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Journalism
13 June 2013

Uneasy Rider

The air was smothering and had a faint musty smell to it that made me wonder if that is what mothballs smell like. I felt the uncomfortable sensation of dust, feathers, or some other kind of floating fuzzy, tickle my nose. Resisting the urge to sneeze, knowing I couldn't make even the smallest of sounds, I held my breath. I thought for the millionth time that hour how nice it would have been if I had never left school this afternoon, and that maybe if I had stayed, I wouldn't be sleeping on the floor of an unfamiliar closet.

A week before, I met him for only the second time. Travis, a friend of a friend...of a friend. Our first encounter was at a ranch party of his in Waller, Texas, two years previously. It was a post hurricane Ike Texan celebration that a friend dragged me to; there was plenty of cheap beer, chevy trucks, country music and a bonfire the size of a one car garage.

Our second encounter was in the middle of downtown Austin, just off the UT campus, four floors up, and in an apartment six times the size of my dorm room. I didn't place him right away. His black, shaggy hair was buzzed and missing a baseball hat. He had at least five more tattoos than when I'd last seen him—on each arm. His new alternative look didn't manage to hide the Waller accent, though, and that was only accentuated by the Natural Light can in his hand.

Travis was the kind of guy who would ruin your life if you let him into it on a serious level. However, as an acquaintance he was amusing to be around and was generous enough, if you were a woman, to buy you anything you wanted. He wasn't a romantic person, nor was he

the object of anyone's affection. He was just like an idiotic character from a movie—probably the kind that would make a drug deal in a really stupid way and then get shot over it. Travis didn't go to college and at the time he was only twenty years old to my eighteen. For some reason, despite his total satisfaction with his life and the way he was living it, I saw an abandoned puppy when I looked at him and the need to save him, or at least get him “back on track” with his life, consumed me.

We had a conversation out on the balcony that consisted of me asking questions and him droning on and on about his simple life philosophy.

“None of that stuff matters,” he told me, referring to my question about college. “Marryin’ and settlin’ down is what counts in the end. Puttin’ down roots. For me, that first time didn't count, but I'll get it right eventually.”

“What first time?” I questioned him.

“The first time I was married. Right outta high school,” he paused to take a sip of his beer. “She was a crazy bitch so I divorced her. Tryin’ to find a good woman is hard. Y'all are all crazy.”

I tried not to be offended by reminding myself who I was talking to. It didn't work.

“I just mean,” he tried to explain quickly, “this one girl started pokin’ holes in our condoms and then one day tells me she's pregnant. I sued her because she's crazy. And now I have some kid runnin’ around that I've never met.”

After asking him if he was even interested in knowing his own child and receiving a “fuck no,” in return, I turned my attention to a flock of sorority girls drunkenly stumbling down the street. I couldn't tell if Travis was unlucky, or just stupid.

“Hey I’m gonna be goin home to throw another bonfire next weekend if you wanna come. Matt and them’ll be there. I can give you a ride,” he added as an afterthought, completely moving on from the absurd anecdotes that had left me silent.

“Yeah, sure, that sounds cool,” I told him. He nodded distractedly and started yelling flirtatious remarks at the sorority girls who were almost at the end of the street. I shook my head, rolled my eyes, and left him on the balcony.

The sneeze finally managed to squeak its way past my attempts to smother it and a harsh “Shh!” was hissed at me from the lit area beyond my feet. I went back to holding my breath. If I could just fall asleep, maybe I wouldn’t sneeze. Or maybe, I was actually asleep and I would wake up soon. My ears strained to hear the ominous crunching of footsteps that continued to circle the house. Faint, muddled voices from the outside made my anxiety remain high and I shut my eyes tight, wishing for Dorothy’s magical red shoes to take me home.

That afternoon I stood outside of Brown-Cody, checking the time on my phone and mentally congratulating myself for actually remembering to wear sunglasses. He was late. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I couldn’t stop myself from being frustrated. Tardiness is one of my pet peeves. Probably the biggest.

Just as I glanced over to the bench off to the side and contemplated resting my feet, I heard a loud sputtering and glanced up to see a Harley-Davidson cruise up next to where I was standing on the sidewalk. Travis took off his helmet and gave an easy grin.

“Sorry, traffic.”

I just looked at him.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked after I still hadn’t said anything.

“I don’t remember you mentioning a motorcycle,” I said hesitantly, earnestly thinking back to the particulars we had discussed the night before via text. Nope, no mention of a motorcycle.

“Well it’s not mine, it’s my buddy, Carlos’,” he waved off my concern, as if ownership was what I was actually worried about. “You ever ridden on a bike before?”

“A dirt bike. And I guess a sports bike once.”

“A crotch rocket? Ah, then you’ll be just fine. Get on,” He said, waving me over.

I considered my options. Either I wimp out and stay all alone in the dorm all weekend, or I get to go home and be around friends from high school I hadn’t seen in months.

I studied the bike. It was one of those machines that made men remember they were men. Travis had a bandanna tied around his head, and that and his tatted arms were the only things that didn’t make him look completely out of place. He was lacking a handlebar mustache and about a hundred pounds of muscle on his lanky frame.

“Sure, what the hell,” I decided, suddenly and threw my leg over, settling myself in the second seat. He plopped the helmet on my head and I somehow managed to figure out how the hell to buckle the damn thing. And then we were moving. As we left the parking lot, a couple girls I knew saw me and giggled excitedly at the sight of me on a motorcycle. Somehow this raised my confidence level, and by the time we reached 29, I felt a little like a badass.

About an hour later, my ass was absolutely killing me.

And it had started to rain.

Apparently, rain while riding on a motorcycle is both dangerous and highly uncomfortable. I wasn't sure about the technicalities of the danger idea—it had something to do with tires and wet roads—but it didn't take long for me to understand the lack of comfort part.

When the rain first started coming down, little drops here and there, I didn't notice anything. But then, in true Texas style, the downpour happened. All of a sudden, I wasn't so sure that it was really water falling from the sky anymore. No, it definitely felt like shards of glass cutting and slashing at my skin, soaking me and putting me in hell on Earth.

Ten minutes into this mess was when Travis decided it would be safer to pull over and wait for the weather to clear a little. So there we stood, next to this motorcycle on the side of 290, in the middle of a downpour. I had never felt more physically vulnerable than at that very moment. That was the first moment I started to question my choice to get on the bike, and suddenly the world seemed to be such a huge, terrifying place.

Somebody was shaking my shoulder.

I woke with a start. When did I fall asleep? *How* did I fall asleep?

“Hey, I think it's safe to come out now. You can sleep on the bed, if you want,” Travis whispered to me. It took me a moment to figure out what he was talking about.

The police.

Shit.

Sitting up took more than a little effort. My body was stiff from laying on the floor and I felt as if I had woken up from the dead rather than just a nap.

“What time is it?” I manage to croak, sleep transforming my voice into a monster's.

“Around three,” he helped me up and steered me out of the closet and to the bed. “We’re wakin’ up early and gettin’ the fuck outta here, so get some sleep.”

Right, I thought, allowing myself to stretch out on this unfamiliar bed and try to resume what little peaceful sleep I had managed before.

Fuck my life.

When we had finally arrived at his house in the middle of nowhere, Waller, Texas, he sat me down in front of the TV and then left, mumbling something about meeting everyone else at a gas station and leading them here. So I made myself comfortable, curling up on the couch, flipping through television channels.

Shopping network. *Click* News. *Click* Lifetime. *Click* Spike TV.

Friday night television is the worst.

Somehow an hour had passed without me noticing. Travis still hadn’t returned.

A sudden loud crash and bang interrupted my glazed over concentration on some kind of diet pill that would kill you if you had any kind of pre-existing health condition. I sat upright and looked over to the back door.

Another crash. This time, the back door flew open and Travis threw himself into the house, slamming the door behind him as he fell to the floor.

“Um. What the fuck?” I said, relaxing slightly, but not my You’re-Such-A-Freak facial expression. He was panting on the floor.

“Don’t turn the TV off!” He gasped, crawling on the floor and looking furtively over at the open blinds. “Get off the couch and onto the floor!”

I hesitated, making sure he wasn't playing a stupid game. The frantic look on his face convinced me otherwise. I slowly lowered myself to the carpeted floor and crawled to the other side of the couch, sitting next to him. He had his leg extended and there was a huge, singed gash in his leg.

"Oh my God!" I exclaimed loudly and he shushed me—holding out his hand, signaling that I should remain quiet. He was busy calling someone.

"Dad!" he exclaimed in a loud whisper. "Dad! The cops are after me! Some bitch turned me in and they followed me out to the house. I threw the bike down, hopin' they'd run over it and destroy evidence, but I burned the shit out of my leg. Now I'm hidin' in the house."

"What the FUCK, Travis!" I hissed at him. He waved me off and kept listening to whatever his dad was saying on the other end. Bewildered, I watched as he ushered me into the next room, what appeared to be the master bedroom, and then into the bathroom. The bathroom was brightly lit and he managed to drag himself to set next to the bathtub on the floor. He pointed to a cabinet and I opened it to find a bottle of Hydrogen Peroxide. He pulled a towel off the pile next to him and motioned for me to soak it in Hydrogen Peroxide. I did as he wanted me to and then whispered "Brace yourself," right before I pressed the towel to his burn. The way his eyes widened and he bit his arm to keep from crying out was almost comic and I had to keep myself from laughing, reminding myself that nothing about this situation was funny. The stress was starting to get to me.

"Travis, tell me what happened," I finally said. Apparently his dad had put him on hold.

The story he told me was something I would have expected to see on any one of the trashy television channels I was surfing through just five minutes before. It was one of those

unbelievable moments that made me wish I had a video camera to record it, just to prove that it happened and I wasn't making it up.

Apparently, Travis was a member of the Bandidos, some sort of nationally recognized Outlaw Motorcycle Gang, who are constantly watched by the FBI. His "buddy," Carlos, is actually the leader of the Houston chapter. The motorcycle we rode on to get to Waller was "his," but was actually stolen from some poor man in New Mexico.

According to Travis, some "bitch" that he knew who used to work for the Harris County Jail, who had been invited to his party, actually turned him in and had the cops waiting for him when he went to the gas station to meet people. Once he saw the cops and noticed they were watching every move he made, he "hightailed it outta there" and came as fast as his could on that Harley, which was *maybe* eighty miles an hour, back to the house. They followed him the entire way, sirens blaring and lights swirling around madly.

Travis, not thinking that they'd actually follow him onto his own land, turned off onto the long dirt road that lead up to the house. However, once he noticed them turning off as well, still close behind him, he had the clever idea to throw the bike down. This is when the burn occurred, for when he threw down the bike he forgot to move his leg out from underneath it. The tailpipe landed on his leg, inducing the burn, and then he made a run for it, around the back of the house, up the back porch steps, and then into the backdoor of the house.

"Well, why'd you throw down the bike?" I whispered, hanging onto every detail of the story, incredulous and furious at the same time.

"I was hopin' they'd run over it and contaminate the evidence," he whispered back. I couldn't tell if that was a stupid or genius idea, because I don't know anything about the law, and

much less breaking it. “The only problem is, now that I’ve destroyed Carlos’ bike...he’s going to kill me.”

“You’re exaggerating,” I scoffed. He showed me his phone.

“U can try 2 run, I will find U and kill U for fuckin me over,” was displayed in a text message on the screen. From his “buddy” Carlos.

“Oh, God,” I gulped, a cartoonish like gesture, but one that didn’t seem so funny now.

According to Travis, the reason we were hiding out in this bathroom is because they—the police—can’t see inside the windows to tell if anyone is even home. The only reason they hadn’t busted the door down by then is because they actually hadn’t seen him run inside. This explained why we suddenly heard the crunching footsteps surrounding the house, and a loud banging on front door. They were trying to scare us out. My eyes widened and finally I had felt the fear that my brain had been trying to process the entire time.

It finally occurred to me that we were hiding from the law. And I hadn’t even done anything wrong. But I couldn’t surrender myself because then I’d have to explain my part in everything, and knowing my luck they’d probably arrest me as some sort of accomplice. Or worse, call my parents.

Obviously, my priorities needed some figuring out.

My palms were tingling and sweaty. I looked at Travis. He raised his finger to his lips.

For quite some time we barely breathed. He was somehow still on the phone to his dad.

“Hey,” he whispered. I looked over at him. “Go sleep in the closet.”

I narrowed my eyes and felt the corners of my mouth turn downwards as I grumpily crawled over to the closet. Muttering profanities, I lay down and stared into the darkness. This was legitimately the worst night I had ever experienced. I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed I’d

wake up in my bed in Brown Cody. I opened them again, breathing in the stuffy air. I was definitely not in Georgetown anymore.

Author's Note

It was hard for me to tell this story in a detailed way while keeping it between 5-7 pages double spaced. Another thing I found difficult was balancing the detail and description of what was happening and setting the scene, with the actual dialogue and flow of the narrative.

While it all happened in one day, it was a pretty complicated situation. The important thing to note is, neither Travis nor I got caught or got in any kind of trouble. We managed to wake up obscenely early the next morning and slink our way back to the Austin area, taking all the different back roads we could manage.

I think the idea I was trying to get across in my narrative was one that describes young women's fascination with "the bad boy" and making impulsive decisions, and how, ultimately, young women need to realize there's a definition between watching James Dean's Rebel Without a Cause, and experiencing it. That was a really important lesson that I learned the hard way. Obviously.

Travis and I lost touch after that weekend.

To be specific, I cut all ties and avoided him as much as possible.

As terrifying as the experience was at the time, I look back on it now and have to laugh at how completely ridiculous it was. It was completely serious, but with this odd flavor of comedy that really characterizes a comedic situation. Sometimes I wish my life was a television show.