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JUST WILLIE PLEASE EIGHT FLASH FICTION TALES

Don Robishaw



Cover image: *Boston Street Scene* by Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828-1901). Oil on panel. 8 x 5.5 inches. Between 1898 & 1899. **Public domain.**

JUST WILLIE PLEASE

EIGHT FLASH FICTION TALES

Don Robishaw

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Bad Road Ahead

Willie's Hometown: Providence, Rhode Island, 1963 to 1964

My neighborhood's on the wrong side of the tracks. Mangy cats and mutts run loose, making snow yellow and tearing up garbage bags attracting hungry gulls, sparrows, and pigeons. Under a city street light on the corner of Chance and Destiny, I say to my career advisor, "Getting outta here, if it's the last thing I do."

Bobby whips out a pack of coffin-nails and snaps it on a telephone pole rung. A cigarette pops high. I catch and flip it off my thumb into my mouth. Bobby Ryan says, "Got a future together," and removes a Zippo from his dungarees. "This trick's our ticket outta here."

"Sure, maybe chicks will dig it, too." I exhale three perfect rings, bend over, and pick up paint chips that dropped off the siding of a corner triple-decker and pass him a couple. "Why did we used to eat these?"

"Can't remember."

"Eyesight's stronger since I stopped." I squeeze and slam the gray pieces to the ground.

Staring at the chip in his hand. "I'm better at math," says Bobby.

"Cause you repeated the eighth grade, twice."

"Don't bust my balls, Willie."

"Time to blow this popsicle stand. Boxing's my ticket."

Bobby shrugs, "Baseball be mine, brother." He turns over his palms and lets the chips fall. "Remember your mom yelling out the window, 'Put those down, they're not potato chips, ya little bastards.'"

My stomach hurts from laughing. *Willie, long-term damage or not, gotta get off these streets.*

The Neighborhood

After WWII Acme Paint Shop has deals on shades of gray rivaling depressing winter skies. TV shows are in gray, even though they call them black & white.

No hills, few trees, and dilapidated multi-floored houses line city blocks. At the heart of the neighborhood stands Roger Williams Housing Project. Tenement buildings surround forty-some-odd flat-roofed three story red brick buildings. Bobby and me roam Southside, the underbelly of our hometown, searching for a ‘way out.’

“They’re advertised as new and modern. Place supposed to be a step up.”

“You shittin’ me? To where Bobby? It’s the fuckin’ projects, man.”

These streets can be hazardous to your health. When crossing neighborhoods, we declare we’re from the Southside. I pride myself as a guy who doesn’t take shit and got the scars to prove it. When harassed by a gang though, I always say, ‘You boys know my brother, Malcolm Robinson?’

They might say something like, ‘Meant no disrespect.’ He’s one of the baddest dudes in South Providence. Nobody messes with him. That be before he joined the Marines, though.

Bobby Ryan wears a Red Sox cap over his crew cut, a baseball player with potential. I never wear a hat but often wear a steel blue and silver silk bomber jacket with an angry tiger embroidered on the backside. Malcolm brought it from the Far East after he enlisted in the Marines.

Back on the Corner of Chance and Destiny

I got other friends. Bobby and me help Leroy Turner, the baddest dude on the Southside, with his paper route. He served his time and now teaches boxing at the gym. Leroy also helps stage sparring matches on the project roofs, till a kid fell off and broke his leg. Leroy organizes matches in abandoned warehouses for fight night, too. I coulda been a Golden Gloves champ

, if I had gone out for it. I pride myself on my skills. *Willie Robinson, future Middleweight Champion of the World*. We continue sparing in the yard, basement, gym, and Roger Williams Park . . . anywhere.

Home Life

Big Daddy's no fan of mine. Looks nothing like me, either. Mixed origins, I think. I'm more like mom, skin's a little lighter, though. In the morning, take my palms and push my black hair into a perfect duck's ass on the backside. It takes seven minutes and a pound of pomade to create a well-formed DA. A popular look these days, with thin sideburns and a pompadour.

Pop is getting nervous. We're eating hot dogs, dry flavorless beans, and canned brown bread, again. He's watching *Ozzie and Harriet*, belly protruding a foot out in front of his —.

“Bella!” He yells. “Get your lazy ass in the parlor and bring me a fuckin' beer.”

He spots my tattoo. *Ab shit*.

“Get over here, boy. What's on your arm?”

“Just a little ink, Pop.”

His faded yellow undershirt, smells like cheap whiskey. He reaches out and brushes my cheeks, hand slides and tightens around my throat.

Mom cries. His breath is overwhelming, as I start to black out. The room darkens. Who shut off the lights? Eyes water. I'm scared shitless.

He lets my neck go, grabs and twists my arm behind my back, and shoves me, “Don't give me shit, boy.” I kiss the wall as he pushes my face against plaster of Paris. *Someday man, it'll be my turn*.

He removes his belt. Cracks of leather echoes off the walls. Vibrations of pain spread from welts on my face.

Blood drips from my nose and mouth, “Be eighteen soon. Kick your ass then.”

“You need to toughen up, kid.”

Jutting my jaw forward I say, "Might fuckin' kill ya, too."

"You be doing me a favor, boy."

Pop carried a rifle in the war for four fuckin' years. Mom says he's never been the same since the war. The Veterans Administration Hospital calls his flashbacks and nightmares battle fatigue.

Bobby gave up baseball, dropped out of school, and joined the Navy.

The judge advised me to do likewise. Case dismissed.

*

There were three ways out of the projects: jail, military, and boxing. My first professional match was last night. *Willie, gotta get out of this place if it's the last thing you ever do.* Knockout win in the fourth round.

My draft notice sits on the kitchen table.

Just Willie Please

The Winter of '84

Lying still on a covered stainless steel slab at the blood bank, I eyeball left and right. I spot ten other occupied racks. A needle penetrates and enters a clean rope above a portrait tattoo on my left forearm. I hide the old track marks on my right.

When the woman in white moves her hand towards my flush face, I relax. The nurse touches my skin and gives instructions while blood escapes into a fresh plastic bag.

“One hour, Sergeant Robinson. Focus on your breathing.”

“Willie, please. This ain't my first rodeo, darlin'.”

She brings an index finger to her lips, cocks her thumb, and blows, “I know that, cowboy.”

Twisting my wrist, I glance at a black-faced Timex, and wink.

The nurse places both hands on her lower abdomen and models the pattern. “Breath deep. Close your eyes. I'm here if ya need me.”

“Willie here, be alright.” The fear is worse than the pain. Loathe needles, and the oncoming flashbacks even more.

I inhale, hold, and exhale . . .

5:00 PM, February 28, 1963, in Providence, Rhode Island

Seventeen years old, I'm standing outside my girlfriend's apartment. A long haired, dark eyed Romanian girl in her twenties lives above the Acme Paint Store with her family in a crowded tenement. Gray paint chips, empty cans in the yard, and the smell of lead helps keep the rent low.

A rare moment alone with that young lady leaves lingering scars from her pointy red nails on both cheeks. As we roll around on the floor, she raises her eyebrows. “Don’t be too happy there, Willie. We’ll never get married.”

“Say what? I still got teeth coming in.”

She laughs.

It’s the next day. I’m going home after a walk with my girl. It has embarrassed me to bring her to the projects. Time to introduce her to Mom. Something’s wrong. I recognize a loud cursing voice. I run upstairs and turn towards a neighbor. My door is wide-open.

The stench of vomit and alcohol tells me Big Daddy’s drunk. Mom’s on the living room floor behind the couch and bleeding. A red and broken duckpin bowling trophy lies beside her. I take Mom in my arms, her bloody nose dripping,

“Sorry, should have been a better Mom.” Blood continues to flow and dribble from her skull. “Find Malcolm, Willie.”

She squeezes my hand. It then goes limp. I check for a pulse.

Anger overwhelms me as I rise. My right fist punches plaster of Paris, his precious award in my left hand. I enter the bedroom red hand, red-face, and with tears flowing from my red eyes. He sits on the bed. From the doorway, shaking, I heave the trophy. It grazes his ear. Blood drips as I pound the back of his head with both fists. My girl screams and struggles to pull me away. I shove her aside and reach for the trophy.

A stranger’s voice startles me, “Robinson! Hands up, kid. Last chance. Drop it.”

Inhale, hold, and exhale . . .

5:00 PM, December 1, 1967, in Vietnam

Another hot one today in Saigon. I show up at a hospital in an open jeep. It’s my last day. I process out. It won’t be long before I’m on the road home with an honorable discharge, a

bundle of cash, and eligible to collect government unemployment benefits for a year. My problem — scag. Where's my next fix?

Inhale, hold, and exhale . . .

7:55 AM, June 29, 1968, in Leeds, Massachusetts

I'm standing on top of a ridge looking over rolling grassy hills. Twenty-two years old, discharged from the army, and back in Massachusetts.

Check my watch and have enough time to recite ten Hail Marys or smoke a joint. Don't believe in God since I lost my squad, so prayers are out. They didn't work when I needed them the most.

The Veterans Administration Hospital won't allow pot on the campus. Aren't they supposed to be helping me? I shove off the granite rock and survey the VA's hundred acres of grass. I lay the roach in its tin. And in a cloud of dust and the speed of light, fire up the *Lawn Ranger*.

If the VA supported my request and allowed me to smoke a joint before work and at lunch, I might have stayed for the summer of '68. I needed a little help from my friends, that's all. Not the worst place to live, and pushing a mower eight hours a day was not the worst job I ever had.

Veterans and many other good men and women were jailed in those days for smoking pot. The consequences of prohibition: lives ruined — labeled ex-cons. I punched my time-card for the last time.

Inhale, hold, and exhale . . .

It's an hour later and I'm still on a covered stainless steel slab at the Boston Blood Bank. Eyes wide-open; draw in air, let it out, and relax as the woman in white strokes my cheek.

The nurse removes the needle and covers the puncture with a cotton ball. "Please stand, sir. Are you all right?"

“

Willie here's okay, darlin'." We stroll around the room.

She points towards a sofa and a table with pastry and orange juice. The second Thursday of each month is my scheduled appointment to donate. Deposits made on time land me fourteen dollars. If late, two bucks less.

I drink all their orange juice and devour a half dozen doughnuts.

“Thank you, Sergeant Robinson, for your donation and service. Can’t stay here all day.”

“Come on, mam. *Just Willie, please.*”

Blood Usury

Fran, my new friend from the shelter and I hit the streets. Cash a twelve-dollar check at a multi-purpose package store in West Roxbury. Get a sawbuck back. Blood usury. Two dollars. Bullshit.

Clerk with sad brown eyes reminds me I have a daughter somewhere. Touches my palm, turns it over, scans my life line, frowns, and shakes her head. “Bad road ahead, Willie.” Never charges for coffee, never says thank you for your service. She could be Amerasian. “Have a nice day, Willie.”

“If I were a younger man.” She smiles and hands me the Java and a brown paper sack. Good kid. The owner would fire her ass in a Boston minute if he caught her giving away free stuff.

Fran and I loiter under the dark gray skies, outside the packy sipping coffee. A half hour later Louie the creep, owner of the multi-service package store, taps the picture window and mouths something.

I lift both hands in surrender and say, “Come on, man. Public vagrancy, big bloody deal.” Asshole.

“What are we going to do, Willie?” Fran says.

“Get fucked up.”

Fran laughs and whacks my arm.

“Loss of blood and cheap wine sometimes causes more flashbacks, though.”

“Here for ya, baby.”

We leave the shopping plaza and find an abandoned black Chevy, in a vacant lot on a side street, with four flat tires and no windows. I open the door and slide into the grubby backseat. My ponytail catches broken interior roof light wires. Fran puts her hand on my knee. I help her get in the car.

I fumble taking my gloves off one finger at a time. I reach deep into the peacoat I found at the shelter and fish out an old friend. Remove alcohol from the sack, unscrew the cap, and for fun fill the flask I bought at a yard sale for a buck. “What’s the word?”

Fran says, “Thunderbird.”

“What’s the price?”

“Thirty twice.”

“How’s it sold?”

“Good and cold.”

I raise the wine and twist my face, “Ah, *The American Classic*. Nit, nit, nit, ah. God-damn that’s good shit, aye. Ahoy cruel world.” Pass it to my friend. She digs the stuff. We’re having fun.

“Does the alcohol warm you up?”

“No, wanna see what will, sister?”

Fran’s hand is still on my knee. Make out. Time goes by so fast. Not the best neighborhood. More clothing on than we need. Don’t feel the cold anymore. A rare moment, as we explore each other’s bodies.

I’ve missed this. Not on top of ladies’ hit parade these days.

Cop kicks the door. Shakes his head. “You know, youse guys can’t be here.” Hands me a five-dollar bill. “Go get a coffee.”

Walk to the ‘dry’ shelter. “Ah shit, you drunk again? Can’t let you in, bro.” Says Sonny the night guard.

“Hear ya brother.”

“Wore that coat you’re wearing for three years, mate,” and slips me a five-dollar bill and shuts the door.

Man, give Fran some cash. She waited over an hour outside the blood bank for ya. It’s late November with a wicked chill in the air. We shiver and stagger

towards tent city along the Charles River. A thirty-minute walk, turns into fifty. She can't stop chatting.

Thin, short blond hair, can be a pretty girl if she'd fix her teeth. "Still cold, Willie?" I imagine her with a makeover, a trip to the dentist, and well dressed.

Stop to make love on hard ground under the bridge over the bottomless river. I try to give her ten dollars for waiting in the cold. She misunderstands and refuses to take it. She blesses herself and cries. We don't look at each other and stare out at the muddy river.

There is a bottom, and it looks like Fran and me. She rubs her hands back and forth on her fake leopard skin coat.

"Who is Malcolm?" She touches the portrait on my forearm.

"Sorry darlin' never talk about him." I put my arm around her shoulders. She shoves it away. For Christ's sake, just keep your mouth shut, will ya.

I stand, put my gloves on one finger at a time, and wait for her to take my hand. She hesitates, shakes her head, smiles, and grabs my hand. We continue on to Tent City.

Fran Shares a Story

My friend Willie and I walk behind the biggest fuel-storage tank I've seen: Black with multi-color spray-painted graffiti around the backside. The area is referred to as Tent City.

By the light of the moon, ten women and men hunch around a flickering fire cooking fresh catfish and drinking wine. Willie squats beside them.

I'm standing over the fire, shaking because it's cold. *Not because the girl voted most likely to succeed has any fear of public speaking, mind ya.* "Have any of you ever attended an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting," I ask? Many of them raise their hands or nod. "Please, allow me to practice my AA guest speaker story this evening."

Heads nod and thumbs rise. "Go ahead Fran, we're all vets here," says Willie.

"They call me Sister Fran. I always wanted to be a nun. Thought it was destiny since a priest I knew from Providence encouraged me. He said, 'You're like a daughter.' Father John liked to hug. Daddy didn't. Never hugged Mama either, but loved Jack Daniels Tennessee Whiskey. I'd sneak a sip as a kid."

Willie bursts out laughing and is joined by others.

"Please, may I continue?"

"By all means."

"They assigned him to a different parish before my senior year. My real Dad died on my eighteenth birthday. Two years later, they transferred the young priest again to the Brotherhood Convent where I was in my second year as a novice. Happy and excited to see him, I thanked Jesus for answering my prayers. Our relationship matured. Not every girl who entered the nunnery lost her virginity there. I never expected I'd fall in love with a man of the cloth. I was forced to resign and never saw him again. I blamed God for taking him elsewhere."

“What happened Fran?” Willie moves away from the fire, stretches, and says something else about calling or writing. I give him the devil’s stare and continue.

“I was used to the convent’s discipline and joined the army where I mixed drinking and sex too often. I was out of control. Got a bad paper discharge. That was the moment I stopped believing in God, swapped Him for the devil, and learned he doesn’t go away that easy.

One time I attended an AA meeting in Providence. I saw my sponsor by the refreshment table. I said, ‘How ya doing Eddy?’

‘A day at a time. Sober twenty years. You, Fran?’

‘Six days, but who’s counting.’

“I laughed, but he didn’t.”

‘Got liver issues. What should I do Eddy? Need a few dollars for bus fare.’

‘Get to the clinic right away. If you have a slip or an urge to drink, call me.’

“He handed me his sponsor card and said, ‘I had thirty slips before this streak.’ He gave me a fin. I stuffed that five-spot in my pocket and hit the streets again. Four blocks the other way, I crossed the Three Rivers Bridge, and on the left was the Dew Drop Inn Lounge.

I’m outside the bar. Would the smell of freedom on strangers draw me inside that night? You’ve heard of the sweet smell of success? What’s the smell of not expecting much from life like? Was it that stench of beer or whiskey-laden breath? Was it the shakes, the sweat, the refusal to look a stranger in the eye the next morning in bed? Ah, the whiff of a real drinkin’ man, or woman.

For six sober days, I longed for those moments. That evening I realized there is a bottom, and when I saw my reflection in the plate-glass window of the Dew Drop Inn it looked a lot like me. The bottle’s always here, when there’s nothing else. There’s nothing quite like it.

I doubled back that evening to the top of the bridge, peered over the side, and closed my eyes envisioning my obituary: *Girl voted most likely to succeed, found on the bottom of a muddy waterway.*

I blessed myself and stepped over the railing. Frigid up there on that old span. I reached out, too late, and watched my beanie fall onto a floating piece of ice. Perched there half-standing, listening to the wind blowing, holding on for dear life, and afraid to jump. I prayed, 'Forgive me Father—.'

"My foot slipped when I wasn't ready. I stared into the abyss, the stinging air whistling past my frozen cheeks. Time passed before my eyes, almost.

A tugboat towing a canvas covered barge passed under the bridge. Whatever was beneath the sheet was soft enough to break my fall. Still, blood dripped from my nose. My bruised fingers grabbed a port-side cleat preventing me from going in the water. I dragged myself onto the tarp. Wet to my knees, face battered, aching back, knowing I'd be sore in the morning, I thanked God I was alive. I looked skyward for angels.

After falling off a bridge and living to tell about it, wouldn't anyone want a drink?"

"I would," says a young woman, as she rubs her hands together over the fire.

"Okay sister, pass the wine."

We almost made it, Hon

Along the River Charles, ten homeless men and women sit around a fire rubbing their hands, waiting for me to say something. I stand on broken glass, back against black tank, wearing a navy peacoat with collar up, and a charcoal toque.

An old red-faced vet, rubs his arms up and down. “Come on, Willie. It’s cold out here, ya bastard.”

I grin, ease my hands out of my pockets and point to my thumbs to my chest. “During my first tour in Nam I was an interrogator. Took an intensive course in Vietnamese after boot. Got out with good paper — an honorable discharge, even though I was a junkie. A year later reupped. Assholes gave me bad paper. I was a good soldier, though. Never drank or did drugs before Vietnam. Volunteered twice, for Christ’s Sake!”

New girlfriend Fran, with pain in her face, nearly passes out into the fire. I bend and shake her again and again. “Baby, don’t tell me you mixed downers with wine. Get up.” She donated blood today, too.

Two boys lift, drag, and carry her up the rocky embankment. A bit tipsy, they drop her several times along the way. We hit the streets, hail a cab, and head to Boston General. Friday night, place is crazy. The men who helped, split.

They pump her stomach and fill her with drugs that heal, not hurt. I sleep in the waiting area.

Next day she’s ready to process out. She takes my hand, turns it over, stares at the lines, cries, and says, “Bad road ahead, Willie.” Man, hate when she does that. I touch her hands.

A hardened ER nurse enters Fran’s suite. “Do you remember me?”

“No.”

“Were you paying attention to the doctor this morning?”

“What doctor?”

“The one who stabilized your heart rate and brought your blood pressure down to a manageable level. If you don’t quit drinking, you’ll end up dead.” We’re forced to listen to her spiel. We’ve heard it all.

Fran’s discharged and persuades me to attend Alcohol Anonymous meetings with her. Hate those talks. Guess it’s love. “Okay, baby.”

“Haircut and shave, too.”

“Not the beard, sister.”

“Yes, Willie.”

“Okay, okay. Where do you wanna go now?”

Rubbing a bruise above her eye, “Get me out of here. Hospitals give me the creeps.”

Fran and I are guests at the dry shelter. Luck’s on our side. She gets approved for Social Security Disability Insurance with the help of a lawyer.

The staff works hard to find us an apartment. We move in and continue to attend meetings. Fran’s on my case to find work. I say, “I stopped drinking, quit smoking, and got a haircut and a shave. Isn’t that enough?”

I have no skills, except for interrogating people.

I take a second shift job washing dishes at a restaurant. Three weeks later, I have a slip and show up drunk. Management gives me the week off to attend rehab.

Fran attends church on Sundays, gets her teeth fixed at Tufts University, and never misses a meeting. She’s had a moment of clarity.

Sometimes we go to the shelter to eat and hang with friends. My AA sponsor works the front desk. He's outside on a break.

Silent Jim, spent two years in the brig for assault, is also outside. He's his usual drunk and belligerent self. Stares at me, but is busy arguing. He yells, "You're a prick, Sonny." The two have been at each other for several weeks now.

"Told you three times it's the policy. Can't come back for a week."

Fran blesses herself, "Be careful."

Confident, Sonny turns towards her. Jim pulls out a switchblade, cuts my friend twice from ear to ear. Fuckin' blood everywhere! Sonny grabs his throat, blood drips between his fingers. He falls to the ground.

I try to stop it with an old rag. It's no use. I check his pulse. He's flatlined. You should have protected him. You should have stopped it, Willie. Time stops . . . not in Boston anymore. Back in Nam. Mom told me to take care of my brother Malcolm, who's MIA in Vietnam. I should be dead, not Sonny. Can't even help my friend or my brother.

Police arrive and find that motherfucker inside a dark green smelly trash-filled dumpster in the courtyard. I'm on the top. They knock me off with a 2 x 4 in my hand. I hope to never meet that bastard again. Police drag him away. The shelter beefs up security for the next month.

Fran becomes too friendly with her SSDI lawyer. He attends AA, too. We fight. I tell her, "Stop going." I suffer from PTSD and can't sleep because of recurring nightmares and flashbacks, since the attack. I take it out on Fran.

We're penniless, jobless, homeless, and back on the streets. Fran quits the meetings and abandons sobriety. We break-up. Even give the pup back to the animal shelter.

I'm at the blood bank again, making a deposit. Another lucky day. They give fifteen dollars. Hang around, drink all their orange juice.

"Thank you, Sergeant Robinson for your donation and service, but you can't stay here."

“Come on, mam. Just Wille, please.” I turn, walk away, hit the streets, and cash the check at the packy. I’m not in a good mood. Don’t even think about it, Louie. Can he read my mind? There’s no check-cashing fee. Luck’s changing. Got a few dollars. Should I go back to the horse track? I buy scratch tickets.

Young clerk with sad eyes, the one who reminds me of that lost daughter in Vietnam, touches my hand. She turns it over, scans the lines, and shakes her head. “Have a nice day, Willie.”

“If I were a young man . . .” She laughs and hands me my coffee and a paper sack.

A Eulogy at Tent City

I squat on the damp cold ground, back against a black tank, and stare out at a diverse group of fine men and women of mixed ages, ethnicities, and dress style. I'm one of Sonny's friends who gather along a river on a chilly November morning.

My x-girlfriend's here with me, perched on a rock. "Sergeant Robinson, love ya, but you'll never change. You'll never get your shit together."

"Just Willie, please. We almost made it, kid." I scratch my chin. "Shaved for ya, didn't I?"

A tear drops. Hate when she does that. I lean forward, grip my forehead, and shake my head. Fran wipes her tears.

I speak to those gathered to pay tribute to Sonny James. "Brothers and sisters, ya gotta help me out here." Pointing my thumb to my chest I say, "Willie's not making no long-winded-speech. As you know, our brother had his throat slashed by Silent Jim. That son-of-a-bitch. A bad man. I shoulda killed that —."

Too angry to continue, Loser takes over. Red-faced and shivering, "Remember the time Sonny gave ya his peacoat?"

I rub my eyes, "Even though he refused to let me in the shelter, still tossed me a five-spot."

Sporting a black motorcycle jacket, Loser continues, "Sonny always packed a set of sticks. Banged those damn things while dining."

Fran's shaking. I grab an elbow, thinner these days, and steady her as she gets up and points her thumb right. "Except the time Big Harry here had a wicked hangover. Wasn't in the mood for the incessant banging, was ya, Harry? Broke Sonny's drumsticks and walked out. Didn't ya? Ya bastard." The big man's eyes redden, as he drops his head towards the hard ground.

Loser says, "What many don't know, Sonny James was not his real name."

“What was it,” I ask?

“Changed it after getting out of the navy. Back in the day, was one of the top drummers in North America. Played Vegas. Married a chorus girl.”

“I hear a break-up coming.” Fran pretends to be fiddling.

The Loser continues, “She left em. It was her or the drums. Hooked-up with the club owner, had twins, and bought a house in the burbs. Never performed again.”

I say, “At least he sobered up during those last two years. Planned a comeback, too.”

An ex-minister rises, says a few words, passes a basket, and hands me half. My half will get me where Sonny wanted his ashes spread. We rise and head in different directions.

“Where to Fran?”

“Get me out of here, Willie.”

While standing on broken glass, I pick-up an empty whiskey bottle off the hard ground and fling it against the tank. I remove the paper sack from my peacoat and say, “What’s the word, Fran?”

“Thunderbird.”

“What’s the price?”

“Thirty-twice.” She laughs and takes a swig. Several hard coughs and Fran whispers in my ear for a minute.

We embrace. I shake my head, tears gush, and walk alone towards the station with Sonny’s ashes, a set of drumsticks, and Fran’s ‘final’ words rolling around my brain.

Anybody Here Seen Willie?

Two days after saying goodbye, Fran finds herself waiting for him by the light of the moon, leaning against the plate-glass below a flickering neon blue sign. It's so cold. How cold? Cold enough you could ice-fish on the old Muddy River. She sips at a chilled coffee in front of a full service liquor store waiting for the owner to call the uniformed Boston Blue, again.

A *tap-tap-tap* comes from inside the thick window. She straightens up, moves her hand to hip level, and prepares to toss a middle finger . . . Surprise, it is not the creepy owner, this time it's Kathy, the lovely Amerasian clerk. Fast thinking Fran twists her wrist and plunges a balled-up-fist into her pocket.

The clerk sniffs and raises a steaming cup of hot Java overhead, points a finger, and mouths, "Come in," through the plate-glass.

Fran slides a palm out from a pocket, pushes the door open with a click; and steps into the multi-service liquor store. Wine and spirit bottles line rows of shelves, and stand-up coolers rim the perimeter behind a locked cage. A year . . . two years. She wonders how long it would take to drink them all. A twenty-four seven to the right of the front counter remains open after ten PM.

"Please, sit at the table in the corner and warm yourself. Here, take this. Careful, it's hot. Be with ya in a minute. Fran, what happened to the gloves and hat I gave you?"

Fran's jaundiced face is having trouble smiling these days. "Lost 'em. Hot coffee, mmm. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Kathy finishes up the store business.

Fran stretches and lifts her palms to the fluorescent lights. Her watering eyes dart around the store, empty of anyone but her and Kathy and screams as if she was addressing a large audience in a theater. "Anybody here seen my old friend, Willie?" Then she bawls.

Kathy looks left and right, thinking Fran needs to get her shit together. Grimaces as she drifts from behind the counter, “I look every day too, dear. Shh, please.”

“He’s dead, and it’s my fault,”

“Stop it now, damn it, or you’re going to leave.” She hovers over Fran while her hands squeeze and massage her hunched shoulder. “Relax darlin’, he’ll turn up soon.” Quiet, but still she shakes.

The store clerk gives free coffee and special attention when Willie shows up for his wine, or to keep warm, or to cash a check from donating blood. Kathy has taken a liking to him; and not only because he’s destitute. She likes to help homeless people in the neighborhood. But there’s more to it. A long-shot, yes, but there may be a deeper bond between them. He always smiles cause she reminds him he has a daughter in Vietnam. Kathy’s right around the same age.

Willie never met his daughter. He went back, but alcohol, drugs, and PTSD got in the way. His Mom was black. Dad was white. They jailed him for killing Willie’s mother. Kathy’s skin shade is unusual for a young Vietnamese woman; the same shade as Willie’s, in fact. She doesn’t know her biological father, either. He was a G.I., too, based on what the orphan agency reluctantly told her when she turned eighteen.

After staring at the overhead lights for a minute, Fran says, “I’m worried.”

“I have two weeks off, starting tomorrow. Can’t be hard to find him. I’ll cover our expenses. I am sure he’s okay.”

“Honey, I only have a few months to live. I need a new liver.”

“Doctors can do amazing things these days,” says Kathy. “My adopted Mom got a new one. She also attends AA meetings regularly. Life is good.” Kathy continues massaging Fran’s shoulders. “Maybe a day will be enough. Come back, either way. How far could he go? He’s broke.”

Fran circles her head left, then right. “Do you have a car?”

“Yes, my adopted Dad gave me his pride and joy when I graduated.” Eyebrows raised, “Wait’ til you get a load of Miss Blue. A classic 1967 Chevy Malibu.”

“Wow. Convertible?”

“Nah.” Kathy removes her palms from Fran’s shoulders and sits at the table. “Willie’s always been nice to me. Are you clean?”

“Yes, doctor’s orders. I have a problem. The shelter’s holding my Social Security check for me.” Her eyes light up. “Can you cash it? Then I can repay you.”

“No problem. Don’t worry about what you owe me. I just don’t want you buying alcohol, that’s all.” Kathy lets the homeless borrow money. They’re good for it. Sometimes it takes folks a while to pay her back. “When did you last see him?”

“A couple of days ago we went to our friend’s eulogy service at Tent City. Willie took his ashes and drum sticks by bus to the source of the River Charles. A one-way ticket to ride. It’s my fault Willie’s missing. Should have gone with him. I should a — .” She bawls again.

Kathy rolls her eyes. “Can’t have made it too far. Don’t blame yourself. Let’s do it. I’ll figure out where to pick up a map. Ten AM the day after tomorrow, after rush hour, in front of the shelter. Are you sure you’re clean?”

“Yes, I told ya.”

“Don’t lie to me. Alcoholics and junkies come in all the time.”

“I’m not fuckin’ lying. Trust me.”

“I may be nineteen, but I grew up around here. Don’t want to have to carry you. We’re on a mission.”

“Can take care of myself. Twice as old as you.”

“I’ll cash your check, but holding the money. Up to you. Otherwise I go alone.”

Hard to describe Fran’s face after Kathy asks, “Deal. . . ?”

A Funeral on the Bridge

Cold up here on this rusty iron span. For a few bucks, I'll paint this ugly mother. Press a black watch cap real tight, remove paper sack from my peacoat, and test the wind direction by licking and lifting a finger. Toss a set of drumsticks and Sonny from the downwind side of the Red Bridge into the River Charles.

He loved the sea. An eighty-mile waterway takes him through the four hams; Needham and Dedham, crosses paths with Waltham and Bellingham, and flows through Medway, Medfield, and other Massachusetts towns and cities, to run out into the Atlantic via Boston 'Habah.'

My friend's not coming back, no more. Sonny used to always say:

*Brother, can you spare a dime?
Need a drink, ain't got no money.
And ain't got a dime.
Rough out here for a panhandler.
Can't even buy, Thunderbird wine.*

Old ways don't work these days. Panhandling calls for patience, persistence, and writing skills. A Sharpie and invented spelling are acceptable on a raw sheet of cardboard.

Suits not around Government Center on weekends. Find em in their MGs or in a Benz along America's highways, byways, and city roadways.

When broke, jump the turnstile in the subway or like today, hop a train. Must be skill to it. Looks easy, though. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans,' as Sonny would say.

A northeast bound freight comes up from Milford. I sense the vibration on the track and hear a sound round the bend. Get a rush when the engine roars and rumbles, and tracks rattle and roll. Whistle's blowing on that mile-long freighter. When she gets here, I'll go halfway up that giant erector set. An easy climb — even after a few shots of rye. Round that curve she comes, real-

slow-like. Five-foot jump to a slow-moving-train. When I get near
Cambridge, climb down and hop off.

Whistle's blowing. I'll soon be riding the rails. Dig it. Pick out a boxcar Willie.
Got a hundred to choose. Here comes a yellow New England Freight Car.
That be the one. As the sun sets over Western Mass, she comes to a crawl.

Train, take me where I can ease me pain. Lost Mom, Big Daddy in jail,
Romanian girlfriend and family moved again, childhood bud killed in the war,
my squad too. Lost track of Amerasian daughter and older brother Malcom,
still MIA in Vietnam. Train, take me where I can ease my pain. Take me
home train. Perched here, soaked, and listening to that whistle blowing. Rain
and snow falling. Heavy now. River's running fast and high. I jump and roll
on top of that old yellow freight car. Train picks up speed. It jerks. Stop! Stop
this train. Willie here's getting off. I slip and stare into that bottomless river.
Take me home, Charles. Take me home.

Sergeant Robinson's getting off . . . *Just Willie please.*

About the writer:

Don Louis Robishaw has been a sailor, Peace Corps volunteer, bartender, hitchhiker, world traveler, college professor, and circus roustabout. His work appeared in *O:JA&L*, *Literary Orphans*, *Crack-the-Spine*, *Literary Heist*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *O' Dark Thirty*, *FFM* and elsewhere. Robishaw's short collection *BAD ROAD AHEAD* was the winner in Defenestrationism's FLASH SUITE Contest. *Bad Paper Odyssey* was a semi-finalist in the "Digging Through the Fat" Chapbook Contest.

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