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The American Maniac

By Elaine Rosenberg Miller

She slammed the door and murmured her thanks and something about the weather and how she thought it was a crime more people didn't stop for hitchhikers.

"I'm a sex maniac," the man said, smiling shyly.

She looked at him with interest.

"That's all right," she said, "we all are."

"But I'm giving you a ride, what are you going to give me?" he giggled.

"I'll give you a ride if I ever see you hitching. I hate skiing. You really have to be in top form, physically. I remember when I went skiing they were carrying people off the hill as if there had been a war."

"I need some loving. Hmn. I'm not going to let you forget that. I'm going to make you change your mind."

"Do you have any idea how fast they go? Forty, fifty miler an hour."

"Do you want to stop for coffee" She shook her boot. The snow was beginning to melt and creep in between the seams. She glanced at the side of the road. A neon sign declaring BLAZING TEXAS RED HOTS fired the overcast sky.

"Oh, no," she said good humouredly. "I have to get off soon. Well, what did you think of the game last night?"

"They got some forward."

"He's my brother," she said.

"No kidding!"

"Oh, yeah. We used to play together as kids. Then my dad was killed in the war and we kind of cut it out.

"What war? Where are you going anyhow?"

"You know, the last one, this one. He was a demo...demolition expert and a ...wrestling

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coach. His men were working out in a field one day and hit a mine. He thought it was his and he volunteered for this special assignment everyone knew was suicide. It turns out when they put all the pieces together they discovered it wasn't his after all."

"You mean it wasn't his his mine?"

"It wasn't ...his men."

"Jeez." He pulled over to allow an ambulance to pass. She unraveled her scarf and sighed.

"Um, he didn't die either. He was shot by his orderly in a poker game."

"You never know," he offered, rejoining the traffic. "You want a piece of gum?"

"Thanks. My mom always warned him he'd die because of cards. That's where they met, my mom and dad, at a card table. She was a professional dealer in Vegas but she could take it or leave it. She left it for my brother and I. She used to call us 'the aces of her eye!'"

"Look, what time do you have to be at the place where you are going?"

"Really soon." She leaned back and rested her elbow against the window ledge.

"Terrible weather."

"Are you a lover?" he asked, turning in her direction.

She gathered her bag of books and placed them on her thighs. "Of course," she said brightly, popping a lavender bubble. He gave her a mildly sinister leer.

"How about giving me some loving?" He began to pick up speed.

"I am not," she insisted, rasing her head delicately, "a prostitute."

"Oh, no," he sputtered, "I didn't say that, I know that. I just, well, uh, you know I..."

"That's okay," she said and opened a side vent on the dashboard.

They turned onto a main avenue in silence.

"What's that?" he asked, reaching across her abdomen. She moved quickly.

"This?" she demanded, fingering a yellow ticket. "Oh, that's from skiing. We talked about that, remember?"

"Are you from the university?" he asked suddenly.

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"I got a volleyball scholarship. You know, the height and all. My family's tall. So was my father until he died. We got the flag that covered his coffin. It was extra big, his coffin. They buried him in Arlington right near the president. Every Sunday thousands of people pass his grave and they are all mourning. Of course not for my dad, but the mood carries over."

"Because if you're from there..." he started, growing angry.

"Where?"

"That place..."

"Virginia?"

"No, the university. Because I'm going to tell you right here what I think of them. They are the worst bunch of sons of bitches I ever seen and if I met one of them on a dark street alone at night I'd run them over right then and there and not think twice about it. They're filthy. I got this neighbor who says they run around naked in the apartment below his and they don't care where they do it."

"Even in the road."

"What"

"Yeah, I agree with you. No, I don't go to the university."

"But you said you got a scholarship."

"I did, didn't I? I'm not supposed to tell anyone about that. Don't you go and tell anyone about that. We had a lot of trouble getting it past those, you know, who run the student government. I mean I don't go like they go. I support the president. I worked in his office, even."

"Yeah?"

"I fixed his executive chair. I do carpentry, part time," she said breaking out in a laugh which she turned into a cough. "The weather, bad lungs, hereditary, my mom's family were coal miners."

"We were farmers."

"What did you farm?"

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"Cabbage."

"I like cabbage. My dad was Irish."

"You sure talk a lot about your family."

"We were very close." She gazed around the red interior of the vehicle. She glanced at a tackle box in the rear seat. "You fish?" she inquired politely, eyeing the street signs.

"Naw, them's my tools."

"You're a mechanic?"

"No, a butcher."

"Well, she announced, "I'll be getting off soon, next block." She grit her teeth.

"Aw, why can't I change your mind?"

"People are expecting me."

"Who?" he asked, removing one hand from the steering wheel and dropping it to the torn seat cushion.

"My, my. I'm late already."

"Who?" he repeated, moving his hand beside the folds of her coat.

"My driving teacher."

"How come you have to go to him?"

"I... well, today's Sunday." They stopped for a red light. She grasped the door handle.

"Will you wait a minute!" he protested but she had opened the car door and stepped out into the slush filled intersection. He grasped her scarf and pulled. They stared at each other. She gently unfolded his fingers.

"Thank you," she called as she shut the door and began to walk across the lanes of steaming cars, buttoning every button of her coat and hiding her face in the fabric of her collar.

The End

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