

The Odyssey of Frank and Vern

or

Deseree LeBoe and Trolley Car Retribution

James David Rose

“Vern! When you comin out them bushes?”

“Soon as I find me my nickel. I done drop it here somewheres.”

Vern lumbered out of the brush to face his companion. His steps were broad and firm, with rhythm and purpose. The tops of his scuffed leather shoes shone wearily in the early morning dawn as he paced along the tracks. Vern quickened his step causing his bulk to shift from side to side and the pots in his backpack to rattle.

“Frank! I found it. Wait up a minute!” Frank slowed down and turned back to face Vern. Three days of unshaven beard cut a dark path across his chin like a clown’s painted smile. Frank wore a dirty brown fedora. The crease ws puffed out, the brim bent and limp. Like Frank and Vern, it had seen better days. But it had a happy look, a satisfied look, worn like its owner but content. Frank stopped, inspected a button, and squinted into the sun as he watched Vern come up to stand beside him.

“Ain’t got time fo you to lose your money. Got to get goin if we gonna get to Henry by noon. Hurry on up, Vern.” Frank turned around again and started to march down the tracks. Vern was beside him now, puffing slightly. Too much exercise for one morning. Vern wore a derby atop his bald head. There was a large white scuff across it on one side and a hole in the top, a reminder of trolley cars back in Chicago. Vern put a big hand on Frank’s shoulder. It was the hand of a piano player; but he had let his fingernails grow some, and his hands had hit harder things than keys. When Frank did not respond, Vern tapped him.

“Frank, who’s this lady friend of yours in Henry? Why we goin?”

“Miss Tate’s been a friend of my family for a long time. She done write me an say she gonna give us some work to do on account

of the deepressin of the economy, or somin like that. Real nice lady. Gots pretty eyes. Eyes so blue they shock you sober out a three day drunk. Guess most of her's pretty. I ain't seen her in a long time though. She could be ugly now, but she still be the same nice person. Dat who she is." Frank put a hand in his pocket where he felt the folded letter. He ran a thumb through the folds and sighed deeply, thinking of the last time he had seen her—white summer dress with a delicate scent of rosewater. She had been a rose then.

"Oh, no," worried Vern. "I done know that noise. You thinkin marriage on this Miss Tate, ain't you? Ain't you? Womens only gives us mens trouble. She might be nice, but love gonna mess you up." Vern shook his head sadly and scratched the back of his neck.

"I hears you, Vern. My ears hear you and say 'I know,' but my heart say 'Settle down with this nice lady.' Who I spose to listen to. What you know about women anyway? All you done is play piano for them Chicago gangsters and slap up meat hammers. I been knowin Miss Tate for long enough to git married."

"How come you knows her so well and you still calls her 'Miss Tate'? Ain't she got a first name?"

"Miss Felicity Kendell-Tate her name." After Frank said the name with a careful grace and respect, Vern pronounced it slowly, letting each syllable roll off the end of his tongue.

"You sho gonna marry a woman with a mouthful of name," said Vern.

"I knows it."

Vern and Frank walked on a little faster. The sun was rising higher, and the town of Henry was still some fifteen miles away. They entered a wooded area where the tracks buried deeply into the forest. The sun pushed down through the leaves, dripping splotches of light all over the ground. Vern lifted the derby from his head and wiped his cuff over and around his head. He stopped and pulled a drawstring bag from his vest pocket. Squinting at Frank just ahead, Vern began to walk again, rolling a cigarette. Vern came up beside Frank and threw the small bag at him. He threw it back at Vern and stopped.

"Vern, now how am I spose to get married if you keep pushin these bad habits on me. No woman gonna marry me with a smoke between my lips." Frank shook his head and began walking again.

"So you is gonna marry Miss Felicity Kendell-Tate!" Vern sounded like a detective uncovering the identity of a murderer. "You is! I done knowed it. First them sorry dog eyes and then that sigh. I seen it nuff times before. She done smitten you."

"Smitten me? What that spose to mean? Smitten?" Frank stopped again.

"Heard it in some song I done played at the Hotel Carmichael in Chicago. Pretty song. Do you wife got a piano?"

"My wife! I not even married the woman yet. She might've even forgot about us by now. Took nearly four months to find us in Louisville. I don't know bout no piano, though. I sure hope she do have one. Been a long time since I heard you tickle them ivories." Frank smiled in memory. His mind flashed briefly back to the Hotel Carmichael where he first saw Vern in a tux behind a black Steinway.

"Oh, Frank, you member that lady who used to sing back there. She had the prettiest white teeth and the blackest hair. So black it shined. Her skin was like coffee. Oh, she was a one."

"I hears you talkin, Vern. Never seen a prettier woman. How come you never put a ring on her? Make a great team, the two of you would. You and Deseree LeBoe." Frank put Deseree into the picture sitting on top of the black piano. She was wearing a cream-colored dress slit up one side. "Lot of leg on that woman," Frank thought.

"Heh! Nope. She was already married. Her name weren't Deseree, though."

"It weren't?" Frank asked very perplexed.

"Deseree was only a stage name. Her real name were Wanda Elson." Vern kicked a small stone. It spurred noisily off the rail and into the green, landing somewhere in the shadows.

"Wanda? She ain't look like no Wanda." Frank wiped the name of Deseree from the plate at the bottom of his memory picture and thought in Wanda. It didn't fit anyway he looked. A woman as lovely as Deseree was never, never a Wanda. "To me she always Deseree LeBoe, I tell you now. Deseree with the long legs. Pretty toes too. Not a whole lot of women with pretty toes. Whatever happened to her? You heard anything about her after she left the Hotel Carmichael?"

"Bout four months after she quit, someone tole me she haul off and marry one of them white gangsters. Magine that! Miss Skin-Like-Coffee marry some white man. Never saw her after she left, though. Might all be pure bull. Didn't even get invited to the wedding. She sit on my piano for two years, and she not even invited me to the wedding."

"Women," Frank said with disgust.

"Whoa! Listen to your mouth. You say 'women' like you spittin bad milk out, and you yourself gonna haul off and marry one by the time we get to Henry."

"I ain't said I goin marry the woman!" Frank stopped dead and planted a foot in the gravel between the ties. A bead of sweat popped

onto his forehead and the crow's feet around his eyes deepened. "I said I was thinking of it. You gots to get it straight what people says is what they says. Not what you think they done said. Now let's get goin." Frank quivered for a second and then stormed off down the tracks. The forest opened up a few yards ahead. Vern just stood there with his head down, looking at the quartz flecks in the gravel. He looked up, licked his teeth, hissed slowly, and jammed his hands deep into his pockets. The pots rattled in his pack as he shifted from side to side walking the tracks, listening to the scrunch of the gravel beneath his shoes. Frank broke into the sunlight just as Vern caught up with him. The sun was a good deal higher and a good deal hotter. The burning ties stretched toward a distant horizon. The ties went on into forever, but the travelers didn't have to get to forever, only to Henry, and they wouldn't make it there by noon.

Vern shuddered as he realized there was a hole in his pocket. He had lost his nickel again. Best not to mention it. Vern coughed.

"Frank," Vern said low and calm, "it's gettin hot and we're both tired and been walking together a little too long, maybe. But you're my friend and I didn't mean no harm."

"I's sorry too. I didn't mean to yell like that. It is a little hot. We ain't never goin to get to Henry by lunch time. We might need that nickel of yours to help buy some lunch." Vern's heart sank.

"Frank." Frank turned to look at Vern who had turned out his pocket with the hole in it. Frank began to laugh a little. Then Vern began to laugh a little too.

They walked through Gleason and read a little news and stared through the window of a restaurant watching the white-coated waiters twist among the diners. Then they walked out of Gleason, hungry, but a little better for the wear. Then it began to rain.

The drops pipped down slowly at first, refreshing in the summer warmth, hissing on the heated rails. The sun was still shining, and only a few clouds were dark. But soon a thunderhead rolled up, as if sensing that two people would be out in the open to drown in the misery of a storm. The rain began to slice down in a fury; wind whipped around them threatening to steal their hats. Both Vern and Frank held onto their hats like children refusing to give up their teddy bears to maturity. Vern's pots rattled in the sack, and Frank's shoes opened up to the rushing torrent of water guzzling between the tracks. The sound of thunder rushed down upon them making the two travelers jump. The thunderhead grinned icily down at them. Vern shouted through the deluge:

"Frank, we gots to find a place to get out of this rain!"

"Yeah!" Frank looked around and saw nothing. He knew that for eight more miles there would be nothing, only a storm. "There

ain't nothin' ahead for bout eight more miles. We can go back to Gleason," Frank said, not meaning it.

"We could, but I don't want to. By the time we git there, sits out the storm, and walk this far again, we'd be in Henry. No use. Let's keep goin'. I needed a bath anyway." Vern splashed on ahead. Frank followed, thinking that he needed a bath too, especially to see Miss Tate. He thought of Miss Tate and her house. He imagined doilies and vases, pretty lace curtains and velvet couches, which Miss Tate lounged comfortably on one with a rose between her teeth. Frank had seen that in a movie. He had liked that. Frank saw himself sitting at a table set with real china covered in blue floral designs just like in the Sears catalogue. An indoor toilet, yes, and a big parlor (with a piano for Vern). The wedding cake would have three tiers and little marzipan people on the top, while two doves fluttered in a white cage nearby. Yes.

"You thinkin' bout that wedding. I knows it. Your eyes got that puppy dog look in 'em. I hope you have lots to eat there cause I am hungry."

"Vern, the weddin' won't be for a few days, and I am sure you would've eaten by then. So hush your stomach and let's hurry on up." Frank walked on, turning on the picture again. Photographs on the walls, wallpaper with little flowers, newspaper every morning. Yes. Very nice. Miss Tate sitting on the bed covered in satin sheets (pink); Miss Tate wearing revealing night attire (pink), little bedroom slippers (pink) with puffy balls on the top (pink), skin like coffee, long legs, and pretty toes.

Frank blinked himself back to reality when the piercing whistle of a train split the air. The train approached with a fury sounding like a herd of iron bulls. The huge lamp on the front burst around them and threw their shadows far ahead. The rhythmic punch of the wheels bore down upon them as they scrambled to get off the tracks. The air, hot from the steam engine, ripped past them, pulling at their clothes while the tracks clattered under the weight of the monstrous cars. It was frightening, like a dragon from the past belching acrid plumes of smoke and roaring in a cacophonous thunder. The freight left Frank and Vern in the calm of the rain.

"Vern, I was sittin' here thinkin' bout the weddin' and all, and you know what?"

"What?"

"Miss Felicitee Kendell-Tate done started lookin' like Deseree LeBoe."

"Uh-hum," Vern replied flatly.

"What that souse to mean?"

"It mean what it say. I knows what I knows and I knows you

ain't the type to marry. Not to marry no woman with a name like Felicity Kendell-Tate." Vern made the hyphen almost audible. Frank stopped, clenched his elbow with his right hand and massaged a screaming muscle. Vern plodded on ahead through the slackening rain. Vern waited for Frank to catch up. They walked in silence until they saw a sign that read, "HENRY: 1 MILE."

"One mile left."

"Uh-hum," Vern said again flatly, a little worried this time.

"You been very quiet, Vern. What you been thinkin bout?"

"You member that paper we read in Gleason? It said some man in Union City hiring piano players for his hotel. I figure if I walk you to Henry, I can make it back in two days if I hop the next freight train."

"What you sayin?"

"I ain't gonna stay in Henry with you. I's sad to leave you, but you gonna marry up and leave me out in the cold. Don't say you ain't, cause you is. I know them dog eyes and that heavy breathin. You is smitten by a lady you knowed twenty-five years ago who you think look like Deseree LeBoe. She ain't gonna be no Deseree LeBoe, and I think you knows it too. I's sorry, but I can't stay around and watch you live a life that's wrong for you. Frank, I is gonna ask you once to come with me to Union City and see bout gettin jobs at this hotel. I goin to ask you once, and then I gonna leave. Frank, come with me to Union City."

Frank's face darkened, his eyes brimming with anger. He plunged his hands deep into his pockets and turned toward Henry with clear resignation. Vern watched him and sighed. Frank stopped and felt the letter in his pocket, soggy and pulpy. He brought it out into the now drizzle of rain. The ink was washed away, smeared and confused. It ripped easily in his hands. Frank slowly flicked off the wet paper and turned back to Vern. Vern looked at him from below the visor of the derby. Frank stared at the hole in the crown and remembered the street car. Number seven it was, driven by Riley Cooper who had a dimple in his chin and a waxed mustache. Riley Cooper had run down that derby like a bull. Given the chance, Riley would have strapped the derby to the front of his trolley in mute vanity. Frank's own beloved fedora had just narrowly escaped that fate as well.

Frank took off his fedora and slapped a crease into the top with the edge of his hand. He put it back on his head and followed Vern down the tracks to Union City. The sun shone past the emptied clouds, dragging their shadows back toward Henry. Soon the shadows were gone too. ■