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Abstract

'Are you going west?' she asked when we first met that night in the cafe of a 24-hour petrol station in South Australia. I could hardly believe what I'd walked into. 'I'm going through to Perth,' I replied. She looked like Carly Simon off the album covers, the sort of body object I had always wanted for a girlfriend. Even then I'd the feeling that the wailing jukebox, countless cups of coffee and chain-smoked roll-your-owns was all on her territory.

Big Smoke Woman

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We drove for miles on small talk feeling each other out by the dim light of the instrument panel and flashes of distant lightning.

Where are you going? How long have you been on the road? What music do you like and where do you think's the best surf in Australia?

She must have been feeling pretty pally then because she put her head on my lap and tried to stretch out across the front seat.

'My boyfriend's waiting for me in Perth. He's a real spunky guy. He's a Californian. His old man's loaded. We're going overseas in January, soon as he can get the bread together.'

I didn't have a girlfriend so I shut up. Later I told her I was on holiday from a boring abattoir job in northern N.S.W. and wasn't worried if I ever went back. I was driving towards bigger waves and some vague idea of finding my real value across the other side of the continent in Margaret River.

The night and highway rolled on.

'You want to be in a surf movie,' she ventured after a long quiet.

I told her I wasn't real fussed.

She continued that some friends of hers were making a surf movie at Cactus Beach and that we ought to detour from the highway and spend the night there.

We did. But there was no surf and no surf movie. All we saw was her old ex-boyfriend.

She was pleased though.

I think he was all she wanted to go there for.

We drove all the next day taking turns at the wheel. She was pissed off and taking it out on my accelerator. The heat and dust of the Nullabor and being cooped up in my car didn't help. She was menstruating too.

'Got any old rag?' she asked that morning before we left Cactus.

'No, I haven't. What do you want rag for?'

'What the fuck do you think!'

I managed to get out that there were a couple of *Dawn* 'date-rolls' in the boot of my car.

'They're no use,' she replied.

I gave her a couple of dollars when we arrived in the next town.

I was pretty quiet on the highway. I didn't think there was much I knew or had experienced that would interest her, not right then. She carried the conversation anyway. I've usually found it's easier when I just listen to people, I can't make as many mistakes that way. I realized she knew a lot on subjects I had only just heard about.

She knew the intimate histories of 'The Band' and Dylan and Nilsson and Crosby, Stills and the others.

I listened but a lot went over me.

She school-mammed when I told her I hardly ever listened to the words of songs on the radio.

'You really should. That's the main part,' she enthused.

'Most of them I can't hear the words they're singing, and when I can they keep just going over and over. I guess I listen mostly to the music,' I explained.

During her explanation of the Age of Aquarius and the hidden meanings of Lennon/McCartney, it somehow came up that I didn't know what a 'roach' was.

'You sure you come from Byron?' she prodded, 'I thought everybody up there smoked.'

It was out. I was a bumpkin.

She was eighteen (that's what she told me), one year younger, but she seemed so much more sure of herself. It must have had to do with her father being a professor at Adelaide University — the same place she had already dropped out of.

I was from a family who all left school early and were meatworkers.

She was like somebody from another world.

'Jesus you're a fucking bore!' she started after another long silence. 'You're too quiiieet. You're so ... so cold, and withdrawn. You don't even think. I've spent fuck knows how long with you and I can't remember a single intelligent thing you've said. You're sooo boorrrriinnnggg.'

Coming from her it hurt. I'd always had this idea — some people call it ego I think — that I was cool and all women loved me, well almost all, and her criticisms sliced through this idea of myself like a just finely steeled knife. She only made me withdraw further.

We were quiet for a long time.

Then she tried to apologise saying she was sick, had had no sleep, was up all night screwing and smoking hash with her ex.

I sulked and brooded and fiddled with the car radio.

We were so far out in the desert it would only pull in one station and it seemed to play only classical music. Even then the signal was weak and interfered with.

I turned it off.

Power and telephone lines running parallel to highways and the people who put them there must be the curse of all long-distance drivers I thought.

I forced myself to hum a tune.

'That's Donovan isn't it?' She knew all the answers.

I slid deeper into myself and my driving.

'I can see you're a real sensitive person,' she started. 'But you shouldn't let your emotions run your life, you've got to control it with intelligence.'

It struck deep.

If only I could, it'd be the answer to all my problems, I'd be in control. I thought about that for a long time, until she got going again.

She wanted me to buy her more tobacco, some dope or a bottle of 'Southern Comfort'.

She wanted to get out of it and I wanted to keep on going. I entertained it, but didn't want to and couldn't bring myself to throw her out.

Then it happened. She was driving in her brief undies and halter-top with her left leg drawn up lotus style looking out her window at the desert. She was pretty good at making herself at home.

'Did you know, a cheetah in the African desert has been clocked at 150 MPH,' she told me.

'No.'

'They can. They've been clocked at 150 MPH and faster. I saw it on tv.'

I looked at the speedometer.

'I didn't know that,' I paused marshalling facts. 'A hundred and fifty's pretty fast ... I thought they could only do about 60 — flat out. My little brother got the Guinness Book of Records for his birthday. I read about it in that.'

'Yeah, well I saw it on a tv special.'

'Look, we're doing 70, 80 now, do you reckon a cheetah'd be able to keep up with us. A hundred and fifty is twice as fast as we're going now.'

She jerked back and took a deep breath.

'Yeah, well they can run really fast.'

That shut her up.

Anyway, I knew I was right. I knew I was more right than she was.

It was dark when we entered the eucalypt forest and it started drizzling. Wallabies were on the road licking the steaming bitumen. I slowed to 45 but had to stop every couple of hundred meters or so and blow the horn and yell. A few times I thought I'd have to get out of the car and move them bodily.

She wasn't much help.

'We used to slow down to 50 and drive along on low beam, that's what we should be doing,' or 'Go on! Stick your head out and yell at them.'

But the novelty of the wallabies and cool rain had changed my mood. I let her words run down off me like the drizzle on the windscreen.

I had to slow further. The drizzle and frequency of wallabies increased. And they seemed to get more stubborn.

'We might as well stop the night at the next motel,' I suggested. I'd been waiting for an excuse like this all along.

She insisted it be a double bed.

We had a big meal in the dining room and went to our room and showered.

I offered up the theory that the water was salty because it was probably from an artesian bore.

'Yeah, maybe,' she admitted with just a towel wrapped round her.

I wondered how she lived on junk food, hard liquor and dope and still kept her body so attractive. Then I remembered her telling me about old businessmen treating her to slap-up meals in fancy restaurants and big cash handouts, 'treated me like their own daughter', she'd said.

I wondered how it was I found her with no money expecting to make it to Perth.

She lowered herself into bed like it was a hot bath. I busied myself in my suitcase trying to decide what to wear yet knowing I was beyond the impressing-her-stage. Then she picked up on the three copies of MAD I had in the suitcase.

'Fuck, not MAD. Don't tell me you read that crap. Typical poofta gremlin conformist Australian male youth behaviour,' or something, she burred.

What did it matter now I thought. I walked to my side of the bed and dropped my towel while she spouted how sheepish Australian youth were according to Nat Young.

She didn't notice me slip out of my oldest pair of navy blue y-fronts and under the sheets.

'Have you had much experience?' she queried lighting a smoke.

'Nope. Only a ... couple of women,' I said trying to sound cool.

She eyed me as she huffed and puffed on another cigarette. The motel was silent except for the steady patter of rain on tin roofs.

'You're not like the other men I've been with.'

I wondered if there was something wrong with me.

'What do you mean?'

'They've always finished screwing before we get out of the car.'

I wondered whether this was the sign for me to begin. I think I must have been hard or in one of the various stages of being hard ever since she insisted on the double bed back on the highway. It must have been a couple of hours at least.

I drew in the contours of her body covered by the thin sheet. She made me feel the long skinny boy-man I knew I looked. She was so much more developed than any girl I'd fucked before. They all seemed like school-girls alongside. Both of them were.

She would be my first big 'real' woman.

I wondered if I should do something special, something I'd only read about like eat her out or fuck her between the tits or something.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'Nothing.' Well here goes I thought.

I rolled and slid across to her and took her in what I'd always thought a romantic embrace. Her tits were nice and warm and her nipples stabbed into me. I slid my knee up between her thighs and ran two fingers along and into her still dry vagina.

But I felt no urgency. Nothing. There was only that small complaining part of me needling me to fuck her. Some other part had the brakes on. My heart just wasn't in it.

I lay there like a baby, listening to my heart-thump, myself breathe, staring past her.

'What's the matter with you now?' she whined, 'I haven't got all night. I've gotta get some sleep.'

'I dunno. Something's wrong.' I felt a nuisance. 'I can do it with other girls.' I disentangled and lay on my back.

She was quiet for awhile and I noticed she had the cigarette going again.

'You've been really good to me Peter. You took me to Cactus, bought me stuff ... really taken care of me. I want to repay you. Screwing is the only way I can make it up to you.'

It stuck in my mind. I was silent.

'C'mon Pete, what's the matter?' she cheered stubbing out her cigarette. She rolled on top of me and tickled me.

I lay there staring at the ceiling trying to push her away. I felt cold inside. Nothing was funny anymore.

'Shit! What's the matter with you? If you don't get it on soon I'm going to go to sleep,' she proclaimed. 'I'm going to have one more smoke and then it's lights out.'

Everything was slipping away. I felt for my cock knowing it had retracted to the size it takes on in cold water.

'I dunno. It's like, it's like I've got something to live up to...' The words were lost. I noticed her cigarette was nearly finished.

She caught me looking and we stared at each other. She reached a hand across and took my grub-like cock. She kneaded and squeezed it like I wasn't attached.

'Jesus,' she sighed. Her handwork got rougher until she was just squashing it.

I took her hand away and lay there silent.

'I was trying to say ... it's got something to do with my family, the way I was brought up. Something...' I agonized after words.

'Shit! What've they got to do with it? It's *you*. You're the only one here,' she sighed. 'Or are you going to get your family to come and do it for you?'

'I said ... it's to do with my family and the way I was brought up,' I said feeling surer, 'with church and school, and sunday school and ... everything, life. You know, childhood, and growing up, what you're taught, at home, school, everything ... like ...'

'You're fucked, you're really fucked, you know that.'

I was beyond caring.

'Yeah. I know. At least I know I'm crazy, not like some people. They're crazy and they don't know it,' was my stock reply. My father had taught me well but it was little consolation. I rolled over away from her and stared at the wall.

'I'm going to put the light out now, I'm rooted — figuratively,' she imparted.

I lay there staring skimming through my childhood and the sex and psychology sections of magazines I'd read, searching for the answer to get it up or get to sleep.

She exhaled loudly behind me.

I could hear her groping for a cigarette.

I waited till she struck the match and I rolled over.

'I don't give a fuck, if it takes me till I'm fifty — I'm gonna work myself out.'

'Yeah ... you do that,' she murmured drawing back behind her red glow.