

Susan Tepper  
Joy Ride

**A**FTER ABOUT AN HOUR IN THE CAR Russell was sorry he agreed to this whole deal. He'd been hired to drive Old Billy from Jersey to Colorado for the holidays. *Just* Old Billy. Not these three twenty-three year olds Billy picked up last night at that cowboy bar in Ohio. An underground bar, no less. But Billy had insisted and Russell was in no mood to argue out there on the cold street. It had been a long day of driving and he just wanted a burger and bed. Being on a walker, the old man had to be practically carried down into the bar then up again. He snagged these kids into helping. The bar was mobbed. A blasting juke-box and one of those plug-in horses that bucks you off. Some chick on the horse and guys screaming and placing bets on how long she'd hang on.

Russell snagged a round table. The five of them shoved in. Billy regaling the kids with his tired stories of the Grand Ole Opry. Yawning, Russell got up, inched his way through the crowd toward the packed bar. He'd heard it all – as they drove through Jersey and Pennsylvania. Dolly Parton, Brenda Lee. How Billy could have had Brenda Lee – all of it. Frankly it was a snore.

His initial instinct had been to bypass Ohio, take the southern route instead. Better chance of decent weather. But the old man flipped his wig demanding the northern route. After a lot of explaining, Russell had folded. Anything to shut him up. Big mistake. Now he was stuck with these kids. Sonia, Peaches and Tad. Old Billy and his tall tales about his *ranch* in Colorado. Horses and all that.

Horse shit, thought Russell moving into the center lane of the highway. The girls, he had to admit, were pretty hot. Tad could use a hosing. Next to him, up front, Russell noticed an odor.

In the back seat the old man was having a high old time. "You're both so pretty," he was saying, "you don't need to argue over who gets to sleep in my bed. I'll take you both together. Me in the middle. A meat sandwich."

The girls found this hilarious, and Tad laughed so hard his body started bucking.

"Hey, watch it up here! You want to cause an accident!"

Russell didn't find anything funny about it. In fact, Billy in back with those two girls made him sweaty around the neck despite it being another freezing day. Who are these people? They could be anything. Convicts on the loose. They didn't seem to have jobs they were worried about, taking off to Colorado so free-wheeling.

"I have to stop for gas," he told them. The tank still more than half full but he needed an excuse to get out of the car, move around a bit, think. Billy might insist on keeping the girls in the back seat the whole trip which meant he'd be stuck with Tad. There wasn't enough air up front for them both.

While the car was being gassed, Russell went into the snack shop and

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bought two Mounds and a Milkyway. The sky looked puffy which could mean snow. Each day's weather more dismal than the day before. As if he were headed toward a black and impenetrable vortex.

As he made his way slowly back to the car, Tad stuck his head out the window. "Russell," the kid yelled, "get some Tampax would you?"

Tampax? What do they think they have here? A delivery boy? He continued toward the car and got behind the wheel.

"OK," he said. "Let's get a few things straight. I don't mean to sound petty but I'm not buying anyone's Tampax. Or anything else. That includes food and lodging."

"I'm payin'!" shouted the old man. "This trip is on me! The kids get whatever they want. I'll pay. I want my kids to be happy."

Russell stared out the windshield. Gusts blew the scrawny trees planted in groupings. It did nothing much to make the service station more palatable. He bounced the car keys in his hand. These three had Billy by the balls, the old man lapping it up like a thirsty dog.

"Fine. Pay for whatever you want," said Russell. "I don't care. But I'm not getting anyone their Tampax. However, I will wait while you go inside and get it yourself."

"I respect you for that," said Sonia. Leaning forward she touched him lightly on the shoulder. He could feel her face close to his. "It was for me, and I told Tad to shut up about it. Why can't you shut up, Tad? You only end up alienating people. Nobody wants to be anyone's slave."

"My ancestors were slaves," said Peaches.

"I'll just be a minute," said Sonia opening the car door.

Russell watched her walk past the pumps toward the snack shop. She was very tall but had a nice sway, her high blonde ponytail bobbing. He peeled the wrapper off a Mound watching her disappear into the snack shop.

"What's that chocolate I smell?" said Billy.

"He's eating a Mound," said Tad.

"Who? Who's eatin' a Mound?"

"Russell."

"I want a Mound," said Billy.

Russell went on chewing. Ordinarily he'd pop out of the car like a jack-in-the-box and get the old guy his Mound. Despite Billy's rude cranky attitude, he was the paying client and Russell the lackey driver. Well today he didn't feel like doing it. When he finished the Mound, he unwrapped the other one, the paper crinkling; aware that they were all aware of what he was doing.

"He's got two," said Billy.

"That's plain selfish." Tad pulled out a cigarette.

"Not in here you don't. No smoking in this car." The big Lincoln

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belonged to Leo, brother of Nina who owned the car service. A special arrangement, the Lincoln, due to Billy being a celebrity of sorts. Leo would murder Russell if he smelled any remnants of smoke in his precious car. That was a given. Russell stared at Tad until the kid put the unlit cigarette behind his ear. And don't cross me, Russell was thinking. None of you better cross me.

Sonia got back in the car, then.

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After lunch at Taco Bell nobody switched seats.

"It's so comfy back here," Peaches was saying.

Through the rearview mirror Russell saw her head resting on Billy's shoulder.

"You cozy up, sweetheart," said the old man.

"Back here is fine by me," said Sonia.

Billy happy as a pig in shit with a girl on either side. Saying *my kids* or *the kids* every other breath. Tad announcing he liked the front seat for the extra leg room.

Not if I saw them off while you're sleeping, thought Russell. He glared at Tad and started the car. Hadn't felt this angry since he fell off that truck in the Gulf War, breaking most of the small bones in his face. "Does anyone need to use the bathroom? If so you better go now!"

Tad, who seemed high all the time, was making frequent trips to the Mens Room. He claimed he had to pee every time Billy needed to; making Russell suspicious. Girls peed a lot; everyone knew that; and old men. Russell hardly had to pee and he would turn fifty in December. He looked over at Tad. The passenger seat was way too close in his opinion. The kid caught Russell looking and grinned.

"You are one upset dude," Tad said.

"Don't fuck with me."

"Hey! Hey! None of that talk! My girls don't like to hear cussin' or swearin'. Right girls?"

"Right Billy," Peaches said in her soft voice.

They drove a while under a darkening sky. Russell calculating by states and bathroom stops how much longer was left on the trip.

When they finally stopped for the night, he would phone his brother Stan back in Jersey. Tell him what transpired over the day. Being an electrical worker Stan was used to dealing with complicated systems. Tell him about the girls. How having Peaches in the car was making him horny.

Hour by hour the sky looked more impenetrable. Russell checked it out with each bathroom stop. He thought of pilots coming in for a landing using radar. The Lincoln had no radar. It did have rear wheel drive. Nice if you live in Florida, he thought, peering up again. "Sky definitely a snow sky," he said. Nobody answered.

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A little while later Russell heard a purring sound coming from the back seat. His hands tightened on the wheel. *What a bunch of sickos.* He considered pulling the plug, stopping their joy ride. Kicking the three of them out of the car at the next rest stop. The old man would scream and holler like crazy. So be it. Only seven or eight states left to go. Russell could buy some ear plugs. He thought about this as flurries blurred the windshield. But Peaches smelled like fresh lemons. It was a quandary.