

TITLE: To Be Determined...

Contributors: Tanya Hofford, Maria Fisher, Rachel Hofford, Rob Ferguson others to be determined.

PART I - by Tanya Hofford

Graduation is over. College is officially complete, and before accepting their fates of becoming responsible adults, Shannon McAndrews, Pamela Jones, and Felicia Timon decided to spend one last month touring the United States. Being that all three women were from different areas across the country, this was a plan they had had since they met during freshman year. The time is here and the girls can hardly contain their excitement.

The apartment they'd shared for the last 3 years was now completely empty, and Felicia had taken the last load of boxes to the post office earlier today. The girls walked into their once crowded living room and laughed as they remembered the countless parties they'd had and the movie nights that turned into gossip sessions. Though they should be sad that they were leaving, they were each anticipating the journey ahead and squealed with excitement. Pamela pulled her long, wavy chestnut brown hair into a ponytail and said "Ok girls.... let's go!"

The three women piled into Shannon's dark green 1978 Mustang Convertible and started on their voyage... A voyage they had only dreamed about until now... A voyage they never could have imagined would end the way that it did.

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PART II - by Maria Fisher

Shannon took the wheel as all three piled inside. Pamela, called "shotgun!" and positively bounced with excitement while she waited for Felicia to climb into the back. The mustang roared to life with a ferocious yawn, which Felicia quickly echoed.

"You're going to catch bugs doing that," Shannon said.

Felicia snapped her jaw shut, eyes wide. Between clenched teeth she said, "you think so?"

Pamela laughed. "Who cares? It's an adventure. Eating bugs is part of the package."

"I'll make sure to save one for you then," Felicia said sweetly.

Shannon steered away from the curb and into the orange hue of the early evening. The streets were busy, it being the beginning of rush hour, but the women had agreed to take backroads as much as possible on this trip.

"Who knows what's out there?" Shannon reasoned.

"Here we go ladies. Like the three musketeers." Pamela said as they turned down their first unknown road out of the city. "All for one and one for..."

"I don't like that," Felicia interrupted. "I would rather not think about candy bars just now. I always end up eating too much on car rides."

They considered this as the wind tangled their hair.

"Three amigos?" Shannon suggested.

"Hats," Felicia said, as if that solved everything.

"There must be some female trios," Shannon persisted. "Young, intelligent, adventurous..."

"Hey," Pamela said, "we could be Charlie's Angels! Or the Powerpuff girls."

"It feels a bit forced," Felicia said.

"And I'm not pulling the Angels pose in every photo for the next four weeks," Shannon agreed.

"Three blind mice, then, or nothing," Pamela said. Her hair now floated in a gossamer halo around her face.

"That sort of works," Felicia said.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to have my tail sliced off," Shannon added.

"No, let's wait until we hit menopause."

They laughed, and settled into a companionable radio-accompanied silence. The sun dripped toward the hillside, and the suburban landscaping blended into outskirts, then countryside.

When the hitchhiker was a half mile away, the angle between him and the sun turned him into a small silhouette balancing atop a long shadow. Because of the twilight, none of the women noticed the lime-green bowler hat he wore until they were almost upon him. Then, without realizing why, or even acknowledging the decision, Shannon slowed, turned the car onto the shoulder, and stopped.

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Part III - by Rachel Hofford

"Shannon!" whispered with a hint of screech. reserving her backseat driving for this situation.

"No backseat driving!" Shannon mocked, playful.

"You're not going to offer him a ride, are you?" asked Pamela, her voice quiet with concern.

Shannon didn't answer either of her friends. "Where you headin'?" she asked, as she rolled down her window. The hitchhiker's eyes stood out like turquoise, complementing his bowler hat, intense against his dull oil-and-dust skin.

The initial shock of Shannon's sudden approach slowly receded from his face. He cleared his throat.

"New Orleans." He looked directly at the setting sun, squinting. "But wherever you could take me would be better than where I'm standing right now." What looked like the outline of a smile passed over his lips, and was gone before any of the girls could register its presence.

"Well, sir...we're not heading to New Orleans yet, but how about we drop you off in the

next town we pass through? Then at least you won't be out in the middle of nowhere," Shannon said.

The hitchhiker stared down along the trajectory of the car's hood, as if mapping out the trip. Suddenly, his brows closed around his eyes—wiry, bushy, unkempt eyebrows that weren't previously noticeable hidden under the hat's brim. "Oh, I don't know about that. The next town isn't much more good to me than the middle of nowhere is."

"Well, suit yourself, then!" Felicia yelped from the back seat, escaping her worried silence.

Also roused from observation, Pamela tried to whisper, "C'mon, Shan, let's go."

The hitchhiker's hearing proved better than expected. Without glancing at Pamela, he continued his conversation, "Shannon's your name, eh?" His voice had adopted a buoyant overtone. "That was my second wife's name, too! Beautiful name... Tell ya what, if you could just drive me an hour down the road the way you're headin', that would suit me just fine. I don't want to be a burden, and I don't have any money to offer in return, but I do have an interesting story to tell while we drive, if you don't mind listening.

"Alright," Shannon nodded her head, not bothering to even look at the other two girls. "Felicia, can you slide over?"

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Part IV - by Tanya Hofford

Felicia fought the urge to scream "NO!" and to command Pamela to stomp onto Shannon's foot to get the car moving again. Instead she slid as far to her right as she could, making sure to not allow the stranger to touch her or any of her clothing. It's not that she is generally scared of new people, but she was getting a really strange feeling about this man.

As if she'd read Felicia's mind, Pamela mustered up the courage to ask in a shaky voice, "So... wh-what's your name?"

The stranger replied, " You can call me 'Nomad'."

"That's a strange name..." started Pamela.

Felicia cut in "So, Nomad," sending a glare toward Pamela, "what's this story you have for us?"

"Why do we need to start with me? Why don't you each tell me something about yourselves, first?"

Shannon didn't skip a beat and began filling him in on details of their recent graduation and their trip across the U.S. Filled with excitement, she was beginning to go into her own personal history when Felicia broke in "Yep, that's pretty much it. We're recent graduates, and we on a road trip. Your turn." She was not at all enthused with this situation and wanted to divulge as little personal information as possible.

It was dark now, and the passing lights of the occasional passing car allowing the girls to see that Nomad nodded, smiling with a crooked smile that seemed to make him appear as though he was winking. "Fair enough." He commented.

"Well about 5-6 years ago, I was working just outside of Los Angeles as a limited term contractor. I worked for a firm that would set up appointments for me to go to. I worked for various types of customers for various requests, like removing hairbrushes from garbage disposals, filling in random holes that showed up in yards with no explanations, electrical problems that caused appliances to turn on by themselves.... I could literally go on for hours. But nothing beats the time that I was assigned to a job to...

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Part V - by Maria Fisher

...a large house in old Hollywood. Most of those places have been done and redone, with each new big shot tearing out the old stuff to put in new old stuff. But this one still had the golden-age feel. It was the little touches--the windows and electrical outlets. You could tell, if it ever got cold in SoCal, it would have been a drafty place.

"A little spitfire maid named Rita met me at the servant's entrance. She had the look and attitude of a terrier, and you could tell that she ran the rest of the staff by sheer will. But today she was spooked, showing too much white around her eyes.

"So I introduce myself, say, 'You must be Rita,' and ask what's the trouble. She says, 'It's Peepsie.'

"Now, she's got a pretty thick Spanish accent, and she's nervous, so she's talking too fast. I had to have her repeat herself a couple times. 'It's Peepsie. It's Peepsie.'

"So I say, 'Your name's Peepsie?' She loses patience and starts jabbering in Spanish, but then she stops and talks to me really slowly.

"No, I'm Rita. You come this way.'

"She pulls me into the house through the kitchen and a bunch of these really narrow halls, these servant halls that are really dark and the wood floor creaks. When she stops me at the end of the hall, it's in front of this tiny old door.

"You could tell the door had been there forever because the doorknob had all these ridges on it, so you could see all the colors it had been painted over the years. So I grab the handle, but before I open it, I turn to Rita.

"Peepsie is in there,' she tells me. I say to her. 'Look, Rita, what exactly is Peepsie?'

"She struggles for a minute, then says, 'He's a little...uh... little bird.'

"I look at the door again and say, 'A little bird. And it's trapped in here?'

"Yes,' she says, 'Peepsie. He needs to go back to his cage.'

"So I said, 'You need me to catch your canary?'

"Oh, no,' she says.

"So now I don't know what to think. I open the door, and it's a small library with a large window seat and a bird cage. You can see Rita's been cleaning the cage, because it's open and there's a couple newspapers and a vacuum right there.

"So I slip into the room, careful not to open the door too wide in

case the bird flies past me, but I don't see him. I look at all the shelves and think, 'This bird could be anywhere.' I'm sort of creeping into the room, trying to find the bird, when Rita opens the door wide behind me and stares.

"'Careful woman,' I say, then look around for the bird, but I don't see it. Now Rita's just standing in the door, and I see where she's looking. I think she's looking at the cage."

"Then I hear the vacuum chirp."

The women all start laughing. "Oh no!" Shannon said.

Nomad, also laughing, confirmed. "Yep, that poor woman was using the hose attachment to vacuum up the bottom of the cage, then she must have gotten distracted, waved the hose around, and sucked up poor Peepsie."

"So I got the vacuum all broken down and open the bag, and there's this dusty little canary hopping around. The poor thing didn't even try to fly away. I just scooped him up and put him on his perch."

"Was he ok?" Pamela asked, once they stopped laughing.

"Seemed to be," Nomad said. "But you better believe that bird got the ride of his life."

They all laughed again.

"But the really odd thing about that, was what else I found in the vacuum."

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Part VI - by Tanya Hofford

The girls had settled in to the comfort of the story, not minding the company of the strange man nearly as much as before, and actually starting to loose track of how long he'd been riding with them.

Nomad continued, "After making sure that Peepsie's cage was fastened tightly, I turned

back to the vacuum to reassemble it back to its original state, when I saw several hundred dollar bills crumpled and slightly torn.

“Now, I don’t often get surprised by things, but it’s not often that you come across someone with so much money they’re willing to throw it away in that quantity. So, I looked up at Rita and began to ask, ‘Do you realize that there’s money in h-?’ When she cut me off, running over and pushing her way between me and the vacuum. She began to talk quickly in her thick accent again, as she began to try to push me out the door. Curious why she would be trying to get rid of me so quickly and intrigued by my findings, I planted my feet against the old, slightly worn hardwood floors. I again asked ‘Do you realize that there’s money in the vacuum?’

“Rita looked up at me with her eyes wide, tears forming in only the corners and began to explain that the people who owned the house had inherited it from their ancestors, and hired her nearly two years ago. As it turns out, she was vacuuming behind an ancient china cabinet in the main dining room when she found a crack in the wall. To ensure that the walls were clean behind the cabinet, she ran the vacuum hose over the crack and heard something get slurped into the vacuum. When she went to empty the bag later, she noticed three one hundred dollar bills. After surveying everything that had happened that day, she realized that the money came from a hole in the wall. As it turns out, in place of insulation, this old mansion is insulated with money. And everyday since she had originally discovered this, she’s been going through the building finding every crack there was, and secretly pocketing her findings.

“Now that I knew her secret, Rita became nervous and began offering me things to ensure that I didn’t tell the owners of her findings. She offered up everything from the money in the vacuum bag to her first born child. Just when I didn’t think that the situation could have gotten any stranger, she said the craziest thing...

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Part VII - by Rob Ferguson

“I give to you the magic.”

“What?”

“Si, it’s magic I give to you. Come, follow me.”

She started walking away but I just stood still, dumbfounded.

“Come, come,” Rita insisted, motioning me forward with her hand. Curious, I followed. She lead me along more narrow hallways and dusty old passages that smelled of moldy potatoes. After several twists, turns, and long straight passages, Rita stood in front of an old white door. The white paint of the door was chipped and peeling in long curling strips that exposed a dark, redish-brown undercoat. Rita stood in front of the door with her hand on the knob. “This is the room I stay,” she said in her heavy accent. “Please, you wait me here.” Rita opened the door, darted over the threshold and close the door with a quick snap. I heard shuffling and the sound of what I assumed to be boxes or crates being pushed along the floor. I could make out a few words as I heard her mumbling in Spanish: “Mala. Verde. Aciago.” Eventually she emerged from the room. Even in the dim light of the hallway I could see beads of sweat on her forehead and upper lip. She was breathing heavily and forced herself to smile. “Aquí,” she said, extending her hands forward. “For you.” In her hands she held this green bowler (Nomad tapped the hat he now wore). I just looked at her, and laughed.

“Uh huh,” I said. “I suppose this is a magic hat?”

“Magic! Si, it’s magic. For you, for you. Now you leave and never come back.” Rita literally put her hand on my back and started pushing me up the passage from which we’d just came.

“Sorry, sister,” I said, resisting her. “I’ve seen plenty of strange things in my day, but I’m not one to believe in magic.”

“This hat is magic,” Rita insisted. “Here, I show you.”

Part VII - by Maria Fisher

"She held the hat directly in front of me, showing me white satin interior, then turned it around and put it on her head."

"‘I’m thinking of something’ she said, tapping the hat with a short-nailed finger. ‘You will see.’"

"I shivered then, the way you do right before a sneeze. She took off the hat, flipped it toward me, and inside was a large, round gold coin."

"‘You take,’ she said. I reached for it, but the weight was all wrong, like it was made out of wood."

"‘Chocolate,’ she said, and laughed. ‘It is my favorite. The only thing I can make.’"

"I opened the foil wrapper and took a bite. It was fantastic chocolate, rich and smooth with a slight cayenne kick at the end."

"‘It’s a cute trick,’ I said, but I’m not much of a magic man."

"‘You try it,’ she said. ‘Try now.’"

"I shook my head but put the hat on anyway."

"‘Now, think of something,’ she said. ‘It has to be what you love most of all, but it can’t be a living thing. Those do not work.’"

"I thought about my father then. About the evenings on the porch when I was a child. We sat around his feet listening to the adults talk, listening to the radio play the ball game or the radio shows. But my favorite was the music. Sometimes my father would sing along, his voice a strong low bullfrog call in the night."

"Rita shivered. ‘It is done,’ she said. I took off the hat, and looked inside. There at the bottom was a fine silver comb."

"She looked at the comb then at me. ‘You want to be...’ she waved her hands vaguely at her head ‘... hair ... cutter?’"

“Well, no ma’am,’ I said, chuckling. ‘I’ve always hoped to be a musician.’”

“Rita furrowed her brow for a moment. ‘Can... piene... play music?’”

“Yes, I suppose, when held to a newspaper,” I told her.

“Ah,’ she said. ‘You play this then. Very good music come from this.’”

“You’re letting me keep the comb?” I asked. “Si. Comb, hat, it is for you. But now you go.”

“She’d given me a good story to tell and a very fine comb I was sure I could hock for a week’s pay, so I left. I liked Rita, although how a housekeeper ever picked up such subtle slight-of-hand, I couldn’t imagine.”

“Did you ever play the comb with a newspaper?” Shannon asked.

“Well, now, that’s a funny story, too.” Nomad replied.

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