

THE DWARF

It looked like the street was lined with garbage cans.

That's all I noticed as I drove toward the bridge across the Mid-Hudson. At the intersection I hit a red light. My thoughts were elsewhere. It was May, day-dreaming weather.

"Goin' over the bridge?" a voice said suddenly, seeming to emanate from a place inside my head. Or car. I looked around. Turned and checked the backseat. There was no one.

"Hey! You goin' over the bridge?" said the voice again, a bit more adamant.

I did hear it, a definitive male voice sounding not unlike Yosemite Sam, Bugs Bunny's sometime nemesis and erstwhile sidekick. But where was it coming from?

It brought to mind when I was driving a bread-truck through the City and booming voice announcing some apocalypse was warning folks along Eighth Avenue. And like with this voice at the light, I had looked to see where it was coming from. I remember looking up at the buildings gliding by, checked the street corners that were percolating people, but couldn't - like now - find it's source. It seemed to follow me down the Avenue. At a red light on 23rd Street I finally found it, as a little olive-skin man with a pencil moustache driving a battered mustard-colored Toyota pulled up in the next lane. Perched like a demented parrot on his roof was an equally-as-battered speaker. In his hand was a small black microphone. His car windows were rolled up in the 90-degree heat.

"Jesus is coming! Make way you sinners, and repent! The Day of judgment is at hand!" he squawked, his shirt soaked through with grimy sweat. He pulled away in a magical blue cloud of burning 30-weight, his voice fading as he drove into the oblivion that is New York.

"You going' over the bridge?" the voice asked again. And I noticed from the corner of my eye, the tips of tiny sausage-like fingers slowly creeping up the passenger-side window of my car. I was dumbstruck. My mouth hanging open letting in May flies, as a huge head followed those little fingers up to the window.

"Hey...goin' over the bridge?"

It was a dwarf.

"Sure, sure," I told him with absolutely no hesitation. "Get in." I had never had a dwarf in my car before, let alone a hitch-hiking one.

I leaned over to open the door, but he had already done so. He literally jumped into the car, his little legs hurdling him up from the street. And as he settled into the passenger seat I checked him out: dark hair, dark beard - he resembled Toulouse-Lautrec I noted -

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but wearing jeans, a black t-shirt and carrying a miniature LL Bean backpack. I tried not to look at him, but couldn't stop myself. I might seem rude to stare, but how many times could I count on having a dwarf in my car?

I told him to hook up the seat belt. He didn't say a word; just grimaced. "I could get a ticket," I informed him.

He contorted his body, his arm reaching with the belt for the clasp by the door; his legs, fully extended, twisting pretzel-like on the seat. He tried for a few seconds to engage the seat belt but just couldn't quite do it.

"Want me to do it?" I asked.

He didn't answer; just dropped the seat belt like it was red-hot and sat there, steaming mad. He could barely see over the dashboard. His purplish lips trembled in his well-groomed beard as I reached across him and snapped the belt closed.

This wasn't the first time I had something of a run-in with a dwarf. In fact dwarfs have always seemed to presage some revelation-or-other in my life. The first time was when I was a little kid, the day my parents foolishly took me downstairs at the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus at the old Madison Square Garden. As I descended the smoky gloom I saw the sign - Human Marvels of the World. It was the circus' side-show...you know, freaks.

The marvels were separated into cubicles, each with a bright bulb hovering over them and their particular "marvelousness". There was Thor the Giant, bearded and wearing a Viking helmet, a ring on his huge finger able to circle my wrist, his booming laugh pounding my temples; Freida Pushkin the armless and legless Russian poet, typing away at a typewriter with her nose, then picked-up by an assistant and placed in a carrying case; Sammy the Alligator Boy, his reptilian scales shining sleek in the bright light, his eyes slits that were blinking wildly. And then there was Bo-Peep.

Bo-Peep was young, no more than three-feet tall, blond and blue-eyed, wore a little bonnet on her head and carried a curved shepherd's staff. Alongside her rolled a stuffed sheep on wheels that she pulled from one side of her cubicle to the other as she sang "The Whiffenpoof Song". And, oh yes, she wore a low-cut gown and was perfectly proportioned. She was a little person, yes, and a very attractive one at that. As she pulled her little lamb across the stage our eyes met. And she smiled at me. And froze her gaze on me; dancing over and shaking her hips, her ass, tossing her hair wildly about her heavily-painted face. Her audience yelled for her to "take it off!" and threw coins at her. And as she bent down to collect those coins - she was no more than a foot away - she looked up at me and smiled little chiclet teeth between her brightly panted lips, then put her little fingers to her cackling mouth and blew me a kiss. I was delirious. And got my first hard-on.

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Then there was Eddie Gaedel, the first bonafide midget to ever bat in a major league baseball game. It happened soon after my Bo-Peep experience - I think - and the picture in the New York Daily News of his bat resting on his shoulder, eyes closed, number 7/8 stitched onto his St. Louis uniform crystallized for me that old adage that my Father, brothers, uncles and various coaches had always told me about the game of baseball: "Richie," they would say as I pounded my mitt in a delusion of the possible - sort of like Lenny in "Of Mice and Men", when George tells him about the rabbits - "it doesn't make any difference how big you are, for unlike football or basketball it's how you play the game that counts...size doesn't matter." Little did I know then that Eddie Gaedel was the personification of one Bill Veeck, owner of the woeful Browns, who used the little guy to get some much needed publicity for his last-place team. The realization, a few years later, crushed me.

In high school Bobby the Dwarf would sometime hang out with me and my friends. He had graduated a couple years before, came from a fairly well-to-do family and was the only one who had a car. He would drive down the main drag beeping at the girls, his little arm waving with great expectation at the local beauties. Before I knew him I always wondered how he could do it. Drive. "Do his feet reach the pedals?" I often asked my friends. They'd just shrug. They had more important things to contemplate than how the local dwarf drove his car. One evening he asked us if we wanted to go to a roadhouse on the outskirts of town.

"Sure," we said in unison. We were intrigued.

Bobby, as I found out that fateful night, was one unhappy little guy. "I have to find a girlfriend," he whined on the way out of town. He sat on a couple phone books and worked the gas and brakes off a jerry-rigged steering column. We all stifled our guffaws when we first saw it. At the roadhouse, Bobby desperately went from girl to woman to girl again, propositioning every one of them, promising them all everything from money to marriage, and in the end staring up at Mary Lou the 6' 1" Portuguese beauty. Totally drunk, he proposed, telling her that although he was small in stature he was "normal" in every other way. She spurned him with much delicacy. But Bobby, his love life in the proverbial toilet, bobbed and weaved out into the parking lot, took off all his clothes - probably to prove to us that he was "normal" - grabbed onto the rear license plate of his car and threw up.

"I'm a fucking failure," he sobbed between spasms of puke. "I'll never be with a woman...a normal-size woman!" It was hard to reassure him. I knew then that he, like all dwarfs and midgets, felt to be cursed by the gods.

In reality, the gods, like humanity, have had a more ambivalent stance toward these little people. In ancient Egypt gods like Ptah and Bes were portrayed as dwarfs. In later times and civilizations, dwarfs, though not considered gods, were still viewed as special beings, even sought after and collected like trophies. In Hellenistic times they were highly prized and displayed at festivals bejeweled and naked, or sent into arenas to fight each other or fierce animals or even fiercer Amazon women. Even after they were thought of as

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buffoons and court pets in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, there still clung to them an aura of magic. Every kid knows of dwarfs, long before ever meeting one, from fairy tales and bed-time stories. In art, Velasquez painted them, as did Goya, Bronzino, Raphael, Van Dyke and Veronese, among others. Durer painted a dwarf "Adam and Eve". Poe wrote about a dwarf in "Hop Frog", Swift about Lilliputians in "Gulliver's Travels", and Tolkien inhabited a whole world with them in "The Hobbit". George DuMaurier gave us the Victorian de-mystification of them in "Memoirs of a Midget". Knut Hamsun, in his foreboding fin de siecle novel "Mysteries" gave us a malevolent dwarf who undermines the lives of the people in a small Norwegian village. And the idea of the evil dwarf is no more fecund than in Nobel Prize winner Par Lagerkvist's 1945 novel "The Dwarf", where the villainous protagonist, claiming to be from a singular race of man - and one superior to that of his Master (an artist) - causes the destruction of his Master's world. For Lagerkvist "The Dwarf" was a moral monster, a symbol of the darkness in the human soul that undercuts man's noblest aspirations and endeavors - in this case art.

Perhaps the most famous of literature's dwarfs is Oskar Mazerath in Gunter Grass's post-World War 2 novel "The Tin Drum", where the four-year old Oskar, on the eve of the war in the then Prussian city of Danzig, stops himself from growing. Protesting the human folly that surrounds him - and that was to come - Oskar's wish was to remain his innocence and the magic of childhood.

The Emperor Augustus kept a midget by his side for consultation on matters of State. The dwarf Bertholde became Prime Minister to the King of Lombardy. Gregory of Tours was a dwarf, as was Godeau, Archbishop of Grasse in 1672. Charles III, who ruled Naples and Sicily in the 14th century was a dwarf, as was Ladislav I of Poland. There are even suspicions that Attila the Hun was a dwarf.

My dwarf - see how quickly they can become a possession - sat bolt upright as I drove over the bridge. He craned his neck to see over the dashboard and out the front window, never giving into the temptation to sneak a peek out the more accessible passenger-side window. I asked him where he was going. No answer. I asked him where he was coming from. Again, no answer. Asked where he lived. What he did for a living. Again and again...no answer. The ride across the bridge and onto the exit ramp and the highway was becoming interminable. I had one tough dwarf in my car.

So my mind, in self-defense against labeling this dwarf as emblematic of all dwarfs, I mused back to a hot August day some 25 years earlier, when I was a contestant on the TV game show "Quick Draw". Michael Dunn, the actor (from the film "Ship of Fools") and dwarf was my celebrity partner. The actress Phyllis Kirk ("The Thin Man" on TV) was the female celebrity for the women contestants. It was a Saturday and "Quick Draw" was taping all of its weekday shows. Unfortunately I was the Friday show, which meant I had to sit through "Quick Draw" Monday, "Quick Draw" Tuesday, "Quick Draw" Wednesday, and "Quick Draw" Thursday. It would have been a suicidal experience if not for Michael Dunn. For some reason or other he and I would sit together between the "days" and we would discuss theater. It was Albee on Monday, Ionesco on Tuesday,

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Beckett on Wednesday and Artaud and his Theatre of Cruelty on Thursday. Michael did most of the talking. It was an education for me.

On Friday, Michael and I faced off against Phyllis and a housewife from Floral Park. It looked like a lock for me because Phyllis and the women Monday through Thursday hadn't come close to defeating Michael and his male partners for the huge 28-inch color TV set - the grand prize that I was going to sell when I won. Like I said: it was a lock. Michael knew I was an artist, out-of-work and broke to boot. We joked about it Monday through Thursday, and he promised to "win that TV for Rich."

But on Friday, suddenly, Phyllis, who had been brain-dead Monday through Thursday, became intelligent. I had a slim lead going into the final round, where I had to draw clues on a see-through screen and Michael (and or Phyllis) would guess what it was. The clue was "Casper the Friendly Ghost", and like I said, it was a lock. Michael had already dealt with my drawings of Sir Edmund Hilary climbing Mount Everest, the play "Pygmalion" and King Kong, so it seemed like a no-brainer for him. Besides I can draw. So I drew a flawless Casper, his lips puckered as he flew through the air. But Michael, my little theater buddy, didn't recognize our friendly ghost. He hemmed, he hawed, drumming his fingers on the table...and the buzzer went off. He looked at me sadly as Phyllis guessed the answer. We had lost...no, I had lost.

My friend Dominick, watching that Friday from Brooklyn, told me it was a fix. "The dwarf threw it, Richie. You can never trust those little fuckers. They talk to you all nice and sweet - Artaud? Right? - and then when you least expect it...WHAM!..right in the fucking back. They're not like you and me, Richie, they're fucking DWARFS!"

My reverie of "Quick Draw", Michael Dunn, the Theatre of Cruelty and Dominick's racist rant was broken by a gruff order from the dwarf in the front seat of my car: "You can let me out here!" And he got out. There was no "Thanks, man". No "I'm grateful for the ride". Not even a wave, as the top of his head passed in front of the car and he waddled down the hill.

As I watched him disappear I wondered if the opportunity ever presented itself again, would I ever pick-up a hitch-hiking dwarf?

Sure, I thought, who wouldn't?