

Johnny knelt on top of his bookcase as he wiggled the screen out of its frame and let it slide onto the bush outside his bedroom window. Just as he raised his leg over the ledge, he remembered his retainer and yanked it out of his mouth, tossed it onto the dresser and climbed out.

Sneaking around the side of the house, he unlatched the gate, inched through, then locked it. He glanced west toward the Brewers' house and east to the Fillmores'. At ten thirty at night, the neighborhood had tucked itself into bed. His old man's station wagon parked in the driveway was a real daddy's car, but it had wheels, and that's what Johnny needed to take him to his first gay bar.

Johnny pulled his dad's key from his crushed velvet pant pocket, unlocked the car, and slipped behind the wheel, leaving the door ajar. He put the gear in neutral and let the Buick roll back into the street and then pushed the car past the Wilsons' house, shut the door, started the engine and took off for the Harbor Freeway and Santa Monica Boulevard.

When he had read in the local paper that his science teacher was arrested in a raid at The Rusty Nail and lost his job because he was a homosexual, Johnny felt bad for Mr. Gilroy, but excited to know he wasn't the only queer in the universe. The Rusty Nail reopened as a bar for men and women, gay men and women, Johnny learned through the back pages of the underground press.

Johnny pounded his fist against the wheel, feeling the victory of freedom. He had the fake ID his sister's boyfriend made for him, thinking Johnny wanted to meet some fox at the Blue Turtle, but with a constellation of zits on his chin, his voice still swinging between the Little and Big Dipper, Johnny's chances of making it through the doors of The Rusty Nail were still slim.

Three days before he got his driver's license, Johnny rehearsed punching and fluffing his pillows like he'd seen prison escapees do in the movies, then he pulled the cover over them to make it look like a body underneath. He practiced climbing out the window so he wouldn't mess his clothes by falling into the bush that grew outside his bedroom. He committed the perfect getaway until he realized he'd left the Free Press with the big red circle around The Rusty Nail lying on his desk. No sweat. He'd be back before his parents woke-up.

Johnny rolled down the window just enough so that it didn't disturb his long hair that he brushed and groomed until his arm felt tired. When he had missed several hair cuts, his father told him he didn't want his son looking like a queer. Johnny told his dad not to worry, he hated fags, but long hair was in.

His dark mop covered his ears, and he grew really cool sideburns.

If his old man saw him now in his bitchin' yellow stripes and red polka-dot shirt and Nehru jacket, driving his car, he would flip.

Johnny drove up the onramp. Too bad he wasn't in a boss looking Mustang instead of an old fogey's car. He'd park a block away from the bar so no one would see it, but what if he met someone? It was his uncle's car, he'd tell them, because his Mustang was in the shop. Lies. That's what his life was about, dating girls, football, acting tough, all to please his dad and everyone else. He even put up a poster of Raquel Welch when he wanted to tack up Steve McQueen.

Johnny's secret gave him headaches. It was a monster that gobbled him up until he felt like he'd become the thing that consumed him. Something dirty. Something that made guys pick fights with him. He hoped to replace loneliness with friendships and meet a cute guy at the bar.

He relaxed into the flow of the cars, turned on the radio and switched the dial to KRLA and Dave Hull, the Hullabalooer.

“Mony Mony” blasted through the speakers. Johnny thought he would explode with pleasure. The sexy beat sparked his fantasies into a rocket fueled ascension where dancing led to kissing and kissing led to hot sex and hot sex never ended.

His loud singing drowned out Tommy James. He took his hands off the steering wheel and clapped along with the Shondells, laughing and hollering, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah!”

Johnny zoomed past downtown and veered into the lane for the Hollywood Freeway. He slouched down in the seat, his left hand hanging over the wheel, real cool, like he’d done it millions of times. He glanced left, then right, just to see if anyone was lucky enough to see how groovy he looked.

He reached in the glove compartment and took out his dad’s cigarettes. Shaking one free, he stuck it between his lips then punched in the lighter. It popped out, and he lit the cigarette. He took a drag and coughed. His eyes watered. He puffed without inhaling.

Someone pulled in front of him.

“Asshole!”

Johnny stepped on the gas and swerved into the fast lane.

“Wanna drag? I can make this mother move.”

He stubbed out the cigarette and caught up with the guy who almost creamed him. The jerk wasn’t even paying attention to him, probably didn’t even know he almost caused an accident. Johnny blared the horn. The guy gave him the finger. Johnny laughed. He had to be at least eighty, older than his grandparents.

He passed the Melrose exit. The Western offramp would be next, and he’d take it to Santa Monica Boulevard.

He flattened the gas pedal all the way to the floor. Street lamps flickered by, he felt the air lift his hair, smelled the damp night and asphalt. Johnny glanced in the rearview mirror. Red lights flashed. A siren screamed.

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