of another meal, or able to survive on an apple or two for the rest of the day? In one meal, you have all the calories you need for a whole day – for an adult male, daily requirements are only 2500-3000 kcal. Yet the average American diet now provides 3800 kcal per day, up by 500 kcal since 1970 (a typical thanksgiving meal can give some 7000 kcal). This is well over the energy requirement for inactive women and men, and now is the cause of many health problems.

Did Lennie and George's lifestyle, one cut short though it was, have anything going for it? They were physically active, ate moderately but apparently sufficiently, but could only dream of luxuries, which for them were pork, salmon and tomatoes. Today, we have access to all the luxuries, but can only dream of a lifestyle that would keep us well. We know that exposure to nature is good for us. Perhaps we should emulate our hunter-gatherer forebears by undertaking physical activity in the presence of nature? Such green exercise brings mental and physical health benefits, as well as improve our knowledge of green places and its associated biodiversity. This suggests that the countryside, the grandest national parks and most local of reserves, together with urban parks and city gardens, should all be seen as part of a national health service. They are places where we can burn off excess calories, and perhaps contemplate a little on food and where it comes from. Those food choices, shaped by advertising as well as appetites, affect our health and the health of environments where the food is grown. We just may have an opportunity to keep the fat on the land, and off ourselves.

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His new book, *The Earth Only Endures*, was published by Earthscan in 2007