

Who's Fat Anyway? The Other Side of Fat

by Oso

We were in seventh grade when my best friend Mindy started calling me skinny. It wasn't necessarily a malicious thing, but considering I was the fattest kid in my class, it definitely felt strange. Everyone got a good laugh out of hearing her calling, "Skinny" out across the playground. Her rationale for doing this was that if you tell someone something long enough, it usually happens, or they at least start to believe it. I think she had read a book about the power of positive persuasion.

I was pretty much always the biggest back then, biggest at a party, the biggest in class. In my family I was not always the biggest, but that was on account of my age. "Give it time," they would say. So now, some years later, sitting around with the collective of *Fat Girl*, I realize I am not the biggest. Flipping through *Fat Girl*, I wonder, am I fat enough? Do I belong here? It's not that I think other people feel like I don't belong at *Fat Girl*; this is an internal dialogue that I have with myself periodically during meetings and whatnot. It's strange to walk this thin line (so to speak), going back and forth between being the biggest and then... I wouldn't say being the smallest, but definitely smaller.

At my work, the window display was so small that I wouldn't go in it for fear I would get stuck. I always sent the little clerks in for me. Yet, at *Fat Girl* meetings and roundtable discussions, I find myself waiting till others have chosen their chairs, making sure not to take a space that I don't need as much as someone else might.

Depending on the size of the woman in my bed, I find myself feeling different; not necessarily ever smaller, for no matter their size, I tend to have a large presence in the bed. But usually I notice the size difference when holding them in my arms. Although my fiancée is not a small woman, there's definitely a size difference between us. Late at night, I lie in bed next to her. I run my hand up her leg, to her fleshy thigh, and then over my thigh, which to my mind, in comparison, seems huge. And I think, God, my leg is big.

The size of me, in relation to different lovers, lucky for me, has always been a pretty positive thing. It makes the big ones feel not so big, the small ones feel safe, and the ones in the middle almost always feel smaller. So, with everyone feeling satisfied, along with that comes what has felt like to me, great appreciation for my size. I suppose it's a backwards way to compliment me, appreciating my fatness because it makes them feel skinnier. I get lots of comments, or shall I say, words of encouragement, not to change a bit. They love me just the way I am. I suppose for me to change would make them change too, in terms of their size in comparison to mine: the smaller I got, the "bigger" they'd get.

I remember sitting around one afternoon with some other fat dykes. We had just had a *Fat Girl* photo shoot, and someone turned the conversation to the idea of dressing up as Tweedle Dee, and they needed a Tweedle Dum. Someone else suggested me, and the fat dyke with the idea said, "She's too small!" I thought, "Wow, no one has ever really said that about me." But looking around that room, clearly, I was too small. Never before in my life, until *Fat Girl*, had I ever thought, am I big enough to fill this space?

I respect these fat dykes who I am working with: the ones much bigger, the ones somewhat smaller, and the ones pretty much my size. We have different issues, clearly, and at times, especially for those dykes bigger than me, that must be hard. I'm sure they look at me sometimes and think things like, "She could not possibly know how I feel." That is the same way I feel looking at skinny girls, and we are both right. ★

Fat

Tristan and

DANA: Tristan, how do you resolve your desire for a "small girl" with the issue of "internalized fat-phobia"?

TRISTAN: In general, I find myself drooling and swooning over big, luscious girls. That desire gets comprised, in part, out of identification and knowing the strength it takes to be a gorgeous fat dyke. I wanted to affirm that courage in my relationships. I wanted to date a fat girl to both encourage and mirror the love of my own body and to make a political statement about fat dykes loving fat dykes. What happened instead was that I fell head over heels in love with a thin girl. And so while I know that my total love of and desire for your body isn't about a rejection or hatred of my own, I do worry that other fat dykes will read it that way, as a kind of political slap in the face. I guess that at this point in my life I feel pretty solid in knowing that I do think fat women are hot and beautiful. The problem, of course, happened when I tried not to be attracted to you because you are a small girl. So in my relationship with you I had to work out two things: the first was allowing myself to be attracted to you, to find you really sexy while not feeling like I was buying into the stereotypes about what beautiful and sexy are and I also had to risk being rejected by you because I'm fat.

D: I often experience you as more comfortable in your body than I am (in bed and in the world) and I wonder how much of that ease comes from years of digesting pro-fat rhetoric. Were you always so confident, or did that grow out of your fat-activism?

T: No, that confidence was most definitely not always there. I had to work on it, and work and learn and relearn. It never really ends.

D: I don't think we'd talked about the big girl/little girl thing before we had sex for the first time—not directly at least. So we'd probably been together three or four more times before I consciously applied that information to my experience of our physical intimacy. Now, with that knowledge, I'm really fascinated by what that first time was like for you.

& Thin together

Dana* tell all (well, almost). * Dana is now known as Daniel

T: There are a lot of different answers to that question, but as far as body image stuff is concerned...I was really petrified. As much as I know about my body, and why it's so great, there was such a huge chance that you wouldn't know how good the gettin' was. It was like handing my body to you on a silver platter, and I half expected you to ask the waiter to return your meal; you just couldn't stomach it. I was pretty defensive—that defensiveness that I think comes across as extreme confidence...because I have to do the loving of my body for the both of us; in case you weren't there to meet me, in case you couldn't love my body the way I do.

D: I'd like to be able to say that my obliviousness to your mindset was due solely to the intensity of my efforts that first time, but I know it's more complicated than that. I'm thinking about how I used to insist that we were the same size...

T: An incredibly humorous, albeit well-intended, gesture...

D: Yeah, and I was thinking about how it was a way of not dealing with the size issue at all on my part—sincere as the perception felt to me. It's similar to the time I was trying to talk to my mother about fat politics and her response was something like: "but Tristan isn't fat, she's adorable!!!" That conversation made the ways that well-meaning denial (of size, race, class, etc...) isn't benign so much clearer to me. I kept feeling like she was literally refusing to see fat as a legitimate social problem by distancing my cute girlfriend from the negative implications of fatness. So, while my initial size-denial probably made some things easier for both of us, I think it makes for bad politics and I actually think things got hotter and more interesting for me sexually when we started talking about it all the time.

T: I think the transformation in your thought process about all of this has been really amazing. From originally thinking that we were the same size, and I know that you believed that wholeheartedly. It was really funny and it eased my fear of rejection, but of course it was pretty frustrating because you also could not fathom the kinds of daily oppression I would talk about, and I knew that you didn't know what that was like. There was almost a kind of refusal to believe that I was the object of so much hatred, or that fat people are asked to leave planes because they are supposedly too heavy or can't get jobs for basically aesthetic reasons. But after a while you actually started to believe that our bodies are different sizes and that culturally, mine means "bad" while yours means "good;" and I now feel like I have a really strong ally, that you actually do see my body, and you think I'm the hottest thing in town.

D: I think that another part of my refusal to see our differences had to do with my metaphors about being "big" enough or "butch" enough physically or psychically to be intimate with you. Now, I really get off on the ways we can play with those dynamics—whether

you're performing big bossy girl for me or whether I'm dominating you as a psychically huge boyish girl.

T: In terms of butch-femme stuff, I thought on some level that the girl needed to be smaller than the boy, and I was worried that you wouldn't be able to hold me, or hold me down. Fortunately, there are so many images of older butch-femme couples with weenie boys and bodacious girls, and that helped a lot. And of course I soon found out that you are actually more than strong enough to hold me down, and that was really exciting to discover, too.

D: It helps to be a strong, weenie gal with wrist restraints...I want to ask you about what it's like to be a fat dyke. What's it like to be a big dyke in queer social spaces? Is it less empowering to have a small gal at your side? What about when we go to the mall?

T: So many questions, my little one...I've been disappointed often by A) the lack of knowledge in queer communities about fat oppression and B) the total rampant, unabashed, unself-conscious fat hatred in queer communities... "no fat dykes" personal ads for example. It's just that much harder when you expect a group of people—your friends or people you do queer political work with—to support you; the fat-phobic comments feel like getting punched in the stomach. The perception of us as thin girl and fat girl by either a dyke audience or a straight one feels really complicated. I think it's actually more about fat-phobia than queer stuff, although being queer is that much harder at the mall. I know you have friends who disapprove of my body, and my friends want to make sure that I'm o.k.—"how is she about body image stuff?" There's always the danger that people will think I picked you because of my internalized self-hatred, or that I'm being a traitor. So, in terms of being an in-your-face fat girl, yes, your presence as a thin girl at my side is less empowering. I guess I know that we'd get even more shit on the streets if we were both fat, and there's a certain amount of privilege that I've gained in being in a relationship with you. I can use you as somewhat of a buffer from all of the things about me that make me such a target. I'm not trying to valorize this, just be honest about that privilege.

I really like the fact that Fat Girl calls itself a magazine for big girls and the girls who want them, because I want to see more small fat-philic gals speaking out against fat-oppression. I know that this is tricky territory, but I get so frustrated with people who insist that my interest in this issue is 100% about loving a big girl and not at all about personally feeling really angry about a totally under-addressed form of discrimination. I still have concerns about my visual legitimacy as a fat-lib proponent—but I guess the ally issue shows up in every movement. ★

Itchin' to talk about something? Tape it, transcribe it, and send it to us!