**Burning Up the Highway with Betty Jo**

S. Katherine Burnette

Although her face was turned towards the side window of the mammoth sedan, George looked at Betty Jo. The morning light slanted into the car and sparkled off the glass lending a softness to her profile.

“I’m so glad that I brought her on this trip.” George thought. A traveling salesman, the last of a great American tradition, he motored up and down the tarmac of the Eastern Seaboard in an old burgundy LTD.

The car whistled through the state of Virginia while George adjusted the crackly radio. Betty Jo was a picture, as his mom would say.

George looked down at this own “waist” straining at the seatbelt. It was hard finding elastic waist-pants anymore. Fortunately, Ms. Quick at the Highway 96 Thrift Store kept her eyes out for pants to fit him.

The last few weeks, business had dropped off. Watching the mile markers fly by in the rolling horse country, he considered today’s and tomorrow’s schedule. He eschewed the big cities, leaving those to the newer younger guys.

Betty Jo had blown away his loneliness like the fuzz off a dandelion. And, if he hadn’t been driving his rural company route, he would have missed meeting her.

Forgetting his upcoming presentation, George thought back on the night earlier in the week that he’d met Betty Jo. George had pulled over in Richmond, Virginia just as the sun was setting.

Although it was later than he normally liked to eat, he headed to the hotel’s Italian restaurant. Seated at a booth for one, as he slid into the banquette, he noticed a pretty lady at the bar.

He studied her by looking up quickly over his menu. Dressed conservatively, she wore a white blouse and a black skirt with low heeled black shoes.

Although not a charmer, George was a born salesman. He paid his dinner check and walked over to the bar. He eased onto the bar stool, careful to keep his shoulders back to disguise his girth.

“I hate to bother you, but may I borrow your newspaper?” She’d smiled shyly up at him, pushing the discarded pages towards him. The longer they talked, the more they found things they had in common.

She sparkled when she talked about her job. Her laugh was infectious and made George feel like the only guy in the room.

Much later they stood up a little shakily, laughing, and headed towards the bank of hotel elevators. When the doors closed, they reached hungrily for each other.

The next morning, George brought the car around before grabbing a hotel cart and their luggage. Betty Jo had had a glow about her although the shine of her skin could have been due to the large tub of moisturizer they’d shared. He hugged her as he helped her into the passenger seat.

The thrumming of the car’s engine rudely brought George back. The road unfolded in long black strips. He looked over at Betty Jo. He sighed contentedly and pulled the sleeves down on his navy V necked sweater. Betty Jo did best with a lot of air conditioning.

Last night, their lovemaking had been especially tender. Selling no products all day, he had come back defeated to a quiet cool room. Wordlessly, he had fallen into her arms.

George checked the green highway sign. He had been lulled into a sort of fugue state between the air conditioning and the lush green countryside rolling by his window.

A nearby siren jolted him. He grabbed the rear-view mirror. Blue lights and red lights were coming up fast behind him. He was going only slightly over the posted speed. But, the flashing lights and screeching siren were behind him and not pulling around. George began to sweat but slowed down and pulled over onto the gravel shoulder.

Up to the rolled down driver’s window sauntered a gray uniformed state policeman. Oddly, a second younger one stepped up to and stayed to the rear of the passenger side of the car.

The older man stooped down, pushed his face almost into the car, and drawled, “Where you folks coming from?”

George swallowed trying to figure out if there was a right or wrong answer to the question.

“We’ve been down in south Virginia. We’re heading up north for a meeting that I have, sir.”

Betty Jo’s face remained turned towards the pastureland to the right. He knew that she didn’t care for policemen.

After staring at him a minute, the officer drew back, shifted the toothpick in his mouth, and walked around the car.

“License and registration,” he barked. George gingerly reached over Betty Jo to get the registration from the glove box. He accidently rucked up her skirt hem.

The heat assaulted him after the delicious cool of the air conditioning. George felt the sweat gather at his neck begin to trickle down his back. His arm pits felt soggy.

The officer strode back and sat in his running car for a long time. The blue lights swirled around but the siren was off. George could feel the few long wisps of his comb over get matted to his skull. He heard one of the black and white cows moo and walk over to the wire fence.

Finally, the first officer came back with his papers. George could see the second officer come up to the passenger side door. In a whoosh, the second officer grabbed the handle and yanked open the door. “No!” George screamed. Betty Jo toppled onto the roadside gravel head first. The part of her face that had rested on the window stayed there. Her head, finally freed by gravity, rolled down the shoulder and into the weed filled ditch. Her soft yellow curls lay matted with dead leaves and bits of gravel. Her eyes turned up toward the sun. The younger officer inhaled the miasma of decay, ran to the grass, and retched.