

THE REAL MAP

by Dennis Hiatt

At age thirty I came to the conclusion that life was a painful event that I had very little control over. If one gave up smoking, ones live-in girl friend of three years would move out because she was in love with a Mexican delivery boy who smoked. If, on the other hand, one got so drunk that one pissed ones pants, and still managed to pick up on the beautiful girl in the motorcycle jacket, one would wake up missing all his money and his Visa card would be happily breeding in the next state. (Oregon)

This may not be the story of everyone's life, but it is my story. One night, about a week after Rhonda dumped me, I smoked a little killer bud and this ying and ying of pain seem to stretch before me like an interstate road map. Red lines of the main roads, blue for the secondaries, dots for the towns, dots with circles for the cities and stars for the state capitols.

Good, I thought, one can read a map. One might not like the towns, but one can know where one is going.

So simple. So beautiful.

Good.

We will go forth. We will haunt the edge.

The next day I sold the Russian icons my grandfather had left me and bought a 1986 Toyota. I also bought a .38 police special, a kilo of bud, a Micky Mouse watch, two Siamese fighting fish and a tank to keep them in.

I quit my job and picked up some odds and ends of drugs.

I would now leave San Francisco and travel the map. I sat in the brown car and stared at my Rand McNally with red eyes. I could sail west to Reno. I might slip south to LA. Or...I could cruise north to Seattle.

Or, I chuckled and took a deep, hot hit of blasting bud, I could go to Portland. Ah yes, the place where California

State Troopers are bred. The town where a hot tub is what you take to the senior prom and the ballet has a happy hour.

I exhaled and nodded to the Siamese fighting fish. One of which was awfully dead. Mayhaps I shouldn't have let them play together.

Whatever. I scooped Mel out and tossed him on the sidewalk. Rhonda nodded back, so I took another hit and coughed, "Far out. Let's go."

After a little LSD Rhonda and I rapped psychically as we drove up Interstate 5. Sometimes we'd just watch the trees and shit fly by or groove on a tune on the radio, but mostly I smoked bud and she tried to explain about healing crystals and Politically Correct. In that respect Rhonda was a lot like my ex-girl friend, who was her name sake.

When we crossed the California/Oregon border, I had this vivid image of sleeping bags filled with human bones. I shook my head and the scene would not go away. The woods must be full of dead campers, hitch hikers, run-a-ways, and black teenage whores. Rhonda nodded. They didn't recycle. They didn't eat organic veggies.

All of them? I coughed down a bong hit.

Rhonda shrugged. Her fins were very beautiful when she shrugged, but fighting fish can lie.

Not a healing crystal in the bunch? Rhonda's tail flicked and I felt the car edging into the gravel on the shoulder of the road. I straightened the car out.

You'll see, Rhonda smirked. Red lines, blues lines...all white lines.

That reminded me of the coke in the glove box. However I would not pull over. In my mind I could see a blue/grey sleeping bag. It looked just like mine and it was wiggling.

I did stop in Grant's Pass to gas up and piss. I pulled in to an Exxon station. The car in front of me had a bumper sticker that read; SHIT HAPPENS.

Shit does happen, but I didn't need to be reminded. I

yelled fill-er-up to the brown gas jockey and went to the john. It was clean and I washed my face and my hands. The sleeping bag quit wiggling.

When I got back to my car, the pump jockey was inside my Totoya wiping down Rhonda's tank. He grinned at me. "Sure does smell nice in here."

"Fish are like that." I shrugged and handed him money.

"Using the seat belt on the fish tank...aint that special." His grin was not friendly. I could see sleeping bags wiggling in his soft, sly, brown eyes.

I adjusted the rear view mirror and started the brown car. He stared at me. I grinned. "You kill many whores this month?"

He shook his head. "You?"

"See you in the forest, " I smiled as wide as the grill on a truck. "Deep, deep in the forest baby."

He wasn't smiling or grinning when I drove off. Mexicans have no sense of humor, I thought.

Rhonda said, take the coast highway. I want to see the sea.

The suns going down, I said. I wasn't falling for fish trickery. I was on a red line heading for a circled, red dot.

Your cokes history, she smirked.

I checked the glove box. It was still there. We didn't talk again until I pulled into Portland at midnight. At least Micky Mouse said it was midnight.

I parked at a restaurant named Quality Pie.

Rhonda said, Leave the engine running or I'll freeze.

Sure, I agreed. The micro dot was wearing off and I was finding it harder to relate to Rhonda. However the bright lights of this northern restaurant stimulated my thyroid or something more vulgar and I was buzzing like a fly against a window pane by the time I made it to a booth.

A chili dog and coffee, I barked to the welfare mother in an Oregon pseudo Nazi black skirt and black tie who took

my order.

As her fat thighs dragged away, I looked around this red dot with a circle.

In the next yellow leatherette booth, staring right at me was a rather odd young woman. She was darkish. She had large lips and kind of bottle opener front teeth. She was smiling. She was also wearing a shirt that read: you can't be first, but you can be next.

Next for what I wonder.

Sex you asshole, Rhonda intoned from the Toyota.

Oh, I smiled back and said, "Nice shirt."

From the warmth of the car Rhonda laughed. Cover a frog with sugar and you'd eat it, wouldn't you?

"Thanks." The young woman shook her head ever-so-slightly. "You looked really ripped."

I stared at her breasts. "Huh, you looking for a date?"

She chuckled rather sourly. "No and I'm not into watermelons either."

I realized she was an African American and that her smile was not friendly. "Oh." Said I.

"You a computer geek? I mean you look like you'd have to buy sex."

I shrugged. "I don't smoke."

"Not cigarettes maybe." She agreed.

The Nazi Welfare mother brought my coffee and a sickly glass of ice water. She was young and her eyes were a pale, dead blue. "I just pulled in from California. " I offered up wondering if that would cost me my life.

She nodded. "I got my masters at UCLA."

"Oh." I said, knowing she was lying.

"You want to hear a weird story?" The girl in the next booth asked. But now she was in my booth. She had nice black hair. It looked very strong and alive.

"Sure."

Her eyes lit up like a child sweating bullets on

Christmas morning. I liked her.

"I moved here last week and I was like way broke."
She paused. "You know what I mean?"

"I really like your hair." I smiled to show I meant it.
Fish cannot smile you know.

"Hey, try and hold it together. Will you?" She seemed kind of happy that I was at loose ends. "We're both new in Portland. Okay?"

I nodded.

"Okay, so I was digging through the papers to find a share-rent gig and I came across this housesitting thing at an art gallery."

I smiled. It was kind of like talking to Rhonda, only...
I don't know...more real maybe.

She smiled back like she was about to tell me something she'd only share with a friend. "Only it wasn't an art gallery. It was like a house. They had these black velvet things in the front room. I mean," she leaned forward looking very intense and really sexy, "this was where junk pop art went to die."

"A fighting fish grave yard...so to speak?" I rallied to hold up my end. Rhonda was ominously silent. But she might have just been interested in the story.

"Hang in there." The young woman said, really meaning that I should shut up. The chili dog showed up. We both looked at it. It did not look happy. When the UCLA waitress was out of human earshot, she went on. "So the deal was here is this father and son. The old guys name was Simon and the kids name was Sunspot. And I'm to get free rent just to look after the place while they're looking for more paintings."
She stopped and looked at my food.

I forked a nibble and she went on. "Okay, the first night Sunspot, who's about thirteen and a dropout starts scratching at my door like at three in the morning and he's whispering: `bring your lovers home.' Is that weird or what?"

I nodded, though it seems a reasonable request to me.

"So, after three nights of this scratching and whispering bullshit, I think I'd better have a talk with Simon and tell him to jerk ol' Sonny's ass into shape, but tonight at eleven, here's the fucking scratching again and 'Bring your lovers home.' and this time it's not the kid but its the old man. I climbed out my window and hauled my butt down here."

"My name's Mel. Want this chili dog?" Man I knew I was in a red dot with a red, red circle. I'd read that damn red map right.

"Thanks." She took my fork and pulled the dead dog to her. "Mine's Mable."

"Nice name." I grinned.

Between mouthfuls she grinned back. "You must be really ripped."

I shrugged. Rhonda said Help! Screw you, I thought back, but I said. "Uh, I gotta go check on my car."

Mable scarfed down the last bean. "Hang on. I'll go with you."

Leaving a penny tip, I paid the cashier while Mable gathered up her things. Two big green/grey bags of things. A lot to take out a window I thought. Her teeth looked rather sharper than they'd first seemed. Then in a rush it hit me. I'd left my fucking car running in a parking lot in a strange and cold town. What bad drugs, my drugs were turning out to be.

It was raining when we stepped outside. I found the car where I'd parked it. True it's windows were fogged up, but it was still there. Mable looked at the car and shook her head.

"Are you okay, Mel?" She was still shaking her head.

I got behind the wheel. Mable opened the passenger door and saw the fish tank. Rhonda was strangely quiet. "Get in." I said.

Mable heaved her bags into the back seat, and slipped in

past the fish tank to sit next to me. I handed her the bong and pulled slowly out of the parking lot. She fired up the bong and handed it to me at the first red light.

I don't know how long we prowled the dark, wet, glassy streets of Portland, but I found no map within the dot. The rain was soft and dripped from the many tall, leafy trees which lined the old streets. The brown Toyota was warm and steaming. Rhonda slept and Mable and I did not talk, until I pulled up to a shadowy park.

"This is good shit Mel." She was looking at the wet, dark trees.

I nodded. Micky Mouse said it was 2:00 AM. I felt lost and cold. I could coke up, but why? Mable was leaning on me. I could feel her breast on my arm. "Tired?" I asked.

"You running from yourself too?" She replied.

I was stoned but the micro dot was flushed from my head by time and the black, night air. I took her hand. "I wanted..." My voice trailed off.

"Yeah?"

"Tell me where you live."

She shook her head. "Yeah. Right. Take home my lover." Mable took her bags and got out of the car. She walked across the wet grass into the dark trees. I turned off the car's engine and at some point went to sleep and dreamed of sleeping bags.

I woke up to a raw sun come up over the horizon. It cast the long shadows of the new day like a white washed picket fence across my Toyota. Four kids with spiked food colored hair and black, leather jackets came out of the trees like baby devils. I started the car. The fish must be as cold as hell by now. One on the kids rapped on my window. He looked sick. "Hey Man," He yelled through the window. "There's a dead chick in the trees."

"Shit happens, call a cop." I said and took out the road map. Breakfast and the bong could wait. I needed to get out

on the road. I needed to know where I was going, because soon there would be cars with flashing red and blue lights here in this savage park on the edge of the smell of shit.

