

The Fat Girl

Colin Morra, in a rage, reached across the bar, picked up a full bottle of whiskey, smashed it against Frank Ricci's forehead, and killed him. Frank was his best friend for almost twenty years. He saw Frank's chin hit the rim of the ancient alcohol-stained and cigarette-burnt wooden bar; his body slid off the bar stool, then continued slumping to the floor. Colin stared pop-eyed at what just happened and dived down to prevent Frank's head from hitting the floor. Sitting in a puddle of whisky, blood, and broken glass, Colin cradled Frank's head in his arms and rocked up and back, crying rivers of tears, snot running out of his nose. Frank stared at nothing through lifeless eyes, blood running out of one ear. Yells of "call 911," "call the police," and "holy shit" rang through the bar. Some customers ran out thinking it was best for them not to "take a meeting" with the police.

The E.M.T. arrived, lifted Frank off Colin's lap, placed him on a gurney and slid him into the ambulance. The police arrived immediately after. One wordlessly lifted Colin off the floor dripping with whiskey, glass, tears, and blood, tied his arms behind his back with a plastic strip, walked him to the waiting squad car and gently, with one hand holding the top of his head, placed him in the back seat. The other policeman stayed behind to take statements. The fight was over a woman.

Colin and Frank grew up together in a working class/out-of work-class Irish/German/Italian section of Brooklyn. It's an insular crime-free neighborhood. Blacks and Hispanics enter at their peril. Five years ago two men came into the area to sell drugs, one is still in a coma and the other walks with a noticeable limp due to the loss of a kneecap. Most of the area is made up of small one-family and two-family attached homes, clad in worn-out aluminum siding, built before anyone can remember, old and rundown thirty years ago. They have small front and back yards that were cemented over after grass refused to grow in such a depressed environment. The front areas of many homes display "Madonna and Child" plaster statues, American flags, black M.I.A. flags and the ubiquitous garbage can. The neighborhood has one of the highest rates of men and women in the armed forces, not due to any all-inspiring sense of patriotism, but because it's the only means of employment for many young people.

There are many four story walk-up apartment buildings in the area of the same vintage and condition as the private homes. Inside, the vestibules are all decorated with broken mailboxes and doors with smoked, decorated glass that was last seen in your granny's house. Many staircases are painted the same brown lacquer. The rest of the hallways were never painted in any resident's lifetime. If you are a fan of linoleum you'll find it here as a stair runner. The rents were deservedly low except in the cases when the government paid it all. Most of the people in the area who had jobs worked in construction, non union, "off the books". The highest one could aspire to was a city job that some obtained by doing odd jobs for the local politico—some of the jobs were considered very odd by other's standards, but everyone has to eat. In this neighborhood everyone smiles and looks the other way.

Colin's mother was a waitress and worked all hours, leaving him on his own. His father went out for the proverbial "pack of cigarettes" when he was six and no one saw him again. Frank had both a mother and a father at home. What the father did to put food

on the table, no one knew, including Frank. His mother worked at night as a cleaning woman in an office building.

Colin and Frank met in third grade and ran in the streets together along with the Gallo Brothers (Gary & Larry), Jimmy Conner, Zack Burke and Donny Sutton. They are still friends today. Colin has quiet, unassuming looks, black hair, a baby face and is a natural born follower. Frank is tall, thin, with a face scarred by his former acne. All of them were undistinguished in every way. They got into their regular quota of street fights, petty theft (not in their own neighborhood), and vandalism. In other words, they were regular neighborhood boys. School played a very marginal role in their lives.

In eighth grade Stephanie Zukowsky transferred into their class. She was instantly the butt of all jokes and the object of derision. All of it directed openly. It was to be expected in this situation. Number one, she was the new girl, number two, she was fat, number three, nature's natural cruelty burns brightest at this age. The girls joined in, happy not to be the victim. Stephanie bore this with the outer crust of one who was inured to it from experience. She kept to herself as she had no choice. She was a good student.

Frank dropped out of school his junior year to help out at home, and Colin, seeing no reason for the need of a high school diploma, followed him. They both took the neighborhood's usual path, low end, low pay, construction jobs, spending their free time (which they had plenty of) in Muldoon's with their friends drinking whiskey and beer and betting on sports games. They were well on their way to replicating their parents' lives. A favorite bet was on the basketball tournament, where they pooled their money. The winner gets all and the one with the most losses must do a humiliating deed. The N.C.A.A. quarter finals were on, the bets were made, and Frankie decreed that the humiliating deed of the loser would be one date with Stephanie Zukowsky. "Is she still around?" Someone said, to much laughter.

"Yeah, yeah I saw her walking down the street last week fatter than ever." More laughter followed, everyone put up their money and placed their bets.

Colin lost and had to take his punishment. He had to bring her to Muldoon's on a date so that his friends could watch his embarrassment.

Colin put it off as long as his buddies allowed, but he knew he had to pay up. "I might as well get it over with," he thought. He couldn't take the constant razzing. He bit the bullet and called her. "Hello, Mrs. Zukowsky? Is Stephanie there? I'm an old friend from school. Tell her Colin, Colin Morra." A few seconds later "Stephanie, hi, it's Colin Morra. Do you remember me from school?"

"Sure I do. What do you want?"

"Well, I thought maybe we can go out some time."

"You want to take me out, like on a date?" She answered suspiciously.

"Yeah, a date."

"Where would we go?" She asked, very much on her guard.

"How about Muldoon's?"

"That dump?"

"It's O.K. and the food ain't bad." He said

"When?" She asked, still suspicious.

"How about tomorrow night at eight?"

"Well, O.K." She answered in her wary voice.

"I'll meet you on the corner in front of your house, O.K.?"

“O.K.” She answered, “But don’t stand me up for a joke”

“C’mon, would I do something like that?”

“Maybe,” she answered.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at eight for sure. You got my word,” he said and hung up with a big sigh.

In a leather jacket, jeans, and a knit hat pulled over his ears he waited in the cold. She came out of her building bundled up in a fake fur overcoat; it made her look like a short bear. When she smiled, her cheeks puffed out and her eyes closed to slits just like in high school. “Hi Colin.”

He echoed the “hi” with a tone of resignation. She had the same tight curls and short cropped hairdo and when she turned he could see the bristles of hair on the nape of her neck before it was stopped at the border of a crease leading into a short mound of fat. She was as unappealing as he remembered her. They walked silently four blocks to Muldoon’s.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the door for her and they entered the dimly lit beer-smelling bar. He saw his pals sitting on the bar stools slapping each other on the back, having great howling laughs at his embarrassment. He steered her to the rearmost table, the one partially hidden from the room. They took off their coats, and sat facing each other. She leaned over the table and said with a sneer. “What a bunch of assholes. You still hang out with those moronic pricks?”

“They’re ok, don’t pay any attention to them.”

“I don’t know why you asked me out, but whatever the reason, I’m glad you did. You were the nicest guy in the class. You never joined in calling me names.”

He just nodded, not knowing what to say to this compliment. “What do you do now? You got a job or what?”

“Well,” he stammered, slightly embarrassed, “I do some part time construction work, non union, and some odd jobs here and there.”

“You know Colin, I watched you in school, you were very smart, you shouldn’t have dropped out, you could have graduated, and maybe even gone to college.”

“Nah. Me? Not a chance.” They ordered cheeseburgers, fries, and beers from a smiling waiter, who was in on the joke. “What do you do?”

“I work at N.B.C., in the mail room. I sort and deliver the mail to the T.V. people and the news people, answer the phone sometimes, and sometimes get coffee for some celebrities. I went to a two year college, now two nights a week I go to computer school.”

“No kidding. That’s great.”

“I’m going to make a life for myself. I’m not going to live like my mother in this shit neighborhood all my life,” she said. He was listening to every word; no one ever spoke to him like this before. He listened to her for another hour and the time passed quickly, as if he was speaking to an old friend. They got up to leave and, passing the bar on the way out, he saw that his friends had already left. She put her hand through his arm as he walked her home, into her building, up three flights of stairs full of cooking odors, to her door. She unlocked the door, turned to him and gave him an ardent but tender kiss on his lips. “I have computer class tomorrow. Let’s go out the day after, eight o’clock again. O.K.? This time I’ll pick the place, No more shithole bars.”

“O.K.” He answered. She entered her apartment. closed and locked the door and left him in the hallway, totally bewildered.

The next day on the construction site he was the butt of all jokes. It seemed that Frank and his buddies told everyone about his date, and they ribbed him good-naturedly all day long. By the next day it was old news and the crew took up another topic. He thought about their date all day as you would think of a girl you just went crazy for, but he didn't feel that way about her. So, why? He had no idea.

That night he met her in the same spot, this time she was wearing a nice dress, makeup, and her hair looked nicer. Too bad she couldn't do anything about that roll around her waist, and that huge ass, he thought. She took his hand and they took a bus to another neighborhood. They ate at an Italian restaurant that had white and red checkered table cloths. "Isn't this nice?" She said "It's much better than Muldoon's with those pricks laughing at us at the bar. This is the way real people live. Not the way we do. With a little education and ambition you could do much better, and you should start by losing that gang of losers. You're better than they are and they'll only keep you from getting anywhere. Did you see those old shaky rummies at the end of the bar at Muldoon's? That's your buddies in a couple of years and it could be you too if you're not careful."

She was getting into his head like no one ever had before and he didn't know if he liked it or not. The check came, the waiter gave it to him, but she took it and paid the bill without a thought. They took the bus back to her house. He walked up the three flights of stairs smelled the same cooking smells and wondered if the cook only knew how to make one dish. She unlocked the door. "Come on in, my mother is working tonight."

The living room looked like they bought the same furniture, from the same cheap store, the same year that his mother had, and the last paint job was in the same decade as his. They had doilies on the arms of the chairs. He hadn't seen doilies since grandma died. They took off their coats and she kissed him, that same soft tender kiss. "Let's go into the bedroom," she said. "My mother won't be back for hours."

In her small bedroom she shut off the lights for the sake of modesty or embarrassment. When they lay down the bed creaked from the weight. She was big all over but very sensual in her way. Afterward she held him in her large arms and stroked his hair. "I really care for you. You don't have to say anything. I know what I look like. I'm not stupid. I know I'm fat. I've been called "fatso" and "hey, elephant girl" since, like, first grade. I turn off my ears; I don't let anything get to me. I will succeed in life. They can all go to hell. You're different, Colin. You could be anything you want to be and you're great at sex." She laughed and slapped him affectionately on his butt. He didn't know what to say. This was the first time he had sex with a girl who was not a hooker or a whore and hadn't just wanted to get up and leave. He felt cozy and relaxed in the arms of someone who really cared for him, probably the only one who ever had. He felt as though he just lost his virginity and he liked the feeling.

"Hey, you better get going. I got computer class tomorrow night, but I tell you what: if your not working tomorrow, why don't you come meet me in the city, we'll have lunch and I'll show you where I work. O.K.?"

Colin lived in the city his whole life without ever visiting Rockefeller Center. He waited for her at the entrance to the skating ring. When she walked toward him he saw another incarnation of Stephanie, the business woman with a suit, hair in place, high heels, and a serious demeanor. She lit up when she saw him. "Hi, you want to see where I work?"

"Yeah, O.K."

Stephanie showed her I.D. card to security, vouched for Colin and took the elevator to the twenty-fifth floor. The office was a large room subdivided into small cubby hole-like offices by wall board, decorated with family pictures, or children's crayon drawings saying, "I love you, Mommy", desks, banks of computers, phones and piles of mail. Colin took this all in with the expression of a visitor to a planet somewhere in outer space. Stephanie stopped at her area, completely bare of any decoration. "Here's where I work," she said with pride.

"Wow, you really work here?" Colin said, staring wide-eyed at the computer.

"Maybe I'll take some pictures of you and put them on my wall." She laughed.

They ate in a local luncheonette and she paid the bill, as usual. "Colin, I'm going to computer class tonight, so why don't you come over to my place tomorrow night. I'll make us dinner. My mother works tomorrow night and won't be home, O.K.?"

"O.K."

"Gotta run," she said, gave him a quick peck on the cheek and left.

On the train going back he had time to think. In his mind she was no longer the fat girl, she was Steffie, and she was leading him in a direction he never thought he'd go. It was as if he was on one of those moving sidewalks. He was not doing any walking but he was going to a destination. Did he want to go there? He wasn't sure. It was miles better than what he had now, or would ever have; he could see it in her office

That night Colin had beers at Muldoon's with Frankie and the Gallo brothers.

"Hey where you been? You weren't at work today."

"Nah, I had stuff to do."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Just stuff."

"You're acting strange lately, Colin," said Larry Gallo. "You're not doing coke or anything, are you?"

"Nah," said his brother. "He's got some super pussy he won't share with his friends"

"Hey Colin," said Frankie. "Don't I always pass on my old used stuff to you? If it wasn't for me you'd never get laid. Fair is fair."

"Ohm fuck off guys. I just had stuff to do and I don't do coke," said Colin, annoyed.

"O.K., O.K., whatever you say," said Frankie.

"Let's drop it, O.K.?"

"O.K. You know tomorrow night there's like an engagement party at Zack's house."

"What?"

"Yeah. He's says he's marrying that bimbo, what's her name, Tiffany."

"You gotta be kidding. If it wasn't for fatso she'd be the ugliest girl in the neighborhood. Hey Colin, how was your one nighter with—elephant girl." Colin said nothing as they all laughed.

"I think I'd throw up if I had to put my beautiful pecker in that," said Gary.

Frankie yelled, "Hey Pat, another round. Colin's buying." Colin had enough for one night. He stared down the end of the bar and saw two old men leaning over, trying to lift their glasses to their mouths, shaking and spilling most. Steff's warning was right in front of him. He downed his beer. "Adios, you jerk-offs, see you tomorrow at work."

“Hey, where you going? It’s early. What, you got more “stuff” to do?” Said Frankie.

“Fuck off,” said Colin, as he walked out of Muldoon’s .

Zack’s basement was decorated the same as all the others in the neighborhood. Grey painted peeling walls, done years ago, a boiler and pipes being the most prominent features. Two worn couches, one without legs, and two green painted wooden tables that held cases of beer, potato chips and cold pizza completed the basement decor. Music blasted from a boom box and the neighborhood crowd flowed out to the backyard of the house. Zack’s girl Tiffany was the center of attention; a tall, thin blonde of about eighteen who was in dire need of orthodontia. Someone was passing out shots of scotch to toast the couple. The noisy crowd was on its way to getting drunk and the smell of pot was in the air.

That afternoon at the job site Colin thought about how to get out of going to Zack’s party; he settled on going in early, making an appearance, ducking out to Steffie’s, and hoping everyone would be smashed enough not to miss him.

Frankie kept toasting Zack with shots, and Tiffany’s friend, Shirley, arms around Colin, kept rubbing up against his crotch. He kept postponing his exit. Five minutes turned into a half hour, and a few hits of pot turned into an hour. He checked the time, and with a “holy shit” squeezed through the crowd and out of the basement without any goodbyes and started running the twelve blocks to Steffie’s house. Sweaty and out of breath, he rang the downstairs bell. No answer. He rang again and again. Colin walked out to the side of the building. When he looked up, he could see her lights on. He called her on his cell phone.

“What do you want?”

“I’m sorry, Steffie, I’m really sorry. Please buzz me up.”

“Go to hell,” she answered, “I thought you were different, you’re just like the rest of the assholes.”

“Please let me in Stef. I know I fucked up, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t care how you treat me Colin. I’m only the fat girl to you. You think you can treat me like shit and the poor elephant will take it. I won’t take it from you or from anybody.”

“Please Stef,” he pleaded.

“What you do want, one last fuck?”

“C’mon Stef, don’t talk like that. Buzz me in.”

After a few moments of silence she said “O.K.” in a quiet, no longer angry voice. “Come on up.”

She opened the door in pajamas and no makeup and said softly, “I dumped the food in the garbage an hour ago.”

He took her in his arms “Forgive me Stef. I wouldn’t hurt you. I really care for you.”

“You really do?”

“I really do.” She held him tightly and they walked into the bedroom.

The next few weeks were a storm of activity for Stephanie. She made plans, plans that included Colin. She got an application for him to apply for a high school equivalency diploma and found an opening for an apprentice electrician, a union job. At the same time, she walked all around the better areas of Brooklyn looking for an apartment. She

said nothing about this to Colin. Two weeks later she found a nice one bedroom apartment in a good area across from a park, signed a lease and put a down payment on some furnishings.

Stephanie was ready to make the move she had planned for years. She put off telling Colin for fear of rejection. With or without him, she was going forward with her life.

One week before moving day, they were walking arm-in-arm to nowhere in particular on a nice spring day, when she told him all of her plans for the move and for his future. "Come with me, you don't have to marry me or anything. We'll live together and then see how it goes. What do you say? You want to think about it? I'm moving this week."

"Steffie," He said, staring at her like a puppy. "You can't leave me behind. I want to go with you." She thought her body would burst, what she wished for was coming true. She threw her arms around him, jumped up and down, and wouldn't let go.

The phone rang; it was after midnight. A dozing Colin picked it up. "Hello?" "Hey, shit for brains, it's me. Come on over to Muldoon's and I'll buy you a drink."

"Who is this?"

"Who do you think? It's me, Frankie."

"Frankie, you're drunk and it's late."

"Ah, come on, one drink, and besides, I need someone to take me home. I'm shit-faced."

"O.K.," said an exasperated Colin. "I'll be right over."

Frankie swayed on his usual stool when Colin walked in. "Aah, my all time greatest buddy. C'meer, let me give you a big kiss. Hey Pat, a shot and a beer for my best friend. On me."

"What's eating you, Frankie? Why the big load on?"

"It's because my best buddy has gone insane," yelled Frankie.

"Calm down, man. You got to lay off the sauce. What's the problem?"

"The problem is: you've gone crazy, Colin. I saw you strolling down the street in broad daylight with an unidentified elephant."

"Oh, that's it."

"Yeah, that's fuckin it. I don't get it, you and that pig."

"She's a nice girl," Colin said quietly.

"A nice girl? Are you kidding?"

"I was going to tell you anyway so I might as well tell you now, Frankie. I'm moving out of the neighborhood and I'm moving in with her."

"Moving in with that fat whore?" Frankie's fury mounted.

"Stop it, Frankie."

"Colin, she fucked half the guys in tenth grade," he screamed.

Now Colin screamed too. "Stop it."

"Colin, I fucked her too."

Colin screamed at the top of his lungs, "Stop it, stop it."

“Yeah, you asshole, I fucked her,” Frankie screamed back. Colin Morra, in a rage, reached across the bar, picked up a full bottle of whiskey, smashed it against Frank Ricci’s forehead and killed him.

Richard Asher

So far I’ve only taken one course, and last week an old lady with a walker tripped over me right in front of the Y. I took it as an omen that I’m on the right track. I’m at the threshold of a brilliant career. Am I happy I took the suggestion and answered that ad.