

Out of the Woods

Jeff Dowdy

With love to my patient
and loving wife, Amy,
who sat with me
through a 30-day
writing marathon.
I love you.

I

About a month ago Marge and I had moved down to White Purchase (whatever the name meant or suggested I wasn't sure). White Purchase was down further south than I'd ever wanted to admit that I lived. Since I was from Atlanta I was from the south and despite losing a lot of my accent while away at school and avoiding being too heavily influenced because of my parents, I was from the south.

After finishing graduate school doing nothing to booster my financial worth to anyone, we moved down to White Purchase and I got a job at the local paper, the White Purchase Post. Initially I'd hoped to fill my days with sports writing, maybe even interning with ESPN (if there were such a thing), but good sense had me send out a resume and start where I felt I had the best chance at actually working. My desk at the Post consisted of an old standard issue work desk, wide with a fake wood grain on top and three drawers down the right side. I had some sort of sorter on my desk (left by the past employee) to store things although I never seemed to understand what to fill it with. ON the side table forming a kind of L with the desk was my computer work station. It wasn't a personal computer but more of some kind of monitor and keyboard connected to some central mainframe. I'm not sure how to describe it since all I'd been exposed to prior to the Post was personal computers.

My chair thankfully swiveled. There were no tears in the leather with foam coming out and it didn't adjust in height. It was o.k. and I would manage. I had a small rectangular corner of a window behind my monitor but couldn't see out for the blinds that I shared with the cubicle next to me. At the entrance to my work space was a major byway. If you were going to speak to the editor, you walked past my desk. If you

were the editor and going to speak to any of the newswriters, again you went by my desk, etc... So I was on the job when at work even when there wasn't much to do like on Wednesdays the day of one of our bi-weekly delivery.

Marge and I lived in a small apartment in an old yellow 100 year old house. The house had been divided up into two apartments, one in the front and ours in the back. It was kind of a loft apartment or at least similar to what I thought of as a loft apartment. Walking in the only entrance you were faced with a room that stretched to both sides of the house. On the right we'd put our sofa and television and on the left our kitchen table. Also on the right were the steps that led upstairs to our bedroom and the only bathroom in the house. Back further to the left was our kitchen and under the steps was another extremely small room were we stored some of our books and photo albums and were Marge kept her weights.

Marge was an incessant exerciser. When I first met her I decided I would go and run with her. I'm not a runner and will never be a runner. When faced with the question of run or fight. I would fight nine times out of ten because I couldn't risk wasting my energy running because an eighty year old man could catch me. But for Marge I decided to run.

The first time out maybe she just took it easy on me. We probably went 2 and 1/2 miles. And I felt like our pace was pretty leisurely. Marge is pretty friendly to strangers so I guess she thought it would have been rude for her to run off and leave me which she so easily could have done (she tells me now). The second time out was much of the same and I even felt by weeks end that I could like running and that I definitely could like Margie.

Then the next week instead of running with Margie it was like I was running with the Road Runner no more like I was running with the Tasmanian Devil. She nonchalantly

high school was located about seven miles outside of town from the square. It was a beautiful gym was large paned windows and thick pine board siding painted white. Just walking into the gym I felt like I was walking onto the small court where Larry Bird or Pistol Pete got their start.

The city league played twice a week during the season. My team was the Post-Its, made up mostly of some of the black young guys who worked in the printing section for the Post and James from advertising. I was thrilled about the team and thankful that we only had six players show up most games, otherwise I might not have made it on the floor.

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Climbing out of my car I reached over to grab my notebook and my camera. I patted my front pockets and located my pen, locked the door and walked up to the old green shotgun-like house. The door was half-cracked open and I could hear voices inside, black ladies talking loud.

One of the ladies came to the door and let me in. They were all sitting around in a circle drinking sweet tea and dressed like they had been to church that morning even though it was a Thursday.

Everyone introduced me to Ms. Sally, the lady I'd come to photograph and interview.

"Nice to meet you Ms. Sally and congratulations," I said.

"Well, I never dreamed something like this could happen to little old me," she replied. She and the ladies all laughed and nudged one another.

"I just have a few questions."

"Go right ahead dear," Ms. Sally said sitting up in her lazy boy and crossing her legs at her ankles.

"O.k. First, do you regularly purchase lotto tickets?"

"Well," Ms. Sally said, "I guess there ain't no hiding it."

I smiled and the ladies all laughed.

"I started buying the tickets at Anderson's 10 years ago, I guess. Things were getting pretty slim and I'd hoped it could help, you know. I'd pick up some ground beef, onions, milk, the regular stuff and then if I had any left over I'd buy the tickets."

"How did you pick the numbers," I interrupted.

"Well, I can't tell all my secrets," Ms. Sally said putting her hand over her mouth and laughing, which all the ladies loved, dancing around a little bit.

"The numbers were always the same. I got three children of my own. I raised several but they weren't mine."

"I'd always put their birthdays on the ticket, the day of the month they were born," she said.

"I see."

"Well, if you ladies would be kind enough, could you gather around for a picture. Ms. Sally, you stay right there in the chair and you all just gather around."

"You wouldn't happen to have *the* ticket, would you?" I asked.

Ms. Sally pointed over to the hutch along the wall and one of the ladies bounced over on her toes and retrieved the ticket.

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Back in the car I flipped out my cell phone and called Margie.

“You won’t believe where I was just now.” I said

“What? Where?”

“I was at this 84-year-old lady’s house who just won the lottery. Here in White Purchase!”

“What? You’re kidding me. She had one of the tickets that won?”

“Yeah, unbelievable. You should have seen the crew gathered at her house to celebrate.”

“That’s incredible. What are you doing now?”

“I’m driving back to the Post and then a little later I’m going over to City Hall to talk with a Mr. Hemmings. He also had a ticket.”

“No way,” said Margie. “I guess you won’t be home for lunch then, huh?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“O.k.”

“Well, I’ll see you tonight,” I said hanging up the phone.

Chason Hemmings had been the city manager of White Purchase for the past 10 years or so. I couldn’t get the story straight. He’d left recently to start work in real estate, something for the industrial side of town.

Chason was about 55 from what I could gather and had many people in White Purchase who didn’t particularly like him and several others that followed him around as if he were the president. He’d thought about trying for Sheriff but the real estate proved a better opportunity, I guess.

I drove up behind City Hall which proved not to hard to find. It was just off the square in a white brick building and had apparently been there for decades. I walked into the front reception, a small room with fake wood siding and brown thin carpet. Whether I’d been this thin originally was hard to tell, but a track was worn heavily from the entrance to the side door leading back to the offices. Reception must have only been for a few of whom I guess I was one of.

“Yes, I’m here to see Mr. Hemmings,” I said to the receptionist.

She ignored me for a second, writing something down and then looked up.

“Hi honey,” she said with a smile stretching across her round face.

“And what’s your name,” she asked.

“I’m Stan Priest from the Post,” I said.

“O.k. I’ll tell him you’re here. Have a seat, dear. Just a second, o.k.,” she said picking up the phone.

I turned around and sat in one of the metal and leather black chairs next to the magazine rack. I checked my camera to make sure that I had plenty of film... 14 left. And I patted my pockets to feel for my pen and notebook.

In front of me on the far wall were the names of past mayors and city councilmen and city managers. Chason’s name was still up as the most recent city manager. I guess still not enough time to change it.

“So Stan when did you get here to White Purchase?” the receptionist asked.

Surprised I turned in my seat and stood back up where I could see her.

"I guess it's been about 3 weeks since we moved down."

"We? So you're married?" she asked.

"Yes. Margie. We met in college," I said.

"That's nice. Well, my name is Darla Murphy, and if you need anything you just let me know. I guess we'll see more of you since you're at the Post."

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Chason called me into his office around 11:35. Why he had an office I didn't know? My responsibility was simple. Get the facts about the winning lottery ticket, snap the picture and get back to the Post to write it up.

"Mr. Hemmings, thanks for seeing me. Stan Priest," I said introducing myself even though we'd spoken on the phone to set things up.

"And congratulations," I added.

"It's nice to meet you son. Have a seat," he said in a paternal tone.

"So, you were city manager for a while," I said.

"That's right. 10 years."

"How was that? Was White Purchase a handful?" I couldn't help my sarcastic tone. I hoped he didn't pick up on it.

He didn't answer but just laughed so I got to the point. "So where did you buy the lotto ticket?"

"I buy all my lottery down at Anderson's One-Stop. I like to stop by and talk football with Sandy and usually I just pick my numbers while we're chatting," he said.

Anderson's, I thought. Sammy is making some people rich around here.

"Where were you when you found out that you'd won a share in Georgia's biggest pot to date?" I asked.

"I heard it on the radio in my car. You know they announce it after the news segment in the afternoon. I was driving back from visiting my daughter in Atlanta," he said.

"When he called out the numbers I didn't have my ticket with me. Of course I wasn't suspecting to win," he added. "But I knew I was close when I heard the first few."

"I always do the same first two numbers, my age. I guess I'm getting better with age," he laughed.

I thought that would sound good in the Post and would give a good laugh to those who adore him and a sneer to those that hate him. I wrote it down in my notebook.

"Well, can I take your picture with the ticket?" I asked.

"Let's go outside. It's a nice day," he said. *Hot as anything*, I thought.

"Besides, I don't really work here anymore even though I miss the place."