

Although it did not get as much acclaim as his stylized prose and fine sense of drama, Roger's writing often exhibited an element of wry, even low, humor. "The fit hit the Shan" broke into the otherwise poetic prose of Lord of Light. The Hugo Award-winning "Unicorn Variation" introduced beer-drinking unicorns and sasquatches. The part of Roger that reveled in that humor would certainly take great delight in Jay Haldeman's irreverent look at fairyland tale.

SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT

JACK C. HALDEMAN II

ETHEL WAS BORN TO TROUBLE. SHE HAD A MEAN STREAK THAT flat wouldn't quit. Getting exiled from the Enchanted Forest was the best thing that ever happened to her.

Being stuck in real-time Earth was supposed to be the ultimate punishment among the fairy community, but that was not Ethel's read on the situation. Let the do-gooders have their pixie dust and magic wands; Ethel would take a cold beer and a thrown rod any day of the week. Besides, she *liked* smelly bait; the riper it was, the better she liked it.

Ethel had lost her wings over a variety of infractions, minor and major. From short-sheeting the Queen Fairy's bed to tromping down the flowers in Tranquil Garden, she had been in hot water from the time she was a mere tad of a fairy. Getting the boot had only been a matter of time.

She blamed her parents. Not for the mutation in her fairy genes, but for her name. *Ethel!* What the hell kind of a name was that for a fairy? Fairies were supposed to have cute, perky names like Trixie or Trina. Either that or something classical like Titania or Hypotenuse. *Ethel!* It sounded like some sort of a petroleum byproduct. No wonder she turned out so sorry and deranged. She'd been marked at birth. Marked bad.

Ethel shrugged and sniffed the squid. Even for bait, it was wonderfully past its prime. She threw a spare tentacle to Luther, who snarled once and darted a dirty gray paw out from the shadows behind the jukebox to grab it. This, of course, woke up Diablo, whose untrimmed toenails clicked against the concrete floor of the bait and beer store as he came over to check things out.

Diablo was the ugliest and meanest-looking pit bull Ethel had ever seen. She'd won him in a poker game in a most dishonest fashion. Only a few of Ethel's fairy powers remained and they included manipulating games of chance, causing vehicle difficulties, and capsizing boats. All very handy powers when running a bait shop in this godforsaken Florida swamp. She tossed a rotten tentacle to Diablo, who caught it on the fly with a resounding snap of his powerful jaws.

Later he would probably go out and eat grass and throw up on the floor like he always did. Ethel scratched his ugly head and whapped him on the nose.

"Good dog," she said, bending the truth.

The screen door creaked open and a brief hint of light crept into the dark store. Slow-moving and looking every one of his sixty-four years, Bayport Bob shuffled past the warped pool table and somehow managed to find his way to a stool.

"Morning, Ethel," he muttered.

"The usual?" she asked.

He nodded. Ethel cracked a can of Budweiser and set it in front of the old man. She dug out a bag of frozen chicken necks and set it beside the beer.

Diablo gave Bayport Bob's left boot a cursory sniff and went back to settle down on top of a stack of old newspapers by the wood stove. The old guy wasn't much interesting to Diablo, being a regular who came in every morning for a beer and a bag of chicken necks.

Bayport Bob was a crabber of sorts. He had a few traps he ran from his john boat in the salt marsh that surrounded Ethel's Bait and Beer. Bob was not a successful crabber. On a good day he might make enough to pay for his beer and have a few coins left over to supplement his Social Security.

Once a month, if the crabbing had been good, Bob and his wife Darlene would drive into town and have a real sit-down dinner at Pete's Barbecue. They were simple people, and it was their only extravagance.

Ethel pulled the floaters out of the live bait tanks while Bob sipped his breakfast. She made a small pile of the dead shrimp and shiners, their

bloated bodies already start-ing to rot. She wrapped them in tinfoil and put them in the beer cooler next to the Coors. They'd make dandy snacks for Luther, doled out at irregular intervals during the day.

A group of loud college students came in and bought a case of beer and some snacks. Party time. Diablo snarled at them and so did Ethel. Their laughter and youthful energy—being out of place on such a wonderfully gloomy morning—grated on her nerves. She short-changed them and slipped a smelly squid-soaked napkin in the bottom of their bag of groceries, but it wasn't enough.

As they were walking out, Ethel felt the familiar tingling in the area of her shoulder blades where her wings had been. It was time to use one of her powers.

She closed her eyes and visualized the college students standing by the side of the road, shaking their heads at their car, hood up, steam billowing out. Yep. Radiator trouble, that's the ticket. She grinned. Done deal.

"Later, Ethel," said Bayport Bob, making his arthritic way out. His bag of chicken necks—crab bait—dripped blood in his unsteady wake.

Ethel grunted goodbye. Then she started on her morn-ing tasks.

First she stopped up all the bathroom sinks with wads of toilet paper. Nothing like a wet bathroom floor to make patrons a bit edgy. Then she loosened the toilet seats so that they wobbled precariously and might even fall off if one was not balanced precisely upon the porcelain throne. She stuck a bent quarter in the tampon machine, effec-tively jamming it and rendering it useless. She checked the cartons of milk to make sure their expiration dates were ancient history. The butter and cooking oil passed her sniff test for the proper level of rancid aroma.

It helped that she was stuck here at the armpit of no-where, at the end of about thirty miles of axle-breaking limerock road. Her customers, such as they were, had no other choice.

The meat cooler was running about fifteen degrees above safe temperature and there were mosquitoes breed-ing in the mop bucket. A one-legged chicken sat on the pool table, shedding feathers.

Ethel smiled as she wrapped tainted day-old tuna fish sandwiches. Real-time earth was one fine place. She had no complaints. It beat the hell

out of namby-pamby land.

The morning passed quickly enough. Mostly regulars coming in for an early beer or people wanting bait, directions, or free advice.

Ethel took liberties with the free advice part, figuring people got what they paid for. She gave one tourist couple directions to Mosquito Lagoon, telling them it was a secret bass fishing spot. They'd be eaten alive by the nasty bug-gers and lucky if they caught anything but malaria. She got a kick out of that one.

For Ethel had a nasty streak about six lanes wide that ran through the Interstate Highway of her soul, and she loved every bit of potholed pavement. Exile was freedom, pure and simple. Her life as a merry prankster could not be broken unless she performed an unselfish and totally altruistic act of kindness to relieve someone's suffering. Fat chance. Ethel was looking forward to a long and productive stay. She cackled to herself as she tapped a keg of flat beer and tossed Luther a shrimp head which he caught from the shadows with a snap and a snarl.

Lunch was always fun, because she had a captive clientele. There simply wasn't anyplace else around for people to eat. Her specialty was fried fish sandwiches on stale buns. It was amazing what people would eat if you smeared enough tartar sauce on it. Once in a while someone would complain about the feathers or a piece of turtle shell in their fried fish sandwich, but all they'd get in return was car trouble down the road.

"Born lucky, that's me," said Scratch, washing a fish sandwich down with a warm beer. "Always have been."

"You so lucky, how come you ain't rich?" cackled Martha, who was having her usual lunch fare, two bags of chips and three beers.

Scratch ignored her. He was prone to ignore things that didn't feature him prominently. "Only last night, I won twenty dollars and a fine horse playing poker at Bert's."

"Horse," laughed Fred, who wore a set of grease-covered overalls with *Sam* stitched above the left pocket. "That horse was a mule. An old one, too. A sorrier animal I've never seen."

"Luck will out," said Scratch, looking real proud of himself.

"So how about a lottery ticket?" said Ethel. "This week's jackpot's up

to sixteen million.”

“I believe I will,” said Scratch, pulling a wrinkled dol-lar bill out of his pocket and putting it on the bar. “Give me one of those quick picks.”

Ethel punched the machine. Her shoulders tingled as it coughed out a supposedly random number, but one that would be one digit off all six winning numbers on Satur-day’s drawing.

“I’m off to catch me some speeders,” said Gus, a dep-uty sheriff who loved pork rinds, Dr Pepper, and throwing his considerable weight around.

It was next to impossible that anyone could speed on the pothole-infested roads around Ethel’s Bait and Beer. Gus just liked to give people a hard time. He was prone to calling everyone he came into contact with *suspect*, and giving poor people broke down with car trouble even more trouble.

Gus had a blown head gasket in his future. In his *real near* future.

It started to rain after lunch, and the place filled up with construction workers looking to kill some time. Ethel stayed busy and before she knew it, the day had slid into night.

The regulars were in place and Ethyl was so busy crack-ing beers she almost didn’t notice Bayport Bob come in. But she did see him, and he looked awful. He was soaked and slumped. He sighed as he took the end stool at the dark end of the bar and started counting out nickels, dimes, and pennies.

It was rare to see Bayport Bob in at night. His usual was to have one beer during the day when he got his bait. Ethel walked over.

“Bad day?” she asked, setting a beer in front of him.

Bob nodded, adding two more pennies to the collection in front of him to make it right and pushing the pile toward Ethel. “Dirt in my gas line,” he said. “Boat quit on me out by Miller’s Pass in the storm. Ten crabs. I ain’t never gonna make no money this way.”

“At least you got Darlene to go home to,” said Ethyl.

“Not this week,” sighed Bob. “She’s up in Atlanta for the tests.”

Ethel looked at him.

“They say they can fix it with an operation, but we can’t afford it. We done sold everything we got to pay for the doctors already. All I got left is that damn boat and it don’t run now.”

Larry called for another round and Ethel left Bayport Bob to take care of the rowdy group. On her way to get clean glasses she punched the lotto machine.

After Larry, she stopped to explain to Bertha for the millionth time that she didn’t serve no drinks with umbrel-las in them, then she moved down the bar to pop five quick beers and cleaned up where Diablo had piddled on the leg of a bar stool. On her way back to Bayport Bob, she palmed the ticket out of the lotto machine.

“Customer left this,” she said, putting the ticket in front of him. “Might as well take it.”

“Think it’s lucky?” asked Bob, holding the ticket up to the light.

“Yes, I do,” said Ethel, tossing some dead squid to the cat and feeling a hot burn across her shoulder.

Damn. She’d done it.

An unselfish act of kindness was about to suck her back to the Enchanted Forest. All that sweetness and light. She could hardly bear the thought.

Well, at least there would still be flowers to trample in the Tranquil Garden and the Queen Fairy could always use a tweak or two. Ethel had always been one to make the best of a bad situation.

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AFTERWORD

I first met Roger in Baltimore in the sixties. For over thirty years we were friends. Thirty years is a long time for most things, but this thirty years was far too short. He was a good friend and I miss him terribly.

I was a fan when we met, attracted to the science fiction world because of my love for the literature and the com-panionship of like-minded

people. And to be truthful, the beer and all-night parties didn't hurt.

When I started writing professionally, Roger lived a few blocks away. He read most of what I wrote and was very supportive. It helped a lot.

A quiet man by nature, Roger had a great sense of humor. I fondly remember his laugh and the wry amusement he could find in all things human.

He enjoyed the short, humorous stories I occasionally wrote. Roger followed them closely, and would call or write me about a particular story or character of mine that caught his eye.

When he was putting together the anthology *Warriors of Blood and Dream*, he called me and asked for one of my short funny pieces to balance out the book. Actually, he asked for two of them, one for another collection, but I only had time for one.

The story was "True Grits," about a backwoods Southern redneck whose "martial arts" specialty was bashing people on the head with a tire iron. Roger liked the story a lot. He died as the book was coming out.

So "Southern Discomfort" is another short Southern humor piece. Maybe it was the one I didn't have time for.

The one that neither of us had enough time for.