

THE SMUGGLER

Larry shifted down a gear and fumbled for his Malboros, finally succeeding in locating the battered packet in his jacket pocket. The zippo flared and he inhaled the smoke and flipped it shut with a satisfying clink. A quick check in the rear view mirror revealed nothing more than an eighteen wheeler drawing closer. It had pulled onto the interstate just past Boonville. He contemplated outrunning the gargantuan monster, the Viper had the power to outrun just about everything, including the law. Today was not the day for playing boy racer though, the merchandise in the back was too valuable to risk drawing attention to himself.

Another time, another place he had played this game, dancing with death on the interstates and secondary roads. Back then he had been driving the old green Super Bee, the Dodge had been his vehicle of choice for years. Chrysler seemed to make the fastest production cars and in his game he needed speed as opposed to image.

Leanne had been his companion when he ran moonshine from Kentucky to Chicago. They had met at her father's farm in West Virginia when he had stopped to ask directions. One look into her steel-blue eyes and Larry had been hooked by the intense stare, like she was reading his mind with bemused detachment. She had given him directions and then stepped back smilingly.

"Will we be seeing you again?"

"I don't think so," he pulled the shades over his eyes, "man's got a business to run, but if you feel like tagging along I could use some company."

"Where you headed?"

"Chicago," he shrugged.

"Meet you in fifteen."

Larry had stared at her but she was already striding up the driveway. It had been a joke, he always joked like this. One of his favourite jokes was to call a girl and ask what she was doing right now and when she said nothing, he would ask if she could fetch a wedding dress and meet him at the altar in ten minutes. Most times it got a laugh, but he had the distinct impression that if he used that throwaway line on Leanne, she would have come out in a wedding dress.

She hadn't blinked an eye when she popped the trunk and saw the rows of bottles neatly stacked in boxes.

"You need to pack those in blankets," was her only comment, "you pull up next to a police car and they hear rattling bottles, you're sunk."

It was the little things that counted. Like packing the bottles and making sure they stayed upright, making sure his taillights and indicators were working. How many times had he been busted with a broken taillight? Leanne thought of those things. She knew his favourite brand of cigarettes and beer, she even thought of extra pepperoni on his pizza.

They had become more than business partners. Perhaps it had been the constant threat of arrest that drove them into each other's arms, or maybe it was just the sheer loneliness of driving a thousand miles twice a month. But something had happened between the two of them and nothing could ever be the same again.

Larry changed down a gear and let the semi roar past, and in a moment he saw her face staring in mute wonder at the truck bearing down on her as she crossed the road. He had screamed out a warning but it had been lost in the screech of tyres that bit into the blacktop. Leanne had tried to move at that moment, but it was too little too late as the front of the truck caught her beautiful body and pulverised it. He had seen her sliding down the front of the truck and under the wheels. Blood spurted out of every orifice in her body as the wheels crunched her body into nothingness. He had known she was dead before the truck finally ground to a halt. His girl, lying dead beneath the wheels of an eighteen wheeler. They shouldn't have been in this truck stop. She had wanted to carry on into Columbia, but he had been dying for a Coke, now she was dead, the Coke can rolling to a stop at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Your girl?"

He stared at the cop and thought of the forty bottles of moonshine and fifty cartons of cigarettes in the trunk.

Think of the little things.

"She was a hitchhiker," he replied, "I picked her up at the state line."

“Where was she heading?”

“Chicago,” he swallowed, “is she?”

“Yeah,” the cop bit into his hamburger, “as a dodo, sorry.”

Larry had wanted to say more, she was his girl, his life and all his dreams rolled into one, but he had kept his mouth shut, not willing to hang around any longer than was necessary. Leanne would have wanted it that way.

“Promise me one thing?”

“What?” Larry rolled over and stared into her eyes.

“If something happens to me, you know?”

“Uh huh,” he stroked her face, “you want me to do what?”

“Leave me,” she looked past him, “I don’t care what happens, but leave, take the money and run. I don’t want you risking your life or your freedom for the sake of me.”

“Honey,” he put his arms around her, “don’t talk like that.”

“You must,” she whispered fiercely in his ear, “promise me.”

He stared into her eyes and finally weakened.

“If you say so.”

“Just promise you won’t forget me.”

“I promise,” he felt the lump in his throat.

“I promise,” he licked his lips as the eighteen wheeler disappeared into the distance.

Five years gone and although he had loved since, they weren’t the same. No one could take her place, no matter how hard or long she loved him. Leanne had been his doll, his angel and now she was sleeping with the angels,

The siren alerted him to the danger he was now in and as he looked across he saw the cop car directly opposite, the cop pointing to the side of the road.

Larry stared, knowing instinctively that this was no random check, they had him pegged. A red Viper with interstate plates on a Missouri highway. They would go over the car with a fine tooth comb and when they found the coke, they would confiscate the car and haul him off to the county jail.

Larry changed gears and planted his foot. The car surged forward and left the cop car behind. He knew this part of the world like the back of his hand. Just five miles away there was a turn off that led back down to the Big Muddy, and once on the back lanes he would lose them, he just had to make it in time.

Powered by a Vee Ten engine, the Viper was the fastest car he had ever driven. It was technically his, but the people in Chicago who peddled their wares on the streets had paid for it. All he had to do was four runs a month from Mexico to Chicago and the car was his. He didn’t even have to cross into Mexican territory. A car met him in Tuscon at night, the drugs were transferred to his car and he left. The money was transferred over the Internet, all he had to do was bring the drugs to Chicago. It was something Leanne had always been against, whiskey and cigarettes were one thing, drugs were an entirely different animal.

He had fallen into the drug business by degrees, a little pot here and a few pills there, now it was the good stuff. He had experienced a moment of clarity six months ago when he had been pulled over for a random check. The cop had been so close to the stash he only had to lift a spare tyre to find the stash hidden beneath it. Larry had almost given the game away out of guilt. Leanne would never have stood for it. But the the cop had given him the all clear and he had been off, a smile on his face as he headed back onto the interstate.

He slowed momentarily for the eighteen wheeler and then in a moment of anger, shifted gear and powered on up beside him. The driver could see him coming, he could also see the blue lights flashing as well and for a moment he thought the driver was going to cut him off but then Larry was past him and heading towards the turn off. He was too close however and for a split second he contemplated heading for the next turn off but that was ten miles away.

It was now or never.

The tyres squealed and smoke poured from them as he veered across three lanes and towards the ramp, and then it happened. He felt a bump and then a screeching sound as the undercarriage was ripped away, and then the car was tilting onto its side as the concrete ramp tore away the

suspension. He saw Leanne's face, she was smiling as she turned to look at him. She was standing in a field of sunflowers, the wind blowing her golden hair and then the car smashed into concrete wall at the other side and exploded.

His dying scream was carried by the breeze.

"Leanne!"

The cop stood back as the fire hose extinguished the blaze that had consumed the unfortunate occupant in a matter of minutes.

"What do you think he was running from?"

His partner shrugged as he turned away.

"Drugs, I'll bet."

The driver of the eighteen wheeler was standing smoking nearby, he straightened up as the two cops approached.

"Can I help you?"

"We might need a statement from you."

"Sure," he shrugged, "anything to help."

His eyes misted over.

"I've been thinking of giving this game away, not five years ago I hit a woman crossing the road, killed her outright," he shook his head, "one day it's gonna be my turn."

Written by Alastair Rosie 2006 ©