

CAMEL BELLS AND ZODIAC CHARMS

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Sonya was a ditzy girl. And I do mean ditzy. Some called her just another airhead, but I knew it was more than that. She was just plain ditzy and there was nothing anyone could do about it. She had the old tie-dyed tank tops that clutched her small breasts that amazed the eyeballs of many males. And those ridiculous strings of beads, leather bands, zodiac signs, you name it, it hung from her. She was a walking head shop.

Now I admit, there was a time when all that crap strung on your body meant you were really into something. And if you displayed your knowledge of I-Ching, organic food, and Joan Baez, it was an instant turn on. I mean, people then would try to get into you; they thought you had it together. And if you laid on the crap about having a private guru, they loved you for life.

But Sonya didn't know that today that sort of stuff was uncool. I tried to tell her a thousand times, but it was no use. She would just smile and say, "I love you, brother. even if you haven't got your head together." Then she would resume chanting in her full lotus, blocking out everything I said.

Her real name was Janet Wilson, but sometime around '69 she changed it to Sonya. She thought last names were, "A fucking ego trip for parents and husbands!" So, everyone just called her Sonya and left it at that. I'd long since given up arguing with her about her name, although at times I would still slip and call her Janet. I usually got a quick one-finger response then splattered with a half-hour of anti-surname nonsense. But what could you expect from a ditzy girl? An airhead.

So, what was I doing driving down that two-lane at four in the morning? God only knew. It had been one of her spontaneous ideas. She had said, "Come on, let's drive to Virginia! I know a beautiful mountain down there and I know you'll love it." So we left Pittsburgh around 2:00 am and started weaving through the West Virginia hills. I swear, there couldn't be a straight ten miles in that whole state, but Sonya insisted we drive through the mountains. My back started aching from all the leaning on the curves and the sick smell of patchouli incense billowed from the ashtray.

Sonya tuned in some obnoxious DJ from Cleveland who was playing the top three hundred hits. He was only on number 284, and by the time he reached 278, I'd had it. His sarcastic voice, the winding road, and the incense fumes forced me to the side of the highway where I stood outside the VW van and puked my guts. Sonya rolled down the window and explained that I was

sick from all the junk food I'd eaten. First time that trip that murder crossed my mind. She must have seen it in my eyes, for she gave me a feeble smile and quickly rolled the window up. I hung on the side of the bus for a while, breathed my last gulps of fresh air, then climbed back in.

The van chugged slowly over the mountains. After a couple of hours, we were on the Interstate. Finally, a road. Sonya had done her exercises and was fast asleep on the floor of the van. I woke her when I no longer knew which way to go.

It had been over eight years since she was last here, but she insisted she knew where she was going, and I was too tired to argue. She directed me through all these back woods places, two-building towns and deserted gas stations. She had a keen eye for bad roads-I'd never seen so many potholes and mud pits. We finally came to a little dirt strip and she began shouting, "We're here! We're here!" All I could see was a little turn-off that led to a trash pile.

"This is it?"

"Yeah isn't it beautiful? Oh mountain, you're so beautiful!"

"Holy shit."

I parked the van next to the pile which became more obvious as the dawn light rose over the mountain. Crushed televisions and broken chairs, with tons of cans and bottles. The old bus fit right in. Sonya flew from the van and started off towards the woods.

"Where are you going?"

"Why, up the mountain, where else? "

"Now look, I just finished driving all night and there is no way I'm going up that mountain now."

"But—"

"No! Now let's get some sleep."

A string of beads twisted around her hand. "Well... if we have to."

It was a small victory. but I was proud of it. We curled up on the floor of the van in a double sleeping bag. Although she was excited about climbing the mountain, she fell asleep instantly.

I awoke in a thick cloud of incense. Strawberry Fields. Sonya was reading aloud from one of her haiku books, something about a leaf floating down from a tree. The only connection I could make with the poem was a mental picture of Snoopy watching the leaves fall in the comic strip. She stopped reading when she saw me stir.

"Are you ready to go up the mountain?" Her eyes were wide in expectation.

"I just woke up! Why don't you give me a minute to breathe?"

"All right, but we have to start pretty soon, or we won't have time to make it up and down again before dark."

"Okay, okay."

She took a pan of boiling water off the camp stove poured some into a cup. and handed it to me. I set the cup down, pulled on my pants and socks, then took a sip. "Yiech! What is this?"

"Herb tea, do you like it?"

"Well, ah, it's okay, but don't we have some coffee?"

"Coffee is bad for you."

Normally I would have argued, but what can you say to an airhead? I finished getting dressed, drank the tea, and we started up the mountain.

The trail was well marked, and it wasn't too steep-- at first go-- we made pretty good time. Hell, I had no choice. Sonya took steps like a marathon runner. I couldn't believe that such a small girl could move so fast. I had a hard time keeping up with her, but I didn't let her know.

Fortunately, we stopped every few minutes to talk to a pine or pet some moss. Every time she made me say something to a tree or some scrawny bush, I had to look around first to see if anyone was watching. You think it's funny, well shit, you just try talking to a tree sometime and see how it feels. Man, I didn't even know the proper way to address a hunk of moss, so you can imagine how I bombed out on a tree.

Then the climbing got really tough. The trail was still marked, splotches of blue paint here and there, but I'm sure the idiot who marked it was playing a joke on everyone crazy enough to follow it. He was probably still laughing his ass off, sitting in front of a Saturday afternoon football game. What a shithead. He was watching Oklahoma while I was wedged between two rocks, clinging to some bush, ("Oh, that's laurel!"), hanging on for dear life. And it wouldn't have been so bad if that had been the worst of it. No way.

After climbing through the rocks, we had to climb straight up the side of a cliff. About halfway up, with fingernails jammed into some little crack, Sonya says, "We could've taken the other trail, but it's more beautiful this way." That was the second time murder crossed my mind. But hell, what can you do flat on your face against some rock. I don't know how I made it past that point, but eventually we were on the top of the ridge on somewhat more of trail. Sonya never let up the pace. Or the chatter.

"Look at that beautiful white pine, and the silver maples, and those are tulip poplars, and..." and so on and so on. I was really beginning to tire, so I had to do something.

"Sonya, you look like you're getting a little worn out. I think we'd better stop for a minute and let you rest."

She didn't buy it for a second, but we stopped anyhow. And after resting and looking around, I was amazed. It truly was beautiful, but I couldn't let on too quickly that I agreed. Then I noticed she had been watching me look at thunder clouds rolling over the rocky ridge and I knew I'd been caught.

She smiled. "Okay, we'll stay here. This is one of favorite places anyhow. Also, it is close to the main trail so we'll be able to get down pretty fast if it starts getting late"

She sat down in the pine needles and began chanting. After a half hour or so, she stood up and started undressing. A little light clicked in my head as I ripped off my clothes. She was beautiful, sitting naked between the rough rocks and hanging pines. I sat next to her, put my arms around her soft shoulders, and started kissing her.

"What do you think you're doing? "

Her harsh words startled me. "Well, I ah, I thought"

"Man, you just about wiped out my communion with nature."

"But I--"

"You only have one thing on your mind. Can't you forget about your body for one second? Now either sit down and chant or get dressed and quit bugging me.

Third time thought of murder. I don't know what stopped me. There she was, sitting right at the edge of the cliff, lost in her "communion with nature." One little shove and it would be bye-bye Janet Wilson, alias Sonya the ditzy airhead. But hell, what can you do? I sat down and began chanting.

After a few minutes, I heard this weird sound. At first, I thought I was hearing things. Or maybe this chanting stuff was going to my head. But no, it couldn't have been that simple. Instead, what I heard was the distinct sound of girl scouts singing along the main trail. I was trapped.

I grabbed for my clothes just as I saw the first dozen girls. I yelled at Sonya, but she just kept chanting. I had my jockey shorts around my ankles just as the girls saw me. At first, I didn't know what to do, but shit, what else could I do? I let go of my shorts and started waving. I waved and

waved and smiled the biggest smile I had. The troop passed, giggling and red. There must have been at least five hundred of them. But finally, they passed. And Sonya kept on chanting.

I sat down next to her "Do you know what just happened?"

She stopped chanting but didn't answer.

"I said, do you know what just happened?"

She doubled over and started laughing. And laughing. Ditzzy broad. She thought the whole thing was funny. I was sure she'd planned it. She must have known what was going to happen. She laughed until she could hardly breathe. Then she controlled herself and fell silent. I looked into her soft, crazy eyes, then smiled at the one silly string of beads resting against her breasts. We rolled around on a bed of pine needles, under spruce and hemlock trees that glistened in the sunlight.

In the long drive home, the Cleveland DJ was around number 180 as the incense hung in the air. The West Virginia roads twisted along as Sonya slept in her seat, her head leaning against the window. I looked at that ditzzy girl, and those silly beads and leather bands, and thought, what a hell of a way to spend a seventh anniversary.