

## The Great White Bed

by Don Webb

*In Don Webb's new story collection, When They Came, Bruce Sterling is quoted as saying, "Don Webb is a genius. He's not widely appreciated. There are some things mankind was not meant to know." Perhaps humanity was not meant to know the things alluded to in this new story. Or maybe it's more frightening if we were meant to know these things....*

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I wanted to write about the bed because I thought it would be therapeutic. For pretty obvious reasons I never got over that summer, and I know there's a mental part to go along with the physical part. I don't write about the book. And see, I'm already there. I can't make myself think about what I need to think about. The room. The bedroom. I can start with that. It smelled of geraniums. My grandmother had loved them and it had become my job to keep them alive after she died. She grew them in coffee cans, and when they got too root-bound she would put them in plastic buckets that she got working at the cleaners. Clay pots were an extravagance. There were five of the big light blue buckets on a special shelf built across the windows in the bedroom, so the bedroom always had a green smell.

It was hot too. There were two swamp coolers that cooled the house down. One in the living room at the front of the house, one in the den in the back. Neither supplied much cool air to the place where I slept. I remember the first thing that Grandpa had asked when I moved in with him that summer was if I wanted to sleep with him. I thought that was creepy and I said I'd sleep in the guest bedroom, where Granny did her sewing. It was so hot that I never turned down the big white thick bedspread on the bed and lay on the sheets. I just lay on top of it. I didn't want anything over my body. At home I slept on a twin bed; the king size bed seemed the biggest thing in the world to me.

I was thirteen. Next year would be junior high.

I helped Grandpa out. I cooked his meals, did his laundry, cut the grass. In retrospect it was a big job for someone my age, but I came from a family of workers. I didn't do a good job with the laundry and my food repertoire relied heavily on Spam baked in the oven covered with ketchup.

My friends were rich kids, mainly in camp or hanging out at the private swimming pool. These days I know they weren't rich, but they seemed rich to me. I amused myself with TV, watching old black and white comedies in syndication. I remember that summer had a good dose of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* mixed up with the strangeness. Cable TV was new to Doublesign that year. We got twenty-eight stations. Grandpa would get up early and wake me up. He had been a farmer, before they moved to town. Kids are not supposed to see the dawn in summer, no matter what anyone says. He liked cereal for breakfast. He really liked one called Team, I don't think they make it anymore. He would make coffee and I would pour the cereal. Afterward he would go off to read the paper and I would do

the dishes. If I had any yard work to do I would do it in the mornings before it got too hot. I trimmed the hedge, cut the grass, weeded out the dandelions. Early on I had tried to keep a little garden going. I had planted some tomatoes and cucumbers. But one day Grandpa weeded them all out of the bed where I had planted them. His mind was going, but no one in the family would say so. When I tried to stop him he hit me with his cane and said I was stupid. Like I say, even without the weirdness, it was a big job.

Noon would come around and Mom would join us for lunch, which I had made. She worked downtown, a mysterious place full of much activity. She would eat my ketchup-covered Spam and canned green beans and visit with her dad. Sometimes he would ask her things like “How come I haven’t seen you in a month?” even though she came every day. In the afternoons he would forget that we had eaten lunch and ask me when the hell I was going to fix it. He took a nap about three, and I know this will sound strange, but I started napping too. Summer was long and boring and it was easy to doze off. I would lay down in the green smell on the huge white bed and snooze.

School had been out about three weeks, when I woke one day to seeing Grandpa reading the book. I always took shorter naps than him so I was startled he was up. I went in the living room. He sat in his rocking chair and even though the light streaming in through the picture window lighted the room, he had Grandmother’s prize lamp turned on. I loved that lamp. It had two globes, one above and one below. Someone had painted a rose on each globe. I wonder who has it now.

The book was small and thick—about the size of a Stephen King paperback. It was bound in gold-colored leather, and had a green nine-angled design on its cover. I don’t want to say more about it. I didn’t mean to say that much.

Grandpa was totally absorbed, his lips moving slowly. I had only seen him with a few *Reader’s Digests* over the years. His concentration had been slipping so much since Granny died I didn’t know how he could be reading. I guessed he probably wasn’t. Just distracting himself. I was always in favor of his distractions. He didn’t get mad at me and I didn’t have to think up things to talk about. It was a lot easier cutting his lawn than coming up with discussion topics.

I made macaroni and cheese plus canned yams for dinner. I didn’t disturb him until I had food on his plate. He came in, we said our prayers, and afterward we watched the six o’clock news. We watched TV together every night. He would fall asleep about eight. I would get him up and tell him to undress about ten.

The next day I had a pleasant surprise. Sunlight woke me, not Grandpa. I got up, pulled on my clothes, and found him reading again.

“Hey, you ready for breakfast?” I asked.

“You bet,” he said.

His eyes had the shine they used to have when I was a little kid. He got up out of his chair and told me, “You know, I think you’re old enough to have coffee now.”

He put a great deal of sugar and milk in my coffee. I loved it and I still do. We ate our cereal in our usual crunchy silence, until curiosity got the better of me.

“What’s that book you’re reading?”

He looked at me as though I had said something very strange, like, “Are we going to the moon this afternoon?” He said, “I’m not reading anything.”

“Not now. I meant just before breakfast.”

“I wasn’t reading anything.”

The light went out of his eyes just as though someone had hit the switch.

I did the dishes and went off to watch *I Married Joan*. The TV was in the den. After laughing at Joan Davis’s antics for a quarter of an hour or so, I went to the front of the house and spied on Grandpa. He was reading. He seemed about halfway through the book. I cleared my throat. He didn’t look up. “I’m going down to the park,” I said. He didn’t look up. I went back to watching TV. Maybe his senility had entered a new peaceful stage.

When Mom came that day, Grandpa was talkative and cheerful. He told Mom what a great job I did with the lawn, how much he liked my food, his opinion of the Mayor and otherwise talked like an adult human being. I didn’t know what had happened, but I thought it was the greatest thing ever!

Mom gave me some money so that I could walk down to the Ice Palace and buy cones for Grandpa and myself later that day. I knew she was happy. She had been through so much grief watching her dad rot, and she thought that maybe, just maybe this time, God had listened to our prayers. I thought it was my cooking. Okay, I really didn’t think that. I thought it was the book.

It was on the walk down to the Ice Palace that greed filled my soul. What if really and truly the book was making Grandpa well again? If it could fix up his tore-up mind, what might it do for mine? I mean, my mind was good; I made A’s in math and English, and I could always outsmart people in game shows. I would get the book. Not take it from Grandpa, because I didn’t want to stop his miracle, but read sometime when he was asleep and get my own benefit. I would begin junior high as a genius!

The first logical time would be afternoon nap. I watched the old Seth Thomas clock on the living room mantel with X-ray eyes. Grandpa read. It became three.

“Don’t you want to take your nap?” I asked.

I had to repeat myself a couple of times before he looked up.

“I’m giving up naps in the afternoon,” he said. “I think I’ve slept enough in my long life. But I bet you sure are sleepy.”

The moment he said it, all I could think of was sleep. The great white bed filled my mind. Big and solid and soft. It seemed huge and inviting. The bed was in my head and I needed to be in the bed. I started to speak, but I just yawned. I got control of myself and said, “A nap does sound good.”

I went to the bedroom and lay atop the thick white bedspread. Usually I had to lie still for a long while, staring at the round glass light fixture that Granny had put in. I would watch the center brass nut and focus on it while my thoughts drained away into the milky white glass around it. But today sleep came the moment I lay on the pillow. I slept until Grandpa woke me.

“Get up,” he said. “I’ve made supper.”

I couldn’t figure out what had happened. My brain was all logy. I drifted into the kitchen, where the small brown dining table was. He had made dinner. Fish sticks and lima beans. He had poured milk for both of us. We prayed and ate.

“I thought it would be nice to make dinner for you. You’re always making it for me.”

“This is nice,” I said. I hated lima beans. Still do.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about exchange lately. Too many things only go one way. You know what I mean?”

“I don’t follow.”

“Well it’s like this. You do all this work for me and I don’t do anything for you. That’s supposed to be fair because I brought up your mother and her brothers. I bet that doesn’t seem right sometimes, does it?”

I thought about being hit by the cane. I thought about not answering. But maybe this really was the time God was answering prayers.

“No sir, sometimes that does not seem fair.”

“Or books. Do you ever think about books, Billy? We spend our whole lives reading them, but they never get a chance to read us. Would you like that, Billy, if a book read you sometime?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know what it would be like.”

“Well you’ve heard the expression, ‘He can read a man’s character.’ Haven’t you?”

“Yes, but I don’t really know what it means.”

“Well, Billy, being read by a book is about the finest experience there is. Not everyone has it when they grow up, but maybe you will.”

God wasn’t answering prayers. He was crazy, but in a new way. I cleaned the table after dinner and we went to watch *The Carol Burnett Show*.

Sleep hit me hard again that night. I woke up to sounds from the living room. I don’t know how long Grandpa had been talking. He was arguing. I couldn’t make out the words, but it scared me. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do if Grandpa went crazy by himself in the middle of the night. Finally I heard one statement clearly:

“No, I won’t do it. It’s not a fair exchange.”

I got out of bed. I was wearing just my underwear, so I got dressed. I didn’t want to confront Grandpa partially dressed. As I put my clothes on I heard him get up out of his rocker and make his way toward his bedroom. I lay back down on the bed. Even though Grandpa was pretty deaf, I didn’t even dare breathe.

I would have bet a million bucks that I was not going to go back to sleep that night, but sure enough sleep hit me like a ton of bricks.

I felt the bed below me melt. I was sinking into half-melted vanilla ice cream, although it wasn’t cold. As it passed my eyes, the scene lit up with a terrible whiteness. There was nothing but white, a great white blindness, a great white dark. I could feel myself pulled lower and lower. I couldn’t struggle, couldn’t swim. For a moment I wished I were one of my rich friends who was hanging out at the pool this summer. They would know what to do. They didn’t have to take care of their goddamn grandfathers. The down-drift took forever, and it gave me time for a lot of thoughts and none of them were very good. Maybe I was in a children’s story where bad thoughts made you sink.

Then suddenly it stopped. Although the non-landscape hadn’t changed and all I could see was the thick whiteness; I felt something looking at me. Something big. I tried to analyze what it felt like. I mean, I had watched *Star Trek* and *Night Gallery*. But I couldn’t get any feelings for old or young, human or alien, alive or undead. All of those charts were two-dimensional schoolbook ideas and this was floating above the white page of the book about nine inches. I felt it wasn’t going to get bored staring at me, and that scared me. It could look at me forever and not blink. For a brief while I wanted to see it, but then I was glad I couldn’t.

Slowly I felt something congeal under me. I wasn’t floating anymore. Then a tiny speck formed a few feet above my head. It turned out to be the brass nut in the center of the light fixture. I was staring at the white glass of the fixture. The sun was up. I could hear Grandpa making coffee. The bed was dank with sweat. My nightmare had soaked the thick bedspread. I was already dressed, so I went on into

the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I said to Grandpa.

He just looked at me with hatred. The light and life had gone out of his eyes. We didn’t talk during breakfast. I mowed the lawn afterward even though it didn’t need it. I just didn’t want to be around him. I don’t know if he read his book. Or if the book read him.

Lunch was worse. He was still not talking, and Mom was so upset to see him regress she actually broke down in tears. After lunch she went out to her car and just sat in it and cried.

I went out to comfort her. I was thirteen and it was the manly thing to do. She rolled down her window to talk to me.

“Mom, are you okay?” I asked. I know it was a dumb question.

“What happened, Billy? Did you do something to him?”

I couldn’t believe her response. I knew she was upset, but I wasn’t some kind of miracle worker, some kind of jinni that could make Grandpa better or worse by blinking my eyes. I got really mad, so I turned away from her car and began running to the park. I knew she was late to work and didn’t have time to follow me. She managed an office and everything depended on her. There were some cedar bushes in the park, about six feet tall. Underneath the green, make-out artists had hallowed and hollowed a space over the years. I dove into the cool dry dark to cry. I knew no one would be making out at twelve-thirty in the heat of the summer. I cried a long time. I messed up my clothes. Great—now I had laundry to do as well as the additional job of hating my mom and feeling guilty. I didn’t give a damn about Grandpa at this moment.

I headed back to his house. This was going to end today. I would tell my mom and my uncle that I couldn’t do this anymore. That I wanted some regular summer job like sweeping out a barber shop, which my friend Jerry had. I was going to tell things I had never told before, like the cane. I didn’t think I would tell them about the book. That was probably Grandpa’s craziness.

Sure enough, when I got back to his little brick house he was reading his book. He was almost to the end. I had been gone for nearly two hours. I hadn’t cried that much since my grandmother died two years ago. I thought crying was supposed to purge you, make you feel better, but I felt all raw and sticky like parts of my soul had been through a blender and were hanging outside of my body. I didn’t talk to the old man. I just went to bed.

To my initial relief the same magic that had brought sleep the last two times worked again. I was out like a light.

However, the world changed from a fabulous formless darkness to a great

white thickness. I knew I was sinking into the world of the great white bed. The down-drift made me sick this time like a too-long downward ride in an elevator. Of course in those days growing up in Doublesign I had never even seen an elevator, but you can't enter a memory without carrying later memories in with you. Down, down, down.

It was an abrupt and unpleasant stop. I could hear my Grandpa saying something. It was a precise but muffled voice. The kind of voice you use giving a phone number. I began moving sideways. Slowly at first and then at a pretty good clip. Then the movement stopped again and I was lying next to someone.

I could move my head a little. It was Granny. She was dead and very, very white. I knew the great Whatever had been watching her for a couple of years, and had never got bored.

Then I felt the little knives.

Something was slicing through my feet. I couldn't raise my head enough to see it, but I could hear it and of course it hurt like hell. About an inch was being cut off. I didn't think I could stand it. Why didn't I wake up? Why didn't I black out?

Then after that section had been cut clean another cut started about an inch higher. I figured loss of blood or shock would get me. I kept telling myself it was just a nightmare, but that doesn't really help with that much pain.

Then another cut.

Then another.

And so slowly forth until my knees had been reached. All I was at this point was tears and pain.

Then a dark rope dropped down from above. I can't tell you what a relief it was to see something black in that great white space. It hit my face, snaking over my eyes and mouth, finally it touched my ears.

"Billy. Billy can you hear me?"

It was my uncle's voice. I woke up on the great white bed and then passed out from blood loss.

The rest of the summer and the fall and the winter and spring were physical therapy.

I had lost both of my legs up to my knees. This is not a euphemism. There was nothing there. There were no traces of my feet and lower legs anywhere in Grandpa's house.

But there were a set of feet and lower legs on his bed in his room. They were cold and embalmed and a couple of years old. They belonged to my grandmother.

I didn't find that out until just before my mother's death last year. It had been decided not to tell me everything, as though knowledge could make it any worse. There was no trace that my grandmother's grave had been disturbed in any way. They had dug up her coffin and put the legs in, burying it as well as any gossip with her. They put Grandpa in a mental ward afterward. Mom never went to see him again as long as he lived, but that turned out to be only three months anyway. When Mom got cancer she decided to tell me everything.

My uncle had dropped by that day because Mom had called him. She felt bad about what she had said to me. She couldn't leave her office, but her brother got off early. Mom told me that she felt guilty about what had happened to me every day of her life.

I live in a special home for people with mental and physical disabilities. When she was alive, Mom would come see me every day at noon. We always ate together just like she used to eat with her father. About two months before she died she got too sick to come, but they took me to see her in the hospital a couple of times, that was when she told about Granny's legs and so on.

I read and watch TV a lot. It hasn't gotten better in the last forty years, I can tell you that. I am kept here because I can't give an explanation of what happened to me that makes sense to anyone. I didn't get to finish school and I regret that. So I hobble around on my two fake legs. I even keep a little garden. Just flowers, no tomatoes this time. I never learned that Internet thing either; they don't like us looking things up. The only thing that some people would find odd about me is that I won't sleep on white sheets or have a white blanket or a white bedspread.

Mom told me that she searched every inch of Grandpa's house for the book. She told me that she never believed my story fully, but knew it had to have some truth. She didn't find the book. Maybe Grandpa found it at the park or bought it in a garage sale. I tried researching occult matters once, but the people running the home thought it was a bad idea for me. One time I had a dream, about ten years ago, of Grandpa lifting the thick white bedspread and looking under the bed for something and just finding the book. That still doesn't answer the question of where it came from.

Sometimes in my dreams I smell geraniums and find myself in the great white space. I can't scream in my dreams and I've never woken up my roommate with any odd sounds. I don't tell my doctor about it, as it seems to upset her. But the dreams are rare. I think they're really not dreams at all, I think it's just how things are. I think the great Whatever is always watching us.

And It's never bored.

—*For Basil Copper*