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Suzie Andrews

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Country Music

Suzie Andrews

The first time I heard Hank Williams sing *"Your Cheatin' Heart"* was in the cab of an 18-wheeler hauling pickles to Dallas. The only destination I had was anywhere but Kansas, so Dallas seemed just fine with me. That's what I told the blue-eyed trucker with coffee-breath sitting on the stool next to me at the truck stop in Emporia. He raised an eyebrow, tried to suck in his gut, and told me he had a vacant seat all the way to Big D. I didn't believe for a minute that all he had on his mind was hauling pickles.

"Name's Roger. You got one?"

My big mouth gets me in trouble just as often as it saves my ass, and not knowing which applied here, I took a chance on either outcome, stared right into those denim-blue eyes and said, "No, three."

"Well, slap me naked and hide my clothes! Ain't you the comedian?"

He unrolled a pack of Camels from the sleeve of his

Willie Nelson T-shirt, let go with one of those piercing whistles that I could never master, gestured to a couple of guys who looked like they had three teeth between them and said, "Scooter, Charlie, come on over here. This little lady's going to put on a show right here, just for us."

The one with the tub of lard lapped over his belt started thrusting his hips and rolling his eyes, anticipating a whole other kind of show. Can't say as I blame him; no one ever told me I was hard to look at, and I was at a truck stop at midnight in the middle of god-nowhere Kansas.

Roger swiveled his stool around to face me, pulled another Camel out of his sleeve and grinned like he'd just found out his best friend was sleeping with his worst enemy's wife and telling anybody about it just wasn't important. I got the message. 'The growing was in the knowing,' my mama used to say.

"You win. Jeevie Rae Peek."

"Well, that's one, or should I say three, that I ain't never heard before—except maybe for the Rae. Was your mama drunk when she named you?" "Don't know the answer to that one. She said she named me Jeevie on account of all the puking she did while she was pregnant - the 'heebie-jeevies' she called it. Bet you ain't never met anyone named after vomit!" I usually saved that one for later, but I figured that would shut him up. I wasn't in a great mood for acting tough or acting at all, even though I was pretty good at it when I could see the purpose in it. I just wasn't sure I wanted to get into it with this guy, considering the circumstances, but I thought that maybe I ought to be a little nicer if I wanted him to haul me out of Kansas. I wasn't scared of him and I knew I could hold my own if it came to that. So, I guess I was surprised when he started cackling like Granny's old guinea hen and plum fell off the stool. This guy

knew how to get a rise out of me and I wasn't sure I liked that, Maybe I ought to tell him everything. That would spin him around for sure. I gave it a little more thought and decided to study him a little more before I laid it all out, if I did at all. Anyway he was honest - that's more than most folks had going for them. What the hell! I was laughing, too, and those blue eyes just kept looking at me. I've always been a little partial to blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, girl. Ain't laughing at you, I'm laughing with you! You made that up didn't you? I swear to God you really are a comedian. Jeevie's a cute name either way." He broke down again and got me going, too.

"Yeah, just luck I guess." I wasn't putting on laughing; he had a way. Riding to Dallas with him might be okay. It didn't matter anyway.

"Hungry?" Roger asked as he looked at the naked girl clock on the wall. I could imagine him saying something stupid

like, well, time to go, it's half past a tit, but he didn't.

I told him I wasn't hungry, even though I was a little. I just wanted to get on the road. He started talking about how there wasn't anything fit to eat at a truck stop, but most of them had good coffee. "Well, if you're serious about getting to Dallas, and don't mind Camel smoke, I'm heading out in about ten minutes."

He paid his coffee tab and left a five for the waitress. I didn't know if he was trying to impress me with his generosity or if he felt obliged since we had warmed the stools for a while and hadn't bought anything but coffee.

I bought a hard pack of Marlboro and spied the blue neon restroom sign. I thought I could make it across the room without my ankle giving out, but I wasn't sure. I didn't want him to see me limp and ask any questions, so I waited until he said he was going to get rid of the coffee and then check something on his rig. He'd meet me outside the front door. That sounded

just right to me. I figured I could fake it for a few steps, especially if I could hold on to his arm. I twirled my hair around my index finger and thought maybe I'd just gotten lucky.

When I woke up we were in Oklahoma and a raspy-voiced singer was philosophizing about an angel flying too close to the ground. I'd never listened to country music much before but it was growing on me. Roger was singing along. He knew all the words. The angel song ended and another one about a cheating heart started. He knew the words to that one, too.

"You like country music?" Roger asked as he turned up the volume.

"I never spent much time listening to it, so I can't say, but it's not too bad." I guess country music had been sort of like the wind coming off the lake on Michigan Avenue - it was always there so after a while you just didn't pay any attention to it and even if you did, it didn't make no difference anyhow. Everybody in Kentucky listened to

country music, but Mama thought I was too good for that hillbilly stuff and said jazz was real music. Of course, she said that after we moved to Brotherton, when we couldn't stay in Chicago anymore.

"If you want to know about real life, just listen to country music. Hank Williams. That song there - *"Your Cheatin' Heart"* - now - that's about real life. It's why I like Hank so much. His songs were about his life, not made up to make things sound better than they really were."

I lit a Marlboro and thought that maybe that was the problem - if I had been listening to country music all my life I would have known what to expect and wouldn't have been disappointed. I wondered why Mama never thought of that; I wished I'd eaten at the truck stop. Roger must have heard my stomach growling because he offered me Twinkie. He said he didn't even know how it got in his sack because he wouldn't touch it, but I was welcome to it. I wanted fried chicken but I wolfed down the cupcake.

My legs were getting tired from sitting so I stretched them out on the dashboard. I wondered how truckers took all that boring sitting still in one place and thought that maybe this whole deal was for Roger's benefit - all he wanted was someone to talk to while he made his haul. That's when I heard the siren. Surely they wouldn't be looking for me. I wasn't in Kansas and who would know that I was in a truck? Just to make sure I curled up in a ball and headed for the floorboard. Roger rubbed his chin stubble and said he guessed it was about time I told him what I was running from. The siren was long gone so I thought I could come up with a good one. The country music would help, Roger changed the radio station to a call-in talk show that he said he never missed and I reached in my purse for my tube of Menacing Mauve lipstick. I wondered if it made Roger nervous seeing me reach for something in my purse. Some guy on the radio was complaining about women

with breast implants and how they were nice to look at and all but touching them was something else. He thought women ought to wear a warning bracelet to let men know they were fake. Roger said that if women lied about their breasts - and that was what they were doing - what else would they lie about? They ought to go ahead and just outlaw those things because the next thing you know they could be one of those female impersonators and there ought to be a law against that. Yeah, I hear you there, I was thinking.

I wondered how anybody's life could get so screwed up. Mama should have taken her own advice and never had anything to do with a man who was prettier than she was or wore more jewelry than she did. But I guess it wasn't 'til afterward that she came up with that. And probably even then she didn't know the whole story.

A bug splattered on the windshield and I thought I would run it all past Roger.