

Following the Trail

By: Joe Kuharic

The dust swirled around the tires of the car as the candy apple red '67 Ford Mustang named Delilah thundered through the desert. Empty pop bottles clanged together, littering the floor of the back seat. The leather seat itself was filled with alligator suitcases. The young man in the driver seat looked over at the ravishing young girl in the passenger seat next to him. A smile slithered across his face as he recalled the first time they met. They were both about twenty-five when he'd handed her the note; that's when she fell in love with him. After that day they had gone everywhere together.

It seemed like they had traveled over the entire country, which was good because they both liked to see new places and didn't want to stay anywhere for too long. Though, he thought, it would be nice to be able to stay in one place for more than a few weeks.

She looked over at him from behind her polarized Versace sunglasses. Her black hair billowing in the wind, were ravens escaping through the window. She popped a stick of celery green spearmint gum into her mouth.

"I'm glad we decided to take this trip," he said.

"Me too! I've never been to Mexico before."

"It's especially nice this time of year, but I'm just ready to be out of the country for awhile," an enormous grin encompassed his face and it was infectious as she too began to smile.

The sign on the side of the road read, US/Mexico border 10 miles. Beyond that was a speed limit sign posted at 70 miles per hour; they were easily doing 90. He began idly flipping through the stations on the radio; turning the dial and hearing the satisfying click of old electronics. He bypassed the news channels looking for some good 'ole Rock and Roll. He passed over 96.5 F.M. where "Carry on my Wayward Son" buzzed out of the speakers.

"Oh wait, I like that song!" she exclaimed.

"Ha, you would!" but he relented and left the radio alone.

"So where are we going when we get there anyway?"

"Well, there's a hotel I know of in Monterrey. It's aspirin white, kinda looks like one of those adobe churches you see in old westerns, except there's palm trees instead of cactuses in front of it. There's a guy that I know who stays there a lot. He can show us around."

"Oh, okay" she paused momentarily, "You know I can't speak Spanish right?" he looked over at her and laughed like a kid at a fart joke. "It's not that funny,"

"You're right, I'm sorry. I just never really thought about it,"

Ahead of them an armadillo was crossing the road in its brown suit of armor, but they barely paid it any heed as they blew past; it became just another speck on the landscape. It however mattered very much to the armadillo that tucked itself into a ball and rolled back to the edge of the road.

"Hey, don't forget to give your mom a call when we get down there, I know she gets worried about you," he said.

"Yeah, she's pretty over protective sometimes,"

"She just cares; don't worry about it too much,"

He reached in his front pocket and pulled out a box of Marlboro Red's slipping a cigarette quickly between his lips, he was her James Dean. He replaced the box and began patting himself down looking for a lighter, he turned to look at her but before he could say anything her brass Zippo was lit and waiting at the end of the stick.

"Thanks babe," he gave her a knowing wink

She looked out at the open desert as they were driving ever closer to Mexico. It was fairly barren out here. Mostly rocks painted a dirty rust color that couldn't possibly be appealing to anyone. What little vegetation there was to see was either dead or dying. She stuck her arm out the window and made it dance in the wind, up and down, waves on the ocean. She could feel the resistance of the wind on her hand as she pulled it up and the hard force as she brought it back down. Abruptly she was pulled out of her thoughts.

His cell phone, which had been resting on the center console, had begun to ring. She scooped it up and looked at the caller I.D.

"Restricted number," she said with a frown.

He took the phone from her, thumbing the send button in one swift motion.

"Yello!" he'd been waiting for this call.

"Am I talking with Mr. Etzel?" came the voice on the other end of the line.

"You can call me that. Who do I have the pleasure of speaking with?"

"My name is Special Agent Southwell. Mr. Etzel, you're in a lot of trouble. I'm guessing that Miss Birkner is with you? Why don't the two of you pull over and we can settle this peacefully?"

The young man gazed up into his rearview mirror and saw a dozen pairs of rolling red and blue lights were still following closely.

"No can do Agent, we're on our way to a little vacation of sorts. There just simply isn't time to stop,"

"That's Special Agent. Come on Mr. Etzel. Your little bank robbing spree is over. Haven't you corrupted Miss Birkner enough as it is? Why don't you at least let her get out? I'm sure the District Attorney will go easy on her,"

"Now that's definitely something I'm not going to do. She doesn't want to get out and I'm not going to make her. Goodbye Agent,"

"Mr. Etzel, wai-," the line went dead. He wiped it down and tossed the pay-as-you-go phone out the side of the window.

"Well, I guess that means they're on to us," she smiled and touched his thigh, reaching up to kiss him on the cheek. "There's nothing to do now but keep going!"

Driving faster still they came upon the next green sign: US/Mexico border 3 miles ahead, have your passport ready, be prepared for a wait.

"When we get to Mexico I promise you I'm going to take you shopping. I know I've been saying it for awhile but this time I swear we're gonna do it. And we're going to go snorkeling too, I've always wanted to do that," he said.

She reached across the seat and hugged him. "I can't wait!"

He now reached back into his thoughts to their last robbery. They had become so comfortable with it that it seemed like any other day on the job. She would fake illness, go into hysterics, anything that she could think of to cause a distraction. As always he'd slip the note across the counter to the attendant, he always chose a woman; less of a chance they'd reach across the counter and try to be a hero. They were careful every time, this time however the camera in the bank was able to get a clear shot of his face and it was only a matter of time before the F.B.I. was able to track them down; more than likely putting the heat on her mother. She looked up in the rear view mirror and noticed that the police cruisers were starting to back off. "Hey look, they're leaving us alone!"

"Oh, good. For a moment there, I thought we were in trouble," he said.

They crest the hill to the border and were greeted by a barricade of awaiting police cruisers.