

Her blue eyes floating on twin clouds of innocent beauty

by Carl Santoro

I'm on Route 95 in North Carolina, headed home up north on a weekend pass. The year, 1969. It was time to change signs. This never took too very long, but while doing it, I always had the feeling that my next ride would speed by. I put the small, hand-sized sign which read "95" into the inner slot of my homemade hitchiking signs holder and exchanged it for the larger "D.C." one. The weatherproof acetate allowed it to be read from a distance in all weather.

The very next car came to a screeching halt onto the pebbly shoulder. A hand from the opened back window beckoned me to approach. I ran at full speed and began reaching for the door handle when the front door swung open freely seemingly by itself. Inside I quickly noticed four smiling faces. I made it a practise to be the first one to speak upon entering and so I did,

"Hi, how far are you going?" I asked as I settled in the front seat and closed the door. The driver spoke first,

"Well, we really don't know. Maybe Emporia." he replied with a lazy southern accent. He wore shades high on his nose and drove slouched back with his belt open.

"Great," I exclaimed. "Every little bit helps." I was aware now I might only gain about 8 miles with them and then jump out in Virginia. Emporia would be an hour's drive (65 miles) from Richmond, three hours' drive (180 miles) from Washington, D.C., plus downtime waiting on the next ride. Then on to the airport for the Eastern shuttle to LaGuadia.

I found myself sitting next to a young, rather plain-looking, redhead

Available online at <http://fictionaut.com/stories/carl-santoro/her-blue-eyes-floating-on-twin-clouds-of-innocent-beauty>

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girl of about 18, who was quite pre-occupied trying to make plastic bubbles. A hand, another girl's, tapped my left shoulder and asked if I wanted to put my bag in the back. I nodded and handed it over. The boy she sat next to asked me for a cigarette. "No, I don't," I replied.

Our short journey together was on it's way and before even three minutes had passed we noticed something on the road. About a quarter of a mile, a dark object was slowly heading east towards the grass. In about fifteen seconds we come up on it and the driver swerved us to the right to avoid smashing the giant dark green box turtle. A sigh of relief fell over us all.

The girl I sat next to said she had just looked up in time to see it, Randy, and it was quick thinking that you avoided it. Randy said he nearly missed it and commented on how Judy was the only one in the world who could discover plastic bubble paste, baby.

Judy giggled and made an exhausted looking bubble ooze out slowly through the thin narrow tubing held tightly by her full red lips.

The interior fell silent and I started thinking how much I'd like to get out Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand from my bag. Only thing was, I didn't want to insult these people by ignoring them. Actually they were very interesting and colorful in all their hippie attire. Suddenly, the monotonous drone of the highway pavement humming under us was abruptly interrupted as Judy swiveled about and asked Veronica for a soda. Veronica, in flashy contrast to Judy, appeared to be a sleek, quiet, yielding young girl, also probably 18. Her blue eyes floating on twin clouds of innocent beauty. Veronica handed her the soda and offered me one. I was extremely thirsty. I took it. Then Judy offered me some candy. Then Veronica offered me some cookies and like before too long we were all filled with various calories and smiling happily.

Jesse was still searching for a cigarette in the back seat. Veronica found a tin of pipe tobacco and they rolled him a joint. Jesse smiled.

As Jesse coughed out his first, very full inhale, he looked at me with watery eyes and asked if I had ever read *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein.

Even though I hadn't, I began to "grok" the entire situation.

