

W I L D F O R Y O U

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

IT WAS A PONTIAC FIREBIRD with a custom paint job, a metal-flake candy-apple red. The personalized plates said WILD4U.

I was right behind her on that big clover-leaf that slopes down off Woodall Rogers onto I-35. The wind caught a hank of her long blonde hair and set it to fluttering outside her window. I saw her face in her own rear-view as she threw her head back. Laughing, or singing along with the radio, or maybe just feeling the pull as she put the pedal down and scooted into the southbound lane.

She was a beauty, all right. Just a kid, but with a crazy smile that made my heart spin.

I whipped my pickup into fourth but I couldn't get past this big white Caddy coming up on me from behind. The two lanes for Austin were fixing to split off in half a mile. An eighteen-wheeler filled up one of them and the Caddy had the other. I eased off the gas and watched her disappear over the horizon, a bright red promise of something beyond my wildest dreams.

It was mid-afternoon, sunny with a few clouds. The weather couldn't decide if it was summer or winter, which is what passes for fall in Texas. I wasn't but a kid myself, with my whole life in front of me. I put Rosanne Cash on the tape deck and my arm out the window and let those white lines fly by.

I WAS AT the Fourth Street Shell station in Waco, halfway home, when I saw that little red car again. I'd just handed my credit card to the lady when the squeal of brakes made me look up. There it was, shiny and red, rocking back and forth by the Super Unleaded.

I kept one eye on it while I signed the receipt. The driver door opened and this guy got out. He was in jeans and a pearl button shirt and a black cap. I can't say I liked the looks of him. She got out the passenger side and leaned across the top of the car, watching the traffic. I couldn't hardly see her because of the pump. I hung around the ice cream freezer, hoping she'd come inside. Instead the guy came in to pay cash for five dollars' worth.

I followed him out. She turned to get back in the car and I felt a chill. Her hair was shorter than it had been, just barely past her collar. And her face looked older too.

I couldn't figure what the hell. Maybe she'd got her hair cut? She'd had time, as fast as she'd been driving, and as long as we'd been out. I felt like I'd already spent half my life on the road. Or maybe this was her older sister had borrowed the car somehow.

Weird, is what it was. I got back in the truck and hit it on down the highway. About two miles on they came up behind me to pass, and that's when I saw the license had changed. Now it said MR & MRS.

Right as they pulled up next to me I looked over at her. She was staring out the window, right at me. She pointed a finger, like kids do when they're making a pretend pistol. And smiled, that same crooked smile.

For some reason that really got to me. I don't think I'll ever forget it.

SOME THINGS ARE just Mysteries, and you don't expect to understand them. When I passed that car south of Belton, there were different people in it. The woman driving looked like the blonde girl, but was old enough to be her mother. There was a dark-haired girl in the passenger seat, maybe thirty years old, and two little kids in back. The dark-haired girl was turned around to yell at them. The speed limit had gone back up to 65, but they chugged along at 60. The plates were standard Texas issue and there was bumper sticker that said ASK ME ABOUT MY GRANDBABY.

Tell the truth, I was too tired to think much of it anymore. The sun had started to set and I had this pinched kind of pain between my shoulders. About thirty miles on I saw a roadside rest stop and pulled in.

I might have slept a quarter of an hour. The sky had clouded over and the sunset lit everything up pretty spectacular. It was being thirsty woke me and I gimped over to the water fountain on stiff legs.

Luck or something made me look back at the highway. That metal-flake red Firebird pulled off at about thirty miles an hour, just barely rolling. The old lady was by herself again. While I watched she hung a left turn under the interstate and disappeared.

I had my drink of water, remembering that pointing finger and crooked smile. I got back in the pickup and followed. When I came out on the northbound access, I saw the car pulled over in the Johnson grass at the side of the road. I parked behind it and eased out of the truck.

There was nobody inside. Up ahead an ambulance screamed onto the northbound entrance ramp, siren going and lights flashing. After a few seconds the lights went out and it crested a hill, headed back the way we'd come.

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