

Tripping

Wrapping her scarf around her neck, Carla sat back in the passenger seat of her cousin's ancient '54 Volvo, gazing out with amazement at the painted houses on the narrow hilly streets of San Francisco. With his pale wispy hair hanging to his shoulders, his wrinkled short-sleeved button-down shirt revealing bone thin white arms, Johnny looked like some kind of phantom comic character driving over potholes, swerving carelessly around delivery trucks, seemingly oblivious to the passersby walking their dogs and rushing through intersections. Both of them were flying high on Johnny's dope.

This old Volvo was imported from Sweden he had announced to her proudly this morning. Had she ever noticed the red Volvo sedan in the KZEC parking lot when she came to work? he asked. No, she hadn't.

"Well, my dear, that Volvo is the station manager's car, even older than this one, so you see we're in good company." She laughed, recalling with pleasure how he had managed to get them both vacation time, even though she was a new hire Girl Friday at the public TV station (a family funeral in Southern California Johnny told the station manager mournfully).

Patsy Cline was singing the oldie but goody, "Crazy". Carla turned up the car radio.

"Crazy, crazy," Johnny echoed, one hand drumming on the dashboard in time with the country western singer. He pulled out his tape recorder from his pocket, leaned

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over and touched her shoulder, letting her know he intended to record their trip for posterity.

“You’re crazy,” she laughed, peering out at the fogbank as they head onto 101 south going out of the city. “I don’t even know where we’re going.”

“Do you even care, Carla Deane?”

“No!”

The wind rushed through her open windows. Johnny began telling her about an acid trip he’d taken with a guy from the station. Stoned out of their minds, they’d watched President Nixon resign on TV.

“It was hilarious.”

Carla nodded, half-listening, patting her skirt covered with pink flowers on a green background. She’d bought it in Union Square with her first KZEC paycheck. Then she checked for her wallet in her purse, smoothing her white lace top over her chest. She no longer wore a bra, very daring she thought, just another example of her brand new life here on the West Coast.

Wind sliced through the car as they sped past Daly City and Burlingame, toward San Mateo and San Jose. “*Angel of the Morning*” had replaced “*Crazy*” on the radio. Johnny scowled, switching the dial. And she loved that song! She’d listened to it over and over on the TWA headset, but Carla wouldn’t tell Johnny that.

Carla checked to see the passenger door was locked. She shivered, feeling both hot and cold, stunned. She wished now she’d brought more than this light scarf. Her long dark hair blew out in the wind.

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She hadn't slept at all last night from excitement at the thought of this trip. Johnny said he wanted to visit a friend about a music gig in LA he might get sometime in the future. She felt happy Johnny had invited her. They would be driving down the coast, getting to see the beaches of California!

She wished she had a cigarette now, but Johnny had decided to quit smoking, so she had left her Trues back in her room (if you could call that closet Johnny gave her a room, ha ha).

They stopped at an Arby's in San Mateo and ordered roast beef sandwiches at the Drive-In window. Johnny kept the motor running, afraid the Volvo might stall if he turned it off. While they waited for the fast food, Johnny drummed with his long nails on the dashboard to the radio, irritating her as usual.

"What's wrong?" Johnny asked.

"Nothing."

"Nothing!" he imitated her, making his famous ghoulish face. Carla punched him in the arm.

"Ouch!"

They ate in the car. Carla had to wait for what seemed like ages for him to get out of the Men's room. He had to stop again to use the bathroom at gas stations in Gilroy and Salinas.

"I hope you aren't going to do this all the way to LA," she complained.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I must attend to my bodily needs like everyone else," answered Johnny, settling back into his seat. "Besides we're not going to LA, we're going to Van Nuys."

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"But you said we were going to LA," she said, disappointed.

"Van Nuys is almost LA." He patted her knee.

"Are you sure you don't have an infection or something?" She wondered aloud.

"What?!" he asked, affronted.

Carla was thinking of the gonorrhea test she'd had just last week at the Planned Parenthood in the Fillmore. She wouldn't dare mention that though. She was still taking antibiotics.

"Well, there's diseases out there."

"OhhhhOOOOOO," he shivered dramatically, glancing sideways at her. "How would you know anyway?"

She sighed, not even bothering to reply. Since she arrived in San Francisco, a lot of their conversations had ended up like this. They both pretended he didn't have a whole, secret dangerous life. For that matter, she wished she had a life to be secret about. Her head felt light, her clasped hands hot. It was going to be a long afternoon.

At Monterey Johnny got onto Highway 1 that, he told her, went along the coast by the Pacific Ocean.

"You gotta see Big Sur," he told Carla, reaching out and jiggling her knee.

She laughed. Big Sur sounded like a blockbuster movie.

They crossed an arched bridge rising through the fog. The view of the cliffs and crashing waves beneath them was spectacular. She imagined herself in the passenger seat of a yellow convertible, hair flying in the wind, just like in a movie.

Johnny made a left turn. "Julia Pfeiffer State Park," she read.

"A short stop to use the bathroom," he told her pointedly, daring her to comment.

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The Volvo made clunking sounds on the gravel road as he slowly drove through a deep, dark grove of redwoods to a parking lot. Carla imagined the first pioneers seeing these otherworldly forests for the first time, considered with astonishment the Native Americans who inhabited them. She'd never seen trees like these majestic giants. So mysterious. "Sacred" was the word that came to her. She rolled down her window and put out her arm. She could almost touch the huge, scabrous trunks.

"I feel as if I'm in church," Carla said, sighing. She was standing beside Johnny on the park's Overlook Trail. They were watching the sea otters playing in the surf below.

"It's like I'm praying."

"Just like being in that pew in St James," he joked.

"Better," she answered, remembering those endless Sunday masses kneeling in their local parish church.

Clouds were gathering, hovering over the high, high trees when they left the park. Driving South on Highway 1, Carla saw glimpses of the ocean, never-ending beaches of white sand.

The sun was setting when they reached Santa Barbara. Johnny parked at a Look Out point above a beach. Leaning against a wooden fence above the beachfront, they shared a joint. Carla watched seagulls swing high above the gray crashing surf. She breathed in the dry cleansing smell of the coastal mountains and the wet ocean wind.

Suddenly Johnny leaped over the railing and ran over the dunes toward the ocean. Pulling her scarf over her head, Carla followed, taking off her shoes at the surf's edge, dancing in and out with him ahead of the foaming waves. He picked up a stick of

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driftwood, dragging it through in the wet sand. Hunching her shoulders to protect herself from the wind, Carla went off, down the beach by herself, thinking of nothing.

It was dark when they left the ocean. A few miles more down Route 1 and Johnny was acting his old peevish self again, complaining about the sand in his shoes, in his pants.

“You took off your pants?” she teased.

“I wish,” answered Johnny.

At a Chevron station, he filled the gas tank, bought a six-pack of beer, cigarettes too, and went to the Men’s room.

“I thought you quit,” Carla said, nodding at the cigarettes. She wasn’t going to mention the Men’s room.

“These are for you.” He threw the green cardboard pack of Trues in her lap.

She put them in her purse. They were going to reach Van Nuys soon he said..

“Tell me about your friend,” she said, patting her skirt. She’d never really known any of Johnny’s friends, even when they were little and their mothers brought them together every week to play.

“Richard’s a music producer. I met him at Carnegie-Tech. He taught in the music department.”

Carla nodded; they had both gone to the same college in Pittsburgh, till Johnny dropped out.

“We can spend the night at his place,” Johnny volunteered. “Look for Van Nuys.” he pointed to the folded maps in the door slot beside her.

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It turned out Richard lived twenty minutes from Los Angeles. Still it took them two hours to get there from Highway 101. Johnny's friend treated them to a late dinner, lasagna they picked up at an Italian take-out deli down the street. They drank the six-pack. Richard, a serious, dark-haired man older than she expected, regaled Johnny with news about his new, very lucrative assignment, a documentary about women and rape, which Johnny could possibly be a part of (cross your fingers!).

By midnight Carla was lounging in Richard's Jacuzzi, gazing up at the night sky, trying to identify constellations. Johnny, who insisted he never touched water, napped on a lawn chair. Richard swam laps in his pool, back and forth, a nightly exercise, he confided. Carla was impressed.

Richard came to the pool edge. Johnny roused himself to light a joint, offering it to Richard.

"I don't smoke weed anymore, but hey, I'm celebrating tonight," said Richard.

"Congratulations!" Johnny nodded with his usual half-smile, half-sneer.

"The deal of a lifetime!" Richard slapped the water. "And it's all lined up, six one hour specials starting in the fall. We're even going to run tape of a few women in jail."

Johnny clapped desultorily. "Nothing like rape to get attention!"

"Why are they in jail?" Carla couldn't help calling out from the Jacuzzi. "Aren't they the victims?" She didn't hear Richard's answer, and she didn't want to either. She stepped out of the hot tub, reaching for a guest towel.

"Send me a demo, Johnny," Richard was saying. "I'll let them know you're interested."

"Yeah, maybe," Johnny said.

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They spent the night on Richard's living room floor. Carla slept on a foldout cot; Johnny took the sofa. It took a long time for her to fall asleep. From the narrow, hard cot, she could see out the window into the dark, pocked with streetlights. She wondered about Johnny's friend and their relationship. Richard was an attractive man. Did he have a wife? A girlfriend? A boyfriend? There were big happenings at the studio tomorrow, he'd mentioned; unfortunately he wouldn't be around to say goodbye.

"Where to now?" Johnny rubbed his eyes the next morning. Carla was up already, having tiptoed to the bathroom in the dark earlier. She'd heard Johnny with Richard in his bedroom; she'd heard Richard leaving.

The sky, Carla noticed through the window, was a soupy gray. They ate leftover lasagna and then were on their way.

"Killing me softly with his song, with his song," Johnny sang along with Roberta Flack. Carla hummed too; we're tripping, she thought happily.

They had just passed the LA Airport exit when Johnny said, "I have an idea. Let's go all the way to Mexico."

"Johnny!" Carla exclaimed, shocked. "Won't I need a passport?"

"Not where we're going," Johnny mused. "You have a driver's license, don't you?"

"Yeah, but it's from Pennsylvania." She pulled her wallet out of her purse.

"That's all you need. Don't worry, they never check American tourists I heard till after Ensenada."

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Well then, why not? They had the whole weekend! They stopped at McDonalds for coffee. Carla bought a Spanish dictionary at a chain bookstore in a mall. Traffic got lighter after they passed San Diego.

"I like this car," Carla said, patting the dashboard of the Volvo.

Johnny smirked. "Dad went to Mexico to a big sales convention once," he said over the wind and the music. His voice, high and wispy, matched the dissipating fog outside.

"I remember those pictures of Uncle Victor," said Carla, tuning in. "Aunt Eunice gave them to my mother."

"Yeah," Johnny nodded.

"Your dad posing with a burro outside Mexico City," Carla reminisced.

"How apropos!" Johnny slapped at the dashboard. "I used to look at that photo for hours. Like maybe I'd get to know him better seeing him next to an ass."

"Yeah," Carla said sympathetically. "I didn't know my dad either."

"Yeah, well, he didn't beat you either."

Carla winced, thinking of those times Johnny showed her the blows on his back and arms. She never understood it. Uncle Victor had always been nice to her.

They exchanged dollars for pesos at San Ysidero. It was a short drive from there to the border. The two officers waved them right through the checkpoint.

"See?" Johnny grinned.

Tijuana was so crowded, donkeys everywhere, honking cars. That night they got a small, cheap noisy room in a beach hotel in the middle of nowhere. She fell down on the lumpy double bed as soon as they walked in. She felt raw. Johnny curled up in a

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wicker chair that he insisted smelled of urine and rose water cologne. He took his tape recorder out; she wondered what he could tape this time of night and then immediately fell asleep.

The next morning when she woke the heat was already overwhelming, heavy as a suit of armor, wrapping her in its airtight skin.

"Where's the air conditioner? I'm dying from the humidity," Johnny whined. "God, am I the only one who is hot?"

When they emerged outdoors, a layer of yellow dusty air enveloped the car. It hovered over the town too, murky, hiding the sun and the clouds. Johnny maneuvered the Volvo through narrow, crowded streets. They stopped at a roadside stand and bought tortilla burritos wrapped in brown packing paper. Johnny got snarky. Carla resented his unrelenting joking, his snide repartee, though she didn't understand why.

In one of the many sidewalk markets he bought a wood donkey with gold, red and green tassels swinging from its mane and tail.

"A present," he winked when they returned to his car. "For a friend."

"Darn," Carla said, "I thought you bought it for me."

"Want it? Here, cous," Johnny dropped the donkey in her lap.

"Is this to remind me of Uncle Victor?"

"That asshole." Johnny patted her knee. "I'm glad you're here, cous."

Carla smiled, laying the toy donkey in the back seat. She looked out the dusty window as Johnny filled the car with gas at a Pemex station. The terrain turned hilly, spotted with flowers. The road narrowed, winding up and down, in and out of canyons caused by volcano eruptions eons ago Johnny pointed out. Peace, a yellow blanket,

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spread over her. Johnny seemed happier too. A dreamy expression lit his face. They passed ruins, abandoned missions. She could have gone on this way forever.

Coming over the hills she saw a wall surrounding a courtyard, and then wispy olive treetops and a small, old house surrounded by a gate.

Johnny stopped the car.

“Gotta pee,” he said, jumping out of the car with his tape recorder. Leaving the engine running, he stretched out his arms and then disappeared into the brush.

Carla opened the passenger door and stepped outside, dropping her scarf on her seat. She leaned against the wall. The air was very still. A few birds flew up scattering.

Through the gate she saw dusty trees with limp leaves hanging down making shadows on the courtyard. A heavy woman stood under a clothesline, folding clothes. An old man leaned against the door. A little boy ran around the side of the house, and then came back, crying. The woman dropped the clothes into a basket, reached out to the boy. Carla smiled hesitantly at them, wishing she'd taken more than two years of high school Spanish. The air was blue, dry. Far away, blue shadowed mountains curved along the horizon. Nothing moved. All the brown dust settled deftly, punctured, still. She looked into the car, noting her scarf, then picked the toy donkey from the back seat and set it on the courtyard wall.

Johnny reappeared, waved at the family in the hacienda; they didn't wave back.

“Let's go!” he said, jumping into his seat. He never noticed the donkey left behind on the wall.

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The tires screeched against the gravel as they set off down one road and then another, bouncing in and out of small narrow dry creek beds of cacti where high blowing yellow flowers bloomed. Carla fell asleep.

They came to a rundown stucco roadside bar. Carla opened her eyes. A neon sign blinked *Cerveza* from a small high dirty window. Johnny stopped, got out, stretched.

"I'm thirsty. Let's take a look," he said.

She followed him in. The bar was dark and cool, narrow. They were the only customers except for several men, middle-age laborers, by the counter and an old woman in front of a drab curtain behind the bar. The men talked louder, became more animated.

Johnny headed toward a round table near the back.

"What are they saying?" Carla asked, sitting down across from him. She saw a blinking red and yellow jukebox in the corner.

"They just noticed my gay demeanor." Johnny positioned his chair so his back was to the corner. "Cheers," he saluted the men across the room, taking out his tape recorder.

"Johnny, don't!"

"Worried for my safety?"

"Well, yes I am! Put that away."

Johnny set the tape recorder on the table. Were the men watching? Carla shivered, noticing the old woman setting out beer bottles on the countertop.

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"Want a beer?" Johnny stood up, put his hand in his pocket and pulled out some Mexican dollars.

"Whatever you're having."

He began to count the coins and bills, went over to the jukebox and deposited a few coins.

Carla sat, uncomfortable, needing to pee. She watched him walked past the men to the bar and order in Spanish. The old woman took his money and disappeared behind the curtain.

"A penny for your thoughts," Johnny said, returning with two open bottles of beer. She glanced at the label, but didn't recognize it. Johnny took a big drink.

"I wish I knew Spanish." Carla took out her Spanish dictionary from her purse and opened it on her lap. "How do you say, 'Where is the Women's room?' in Spanish?"

"You should have gone in the bushes like me," Johnny said, taking another swig. Carla took a drink, making a face at the strong, bitter taste.

"Love. Love is strange," Johnny sang the old '50s song along with the jukebox.

"I'm boring you," she said, taking another sip.

"Just a little, cous." He began tapping their bottles with a pen he took from his pocket. Pling pling pling. She watched him scribble the lines of a clef on his napkin, add musical notes. Pling. Pling.

"I'll call it 'Symphony with Beer Bottles'," he said, noting her interest.

"We didn't have to come to Mexico for that."

"Yeah, well." he took another drink, struck the bottles with his pen, then transferred the sounds into notes on the napkin. More sips, more testing the sounds

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with the pen. Carla watched him transcribed notes on his improvised score. She leaned toward him to lessen the pressure on her bladder.

"I need a bathroom."

"Here," he said, holding out an empty bottle.

The old woman had reappeared from behind a dirty curtain. She was motioning to Carla.

"Oh God!" stage-whispered Johnny. "She's been eavesdropping the whole time."

"Well, you needn't worry because all you said was bullshit," Carla answered crossly. Standing up, she followed after the woman, stumbling down a narrow dark hallway.

"Thank you, *Gracias*," Carla gushed, nodding gratefully as the woman left her in a tiny room. The toilet had a broken seat.

Peeing standing up, Carla felt so relieved she nearly forgot where she was.

Coming out of the bathroom, she saw the men watching her. "Angel of the Morning" in Spanish was playing on the jukebox. She had a sensation of *deja vu* as if the ground were moving or she was on that airplane from Pittsburgh. "Just call me angel of the morning, baby."

Johnny would never have chosen that song; it must be the men who picked it. It felt easy to ignore their sullen looks now. In Spanish, the words did sound softer, sweeter. Was it because of the beer she had drunk? Could it be only a few months ago that she was coming into San Francisco as dawn lit up the heavy cloudbank outside the plane window?

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Reaching their table, Carla sat down heavily. Johnny was still playing the bottles, this time with a table knife. Where had he gotten it? He plinked along with the jukebox, clinking the knife against glass, speeding up the tempo.

“Hello, angel,” he said, grinning.

“You’re making fun of me,” she told him.

“So?” He hit the bottle hard with the edge of his knife. It fell to the floor, rolling, spilling the remaining beer, shattering against the table leg.

"Oopsy-Daisy!"

Johnny gave her a little sour smile and leaned over in his chair to pick up the slivers of glass. Embarrassed, Carla opened her Spanish dictionary.

"Com'on, let's go," she murmured, dropping the dictionary into her purse. "You're ready, aren't you, Johnny?"

He nodded, clinking the one remaining bottle the last time and picking up his music-scored napkins.

As they walked away, Carla gave Johnny a little hug to show she wasn't mad. Once outside she held out her arms as if beginning a dance. Oh! how wonderful to embrace the wind blowing across her. How cool and soothing compared with the dank foul-smelling bar.

“You drive,” Johnny said, sliding into the back seat. He lay down on his side.

Carla daydreamed as she drove, mesmerized by the lonely road, the dry desert landscape. She could hear Johnny twitching in his sleep. Sometimes he made loud noises, waking up from his own erratic thrashing. Once he called out, saying that the spirits were laughing at him.

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“What?!” Carla cried out, startled. She had been thinking of a cute guy she’d met at the TV station last week. Maybe she’d see him again.

Johnny leaned over the front seat and touched her shoulder. “Spirits, Carla. I saw them laughing.”

“You’re just tripping,” she called from the front seat.

“Spit on the dust, that's what the Aztecs do to keep the spirits away,” he said.

“Spit on the dust.”

“What do you know about the Atzecs?”

“Mayans then,” he replied. She heard him spitting out the window.

“Stop the car, I want to get out,” he said.

But Carla kept on driving.

It seemed like forever when, exhausted, she stopped the Volvo near an empty shack. It was turning dark. She rolled down her window. The night overtook her, filled with the moon, stars, and a great silence. She turned to see Johnny asleep in the back seat, clutching his tape recorder in his fist. Carla, rolled up her window, locked the doors, pushed back her seat and closed her eyes.

She awoke to crowing and faint scuffling sounds. Startled, she sat up. Out the front window, a new red sun slid up from behind rolling hills. A stream trickled into a gutter in front of the car. Was that a rooster and some hens scurrying about? She saw Johnny crouched beside the gutter, holding out his tape recorder toward the chickens.

Carla opened her window. "What are you doing?"

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Hearing her voice, the chickens and rooster scuttled, clucking madly. Johnny hissed at her from the gutter. He walked away down the road, making cock-a-doodle-doo noises, holding out his tape recorder. The farmyard appeared abandoned.

They argued about who would drive. Carla said it was his turn. She wanted to stop for mole chicken in Tijuana but, when they finally got near the border, Johnny said there wasn't time.

"I've got to be at work tomorrow morning, and so do you, Carla, my dear."

They passed right through customs. This time they took Highway 5 North, inland.

"It's ugly, but it's fast," Johnny explained.

He drove all the way up the coast, taping at intervals while shouting random obscenities at passing cars, imitating roosters crowing. Carla wrapped her scarf over her ears, pretending not to hear.