

Girl, You'll Be A Woman Soon

By Sophie Littlefield

*Girl, you'll be a woman soon
Please, come take my hand
Girl, you'll be a woman soon
Soon, you'll need a man*
Neil Diamond, 1967

Fifteen hours to Florida, and the sky started out gloomy and grew angrier the whole way. Scudding clouds at dinner in Knoxville turned to a thick roiling stew by the time the last of the light left the sky.

They were in Heather's dad's car, a solid two-year-old Buick he'd agreed to let them use only after reminding them that gas wasn't cheap and to take turns filling up the tank. Even then he didn't seem to approve of any of them. Trish could understand with Destinee, but the rest of them? Clean with the sheen of virginity on them like sizing on cheap calico, frosted lipstick and Farrah Fawcett hair – it was 1981 and virtue was still something you tried to preserve.

Half an hour after midnight, they were somewhere in northern Georgia. Trish was still too giddy to sleep. The furthest south she'd ever been was Arkansas. Seeing a palm tree was high on her list. Seeing the ocean – unimaginable. On a family trip to the Ozarks when she was thirteen, she squinted until the far shore blurred into the sky – pretended it was the sea, endless and beckoning. Opened her eyes and it was just a lake, squishy and weedy at the bottom.

Destinee was driving. Lisa and Heather were asleep in the back seat. Destinee: a girl no one knew well, a girl they shied away from in the dorm, invited mostly just to help with the expenses and driving.

“Have you been to Florida before?” Trish asked after a while.

“Once,” Destinee said. “This boyfriend of my mom's? He had this jacked-up Camaro, worked out at the electric plant. Guess he got some time off because he decided to take us to Disney one August when I was in junior high.”

“In August?”

“Yeah, nice, right? Like a fucking oven outside. And Luther, that was his name, he and my mom were stoned most of the way and he tried to grab my ass every chance he got.”

“Oh my God.” Thrill of repulsion, thrill of something else. “What did you do?”

“About Luther? Nothing, for a while. It wasn't like he was moving very fast, you know? I wasn't scared of him. But then I got tired of it so I slashed all his tires with a Denny's knife.”

“You did?” The image came straight and full-formed to Trish's mind – Destinee brandishing a wicked blade.

“Yeah. Waited until he went to the john. I knew he'd be a while because he always took forever to take a dump after breakfast. He left his wallet at the table, so I took all the money out and then I did his tires, and mom and I ended up going home on Greyhound.”

“Wasn’t your mom...wasn’t he..?”

“Oh, I imagine he was plenty pissed when he figured it out. And I had a hard time getting my mom to come with me. But it was worth it, you know?” Destinee tapped a rhythm on the steering wheel with her thumb. “Not letting him get away with it was worth a little inconvenience. That’s what I learned that trip.”

Trish thought about that story as miles of inky black rolled by. She wanted to know more, but wasn’t sure what questions to ask. Destinee wasn’t like any of the other girls in the dorm. She’d worked for a long time, saving up for college. She was older. Harder. She knew things.

“Hey, I’m beat. Want to take over for a while?” Destinee asked, interrupting Trish’s thoughts.

They coasted off the highway to an all-night gas station convenience mart. One of the girls in the back seat made a clucking, mumbling sound in her sleep.

Inside they bought coffee, Hostess pies, gum. Split it down to the penny. Back in the car, they switched places.

“That thing with the truckers...” Trish said it casually, as she backed slowly out of the lot.

Heather’s Dad had a CB radio in the car, and after it got dark out, she turned the thing on and got a conversation going with some trucker and suddenly it seemed like there were dozens on the air. Heather told them that they were schoolgirls. Said: “We’re just some schoolgirls looking for a party in Florida, any big bad bears out there know the way?” and so on. The truckers liked it plenty. Hooting and hollering, more than one offer to buy them dinner, a couple offers to do other things. The one that stuck in Trish’s mind: “I’d like to pull down your bikini bottoms and lick the sand out of all your cracks.” The truckers kept it up until Destinee grabbed the speaker and told them to go fuck themselves, then snapped the unit off.

“I mean, thanks for, you know, stopping it,” Trish said. It wasn’t exactly what she meant to say.

“No problem. You have to remember, men are dumb animals. It’s just a basic stimulus-response thing,” Destinee said, peeling the wrapper off a pie. She was studying psychology.

“You mean like, it’s not their fault? When they’re...like that?”

“Oh, sure it’s their fault,” Destinee laughed. “But you still have to know how to shut them down. They won’t do it themselves.”

Trish glanced in the back: Lisa was leaning against Heather, her cheek pressed against Heather’s arm, both of them still asleep. They looked sweet, like children.

Back on the road, the radio played softly, edging in and out of static, country and farm reports. No sign of dawn yet. Destinee drifted off to sleep, prettily, her head resting on a rolled-up jacket against the passenger door. Trish didn’t mind driving. She thought she might never have experienced such total privacy, even all tucked tight with the others in the Buick. She was driving and it was quiet and she felt older than her eighteen years, in a good way, a mature way.

I’d like to pull down your bikini bottoms and lick the sand out of all your cracks.

The rain started with force, drops plonking against the windshield in an aggressive staccato. It was almost six in the morning and Trish realized that she'd been cheated out of the slow burn of dawn.

"Hey," Heather whisper-talked from the back seat. In the rear-view mirror Trish could see her rubbing sleep from her eyes. "You were supposed to wake me up to drive. Where are we?"

"Woodbine, Georgia," Trish said. "Fifty miles from Jacksonville."

"And it's raining? Shit!"

The others stirred, staring out the windows at the gloom. Trish wondered if she'd get her first palm tree, or whether it would whip by in the gloomy gray, indistinguishable from the rest of the vegetation.

Speaking of which, southern Georgia wasn't what she expected. There were trees everywhere, thick twisty trees that looked as though their roots twined far below the earth. Trish knew several things about Georgia. She knew that it was poor, that people lived in shacks, that blacks and whites did not live comfortably together. From all of this she had imagined an arid, cracked land. She was from Missouri – in Missouri, drought was the worst news, the thing that could break you. Here they had water, but evidently they were still screwed.

But it didn't matter. They'd be in Florida in a few miles. Trish was on her way to Florida to party like college students were supposed to, and she didn't plan to let anything get in the way. Not the weather. Not the company, though secretly she might have wished for different companions.

In a sense they were the leftovers, the ones who weren't going with other groups, with best friends. None of them, for that matter, were or had best friends. Trish guessed that when Heather's dad offered the car, he had hoped his daughter would barter it for a better set of friends. Prettier, more popular girls than Lisa and Trish. Destinee was prettier than anyone, but in a flashy sexy way that made her look thirty with some exciting hard miles, rather than twenty-two trying to pass for eighteen.

Well, fuck Mr. Kenny, Trish thought – they were making do with each other. Beggars couldn't be choosers.

"I think it might be clearing that way," Destinee said, pointing out the window.

But if anything, it had gotten windier and wetter when they passed the *Welcome to Florida* sign. Trish spotted it only as they were streaking past; she considered turning the car around to take a picture, but decided against it. No sense reminding everyone how much of the world was new to her.

Trish meant to stay awake the rest of the way, but she drifted off and woke up with a pain in her neck as they were pulling into the motel parking lot in Daytona Beach.

The rain had lightened, and morning had come up to meet the gray skies, but even so the building in front of them was a looming disappointment. Constructed of cinderblock with flaking paint, it resembled a giant bunker in a sea of asphalt which lay rippled and broken as if attached to migrating titanic plates.

The musty dark registration area. An unanticipated charge for sharing the room four ways. Lugging up their things in garbage bags – only Heather and Lisa had proper

suitcases. More dismay at the sagging double beds, the odor - somewhere between stale smoke and what Trish guessed might be the result of sex, or some rotting organic thing.

By lunch time they were all asleep, drapes drawn on the thin light outdoors.

When they woke, they walked to the other end of the hotel and stood in the cinderblock open-air alcove looking out at the ocean.

My first palm tree, Trish thought. My first ocean.

She wanted to be impressed, wanted a heart-skip moment, but neither looked real. The palms were small and leaned in their pots, and their leaves were ragged like the ears of a dog that fought with other dogs. The sea, well, it looked like a reproof, a scolding for getting her hopes up, a sheet of frothy gray, black in places.

Don't get your hopes up - it was an eleventh commandment in the Bartley house. Trish's mom worked in a laundromat for extra money. Her father managed a home center twenty miles away in Versailles. Trish had been required to be home after school to watch her sister Maggie. Now Trish was gone, and Maggie was nine and letting her own self in the door after school, cooking her own suppers.

Only Destinee seemed unfazed. "This is okay. We're here, aren't we? Together?"

She said they had to look their best early in the evening because that was when they'd be trolling for dinner. She had brought only enough money for her share of the gas and hotel bill; she'd had to pull extra shifts at the Red Hen Pantry to finance even that. She was paying for every cent of her education herself. Trish was right behind her; her father had sent her two folded twenties in a safety envelope with a note that said: *don't tell Mom*

Heather and Lisa had some money, but they went along. They all slipped single-serving boxes of breakfast cereal from the dorm cafeteria under their sweatshirts until they'd accumulated enough for the trip. The plan was to buy milk and juice, skip lunch and "work for dinner" - Destinee's words, spoken like someone who'd done it plenty.

She turned away from the ocean and was halfway back to the room when the others, cutting each other glances, followed. Destinee got the shower first, the hair dryer and the mirror.

None of them brought umbrellas. As a substitute, they took the pillowcases off the pillows and held them above their heads as they ran down the strip.

One remarkable block after another. Pancake houses, waffle houses, biscuits and gravy for \$1.99. Motels even uglier than their own, smells of mildew and garbage wafting out to the street. Paint stores, tire stores, package stores, check-cashing outfits, but most of all bars. Bars, and more bars, all windowless, squat, flat-roofed affairs.

There didn't seem to be much to distinguish one from another, but Destinee pulled up short in front of a brown-shingled place called the Rocket. They followed her in: dark and close and humid. Smell of stale beer and men's cologne. Oh! Trish knew that smell - knew it from the few fraternity parties she'd gone to - places she'd felt

exposed and out of place. But here: maybe here was different.

“Why here?” Heather wanted to know.

Destinee pointed above the bar, where a short menu was scratched on a chalkboard. “They serve food. Aren’t you hungry?”

Forty-five minutes later they were eating: onion rings, fries, burgers. Their benefactors, three thick-ish boys from Tennessee State, watched with calculating concentration, and Trish wondered which girl would be the extra. Well, it wouldn’t be Destinee, that’s for sure – with her bleached hair like Lonnie Anderson in WKRP, her tits too big for her petite frame, she lit up the place like a hundred-watt bulb.

Trish licked ketchup from her fingers and looked at her friends. Lisa, lean and bony with a perm that needed updating. Heather, with hips as rounded and soft as buttered rolls. Well, some guys liked that. But Trish thought she might be second-best, and the knowledge burned inside her along with her third draft beer. She licked her fingers again, experimenting, seeing if she could get the guys to look.

She could.

Rain every day. The sun came out after breakfast and tried to hold on through lunch, but the effort seemed to exhaust it; rolling lusty clouds arrived from the ocean and splatted down a fresh assault.

They went to the mall. They went to a matinee. Lisa got her textbooks out and Heather quizzed her. Trish sent Maggie postcards, writing: “You should see this place!!” in big, loopy letters.

Destinee plucked her eyebrows, filed her nails, read magazines, and didn’t seem to mind. Destinee never wore down. Her spirits were high whether she was telling you how to give a blow job or how her mom had a couple of veins collapse and spent last mothers’ day at the county clinic. She sent her own post cards, to aunts (one her mother’s sister in Washington State, and one who wasn’t an aunt at all, but an old friend of her mother’s who’d married money). Destinee said the postcards were insurance – she kept in touch so the aunts would continue to send things on her birthday, Christmas. For proof she held up her wrist. She wore a delicate gold chain bracelet with pink stones scattered through.

Trish spent her time with Destinee and she noticed the curious glances Heather and Lisa gave her. Yes, all right; she was the one who hadn’t wanted Destinee to come in the first place. So sue her.

But Destinee wasn’t what she expected. “This is the good part,” she said when they raised the first beer of the evening and clanked their mugs together, just the four of them, no matter who bought the round. “To friendship, and to hell with everyone else.”

And at the end of the evening, saying good nights in the dark, she never missed anyone: “Goodnight, Lisa. Goodnight, Heather. Goodnight, Trish.”

They were well-fed. It wasn’t hard. Beers lined up on the bar, whatever they wanted to eat. Sometimes they danced; if one was asked, they all got on the dance floor.

They made out with different guys every night, even Lisa, who came home giggling one evening and confided that the boy had pinched her nipples hard and tried to roll them around like a dial on a radio. Lisa and Heather and Trish compared how far the guys went – how far they tried to go – never letting them past their waistbands. Destinee said little, stretched out on the bed with her hair in a ponytail. Only this, “You only get one first time. Don’t waste it.”

They always came home together. Destinee would tap them on the shoulder, find them out in the parking lot leaning on some boy’s car, tucked into the yeasty dark of a booth, and they’d trip home, leaning on each other and laughing.

Destinee made sure they always took their makeup off before getting into bed.

Their last day they woke to drizzle, but as they ate their cereal, a patch of sun lanced through the window, splashed on the carpet and caught them all by surprise.

They were down to the beach in twenty minutes, with their bikinis and suntan lotion and sunglasses and extra towels lifted from the housekeeping cart. The beach was mobbed – girls on islands of towels, jousting knots of boys careening past, hollering and throwing footballs waist-deep in the surf.

They strolled and found a volleyball game, watched for a while. Six boys and a Styrofoam cooler full of beer. Destinee joined the game, and she was surprisingly good. She’d go down on a knee to bump the ball, jump high to spike it. Her team won. The guys picked her up and carried her down the beach, their hands supporting her hips, her shoulders, and she threw back her head and trailed her fingertips through the salty air and laughed.

The night before, she’d been in a different mood. She stole a pack of cigarettes off the bar and she and Trish sat outside and smoked while Lisa and Heather played drinking games with boys who said they were from Harvard.

Destinee told Trish three amazing things. First, she’d be twenty-five in June. Second, her four front teeth weren’t real. A man who’d lived with her mother had hit her in the mouth when she was fifteen, and she’d had to live with the cracked shards for months. Filing down the sharpest edges with an emery board so she didn’t cut herself - until the aunt who actually was an aunt paid a visit and dragged her off to a dentist. Third, she had a 3.8 GPA.

She also told Trish a few other things that weren’t so surprising. She’d had two abortions and two men had asked her to marry them. She didn’t plan to get married, ever. She said this last with steel in her voice.

“I can’t believe everything that’s happened to you,” Trish said, meaning it.

Destinee shrugged. “Life gives you shit sometimes, you know, problems. You just have to learn to fix them. That’s what I did, I learned to fix things.”

“Why did you come on this trip?” Trish blurted, beer and smoke and unaccustomed intimacy making her blunt.

Destinee blew out a long thin stream of smoke. “I just kind of wanted to feel like a real college student, I guess.”

“But do you...I mean, did you even really like us?”

Trish unrolled a smile that softened her flashy features soften and made her look

almost sweet. “Not much. But I do now.”

Their last night: a little extra eyeliner, aloe for their sunburns, their best outfits pressed, perfume behind their ears and between their breasts.

Emboldened; the boys in the same mood. In the morning, everyone would be on the road with their hangovers and sodden bathing suits in plastic bags, back to the East and the Midwest where trees stood black and leafless, where curbs held sooty piles of snow and ice.

No beer tonight – it was mai tais and daiquiris. After dinner, Destinee dragged them to the parking lot; a grinning boy held open the door to his car. Destinee gave directions; she sat up front while everyone else jammed in the back, laughing, knees and hands a jumble.

They got out a long way up the strip. Here, the hotels were new and sleek and tall, the parking lots weeded and the landscaping trimmed and lush. They parked in front of a hotel that had a revolving night club on top. The boy started to get out of the car, but Destinee kissed him and Trish could see her slip her tongue in his mouth, press her hand to his chest. Then she was out of the car and sprinting and they followed her, caught up in her energy, her determination, and they didn’t see that boy again.

Up in the lounge on top of the hotel, Trish was mildly disappointed. It was softly lit and decorated with club chairs and bamboo coffee tables, but through the windows the ocean looked like nothing. She couldn’t even tell the room moved.

She stared out at the darkness, swaying to the music, enjoying her buzz. Then Destinee came up behind her and whispered, “I brought you a little surprise.” Behind her trailed two guys in dress pants and Hawaiian shirts. They came smiling, came with two drinks each in their hands, with money showing in the way they said hello.

“This is Brett and James,” she said. “They’re here on business. They got us a table. Heather says the spinning’s making her sick. She’s going home with Lisa.”

“Oh!” Trish looked around; hadn’t they all been here moments ago? “Is that all right? Are they mad?”

Destinee gave her a sunny smile and leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. “No, they’re fine. Go, I’ll be right back, I’ll just walk them to the elevator. Order us something nice.”

Trish felt a little wobbly as she followed the men to the table. “Don’t you have to eat dinner to sit here?” she asked.

The taller one, James, laughed. “Got that covered, darlin’. We’ve eaten in this dive at least four times this week. Think they’ll put up with us a little longer.”

Destinee returned and ordered Trish a basket of fried shrimp, “To keep your strength up,” and they listened to Brett explain about the outboard engine business and the fishing trip they’d taken their clients on and how Savannah was the new boom town. Trish spotted a tan line where Brett’s wedding ring had been and for a second tried to figure out how to signal that fact to Destinee. Then James’s hand was on her knee and he did something with his fingers along her skin that made the rest of the week’s groping seem like practice, and she forgot.

But in Brett's room, which had bottles lined up on the desk and a boom box playing Foreigner, she started to feel a little sick. Brett had draped towels over the two bed lamps so the room was lit in a soft, dim glow. He and Destinee played cards on the bed.

James had the adjoining room, and the door between the two was wide open. He tugged at the top of her skirt. "Want to dance?"

Trish thought the suggestion was sweet, but what she really needed was air. She let him dance her through the door into his room, and then she took his hand and pulled him out on the balcony and took some deep breaths, the whole while thinking: This is a man who held her from behind, erection pressed up hard against her ass, chin tucked beneath her ear, stubble lighting little fires in her tender flesh. This is a man.

It helped, but the queasiness didn't go completely away.

"You were the prettiest girl in the place," James whispered, and his breath was whiskey and smoke and it blended with his cologne and even through the nausea Trish thought: why not? Why not tonight? She wasn't sure she was even technically a virgin any more. At the Sig Ep valentine formal, Ron Covers had managed to get three fingers in her, and judging by the pain, something had to have happened down there. Well, she could get it done tonight, older guys always had condoms.

"I just..." a wave came and she swallowed hard, concentrated on keeping everything down. The nausea was more an annoyance than a deterrent; if she could just get past the worst of it – and maybe not drink any more – she'd be fine.

"We'll go slow," James said, lifting her skirt and trailing his fingers along the outside of her thighs, pressing against her through the thin nylon of her panties. "We don't have to do anything you don't want to. I just want to touch you."

Trish wanted to reassure him, but she couldn't speak for a moment, and what she really needed him to do was to stop rocking into her for a few minutes so she could catch her breath, if he'd just be still she'd be fine, but he was keeping up a rhythm and on each thrust it pressed her gut against the top of the railing, wasn't that kind of low didn't they have laws about these things and oh God she really, really had to hurl---

She let out a wail and made a desperate effort to suck down air, but what came out was an enormous belch and then a small spray of bilious spittle. She tried to swallow that too, moaning, and suddenly James jerked hard against her and she gripped the rail to hold herself up and turned and James was lurching away from her and then he jerked again and sank slowly to the floor. Destinee was standing there behind him holding a bent and twisted thing in her hand and reaching for her.

"Did he?" Destinee shrieked. "Did he rape you?" and suddenly Trish didn't have to throw up any more and Destinee's hand was on her arm pinching hard and Trish looked from her friend to the man motionless at their feet.

"No...no!" Trish didn't think, just yanked her skirt all the way up. Like: *here, look, still got my panties on.* Destinee looked at her, and looked down at James, took her silver shoe and toed him over, saw his pants were up, nothing unbuttoned, nothing unzipped. Trish watched the look in Destinee's eyes go understanding and hard and glinty, but not one nickel's worth of sorry.

"What...what did you hit him with?" Trish whispered. "Where's Brett?"

“Brett went to get ice,” Destinee said, bending down and lifting up James’s wrist, which was frighteningly limp. “I came to check on you. I thought...you were crying...”

“No, Destinee, I was fine. I was just trying not to throw up.”

Destinee held her fingers to James’s wrist as her face went increasingly tight. “How could I know?” she muttered. “The way he was humping you - for God’s sakes how was I supposed to know? You sounded like you were trying to get away from him, shit, he’s twice your size....shit!”

Destinee threw James’s wrist back at him; it hit his chest and flopped there unmoving.

“Shit!” she said again. She looked down at the thing in her hand: an arrangement of metal parts. The word carburetor came to Trish’s mind – piston. Destinee held it up. “Brett was showing me his fucking work shit.”

She shoved the thing at Trish, and Trish took it and God it was heavy and cold and blunt and she set it quickly down on the little patio table she didn’t want to touch the thing...

“Help me,” Destinee said tersely. She bent down, slid her hands under James’s shoulders and yanked him up. She was a little thing but she was tough, Trish knew she was tough and suddenly she understood, and then she was on her knees, looping her hands under James’s legs.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” she said, voice Jell-o, not even her voice.

“Yes. He’s dead, and Brett’s going to be looking for me and we have to make this right.”

“But we can’t--” But Trish was already tugging, the two of them were pulling and tugging and oh my God how could he be so heavy they pushed him against the railing and lift-rolled him up the side and finally got him to the top, his slack body resting on the rail, arms drooping to either side, metal pushing into his neck and Trish wanted to pull him back put him back put him on the bed call the paramedics the cops but oh my God Destinee knew what to do Destinee was handling it. Trish remembered the way Destinee had pulled her hair gently to the side one night and told her she looked like Madonna and Trish couldn’t let her down, she couldn’t let Destinee down, and she gave just the smallest shove and the body rolled, it slipped away from them and over the rail and Trish squeezed her eyes shut hard and it was an unbelievably long time before they heard the sound the thudding squashing sound down below and then she did open her eyes but she looked at Destinee, only at Destinee.

“That’s right baby girl,” Destinee whispered and pulled her close. Even though Trish was three inches taller, she let Destinee hold her like a mother holds a child and felt herself shake and felt Destinee hold her firm and strong.

“Now do just what I tell you,” Destinee said, drawing gently away. “We’re not quite done here. Don’t worry, you hear? Sugar, don’t worry, I can fix this. I know how to make it all right.”

And Trish did as she was told and she stayed strong for Destinee, she did what she was told:

Destinee knew what to do. Destinee would teach her how to make it all right.

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