

Far As You Want

by Piers Marchant

At a rest stop in Montpelier, they stopped to buy Cokes and gum from the vending machines. He was showing off, trying to jimmy one of the locks with a safety pin but it stayed locked and she laughed at him and he said goddamn, look at all a them Milkyways.

They stopped again outside Fort Wayne, where there was a truck stop on the thruway and a gift store. She said get what you want, I don't care, and took out a credit card from her pocket. She said she got it from her mother's purse while she was sleeping in with her boyfriend. He's twenty-three, can you believe that? she said. They sleep late every fuckin' morning. And then he walks around naked with his hairy stink ass in the kitchen before he takes a shower. It's disgusting. My mother is such a bitch.

Sweet. He picked up a carton of smokes and a silver Zippo which had the Detroit Lions on it because they were driving through Michigan and he wanted to remember that. He wanted to get a silver plated scale model of a Harley 1500cc mounted onto a fake cherry-wood platform, but she said it was too ugly so he acted like he was hurt and let it fall out of his hands onto the floor and she laughed again and everyone turned around to stare at them. You can all go fuck yourselves, she said. We're on vacation.

They had blown out of Cuyahoga Falls before the second bell. It was crazy. It came to him out of nowhere, out of being bored and watching her hang out in the open door of Bartlet's truck. When he pulled into the parking lot in the morning he didn't want to go into school. Instead, he sat in his car with the heater running, listening to the radio and smoking. He was restless. He thought about going back home, back to bed, or scoring some beers and getting messed up, maybe. Then he saw Bartlet's truck.

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He watched her there with her friends, standing in her boots, taking deep drags off someone's cigarette, her hair blowing across the shoulders of her leather jacket. He had watched her smoke before in the little student lounge by the cafeteria. He wasn't a freak about her, like he could sometimes get about a girl, he just liked to watch her. She smiled a lot but her shoulder blades were taut under her shirt like the fins of a shark.

He had tried to talk her up some before but she was strange. Removed. Her attention was never focused on what people said. She was always cool with him, smiled and said hey in the hallways, but there was that distraction. He couldn't figure it. After a second or two her gaze would fix and she'd trance out on something. It made her seem stoned and spacey, slightly unreal. But that tight little body of hers was real enough.

Standing in the parking lot, he saw himself in his car with his arm around her, imagined telling Russo and McPherson about it when he got home, wiping their faces with their hands to mask their envy and lust.

He got out before he knew what he was doing and stood in the parking lot with the engine of the Ford still running, blowing into his hands and looking at her. Then he was motioning for her to come over to him and she was smiling back in bewilderment and leaning off of the car towards him.

They stood for a few seconds, the exhaust from the car circling around their legs and curling into their lungs. She chewed gum and absently bit at her chapped lips, listening to him. He couldn't think of anything funny to say, a way to make it seem like a joke because it wasn't, so he was honest. We can just drive around, he said. Maybe to Wiley's. Get some food and back before third period or something.

She smiled and turned her head back toward her friends standing there with Barlet. They were silent, watching the two of them. Sure, she said. A trip. Fun.

Yeah, he said. You wanna?

On the way to Wiley's he was glad as hell he had thought of it. She was sitting next to him, looking around, checking his car out. He could see more closely the eye liner she wore, following the curve of her lids with thick black and tapering into the corners of her eyes. Deep, green eyes, with flecks of brown. The leather of her coat creaked when she turned her head. You know what? she said. Forget breakfast. I mean, we've got this car. Let's get out of here for real. Let's travel.

This was something he wasn't sure about at first. But then the idea hit him, and he got blazed off it. It meant they would spend the night together somewhere. Maybe a bunch of nights. He felt his blood rush his veins and fill his heart like a water balloon about to burst. Where to? he asked. But whatever, he knew it didn't matter.

She wanted to stop by her mother's house first to get some things. He thought about what he would do if she didn't come back out. He vaguely remembered something about her Daddy being gone. Died, split town -- something like that.

He smoked a cigarette and flicked at the ash with his finger tips. He was still buzzing with adrenalin, antsy as hell. It seemed too good to be true, and suddenly he wasn't sure about it. His mother, for one thing, wouldn't understand. Would she call the cops? And what about cash? He only had a few bucks. He watched his fingers as the cigarette burned down to the filter.

When she came back outside she had a shoulder bag with her. In the

car, she smelled like smoke and Juicyfruit and his head felt heavy. He thought about the condoms in the glove compartment, hoped he would get to use them. Okay, she kept saying. Okay. Let's just drive. Go.

They drove all the way through Michigan into Gary, Indiana, smoking cigarettes and listening to the radio. They talked about school, about different people they knew in common, how fucked up everything was, how much they hated everybody. People are just assholes, she said. They don't deserve to live. Yeah, he said. Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out.

They drove down the highway and through small towns with old, gray buildings and past white fields with tiny houses off in the distance and cows in straggled groups standing in the snow. She sat there and looked out the window. The initial rush of their skipping out and leaving town had burned off, and now he wasn't sure what it was he was doing. It was fucking stupid or it wasn't.

By the time they reached Gary, it was getting dark. There was a bitter wind coming down on them that kept blowing the nose of the Ford off kilter. They got a motel room at a Days Inn with the credit card. He stayed in the car, set back in the dark of the parking lot, and watched her go to work.

She looked older to him then, watching her through the streaky side window. The way she carried herself, the way she looked everyone in the eye, daring them. She knew you had to want to be caught, wanted some rat's ass employee to check out your story. You needed to push it so far that no one could believe the size of your balls.

She came back into the car and without thinking he leaned over to kiss her. She stiffened. He pushed into her mouth. It tasted acrid. Her tongue was little and soft, without any texture. It darted into his mouth, across the bridge of his teeth, inside his lips, and then

suddenly retreated. She made a sound from the back of her throat. He kissed her harder, their teeth clicked, and she clenched her jaw.

He felt a ball of something heavy and black melt in his head, ooze down the inside of his skull. It burned him. He tried to pull her to him, he was going to fuck her right there in the front seat of his car in a crowded parking lot. But she shoved him away and kicked her legs up between them.

He sat there for a second, all of his muscles tensed and hard like concrete, the electric synapses in his cortex firing off like sparklers. He shifted back to her, but she was looking out the window again, chewing her fingernails.

There was a Denny's down the road from the motel. In between was another field, frozen mud covered by weeds and chunks of rocks, last week's snow, shit-brown and crusted over. Right in the middle, for no reason, there was a cluster of stripped down trees, uncut. An island. She stared out at it. Did you see that bitch at the counter? she finally said. She tried to give me a hard time about my signature. It figures. Nobody ever believes me. Steam from their commingled breath had condensed on the glass. She traced jagged lines on it with her knuckle.

They went into town, hit a crowded bar. Nothing fancy, some knickknacks on the wall, CD Jukebox playing cross-over country tunes. It was hot. Bodies pressed up against them, men in their forties in fancy silk shirts and moussed hair; bikers with full beards and bellies that stood out like latent pregnancies; women with make up and deep set eyes hovering around men and each other, laughing, drinking shots. They sat in a corner and he went to the bar and took out his fake ID. They each had a couple of Jack and Cokes and smoked cigarettes. He smoked these down to the filters, and crushed them into little balls. He was pissed. He wasn't sure why,

but somehow this thing wasn't going the way he thought it would. He didn't want to be there anymore and suddenly it seemed like he was a long way from home.

We should play this game, Lenora said over the music. She hadn't spoken much since the car, but he didn't give a shit.

There's this game where we pretend we're different people that don't know each other at all and then it's like we're meeting for the first time, you get it?

He got it. He waved his hand at her. Proceed.

She drank. And then she stood up and was gone.

He started moving around, drank a couple of shots, tried to flirt with the bartender, but she brushed him off. He didn't know what to do. It was all wrong now. The whole thing was stupid from start to finish. What the hell was he doing out here? His mom had probably already called his dad. His ass would get busted when he got back. Probably lose his car, take a whip or two, and for what? Bullshit.

He walked around the place, his hands stuffed into his pockets. The women were older -- twenties, thirties -- most of them wouldn't talk to him. He had another couple of drinks, sat at a table of college girls and someone wanted to dance with him -- a fat chick with big tits -- and he tried to go with her but he was stumbling around and her friends were laughing at him, this drunk little high school kid trying to dance, so he was embarrassed and then felt a little sick, a rush of bile and acid in his mouth. The fat chick started yelling at him for something he did, but what the fuck? He didn't know. Her friends were coming at him, giving him grief and then a big dude with black cowboy boots was trying to get hold of him like he was the Lone Ranger. But he pulled away and got lost in the crowd, chilled out in the bathroom for a minute, puked a little. Then he

snuck out and played some pool, which was better, because it settled him down, even though he was shooting like hell.

He mostly forgot about her until she was standing in front of him. She had changed her hair somehow, brought it back tight behind her in a bun. She was holding a drink at her chest.

Been watching you play, she said. I'm Sandy.

He looked back at the table, took a shot.

Hey, she said, you wanna dance or something?

Whatever. They went on the floor. She pressed in close to him, put his leg between her thighs. What's your name, sugar? she whispered, squeezing his leg.

She put her face against his neck, so he could feel her breath on his skin. It was her breath. Like that, he was all into her again. Crazy bitch.

Steve, he said, we met before, remember?

I sure don't, she said. I'm not from around here. My boyfriend would kill me if he knew I was dancing with you.

And then she was away from him, and back in the crowd again. He felt like he was slashed open and his guts were hanging out and he knew in that moment that he would do anything for her. Whatever it took. He was wrecked and in love, and smoking cigarettes in a bar in a different city than the one he had woken up in that morning. His head was spinning a little as if he was going to puke again. He sat down and put his forehead on the table to take the weight off of his shoulders. The counter top was smeared with old beer and drink specials. It stuck to his skin. And then, suddenly, she was standing in

front of him. She wanted to leave with him, she said, take him to her motel room. She held his eyes for a second, and he felt his throat constrict, the force of blood going to his head made him dizzy. Nothing made any kind of sense.

Back in the car, she was flushed, full of excitement. She told him she wanted to do it with the lights on so they could watch it go in and out. She asked him if he was married, where he was from. Her voice was different. It bothered him. He didn't know how to answer, so he just muttered something stupid. She told him she was a stewardess for American Airlines, and she had a layover for a night. They stopped at a liquor store on the main drag and she bought handfuls of tiny airplane liquors. Miniatures. They rattled in the paper sack like marbles, and she was laughing and popping them open and sucking them down, letting the liquor spill down her cheeks and neck. She held one to his lips and he drank it without looking until she pulled it away and finished the rest. He looked down from the steering wheel and looked at her fingernails. They jutted out like red curving claws. His mind was blazing for her.

What did you say your name was again? she asked.

And filled with that moment, his eyes half-closed, he yanked the steering wheel over and suddenly they were crossing over the median, sweeping into the other lane, and she screamed at the oncoming cars, and laughed, and gripped his thigh, until she was digging her nails into his leg and he said now you'll remember me you crazy bitch, and all the lights began to float around them in a circle like heaven.

