

Hitchhiking After Dark

Also by Richard Hill
Lake Effect:
A Deckhand's Journey on
the Great Lakes Freighters



Hitchhiking After Dark

Offbeat Stories from a Small Town

Richard Hill

Gale Force Press
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Hitchhiking After Dark
by Richard Hill
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*To all the comics in the world who give us
a reason to laugh when we need it most*

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Introduction

Not until I graduated from high school and left the relatively safe confines of the family did I realize how happily eccentric my family really was. What started out as a nuclear family, in time morphed into a radioactive isotope. My father was like an unstable electron, flying off in unknown directions to orbit in a universe I knew little about. He returned intermittently to join the family nucleus, only to be called off again on a distant mission. That is how it seemed, anyway, to the son of a U.S. Army soldier.

For the most part, my mother raised a family of four boys and a girl on her own. Working in the small northern Michigan town of Sault Ste. Marie, she supported her growing family with a number of different jobs—from hatcheck girl at a nightclub to waitress at various local restaurants. In her mid-fifties, she attended evening classes to earn her high school diploma.

In the neighborhoods I grew up in, most families owned their own homes. My folks rented until they were in their seventies, supposedly because my mother never wanted to feel tied down. She thought she would pick up and move to California or warmer climes when the time was right, but that time never quite arrived. We lived in a rented house for

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a year or two and moved on to the next one. The landlord either sold the house from under us or forced my family out because we had too many members for too few bedrooms. Occasionally, we were several weeks late paying the landlord his rent.

As kids, we relished the adventure of moving to new neighborhoods every couple years; my mother, on the other hand, dreaded packing everything up again and starting over. By my calculations, my family lived in nearly twenty different houses over the years. In the end, we all grew more resourceful in handling new situations and learned how to travel like gypsies at a moment's notice.

My siblings and I came of age in the '60s, a remarkable period that encompassed everything from the Beatles, the rise of rock 'n' roll, and the hippie movement to the Viet Nam War, the drug culture, and the assassinations of King and the Kennedys. It was a time of confusion and disorientation, a time for questioning of values and direction, both personally and as a country. By the end of the decade, we distrusted the U.S. government and many of the large corporations and institutions we had once respected.

Despite this social turmoil, my family always found a way to laugh about things. As long as the situation produced a good story—and my family thrived on great storytelling—it was well worth any embarrassment or discomfort. Whether it was neighborhood gossip, school mischief, or workplace affairs, we always seemed to find something comical to laugh about. In some respects, storytelling was our main defense, our way of dealing with some of the rude jolts and random disappointments of daily life. By laughing at ourselves, we were able to rise above any uncomfortable situation. Through this prism, we viewed ourselves and the absurdities that swirled around us.

Introduction

The stories in this book are, for the most part, about circumstances that spun lopsidedly out of control. Some deal with the ludicrous predicaments we frequently find ourselves in and our ridiculous attempts to right them, often digging a deeper hole in the process. Other stories grew from petty annoyances with issues I've either read about in the newspapers or followed on TV. A few of these tales take place in my early years growing up in a small town, others a few miles further down the road. All of them together paint a picture of the precarious nature of living in a world in which the absurd and the serious have begun to overlap. Enjoy the ride.



Melvin

When you're a kid, life comes at you minute by minute. You rarely, if ever, plan what to do the next day, the next week, or even ten minutes down the road. A kid creates his own entertainment and activities on the fly.

And that's what we found ourselves doing one summer evening in the old neighborhood when I was about eight-years-old. I was hanging out with my brother Fred and Melvin, both several years older than me. As dusk closed in on us, we amused ourselves out in the back alley by pegging rocks at bats that were darting overhead, feeding on the evening swarms of mosquitoes.

Our fearless leader was Melvin, the local bully on the block. He was the cool kid in the neighborhood because he was always up to something exciting and usually illegal. With the help of his *Evening News* paper route, he always had enough pocket change to buy pop and chips, or whatever he wanted. The rest of us scrounged from our meager weekly allowances. Melvin taught us how to do cool things like stealing pop bottles out of open garages and how to knock off "open-siders," Coke delivery trucks with exposed sides that made it easy to swipe a few pops while the delivery man was inside the store. Melvin was proud enough of

his own abilities to show us that shoplifting was really not that hard, once you got the hang of it. All he needed was an empty paper route bag over his shoulder. He demonstrated the technique in Woolworth's dime store one afternoon—a slow, nonchalant stroll down the aisles, keeping an eye on the busy clerk behind the counter. As soon as she turned her head, Melvin grabbed baseball cards, pea shooters, and a leather wallet and slid them quickly into his bag. To make things look good, he purchased a fifteen cent ice cream sandwich and a ten cent bag of popcorn. He then sold or traded most of his loot to other neighborhood kids. It was a rather profitable side business for him, a skill that might one day prove valuable in prison.

Melvin was the first kid on the block to smoke cigarettes, thanks to a couple cartons of Lucky Strikes he had stolen from the corner gas station. His ability to inhale deeply and blow smoke rings so effortlessly was very impressive. He was far more sophisticated than we could ever hope to be. When I puffed on a cigarette, I choked and gasped, unable to hold the smoke in my lungs. Melvin laughed at my feeble attempt and flicked his leftover butt at me. He knew how to carry himself in that cool, careless way—like a young Marlon Brando, a toothpick hanging from the side of his mouth.

His command of the language was unsurpassed. In addition to his superior cussing vocabulary, he could string different swear words together in combinations we had never even considered. If you had done something particularly boneheaded, he might say something like, “You ball-lickin’ bastard” or “You ass-kickin’-jerk-son-of-a-bitch.” Or, if he was ready to pick a fight with you, he might taunt you with, “You wussy little sawed-off prick.”

We all knew he couldn't possibly have developed this verbal ability overnight; it must have required years of trial

and error to hone such remarkable skills. He just made them up as he went along, always a new combination to look forward to.

When it came to girls, Melvin seemed to know things about them that only a pro could dream up. He claimed to have a secret stash of *Playboy* magazines that he had lifted from his father's collection, but he wouldn't allow any of us to sample them. They furthered his education about girls, he boasted, and spurred his imagination in ways he couldn't even talk about. Obviously, by the age of eleven, he had worked his way around the block a few times. But we couldn't exactly challenge him or call him a liar to his face because we had no experience with girls at all. So we accepted his stories as gospel.

At times, Melvin could be reckless and trigger-happy. He had received a Daisy BB gun for Christmas one year and proceeded to demonstrate it one day by peppering our ankles with a flurry of BB pellets, yelling, "Dance, suckers, dance!" Before we could wrestle the gun away from him, he had stung us with a rapid volley of shots, laughing at the frantic way we hopped around.

There was always a fresh trick that Melvin would pull from his sleeve, usually when we were looking the other way. One weekend, when several of us were playing cards in Melvin's basement, he reached into a high cupboard and pulled out a bottle of his dad's Kessler whiskey. He poured himself a shot, tossed it down, then walked over to the bathroom faucet and very carefully filled it up exactly to the original level. We could only marvel at his ingenuity, wondering just how long he would get away with his tricks.

As the years went on, Melvin challenged us to bigger and bolder ventures. One night, unable to locate a willing buyer for a few Saturday night beers, he tried to entice us to

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knock off a local beer warehouse with him. The threat of life behind bars meant nothing to him. But the rest of us had seen enough Humphrey Bogart and James Cagney movies to know it wasn't worth the gamble. Someone might rat on us, or sell us up the river, and before you know it, the place would be crawling with coppers; or so it seemed. Some opportunities were meant to be passed up.

As we picked up stones in the alley and whipped them at the bats overhead, the street lights in the neighborhood flickered on one by one. Fred, Melvin, and I laughed and shrieked every time a bat dove erratically at our heads. We knew all about their tendencies to snatch our hair, to bite us on the neck, and the long series of painful shots if you were stricken with rabies. In all our excitement, we hadn't noticed the approach of old Mr. Johnson in the dark. It was too late to run; he was within five feet of us.

"Hey, you kids! What the hell do you think you're doing? All those rocks are landing in my yard!" He looked us over one by one in the darkness. We stood there frozen in place, too scared to run, hoping he wouldn't recognize us and call our parents.

"You guys look familiar. What are your names?" he demanded in a loud, angry voice. He looked directly at Melvin: "I'm, uh, Frank...Frank Smith." Then he turned to Fred: "JaNorge...my name's Tom JaNorge," he said very matter-of-factly. Old Mr. Johnson, puzzled by the strange names, then turned and walked over to me, looked me in the eye and said, "And who are you?" I paused for a second, quivering uncontrollably, my mind a complete jumble. Then, unable to think up a suitable alias, I finally blurted out, "Melvin! What's my name?"

Melvin

For a long time afterwards, Melvin refused to talk to me. I became a complete stranger, a pariah, unaware of my evil deeds. After a few years in reform school, Melvin may have settled down in San Quentin or Leavenworth. Chances are he probably gave the inmates a good run for their money. Who knows? By this time, he may have worked his way up to warden. But there is no doubt that, with such a clever criminal mind, Melvin could someday pursue a brilliant career in law enforcement.

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