

Our Bus Driver, Fred

By Jack Bristow

I don't know why, but Fred was always talking to me. Maybe because we was both loners, kind of outcasts, but he was more friendly to me than he was with the other kids. When all the other kids was off the bus and it was just me and him (the other kids' houses were closer than mine), he'd tell me stuff-- about his first job delivering newspapers, about his time in that Viet- nam war . . . Fred called it the Godawful War--and about when his wife died. Ruth was her name. I guess her car ran off the road on a foggy day while Fred was still "bombing the shit" out of people, in 'Nam.

Funny, he hated being called Mister. Everybody else, they get plenty pissed if you don't call 'em Mister White, or Miss Meyers. Not Fred . . . I remember one time one of the teach- ers was gonna ride with us on a trip to the potato chip factory and she called him Mister Williams. "No, Ma'am," he said to her, shaking his always-shaky finger. "You call me Fred, you hear? Fred. Mister--mister makes me feel too damned old." I remember she laughed and called him Fred for the rest of the trip. But you know, I knew it had nothin' to do with age. I think he knew he wasn't no better than any of us.

Sad for us, most of the grown-ups at school wasn't as nice or fun to be around with as Fred-- especially our mean old fourth grade teacher, Miss Meyers. Most school days, when the clock above her desk hits 2:30 PM, there's always some dummie who screws it up for all of us getting home on time when we're supposed to. Today it is my only kid-friend, Tim.

Right before me and all the other kids started packing our back-packs with homework, getting ready to go home, I hear a loud, annoying whistle coming from the other side of the classroom. It was Tim. He was whistling Yankee Doodle Dandy. "Da da da da da da da--da da da da," flappin' his arms around like a chicken.

Miss Meyers squinted her old, mean eyes across the room at him. "Timothy," she says.

Tim acted like he couldn't hear her and kepted whist- ling on--"da da da da da da da." Ms. Meyers face kepted on getting uglier and redder, and she yells, "Timothy Bundy!" And then all the kids . . . 'cept me . . . starts laughing real loud.

Her face changes now. The red's gone from her fat cheeks. "All right," she says, looking really mad but not as red, "Aside from your math, you all have a new assignment. By tomorrow morning I want a ten- page biography on Abraham Lincoln. And if it's not completed by tomorrow, Wednesday, you will all be kept after school for an additional four hours."

All the kids stop laughin', and start crumpling up their papers and throwing 'em at Tim's freckly face. He falls over.

"Now, if you can all be quiet for sixty seconds, you may leave," she says, looking at Tim. I'd everythin' all gathered up but Tim started whistling again.

"Enough!" Miss Meyers shouts, her face getting red all over again. "Everyone except Timothy Bundy is excused."

We start to leave.

"Wait a second!" Miss Meyers yells, almost screams. "I have to call you all by name, one-by-one."

Tim's the only kid at school who'll play with me. When they keep him after school--most days, they do--I got no one else to play with on the playground; usually, I just sit under a tall Oak Tree, talking to myself, and pretending to be invisible so the other kids don't notice I'm alone.

By about 3:00 o'clock all them kids are off the bus and it is just Fred and me. Today, I felt upset, and I think Fred knowed.

"Say, Johnnyboy,"--he always calls me Johnnyboy--Fred says to the back of the bus where I'm sitting. "Why you so glum? How's come you ain't bein' yo' normal, talkative self today?"

"I just didn't get enough sleep last night is all--you know how that is."

"I sure as hell do," he says. Then he don't say nothing more the rest of the way home. I wasn't going to tell him what was really bothering me but I think one day, soon, I probably have to.

Fred drives real, real fast; we get to my house, and he stops really hard in the gravel and, like almost everyday, I almost fall outta my seat. Fred pushes the button that opens the bus door, smiles, tips his red baseball cap and I say bye.

No sign of Ma inside the house. I figure she must've finished her shift and the Blizzard Bee truckstop and was off with her new boyfriend, Joel by about now. Probably dancing, or he's probably buying her pretty new dresses--she got a whole closet full of 'em. Or maybe she's spending the night at his trailer; she does that sometimes, and at least she leaves me frozen dinners I can make and says "dial 911" if anyone tries to break in.

I don't know nothing about no Abraham Lincoln--'xcept, that he's maybe worth five dollars--and I don't wanna learn nothing about him. I gone to school all day to learn, I don't gotta learn nothing new when I'm at home. I won't do no homework. Miz Meyers'll be mad but so what? She's always mad and mean. Me not doing my homework ain't gonna make no difference whosoever. . . . So I make a bag of popcorn an' watch cartoons instead . . . what's it matter anyhow? *****

Next day, as we was pulling away from my driveway, Fred does something I never seen him do before: he gets out a match, strikes it agianst his cowboy boots, and lights a cigarette inside the bus as he's drivin' and starts singing a song I never heard sung before. He says it was by a fella named Roy Obertson, or something like that. He looks even dirtier than he does usual today, I remember thinkin' . . . But never mean. Fred never looks mean. He nevers looks like a good shaver, neither, but today his gray whiskers look even longer and his black face looks a lot more older. . . .

Can't exactly remember the words, but they gone something like, "dum dum dum dum dee do wah . . ." over and over again, he says it so many times, it almost makes me go crazy; grasped in Fred's right hand, the one that weren't driving the bus, he had some Wild Turkey in it . . . I remember the name, 'cuz before Pa went away for hurting Ma, he used to always drink it. (He'd usually get nicer when he drunk it but sometimes even meaner . . .) Well, I don't know much about the laws and whatnot but I didn't think Fred was supposed to've been drinkin' that stuff when he was driving; he could've gotten into jail I think and maybe even lose his job. And what'll the other kids say when they see him drinkin' it? I bet they'll tell . . . they can't never keep no secrets. . . .

I'm looking out the window at all the big trees (they look like they're passing the bus) and Fred says, soundin' real happy, 'Hey Johnnyboy, how's come you've been depressed so much lately. Why ain't you talking to me again today?"

"Ummm, no reason," I say.

"C'mon John, you can tell me. We're friends . . . right?"

"Well, uh, Fred, you know Miss Meyers?"

"Sure. Mean old teacher. Face sorta resembles a ping pong ball."

"Yeah, that's her. Well, I'm 'fraid to go to school to- day. I don't wanna go."

"Why?"

"Cuz' I forgot to do my homework--extra homework she gave me and the other kids just because Tim was being a dummie again yesterday."

"Say, John, y'know what? I been overworked. This working everyday a few hours every weekday is really takin' a serious toll on me--you know? I think we both need a day off--me away from this goddamn bus, wh- oops, 'xcuse the language . . . and you . . . you away from that grouchy ole Miz Meyers. So tell me, you ever play pool, Johnnyboy?"

"Naw, I never learnt how to swim."

"No, no. Not a swimming pool. I mean, like, the sport, the game, pool. You see, Johnnyboy," Fred

says, puffing on his cigarette, "I got a friend who owns a bar down- town on Discovery Street--near the Salvation Army, all them thrift shops and whatnot. Usually, Frank don't permit minors--kids like you-- inside his estab- lishment but, like I say, he my friend . . . and so're you. He'll welcome us both with open arms."

I ask, "But . . . won't we get in trouble?"

"Well . . . we'll worry about that when it happens, won't we?"

We drive downtown and here, downtown, things are diff- erent from where me and Ma live. There's people on the side- walks--dirty-lookin' people. Dirtier looking than Fred. A few of 'em here and there with cups in their hands, some drinking drinks like the one Fred's got in his hands. Some of 'em look real sad, some of 'em look real happy. And there's other peop- les, too, folk in nicer-looking clothes and shoppin' bags in their hands walking by the not-so-good-looking people, not looking at 'em. We drive just a lil' more, till we get to a old-looking bar that's got a sign that says, "Frank's Bar and Grill."

We got inside and there ain't many people here. Most of them wasn't even talking, they was just slumped over on their stools, grumbling, mumbling--making weird no- ises I never heard before. They look dirty--a lot like 'em people outside, but I weren't afraid. I knowed Fred won't let nothing happen to me while we was in here.

Fred finds us a table away from all the dirty-looking people. I tell Fred, I says, "Why does all 'em people look dirty? What's the deal? Don't they take baths? Are their tubs broken?"

Fred looks at me, a little mad looking--I never seen him mad looking before--and he says, "John, these are people. Knock off with the 'dirty looking'; they is peop- ple, just like you and me. . . ."

"Geez, sorry," I say. "But why they look so dirty? That's all I wanna know."

Fred sighs, then says, "These people don't got homes, John."

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons," he says, not sounding mad no more. "They don't make no money. A lot of 'em k'aint hold a job . . . A lot of 'em are sick physically, as well as in the head. Some people like dese--I call 'em homeless people, because they're people without homes--fought in wars, like me, had'ta kill people, like me, and now the govern- ment won't take care of them. It tosses 'em out like an unwanted dog. It makes me sick."

A short white man with a beard and no hair comes up to our table and says, "Fred Williams! You

sonofabitch! How've you been?"

"Fine, fine," Fred says, laughin', then soundin' like he's coughing up boogers. He clears his throat and says, "Frank this is my friend--John. John; Frank. This little man, John, has been my friend for a long, long time. Since before I knew you--since before you was even born. Remember when I told you one of my friends took a bullet for me in the war? Well, Johnnyboy, this is that friend."

"Nice to meet you, John," Fred's friend says, shak- ing my hand.

"So what can I get you fellas, something to eat, some- thing to drink? I know Fred'll be having something to drink," Frank laughs. (His throat sounds like Fred's too when he laughs, maybe a little wors(er).)

"I'll have a pitcher of Busweiser, Frank. And get Johnnyboy--get 'em whatever the hell he wants."

I order a rootbeer and a hamburger--no onions.

"Fred," I ask him, "you ever kill anybody when you was in the Godawul War?"

Fred looks at me for a second, sweat dripping down his face. His eyes get red and watery and he says, "Yes sir, I killed people."

"You killed people," I say; I can't believe it. "Why, did they do something bad to you?"

"No."

"They hurt you?"

Fred don't talk for a couple a seconds, he just looks at the salt 'n' pepper shakers down on the table for a few seconds, his face gettin' more and more wetter, and says, "Nope. I didn't know any of them. I dropped bombs on people from a plane. Never seen how many people I killed--thank God. But I knew it had to of been lots."

"Would you kill somebody again?"

"Nope," he says, shaking his head a whole buncha times. "In fact, if I could go back in time, I wouldn't of gone; I would've hidden away so the draft board wouldn't of found me. Maybe gone to Canada--like all my buddies did. But then, I was illusioned--I wanted to be like the good guy in all the war movies I seen as a kid but, sadly, it wasn't nothin' like the movies. Good people died, innocent people died, and there was a lot of blood--that stuff should stay inside a people, not go out."

"Do you ever cry 'cuz you had to kill people in the Godawful War?"

Fred's voice gets really high, high like a girl's, and he starts talking about something else, "So Johnny-boy. How's your Mama doing?"

"I dunno," I say. "She ain't never home."

"Ah, I see. You mean with work and everything-- things must be awfully busy at the Blizzard Bee Truck- stop."

"I guess. But I dunno how busy things get at her work 'cuz I never see her. She's never home. She weren't home last night."

"Hold on, now jus' hold on a cotton-pickin' second here John," Fred hits his fist on the counter. "Your Mama wasn't home last night? Not at all? You mean she left you with a babysitter?"

"Nope."

Fred looked really mad again, and he were about to say something else but Frank cut him off saying, "Alright, here's your drinks, fellas."

"Fred, do you believe in God?" I ask.

"Well, I's raised Catholic," Fred said, sipping his beer.

"That don't answer my question—you go to church?"

"Naw, I haven't gone in a while but--you know, well, when a friend gets married or it's a relative's funeral or somethin', you know, yeah, well, the first funeral I went to was Ruth's; second was my Pop's. And about five years ago my buddy--'nother pal from Nam--Rick, got married. So in the past forty years, I've gone to church a total of three times."

"What about you, Johnnyboy?" Fred looks at me with his eyebrow up. "You believe in the Man Up Stairs?"

"I don't know," I say. "All's I know is I hate going to church," opps, I wasn't suppose to say that. . . .

"'Hate?' Hate's a strong word, Johnnyboy. Why do you hate your church, anyhow?"

"'Cuz of Father Brown."

"Well . . . what'd Father Brown ever do to ya?"

I make sure no one's around, and I whisper in Fred's ear. He gets up and grabs the Ketchup from the side of the table and smashes it on the floor. I never seen him real mad before, but here he looks madder than even Miss Meyers. Real mad.

Frank comes up to Fred and puts his hand on his shoulder, trying to calm 'im down I guess. . . . It looks like if Fred gets mad he could really hurt Frank, 'cuz he's a lot taller and fatter than Frank is, but Fred don't hurt Frank. Frank says to Fred, "What's a matter, man. Is your DSS acting up again?" (He was asking Fred about his back, I think.) Fred yells out a whole buncha nasty words--ones that Ma hit me over the head for saying before, and he even says a few I ain't never heard of before.

Miss Meyers don't even yell at me all this week for not doing any my homework and she never asks why I wasn't at school on Sunday--she's too ticked at Fred not showin' up for work all week to even punish us for that. Nobody knowed where Fred was. He never shown up to take us to school. He's been missing almost five days now . . . Miss Meyers was reading to us about some guy called Thomas Jefernson when Principal Jinkens knocks on the door. She goes outside to talk to him but tells us not to do any "funny business" first. We can hear 'em talking outside. . . .

"This man Fred Williams has a crude mouth, is mentally unstable, speaks like an illiterate--he is unreliable, incompetent and completely untrustworthy . . . I have spoken with him before, Mr. Jinkens and, as I've been trying to tell you for the past 3 years, he is unfit to drive the children to and from school every weekday. This cretin is not even fit to have a driver's license. How the DMV ever permitted a lowlife of Fred Williams caliber to drive on our roads, our freeways is beyond me. He is insane. In his mind, he's still in Vietnam. He invariably reeks of tobacco and alcohol and if you continue to allow him to work here after he comes back from his little vacation then you're even crazier than he is!"

"Well, Miss Meyers," I barely hear Principal Jinkens saying, "we don't even know if Fred is still alive. He could have gone and killed himself, for all we know."

"We can only hope so," Miss Meyers says and walks into the classroom and shuts the door real hard. Tim was goofing off on her chair and she walks right up to him and screams so loud I wish I would've plugged my ears, "Get back in your seat!"

Today's the first time Ma picks me up from school since . . . ever. She picked me up today 'cuz the school hasn't found a replacement bus driver for Fred. All the parents have'ta pick up their kids today. We get home, I hasn't seen her in a long time--days, a week maybe. She's mad at the school for not findin' another driver because she couldn't work. . . . "I'm going to write that stupid Mr. Jinkens a letter," she says, as we pull up to our driveway--the first time I ever pull up without Fred on a school day.

"I have a surprise for you tonight, John," Ma says. "Tonight, no TV dinners. Tonight, you get a real meal-- spaghetti and meatballs with garlic toast, like my Ma, your grammy, Louise, used to make for me!" Tonight Ma's nice, but I dunno why. She plays checkers with me for a few minutes, drinks a lot of her "grown-up" drink and the phone rings and she talks to Joel. I hear her laughin' and giggling . . . I wait for her to come back . . . but she don't. 'stead, she takes some vitamins or pills or somethin' and goes to bed

and I gotta microwave one of them pizza dinners that tastes like cardboard. . . . Microwave says 6:30 PM and I turn on TV. It's an old Dracula movie--they always show stuff like this this time a year. I fall asleep a few minutes . . . an hour, maybe . . . and when I wake up I see some man inside the TV read- ing the five-day forecast. Says he's Alex Winters.

Then, some lady is in the TV and says, "This just in. Local Priest, Anthony Brown, has been found dead today inside the restroom of Christ's Merry Follower's congregation on Topika Street.

I think, What?

The newslady says it again, to remind me.

"Thanks," I say.

Then Sister Mary's there, the nice fat lady who'd tell me all 'bout David and Goliath and the talking snake an' the naked people in the paradise comes on TV, and looks real sad . . . She's rubbing those necklaces you're suppose to pray with after you say dirty words . . . she's cryin' more than I done when I sprung me ankle after Tim pushed me off the monkey bars and I had'ta go to the doctor. . . .

"A devastated child approached me with tears in his eyes, screaming, 'Father Brown's hurt! He's all bloody!', so I ran into the men's room--which is upstairs--and I saw him there . . . face down on the dirty, bathroom tile . . . with the help of Sister Sarah--I'd called out to her when I saw he wasn't moving and was unresponsive--I flipped him over but his face was so bloody and lifeless. I knew right then and there that he was in a better place. But I checked for a heartbeat and pulse anyway, and there was nothing--no signs of life whatso- ever. . . ."

The lady that tells the news is on TV talking again.

"We have just discovered that there was a note taped to Father Brown's chest, scribbled in Magic Marker, which reads: "False Prophet."

Knock knock knock knock knock--knock knock on the front door. I open it and Fred's standing in front of me . . . smiling . . . in the back of 'im, near Ma's car, is a truck with a camper or a mini camper or something attached to it.

"You see the news Johnnyboy?"

"Uh-huh," I say.

"Your Mama ain't no good to you, John. And . . . you know what? The past forty years," he says, pointing his finger at me, it's not shaky like it usually was no more "I ain't been good to myself. I always thought the drinkin'd make me forget things--about Ruth being dead, and about all them folk I hurt with the bombs Uncle Sam made me drop on 'em, but really, it made it all worse. I say you and I start life anew,

John, in Mississippi where I's born and raised. We'll try'n track down my baby sister Diane. She was like a mother to me when Ruth died."

"Well, what're we waiting for," I ask, hugging him.

Fred smiles. "I think we'll have to hide in Frank's campershell until we're out of town. I think they're lookin' for me."

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