

Ticket To Ride

by Robert Crisman

Rob's trip on the Speedball Express went like this:

He blasted on out of the station and sped up the mountain lickety-split. He'd signed on for a ride straight to heaven. The train flew past clouds and jumped over the moon, and tracked off toward Alpha Centauri.

And by God he made it to heaven! St. Peter grinned and waved him on in. Some other saint, maybe John, took his jacket and gave him a robe made of smoke, some Cuban cigars, and a big fucking boatload of chips for the tables. An Houri knelt and sponged off Rob's feet and whispered a promise for later.

He entered the Hall Of Blue Lights. No cheap neon here. The *ching ching ka-ching* of fast action! Angels *sang* in his bloodstream! He wafted on into the Game Room. Bogart and Greenstreet off to his left at the baccarat table looked up and laughed and waved him on over. He started that way--and Ava the Barefoot Contessa rushed up and planted herself there before him. She wore a tiara. Her wisp of a gown flowed around her, kissing, caressing her flesh.

She licked at his nerve-ends, making him sweat. Angels belted out doo-wop.

She put her hand to Rob's face, stroking his cheek with the tips of her fingers, a light in her eye that perhaps even Frank never saw, and plaintively asked him, "What *took* you so long?"

In the blink of an eye they lay in a field of roses, entwined, their every breath a small gasp of attar that danced to the rhythm of oboes. Ravel wept with joy.

Angels swept low and then *soared!* Bobby Hatfield held forth on tenor! This truly *was* heaven!

Rob dropped off to sleep. Ava made off with his nuts in her sack...

He didn't mind. Let her play! She'd bring them back. This was *heaven...*

And next stop, the White Powder River! If all the brochures had it right, he'd float like the sky on a raft made of feathers, with luck til

time died.

It was why he'd come, really...

The White Powder River meandered, past the lush jungles, jade outcrops, the pulsing of drums, and sirens and mermaids that shimmered and sang as he floated on by. Rob became one with the waters...

And then, and then...the day became night! Up ahead now, these spectral lights blinking, all day-glo colors, arranging themselves now into words that spelled out--*The Exit?* From *heaven?*

Above the exit an old wrought-iron clock, ticking, ticking.

Time's *up?*

Jesus Christ, man! Rob had just started to get a good groove on!

St. Peter showed up on a barge with guns mounted foredeck and aft. With him, St. Michael the Archangel, looking all bad-ass and dressed like a Ton-Ton Macoute, with the shades, the beret, the whole fucking bit. "C'mon, Rob," Pete said, "you knew what the deal was, brother..."

Michael, meanwhile, kept tapping his whipstick against his right thigh, letting Rob know he'd *love* to work this his own special way.

One psycho dude...

This wasn't in the brochures for *damn* sure!

Nonetheless, back on the tideflats, Rob scrambled to get back to heaven as soon as he possibly could. Ava, the White Powder River, the raft made of feathers... He wanted to float like the *sky*...

He even made it a number of times. Ava kept making off with his nuts, true bliss for sure but--after awhile he'd fall back to Earth and the wind would be blowing faster and colder...

Then one time Rob geezed and stepped on the train and started on up--but the ride leveled out and heaven began seeming a tad far away. And for the first time he noticed these bumps on the track, his car listing a bit. The train stopped just short of heaven's front porch.

Rob would remember this ride in his *stomach*. So near and yet *so far away*...

And so it went. He kept buying tickets. The train started dying in Leadville and places like that. And this one time in Provo, the train

up and stopped beside Hank Williams' old, broke-down tour bus. Inside the bus, Hank, wrecked by speed, eye sockets empty, toothless mouth gaped, dead and *gone*...

Rob felt his own teeth grow loose in his gums.

Meanwhile, the price of a ticket shot up up up *up*...

Rob started to have to rob banks to come up with the price of a ride. He'd hand the conductor his ticket, the conductor would give him the stinkeye and tell him, siddown, and the train would chug out of the station and start on a ride through pornographers' neon in rat parts of town.

It was *hot* on that train. Rob's armpits *stank*. Rats nibbled up under his seat...

Too fucking bad; Rob had to keep right on riding. What else to do? A habit will *rope* you, my friend.

Rob slept in the train station now. Outside, nothing but dust storms and gendarmes, and golems with Uzis and six-inch-long teeth. Rob owed the golems whole *shitloads* of money. There wasn't enough loot in the banks that he plundered to even *begin* to cover the tab he'd run up.

Rob shivered and shook in the station. He slept in a corner that hadn't been swept since the 1893 Expo. An old *New York Times*, yellowed and muddied and torn by the decades, made do as his blanket. He didn't change clothes. Someone made off with his toothbrush. He had six teeth left.

He'd ride and he'd ride. Then this one time, just out of the station, the train picked up speed and Rob started to *rattle*. He looked out the window--*and the train was hurtling downhill!* I mean like *fast!* It *bounced*, man, no shit, there were *rocks* on the track, and Rob hit his head on the roof, the last of his teeth fell out of his gums just like that and--*goddamn! He had to slow this train down!*

Bing, an idea! Grab the damn brake and--wait! No! Shit, fuck, piss, *shit!* That would mean the end of the ride! Rob was out in the middle of nowhere! Stop the train and then *what?*

The train hurtled down down down *down*, lurching and thrashing and--Genius attack! Rob ran to the boiler room, grabbed up a shovel.

He opened the furnace, coal there on the floor--*and he started stoking! Burn, baby, burn! He'd blast his way through all this shit and take off for the moon!*

Oh yeah, baby, *zooooooooooooooooooom--*

Down a *funnel! Hey, where's the moon?* Rob bumped, bounced, and banged! The whole train caught *fire--and, outside now, wolves! Sabertooth* wolves! *They were gaining!*

Stoke, stoke, stoke, stoke! Rob had to go faster and faster and *faster!* Those flames, licking *closer--his ass on fire!--and here came the lip of the cliff and--shazaa-aa-am--!*

Bye bye, Rob...

Heaven, turns out, was merely a stop on the way to hell's dumpster below...

