

# Willy Takes the Night Train to Heaven

*by* Dennis Hiatt

From the shadowy alley where Willy steadied his sick, pain racked body against the damp brick wall; he could see the old, old woman with the dirty, cigarette-smoke blonde hair waiting for the bus. The hag must have seen him too, because she clamped her purse to her sand dune of a belly like it was a whale beaching itself to escape sharks.

Willy squeezed his burning eyes shut, opened them, flicked a swollen tongue across his cracked, raw lips, and pissed his pants. When the urine had seeped to his rotten sneakers, Willy pushed himself away from the wall with a strength made of hope and god-awful need, and aimed himself as best he could at the old woman. "SEVENTEEN CENTS! JUST SEVENTEEN CENTS LADY!" he screamed as he lurched toward the old woman with his hands outstretched and his voice a quivering siren of pain.

The old woman stumbled backwards as Willy came in for a landing on the pole that held the bus stop sign. Having misjudged the distance, Willy hit the pole too hard. He bounced and kept on moving toward the old woman. The woman's expression said that she thought she was facing hell's own doorman. "ELEVEN CENTS! JUST ELEVEN GODDAMN CEN-N-NTS!" Overjoyed because the old chick was digging in her purse, Willy looked for a place to stop. He probably would have found one if the old woman hadn't maced him down.

Choking and vomiting, Willy hit the sidewalk face first and withered in pain as the acid gas burned his eyes, nose, mouth, and a hundred

little cracks and cuts in his skin. After the spasms passed, Willy lay in a fetal position and wept. He needed a drink more than he needed life. He needed the black, sick pain in his guts and head to recede. He was deathly afraid that if he didn't get a drink soon, he'd go into convulsions. Through his tears he saw blood dripping onto the sidewalk. Willy cried harder. He didn't want a new hurt. He hurt so bad already. Willy tried to pray and couldn't.

People walked by, giving Willy a wide berth. He was condemned to hell, and the living didn't like the sight or smell of the dead. Willy hated the people. Any one of them could save his soul from this shit life with a dollar of charity. One stinking, nothing dollar. Ten people, ten cents, and he could, for a moment, rejoin the human race.

"Say Bro, how ya doin'?" Hands, unsteady but gentle, lifted Willy upright and then drug him back and leaned him against the brick wall. "There ya be."

Willy opened an eye. Ed and Ringo were looking down on him. Ed handed Willy a bottle in a brown paper bag. "Have a taste, Bro." Willy took two gulps of love and, with trembling hands, gifted the bottle to Ringo. "Oh man -- oh man."

"Ya, if they ain't got no Night Train in Heaven, I sure as fuck ain't goin'," Ringo said, then wiped the lip of the bottle and drank. Then he laughed and, with a flick of his head, tossed his long hair out of his only eye. "Shit, you stink, dude."

Willy smiled, showing teeth that looked like corroded coral reefs. "Got a smoke?"

Ed shook his head, and the men drifted down the street, all parties in the conversation satisfied that it had reached its end.

Willy was warmed a little, but not grateful. He knew the boys had drank themselves out of sickness, or they wouldn't have shared. He focused his eyes on the smeared trail of vomit and blood that lead from the gutter to him. Not much blood, he thought, so it wasn't a scalp cut. Scalp cuts bled like motherfuckers. Still sick, but like a man dying of lung cancer and full of morphine, Willy could now think past the pain. Maybe the old bitch had done him a favor. He

was sure that he hadn't stank this bad in a while. How long he wasn't sure, but people hadn't been paying him off so he would leave them alone. Fuck pity. Fuck love. Fuck brotherhood. Piss and puke was where the money was at. Willy hadn't tried crapping his pants yet, but that would come in time.

Two very young kids with Christmas-colored hair and stud-sparkling motorcycle jackets strolled by, smoking and laughing. Willy perked up and croaked, "Got a smoke?"

"Fuck you, you stinking pus-bag wino," the boy with green hair laughed.

"Please! Just a drag off your butt?"

Tears came to Willy's crusted, red eyes, and the slim, child-girl with hot pink hair said, "For God's sake, give it a cigarette!"

The boy shook his head. "Fuck him. He can get a job at Burger King or steal, like I do."

"Pleeeez, Dear God!" Tears rolled down Willy's broken face.

"Please?" he sobbed. "Please!" he begged.

The girl dug in her purse, stepped near Willy, dropped two cigarettes on the sidewalk and jumped back. Willy picked the cigarettes up and sneered, "Two smokes? Mighty fuckin' white of you."

After the punks stomped off, Willy hunted his pockets until he found a lighter that he thought he remembered having. It was a black throwaway lighter, and Willy had no idea where or how he had acquired it. Willy WAS sort of proud that he remembered the lighter. Little things like that gave him confidence.

Halfway through the second cigarette, Willy spotted a plump, older woman walking a nasty little toy poodle on a long, white leash. The pig and the poodle were heading his way, and the dog was sniffing for a place to piss. As they drew abreast, Willy moaned, "Please?"

The woman drew her coat up around her neck and looked away, but the dog, thank god, stopped and sniffed a pole.

"For God's sake pleeeez, help me," Willy moaned and coughed up a little phlegm.

The woman turned her head and stared at Willy with that mix of sick

interest and revulsion that people usually reserve for fatal car wrecks. Willy hacked up more phlegm and begged, "Seventeen cents lady?" The poodle sniffed Willy's vomit and sampled a taste. The woman fished a quarter from a deep coat pocket and frowned. "What happened to your shame, Will? What happened to your shame?"

Willy, wondering if he knew her, said, "I think your dog's eating it." Willy smiled as the woman dragged the nasty little dog down the street, choking it with the leash. Willy smiled again. Today was starting off nice. He'd had his breakfast and two smokes, and he felt like he could get up and start hustling. This WAS Willy's lucky day. In the very first garbage can he tried, he found a pizza box with all the crust left, and managed to get the food down without up-chucking. Under the pizza box was a wet paper sack with thirteen empty Tab cola cans (cans were so much easier to carry than bottles). God in heaven must love me today, Willy thought as he wobbled to the Seven-Eleven for a whole quart of beer.

When Willy found that he had enough money left over for two cigarettes, he couldn't stop smiling, even though it hurt his cracked lips.

Willy managed to make it to his alley, the alley next to Harry's Ritz Cafe, before he popped the beer open. He went in back of the dumpsters, crapped a stream of runny brown, and wiped himself on damp newspapers. The cool, moist newspapers felt so good against his inflamed rear that Willy felt like he was getting a kiss from a beautiful woman. Willy pulled up his pants and drank deep of the beer. Willy stumbled to the mouth of the alley and, being in a philosophical mood, thought about women.

Willy knew he didn't have a prayer of remembering the last time he'd made it with a chick, but he felt that, if he really concentrated, he might recall the last time he'd managed an erection. Nestled against a brick wall, his quart of medicine in both hands, Willy dug through his memory with the same vigor that he'd once hunted through garbage cans. H was rewarded with a shard of a memory. It was a chick in a magazine. Willy strained against the leash of

dead brain cells. A garbage can in an alley. Summer. It was now early fall, so it might have been THIS summer. Willy plucked at the puzzle in his head, and it fell apart. Shit, he thought, who needs women anyway?

La Donna walked past the alley on her way to work at Harry's Ritz Café, and Willy shuddered. He felt as if he'd tried to bring up and subdue the devil to do his bidding, and failed. Willy looked the other way and faked being passed out. La Donna was a petite, red-headed lesbian that had the fuckin' weirdest hairdos. Her latest hairdo was an off-center shark fin that bobbed as she walked down the street. She was the only person that had, as best as Willy could remember, grossed him out. Thank God she hadn't seen him.

Willy's face still twitched when he thought about the first time he'd encountered La Donna's round little butt swaying down the sidewalk. He had been camped in his alley, and she'd left Harry's Ritz, but she must have forgotten something, because she stopped at the corner and came back. Willy, with a half pint of Night Train in him, had stumbled out and stood between her and the door to the cafe. He'd offered her the bottle as an ode to her sweet sex, and said with a sputter of yellow saliva, "Wanna fuck?"

Instead of running or screaming, or kicking him in the balls, she'd flashed a grin that sparkled like minis of vodka. Stepping right up to his face, she had cooed, "I do women, and I like them just the best when they're having their monthly."

Willy blinked and edged back. La Donna grinned hard and evil, and stepped to him so he could smell her young-girl breath. "I put my fingers in them and write love notes on their tummies with their blood while I eat them. Then I lick the notes off when we're done. Can you dig it? Can you dig blood?"

"Fuck you!" Willy had squealed and stumbled-fled back into the alley as girlish laughter tinkled around him like sleigh bells in the yellow snow of his wasted brain.

That might have not happened. Willy knew it could have been a hallucination. Like the time Fiends from Hell spent the night ripping his guts out; or like that afternoon in detox when he'd been

covered by screaming red ants; or the time the girl that worked at the café, the one Harry picked up every night, the one with tits as big as trash cans, had unbuttoned her blouse and pressed a tit against the window of Harry's Cadillac. Or...Willy sipped the cold beer and tried to drag up events that only happened in his mind from a memory that was as shattered as a wine bottle tossed from a bridge. Or...Willy yawned, capped the quart and nodded off to sleep. The morning passed into afternoon as Willy slept. People came and went down the sidewalks of Twenty-First Avenue. Dogs, better fed and more loved than Willy, sniffed the alley's mouth, urinated and moved on. The afternoon shift at Harry's Ritz Cafe came on, and one of the employees told Harry there was a dead person in the alley. Harry lumbered out into the dank alley and saw that the corpse was just Willy. With two fingers, Harry picked up Willy's quart and looked at it. It was empty. Since Harry had run low on tomatoes, he figured he'd pick up a fresh quart for Willy. That way, when the wino came around, he wouldn't start hassling customers entering the cafe for spare change.

At four in the afternoon, Willy woke from a bad dream. He'd been thirteen and living with his mother in southeast Portland. In the dream, he'd been afraid, very afraid, of something, and went and crawled in bed with his mother, like he always did when he was hurt or afraid. She hugged him tight and rocked him like she'd done up until he was fifteen. But, when he'd opened his eyes, his mother had turned into La Donna, and there was blood on her mouth. Willy fumbled for the quart and twisted off it's cap. It was full. Shaking, Willy picked up the beer and saw that it was a brand that he could never afford. He sipped the beer and found it wonderful. He up-ended the quart and chugged half of it before it could turn into a hallucination.

The beer buzz went straight to Willy's head. He smiled. If he was having the DTs, he'd hit the mother-lode of hallucinations. The smiled died slowly on his cracked face. Maybe, he thought, he'd woke up dead and was in heaven. Willy examined the alley with great care. It looked normal. He tried to look over his shoulder to

see if he had a pair of angel wings. He couldn't turn his head that far, but he could sense that he was wingless. He drank from the quart and pulled out one of the cigarettes he'd bought that morning and lit it. As Willy smoked, he thought most likely he was not in Heaven. If he was in Hell it was, so far, an improvement over living. Since he doubted hell would be funner than life, he wasn't in hell. He was still alive and on earth in his alley. So far, so good. Now, where did the beer come from? Since he almost had to shit in people's faces to get a dime, he could discount anyone giving him the quart while he was passed out. He hadn't been drunk enough to buy the beer and then forget he'd bought it, and even if he'd been ripped, he wouldn't have bought one quart for the price of two. Willy sat upright and took a drag of his cigarette. Something in his mind was trying to break through to him. That something scared him. Willy drank deep from the quart and, to a degree, relaxed. Thinking, he was discovering to his pleasure, was like remembering a childhood language that was rich and beautiful but had been put away with the toys of youth and forgotten.

Willy held the quart up to the light that swept in from Twenty-First Avenue. Near empty now, it still seemed like a gift from God. Willy shuddered, held the quart tenderly to his heart, and raised his eyes skyward. The beer WAS a gift from God.

Willy squinted at the sky between the two buildings. Not even a pigeon or a sea gull flew over. Willy stared at the patch of blue, hoping to see a sparrow wing it's way into the alley. If God was near, he was not up there. Willy strained his brain until he felt his kidneys ready to overflow. He stood and, with unusual dignity, urinated against the brick wall. He urinated as if God was a high school teacher that was watching him and was going to grade him on class behavior. Like a real gentleman, Willy shook the last drops of urine from his penis — carefully, so as not to soil himself -- and looked around the alley to see if he could spot God. God must be near. It stood to reason that if the creator of the universe had taken a personal interest in him, that he'd hang out to see if Willy was naughty or nice. Hell, Willy figured that finding a wayward soul was

just like finding a garbage can that had food and returnable bottles. You kept going back until the people moved or some other bum fought you for it and won. Willy frowned. The trouble was that God must have a few more things to do in his day than save a wino's soul. Willy sat down and tied his rotten sneakers. After making two serviceable knots, Willy raised his eyes and flung a glance around the alley. Maybe, just maybe, God lived near here -- like he did in the olden days when he was Jesus. Willy shivered. Maybe he saw God every day, and if he was good, like he'd been today, God would look out for him.

A smile so bright that it was painful burst onto Willy's raw and cracked features. Love flowed from his heart like it was nobody's business. That Jesus guy drank wine and hung out with hookers. Hell, a wino. A NICE wino might just be his kinda dude. Willy felt pride welling up in him like that spring water from which Olympia made its beer. He finished the quart, brushed himself off and, trusting to The Creator of the Universe for more booze, left the empty where a non-sainted bum could find it.

Willy stepped out into the sunlight of Twenty-First Avenue. He stopped and looked back into the alley. A finger of light glittered on the empty beer bottle. Willy stared in slack-jawed awe at the sparkling quart. IT WAS A SIGN. He scurried back, hid the holy relic under a pile of damp newspapers and covered the papers with fallen leaves.

Floating on the beer rush, and feeling like the Almighty was holding his hand, Willy walked carefully back to the street to look for God. He shaded his eyes with a hand and scanned Twenty-First Avenue. Now, he thought, if God-as-Jesus were hanging around, where would he be? Across the street was a store called ROCKING FROCKS. In its window was a black tee shirt that said in big white letters, I'M NOT A SLUT, I'M WITH THE BAND. Willy turned up his nose at Rocking Frocks and wobbled slowly down the street, looking in windows.

After ten minutes of hunting for God, Willy was getting pretty burned out. He sat on the curb and tried to think up a new strategy.



In the olden days, Jesus had got snuffed for being God, so Willy doubted that God would be advertising that he was God this time around. However, if God was hanging out on Twenty-First Avenue, wouldn't the devil be in the neighborhood, kind of keeping an eye on him? And wouldn't the devil be a lot easier to find? Willy frowned. All he had to do was look for some dude with red skin and horns, and see who he was keeping track of.

Fear kept the smile that was trying to form off Willy's face. He knew the Devil, and she had a red hairdo that kind of looked like a big floppy horn. And she worked at Harry's Ritz Cafe. Willy shuddered and stood. If he was going to get to be God's buddy, he'd have to find him, even if that meant hanging out and watching La Donna. Back at the cafe, Willy stood on the sidewalk where the window met the wall and peeked in. La Donna was sitting with the baker, a haughty, distant man, and some skinny, beautiful chick. The Baker rose to leave, and Willy, not about to miss a chance to find God, wobbled painfully to the door and followed the Baker down the street. The baker's hand was wrapped in a makeshift bandage and looked like it had been burnt. Willy kept behind the Baker until the man went in a bookstore four blocks down the street. Willy stared at him through the window as the Baker bought a book. The book was a fancy, hardbound one whose title read 'BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL'. Willy almost shit. This superior looking baker was fucking GOD him-goddamn-self. And Willy had always thought that the son-of-a-bitch was just another holier than thou smart-ass.

It took Willy a half a block to work up the never-to-say, "Excuse me, Sir?"

The Baker turned and sneered rather sadly at Willy. Willy hobbled up to him and pleaded with outstretched hands, "Sir, are you God or Jesus?"

The baker cracked an ugly smile. "We are lacking canons of decidability on that issue."

Willy almost passed out. That was fucking God talking! It was! It was! It was! Tears came to Willy's eyes. "Please, Sir! I hurt so bad coz I need a drink, that I want to die."

God smiled what was nearly a real smile and said quite simply, "Come."

At a respectful distance, Willy followed God down the street. He needed a drink so bad that he was shaking, but for the first time in years, Willy walked with dignity. When they got to the liquor store Willy, the humble disciple, waited outside. God came out, handed Willy a pint bottle in a brown paper sack and said, "The choice is now yours to make."

Willy's hand shook as he tore the brown paper from the bottle. It was a pint of 180 proof Ever Clear. Chugged, it would kill a horse. Willy stared at the pint of near pure alcohol for a long time and when he looked up, God was gone.

Trudging back to his alley, Willy wept. It was all clear. God loved him and wanted him to come home. Willy, still crying, crawled into his alley and flopped down behind the dumpster. The first sip burned like fire. The second burned like ice. The Ever Clear burned not at all by the time the pint was empty. As the bottle slid from Willy's scabby, cracked hands, he looked up and thought he saw a small bird that could have been a sparrow land on the brick wall so far above him. Willy smiled and closed his eyes. He was going home.

