

Paradise
By R. A. Conti

I had just spent several grueling days trying to diagnose and repair some sophisticated and expensive computers and my brain was fried. I decided to take the slow and leisurely route back home so I could relax and clear my head. The old highway I chose was once the main east-west road. It was not used much after the interstates were built.

I spotted something by the side of the road up ahead and slowed down. Since I was in farm country, I thought an animal had wandered off. As I approached, I saw it was a person. When I drew closer, I saw a young woman waving to stop me.

I pulled off the road to see if she needed help. She seemed distressed and I asked her what was wrong. She pleaded for a ride. I told her to get in and suggested we go to the local police so they could help her. I didn't know if a crime had been committed, or if she might be in trouble.

"Please, no police. Just let me ride with you. Please." I didn't want to force her out of the car so I kept driving.

"My name's Steve," I told her as we continued down the old highway. She wouldn't tell me her name, where she was from, or her destination.

After a couple of hours, she still had not said anything. I started to wonder what I had gotten myself into. Now that I had her, would I be able to get rid of her?

I pulled into a roadside restaurant around noon. The girl sank low in her seat as I entered the lot. It seemed obvious she was trying to hide. She refused to go in the restaurant with me. I brought back a sandwich and a soda and handed them to her.

When it was nearly nightfall, I decided to find a motel. I worried about how I was going to handle this. It would seem strange if an old guy like me registered with a sixteen-year-old girl. I told her I couldn't afford separate rooms so I would just get a room for her and I would sleep in the car.

"You come in," she insisted. The motel room had a bed and a large couch. I told her to take the bed. I went out and bought us a couple of sandwiches for dinner. When I got back, she asked that once we were ready to sleep, we turn out all the lights and not turn them on, except for the bathroom light when the door was closed.

I heard movement in her bed after I settled on the couch. I wondered if anything was wrong. I didn't speak because I didn't want to frighten her. Then I heard her get out of bed and go in the bathroom. I heard the water running. The door opened a few minutes later. She turned off the light and then made her way back to the bed in the dark.

It dawned on me the clothes she was wearing were the only ones she had. She needed to wash them and let them dry overnight and would have to sleep naked. In the morning, I woke up and she seemed to be asleep. Then I heard her moving and I pretended to be asleep. She went into the bathroom and came out dressed.

I offered to buy her some clothes as soon as we were back on the road. I told her I would give her money and she could go into the store and get whatever she wanted. I thought she might want some privacy. She told me she wouldn't go in unless I came along. We found an old Walmart. She looked at several aisles of clothing, and then selected a package of panties, another of extra-large men's t-shirts, and that was all.

We got back in the car. She thanked me when we were on our way. I said 'you're welcome,' and saw it as an opening to start a conversation. I still didn't know her name or where she wanted to go.

She still didn't seem like she wanted to talk, so I put on some classical music. She listened raptly and then started crying. I asked her what was wrong. She told me it was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard.