

Like Riding a Moped

By Jordan Harper

... and now, the last bad thing about being so fat: My fingers can't find the bullet holes. They're there, because they brought me down and now there is sticky blood mixing with the sweat all over, but my clumsy hands can't find what kind of holes just got poked into my body. Are they just little puckers in the flesh? Or is it worse than that? Are scoops of me missing?

Somebody will write about this on the Internet. I bet they call the article "Fatty and Clyde," or something like that. Everyone will read it and chuckle. And everyone will look at me and see something else, which is what always happens. That's how Benny got to me when I should have known better. He looked right at me.

Men sit next to me on the Metrolink and talk about women like I'm not even there. I'm just the thing taking up two seats when the train gets crowded. Everyone shifts their body away from me. Nobody looks and nobody points and laughs unless there's a kid. Then the mom can try and shush the little kid and maybe smile an apology and then look away, tell the kid it's not polite to stare. Honest, it's okay when the kid stares. At least it stops me from feeling invisible.

The others, the adults, they look and they just see other things. They picture me sitting at home, a pizza box open in front of me and me eating with the lazy mania of a zombie in a horror movie. They see my chomping jaws and glazed eyes, dipping crusts in ranch dressing, how only one slice lives to make it to the safe haven of the freezer - me eating so much that for the next hour every burp will send a chunk of half-chewed dough back into my mouth, so I have to swallow it again.

Maybe they wonder about my shower, about how I have to lift the three folds of my belly and point the hand-held nozzle to try to clean out the gunk that forms there. They wonder how I wash my back, if I own something like the rag on a stick in that *Simpsons* joke.

They imagine the underwear hidden beneath my clothes, both wispy and huge, a negligee knapsack. Maybe they think of the way the panties must smell when I peel them off at the end of the day, like a swamp or a beer left open.

All these things are true.

All these things are true, so when Benny put his tray across from mine at the Galleria food court, I don't believe him for a second. But he is so pretty, really, like Brad Pitt in *Thelma and Louise*. Later on I'll learn that he's from Springfield, down in the opposite corner of the state, same as Brad. And once he'll even try to tell me that they're cousins. Yeah, right, I'm sure Brad Pitt just has dozens of relatives who work for the St. Louis mob. What kind of cousin, I ask, like your mother's brother or what? And he says, no, I mean *cousin* cousin, like that means something.

But all that comes later. When Benny sits across from me I'm sitting in a corner of the food court with my fried rice and egg rolls, thinking about the store. I want to be a salesgirl. Mr. Nesbitt laughed when I told him, and said he didn't know what he'd do without me working the computers. The salesgirls - like Amanda, who sits in the middle of the food court eating a salad - don't know half what I do about carets and cuts and clairity, but they look like the kind of woman you want to drape in diamonds. And now I'm replaying the conversation in my head, the way Mr. Nesbitt won't look at me while he laughs at the idea. And then there's Benny staring straight into my eyes and asking if this seat is taken.

So he sits across from me talking and smiling, and I'm trying not to stare at him. The napkin I put over my General chicken is turning orange from the grease it's drinking, and there's still my crab Rangoon under that napkin. As soon as this gorgeous dip gets up and leaves I'm going to dip it in the General Tso sauce and suck out the cream cheese. But he doesn't leave, and after one lame joke he tells he actually winks at me. I wonder if the girls at Nesbitt's maybe hired this guy or something.

I mean, I've met chubby chasers, and this guy isn't one. Guys like that like to say something about my size right away, to try and make me feel comfortable. Oh God, like how they like a woman with some meat on her bones. Great image, right, like maybe they're planning on cooking me up later.

Most amazing, he's not looking around the room while we talk. Most men, when they end up in a conversation with me in a bar or something, they're always looking around. Maybe they're looking for better options, but mostly, I think, it's because they're afraid someone might see them. A friend told me this joke once, I guess it's a joke men tell to each other:

Why's a fat girl like a moped?

They're a lot of fun to ride, but you wouldn't want your friends to see you on one.

Benny looks right in my eyes. His eyes are clear blue, and I don't see myself reflected in them at all.

He asks if I want to go see a movie after work. I never told him that I worked at the mall. I could have been shopping. This is something I don't think about until later. At the time I can't hardly think at all. But later on, it will come back to me and make perfect sense.

Back at the store, Amanda corners me. Her skin is the color of Arizona dirt, and it's stretched so tight you can see three sides of her collarbones. She asks me who I was talking to. Just some guy. Pretty cute, she says back, the way you'd say it to a niece who had not yet admitted to liking boys. Whatever, I say, just like your niece would.

After work, I stop at Lion's Choice and pick up a few roast beef sandwiches and eat them while I drive, barely chewing at all. He's taking me to dinner, and I'll be damned if I'm going to the restaurant hungry. He's not really going to show up, I tell

myself as I drive and swallow. There's no way. Maybe he's just into fat chicks, I tell myself. But that doesn't feel right. To a guy like that, a fat chick is like Renee Zellweger clocking in at 130 pounds for that stupid movie.

Maybe he's hogging, I think, and the roast beef lumps in my throat. I read one time about guys who will all set out to pick up the fattest thing they can find, and they all show up someplace and the guy with the biggest girl wins. Wins what, I don't know. Respect? I can see in my head a table full of women like me, all of us knowing what was going on and not a one of us doing a thing about it while the men get drunk and laugh at us. And for the hundredth time I cancel the date in my head and then remind myself that I don't even have this guy's number. So one way or another, my fate, at least for the night, is sealed.

It takes me about three hours to get dressed, an hour of that in the shower, getting everything, shaving my legs, even that patch down by my ankle. I have to hold my breath to reach it. I'm lucky I don't break my neck. Choosing a dress takes longer. Lane Bryant of course. Black, of course. Black's slimming, you know, so I only look big as a townhouse. I put my make-up on using a mirror and trying not to actually look at myself, which of course is hard. Then I eat a pint of Cherry Garcia standing over the sink thinking he's not going to come and if he does then that might be even worse and that there's something wrong, there must be something wrong but even if there is I don't care because at least that kind of wrong will be something new.

When the doorbell rings, I just about bite through the spoon.

We eat Italian on the Hill, and I get fettuccini with white sauce and laugh at his jokes, which aren't very funny. He tells me he works in contracting, and I ask him what that means, and he fumbles a bit. So we drink more, and I let myself get drunker than I should on a date, because if I don't I'm going to jump out of my skin. Which wouldn't be so bad.

After the dinner, after I refuse to have dessert, just say no, when he asks me if I want to go to his place, I say yes. I breathe in deep, trying to see if my nervous sweat has kicked up any of the smell, but I don't smell anything. And the way Benny smokes, I'd be surprised if he can smell anything at all. So we go to his place in the Central West End and it's done up in that way that looks tasteful but just means that you bought everything at the same store. And I'm looking around and he puts a hand on my shoulders and it's like someone set my insides on puree.

When we make love, he wants to leave the lights on, but I will not let me. He almost glows in the dark.

Laying in bed, the light through his window throws my silhouette against the wall, hiding Benny's completely. He doesn't try to put his arm around me, thank God. He sits up against his headboard and smokes and talks. He lets the name Frank Priest slip, and anybody who reads the paper knows he's like the biggest mob boss in town, and another part of Benny becomes clear. Then he asks me what I do. I tell him I run a

computer system at a store in the mall. He asks what kind of store and I tell him, jewelry, and he says oh, really?

Two nights later he takes me to a bar, and anorexic bitches look at me with hateful eyes like maybe I'm holding Benny hostage. Benny gets up at one point to get us refills and some guy with gelled hair and an upturned collar comes by my table, the muscles in his face slack and his eyes shot. He's trying to talk to me but he's laughing too hard to do it. At another table behind him his friends are tamping down their giggles like children in church.

The guy never gets his line out. Maybe it was about being a moped, I'll never know. Benny comes out of the dark and doubles the guy with a punch in the stomach. Then he gets both hands in the crisp bristles of the guy's hair and slams his head against our table, making my amaretto sour jump. The guy just drops after that. Benny holds his hand out to me, palm up, and says, mi'lady. It has little specks of blood on it. I take it in my own and I walk out of that place feeling like I left two hundred pounds sitting on the bar.

That night, after we make love, I tell him I know what it is that he wants. And that it's okay.

Yeah? He asks me.

Yes, I tell him. Just tell me what your plan is, and let's work together to make it better.

It turns out that his plan needs a lot of work. Benny doesn't know much about jewelry stores, or even jewelry. So I tell him about the security room and its own special server, which I can access. I tell him about the loose stone set, and how they keep another box just like it full of cubic zirconium fakes.

He talks about us robbing it together, like Bonnie and Clyde. You could wear a mask, he tells me. And I just look at him. A mask? What kind of mask could I wear?

He wants to blow the safe. He's already got a bomb, he says. He shows it to me, how you just twist these wires onto those connectors and then push down the little plunger and boom! Never thought I'd learn how to set up a bomb. When I tell him that we won't need to blow anything up, that the best stuff sits out in the inventory room so people can look through it, he gets a look on his face like I just took away his lollipop. He spent a lot of money on the bomb, he says. Well, it doesn't go bad, does it? I ask. Just put it in the closet, and maybe we'll need it next time.

Over the next two weeks I lose ten pounds. I don't know if its all the exercise he's giving me or if maybe I'm not stuffing my face quite so much, but I haven't seen the numbers head south in years. In that scale there's a future where diamond money can buy the gastric bypass, buy new clothes, the kind of clothes they put in the window of the stores at the mall. There's a future where people could see me and Benny at a bar somewhere and not laugh or gape or guess I'm his sister. And we finally come to make a plan that I'm pretty sure will work. When we finally get it all set out and planned, Benny gets out a bottle of champagne and after a toast he pours some of the champagne on me, and licks it off and I don't push him away or wonder how I smell. I just look up at the ceiling and see that other life hanging there, so close I can almost taste it.

The morning of the robbery, we leave from Benny's place, each in our car. Just before we pull out, I get back out and head back inside. Benny gives me a look like, what? I just point to my stomach and roll my eyes and let him paint the picture. It only takes a minute to do what I have to do. Then we're on course.

None of the salesgirls hanging around the display cases say hello. My card opens the door into the back of the store. I boot up the store server, then buzz the door to the inventory room. Jack, a sweet old guy with a gun on his ankle, lets me in. I boot up the security server, and then wreck it with a few clicks of the mouse. I act confused and ask Jack to check a connection across the room. While he does that, I put a little red sticker on the top of the loose stone case, the one without the fakes in it. Jack comes back and tells me the wires are plugged tight, and I say, well, that probably makes it the motherboard. Let me make a call. I step outside of the inventory room and dial Benny's number. He doesn't answer, but he's not supposed to. He's coming from the food court where we first met. He should be here in the time it takes me to take five deep breaths.

He wears a wig and dark glasses, and he steps into the store with his silver pistol pointing right at Amanda's face. With his left hand he grabs her by the hair and yanks her across the counter. That's how skinny she is. And then he's pushing her to the back of the store and one of the other salesgirls starts screaming. Benny pushes past me without even looking and gets Amanda to open the back door and then just pulls open the inventory door, because I zapped the electric lock when I fried the server.

A few seconds later the gunfire starts.

Maybe Jack went for his gun. I don't know. But there are two loud pops and Amanda screams and then Benny is back out, kicking Amanda in front of him, the loose stone case in one hand and the pistol in the other. Right in front of me Amanda falls down and Benny points the gun down and there's a bang and all sorts of stuff slops out of Amanda onto the floor. I would never guess she'd have so much inside her.

Then Benny looks up at me, and even though he's wearing glasses and a wig I can see him perfectly, and he sees me, like we're both naked in the daylight.

I turn so I don't have to watch the gun barrel raise, or Benny's face when he pulls the trigger. That's why the bullets hit me in the back.

If it had gone according to the plan that both of us knew was a lie, then Benny would have headed out the door next to the Footlocker across the way, ditched his wig, glasses and coat in the hall and put the loose stone case inside the big plastic Gap bag he had tucked inside his pants. He would have gotten in his car and drove to the motel just past Six Flags on I-44. After the police questioning finished, I was supposed to drive there myself.

But first, I would have stopped at his apartment and unhooked Benny's bomb from the front door. I would have put the bomb back into the closet and gotten ready for my new life. But I guess Benny will just have to find it himself. See, Benny never really had me fooled. But he did make me hope.

Damn him for that.