

Remember the Barbie Bandits – the two blonde babes who robbed an Atlanta area bank a few months ago, captured by a surveillance camera sporting designer jeans, Nicole Richie shades, perky ponytails and vapid smiles? Well, you may have been following this story faithfully, but I'd forgotten about it until last week, when I stumbled upon an online video interview with one of the alleged criminals. Apparently, the Bandits have been arrested and charged, and are now out on bail, living with their parents as they await trial



The video interview I caught was with Heather Johnston, a 19-year-old high school graduate who'd earned a scholarship to college, headed off in that direction, then taken a detour into the seamy world of exotic dancing before classes even started. It was in this dubious new work environment that Heather hooked up with co-Bandit Ashley Miller, and the two became fast friends, living in the fast lane, making fast money. But apparently, it wasn't fast enough. What started as a joke ("We oughtta rob a bank, ha ha!") soon blossomed into a full-blown scheme when the girls discovered that Ashley's boyfriend had a buddy who happened to be a bank teller. With their "inside man" helping them, the girls managed to scare the heck out of a bank full of people, then abscond with \$11,000.

Watching Heather Johnston's appearance on "Good Morning America" (online, after the fact) was a creepy experience, but in a way that's hard to describe. Everything about the interview was just a little bit off, from Heather's giggly demeanor and glossy pink lipstick, to interviewer David Muir's sympathetic tone and fluffy line of questioning. A header at the top of the screen asked: "Why Did Girl Next Door Rob Bank?" A banner across the bottom read "Fantasy Foiled. Barbie Bandits Caught." Muir never even addressed the question of "Why?" with Heather, but was exceptionally intent on fleshing out the "foiled fantasy" in all its titillating detail.

Bizarrely, there were no questions asked about motive. Why did Heather, the pretty scholarship winner with loving parents back home and everything to look forward to, turn to stripping, and then later, bank robbery? I desperately wanted to know, but apparently, David Muir did not. He did, however, ask about the tight jeans, sexy tops, and cool sunglasses the girls were wearing when caught on camera. Heather giggled and replied that they had called those glasses their "Stunner Shades," to which Muir responded, wittily, "Well, you sure stunned the nation!"

Then, scrambling for his gravitas, Muir asked what Heather and Ashley had done upon leaving the bank.

"We went straight to the mall," was Heather's congenial reply.

"To buy what?" asked Muir.

"Whatever we wanted!" quipped Heather, really getting into the flow of her tale.

Turns out what they wanted was highlights. Their first stop was a posh hair salon, where both girls had their blonde tresses made blonder, then on to a clothing boutique, and, later, the food court. These details were related casually, chattily, with nary a smidgeon of shame. Then, almost as an afterthought – as if it suddenly occurred to her she might not be able to coast on

pure hotness alone – Heather added that she and Ashley had also bought some food for a homeless person.

A Barbie Bandit with a heart of gold. Touching.

Apparently, it was this girly-girl excursion to the mall that would ultimately fell our young outlaws. They were caught on camera at the salon, sans Stunner Shades, and were identified two days later. When asked about this episode, Heather replied, “Yeah, some of the stuff we did was pretty ignorant.” At that point, I thought she’d break down – that remorse and shame would surely rear their twin heads. I was wrong.

“We meant to get wigs, but we never did,” Heather explained, rolling her eyes at the silly lapse in judgment. And that wasn’t the Bandits’ only “ignorant” move. According to Heather, on the way to the robbery, they took an errant turn and ended up at the wrong Bank of America. When they went inside and found that their co-conspirator wasn’t there, they called him, got new directions, then hurried to the right bank, where their heist went off without a hitch.

Except, of course, they got caught. And about that, Heather did seem a bit rueful. But only a bit. She never shed a tear during the interview. Never expressed sorrow, regret, or even embarrassment. (Okay, she did seem a little embarrassed about going to the wrong bank.) According to David Muir’s summation, “Heather knows she should be punished” (I saw no sign of that), but is “hoping it won’t be prison.”

No prison? For stealing \$11,000? From a bank? That’s a federal offence. Oh, and the girls had marijuana on them when they were picked up, so there’s a drug possession charge to contend with, too. And still, Heather’s got her fingers crossed that she won’t be going to prison. I guess hope really does spring eternal.

What gets to me most about this whole scenario is... well, lots of things, really. The parable of the small town girl who leaves home, takes a wrong turn, and gets herself into trouble is nothing new. What is new, and very disturbing, is Heather Johnston’s attitude. Not only does she not seem sorry for what she did, she doesn’t even seem to know she should be sorry, or what it is she should be sorry for. Her only regret, it seems, is getting caught. Her only shame is that she was “ignorant” (actually, “stupid” would be a better word) for neglecting to wear a wig, driving to the wrong bank, heading to the mall without her Stunner Shades disguise. If she does go to prison, Heather will likely see it as punishment for her ineptitude, not her immorality. Maybe I’m just old school, but this is not a satisfactory outcome for me. I need there to be a Moral to the Story! I need the Girl Next Door to Learn Her Lesson.

Maybe that’s impossible. Maybe Heather is a sociopath, with no conscience, no mechanism for guilt. Maybe – but there’s nothing in her history to suggest that. I think a better answer is that she’s just a product of her culture – an extreme example, certainly, but a product of her culture, nonetheless. She’s come of age in an era when concepts like Right and Wrong, Good and Evil, are so blurred, so intertwined, it’s hard for the immature mind – or any mind, for that matter – to know the difference between them. Hers is a world where Tony Soprano is a beloved national hero and Jerry Falwell a despised devil (even in death); where a repulsive, amoral TV show like “Nip/Tuck” is considered the height of artistic achievement by those who give out the awards; where arbiters of opinion like Rosie O’Donnell tell us regularly that Christian Evangelism is just as dangerous as Islamic extremism; where classical music has all but disappeared from even public radio, while nihilistic rap is the ubiquitous, thrumming soundtrack to our days; where nobody’s ever deemed bad or wrong; we are all just victims of an unhappy childhood or low self-esteem or a poor body image or what have you...

It’s a world where journalists interview criminals about their fashion choices and fabulous

highlights, building up the “fantasy” of Babes-Who-Rob-Banks, without ever asking why? Why did you do it?

The only person who seems to be responding sanely to this situation is Heather’s mom. An elementary school teacher and mother of two, the poor woman wept through her interview with Muir, saying she was “devastated” by her daughter’s actions.

“I did something special with my girls every day,” she said, bewildered sorrow pulling at the corners of her mouth. “I hoped I would instill positive values by doing with them daily. I thought that would guarantee me wonderful adults.”

There were never any guarantees, Mrs. Johnston, and today, all bets are really off. As a mother, I share your pain and confusion, and I’m not sure I have any comfort to offer... or answers. But maybe, today, we parents need to worry less about instilling “positive values” (just another Oprah-fied catch phrase now rendered virtually meaningless) and more about enforcing good, old-fashioned discipline.

Next time I have the urge to do “something special” with my daughter, I think I’ll just ground her, instead.