

## The Branding

Tom was driving south, turning onto the M1, with Everard sitting in the back looking through a pile of books, quiet, doing as he was told. On the motorway ramp Tom saw a row of hitch-hikers, begging for rides. A long ago memory whispered to him and he pulled over. The middle part of some one appeared at the window, was framed by it, and the door swung open. A girl climbed in, smiling.

"Hi," she said. "Where you going?"

"Down to London." The car pulled away in a puff of sporty pollution.

"Great."

"You?"

"Dartmouth." She said, raising her eyebrows.

"Where's Dartmouth?" Everard asked. The girl twisted around in her seat to face him. "Its a long way. It's right at the bottom of England."

"Why do you want to go there?"

"Just for fun, to see some friends."

"Is it at the sea side?"

"All right. Read your book, Ev'." The girl offered an understanding smile to the boy, and turned back in her seat.

"Dartmouth, eh?"

"Yeah, I kind of got a late start. I was planning on leaving early this morning. You know how it goes."

"Yes," he said, but did not. They moved into the fast lane and the road streaked into them, passed through them, and away behind them.

"Do you live in London?" Talk was cheap, she gave it away constantly, to all the drivers, and her ease and abundance of word was often played to great advantage.

"We live in Richmond," Everard said.

"That's nice," she said turning again. "I've been there."

"Only I don't live there all the time."

How old are you?"

"Nine."

"Oooh. That's pretty old."

"How old are you?"

"Ev'. Read your book."

"You're married then," she said, turning again to face forward.

"I was. My wife died three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's all right. Time heals, as they say."

"Or we forget," she said distantly.

They drove onward.

"What's happening in Dartmouth, anyway?"

"Nothing really. Like I said, I'm just going to visit some friends for a few weeks."

"Don't you work?"

"No. I don't like it. I tried it once and it didn't agree with me."

"Daddy doesn't work either," Everard said from his corner.

"Actually I have my own business, but it mostly takes care of itself."

"You mean other people take care of it."

"Yes," he laughed. "I suppose I do. I travel a lot anyway—since his mother died."

"How much is a lot?"

He offered a face which suggested an approximation, "Six months out of the year."

"Who looks after your son?"

"I go to a boarding school," Everard said. "That's why I don't live in Richmond all the time. And it's a horrible school."

"Well it costs enough, Ev'. And I've told yo to read your book."

"Your business must be doing well."

"It's doing okay. The thing is, his mother had life insurance."

"Oh. How much?" The girl was more forthright than common sense deemed suitable, but Tom was taking a definite liking to her. She reminded him of a young man he once knew, who was an absolute foreigner to inhibition.

"Four thousand pounds, every three months."

"Wow. Multiply it by one and it's still a lot."

"Yes."

"Was he happy she died?" the girl wondered to her self. "How much is a wife worth anyway?"

"How did she die, anyway?"

"A road accident. She was crossing the street one morning."

"That's terrible," she said.

Just ahead a sign indicated a Service Station. "I think we'll call in at the services there."

"I could do with a bite myself."

It was a classic Summers day: A slight drizzle fell and a tyrannical breeze flung it into their faces.

"It's not much of a day for hitch-hiking," Tom said, slamming the car door closed, hunching his shoulders protectively against the chill and hastily making towards

the service building. Everard ran along behind, trying to catch up to them.

"You can say that again." And was there a hint of surprise in her voice?

"So why do it?"

"It makes me feel alive. What makes you feel alive?"

"I don't know," he said. "Sex," he thought. "Wild unbridled sex," and he smiled an unseen smile.

They climbed the staircase and entered the secluded world of the motorway restaurant.

"What do you feel like?" Tom asked. "It's on me."

"No, I couldn't."

"I insist. What would you like?"

"Me, I want hamburger and chips and pop," Everard said.

Back on the road, talk was returned for the gift of food: thousands and thousands of utterances. Enough chat to fill volumes. Page after page of aching words, tired words, meaningless words, happy words, sombre words, ridiculous words, giddy words, hasty words, living words, stupid and clever words, distant words, whispered words. Whispered words.

"London, forty-five miles," the girl read a sign.

"How far's forty-five miles?" Everard asked.

"Not far," the girl told him. "You'll be home soon."

The prospect of leaving the girl for some reason was not a glad one, and without realising it, Tom eased his foot off the accelerator.

"Do you think you'll make it to Dartmouth by tonight?"

"No. I have my sleeping bag though. I'll find some place to crash."

"Hello."

"I'll be fine."

"I don't know how you can do it. Doesn't it worry you, sleeping out like that? Hitch-hiking by your self? What if some maniac gave you a ride?"

"What if I was hit by lightning? And anyway, most people are nice."

"They might seem nice."

"No, they are."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Susan," she said.

"Susan?" It was like an electric shock. Treatment.

"What's wrong?"

"That was his mother's name."

"Oh. How long were you married?"

" I don't know. A few years I guess. We met in school. She was the first girl I ever knew. I tell you it's funny how things happen, how they work out. I sometimes wonder how much free choice we actually have. It seems like we do one small thing, maybe even without thinking, and it changes the rest of our lives. By the time you realise what's going on, it's too late."

"Does she know what I'm talking about?" he thought. "Has she guessed what I am?"

The problem with people like Tom, who have something to hide, who know something of themselves that they wish to conceal, is the paranoia that they are transparent, that all may look and see within. There comes a time too, when the need to confess grows stronger than the desire to suppress. This was one of those times.

"I don't normally tell people, but I'm homosexual."

"Oh." The girl, Susan, thought of Everard sitting in the back. "So why tell me?"

"I don't know."

"It looks like the rains stopping," she said.

"Yes. Anyway, it was hard for me. I married young and I didn't realise for quite a while. And when I did, well I couldn't leave her. I wouldn't leave her, so I tried my best."

"And then she died and then he was free," she thought, but remained silent.

"Life is full of pretending, isn't it," he said. "I don't have to pretend any more, but I still do. I suppose you get so used to something, no matter what it is, that you just can't let go. I tell you it's funny to be gay. I'm still not used to it."

"Why's he saying all this in front of the boy?" she wondered, "if he likes to hide the truth and pretend."

"Look at the cows," she said, turning to Everard and pointing towards a field.

"I was in New York last year," Tom said, unable to halt the unburdening. "It's really different over there. I came across this gay bar one day; you should have seen it: it was huge. Not hidden either. There was a big sign outside. On the first floor people just drink—guys of course. On the second floor they have these telephones at the tables. When you see someone you like you call him up and say stuff. If you just want to masturbate together you stay there, but if you want to do other things you go to the second floor where they have mattresses spread about the place. It's pretty odd the first time you see it."

The girl, Susan, sat listening, thinking of Everard in the back, feeling increasingly uncomfortable and wishing they would arrive.

"There's a room in the basement for orgies. The entire floor is made from those plastic gymnasium mats. There are naked bodies spread out all over the place. It's odd—the first time you see it."

"So that's what he does with his freedom—fucks it," she thought. "I wish we'd arrive."

When the girl, Susan, left the car in London, the young boy in the back seat waved to her and called good bye. She was filled with a strange and uneasy feeling of emptiness, almost foreboding.

During the evening, with Everard safely out of the way in bed, Tom called a friend to come on over. They drank Vodka and orange and soon were kissing, two men, alcohol lips, and exchanging gifts of alcohol spit. Soon they were spread out on the rug before the fire, doing unspeakable things to one another.

Everard awoke, looked about the shadow room and felt the gentle touch of fear against his boy face. He climbed from bed and quietly made his way down the stairs, hearing strange animal sounds as he went. He stopped, listened, tried to understand, tried to fathom what was going on, continued on with painstaking caution, step by eternal stilly step, along towards the living room doorway. Everard poked his head in, unnoticed. He saw his father doing things with another man. He saw the another man doing things with his father. He saw the another man and his father doing things together. Everard hurried on back to his room, hurried on back to his room with that red hot image, that red hot image forever branded to his eye balls.