

[Excerpt from *Butterflies in the System*, by Jane Powell]

Manny Cottage Youth Detention Centre was nothing like Alcatraz. I opened the window, squeezed through (ripping my t-shirt only a bit), and I was on my way. It was just my luck that the nurse's window led out to the back of the building and not to the front. The riskiest part was making my way from the back of the building to the woods—that were about 100 feet away—without being seen through other windows.

The only way to do it was by mad-dash and that's what I did.

Into the woods I flew, like a wild-eyed deer escaping a hunter's scope. I only stopped for a quick breath when I reached the highway ditch at the other side. Now I'd have to tap into my sixth sense and be patient. The last thing I wanted was to thumb a ride with someone who was going to drive me right back to where I started.

I'd need to judge drivers by their cars and cross my fingers. I figured it best to stick to jazzed-up old Fords and cheap Honda Civics booming with music—they'd be driven by people who wouldn't ask questions. But time was of the essence. I'd have to move fast.

A sky blue Volkswagen bug approached. Its front bumper was crooked, and Jimi Hendrix blasted through open windows. Perfect. I stood up from the ditch and made myself fully visible. I put one hand on my hip and raised the other one with my thumb stuck up, as if I was relaxed and friendly and only needed a lift to the café in the next village.

The guy in the car waved and pulled over onto the shoulder a few feet up the road. I ran to the car, opened the door, and hopped in before he could get his first question out. As long as I was in, I was pretty sure I'd be able to convince him to give me a ride to where I wanted to go. I'd become quite adept at getting what I wanted out of boys and men. Smile sweetly, laugh at everything they say, and play just-dumb-enough. It wasn't me at all, and only guys who didn't know me fell for it, like this guy for instance.

I shut the car door after me, turned towards the guy and introduced myself, "Eh, I'm Gabe, thanks for stopping!" A fake name was the best way to go and the first one that came to mind was Gabe's. "I'm going South, as far as you are or as close to Montreal as you can get, whichever works."

The guy slowly observed me through bloodshot eyes. He smelled of pot and looked like he'd been tree planting all day, or perhaps 24/7 for the past month. He was in his early 20s and had blond dreadlocks that I thought may just be natural—a result of not washing or brushing his curls for a very long time, like maybe never.

Dreadlocks finally spoke, "Eh, man ... no prob. Headin' that way anyway."

I laughed warmly at nothing in particular, and he responded with a flirtatious smile.

"Rick." He threw his name out as if it were special, a gift just for me.

Rick turned the music back up and pulled off the shoulder onto the highway. I glanced back at Manny Cottage, breathed in deeply, exhaled deliberately, and smiled. Freedom had never felt so good.

Then I fell asleep for real.

About an hour later, Rick nudged me awake and asked, "Eh, man ... uh ... Gabe? We're almost in town. Where you goin'? Vendôme metro work?"

I nodded, "Yeah, yeah that'll do I guess."

Rick looked thoughtful and hesitated before he continued, "You seem, uh ... you got a place to go?"

His question made me nervous, "Yeah, yeah of course. You can just let me out wherever. Like, here is fine." I pointed to the bus stop coming up on our right.

He glanced at me and shrugged, "OK, whatever. I was just gonna say that I know a place you can crash, eh, if ya' need it. It's gettin' late and it's not exactly summer no more. That t-shirt's not gonna do the trick tonight."

I thought about his offer for a moment. I hadn't made plans. I didn't have anywhere to go. The last time I ran away for an extended period, I had stayed with my uncle's friend—who'd turned out to be a real douche—and his gang of mini-douches. No way I'd be repeating that crap. I decided to trust Dreadlock Rick. What could really go wrong? This guy was about as dangerous as a stoned pussycat.

"Sure. OK. Yeah. I kinda need a place tonight." I'd said it. Done. Now I'd have to hope for the best and take things as they came. I desperately hoped it wouldn't involve any "favours". The Douche Gang had been big on favours.

A few minutes later we exited the highway, drove the loop around and under the overpass, and pulled into what seemed like nothing more than an overgrown field of wild grasses and giant thistles.

It wasn't until I stepped out of the car did I realize we were actually parked on what once was a long cement-paved driveway. Behind a few of the tallest thistles, which were about twice my height, stood an old rickety house that appeared to have emerged out of a Nightmare on Elm Street movie—after Freddy had corrupted it and violently slaughtered all its inhabitants. I stopped by the side of the car, staring at the house.

"That's your suggestion? The place that's gonna keep me safe tonight? Are you for fuckin' real?" I glared at Rick, waiting for his rationalization.