

## Graeme Foster / CATCHING HELL

"When's he coming," popped the question every five or ten minutes.

"He'll come, don't worry," said Billy, "He never gets back later than four unless pickings are really slim. On choice afternoons he sometimes gets back before two."

I was new to this game and getting impatient. We waited on those cliffs like novice vultures watching the slow harbour traffic butting the rip tide through the narrows and woo-wooing the ragged girls when they walked out of the shanties far below. They'd turn and shade their eyes, looking for the source of the kid noise on the cliff edge where we four lay hidden in the bushes, snickering and woo-wooing for more.

That's about all there was to do except for taking the odd pot shot at oileys and teal as they soared past. No one ever hit anything with the sling shots which were only good for one purpose.

Somewhere in the middle of a Hold-Your-Breath-the-Longest marathon, Walter motioned and directed our purple faces to the two distant figures stumbling along the tracks down by the grain elevators.

"Here they come!"

"Yeah, that's him, you can tell by the crappy check sports coat."

"Check the size of the prize he's hauling in today!"

The Rube and a fat woman with black hair were moving up the tracks at about a mile per hour. With one arm around the woman's pink dress, he waved a bottle in the other, conducting the rumble of his song:

Mana Leeza  
Mana Leeza  
They have named yooo-  
Yer s'much like th'lady  
With a mystic smiille!

"Jesus, look at her. She's gonna sink his house boat sure as shit."

This started us ha-haing our silly heads off.

"Shut up you guys! They're getting pretty close now."

At the gang plank they paused for an embrace. The woman wrapped her big arms around The Rube like a second coat and shook him like a bear. We heard him wheeze:

"Take it easy honey, we've got all night!"

"Okay honey," said the woman, dropping him, "Lets get inside and tuck in." The Rube stopped to get his breath and slick his hair back before leading her across the logs to his tin-roofed shack.

Are ya warm  
Are ya reel  
Mana Leeza  
Or jusa cold n' lonely  
Lovely work ofart.

The door slammed behind them. We waited for a minute without saying anything. Then Billy spoke:

"Okay then, I guess everybody knows what to do. Johnny'll take the eggs over there a few yards. I'll keep over on the other side. Red, you stay here with Walter and keep your head down."

"But I don't get to do anything!"

"Not today, Red, you can do something next time. Just keep your head down and tell us if you see the cops or someone coming. Now remember, nobody does anything until you see the ripples coming off the side of the house boat. That means they're really banging away."

"Jeez, Billy, you guys never let me do anything."

Being little brother was a pain in the ass, but if anyone did come I'd be the one to give the warning and get the credit.

Everyone spread out and waited quietly for the ripples to start spreading away from the floats. I moved out on to a branch overhanging the cliff to get a better view of the cops when they came.

Walter was the first one to see the ripples. He pulled back hard on the slingshot and landed one dead centre on the tin roof.

"Whang!"

Billy was next, striking the walls of the house, then hitting the roof simultaneously with Walter's second shot.

“Whang-whang!”

For a full minute it was like stone rain on The Rube’s roof. You could hear lots of yelling and bumping inside the house. We all laughed like crazy imagining The Rube stumbling around in the dark looking for his pants and the woman screaming her head off expecting an avalanche to come down on them.

The Rube stumbled outside, squinting in the daylight and shaking his skinny arms at the cliffs.

“Clear off, ya lil bastards! Clear off right this minute or yer really gonna catch hell!”

Johnny chucked the first egg which struck The Rube in the foot. “Jesus!” he yelled in outrage as the second one hit him lethally in the chest.

“That’s done it, ya lil buggers! Yer really gonna get it now!”

The Rube disappeared into the house coming back out a moment later with a twelve guage which he leveled at the cliff edge, firing a quick double blast. Shot rifled through the trees.

“He’s got a shot gun!” yelled Billy, “Let’s get the fuck outa here!”

I shinnied down the tree like I’d never shinnied before as The Rube fired a second blast.

“Ow-Wow!”

I turned to see Johnny running up the slope with both hands on his ass making for the road. I was sweating, really scared at being the only one left. At the foot of the tree my pants caught on a short branch. Bending down to remove the cuff, I caught sight of The Rube and the woman standing at the bottom of the cliff.

The tree broke. I hung upside-down yelling my lungs out as the last fiber of bark gave way. Hanging on to the small trunk I tumbled and tumbled, closing my eyes and waiting to smash on the ground below. I never did.

The branches of the tree had buffered and protected me from the impact. Instead, a long skinny arm reached into my nest, pulling me out by the collar. I was so close to The Rube’s face that both his eyes merged into a cyclops. Wine breath poured over me.

“You lil bastard, I’m gonna smash yer head open!”

He threw me on the ground and I closed my eyes again, waiting for the rifle butt to come down on my head.

"No George! Let him be, he's just a little kid."

Lying in the dirt, I opened my eyes to see the woman towering above me. A big fat goddess of mercy with her arm barring the trajectory of the man's upraised gun.

"Lil kid, my ass. I saw the lil red-headed bastard up there with his eggs!"

"That wasn't him — must've been his brother or somebody else with red hair. This little guy was just hanging out on the tree watching what was going on."

"Oh yeah?" The man bent down and picked me up by my coat, a bit more gently this time.

"Now listen to me kid. The lady here just saved you from me knocking yer little head off. Now I'm giving you thirty seconds to get yer ass out of here and around that bend before I start shooting again. And tell that brother or whatever he is of yours that if I ever see him around here or anywhere else, for that matter, I'll knock him silly. Now git!"

With the man's foot for encouragement I made it around the bend in fifteen seconds, not daring to look back at them as they laughed. I'd go home and tell Johnny how he'd catch hell if he wasn't careful.