

Exile

Volume 25
Number 3 *Exile Anthology: A Special
Sesquicentennial Issue*

Article 21

1979

Busy Being Born

Lindrith Davies
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davies, Lindrith (1979) "Busy Being Born," *Exile*: Vol. 25 : No. 3 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol25/iss3/21>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Busy Being Born

By Lindrith Davies

Harley Casey had given up smoking cigars about twelve years ago. He hadn't given up cigars though; since it's easier to render the habit harmless than to quit it, he chewed them now. He was a cautious driver, but he chewed while he drove, at forty-five miles an hour, with pleasant mood-music on the FM, letting his mind wander. As he moved down the El Producto he would spit bits of tobacco that would land on the dash and windshield and harden there. Perhaps this was slovenly, but he wasn't ashamed--what else would you do with the stuff? Spit it into tissues? That was ridiculous. He was too careful a driver to spit it out the window, besides, the car was air-conditioned. His tobacco-specks were a more distinctive badge than the specially engraved nameplate on the dash. But he couldn't in good faith pry the damn nameplate off and still take his friend the dealer to an occasional lunch in the car. All in all, the tobacco-dots weren't a bad compromise. His wife always drove the newer car of the two--they drove that one to church on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, and on their infrequent short vacations. He chewed in his wife's car, but never spat in it.

Harley Casey didn't hold much for the conventions and 'new products galas' that his business seemed bent on holding a few times each year. They were a wart on the ass of progress. In the auto parts racket, one does something with a product if its quality is acceptable and enough of it can be bought at the right price. Such products don't need to throw parties to get you to buy them. The meeting he was headed to this afternoon was especially annoying, because he was slated to be honored there--as if doing the largest volume of their brand over twenty years had been a selfless service to the lucky company. Sure, Casey wasn't really deeply concerned with the fate of the Fram corporation, but their award was the kind of formality, like being listed in the **Who's Who in Business and Industry**, that it was better not to fight. He was acquainted with the men who would be there; met them at conventions over the years. He disdained the gun-ho guys. But, with some of those who were just as bored as he was, he'd exchange stories, and pictures of grandchildren.

Harley Casey had no respect for all these people looking for a free ride through life. Doing as much driving as he did, he was always passing hitchhikers on the road, and they were the constant, ever-annoying symbol of that freeloader spirit. He had never, not since he had his first six-year-old Oldsmobile right before the start of World War II, ever picked one up. Driving was his time for contemplative solitude. He could still chew cigars with a stranger in the car, but what right did some freeloader had to interrupt his thought? And, thinking sensibly, if someone doesn't have the resources of a vehicle, or money for a bus ticket, or at least a friend with a car, one has no business traveling on the freeways. It was a practical objection, not a moral one--but then, morals and laws are, after all, very practical things--they prevent chaos. Then why did Harley court chaos at the on-ramp on Breezewood, Pa., by unlocking his door for a little blond in sandals, raggedy blue-

jeans, and a purple t-shirt with some kind of red tongue and lips printed on it? Maybe he'll never know why. But hell, Breezewood, Pa. is a pretty boring place. She lugged open the door, threw a duffelbag in the back seat, plopped herself down, and said: "Oh, Harley, You just don't **know**. I've been praying all afternoon for a ride with air conditioning and velour seats. I've gone delirious and this is all just a marvelous hallucination."

Harley loosened his tie and searched for a break in the westbound traffic. How in the hell did she know him? He scanned his memory. She also had freckles, and purple hoop earrings, and a purple sash tied in her hair. One of his grandson's friends? Wait, shit, of course, the nameplate. Clever girl. "Where are you going?"

She closed one eye in great thoughtfulness. "West on I-70."

"That's where you're at, honey. Where are you going?"

"I'm on I-70. I'm going west on I-70. Hi! My name's Ramona."

"Thanks, now we're introduced. Ramona what?"

"No last name. Really--none. Just Ramona."

Frank Sinatra crooned 'something stupid like I love you' on the FM. Ramona drew a breath and settled down to a long hitch-hiker's rap. "Actually I'm not at all sure what my destination is right now, but the main thing is--"

"You have no last name, and no destination? Do you exist?"

"Oh, you bet I do!"

"And the deal is, you get out when I get where I'm going, get another ride, and keep going west?"

"Yes, that's pretty much the deal, Mr. Casey." She seemed baffled by his tone; perhaps he had been gruff, he hadn't meant to. "You don't--you're not one of these guys who has other plans for me are you? You don't look like the type--I'll bet you have three grandchildren, right?"

"Four."

She grinned. "Oh wow. I bet they're great kids. Probably spoiled as all hell." Then in a flash she had spun around and was leaning over the seat, ass in the air. "And you're in business--let's see here...tire prices, shock absorbers, ignition parts, exhaust systems--you're in auto parts! Jeez, this catalog is thicker than six bibles!"

"If you don't mind--"

"I'm sorry." She spun around again and slid down on the seat, legs under her. "I was just curious. You're interesting. Gave up smoking?"

Harley suddenly laid his cigar in the ashtray. "Must be ten years now, or more, I had a monstrous cough. Emphysema."

"Emphysema? You inhaled your cigars? That's hardcore there, Harley."

"No, I smoked cigarettes too. I'd like to know where you get an expression like 'hardcore'."

She shrugged. "Picked it up on the streets. I don't know, it's an expression. Refers to a very ingrained habit--like a vice, right? Does it bother you if I smoke?"

"No, not at all."

Instead of cracking her window a sensible inch for the smoke, Ramona became fascinated with the power window button--zoomed the window up and down a few times, absorbed. She leaned over the seat, ass in the air again, and pulled a pack of

cigarettes out of her bag. Lighting one, she asked, "Would you mind terribly if I fiddled around with the radio?"

Harley shrugged. He made his best attempt to concentrate on driving, but he was watching Ramona's smoking and slowing down. Hardcore, that was her word. She took gigantic drags on the thing and held them in her lungs. The cigarette was handrolled, and the smell wasn't tobacco.

"What if some cop stops me right now?"

She waited, rolled her eyes, blew a gust of smoke out the window. "Oh come on, Harley, you haven't driven faster than forty-five since I've been with you. Minimum speed is forty around here though. Speed up so we don't get busted, OK?"

"We'll take our chances, sweetheart." But he caught himself pushing the gas a little harder.

She managed to pull a rock n' roll station out of the static, and then turned the radio down to a whisper. "I'm sorry. I can get pretty obnoxious. I guess you just impressed me as a guy I could bullshit around with a little. Please don't let me upset you."

The pot should be extinguished. The joint should be handed to Harley so he could try it. He shrugged to himself and gave up on both ideas. We must look like a father and daughter driving along in silence; perfectly normal, the eternal generation gap. He with his royal blue tie, she with her purple sash. Harley is everybody's father. That's how he runs the store--the old man, teaching customers how to keep their books so they could pay all their bills, including his; learning the meaning of Ramona's glib word, hardcore--reaching out to a pair of alcoholics, one inspired, the other alienated. Both customers and employees ran to him with problems; they called him "coach". And this little sexy rat here who said she had no last name--that convinced him that she did indeed have parents, no matter how long she'd been balling her way around the country, she was too young and too clean not to have parents who weren't worrying. Like Frank Sinatra's song, there he was--with something he had to say that wouldn't do a damn bit of good.

"You know, Ramona, if you really were an orphan, you'd be proud to have that last name."

She stared for a while--tried to pick up a little more about Harley Casey parts man than his cigars and his catalogues showed. He had a bit of a belly, but he was pretty trim for his age, and wore a well-worn wedding ring. He reached for that cigar with a patriarch's authority. Hmm. He listened. He had her, he didn't deserve to be bullshitted.

"I'm not ashamed of my last name, I just don't use it anymore. It is Washington. You gotta make some decisions in this world. Do you like music, Mr. Casey?"

"Everybody likes music."

A Pennsylvania trooper thundered by. Harley checked his speed. Ramona pulled a regular cigarette out of her pack and punched in the lighter. "Well, that's debatable. But since everybody likes music, what kind do you really like? Not that FM shit, I hope."

"You'll get a few of those pretty teeth knocked out of your head one day. That

FM shit, as you put it, I find soothing, like a bath. You're soothed by your marijuana, I'm soothed by that FM shit."

"Fair enough. But what kind of **music** do you like?"

Harley sent a little tobacco flying at the windshield. "Well, I'll tell you. I enjoy organ music. I play the organ at home--I can't think of a better way to wind down after a long day. But--it's funny, I haven't thought about this in I don't know how long--I've always hankered to play a cathedral organ. To play a Bach fugue on a cathedral organ. I don't know if I'd know a fugue if I fell over one. But the idea always turned me on. Years ago I went out and bought a record, of Albert Schweitzer on an organ in France, playing Bach. But then when I listened to that damn thing, it was nothing. How the hell do you record a cathedral?"

"Well for God's sake, Harley, go to Europe and play a cathedral organ! You can afford it! What are you waiting for?"

There was some bitterness in his little chuckle. "If it feels good, do it, right?"

"He who is not busy being born is busy dying. Bob Dylan said that. Probably stole it from somewhere."

The cars on I-70 traveled smoothly. Predictable. Go to Europe and play a cathedral organ. The Caddy swished along; most of the rusty little Mavericks and Mustangs passed it like it was standing still.

"What a sunset! Man, how can they talk about Heaven being somewhere else? What a farfetched idea! There's a window of Heaven, Harley. Imagine that scene over the great plains, the continental divide, the Pacific!"

"This may be **your** heaven--"

She laughed. "No, **this** is **my** heaven: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting, Amen. Aw, man..."

The Apostles Creed. Her parents must have substituted prayer for sleep since she skipped out. "Well, if you're going to find your Heaven on earth, baby, be prepared to find your hell here too."

"Damn straight."

They passed through a short mountain tunnel and crossed the bridge through Wheeling, West Virginia. They both detested the structure, a many-tiered steel-and-concrete bridge, eye-level with the smokestacks. Ramona finally closed her window to shut out the rumbling echo.

Suddenly she jumped at the radio. "Oh! Wow, wait a second. Anybody who fantasizes about cathedral organs owes it to himself to hear this song. I want an honest opinion, OK?"

Apparently the rock aesthetic required tremendous volume. You're gonna compare cathedral organs to this woman wailing amid all this beating on electric guitars? Still, it was the stuff of power-fantasies. He tried to catch the words. Storm threatening. If I don't get some shelter. Mad bull lost its way. In one quick motion he clicked the radio off. "Ramona, what are you running away from?"

"Hey, Bub, you realize you just turned off the Rolling Stones, the band whose emblem is emblazoned across my tits--not down, mind you, but **off**--"

"What are you running away from?"

"To answer your true question, I am running away from Washington's grocery and package store, 3131 Howard Street, Baltimore, Maryland. Now please don't try anything funny. And if you don't mind--" She reached for the radio again and caught the song at its climax:

I tell ya, love

sisters

It's just a kiss away

It's just a kiss away

kiss away

kiss away yeah, yeah

After that, somehow, ice was broken. She asked his opinion of the song; Harley said he had trouble relating to Rock Music. Ramona talked nonstop for the next half-hour. Harley learned that rock was our age's contribution to serious music--jazz came from an earlier age--and that Jimi Hendrix was destined to take his place in history beside Wagner and Tsaichovsky, not to mention Coltrane and Parker. And Satchmo.

"Louis Armstrong. There I'll agree."

"That's white of you."

Ramona went on to explain that the music of the sixties was the voice of a real people's movement. "And the Woodstock nation isn't dead, either. Just you wait till they start trying to turn the Rocky Mountains into a row of slagheaps to mine their synthetic fuel--you'll see that nation rise. I guarantee it. Think we could stop somewhere and maybe get a burger? I'm famished."

"Sure. I was getting hungry myself. But Ramona--I think your politics are full of shit."

"I love it! Harley, you're a conservative old fart. But I like you a lot."

They got out of the car; she threw her head back to gaze at the stars and stretched every muscle. Harley found himself watching her; she wasn't stretching, she was radiating.

Harley Casey walked through the gift shop of the truck stop to the restaurant, with his little Ramona dancing along on his right arm. "Oh wow, Dad, wanna sit at the counter--remember like we used to at the drugstore, where you taught me how to eat a chocolate two-scooper so it wouldn't drip, like this..."

So they sat at the counter. "Would you be able to find it in your heart to spring a quarter for the jukebox?"

"Haven't you got any money either?" He handed her the quarter.

"Thanks. You're sweet." She turned to the waitress, a tired, kindly redhead in a baby-blue dress, smiling at such a father-daughter rapport. "He's such a worrywort. He's convinced I have to stay in college for four consecutive years. I try to tell him that's not a very educational plan, but...Where do you suppose I got my stubbornness?"

He found himself saying, "Ramona, I doubt that this lady wants to hear our argument."

"Guess you're right. Sorry." She confided to the waitress, "Beneath all his conservatism and grumbling, he's really a softie. We lost my mom when I was little, and

we've been buddies all along. He's spoiled me a bit though." She winked at them and danced off to the jukebox. Harley braced himself for the cacophony about to issue forth and Ramona scampered off to the ladies' room.

The lady behind the counter gave him a wrinkled smile. "I bet she keeps you young."

The jukebox played Frank Sinatra: That's Life!

She couldn't possibly be older than eighteen--and for a few dollars she probably would keep him young all night. "That she does--or maybe ages me before my time--sometimes I don't know which." The waitress laughed politely. The burgers went down on the grill. It was time for Harley to walk directly across the restaurant and make a phone call. His heart was suddenly pounding, what of that? There were forces in him that didn't want crazy little Ramona sleeping with one or two of these truck drivers on the way to Missouri, or some God-forsaken place. Certain things had to happen; he allowed himself no more than a good long sigh, till he swung his stately and suited carriage off the stool and walked straight to the pay phone. The call went through. He reported a runaway, a girl, seventeen years old, blond, wanted in Baltimore, five feet tall, named...

The phone went dead. And then the receiver was jerked out of Harley's hands.

"A woman hitching needs a good knife." She clicked it shut. "Goddamn it Harley, you even played Daddy and goofed on the truck stop with me. You're a dumb shit, you really are a dumb shit. Go pay for the burgers, old man-- Feed them to your **Cadillac**."

"Now you listen--" She jumped away before he could grab her arm, gave him one more chilling stare, and ran out the door and out of sight. He heard a car door slam. Must have been getting her duffelbag. Harley went and paid for the burgers, left a business card so they could send him the bill for the phone, and drove away.

Mr. Harley Casey very seldom talked to himself any more. When he was twenty-five or thirty, and off alone on business trips, he used to talk a blue streak to himself, and when he was in form, he could come up with some very entertaining monologues. In recent years there has seemed to be less and less to say. He hadn't thought about it much; in fact, it only came to mind this morning because, after he'd been awakened by his appointed call from the motel desk, he found himself unable to shut up. One little speech she made last night stuck with him. Right in the middle of all her talk about the sixties and the Woodstock Nation, he had asked her what contribution she could make, hitching around. She'd said, "I don't know, you know, it's probably the craziest idea you ever heard of. But every time I went to church and they talked about the Apostles, I didn't think, what a faded old legend of so long ago--I thought, what has changed? And why not me. So...we're all in this together, the message is simple. We can start accepting that and each other and build our truly human world society, or we can stay divided, and suspicious, and perish. I'm here to lobby for that first one." Indeed.

Harley shaved and dressed. He had a nine o'clock breakfast date with a jobber from Gary, Indiana and a jobber from Philadelphia, both toting new photos of the grandchildren. He heated some water with a portable coil that someone had given him for Father's day, and had some instant coffee, talking all the while about

whatever was in front of him, the ugly turquoise curtains, the stale old coffee he had in his suitcase. And the hitch-hiking prophethess. He unwrapped a cigar, loosened it for the road, and started out to his car. Where do you suppose she is now? With some trucker? He nodded to the chubby girl pushing her cleaning cart; he looked over the pool and remembered he hadn't brought anything to swim in, though a dip after the meetings would be relaxing. When he unlocked his door and climbed in, Harley noticed that his rearview mirror was turned down all cockeyed; must have bumped it getting out. It reflected the back seat, where he set the six-bible-think catalogue. Where Ramona now was sleeping. Lord, when I went back in to pay for the hamburgers...

Her head rested on her folded hands; she drooled a little. She was angelic, she looked the way all sleeping children look, a face washed pure by good dreams. When Harley laid his hand down on the seat beside him, it fell on a pair of purple hoop earrings pinned into a purple silk sash. All right...

All right, hell with breakfast. Harley didn't start the engine. He didn't even lower the power windows. He stared at her face in the mirror for quite a while as he chewed and spat tobacco-bits, but he had thinking to do. When his first cigar was down to the last inch, he unwrapped a second. She had tested him, tried to shame him out of calling the police again, and gambled that he wouldn't. The phone in his room was only ten paces away--but with Harley's luck, she'd wake up just as he got out of the car. That wouldn't do at all. He hoped that his friends wouldn't come around to the motel to see what had happened to him. That gave him a laugh. He put on his best scheister--Jew accent and said, "Vaht are ya ganna do? Vaht the hell, de kids says she wants to be a prophet, vy stop her? Eh, ve don't got near enough of dem these days."

Just then, Ramona opened her eyes.

P. O. Box 25
Georgetown, Maryland