

Losing It

by Jann Burner

(The true story of how it was and how it went)

The following is a true story, or rather it is a true experience from the story of my life. Some say that just because something happens doesn't really make it "*true*".

I am eighteen years old. It is 2:45 in the morning and I am chasing some crazy woman in a Bahama Blue '57 Chevy, two-door hardtop across the high desert of Northern New Mexico. I am driving a borrowed car. I have never met the woman before. Seated next to me is an "A&W" waitress named Reba and next to her is a guy in his middle twenties. His name is John and he has black hair and a scar on his face. He has a vested interest in the crazy woman. She is his girl-friend and she is drunk and she has just stolen his car from the parking area in front of the *Pony Soldier Motel*. Eighteen minutes ago I lost my virginity at the *Pony Soldier Motel* but I didn't get to cum. I do not belong here. I should be home in bed. It is like a dream and in this dream it is summer and I am an Airman third class in the United States Air Force in Roswell, New Mexico.

Being in the Air Force (as opposed to the Army) I have my own room. It is a very nice two-man room and we are allowed to decorate it as we please. It is like a college dormitory. The decoration of one's room is even encouraged here: they have competition. The one with the fanciest or the strangest room wins big money. I have a room-mate. His name is Dallas through he comes from Tennessee. He speaks very slowly in the Southern style

as if he were eating something very dear or very sweet. His speech is very dramatic. He sounds like an actor in a Tennessee Williams play. He doesn't even know who Tennessee Williams is and could care less. I don't see him very often because we have different jobs and work different shifts. I work nights in the control tower and in the mornings when I return to the room I notice that his bed is never slept in. I ask him where he spends his nights and he tells me he's screwing a waitress down town at the A&W Drive In. I find this hard to believe. I find it hard to believe that anyone (at least anyone I know personally) is really *doing it!* He offers to introduce me to his lady.

The town lies on a high plateau in Northern New Mexico. It is a small town. It gets very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. There is one main street that stretches almost two miles, from North to South. At the Northern end of town is the Fat Boy drive-in. At the Southern end of town is the Big Top drive-in. In the center of town is the A&W drive-in. These three places form a trinity.

In addition to the military base there is also a private boys military school as well as a local high school. These three form a second trinity. All three groups hate each other and compete for the limited attention of local girls. Fights are common and exhibitions of bravado are greatly admired. From dusk to dawn the Air Force, the military academy and the high school cruise the main drag, stopping or at least hesitating at each of the three important gathering points.

The town also has a very small zoo. A pitiful little compound of frightened animals constantly terrorized by the local youth. One local airman, in order to demonstrate his cool and toughness, hacked off the last foot of the town's one and only lion's tail. He hung the tail from his rear view mirror with the long hairy tuft hanging down. It was a major story in the local paper. Leo, the

aging, moth eaten, toothless lion had once belonged to an Italian circus. The lion had come down with the flu as the circus passed through and they were going to put it to sleep when the locals came up with the idea of a town zoo. Why not? All the big cities had zoos, why couldn't a small desert town have a zoo too? The Italian circus didn't mind. They were glad to be rid of the diseased beast. Soon the mother's of the town were able to drag their kids to the grassy patch at the end of town and marvel at the caged coyote, the bob cat, the three "wild dogs", the crazed squirrel and the eight-five pound lion, with the long tail.

But I'm sliding off target. That's another story and this one is about "*Losing It!*"

Dallas and I wheeled into the A&W in his '57 Dodge. It was dropped low in front so that all could see the two long chrome exhaust pipes that stuck back from the engine scraping the pavement and sparking at every bump. They were called drag pipes. It was painted black and the interior was black tuck and roll: done the previous spring in Nogales. It was a black on black machine. It was very cool.

We pulled into one of the asphalt slots and a snappy blonde in red carhop garb came dancing down the cement island that separated the facing automobiles. She leaned over against the door and put her head partially through the open window.

"Hi Dallas...who's your friend?"

"Hi Reba, this is Ben, my roommate."

"Hi Ben," she says with an eager smile.

"Hi Reba." I reply.

"Would you like to take Ben home with you tonight?" Says Dallas, casually.

She looks at me again. She smiles. "Sure, pick me up at midnight Ben."

She moves on down the island with a wink. I feel suddenly nervous and silently sip my vanilla coke. As she passes back by the front of our car she blows a large bubble of gum. It pops with a loud crack and everyone in the immediate area whistles and applauds. She smiles, trills the fingers of her left hand high in the air in acknowledgement and with a bump of her hip passes off into the interior of the diner.

On the way back to the air base I tell Dallas that it certainly is nice of him to lend me his girl friend for the evening. I don't tell him that it will be my first time. He says to think nothing of it and offers me his car as well. So, after dropping him off at the room I return to pick up Reba.

Reba doesn't have a house or even an apartment. She carries a small over nighter suitcase. She is originally from Carlsbad, New Mexico. She makes sixty dollars a night at the drive-in and spends thirty dollars every night on a motel room. She stays in a different room every night. She has stayed in the same motel, but never in the same room. She thinks it is somehow festive. I find this hard to believe. I think she expects me to give her money. I am wrong. We drive through town and she drops one liners describing each and every motel we pass. Finally, for this auspicious occasion, she selects the ***Pony Soldier Motel***. It's a low slung Spanish adobe featuring exposed wooden beams and a wagon wheel fence. They sell color post cards in the office and there's an ice machine in the hall. I have never spent a night in a motel (or even a hotel) before. I sit in the car while she registers. Destiny deals us room "14". Once

in the room she throws me a wink and disappears into the bathroom with her tiny suitcase.

"Meet 'cha under the covers!", she says, with what sounds like a giggle.

I don't believe any of this is happening. We haven't even kissed. I feel like I've picked a fight with a stranger only to see him pull a gun. Somewhere along the way it seems to have become quite serious. I take off my clothes and crawl beneath the covers...and wait.

Finally she emerges from the bathroom. She has very long legs and long blonde hair piled high on her head. She is wearing a baby blue shorty night gown. My anxieties vanish as I watch her approach across the room. She hits the light switch and plunges the room into blackness. A rustle of covers; she grabs "*it*".

"You've got a nice one", she says. She pulls me over on top of her and sticks it in. I pump up and down a couple of times and she begins to moan and then gasp. She begins to thrash about quite seriously. I manage to turn on the bedside lamp.

"Is something wrong?" I inquire.

"I am dying!" she says. She is not kidding. She pushes me away like some sort of alien growth and points across the room.

"My purse..." she gasps. "My medicine! *QUICK!*"

She is nineteen. She once lived in the Southern part of the state. She was married and she had a baby girl. One day soon after the birth of her baby she had a heart attack. The doctors, after a through examination, gave her six months to live. She thought about it. She thought about her six month life. She reflected on her

daughter whom she would never know. She thought of her husband, whom she could never love again, with true passion. She left the hospital and never returned home; never saw her husband or child again. That was three months ago.

I don't believe any of this is really happening. I lean down and kiss her tenderly on the mouth. She looks up at me like she doesn't believe any of it either. She attempts a smile.

The door to the room suddenly bursts open and a young man, obviously drunk, stands...panting, back-lit by the street light.

"Reba!" he yells. "Reba, Janice just tried to kill herself. You've got to talk to her!"

"Where is she?" Reba yells.

He points behind him, out toward the street. I roll over and lift the shade. Behind him on the gravel is a blue "57" Chevy. Seated in the front seat is a dark huddled form. Reba climbs out of bed and walks across the room to the bathroom. The stranger leans against the door-jamb watching me.

"I'm John." He says, "You a friend of Reba's?"

I nod and glance at the clock on the wall. It is two thirty in the morning. I slowly get out of bed and dress. Reba comes out of the bathroom wearing Levi's and a T-shirt. We all look at one another and for some reason we all smile. It is somehow understood that we are but merely characters in a long running play awaiting our next cue. Suddenly there's a screech of rubber and the room is showered with gravel as "Janice" roars off into the New Mexican night in John's "57" Chevy two door hard top convertible. This seems to be a town of classic cars.

"That crazy bitch!" says John. And off we go.

It is two-forty five in the morning. I am eighteen years old and I am chasing a crazy woman whom I have never met, across the flat high desert of Northern New Mexico, in a borrowed car. There is no traffic and the road is straight; a minor secondary two lane black top. There are no trees, no bushes, only sand, rock and scrub. In the distance the tail lights of the '57 Chevy are growing larger. We are gaining. There is a stop sign, badly torn and mutilated with bullet holes. I am going too fast to stop but I can see in all directions and there is no traffic. Beneath the glare of the headlights I can see a ditch running across the road like a cross-walk. It is a small ditch about four inches deep and maybe two foot across. I glance down at the speedometer. The needle is just passing seventy five miles per hour. We are gaining. As we cross the little ditch, the two front wheels break loose and shoot off at a forty-five degree angle. As the automobile's frame drops down and contacts the surface of the road, the tie-rods break, severing all steering control. The wheel spins loose in my hands. Suddenly we are riding a four thousand pound metal sled through what sounds like an ice storm. Like a carpenter's plane being propelled down a length of pine two by four, asphalt shavings spew up and over the hood and windshield blocking my vision. As I hit the breaks the windshield shatters filling the front seat with broken glass and chunks of asphalt. The car leaves the road at sixty miles an hour and begins spinning around and around and around...

We gradually slow to a stop about one hundred feet from the edge of the seldom used road. In the distance the red tail lights grow smaller and smaller...I look over at John and he looks back at me.

We look down at Reba. She is laying on the floor beneath a pile of broken glass and asphalt chips. She appears to be dead. I wipe the rubble from her face. John grabs her beneath the arms and drags her outside into the night. There is no moon on this night.

"Her medicine is in her purse--"he says.

"She didn't bring her purse." I say.

He stands there beneath all of the stars holding her body by one arm. We are hushed. His expression somehow reminds me of a hunter who has just bagged a large animal and isn't quite sure what to do with it.

"CHRIST!" he says, *"I think she's dead!"*

He picks her up and drapes her body over the hood of the Dodge, face up. I am still sitting behind the steering wheel watching through the shattered windshield. He slaps her face--*hard!* I've never seen a grown man slap a woman across the face except in the movies. Reba's head turns with the blow and then slowly rolls back again. She is alive.

"Get me some lemon or salt..." she feebly says in a very distant voice.

I get out of the car and peer down into her face. *"REBA!"* I say, "Reba--are you there?"

John climbs up on the hood of the car and straddles her body. He leans over her and places the palms of his hands on her chest between her breasts and pushes quick and hard. She groans.

Through the night a pair of headlights appear. We pick her up and half carry, half drag her to the edge of the road. The approaching lights turn out to be a new white Ford. We frantically wave. It doesn't even slow down. Without the evidence, without our wrecked automobile we must look like drunk hitch-hikers. Soon another car approaches from out of the darkness and we walk out onto the road holding Reba upright between us. The car slows. It is

a large dark Buick and as the car rolls to a stop next to us the passenger window descends smoothly. We quickly explain our situation and ask if they have any lemon or salt. Eyes peer at us from out of the soft dark interior. We frantically beg for a lift to town. The window hums back up into place and the Buick quickly accelerates away into the high desert night. There are no other lights on the horizon. Holding Reba's limp body between us we begin walking slowly back toward town. We walk down the center of the road. We walk for about two hours without seeing another light. Reba grows very heavy. We trade off carrying her and rest often. Finally as the sun begins to rise over the Eastern horizon Reba regains consciousness. She shakes her head and looks around. She is pissed! She is still alive! It had only been a dry run...for nothing and for practice.

"What happened?" she says, "How come I'm not dead? I thought I was dead! Did I do it wrong?" She looks up into my eyes as if I should know. "*Do I have to do it again?*"

