

Rolling Down the Lost Highway

By Kenn Hartmann



You've got taste, I said. She dragged a stool from the crowded bar but didn't sit. 'Because I'm the flower girl?' Ya. Because she's the flower girl. I had gotten turned around earlier in San Luis Obispo. Roared up one street certain I knew the route to the highway. Then roared back the same street upon realizing my mistake. My drag pipes split the California night like a chainsaw ripping through a palm tree - I didn't want to stop until I could see the moonlit ocean. I got to Pismo Beach & coasted in gentle engine throb sufficient to scare little critters from roadside with a sharp piston crack. Parked on deserted main drag - a dark abandoned carnival cement boardwalk. But inside the arcade was occupied to the max - as big as a movie theater with handbill poster covered walls & weird neon turquoise pink black-light facade. Skateboarders, surfers, street-people - wonder where they parked? Ordered a drink & burger. The flower girl appeared primed in sexy white shift cradling a bouquet. I offered to buy entire arrangement for just one favor - give each girl in the room a flower. 'I don't think there's enough,' she said. Girls or flowers? I asked. She winked & waved her hand over petals 'abracadabra.' It took awhile to pass out all the flowers - she was assiduous. She engaged each girl in conversation. She enticed them to giggle & finger their own curls. Then she'd present a blossom & invariably look my way - my mouth gorged with burger & beer, I'd nod. She returned; thus began discussion of taste. I'm intrigued at the finesse of how you passed out those posies, I said. She replied, 'I knew you'd think that.' People in California are paranoid their space will get invaded, I said. 'Who wants their bubble burst?' she asked. So did you give flowers to just pretty girls or what? 'What do you think?' she asked. I think we should walk on beach. She said, 'tide's high. let's go to the pier.'

The Pacific soulful thunderclap curl of surf strikes a strange reflection off city lights & behind us a blood moon sky illuminates the distant range. She looks into dark ocean spray & says, 'tomorrow you can see Humpback whales.' I try to visualize daylight. She points south, 'Guadalupe Dunes...there's the ruins of a Cecil B. DeMille movie set buried in sand - Ten Commandments.' Like the silent era? I picture silly Hollywood mimes

batting eyelashes faces caked in makeup, a cast of thousands wearing togas traipsing in sand awaiting the command, 'action!' She shivers - I put leather over her shoulders. 'Your jacket's heavy,' she says. I reach inside pocket & pull flask casually brushing against her. Cognac, I whisper, care to imbibe? She says, 'the Sherry Austin Band's playing in San Luey. Let's ride up there.' You might be dressed for show but you ain't dressed to ride, I say, you'll get cold; besides I only have one helmet. She takes a deep swallow of cognac. Hmm, I mumble, fuck the government. 'You're going political on me?' she asks. Uh no, I explain, helmet laws - I don't want trouble. 'You don't want trouble? You parked your bike on the sidewalk in front of the bar. Everyone else is parked at the municipal lot.' No wonder streets look deserted. 'You're draped in leather & boots - everyone else is in shorts & sandals.' I feel naked in self-conscious idiocy. Well you wear helmet & don't burn your legs against pipes. I time ignition to rolling crash of breakers. 'Stop in Avilia Beach - I know musicians there' she says 'they've got a helmet.' Point the way. We head to the highway - the triumvirate of El Camino Real, the 101 & Hwy 1 as I madly pump raw fuel into the carbs. I reach back & clasp her naked thigh. She slides her arms around my waist. I grab the handlebars & let it rip as we drift onto midnight ribbon of asphalt. We head north in search of miracles & magic; my knit hat pulled tight to mimic a skullcap. Why be paranoid? Everyone's got troubles. Not everyone's got action. I'm trying to think of a Hank Williams lament but spontaneously break into Judas Priest, 'breaking the law, breaking the law.' Yeah - it's a trip from town to town.

-Kenn Hartmann
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