

GET IT

Handy loved rocknroll so that night when he heard a band playing on the beach he went straight for it. He did not have to decide, he did not even wonder what was going on. The music was there on the beach like a delicious smell.

A hot night. It was after Labor Day but still hot and the chianti Handy drank at Jo's made it seem even hotter. Jo said Italy was hot and Italians drank it. As usual she barely finished her first glass. "Drinking like that isn't going to get you another job," she said and picked up People Magazine, crossed the middle of her livingroom and sat down in a wicker chair. The wicker creaked and bulged.

Handy drank wine. He had not held a steady job in six months -- since the layoffs at the Power Company. He spent his summer standing in line at the State Employment Office. Standing in line impressed on him that he had nothing to do. The flourescent light and grimy floor, cheap clothes that people there wore made the place buzz with loser fright. He hated it. Sometimes he would not go even though just being there was the only job he had.

Cher was on the cover of People. Her hair was done up like a black lion's mane, she wore a white lace dress, bare

shoulders. Jo was too damn sober.

"Handy you have to make your own luck."

Handy felt like driving down to the beach and taking a swim in Lake Michigan. The water was still warm. He wanted to peel off his clothes and dive in, breast stroke out like a frogman, roll over on his back like an otter, float, listen to the ripples spread around him. Before Jo knew what was happening Handy kissed her gently on the forehead and told her goodbye. He did not say where he was going and he took the bottle with him. He finished it in his rusty Duster by the breakwater in the public parkinglot. He rolled his windows down and let in the last of summer air.

Somewhere on the beach a band was playing rocknroll.

Handy kept by the water's edge. Soon he saw the shapes of couples walking together, scuffing the soft sand with their bare feet. He heard whispers, laughter, sighs. As he got closer to the music he saw lights, a large house. It was built of stone and wood, designed to resemble a massive Swiss chalet. The place was lit up with electric light so dazzling it seemed like the house itself was throwing the party.

A large redwood deck was attached to the house's stern. The rocknroll band used this platform as a stage; they were playing guitars and drums and singing. Candy colored Chinese lanterns were strung from bamboo poles spiked in the sand at the deck's rim. The beach was jammed with dancers.

Handy approached this scene as if it were a spaceship. His face was radiant with reflected light. No one tried to keep him away or even seemed to give his arrival a thought. The people he saw were gleaming, like TV: white teeth, suntans, thick hair. Handy felt at home -- he usually watched TV at night before going to sleep.

Near the house a man in a white shirt was making drinks behind a portable bar. He asked Handy what he would like and Handy said a beer. The man handed over an ice-cold bottle of Heineken. Handy thanked him -- the man yelled over his shoulder to someone that he needed more gin. The band was playing Chuck Berry, pumping out "O Whatta Thrill." Handy drank his beer and watched the crowd.

He saw this woman dancing. Auburn hair streaked by the sun, full blonde brows -- light reflected off her lips. She was dancing with a healthclub type who looked as though he considered dancing one of 50 or so practical routes to take with a women on the way to bed. It showed in the way he sidled there on the sand, nodding his head with the beat. The way he kept smiling Handy could tell he was trying to make eye contact, but the woman threw her head back. She looked up at the night sky or over the big man's Izod shoulder at the band. Closeby Handy glimpsed the warm skin of her throat.

Her partner wanted to get a drink. Handy had to make way to let him pass. The woman -- Handy was thinking, Her -- covered her eyes, swept the sweat from her brow. When she dropped

her hand, she and Handy were looking at each other. She was vivid as the image on a drive-in screen to him. He heard himself asking her to dance and watched her agree.

Once a guy he worked with at the Power Company told Handy that no matter how good-looking a woman seemed in everyday life the only way to see if she was really beautiful was to see her doing it in bed. "You'll never know what a woman looks like," he said, "until you're into her but then you see everything." Handy disagreed. He held that beautiful women reveal themselves dancing. He argued that when a beautiful woman dances she shows herself and all the selves she wants to be.

He saw this woman loved to dance.

Her old partner made his way through the crowd with gin and tonics in plastic cups. Behind him the band was playing and not stopping. Handy and Her were dancing and not stopping. They were dancing so hard it was difficult for him -- his hands full with watery cocktails -- to cut in although that is what he eventually did.

"Do you mind?"

Handy was pissed-off, but he stepped back to the edge of the light on a feeling for what was about to happen. While the band was toweling off, the woman was offered a drink, but she turned it down. The big man grinned at this and swallowed one drink whole. Handy overheard him saying "...we can drive up to Grande Mere for a bite to eat..."

Couldn't he see she loved to dance? Handy stepped in and asked her.

They danced on the beach. The way they traded moves sometimes it seemed like they were making love. "I'll never stop," shouted Handy over a chorus of guitars. His partner raised her hand and touched his face; he felt like a patriot in a free country. He told her his name.

"Handy?" she laughed, surprised, "Call me Sherry."

The band played to a car crash finish. Broken drumsticks, out of breath. Suddenly Sherry was walking away, going toward the water. Handy followed and soon the crowd was behind them, they were where they could hear night air shifting on the lake's surface. Sherry remained in the lead, Handy could see her white blouse ahead of him. He wished she would slow down.

"Are you following me?"

Handy was so surprised by her question he told the truth, "I'm crazy about you."

"Crazy?"

"I'd be willing to follow you all night."

"You might have to walk a long way."

"Yes," said Handy, "I would walk a long way."

They walked together as far as the old jetty and all the way back. The party was broken up. The beach where it had taken place looked blasted. Sherry led Handy across the sand,

over the bottle-strewn deck and around the big house. She knew a narrow walkway between the house's flagstone wall and a hedge of rose bushes.

There was starlight at the end of this passage -- and blacktop. A Mercedes, a classic XKE and a Porsche Targa were parked in glamorous silence along the edge of a circular driveway.

"Nice cars," whispered Handy.

Sherry was carrying a pack of cigarettes. She produced a joint, gave it to Handy and crossed the drive to the Mercedes. She lifted herself on to the car's hood; there was a lighter in her hand. Handy came up close with the joint -- flame popped polishing Sherry's eyes.

Handy asked, "What do you do here?"

"I'm between engagements," Sherry cleared her throat, "taking a hiatus before I assume a new identity." She blew smoke in Handy's face.

She had an accent but Handy could not place it. Not southern, not British or eastern -- none of these exactly but Handy thought he heard them all at different times. The intonations she placed on words reminded him of women in different movies he had seen. He asked her questions.

Sherry said that she left home when she was seventeen. Her father was a depressed insurance investigator and her mother wanted her to be an airlines stewardess.

"She thought it would be dreamy flying everywhere," she

shook her head.

Neither parent tried stopping her when she left. A boyfriend had taught her some things about cars so she fixed a junker's engine and drove it to Chicago. She lived with a rock band, traveled to California and then New York where a gangster fell in love with her and gave her a Ferrari.

"Men love to see me drive."

She lived for a time in Japan with a man who cut his little finger off with a knife because he was ashamed of lying to her about his wife. She fasted in India, worked at a Public Radio station in Hawaii, did market research in Minneapolis, wrote speeches for a Congresswoman from North Dakota in Washington, D.C.

As Sherry told her story night breeze blew sparks off the cigarettes she smoked against her blouse; she brushed them away before they burned. Handy studied her in the moonlight. She was mysterious as China to him.

Sherry asked, "Have you ever taken a ride, I mean a long ride in a Cadillac?"

"Great road car," said Handy although he never had.

"Drive that car 200 miles without stopping and you begin to know its genius." Sherry laughed a parched laugh.

"Genius?" Handy was startled by the word.

"The Cadillac is a wonderful thing to me," said Sherry, "it's a fantasy that works. People that are down on it are

people that have never given it its head, let it out on the road. You should try one out to California. That's where I want to go. I love how you cross the desert; it's so flat and scary. You look and see mountains and they seem close but they're miles away -- you could die trying to walk to them. In a Cadillac you're airconditioned and the desert parts for you like the sea in Ten Commandments. Accelerate through Bakersfield, you're up in the mountains. You go down through fog, mist, cold. A big car takes the curves in ultraglide. While you're gaining speed you see the white faces of people driving in the opposite direction, climbing the mountain and leaving the coast. Then, all of a sudden, there it is."

Handy said, "Yeah?" He was entranced.

"Pacific Ocean. Jagged rocks. Salt air through the open window on your skin. The Cadillac makes it like you sailed there."

Handy could see the waves breaking on the American coast. He was moved but did not know how to show it with this woman. He tried joking, "I thought the Cadillac died with Elvis."

"Oh no," said Sherry, "he's not dead -- listen to him sing 'Mystery Train.'"

Handy knew the song: "Beautiful song."

"A powerful song, Handy."

"Beauty is power, I think."

Sherry tilted her head, unprepared for this connection, Handy's making it, or both. "That's right. Do you find many

things beautiful?"

Handy jammed his hands in the back pockets of his jeans, squared his shoulders, "Beautiful things I think of as hope for the future."

Sherry blew a column of smoke in the air over Handy's head and leaned back on the Mercedes, "If I had a Cadillac I'd drive us to California tonight."

Handy laughed now, "What about tomorrow?"

The night was like burgundy and diamonds.

"Handy," Sherry told him, "you are one hell of a dancer."

He smiled at her.

"Get it," Sherry whispered, "get it and let's go."

Handy turned his back on the dawn and strode up the beach to the lot where his car was parked. The early sunlight was diffuse, lending things that Handy saw -- sandy slopes of maram grass and distant poplar trees, a crumbling breakwater and a woman's castoff sunhat -- a tropical calm. As he walked Handy reviewed his situation: he needed a Cadillac by sundown. He had promised to meet Sherry on Lakeshore Drive at six o'clock.

There was a parking ticket slapped to the windshield of his Duster. Handy crumpled it without checking the charge and stuffed it in his Levis. He got in his car and started the engine. "Get it and let's go" was what she said -- all he needed was a Cadillac. There was just one place where he might have a chance of getting one short of stealing it. He was headed for Don Swan's.

Don Swan was black. He looked like Little Richard, had the body of a cat with a superreal pompadour shining on top of his panther's skull. He wore bright colors -- tight pants with bell bottoms and Cuban heeled boots. Jewelry. Sharp-stoned rings on the fingers of both hands. Don Swan seemed to live in a world of his own invention, by his own lights, with his own legends. He ran the nastiest car lot in town. On the west side, near the correctional center.

Handy had helped Swan, done some wiring at the lot under scale. This was before the Power Company, another time in Handy's life when ends had been loose. He worked cheap and quiet and he did a good job under the circumstances. Swan appreciated this. He told Handy to come by if he ever needed a deal on a car. Handy scanned the lot: uneven rows of lowdown Cadillacs, Lincolns, Rivas, Bonnevilles and Delta 88s. Elephant's graveyard is what he thought then, pimpmobile paradise. "Thanks," he said as he took Swan's cash, "I like my car."

Swan shook his narrow head, "You never know when you might need somethin'."

The lot opened at nine but Swan got there at 7:30. He was on foot, with a pair of blue Dobermans on a double lead. When the dogs saw Handy, they bared their teeth but Swan put them down to the gravel with a gesture so subtle Handy missed it. This was a man, Handy knew, whose own people accused him of gouging, claimed he was into weird shit with magic and animals.

drugs and boys and Satan. Handy wanted to trade him his trusty Duster for a turquoise Coupe de Ville.

He figured the only way to do it was with the truth. Honesty was his strategy. He told Swan about being laid-off, of hating those lines at the employment Office, and as much about Sherry as he had words for. The only part he withheld had to do with California because he told Swan he needed that Cadillac and was willing to work off the difference in trade. He offered himself as Electrician-in-Residence at no charge.

Swan tilted his head and stroked his jugular with an index finger. He sighed; on the ground the dogs lifted their pale heads.

"Emotion is a powerful force," he said and he told Handy of all the work that needed to be done on the lot. He also wanted his house brought up to code.

It took Handy the rest of the day to clean up his Coupe. He washed and waxed and vacuumed; deodorized, debugged and glued a rent in the backseat upholstery that looked like it was made with a knife.

Sherry sat on the whitewashed retaining wall by Lakeshore Drive. She wore old Army shorts, her bare legs hanging down. She noticed the car before she looked at the man driving it: Handy pulled the '69 Cadillac in so close its turquoise paint almost brushed her skin. She dropped naturally from her ledge, came around the car and smiled in as the electric window stuttered down.

"Handy, Handy. Move over."

Handy pushed himself across the seat as Sherry got in and closed the driver's door. She looked at Handy sitting on the cream colored leather beside her -- his eyes seemed slightly larger than normal.

"You didn't steal this, did you?"

Handy wanted to put his hands on her and kiss her, "I might have, but no."

It was quiet inside the Cadillac. Sherry reached out like a cat touching a television screen and touched Handy's face. "Let's take it for a test drive," she said. She put the car in gear.

They drove east on Lakeshore Drive, their backs to the afterglow of sunset on the western shore of Lake Michigan. The big Coupe rumbled and its shock absorbers woozed over a couple of rough spots, but the car seemed essentially sound. Sherry accelerated as they crossed the border out of Indiana into Michigan. "This scenery's nice," she said, "but let's take it to the highway." Handy directed her.

She brought the Coupe up to 65, 70, 75 and held that speed past beach towns called New Buffalo, Lakeside, and Union Pier. Handy watched the old roadhouses, closed-up fruit stands and two-pump gas stations streaming by. The road they were traveling was once an Indian trail, it was still called the Red Arrow.

Handy stretched his legs and lit a cigarette. His duffel

was in the trunk. After all the work on the car there had not been a lot of time left to pack but he preferred the idea of getting what he needed along the way. He tried picturing himself and Sherry old, together for years. It was easy to do; he imagined they would look great together. He wondered how they would look back on this night.

Sherry asked, "Do you read poetry?"

"No," admitted Handy, "I guess I don't."

Sherry sideways glanced, "I try to memorize one poem every week,"

"A poem every week?"

"It helps me notice things:

For love -- I would
split open your head and put
a candle in
behind the eyes.

Love is dead in us
if we forget
the virtues of an amulet
and quick surprise.

"That's one." she said.

Handy was trying to think of something to say. Finally, "You'd split open somebody's skull?"

He saw Sherry grin, "I might blow their mind."

"Jesus." He asked her if she wanted a cigarette. She said yes and thanked him.

It was darkening outside. Sherry pulled the lights on, made a cursory check of the illuminated instrument panel, "You see the virtues of amulets and quick surprises don't you Handy?"

This car, for instance."

Just before Warren they took a side road off the highway back toward the lakeshore. Shortly they were running parallel to the beach, driving through sand dunes. Black water was on their left, woods on their right. They drove more than a mile without seeing a house or light of any kind. The road was narrow but straight -- Sherry brought the speed down to 50.

Something jumped out.

It came from the lakeside. Burst in front of the car, a streak of motion across the beam of their headlights and vanished into the forest. It happened so fast Handy was not even sure what colors he saw -- brown, green, white, crimson. Sherry brought the Coupe to a pitching halt. Both of them turned, looked over their shoulders and saw nothing. The thick edge of the forest. Their brakelights colored the treetrunks red.

Sherry executed a U turn and pulled the car on to the road's sandy shoulder. She cut the lights and turned on the leather seat so that she and Handy were face to face. Even in that darkness Handy found he could see her; her expression was solemn, as though she were intent on something or dreaming. She climbed on his lap. Her breasts grazed his chest, her lips were winging over his face. There were so many kisses he felt faint. He did not faint.

They fucked in the Cadillac.

Later they found their way back to the highway. It took less time to get there than either of them expected. Sherry pointed the car south -- toward Indiana again, the way they had come -- and began building speed. Handy lit cigarettes for them both. It felt to him like there had been a cloud-burst, like rain had washed them both away.