

Passenger Story II

It was three years later and I was still sitting in the passenger's seat. Now I had upgraded from a Plymouth Laser to a Chevrolet S-10. She was a working pick-up: dented, shuddering and scratched. Al and I sat under an overpass, smoking pot and playing cards. I could tell by the way he fondled the lighter plug that he wanted to turn on the flashing construction lights that sat on his dashboard. We had run out of gas northwest of Fargo en route to Winnipeg.

"I think we're probably conspicuous enough without the flashers, Al. I mean that tarp is held together with a bungee cord and you can see all our gear through the rip."

"Yeah, but I don't want some drunk to side swipe us as we're sitting here." He skipped back four tracks on the car's aftermarket CD player and played the same damn Barenaked Ladies song that I had been becoming furiously acquainted with for the last four hours.

"True that. But I'd rather be hit by some civilian. If the cops search the truck, you know we're going to prison."

He was saddened when I mentioned the truck getting hit. He loved this truck. He slept in the truck with the engine running when he was too drunk to drive. I was surprised he didn't have an extra tank of gas for just such an occasion. "But then we'd be stuck in North Dakota, looking for a tow."

He was right. I didn't want to push any further. I lit his one hitter and stifled a cough. "Remember that time you passed out in front of my house with the engine running and your knee on the horn? Hearts." I changed the suit in our game of crazy eights.

"Nope. I just remember waking up on the porch with all of those dicks drawn on my face. How long do you think they're gonna be? Matt drives like such a chick in that Pee Wee's Playhouse on wheels." He was getting impatient for our comrades, who drove off in Matt's car, looking for a gas station that was open this late at night. Al pulled out the cigarette lighter, plugged in his wire and the lights began to flash. Yellow blindness. Reprieve. Yellow blindness. Reprieve. Headlights pulled in behind the rusty red S-10 which were followed by a rap on the passenger window.

"That Da-Ko-Tan made us give up a twenty dollar deposit on this damn gas can. I bet he denies it when we get back. 'oh, yah...ya know we neverrr rrrent em haute, chewknow.' We should just forget it and keep on going." I was impressed by Matt's playtime Dakotan accent.

"Nah, just fill it up and we'll follow you. Let's see if we can cross the border before tomorrow morning." We were all a little bit antsy from the drive and excited to get to our campground destination.

It was many days later and I still sat in the passenger seat, weary from a successful trip filled with debauchery and skeptical decisions. We were stigmatized by the social system, punished by the legal system and deservedly vilified by the ordinarily kindhearted citizens of our neighbor to the north. It was nothing we hadn't expected and we survived without incarceration and with a lifetime of stories, inappropriate for consumption by anybody.

We were on the border crossing, an hour south of Winnipeg. I could see North Dakota over Matt's ridiculous car, through the customs gates. Al and I were in the truck with all the camping gear and Matt and Ben were in the front car along with Goofs and Gallant, Matt's weird theater friends who we realized too late, were only on the trip to antagonize the rest of us.

Matt drove a ten year old Buick. During some drug induced manic spree, he had spelled out 15 or so one liners on the paint with vinyl letters. Stuff like "PEE IN MY TANK...SPEEDING FOR DOUGHNUTS...HONK IF YOU EAT BABIES...THANKS FOR THE OIL SADAM..." and so on.

The roof had a pastel checkerboard with a Styrofoam rook and part of a queen glued atop. Of course he had once had a whole set, but they had one-by-one been blown off into transit oblivion. We made a lovely two float parade earlier that day as we drove around a rural Canada town looking for a mechanic. Matt's odd ball machine had blown a spark plug. Al had given in to his constant desire for blinking light attention. We bang-banged and flash-flashed along main street drawing ireful glares from the folks on the sidewalk who must have thought we were the first wave of some circus invasion force.

"You think they're gonna search all our camping stuff? They didn't search us to get into the country. There's no reason to think they would do it to get out." Al wasn't as much worried as he was looking for a stoned conversant in the passenger seat.

"I dunno. I haven't really done this before. But you know how bad the cab reeks. We've been drinking, smoking and not showering for a week. Even before we started, you coulda scraped the windshield for resin." The impact of Canada's lowered drinking age on our nineteen year old livers is usually only measured by an autopsy. We pulled ahead by a half a car length, inching towards America at a painful rate. Then the trip began to bend from idyllic debauchery toward a more disturbing set of failures.

"What the hell?" I couldn't have summed it up better. From the back seat of Matt's laughomatic charged Ben. His leg was trapped on a seat belt and he whipped his freed foot around like a caught animal. When he was freed, he tried to slam the door shut with his hip, whiffing into a graceful piroette.

"And he sticks the landing." I was snide and surprised at the same time.

Ben left the door open to the spring elements. We could hear the bong-bong alarm sound from inside of the Buick. He began to sprint toward a small building a hundred yards back into Canada, holding a stack of papers to his chest. They floated down gracefully to join him face down in a median, tripped by a gradual change in elevation.

"I think Dick Van Dyke is heading toward that government building to get our tax rebates. I hope they don't mind a bunch of muddy receipts." Ben had been careful to collect receipts for beer, camping fees, food, car repairs and misdemeanors throughout on the whole trip.

"I can't believe he can even move between the seven hang over and the four egg omelet." I was proud with the way that sentence came out. I looked towards Al for approval. He belched a vile concoction toward me and lowered the passenger window the rest of the way. "Anyway, I hope he gets us everything that deserve."

I reached into the glove box to find my passport. "You know, I still have that emergency joint. You think we should flick it out the window. Just in case they search us and wanna pin more than paraphernalia charges on us?"

"Nah, we got time to light that shit and smoke it. This line hasn't moved in ten minutes. What could possibly take the border guards so long?"

"You got a lighter?"

"It's in my jacket, with my smokes. You wanna just grab all of it so we can be quick? Show these jerk-offs how professional travelers get through a check-point."

I reached into the back seat and grabbed the jean jacket. I found a smushed box of Marlboro Mediums but no lighter. "You sure its not in yer pocket?" I got no response.

I looked over at Al. His face was white. His knees were locked rigid, right arm was fully extended and his hand was buried into his back pocket. "My wallet. My I.D." Al spoke soft, thoughtfully. "I gotta have it to get back into America. It's gotta be at that gas. Holy shit, we gotta go back. We gotta go back to Winnipeg" The line of cars pulled forward another half car length. Ben was dealing with the Canadian bureaucracy. Goofus and Gallant were two bobbing heads in the back seat of Matt's car. The three of them were probably one upping each other with anecdotal lies.

"We gotta go get it."

"Fuck." Al twisted the steering wheel and gunned the truck's engine. It whined suddenly like a baritone gerbil being served by a tennis racket. Tires screeched and we spun a frantic U-turn, past a one way sign, ignoring a do not enter sign, over a median and then thunka-thunk onto the highway headed north. The line of cars excitedly pulled up one whole car length.

I took out my cell phone and dialed Matt to see if he remembered the name of the gas station. There was no answer. "They musta finally made it to the front of the line." I had found an extra Bic stashed in the large Ziploc bag which also housed two metal pipes, Al's one hitter, a pack of Zig-Zags and a cigarette roller. We must have been the first Americans to smuggle all of this goodness into Canada, hidden in a small empty space under the S-10's center console. I flicked the lighter above my lap and slowly turned the tip of the emergency joint in the flame. I drew in the smoke, held the smoldering bone toward Al and slouched down in the passenger seat to watch the familiar Canadian plains rush by again.

"Fuckin' rager, eh?" Al was concise and it sounded like had picked up some of the local dialect. He stifled a cough and held the joint for a moment before passing it back to me. He wasn't overstating the trip. It was strange how the entire party began talking like some mythic voyagers

on an epic journey somewhere during the trip. We were treating like an American mercenary returning from an oil war or Agamemnon returning to Troy. Both are valid comparisons. Like the soldier, we had little desire to understand our individual actions as part of the greater travesty. Like the king, we would soon be ensnared and destroyed. That, and all we really needed was a bath.

We kept warm with youthful exuberance, unlimited alcohol and an ounce of mids. We were so bold as to flaunt our presence. The Canucks knew we were there. A Mountie told Ben as much as he wrote him a ticket for an open container on a Winnipeg street. I heard Ben yell, "Where's your steed, Mounted Man?" while I was urinating in an alley way next to a night club. "Where is your red coat, Dudley Do-Right? Its cheating to roll up in a Dodge Caravan, wearing a leather jacket. Where's your sense of heritage." He was lucid for someone who had been drinking absinth for five hours.

The Mountie was less impressed than I. "You're the fellows with the funny Buick. How long do you believe you'll camp at the park?" We had shown up on their radar from so many miles away. I was too messed up to recognize this harbinger.

We had drank ourselves to hallucination, slept outside in the springtime snow until our limbs were touched by frost and smoked pot until our brains were replaced were replaced with smelly used dish rags. But the most intoxicating thing that we had been exposed to was a young masculine exuberance, liberated by the frontier. We were dangerously invincible and deceptively ignorant at the same time.

"Nice cophat. Where'dya getyer cophat?" I would have been less emboldened if I had felt the trail of urine that which I'd splattered down my pant leg. I stumbled slowly from the shadows. Ben swung his head around exaggeratedly. The Mountie looked tired. "Lookslike yagodit yer copbadge outta FruitLoops box."

The Mountie was gracious. He finished writing Ben's ticket and ripped it out of a pad. "You fellows have a pleasant night. Don't forget to pay your fine before leaving. Be safe." The rumors of kind Canadian citizens and lax citations have been continually understated. He pivoted about-face and took a stride toward the minivan.

"Where'dya getyer badge. Nice copbadge." I was entirely too intoxicated to be upright but my mind and body were fueled by belligerence. The kind officer took the bait, indulging his own sense of vanity.

"Yeah, I got her in a Lucky Charms box, eh. Move along."

"OhIthought you needed training...and self-restraint...maybee evena degree." I was a dick. I stumble-strut around like had just won a slam poetry battle. The Mountie walked away in disgust and our sour reputation grew with the police.

Al took a final toke and flicked the smoldering roach out of his half rolled window. With our supply of pot gone, I packed six pot-heads worth paraphernalia back into their Altoids boxes and Crown Royal bags which I wrapped in two large Zip Lock bags. The S-10's center console removed to expose the perfect gap for our foolish smuggling operation.

I picked a slotted screwdriver from the floor mat and began to work on the bottom of the cup holders. I put the stash boxes in a small cavern inside the console. "You think we still need the coffee grounds? I bet it doesn't even work, Axel Foley."

"Might as well, its why we brought them." Al surprised me with his caution. I dug around in the glove box. "You think Goofus ever hooked up with one of those MILFs at the other end of the park?" There were only two groups dumb enough to camp in Canada during the shadowy time between winter and spring.

"Nope. Definitely lesbians. They told us as much."

"Never stopped me."

"Yeah, but you're so soft and feminine like a debutant." I smiled at Al, who was quiet for a moment before we both started to giggle like a junior varsity volleyball team. It was nice to be high without also being drunk and shivering. I felt like a warm chocolate cupcake was sitting in the middle of my brain.

I floated through abstract and detached thoughts in blissful silence. The radio had been off since we were sitting in line at customs. The tires thunka-thunked underneath us at seventy miles per hour. I dreamed about the metric system.

Then, with a harsh push of centripetal force, Al veered across the right lane of traffic toward the shoulder. We came to a stop on the shoulder of a concrete artery which bisected infinite kilometers of farm fields. I could see a wind turbine on the horizon. Dazed, I watched it slowly complete a full rotation. Before I noticed Al's back had straightened and knuckles had turned white.

"Finish up, cops," Al was remarkably cool, considering the situation. The bag of coffee and screwdriver lay on my lap. The secret compartment was exposed. I leaned over and slammed it down and grabbed at the screwdriver in one panicked, reactive motion. I pushed one screw into the hole and yanked at the screw driver to finish the job.

My hand slipped off the head. I blindly reached down and grabbed at it again while my eyes scanned the cab for the other screw. I couldn't find the handle of the screwdriver and when I looked down I was horrified to find it wedged underneath the plastic console. I lifted the console and the screwdriver blade became wedged in the passenger seat upholstery. The whole thing was jammed. I could see the reflection, closer than he appeared, of a Mountie as he sauntering toward me from the police cruiser.

The whole mess was like a big neon sign pointing directly at our paraphernalia. I gave one last desperate yank at the screwdriver and heard a rip in the passenger seat. In a hasty craze, I slammed my elbow down on the console, forced rat-a-tat cross threads down the lonely single screw and tossed an empty Mountain Dew bottle from the floor into the other cup holder. There was a rap on the passenger side window. My cell phone started to ring.

A white Dodge Caravan sped by us on the highway, pulled onto the shoulder and reversed quickly towards the S-10 until it lightly kissed the truck's front bumper. I never saw the occupants of the van, nor would I be able to identify the Mountie I had burned outside of the Winnipeg club. I felt indignant like a freedom-fighter in a police state. But I knew that my actions were nowhere near as honorable.

A man wearing aviator glasses, a highway patrol hat, Tom Selleck mustache and a joyless face greeted Al on the driver's side. "You boys should follow my partner to the squad car." We were patted down on the front hood. The partner's face had white wrinkles underneath his sunburned face. He was not unpleasant. But he did apply the handcuffs with a deftness that belied his young face.

I finally got to turn around and see the three officers rifling through the S-10 cab as the young partner pushed my head down and I in the back seat. After so many hours full of shotgun seat inferiority, I felt demeaned by the demotion to back seat driver status. I tried to remember the handcuff tricks I had read about as a kid in the Houdini museum in Appleton but all I could remember is how claustrophobic I felt when I saw pictures of barrel jumpers going over Niagara Falls. Al and I were sitting on the edge of the falls, but we didn't have the luxury of being blind to our fate. Instead, we were forced to watch as piles of clothing and fast food trash and random maps of I-35 began to accumulate around the truck. The cops were thoroughly searching our vehicle and I knew it was just a matter of time before we were caught.

A metal grate separated Al and me from the partner who alone was still a second banana in the passenger seat of the Crown Victoria. There was no rapport. No Mirandizing. No good cop, bad cop. Cop shows are ridiculous fabrications. I wanted to talk with S. Epatha Merkerson. I was ignorant to the difference in drug charges among the three large North American countries.

"Hey, Why'd you fellows guys jump the border there?" Me and Al squirmed from the back seat. "Yew were just waitin' in line with the rest uh the dayliners, at on the end of yer holiday. And then like you sprinted off like an Edmonton fence mouse who just remembered a hot iron left on his chesterfield." I was scared and confused, but not humorless. I giggled at the vernacular.

"I just re-membered that I left my bunny hug at the launderette, eh. I spilled Kraft Dinner all over it. We had to turn around to get it. Maple Syrup. K-Car. Bubbler." Al's obsession with the Barenaked Ladies came in handy for something. Al belched and the faint aroma of marijuana smoke tickled my nostrils. I had forgotten how high we were, how badly the S-10 must have smelled.

"Smart. You know, you pulled an illegal U-Turn at an international border and drove against a one way on a national road. We have enough to charge you even if we don't find any contraband in your truck." He turned toward us, placing his right hand behind the driver's head rest. He met

Al's eyes and locked onto them. Al began to scramble.

"I'm sorry sir, we were here on vacation. I left my ID. Our friends already went through. I need to go to Winnipeg. I have to work tomorrow. I work construction. I'm a contractor with the state of Minnesota." Al was usually unflappable, even when he was baked. I nudged him with my knee and he trailed off. Our inquisitor's eyebrows raised behind his prescription glasses.

"That joker with the comedy car? We heard about you kids in Dauphin and again in Winnipeg. We couldn't be more happy to let you out, but I'm afraid you might have to stay for a few years." I feared that he was right. He was a local cop with calloused hands who slouched a bit in the front seat. The two who came out of the minivan were federals we had jumped the border after all. They had the shined boots and sharply creased pants of former military officers. I watched through the windshield as one of the more proper officers opened a cooler that Magnum PI had unloaded from the pickup bed.

One lifted a disgusting bottle of blackberry brandy. It dripped spent ice. He opened the bottle and sniffed it as if he expected to smell something more incriminating than the trapped marijuana smoke that I imagined billowing out of the cab when I had first opened the door. Tom Selleck motioned toward his partner who growled, "Wait." He left us alone and handcuffed, contemplating our fate.

"Lucky you closed up the stash. We might just make it out. Its totally legal for us to have that booze." Al barely moved his lips when he talked. He was catatonic like a ventriloquist. I assumed he was either trying to avoid detection or an apoplectic bleed had paralyzed his lips.

"I never got the screwdriver out, the handle is in and the blade is out. We're boned. I'm sorry." My top lip straightened and my eyes squinted. I felt like I was about to cry. The urge quickly left. "At least we'll be nice and stoned for the worst part of the interrogation."

Al was unimpressed by my optimism. He sat silently, looking out the window. He was missing a great show. The federals had unfurled our giant six person tent to inspect for something. It had caught the breeze and turned into a sail. The partner ran after it while absent mindedly clutching a folded set of poles. Tom Selleck was half-heartedly following into the farm field. He jogged a few steps, turned to look at the federals and then turned to help the other officer. I wondered if Canada's prison system had single payer health care.

The cops were picking through a duffel bag full of Matt's dirty clothes when Al dissolved the silence but retained his stoicism. "There's no weed in there, we'll just get a fine. I hope Matt and Ben made it through all right."

"Goofus and Gallant, too." I added. But we both knew that we could have left either one of them at the diner with the four egg omelets without even noticing. It wasn't spite or cliquishness. We were just self-absorbed pseudo adults who didn't conceive of others. The partner had corralled the tent, which he haphazardly stuffed back into the bed. Much of the rest of our gear was strewn about the side of the road as Sunday traffic gawked by us at freeway speed.

Tom Selleck opened my door and motioned for me to get out. I didn't know how badly I had been sweating until I felt the chill on my back as I stood up. "You can go, good luck finding your billfold." He turned me around and unlocked the handcuffs. I massaged my hands until I felt the pins and needles fade.

"You might want to check with your friends before you leave Manitoba." The partner sounded ominous but I don't know it was intentional.

Al shuffled out behind me and the Mountie removed his cuffs. Al stretched his arms and legs like we had been confined in a prisoner camp cooler for a month. The partner stared at the S-10 and watched the minivan speed off. He and Selleck got into the car and pulled onto the highway and drove off toward the prairie horizon.

They didn't cite us or charge us. I assumed that they even felt sorry for us because they hadn't asked why Al was driving without a license. Never once did I feel entrapped. Of course we both were youthfully ignorant of everything which existed around us. Before I could say anything, the Crown Vic turned off its lights and passed our stopped truck and unloaded gear. Even though they spit gravel at us on takeoff, it still would have been a pleasure to be charged by those kind coppers who mounted their gas powered steeds and rode into the early evening.

Al picked up the cooler and placed it in the bed. Half full liquor bottles rattled from within. "God save the loon queen!" I screamed. I was invincible. As Al finished loading our camping stuff,

I worked on the screwdriver and finalized our stash box. We screamed Barenaked Ladies songs all the way to Winnipeg and back.

The sun was low in the sky as we started again towards the Winnipeg gas station. It was dusk when we got back to the border crossing. The line had almost completely dissipated. We were one car away from North Dakota with American identification in hand. Suddenly, I remembered the Mountie's advice and I checked my cell phone for messages. There was one; it was a frantic Ben in a strained whisper on Matt's phone:

Were still at customs, we've been here for an hour...They found empty bags. Why did you jump the border? They're looking for you...sending a Mountie...Talking about border violations and federal trade regulations...Tell them we bought the stuff in Canada...They know everything...They've been watching us the whole week...

In the background I could hear a guffawing Goofus, "...and make sure ya clean the trace evidence out yer nether regions, right B-Dawg?" There was a far off official sounding voice and the message cut off. The last car had pulled forward as Al and I exchanged apprehensive eyes.

There was no real worry. In a stroke of good luck, I had deposited our paraphernalia in a gas station garbage can while Al was retrieving his wallet. But the message was a haunting reminder that we were in fact international drug smugglers. We did so for personal use, with no profit motive and without the romance of Scarface in a Jacuzzi. We were travelling addicts, social deviants who broke the law for lust, thrill and satisfaction.

An officer with an M-16 flagged us into a parking bay. It was three years after September eleventh and Al and I were ignorant to our status as suspected terrorists. Inside the garage stood a firing line of well-built white men with jarhead haircuts. I flashed back to the singular female Canadian border guard who smiled politely as she waved us into Canada through a service window. We had only to answer a few questions and produce identification.

There was another border guard standing behind a thick pane of glass that looked onto the truck and its two sweating occupants. "What did those four do?" I asked Al, knowing that there would be no suitable answer.

"It's about time. Where have you boys been hiding? Or should I say what have you been hiding?" Their leader spoke from behind the glass as we exited the S-10. I wondered if it was amplified or if there was a hole cut out like a ticket window at a basketball game. The marines silently wrapped zip-tie handcuffs around my wrists and cinched them until I could feel my pulse struggle to find my digits.

Large warrior hands led us to a containment cell with blazing fluorescent lumens that tore into my retinas. They pushed Al to a seat on a bench which squeaked. I just stood there. "Sit," was the order from my guard. It was the only word that any of the firing line soldiers said to us. I watched his trigger finger lovingly slide across the side of the guard.

Al and I were left alone to stare into a one way mirror which we faced. We looked terrible, pale and frightened. Al lowered his eyes to a drain on the floor of the cell. Mine too were drawn to a glinting stainless guard. There is no sight more horrifying than a drain on the bottom of your prison cell. I couldn't locate a hose. There was no reason for us to fear but we were outmatched by the most mundane and unintentional of their psychological operations.

"We're clean. So is the car." I didn't care if they were recording our conversation. I wasn't revealing anything new. "Ben and Matt got out okay. They're not going to piss test us or anything. We smoked like a hundred cigarettes on the way back. They won't smell the dope we smoked." Al's eyes were drawn down the drain like so many bodily fluids, the product of torture and malice. We were defeating ourselves before they even had a chance. One of the mercenaries slid open the steel door.

"You know why we targeted you, right?" The hulking man waited in vain for us to answer. I hoped he didn't think we were the John Walker Lindh type. Drug charges were one thing, but learning Arabic in Guantanamo was a totally different proposition.

Al crunch-crunched the back of his jelled hair on the cell wall. For the first time in my life, I heard the precursor squeak of an inhalation followed by the hiccup of a stifled belch. He must have been nervous. He exhaled a putrid mix of sulfur and coffee.

"Your buddy Benjamin ran off the median. What was he doing?" The soldier answered his own question, "Dropping off drugs." I didn't want to tell him that he was incorrect. We had already

smoked all the pot.

"He musta had a change of heart. Drug smuggling is a serious offence. We like to keep it in north of the border." Once again, he was crafting stories. We wouldn't know the first thing about buying in Canada. We got the drugs from the same drug dealer that Al and Ben had bought their first grade school dime bag. "They're pulling apart your mule right now. You could save us some time by just telling us where you hid the stuff. We're gonna bring in the dogs anyways."

A metal pounding echoed from behind the mirror. There was a voice from beyond the open door. "nineteen years old, with alcohol. Strike One." The man was yelling for our benefit. The agent smiled. They must have plucked our wallets when they handcuffed us because he pulled two drivers licenses from his breast pocket. He studied the photographs and glanced at our faces before he spun out of the interrogation room.

"Well that's pretty dumb. But it's not like we're drunk." I was glad that Al broke his silence. Another agent stormed into the cell. He was wearing surgical gloves. I wondered if this was the man who had violated Ben's cavities. He held something in his right fist. I could see his knuckles ripple through the glove as he squeezed its contents.

"Y'all have somethin' to tell me?" His Mississippi accent felt warm in North Dakota. His eyes felt chilly as they bounced from Al to me and back. We remained silent. "Mmmhmm," he sounded satisfied.

"We wanna see Ben and Matt," Al had found his tongue, but I wished he would swallow it. "Give me a ticket for the booze and we're outta here." Al was overplaying his hand. The agent was unfazed. "What? You gotta finger us first? We got places to be!" While he yelled from atop his soapbox I twisted like a balloon animal and tried to make myself small like Steve Martin.

We had been so careful to hide the stash and trash our pipes. I was struck at the obvious ignorance toward the liquor bottles. I was not so disappointed as to rant a monologue about rights and justice like Al was embarking upon. I tuned him out and watched the agent's clenched hand. It was so easy to cross the border north bound; the friendly lady laughed at Matt's car and saluted our mettle when we told them of our plans to rough it in the March weather. Al was running out of steam.

Then the epiphany struck. I knew what was he was clenching. I elbowed Al hard in the ribs and he stopped, mid-sentence. Without any proof, "We bought it Winnipeg. We didn't bring it back. We didn't mean anything." The agent frowned like a child who just lost his spot in a carnival line. He was so enjoying Al's rant, knowing that he had all the power and evidence that he needed.

"Well then this is just a formality. We're ready for you, Sergeant." The man from behind the glass came into the jail cell. He held a small zip lock bag in one hand and an eye dropper in the other.

"These little bastards confess?"

"No sir, not yet." the subordinate didn't have the guts to admit that the game had already ended. The Sergeant pressed the mouth of the bag open from the corners, smiled and raised his eyebrows like a magician signaling his assistant. The subordinate flicked open his hand, palm to the ceiling and abracadabra there it was: the charred roach which didn't make it quite out the window of the S-10. An acrid skunk smell filled the cell as he dropped it into the bag.

"If this turns pink, it means its marijuana." He squeezed a fluid from the eye dropper and shook the bag. "If its marijuana, there will be a stiff penalty." He kept speaking but there was no suspense. His act was stale because the audience already knew the finale.

"What do you think it is? Get it over with. You think its pocket lint we rolled and smoked?" Al was fired up and I was still a little stoned. I thought back to Ben's phone call.

"We got it there, in Canada and didn't mean to take it with us into America." I was hoping that he wouldn't notice as I reiterated a lie that I was starting to believe. I was scared and rambling. The bag turned into watered down pink lemonade. The agent shook it more and the color deepened.

They must have had some mercy on us when they wrestled the credit card from my stolen wallet. We were back on the road in two hours. No wiser and five hundred dollars lighter. I was once again in the passenger's seat with my head against the glass as we listened to AM talk radio. The first thing I did when they released us was to toss the Barenaked Ladies CD into a North

Dakota field.

"I can't believe they made us pack the truck back up. They're total douches. How did the pickup bed actually get smaller? Bastards." Al had been staring toward the headlights, he had lost his exuberance. I tried to fill the space. "At least they didn't feel us up like Ben. You told him that tax rebate scheme was worthless." A chuckle escaped the dour Al. I continued, "You remember that old guy at the garage who fixed Matt's car? He was just enjoying his Sunday, working the cash register, looking to close early... We six doofuses roll in. Matt's Buick; 'cars eat babies' written on the hood. Spark blowing like a pistol shooting down main street in Podunk, Manitoba. You and me: stoned, smelly and cold. Giving him grief as he fixed the problem..."

Al looked toward the moon's reflection as we crossed toward the Minnesotan prairie. "Fuckin' rager." Al drove and I dozed in the Chevrolet. He drove until the undulations of static on the radio were more white noise than voices screaming into the darkness.

I woke for a moment, "I've been in two interrogation cells. The other time was for vandalism of some kid's uncle's truck. You'd be surprised at how much nicer the local cop shop's room was. There was no brain matter drain at the bottom, that's for sure. But there's something about the getaway. It's the freedom from persecution, cutting into the night, even if you've been caught and punished. Liberation, you know. When the cops have finally stopped coming after you...when yer finally free from all the obstacles that you put in front of yourself."

"Shut up. The reason we got off is cause we payed. They woulda thrown us in the clink if we couldn't pay. You saw the guns. You saw the cells."

"But you can't tell me that the escape route, driving into the night, off Scott free. I mean, doesn't that feel good Al? Like you beat it? I mean we're drug smugglers cause you can't flick a damn roach out the window. Instead of lifetime in Gitmo, we're gonna sleep in Minneap, \$500 bucks lighter. This truck feels better than the back of some Mountie cop car. If we lived in Cambodia, they woulda flogged us and made us eat rat meat till we and we woulda died of salmonella."

He didn't stifle this belch which he blew into the heater vents. It felt good with everything was back to normal.

"I thought that border agent was gonna flip shit when you went off on your Habeas Corpus rant. That was fricking brilliant. Your such a badass." I had already begun dressing up the selective memory of our triumph over the mean old border agents.

"Call Matt, see what's up. Maybe we can meet up with them in Dinkytown and get some dinner." Al drove east on I-94. We pieced together mythic stories about our experiences.