

Fat Broad

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Ten minutes twice a day is barely enough time to get to the nub of a cigarette, and the laborers stand at the far end of the truck from the flaggers, who are mostly silly college girls working on a tan and getting the same rate as we are. This is good money, so instead of frittering it away on four more years of school I put mine in the bank. I'll invest some, sure, but I'm salting away now for a two-tone black cherry pearl on black pearl Road King. I call it my two-year plan.

Generally, I like the company of women, prefer it actually to the repetitive talk and pipe dreams about how some of these laborers think they are going to get trained on the pavers, and then start socking away \$100 per hour plus to work milling the roads. I hear this every summer. But nobody ever gets a better deal by talking about it.

If I'm going to drift down to the road chicks, though, I'm careful to keep one foot in each boat, and always light up with the guys first. After a couple of puffs I announce I'm going to get some water off the back of the truck. When I reach to pull a paper cup from the dispenser, staring off down the little slat of road we'd already paved, I accidentally brush against Fat Broad's hand. "Hey, Fat Broad was here first," she says, throwing up her elbow and milking a paper cup from the container. Big as she is, Fat Broad can sneak up beside you like a cat.

Though she only works summers, Fat Broad isn't a college girl. She's older than they are, at least a dozen years older than me, I'd say, and unlike the rest of them, she comes back every year like a song-

bird. She drains one cup, but holds her hand on the tap and quickly fills a second. "Save a little something for me," I say. It isn't even 10:30 and already the heat is rising off the Wisconsin pavement. When we pave we get heat three ways: from above, from below, and from the steamy pitch off the tar truck. Fat Broad sweats a lot, and she's sweating through her layers of sun oil enough that it seems to mix together on her brown skin in shimmering beads, making her glisten and shine. I like the look of her skin once the day gets going.

"Fat Broad's always got a little something for you, Sugar." She likes to flirt with everybody, even the drivers who she's stopped while we pull the trucks off the shoulder, but this time it's embarrassing, like she might mean it. So all I can do is stand there and try to listen to the cars swoosh by behind her instead of the pounding in my chest.

"Back on clock!" Little Tony, our foreman calls. Julie and Kim, the other flaggers, pick up their signs along with Fat Broad, who keeps staring at me from behind her mirrored sunglasses as she crumples her cup and tosses it into the weedy ditch. They start walking back toward the wet tar we'd just laid while I pick up my hat and follow Little Tony out to the front of the truck. He begins pointing out the faults and splits in the tarmac that seem to stretch out for a thousand miles in the hot boredom of the August Wisconsin sun as if only he could see them. I try to listen to him, or at least look that way, but I can't shake that moment with Fat Broad behind the water truck.

Just before lunch we come up on a dead dog, which happens sometimes. It was a lab, from the looks of it, lying just off the gravel like the poor thing must've dragged itself a ways after getting hit. Little Tony says I'll have to pull the collar off of it, since I am still the

lowest entry out of Steve, and Carlos, and A-Bomb, and there is no way Little Tony wants to ask the girls, even Fat Broad who probably could've stomached it, because he said he already had enough to worry about with them. Though when he says "them" we know he's just talking about Julie and Kim, because Fat Broad's safety record's just another reason everybody thinks she's such a peach. I've never seen it happen, but at least one flagger gets run down every summer. Like Little Tony always says, "it's usually because they were distracted."

When I find the clasp of the collar underneath I have to pry the dog's head from the ground. The whole dog lifts, like some kind of lever, when I pull on it, releasing a hot, barfy smell and a stampede of little insects. I get the collar off, pull the carcass into a DNR bag, and then want to burn my gloves from the stench on them. They already smell bad enough from all the sour sweat on the inside, and I know that at some point during the day I am going to do something stupid like scratch at my nose and then want to puke all over the pavement.

"The weirdest thing," Little Tony says, and we all listen when Little Tony launches into one of his stories because it's almost like another break, "was this time one fall when A-Bomb and I were picking up for the DNR and we got a call about a dog out on 41. When we got there it was so mushy you could hardly tell it was a dog anymore, so we figured there was no need to put it in a bag just to haul it back to the crematorium. The ground was still soft, so A-Bomb dug a little trench off to the side and I shoveled the dog into it. When I was getting to the last pieces the collar came off and I bagged that and took it in." I've already heard this one, and I know Fat Broad has too, so we smile at each other when Little Tony's not looking.

"Well, they called the owner, this guy, who was, I guess, really, really attached to that old dog. So the next day, on a Saturday, mind you, they had me drive this guy back out to the spot so he could dig the dog back up and take it home to bury. He didn't cry, but you could tell he was really hurting over that dog. What was its name, A-Bomb?"

"Festus," A-Bomb says. "Like on Gunsmoke."

"What's Gunsmoke?" Julie asks, now that we are all standing around together.

"Right," Little Tony says. "Back on clock." He walks back to the truck to write down the timeout to take care of the dog, tags the sack and is back on the paver within seconds.

"That was sweet of you, Sugar," Fat Broad says to me as she walks back to her post. She walks with a deliberate swing in her enormous hips and I half expect to hear the accompanying sound of bongo drums. The pounding's in my neck now, like the feeling I get when the roller comes thumping by.

"I think Fat Broad's got a new boy-toy," A-Bomb says while we are walking along behind Little Tony's paver.

"Pah... go on," I say.

Carlos calls over from the other side, "She'll break you in half!" Carlos is right, I'll bet I don't weigh half of what Fat Broad weighs, especially in the summer months. Carlos and A-Bomb have both done it with Fat Broad previous summers, and had even joked last summer that I wouldn't get past entry until I'd been with Fat Broad myself, like she would be some kind of initiation. I've never been out with someone that much older. So I just smile a little, not as if I'm taking them seriously but like I am willing to take the ribbing, and

then I look down the road to where Fat Broad is standing. Her skin is shining in the hot light of the noon sun and the glare seems to eclipse her orange jacket. She always says she'd stand out there nude if they'd let her, to soak up the rays, but from where I stand it looks as if those rays don't soak in at all. They bounce back off her shiny, round flesh like a signal. What would it be like, I wonder, with someone that fat? "More cushion for the pushin'," Fat Broad would probably say. My last girlfriend had had some butt on her, and I remember kind of liking that. Soft. What's the other word? Ample. Fat Broad is built like an apple, I decide. A big, caramel apple.

So on payday most of us get together again, after a shower and some food, down at The Frozen Tundra, because it's in downtown Appleton, about as far away from the highway as you can get, and because they keep it at a steady 68 degrees. The college girls usually show up at the beginning, to be friendly, I suppose, and are reliably gone by 9:00 p.m. to some other bar where the college kids go. Little Tony doesn't always come out, because he's married and has three kids. He stays at home, he says, and watches some T.V. and saves his money. "You can get a six pack for what one beer downtown costs you," he always says. "You'd be on that Road King by now," he tells me. "If you did like me." He's like a father to all of us, all of the time.

I shoot some pool with A-bomb and he tells me Fat Broad is giving me the eye. That's just fine by me, but I don't want A-Bomb to know. "You're lucky you'll have Sunday to recover," he says. We're working six days a week now that it's summer. "You might even want to take a couple of days next week."

"Shut up, A-Bomb," I say. He knows I don't take days off. In a

couple of years, when I've got my Road King, I might do that, and then drive down those freshly paved roads past Fat Broad and A-Bomb and the rest. I decide A-Bomb's a good looking guy when he's all cleaned up, but he talks too much, like he can't help himself. Girls get bored with him pretty fast, and so he goes home alone mostly.

From the corner of my eye I see Fat Broad sitting in her bar stool stirring her drink with her straw and looking at me funny. She's got a darker tan than Carlos, and I wonder if she has tan lines or if, like the college girls, she goes to a tanning salon. I could probably buy two Road Kings with what those girls blow on fake-and-bakes in a year. I like to imagine Fat Broad has tan lines.

So she wears short skirts to the bar which show off her dark, meaty thighs, and she wears black sandals that look too small for her feet. I don't know where she would find shoes that wouldn't look too small for her feet. A-Bomb sinks the eightball, which is okay by me because he wasn't there yet and that means I win. He goes to buy us another pitcher of Leinenkugel's, and I go over to talk to Fat Broad.

"Nice game, Sugar," she says. Whenever she talks, she talks really loud, and this embarrasses me. I don't know why. I can't help it, I look around.

"I was wondering," I say. I can't bring myself to call her Fat Broad to her face, even though everybody does it. "Do you go anywhere in the winter?" Sometimes I ask questions I don't think I'm even interested in when I can't think of what to say only to find out I really am interested.

"You think I ought to hibernate, like some big, fat bear? Is that it?" She doesn't say this like she's mad, just like she's heard it before.

"No," I say. "I just never hear a straight answer from you."

"Well, Sugar. My folks have a cottage up in Door County and a little store they keep open year-round. When they go down to Florida I take care of the store. Sometimes I go with them if my sister watches the place."

"What's your sister do?" I ask, and I can tell immediately from Fat Broad's face that this was not the right question.

"Why do you want to know about my sister?" Fat Broad snaps back.

"Take it easy," I say. "Who cares about your dumb old sister anyways?" When I leave to go back over to get a refill from A-Bomb I can feel Fat Broad shooting daggers at me from her seat at the bar.

"What'd you say to her?" A-Bomb asks. He can see the daggers as well.

"Nothing," I say. "I just asked about her sister and she flipped out."

"Liza? Or Liesel? Is that it? I can't remember. But only you could screw up a roll in the hay with Fat Broad," A-Bomb says, and he laughs at me while he wracks up another game.

I win that game as well, and the whole time I'm drinking or playing I can feel Fat Broad's eyes on me, full of hate or whatever. Out of the corner of my eye, I also see a few guys come over to talk to her; strangers. Why wouldn't they? She's all dolled up. Hair fixed, face made up, some kind of orangey smelling perfume. Plus, she's as tan as a football. I beat A-Bomb about five games in a row. Who's keeping count? "Don't do anything I wouldn't do," he says as he gets ready to leave. "Wouldn't have done," he adds. "Didn't do."

"All right, all right," I say to shut him up. I can't stand the mental picture of him pumping away on Fat Broad, even though she's

been nothing but a real freak to me. And I don't like that he knows about her sister, but I'm afraid to ask.

"See you tomorrow, I guess," I say to her as I power back the last, soapy slosh of my beer.

"Wait up there, Sugar," she says. She pushes away from her barstool and there's the predictable kissing sound of skin peeling away from vinyl. "You can give me a lift, can't you?"

"A lift?" I say. There's a joke here, to be made at her expense, and I think it's her own fault I'd even think that because she's always slagging on herself. But I don't want to make those kinds of jokes, even if I'm a little drunk and still a little mad. "Sure," I say. "I can give you a lift."

It's still hot outside and when Fat Broad gets into my pick-up there's a noticeable tilt toward the passenger side. This is a lot of woman, I think. A lot of sweet flesh that I can smell like I'm some kind of mosquito. "Where do you live?" I say. I say this with as little emotion as I can because I'm tired now and I know that I have to get up in the morning and stand alongside the road in the August heat and shovel out tar or sticky oil or walk along behind some slow moving motor grater or bulldozer, and I think of Fat Broad standing down at the end of the freshly paved road slowing traffic and reflecting all that sun down on me like a spotlight for Little Tony and A-Bomb and Carlos and all those Wisconsin drivers to consider.

"You want to go someplace secret with me?" she says.

"What do you mean?" I ask, and Fat Broad slides over a little closer to me, evening out the truck. I can smell her perfume, but beneath that I can smell the coconut smell of her suntan oil.

"Someplace secret. You won't regret it," she says and she puts a hand on my thigh and squeezes it like we've been dating for years and

years which hasn't been the case at all. In fact, I don't think that's been the case for either one of us ever. And while I'm wondering if that's maybe something I ought to consider, we're off, out College Avenue, past the kinds of bars where Julie and Kim are grinding away their evenings looking for Mr. Right or Mr. Right Now.

It doesn't take long to get to the country from Appleton, and we're heading west on a paved county road where little eyes reflect from the weeds and bugs click and tink against my windshield. "Slow down," she says finally, when we're way out someplace near Hortonville. "Turn in here." She lifts her sweaty hand off my thigh and I can still feel the hot, moist place where it was as she points out a dirt road alongside a barbed wire fence that drifts into the pitch black of a tree-lined dirt road.

"What's in here," I say.

"My sister," Fat Broad says. "She comes here on Fridays with her boyfriends."

"I don't really feel like meeting anybody right now," I say, though I can't say I'm not a little curious as well as terrified. I picture a family cabin at the end of a long dark road with a woman who looks just like Fat Broad standing on a porch with a beer in her hand while some skinny stranger looks sheepishly for a way past her. Who knows, maybe we'd hit it off and start a club amongst all these tall, dark trees.

"We're not meeting anybody," she says. "Turn your lights off. Go slow."

Fat Broad's hot hand returned to my thigh and she leans forward, eclipsing the light of the dash, as she peers out the windshield. She begins whispering to me, "Slowly...slowly."

"What are we looking for?" I whisper. The tree branches reach out for the sides of my truck, making little scraping sounds that I hope aren't taking off any paint.

"Shush," she says. "There they are..." When we crest a dark hill I can see the red taillights of a car in the road ahead of us. "Stop here," she croaks. "Cut the engine." Fat Broad squeezes my thigh harder with each order, like I'm taking too long to comply and she's having to train me.

"What are we doing?"

"We're watching. She's got a guy in there."

"Who?"

"Who knows? She's got lots of guys."

"Why are we watching?" I say. It seems like a simple enough question, but then Fat Broad eases back into the seat and moves her hand all the way up my thigh. Watching turns her on is my guess. "What are we doing here?" I say. I say it out loud and she puts her finger to my lips to tell me to shut up. It's so dark, and she moves so quickly I don't see her hand coming toward my face and when that finger lights on my lips I jump back like I've been hit.

"C'mere, Sugar," she says, and she slides across the seat bench toward me and leans into me until I can feel the door handle threaten to punch through my back ribs. I can barely breath and then I feel her hand on my belt. "Watch them," she says. "Don't look at me."

"Why not?" I say.

"You know why not," she says, and she reaches up with her free hand and takes me by the chin and turns my head so that I'm looking out the windshield at the occasional bare foot pressed against the glass of their rear window. Then I close my eyes.

I don't recall the drive home, or taking Fat Broad back to her car by the Frozen Tundra, or getting into bed as anything more than you might recall a set of instructions or work orders. But I can smell Fat Broad's coconut oil and orange perfume all over my hands and on my pants and shirt in the morning. It lingers in my truck, too, like she's more a part of my life than she really is. But it's a good feeling, to smell that smell in the morning. It's Saturday morning, which means that I just have a little more Road King money in the bank but that I still have to be up early and at the site by 6:45.

I don't know if I expect Fat Broad to come running over to me and give me a kiss on the lips or what, but I don't expect her to act like she's acted every other day since I started working for the county. "Fat Broad hasn't had her coffee yet," she says to me, and then she starts applying her oil. She must've bought it by the case because every morning she has what seems to be a new quart of it to rub all over her arms and neck and face and chest, all the way to where her boobs separate and past that to what was probably the edge of what nobody's supposed to see in public. What I didn't get to see, but want too also. I watch her put that on, and I notice that A-bomb and Little Tony and Carlos are watching too. A-bomb comes over and gives me a nudge in the ribs and says, "Huh? Huh?"

We finish our stretch of road that evening, which means come Monday we'll be back on maintenance, laying sticky oil or other small jobs that probably won't need crews big enough for flaggers. Fat Broad and Julie and Kim will be farmed out to state crews and I'll go back to filling holes and patching cracks until winter comes.

But the following Friday, there's Fat Broad, bellied up to the bar at the Frozen Tundra, wearing a tight red number and those same too

small black sandals. I say hi to her, and she says hi back, and then there's that awkward moment when you both know you could probably just cut the crap and go home with each other and do it but it seems like there ought to be some play to it all, some romance. Still, you never know when you play at all that, maybe some other guy comes in and sweeps Fat Broad off her feet. So I hang around her and find that I can say things like I like her hair, and that she smells nice. It comes naturally to me around her and makes me feel like a better person than I think I really am.

"Aw, Sugar. You're so sweet. I could just eat you all up if you're not too careful," she says, and coming from her I can kind of imagine it isn't some idle romantic threat.

A-Bomb leaves early and Fat Broad and I get more and more drunk, waiting each other out. I want a normal night, though, not some drive out to God-knows-where to watch her sister work over some other guy. Just some normal talk and some normal horizontal and then some cuddling up with the soft, warm Fat Broad and her coconut-orange too-tanned skin. "What's your name?" I say. "Your real name."

"Lisa," she says. Then "Nah. Nah, I'm just having you on. I always wanted to be a Lisa." We talk some more, about the kinds of things she likes, the kinds of movies and the kinds of actors, until she wants to leave.

"Let's go out to the road," she says. "I'll make it worth your while."

"I don't want to do that," I say. "Let's try my place. Or your place. We don't need to be driving halfway to Minnesota."

"It'll be fun," she says. "I promise." And she grabs a hold of my thigh with that grip like a sailor. It sends electricity all the way up my

leg and I know I can't say no. I try to look over at Fat Broad while I drive through town, to see her in the street lights flashing through the cab. But it's hard to get a look at her. Her eyes are shining, even in the dark, thinking about something else besides me, and every once in a while the thought of that thing makes her squeeze her hand just a little harder so that I think my leg might snap in two. I want to ask her what she's thinking about, but I know it would just spoil the evening if it was about her sister. Sometimes it's better not to have to say everything out loud.

We find the dirt road again, in the dark, and I pull onto it between the fence posts. "This was my grandmother's land," Fat Broad says suddenly. "Now it's my mother's. Soon enough it'll belong to my sister and me."

"You want me to kill the lights?" I say.

"Sure," Fat Broad says. "What the hey."

I drive slower and slower, just trying to stay on the dark road with the lights off is hard to do. The road seems longer, stranger, and darker tonight. My windshield is painted with dead bug smear and so I've got to feel my way along. Fat Broad takes her hand off my leg and it's like someone took the battery out of the evening. "Here's good," she says. I want her to put her hand back there.

"You don't want to go farther?" I say.

"What for? She's not here tonight, if that's what you mean." Fat Broad starts to reach around behind her to unzip her dress, but it's like watching Houdini slip out of a straight jacket. I reach to help her.

"I've got it!" She snaps. "Leave me alone."

"Maybe this isn't such a great idea," I say. I think I want to drop it into reverse and drive on out of there. But reversing through the dark won't be so easy.

"No," she says. "We can still do it. C'mon, Sugar. Give Fat Broad some lovin'." I let her slide over to me, but I think we both know she wants this to be the end of the road for us. She wants to keep her mysteries to herself. As I wonder if she's done the same thing with Carlos and A-bomb and others, I realize I miss her already. That wonderful smell of coconut oil and oranges comes over me; she seems to shoot blasts of it like an orchid. Then I wonder if maybe her sister is out there watching us this evening. If I turned the truck around right now, would I see her car sitting behind us in the dark? Would her face be pressed against the windshield jealously watching for something she might be missing? I don't know which is worse.

And then I wonder what Fat Broad does when it gets colder. She goes to Door County sometimes, she said, but does she come down here too? Does she drive this snowy road alone in the winter, when the stars are all clouded over, and the trees are all naked and shriveled little old men shivering in the dark, wanting to find some warmth like her dark flesh? Or in the winter, maybe, these side roads are impassable. I run the county plows when it snows and so maybe, I think, if I make another pass I can seal this road off with a pile of ice so big it won't melt down until late next summer, sealing her out or in. Then Fat Broad and I can pick right up from wherever tonight leaves off. Sometimes a long, slow thaw is best. □