

I-65

by Carl Bohlin

It was night time on I-65 and the windshield was getting pretty bad with all the bugs. Small ones, fat ones, big juicy ones...you name it. My wiper fluid was out and I had to pull off at the Stuckey's coming up so I could clean them off. Talk about gross. There must have been a hundred easy. Up in the distance it lit up the sky, this huge yellow sign with yellow letters. "Stuckey's." I put my turn signal on and pulled off at the exit. It was 10:30 p.m. and they were still open. They never close.

As I pull up to the pump I notice this red pickup in the other aisle. This guy is getting regular. He's big and has a plaid shirt on underneath his overalls. The only other thing about him is this good sized wad of tobacco inside his lower lip. Suddenly he notices me noticing him. He looks right at me, nods, and then spits this brown-colored saliva right into the garbage can. I swallow and smile at him and proceed to get out of my car. There are some pink paper towels in the dispenser but no more liquid in the bucket. The one over by the big guy looks full. I pull out two towels and walk toward him. He looks up again. I say excuse me and grab the windshield cleaner. I shake off the excess fluid. The big guy grunts. He looks over toward the cashier in the window. I look too. She's sitting there watching us with her chin in her right hand. Her elbow is resting on her knee. She's hunched over and all you can really see is her blue "Stuckey's" blazer. He pulls the nozzle out, turns off the pump, and spits in the can again. As he waddles up to pay, I can see his round frame ends at his waist. He has no butt and his overalls are baggy. I bet he weighs at least 275.

The bugs are caked on. I look at my watch again. It says 10:35 p.m. Tubby comes back and gets into his truck. He takes off. I hope I never see him again... the fat slob. What would I ever do if I ever do get that fat? I'd probably choke on a ham sandwich just like Mama Cass. Cigarettes! I need some cigarettes, so I walk up to the mini-mart and enter. The lights inside are so bright, I begin to squint.

"Winston Lights, 100's please," I say.

"Dollar twenty-five; need anything else?" the girl asks.

"Just some matches'll be fine."

She slides the cigarettes over the counter and then the matches like they were pucks in an air hockey game. Then she winks at me. Right, I'm thinking. The Stuckey's chick thinks I'm hot. Forget it.

"So, do you live around here?" she inquires.

"Just passing through . . . going to Chicago tonight." Why am I even wasting my time with this girl. Just get your smokes and get the hell out of there, I'm thinking. The girl has to be around sixteen years old, but I can tell she liked to flirt with the male customers who come into the store. She's tall and has glasses that make her eyes look really big. She also wears a hat. I decided to make a joke about the large customer who just left.

"Are most of the people around here as big as that guy who was just in here?"

"Who, Big Tom? Well I guess he is a pretty hefty kind of a guy. I think that I'd have to say no."

"No about what?"

"No to your question, silly . . . not everybody that comes into the store is as big as Big Tom. He's a sweetie. Kind of on the quiet side, though. Him and Mary Jean been goin' together about a year now. Sometimes they fight like cats and dogs. To be quite honest with you, I don't know what she sees in the man. What she oughtta do is get linked up with a better man, a thinner man. Someone like yourself."

Suddenly, a chill comes over me. I begin to get really warm all over. The thought of Mary Jean, whoever she was, scares me. I can just see Big Tom chasing me around his farm with a shotgun in his hand. No thanks . . . I don't need that.

"Is that your car?" the girl asks.

"Yes, that's my car," I reply.

The car is a good car. Kind of rusty in some spots, but it is capable of getting me from point A to point B. The body is that of a 1978 Nova, which means "no go" in Spanish, I think. I've got mag wheels on the back axle, and on the inside I've got blue fur on the roof with these fuzzy little balls that hang around the trim. I call it the run down cruiser. She lets out a laugh.

"Hey, it runs," I reply after leaving the money. I walk out the door and back to the car. The whole time I can feel her eyes looking at my ass. I don't look back; I would probably turn into a pillar of salt if I did. Just as I begin to open the door to the car this cricket comes hopping out from underneath. Being still a little ticked at the cashier inside, I take my foot and smash the bug to the pavement. I crush him and get into the car. There's this street light near the entrance and the bugs are trying to make love to it. There's a million of them. It's a wonder why they don't collide with one another. I'll probably have to pull off again in an hour after I kill some more with the windshield.

I-65 North. I'm back — on the road again. Visions of Willie Nelson pop into my head. I wonder if he smokes pot? Somebody told me he did. I switch the station to one that's playing some cool music. The song ends.

"Taking a look at the forecast for the rest of tonight: Fair and mild, low around 63. Tomorrow, partly cloudy with a fifty percent chance of showers later in the afternoon. Currently it's 65 degrees in Indianapolis. Coming up within the next hour we'll be hearing from ZZ Top, Lynard Skynard, and from Rush, but right now here's one from the White Album — by request, it's the Beatles on Q-95."

Helter Skelter comes blaring out of my Jensens. Sounds good. Not too much traffic tonight. I don't mind it though. The only thing is that I get sleepy sometimes. I need a smoke. I push in the lighter and pull out a cig — 19 left. That's better. John Lennon shouts out, "I've got blisters on my fingers!!!" Don't tell me those guys weren't on drugs. Up ahead in the distance I can see a figure. There's a bag at his feet. He's got his arm in the air. Wait, it's a girl. A girl hitchhiker, can you believe that? It's eleven o'clock at night and this gal's hitchin' on I-65 — no way. She's pretty. I pull over.

"Where you headin'?" I ask as I roll down the passenger window.

"Chicago," she smiles.

"Hop in."

She throws her bag in the back and jumps in. She doesn't say much except to thank me for the ride. I tell her it's no big deal. Then I ask her what a pretty girl like herself is doing hitchin' on I-65 this late at night — actually hitchin' period.

"I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself," she sneers.

"What are you running away for?" I ask, carefully.

"How do you know . . . what makes you say that? I'm not runnin' from nothin'," she insists.

I put on my turn signal and edge back onto the highway. After traveling for another ten minutes or so I notice these red lights coming up behind me. Just then the guy in the red pickup passes me on the left. He's in a big hurry. I freak out. It's Big Tom. My eyes widen up and I grip the wheel with both hands; I squeeze the wheel. My eyes are glued to the road.

"What's wrong?" the runaway asks.

"Nothing, s'just that big guy . . ."

"What big guy?"

"Did you see that big red truck just a minute ago?" I look at my watch. It's eleven p.m. "There was a big fat guy. He chews tobacco."

"Oh no!" she shouts. "He's looking for me!"

"You are running, aren't you?"

"Maybe I am. You are going to Chicago, aren't you? Just keep driving. Mind your own business and I'll mind mine," she says sharply.

It's Mary Jean. I've picked up Mary Jean. She's cute, seems really nice, but she's the biggest bitch. I hate her. She has on this pink tank-top that reveals some pretty perky nipples; no bra. Her jeans are skin tight. She notices me looking at her.

"You have a girlfriend?" she asks.

Not again, I'm thinking. Not this one anyhow. Is this really even happening?

"Yes," I lie to her.

"Then what the heck are you looking at, creep?!!" she barks.

"I can look," I answer. "Just can't touch," I laugh.

"Weirdo!" the girl looks out the window and the conversation is over for now. She reminds me of the bugs that dirty my windshield. She's becoming a pest. She's becoming an irritable little pain in my head.

Just then a red light flashes on the dashboard light indicator. I can feel the car start to miss. I try to pump the accelerator. It's no use. I don't bother to put my turn signal on because there's nobody following. The big guy has long passed us up. I pull over.

"Great, Just great! There goes my ride to Chicago," she says sarcastically.

"Listen kid, you probably won't even make it to Rennselaer if you don't shut up!" I come back.

I keep a set of tools in the trunk, so I open the door and walk to the trunk to take a look. I open it. Inside are a set of jumper cables, an old baseball glove, some old rags, a frisbee, and a baseball bat.

"Look, man, forget it. I'm just going to get my bag and try my luck with another car. One that runs, I hope," she whines.

So the car stalls from time to time . . . big deal; all it needs is to cool down for a minute or two.

The bat was a Louisville slugger, one that I had got on bat day at an old Cub's game. It had Billy Williams' autograph stamped in the end of it. I grabbed it and looked at the wood grain — the way it had kept so well for so long.

"Just my luck, a loser of a man with a loser of a car. Why meee??" she bitched.

There wasn't a gas station within miles. The road was empty ... I wiped the blood off with one of the rags. There was some on the car too. I took care of that also. My clothes were pretty well splattered. I changed them. I cleaned it up really well — even took care of the fingerprints. Then I left her there with her bag.

"Goodbye, Mary Jean," I said.

She doesn't reply. I drive off. After another half hour there's a Shell station on the right. I pull off to use the bathroom. It's 11:45 p.m. In the restroom, which is wide open, there's some tobacco juice in the sink. I gasp at first then wash my hands. I leave quickly and walk back to the car. Big Tom is talking to the attendant inside, pointing toward the highway. They don't see me. I'm sure of it. Carefully, I put the bat in the back of his truck; the towel also.

I drive off again. I am unseen. I know it. When I arrive in Chicago, it's 12:30 a.m.