

Reckless Abandon

by Leslie Tucker

"The order is rapidly fadin'
and the first one now will later be last
For the times they are a-changin."

—Bob Dylan

The guy who exhausted my youth once and for all drove a black Mustang convertible and looked like Brad Pitt. The first time he pulled up to the curb at school and offered me a ride, I knew it was a bad idea, but got in the car anyway. It was 1965, times were changing faster than a Chevy Corvette on Woodward Avenue, and a wild girl crouched inside me, ready to jump out and roar. I was an honor student, an accomplished pianist, President of Proscenium, and a member of our high school's State Champion Debate Team, but the dangerous driver of the Mustang wasn't aware of those credentials. All he saw was that I'd finally grown into my long skinny beginnings and developed a face that more often than not, let me get my way.

From the start, Mr. Mustang and I fit like a tight boot on a sprained foot. I hopped into his car and the sun-baked bucket seat seared my bare legs. He offered me a Marlboro and I shrugged, so he stuck it in his mouth, puffed once and passed it over. I tasted him in broad daylight, and shuddered.

Everyone called him Tipp. It was short for a pretentious family name with nothing behind it but a father who managed a furniture store and a social climbing mother with Camaro yellow hair, who wore all her jewelry, all the time. Tipp was only a year older than I was, but far more experienced in outlaw behavior.

My smart girl plans were made. I would go to college at Berkeley, in California, putting plenty of distance between my mother, in Detroit, and

me; and on the off chance I didn't get in, University of Michigan would be my back-up escape. With eight months left till graduation, I was itching for cheap thrills.

I was sick of the geeky, scholar-athletes who called regularly, drove the speed limit in their father's sedans, and never missed sports practice or harassed me about sex. Mr. Mustang slid through school on charisma and stinking good looks. He didn't care about anything but himself and his car, and I knew it. He ran with a different crowd than I did -- kids who were teetering on the edge of decency, kids who ripped open their need for speed. Tipp's friends -- brutally handsome guys and sizzling hot girls, weren't in any of my classes. They were glib and irreverent, drove fast cars, and had too much time on their hands.

I was a fast skier; Tipp was faster. I drove my car too fast; he drove his faster. I chugged my bottle of Stroh's as his friends pounded the table in rhythm, and slammed the bottle down to find that he'd beaten me by a split second. As a pianist, my small motor skill was exceptional and I taught him how to roll a joint, sleek as satin, no wrinkles, then to lick and seal it with a clean tongue. He taught me how to inhale, hold my breath, expand the cerebral euphoria, and exhale in slow motion. We kissed and the planets shifted into perfect alignment. He unbuttoned his clothes and I unbuttoned mine. No pleading. No promises. Lights on, lights off, daylight or darkness -- it was splendor in the grass, splendor in the car, splendor just about everywhere.

Tipp and I were inseparable for six months. He picked me up for school on frigid Michigan mornings and we cruised with the top down, wind burning our faces ripe tomato red. Mascara ran down my cheeks, so I quit wearing it, and when I got lipstick on Tipp's khakis one day, I quit wearing that too.

Several days a week I cut my lunch period Study Hall, and we raced

to Elias Brothers Big Boy, a drive-in on Woodward, and gorged on double-decker burgers, fries, and chocolate shakes. Windows open, we ordered from the grungy menu next to the car, and cranked CKLW up loud, mainlining our hometown, Motown, music. Diana Ross's buttery soprano crooned *Baby Love* and we wolfed down our Big Boy Specials.

One afternoon our food order was bollixed up and we were late heading back to school. Tipp did a U turn and burned into a Sunoco station even though the gas gauge read half a tank. "Why are we stopping? I'm really late and you know I have a test, and Mr. Bagg is so strict and...."

Tipp rolled his eyes, glared, "Get over yourself will ya? You and your and your grades...it's a huge drag. I need cigarettes and it'll just take a minute." And he slammed the car door and shuffled off to get a pack.

It didn't occur to me that Tipp and I never talked about much of substance until the night we went downtown Detroit to see *Blood Beast from Outer Space* on the mammoth screen at the Fox Theater. There were no spaces on Woodward, so we parked the car on a sketchy side street in front of a blind pig. Detroit was famous for its blind pigs, illegal gambling houses located in rundown residential neighborhoods. The streetlights had been shot out, and the area was blanketed in darkness until one of the monstrous men guarding the door, opened it. Smoky blue light streamed out; patrons skulked in.

We thought no one would notice the gleaming new Mustang parked between two rusted heaps, or the two tall blond kids walking away from it. This was not the part of downtown Detroit I was familiar with, and a surge of conscience overwhelmed me as my mind flashed back to my father.

Since Kindergarten, Dad had taken me downtown with him to his office in the Guardian Building, on Saturday mornings. We went to the thirty-first floor of the Art Deco landmark and he caught up on his work without phone interruptions. I gazed out the windows from the highest place I'd ever been and conjured up scary stories while I rode the mirrored elevators up and down, up and down. After Dad finished work, we walked hand in hand to the Embers Deli and devoured corned beef on rye and the creamy cole slaw that had made the place famous.

I cringed when Tipp parked the Mustang in front of the blind pig and locked the doors. We sauntered toward the theater and despite the moderate evening temperature, I was chilled, my mind churning over how hurt Dad would be if he had any idea where I was.

After the movie let out, we high tailed it back around the block and discovered that the Mustang's glossy, Turtle-waxed finish had lightning bolt key scratches around its circumference, and a hole gaped in the dash where the radio had been. Horror struck, we jumped in, locked up, and made the forty-five minute drive up Woodward in silence. The joints we'd smoked earlier, to maximize the special effects on the big screen, had worn off, and that's when I figured it out – Tipp and I had nothing to talk about. After our outburst of swearing over the paint job and radio heist, it was quiet as a tomb in the car.

A low-cloud ceiling blankets Detroit from November till May, and there were no stars or moon to be seen that night. Forty degrees felt warm

to us as native Detroiters, so when we cruised north of Eight Mile Road, we put the top down. I'd been studying Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, for an upcoming test in my Honors Lit class, and the dark fluff swirling in the sky aroused thoughts of empty blackness in my twelfth grade mind. "So what do you think of Sartre?" I asked Tipp.

"Who the hell is that?"

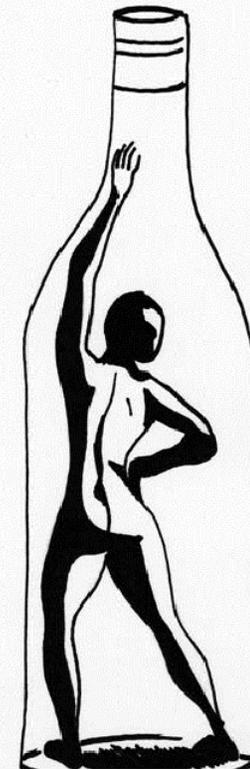
"You know, Jean-Paul Sartre, the Existentialist."

Tipp flashed a snide grin, "Oh give me a break. My dope's worn off and I've got a headache."

She was dancing in the dark corners

Of the midnight bars

In the afternoon



"Yeah, well, what's the last book you read for English?"

He glared, and hissed through clenched teeth. "Are you trying to piss me off? I just told you, I've got a headache."

Dad was sorely aware that my dismal episode of bad judgment was not running its course, as he'd hoped, and put his foot down when I least expected it. He worked his intellectual-communication-with-piercing-eye-contact-approach, placed his hands gently on my mine, and reasoned with me. My smart girl got the message loud and clear, but the renegade was in control, charging hard, exhilarated by the stupid risks she was taking. When my father forbade his smart-girl-daughter to see Mr. Mustang, the renegade reared up and hurled herself into the sensual abyss of the 1960s.

I ignored the intellectual wasteland between Tipp and me because insatiable lust for rock n' roll and each other, dominated our relationship. Bob Seger and his rip-roaring band, our hometown Detroit heroes, played regular gigs at the Walled Lake Casino and the Hideout, before they hit it big and moved out to L.A. In the parking lot, before the band's shows, we slammed back Stroh's and smoked joints, then went inside and gyrated against each other on sensory overload for hours.

Any time The Bob Seger Experience played, we showed up and were dazzled by the fierceness of their music. Our bodies buzzed from cheap beer, and our feet and legs tingled, grew numb, as we absorbed massive bass vibrations through the wooden floor. Detroit and its environs, notorious for oppressive heat and humidity, set records that summer, as we danced, dripped, and shook it down.

When the Rolling Stones came to Detroit and played Olympia, we had fourth row seats. Olympia Stadium, home of the Detroit Red Wings, was a small venue and the plexi-glass shields circling the ice were removed whenever the rink was covered for a concert. For the Stones, a stage was erected over the rink space, and extra seats for the sold out crowd were jammed onto the floor down front. We were breathless with anticipation to see the Stones -- a coarse and energetic band, their front man, feral and sinewy. Static popped from the sound system and I trembled, raw as peeled fruit, waiting for the first glimpse of Mick and the boys.

The audience was wild, and the so-called security comprised of a few half-drunk Rent-a-Cops. Luscious-looking girls, selected from the audience by promoters, were primed, told to gyrate provocatively in front of the low stage. When Keith slinked out and lacerated the room with the opening riff of *Satisfaction*, they tossed panties, bras, tee shirts, you name it, toward his tight leather pants. Lewd behavior by wild chicks in the audience was shocking then; we'd never seen anything like it. Mick, fierce and cantankerous, hair flopping around his shoulders, strutted out on the runway, and the crowd exploded as he pranced over to Keith and kissed him, full, on the lips. We were disoriented and bloated with pleasure as the world tilted beneath our feet. Tipp had grown his hair long, like Mick's, and it brushed his shoulders as his hips shook next to me. It was 1966 and I was eighteen years old.

The world as I knew it had indeed turned upside down. Eric Sevarid crushed our generational naiveté on the evening news, announcing that Civil Rights leader, James Meredith, was gunned down in a peaceful march from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. The Apollo space launch failed and three of America's heroic, right stuff kind of guys -- astronauts Grissom, Chaffe, and White, were killed. World Champion Prize Fighter, Cassius Clay, mystified Americans when he became a Muslim and changed his name to Mohammed Ali. And everywhere, even in our conservative, Detroit suburb, everyday-average-guys were growing their hair long and putting it in ponytails.

On Main Street USA, strange change assaulted the cookie cutter propriety I'd been raised with in Birmingham, Michigan. Proud floozies of all ages and good-girl-next-door types too, pranced around in mini-skirts, while Mitch Ryder and The Detroit Wheels rocked the nation with his tribute to them all -- *Devil With a Blue Dress On*. My friends and I had grown up in the Walt and June Cleaver-ish households of the 1950s, and suddenly, nothing we had been taught by our briefcase-toting fathers and pearl-wearing mothers made any sense anymore. We were pioneers in the wilderness of wild behavior.

Without warning, my planet slipped out of alignment. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, the waters around me had grown, I was drenched to the

bone, and as fast as I was swimming, I sunk like a stone. A breath away from graduating with honors and escaping to college in California, I was weak and nauseated, and my beloved Stroh's tasted like piss.

Risk taking is only exhilarating until it becomes exhausting; and suddenly, I was dead on my feet. And my smart girl knew why. So she did all the things that girls did then to bring on their period when they missed it. Steaming hot baths, running fast for miles, hundreds of sit-ups at a time, but I was young and strong and so was my child, and she held on tight.

To be fair, I have to say that I knew exactly who Tipp was and what we were doing. I could look back now and say I was blinded by young love, but I wasn't. I did know then what I know now, and the predictable occurred, and the responsibility became all mine. I made it all mine. When I told Tipp, he turned the whitest shade of pale and did what guys in that predicament did in those days and offered to marry me. The idea made me nauseous, and I threw up on his shoes and refused. I stood up to his parents and mine, refusing all of them, over and over, for weeks and weeks. It burned more energy than I'd spent in my entire life, but to no avail. Years later, I discovered that Dad, at Mother's insistence, enlisted the help of a Probate Judge, and manufactured the documents for a marriage and divorce to legitimize my child.

At the time, my world was shattered; I'd blown it up myself, yet I schemed to transcend the wreckage and take my child with me. Collapsing into bed at night, too exhausted to sleep, I vowed to do as the Dylan song said:

"Strike another match, go start anew, 'cause it's all over now Baby Blue."