

An Old Sweet Song

by Robert Crisman

Rob thought he might even make it. He'd stopped off south of Seattle, in Kent, and filled up the tank and went back in the can and topped off again. He got back on the road, to all appearances blase, blase. The montages were muted, at least for awhile.

Montages. The heist at the dopehouse: Dennis goes apeshit; three people dead; the old lady sprawled on the sidewalk outside...

The thieves fall out after: Ramon comes looking to kill him; he ducks down the alley and gets away with the dope...

The dope was now stashed in the trunk of his car. A pound-and-a-half of Mexican brown. Weight and long money. Live large while you can.

Rob laughed at himself, a dry, silent chuckle.

Down through Chehalis and bang-on toward Portland. A stop by the side of the road near Kalama. Smooth out the edges, smooth as a baby's behind. The world a slow-motion parade...

Through Portland toward Salem. The groove began to wear thin. Niggling thoughts punched his stomach.

Back at the station he'd pinched off maybe a gram, enough, he hoped, to get him to Cali. He didn't want to dip in the trunk.

Junk in the trunk. Singing the siren song, right? Big ball of ratshit...

A pound-and-a-half of junk in the trunk! Just having it meant that he'd feed the monkey and die like a dog. Well then, what? Drop it off by the side of the road for the buzzards or something? That's thousands of dollars you're talking there, buddy. The stake toward new life and freedom...

There in the car, the monkey kept nipping his neck.

He'd off the dope down in Frisco. Bits and pieces unless he got lucky and dumped the whole thing in one swoop. Two chances of that: slim and none.

He could see himself stuck up or winding up busted.

Fun prospects.

Slinging smack is ugly business in any event, a death trip however it goes. You rub elbows with mutts who are destined to die under prisons and dumpsters. You help put them there.

Rob, death merchant...

But--*what to do?*

The first thing--shitcan this line of thinking. Rob pulled to the side of the road and re-upped. He sat back and sighed.

His fear now, muffled down deep for awhile. He got the car back on the road.

Rob and the monkey, watching the farmland roll by..

He remembered a daydream he'd dream in his cell his second year there when he'd been there forever and release was still eons away.

He had this big car in the dream, a snazzy Mark IV, all midnight purple like Batman's, with bitchin' chrome rims, cruise control, and a sound system made for the angels who scream out to heaven and hell, and on-key.

Sights set on Cali in gangster-lean mode. All skies were blue.

Rob laughed at himself in that cell. He'd fashioned a comic-book heaven.

China White in the trunk in the dream, top-tier shit for a ride on the Stairway To Heaven. Enough to hold him for life plus forever.

He had a plan: go like the wind, down 101 in the breeze. Play tunes and dream dreams we all dream of. And ease in the trunk whenever the dreams would wear thin.

All at his leisure, you dig it? Winding his way down the Oregon coast, looking out at the waves, and watching the seagulls swoop down on dinner as the sun tracked its way toward Japan.

Smack's good for that. It keeps out the chill. You're bundled up snug as a bug in a rug and the world sweeps softly on by.

It turns of course. One day it's a raft on White Powder River. Next day you bang and you bang and you don't quite hit Eden. Almost, but almost isn't shit.

You're *chasing* it now. Chase all you want. Something cold deep inside you just will not be touched. You've used up your ticket. Soon

enough, man, every nerve end you've got will be begging and bleeding and shitting all over the car seat. Turns out that Eden is merely a road stop to Under a Dumpster Somewhere.

Rob knew this. That's why, in the dream, he came up with a gameplan to deal. He'd feel the turn coming and pull into a no-tell motel by the sea. One good geez left, the one that would float him to Alpha Centauri.

He'd tie off, find a vein, and drive the dope home. He'd lay back on the bed, eyes slowly closing as waves lapped outside. Blackness would come like a loving mother's caress.

All that was the dream. Now, outside Eugene, rain started falling. Rob let out a sigh. In the dream skies were blue.

Funny thing, it seemed now that time was rushing up on him. Telling him *move*. There were ogres and demons in crannies, scratching up under him now. The soft, feathered groove was not going to carry him long.

A movie flickered inside his eyes. Reverie was not quite the word. Reveries wafts. This vision locked right on track, the route pre-ordained. Reverie also is toothless. Rob's thoughts gnawed under the *chiva*, insistent.

On the screen now, Ramon in deep shadows. Posed and pimped out top to toe. He turned and his eyes locked on Rob and went dark. Rob stared at Ramon and then down at Dennis, dead as a duck on the floor.

Blood, blood, and blood. Now the old woman there on the sidewalk outside the dopehouse and deader than Dennis. Spotlit so Rob would not miss her. Then black, and then gunfire erupted--and inside the dopehouse, the rotwieller's head just *exploded*.

Dennis, haloed, gun in his hand, grinned and grinned.

Mona screamed, clawed toward Dennis, who held her baby aloft by the heel. Then--*calmly*--she whispered, "Please help me..."

Rob blinked and breath would not come.

Rob, *complicit*--

And Mona lay splayed on the couch, eyes wide at nothing, riddled with bullets, one foot on the floor. Her baby, bloodied, sprawled by

her foot.

Her lapdog yammered and danced and yammered and yammered and *yammered*...

Rob *sidearmed* that little cocksucker right at the wall. The dog burst like an egg and dribbled, blood-red, to the floor.

Mona lay on the couch, maw gaped, decomposing...

Rob tried like a bastard to blink this movie away. The soundtrack-shrieks interwoven with gunfire's echoes--held it in place. He pulled to the side of the road and fished out his rig, chased the willies. He lay back in the seat with a sigh.

He got back on the road. Grant's Pass by morning.

The groove sent him back through his archives: sepia photos, old notes, report cards, the laughter and tears and the songs and the screams that made his childhood a ride down the rapids.

Rob's three. He's dancing and laughing and mugging for mama. She laughs, delighted, she and her friends. The women all love him, with laughter, applause, enveloping warmth. He tries a new role: *Godzilla, destroyer of cities*. A three-year-old *monster*, roaring and stomping, on stage for the ladies. He's powerful, *thrilling!* This little man--*leading man!*--up there in lights...

Mama starts wringing her hands.

Mamas would have their babies stay babies. Especially boy children, the next set of dicks in the world. *Godzilla scared* mama.

Daddy scared mama. Daddy scared Rob. That dead, failed *dog* of a man.

Daddy ruled in the house, with words, slaps, and spit. When Rob was 20 he picked up a chair and put paid to his ass, right after daddy'd slapped mama that one time too many. Daddy died of cirrhosis some 18 months later. Rob feared him past death...

A baseball card there in the Dream Room. Rob Ryan, the Phillies' ace southpaw, closing on 300 wins. He's handsome, respected by Howard and Utley, adored by the fans.

Among whom of course is Madonna...

Poor A-Rod, crying!

Rob laughed through the dope, at A-Rod, Madonna, himself.

He'd notched 19 strikeouts one time in a CYO game. He'd also hit two long home runs. He was 13 years old. Girls love winners. That 12-year-old blonde, third row in the stands, already curvy, drank him right up with her eyes.

Then, logical segue, Alesha, sort of the love of his life, drifted to sleep with a smile as he read her a story, one last soft slur in his ear and goodnight.

She'd tell him, "You're gorgeous!" She might even have meant it. He sure loved to hear it. They were driving one time and stopped at a red light out south of town, and necked like 12-year-old kids. They snuck a look back at the woman behind them. She laughed, delighted, and waved.

Happy days.

Grant's Pass, 15 minutes. Rob decided to keep right on going through town and past the Rogue River. He'd stopped there once at the park by the river and grooved on the green and the sound of the water a long time ago.

He'd stop after all, top off there, and hit 101. Maybe Eureka by morning.

He fixed, not a lot, and got antsy down toward the state line. He really wanted to *bang*. The monkey was making rude noises and digging its nails in deeper.

Rob *itched*. If he scratched he would bleed, bleed, and *bleed*.

The monkey'd turn into Vlad the Impaler...

But that itch! Who in the world could blame him for scratching that fucker to *death*?

He needed relief! His need and *excuse*. He *wanted* to spread his cheeks for the monkey.

There were a boatload of no-tell motels on the road coming into Eureka. He could check in, hang Do Not Disturb on the door, and waft off to Alpha Centauri.

He kept driving. His thoughts grew long teeth once again. Quick snapshots with them: Mona redux, the old lady swimming in blood, out of time...

Rob had helped grease the gun. Does *chiva* cover *that* bill?

Those thoughts--bip, bop, boom, *bam*. Dennis, Rob's old road dog, big as a tractor, looked just like Bluto, now dead.

Pretty Ramon, iceman Ramon--that reptile *cocksucker!*

Instant replays of This Is Your Life: The Last Fucked-Up Years... Prison, thin-margin scuffles, the drop down that hole at the dopehouse...

He would sleep in the no-tell and lay down his burden for good.

A stab of panic shot through him, distanced a bit by that last little load--

Which distance allowed him to *see* the fear thrashing around, like a fat anaconda inside his chest...

Goddamn! He *saw* it! He blinked. Just for an instant unknown became *known--and diminished a little thereby...*

The shrinkage allowed him to *see--*

A no-tell motel by the side of the road, far, far from home. Lit like a promise.

A hope for safe passage to alien landscapes. His passport, locked in the trunk.

Heroin! Ugly malodorous brown ball of *shit...*

A cheap way to go.

Rob whispered, "Goddamn..." He was *amazed* at how clearly he saw the whole sloppy trek--and thereby that he had a *choice*, to crawl through that muck or get out.

He'd been--what?--too lazy to see it before? Too *scared...*

His neck stiffened. Anger, or maybe its echo, now bubbled up under the junk.

He'd wanted to be a ballplayer once! In sixth grade he'd sat in the back of the class and daydreamed no-hitters past boredom. A *ballplayer*, man! He'd had the moves and he'd known the game. The game had given his hands and his soul a sure purpose. It put the light in his eye.

A man has to dance with whatever it is that puts the light in his eye.

Sureness of purpose! The heart's own deep need. Sureness of purpose is *home*. Home reshapes the world, turns screams to songs.

Rob had turned down the wrong fucking road on the way to the dance, to check out some strange, don't you know. Somewhere the music still played.

Songs, oldies but goodies, buried for years under garbage and dirt. But now in the car on the road to Eureka they pushed toward the light, croaking their first notes since Adam got tossed out of Eden.

Eureka and no-tells upcoming. War *raged* inside Rob. He felt so *tired!* Each breath he took came the hard way. Thoughts caromed inside him, this way and that, strafings launched in a fight to the death, that pounded his eyes and turned the taste in his mouth to dead metal.

All this under the coating of *chiva*--a coating like paint being stripped by the wind and the rain...

Now on his right the outskirts of town. To his left beyond town was the ocean. Lined up stood the no-tells, last hos on the stroll, for his choosing.

Set back a bit from the road, unlike the others, the Starlight Motel. He could hear the waves lapping gently outside the back room they had waiting. In the courtyard a lineup of cars from the same lot his came from. He slowed to five miles per hour. No other cars on the road. The neon sign winked and said, "Time to come home."

Rob heard "It's time to *die*, bitch..."

His eyes bugged as he inched down the road. He tried to make sense as war raged and bombs burst in air.

How *nice* it would be to lay down his burden and learn how to sing that old song, even off-key, for a minute, til God's juice kicked in.

Rob damn near squeezed out a laugh. God was deader than J. Edgar Hoover.

And now, like an ogre out of the smoke--Ramon. Standing there by the side of the road! Ramon smiled and spit, as if he knew how this drama was bound to play out.

Ramon, daddy, the jailers down through the years--biographers

all, their notebooks there in their hands at their sides, the last chapter already written:

He died like an old, broke-dick dog. The End.

But he'd winkled those fuckers! He'd stood with a gun in his face and spit on Ramon and made it away like a deer past the headlights!

Fuck Ramon! *Fuck* dear old dad. *Fuck all* the jailers, sideways with sticks.

Fuck that last chapter...

Rob gasped and laughed. Here he was in Eureka at three in the morning at three miles per, the Starlight Motel on his right and--what? He fucking wanted to *die*?

Rob gasped and laughed.

He remembered a night with Alesha before things went south. They sat on the porch on a warm summer night and they heard a snatch of a song from a car passing by:

What a Wonderful World...

Louis Armstrong, the gravel-voiced angel, singing of heaven right here on the ground where it should be.

The memory went in a blink. But its echoes gave Rob a look at the sky.

He came back to earth, in time to see the Starlight recede in his rearview. He picked up speed. The dope in his trunk was a million miles away and, for the moment, forgotten almost.

In days to come the dopesickness would wrack him. He'd want to bang his way to the graveyard. Chances were good he'd get busted.

And, just like that as he sped through Eureka, visions of hell that he'd carried a long fucking time nearly choked him. Yet *still*, muffled under, that old sweet song, croaking on-key. Rob made himself sing as he drove down the road.

He might live. He might die. He might do long time. He might pitch a no-hitter somewhere beyond darkness.

Regardless, he wanted to see what came next.

Life's like that.

