

## The Incredible Journey of Whitey O'Dell

This is strange. Out on the streets and it's warm and misty, mister. April in Saint Louie. They must have signed me out, kicked me out—what do I know? Maybe I pissed them off yanking on the tubes or yelling for my cigarettes. No papers, no pass, no face, no place—maybe I'm supposed to go to a group home. A guy comes strolling toward me in a suit and tie. I'll ask him.

“Hey Buddy, you know where the halfway house is?” But he don't even look at me, just keeps walking right on by—I was going to ask him for a smoke to boot. I wouldn't have killed him. I've killed, yeah, but I'm no killer—I'm just a messenger. Don't kill the messenger.

I see a big brick building with a metal sign—something in Latin with a cross. Maybe this is it. I'm on the porch, no one is answering and the cats are running scared. I ain't sure about this—the neighbors could be watching. I could get arrested, molested—what do I know—I'm just a handy man, not a candy man. I walk around to the side and find a Bilco door into the basement. There's too many dark rooms and quiet—just a clock ticking or maybe pipes dripping? Pipes and wires everywhere, but where's the stairs?

I'm getting real agitated now. The hospital should've told me. No pass, no cigarettes—this ain't funny—I need help.

Coming out of nowhere, this girl walks up to me and I nearly jump out of my shoes. She's young, with long, straight hair, and familiar—like maybe she's a nurse without a uniform. Weird, she don't say a word, but her eyes tell me everything will be okay and my mind stops racing. Smiling, she takes my hand as if I were a boy and leads me to a stairway. We step up into a room filled with people talking and laughing. They pay us no heed and she takes me to the far end of the house. She swings a door out into a courtyard and pigeons burst from a fountain in beads of silvery spray. It's pretty—so peaceful—the birds and babbling water, the black trees with purple blossoms. She releases my hand and waves her arm for me to go.

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I wander into a service station. Phillips Sixty-Six. The sun is out now and it feels good—I need to go where it stays warm. I'm tired of being cold, tired of being tired—old Whitey, where did the years go? I decide to head south—guess I'll just be drifting. The mechanic, a dark and hairy fella, asks me what I want. I ask for a pack of Marlboros. Instead he hands me a candy bar—same kind I ate as a kid and it tastes just as old. I throw it to the ground out back. I stand by the pumps asking folks if they're headed south. Nobody.

I'm just about to give up when an old geezer with wild hair and a bushy beard pipes up. "I'm heading south—toward Cape Girardeau or thereabouts. I could give ya a lift. Just gotta wait 'til they replace my rim. I blew a tire and bent the thing in a pothole, courtesy of the great department of do-nothing transportation." He points to a faded blue pickup on the lift. "My old lady—a nineteen fifty-six F model Ford."

Soon we're rolling south, the streets wet and shiny in the sun, the school kids out on recess, the air smelling sweet but for whiffs of gasoline coming off the seat or maybe his clothes. The truck growls like a bobcat treed by hound dogs, and then I hear a bark back of my head and nearly jump out the window. The old man starts laughing so hard he gets to coughing and wheezing and he can't stop, thinking it's so damn funny. There is a hound dog back there! He's up and scratching at the glass and barking, and finally the old man says, "Oh he, he, he—good Lord that was funny. That's my old dog Annie. She must have woke up and realized I had company. Oh that was precious."

The dog lies back down but now I really could use a smoke. "Hey buddy, you wouldn't happen to have any smokes on ya?"

He shakes his head. "Naw. I gave them the old heave ho years ago—they didn't sit well with my wife. She's gone now

but so's the habit."

The land opens up into fields, pastures and woodlots—it's farm country and it feels good and I get lost in the scenery slipping by. I stick my head out the window and suck in the fresh air, so happy I yell out to some kids playing in their front yard, "I don't need any cigarettes, you little bastards."

The old man lays on the horn and cracks up cackling and wheezing. "You're all right, mister. Ain't no better drug than laughter. What might your name be?"

"My name's Melvin but they call me Whitey—on account of when I was a boy my hair was so blond it was white. My brother had white hair too, but his name stayed Calvin. Melvin and Calvin—we were brothers. And yours?"

"Abraham—on account of when I was born, I was six feet tall. He, he, he. Oh dear—sorry, you can just call me Abe. I'm going to visit my son. He's way out in the boondocks near a place called Circle City, but it ain't no city, that's for sure—just a store with pumps and some woebegone houses. But there was one had a shady front porch where I once met a pretty little gal. She took a liking to me and soon we was . . ."

Like a busted dam he rambles on with words I didn't hear. I was staring out the window, feeling something far off at first, then getting closer, then getting urgent—like when ya gotta have a smoke or take a pee.

“Whitey? Whitey?”

“What? Oh sorry, come again?”

“I just asked ya, where ya headed?”

I look at Abe, my heart swelling like a kid on Christmas day, like it knew what I had to do, and I tell him, “I’m going home.”

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We drive deeper into the country with each T and Y and crossroad town—passing billboards faded or left leaning over like old men, churches with JESUS SAVES signs or crosses made of painted poles. We rattle over one-lane bridges, the creeks flooding their banks, the breezes smelling of mud and grass and melted snow. Now I see a little towhead riding his bike and my heart jumps wishing it was him but it ain’t of course and we pass and wave and he gets smaller and smaller until he’s just a wobbly speck. Gone.

We roll on into the afternoon—Abe’s jabber drifting off and me almost asleep—until I hear Annie start prancing around in the back and whining like something’s up. Abe shifts into neutral and the truck scrapes weeds as we coast to a stop. He kills the engine and it’s all quiet again. We’re at a T with nothing ahead but an iron fence, a lane, and headstones. Annie’s claws scratch the bed as she scampers out. She crosses the road and trots up the lane.

“This is it, Whitey. This is as far south as I’m going.”

“What direction might the river lie, just south of Cairo?”

He points along the road to our left. “Head that way, it’s dead east and you’ll run right into her. Good luck to ya, Whitey.”

I thank Abe and watch him amble into the cemetery and disappear behind the headstones. I’m thinking his son must be in there.

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The sun warms my back and sparkles in the puddles, the water trickling along the road and in the ditches, the birds singing and darting from tree to tree—the buds just waiting to pop into leaves. Tumbling along on this lonesome road, I twirl about and get dizzy and stumble, laughing. “I’m going home!” I stoop over to pick up a stone and see flowers. “I remember these.” Bluets cover the ground like tiny stars. I throw the stone and hit a stop sign—bang! Calvin and me used to do that—he’d copy everything I did. We were always riding the bikes down to the river—well, just an oxbow lake it was. The real river would’ve killed us. We’d make boats out of scrap, set them on fire and watch them burn in the water—Calvin always pestering me, ‘let’s burn the boats, let’s burn the boats!’ One day we found a real boat and rowed it out to this island—thought we were big explorers. Weren’t any other kids around, just me and Calvin.

We built a fort there—we loved that place.

I head east best I can, sometimes cutting cross-country between roads. I avoid the thickets and low spots, but my street shoes get soaked and muddy anyhow. Tip-toeing through a cow pasture, I come to a farm. I hear a creek gurgling somewhere but don't see any animals. Windows stare from the side of a barn, their panes busted or coated in grime, and when I get closer I feel the sun's heat bouncing off the old, weathered boards. The rusty wheels of the slider door are jammed and won't budge, but I pry the bottom out and squeeze through. Light streaks in from gaps and windows and something skitters across the floor. It's so familiar—the smell of barn wood and straw and musty leather tack, stabbing at me like a knife, and now I remember, crying out, “We used to play here, this is the neighbor's barn.”

I hear water running, coming from a far corner. The floor pitches down in that direction and there's a door. I kick it open and see a black dog curled up on rotted floorboards and perched over the rushing creek. He jumps up barking—it's our neighbor's dog and we're both going crazy but I can't remember his name. “Hey boy, do ya remember me, Whitey? It's Whitey, remember me? What about Calvin, do ya remember Calvin?” The dog used to follow us everywhere and now he's beside himself barking. “Where's Calvin, boy? Show

me where Calvin is.” His tail all a wagging, he runs out of the room and I follow and soon we’re in bright sunlight standing by the creek. It’s jumped its bank and is undercutting the barn’s foundation. Lord it’s good to be back, but kind of sad ’cause it ain’t the same and I’m anxious wondering if I’ll see Calvin. “All right boy, let’s go.”

We follow the creek down and find a road, but I’m scared ’cause it’s getting late and the water’s roaring and flooding all over and there’s a fracas like birds squabbling somewhere. But the old boy don’t follow the road, he cuts through the woods until I realize we’re on a trail—it’s the old lane down to the lake.

We break out of the woods and I’m out of breath—my heart’s a pounding and the dog’s run ahead. He stops at the edge of a flooded field and starts barking at a patch of trees in the distance, the branches squirming full of chattering blackbirds. I get panicky—I don’t see our lake and I don’t see Calvin. The dog keeps barking at them trees and looking back at me and then it hits me—he’s barking at the island—this is the lake. Everything’s all flooded together.

I yell loud as I can, “Calvin, it’s me, Whitey. I’ve been stuck in Saint Louie a long spell but I’ve come back. I didn’t mean for us to get broke up, but I had to stop him—you was screaming, remember?” Tears streak my face and old, forgotten



things cause my voice to choke. “Don’t worry none, brother—you stay there. I’m coming over.”

I splash into the water and all of a sudden them blackbirds explode out of the trees, all wing beats and chattering screeches, an endless stream swirling like smoke, like old, spattered blood, spinning over my head like a wheel and swarming into the sun, everything going black and now I hear voices yelling, “Code blue in three oh two—Code blue in three oh two—Code blue in three oh . . . . .”