



# Bob

by Nick Holle

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It's true what they say, friend, Jesus does provide. Whew! You know I've been walking for going on three hours now? And it is too damn cold for *that*. Nobody picks up a hitchhiker these days because they're scared he'll kill 'em. That is not the case here, friend, I can guarantee you that. I'm just lookin' for a ride to Blue Bluff.

So anyway, about twenty minutes back, it occurs to me to pray. Now I haven't prayed since—I mean seriously prayed—since Sunday school. Then, voilà, you pull up like a regular fuckin' burning bush.

I can't thank you enough. Name's Bert, but they call me Wheel, on account I used to pitch in the minors. This was way back. I'm talkin' late seventies here. You know how those things are, arm gets a little sore, doesn't work out. Wouldn't trade it for nothin' in the world though. Met a girl, fell in love there. Found out the night she left, the only thing she ever wanted was to boink Nolan Ryan. She thought if she stuck with me, I'd be in a position to—well, I blew three saves that month, and Nolan got traded back to the National League, so she split for Cedar Rapids. I told her as she was getting into her car, if she wanted him that bad, she should just wait for him after a game. But she said she wasn't a slut and then drove off.

What's your name again, friend? Bob. Yes. Okay. You ever had a girl, Bob? Yeah? And two kids? Well holy shit in a shoebox, Bob, you're doing all right. I gotta tell you, if you don't got family, you don't got nothin'.

You're goddamn right, Bob.

No, no kids. No wife either. Not anymore. Oh-for-two in that ballgame. First wife went out for some groceries one day, got eaten by a rabid puma. No shittin' you here, Bob. Got her right there in the parking lot. They say she didn't even see it coming. Chewed up major portions of her torso before they wrestled it off. She died right there. Can't say I was too sad. She was a real bitch that Kitty. No, that was my wife's name. I'm not talking about the puma anymore, Bob. Anyway, it was all for the best, and I got a major settlement from the zoo.

Now my second wife, she was an emotional one. Up and down, up and down. Don't know how I ever ended up with her. Well, it was the sex mainly. She did things to me I wouldn't, well, you might imagine it, Bob, a real sparkplug. We had a couple dogs, and—

Aw, Bob, no she didn't—with the dogs? Get your head outta your ass! No, it wasn't like *that*. She loved those dogs. These were black labs, and they were like her kids. Her own kids.

So one day, I was in this major fuckin' hurry. I don't know, late for work or what-have-you, and I backed my Blazer out of the garage. Huge bump. What the shit, man? I think I'm still on whatever it is, so I just keep going, a bit too fast, and I run over it with the front

tire. Fuck me! I get out, and sure as shit, Beeble, one of the dogs is lying there, barely hanging on to his life.

So then I panic 'cause the dog's suffering on the driveway, and my wife is gonna go apeshit on me. I get back in the Blazer and run it over to make sure it's dead. I mean, Bob, you understand. I can't let the goddamn dog go through that pain. The stink of the shit is, instead of one bump on the front tire, I feel two. What the Christ? I think I'm hallucinating here, so I keep going. Two bumps on the back tire. I get out again, and both the dogs are lying there now. Beeble's dead, of course. Flo was in the same shape Beeble was before. Ah, man. I had to, Bob. I had to get back in the Blazer, put it in reverse, and put Flo out of her misery. Two bumps back, two front.

In the meantime, my wife, who's seen the whole goddamn thing from the kitchen window, storms out of the garage with a fuckin' shovel and is swinging at me like I'm the Anti-Jesus H. Christ. I'm backpedaling, trip over the dogs, and I land on Beeble, who's just mush by that point. She falls to her knees, crying, "Why God! Why God! Why God!" They had to take her away, Bob...to the nuthouse. She completely lost it, and after her tirade, she went into eternal silence. Just sits there like a log on a log. Doesn't say nothin'. Can't figure it out.

The docs couldn't do shit. I talked with her. I pleaded with her. Nothing. Her face barely changed expression from one word to the next. Well, you can imagine, Bob, that I couldn't be married to a mute who lives in the nuthouse, almost killed me with a shovel. So that was that. I do go and visit her every couple of months though.

But, Bob, something like that? Don't seem like it can get much worse? Well, I'm a victim of circumstance, I guess.

You a card-playing man, Bob? Well, those circumstances would have it that me and my second wife were. Her name was Jackie, by the way. So we played cards every Saturday night with our friends Hazel and Enos Follensbee and Meryl and Nate Pedretti. We called him "Sweaty" Nate Pedretti, though he didn't really sweat that much.

The game, Bob, was euchre. Familiar with it? Well, it's sort like team dirty clubs. The jack is high, but only if that suit's trump. Otherwise it don't mean jack, eh Bob? Okay, jack's second highest, that's different suit, same color. After that it's ace, king, queen, ten, nine, you know, in descending, uh, what-have-you. The object is to get as many tricks—that's a fancy name for a hand, not a literal hand, but hands of cards. You know, Bob, it's a lot easier to explain if we play a practice hand.

Jesus, Bob, I know, not now. You gotta keep you eyes on the goddamn road. I wouldn't put your life in jeopardy, and leave your

kids fatherless just for a card game. No, siree, Bob. We'll take a rain check on the practice hand.

Yes, or trick.

So the Follensbees and the Pedrettis were real supportive after Jackie went off the deep end. I tell you, Hazel makes these cream-cheese and chocolate cupcakes that are to die for. I mean, Bob, for Christ's sakes, these cupcakes would floor you. They're that goddamn good.

About two weeks after I sent Jackie to the nuthouse, my good friends suggested that we put the whole thing behind us and resume our card playing. And they were right, Bob. I had to move on. I had to get on with my life. So that Saturday I went over to the Pedrettis'.

Hazel and Enos were already there, and when I got inside I had an entirely different feeling than I ever had meeting for cards. I mean, granted, Jackie wasn't there. So there's that element. Plus, it had occurred to me only then that we couldn't play euchre with five people. You may think, Bob, that we could find some way to swing it, but don't forget you don't know jack squat about euchre. It's a partner game, Bob, and even your—no offense— goddamn kids could figure out that five people are not easily divisible by two.

So I says to Meryl, "Hey, Meryl. What're we gonna do here? Is someone gonna sit out each game or what?"

Enos steps in before Meryl can answer and says to me, "Actually, Wheel, we had something else in mind."

Now, Bob, you can well imagine that after I-don't-know-how-many-odd years of playing euchre every week, it could get a tad boring. But it *is* a little jarring when after so long, someone finally makes a suggestion we try something different. Then Nate tells me to sit down, and the rest of 'em sit down in the living room, lookin' all serious and what not.

Nate looks around and says, "Well, I guess I can begin..."

He trails off, and I'm thinking, Bob, what in the blue fuck is going on here? The four of them are looking at each other, all nervous, like they've never talked to me before. And they have. Sure, Jackie wasn't there, but I'm an easy enough guy to talk to, right Bob? Finally, I just say, "Guys, for Christ's sakes, who do you want me to kill?" Cause, Jesus, Bob, they were gonna ask me something big, why not ask me to kill a guy?

Well, that seemed to loosen them up a little, and it was Enos who finally mustered up enough balls to say what they were gonna say. He says, "Wheel, we, uh, I mean, all of us. We want to make love to you."

Jesus Christ, Bob, stay on the fuckin' road, please!

Whew! So I quick grabbed a Pabst, chugged it in about three seconds. That'll get'cha a blue ribbon, eh Bob? And then I was like, "Come again?"

Enos says, "Well, Wheel, we want you and us, all of us, to have sex."

Yes, Bob, he meant an orgy. What the hell else do you call it? And, Bob? I gotta tell you honestly, I was a bit stunned. These people were regular people, average Joes, Bob, not unlike yourself. Christ, Hazel and Enos had three kids. Sure they'd all split for college by then, but kids. It doesn't seem like *you'd* be out participatin' in orgies, Bob, your two kids holding your family nucleus together.

I didn't think so. But I looked right over at Hazel because she was real quiet about it, and she just nodded her head.

Come on, Bob. What could I do? I cracked open another Pabst, or maybe it was two, put 'em in my goddamn belly. But I know what you're saying. You wanna know how I responded to this whole, uh, this whole orgy ordeal.

Well, Bob, I gotta tell ya. I can't build it up like this and not tell ya. I said yes, Bob. Plain and simple. Jackie was in the nuthouse. I may have mentioned before, it was the sex that fueled our relationship. With that out of the picture and this opportunity at hand, no is not an option. Maybe for you, Bob, with your circumstances and what-have-you, but mine, well, they begged for it.

It's funny though because I wondered, why'd they wait until Jackie was gone? I asked them that as we were all shedding our outer layers, and Meryl said, "To be honest, Wheel, we thought she'd flip out." If that don't beat the band. Well, then we all did it, Bob.

And first times are like every first time, a little awkward. I mean, obviously the four of them had been at it for a little while, almost nine months. And they'd been wife swapping for the three months before that. It was hard for me to get into the flow, but in a situation like sex, Bob, we humans have a natural ability to adapt. You know what I'm saying?

Of course you do, Bob. And let me tell ya, to be honest, I'm not much of a homo. I didn't find Sweaty Pedretti all that attractive. I mean, Enos was all right, but Pedretti? Not really, Bob. Luckily the ladies had a pretty good handle on what to do with three of us, so the homo part wasn't all that big of a factor. It wasn't like euchre where you had to have an even number.

So that was that, Bob, after our practice hand, we made it a weekly event. And it got crazy. Hazel was the quiet one, but she really got creative with the whole thing. I will spare you the details, Bob, but we're talking about some of the kinkiest shit this side of the Mississipp. We were having a blast, rotating houses, then flat out hitting the town, orchestratin' this thing in restaurants, the state park,

the YMCA, pretty much anywhere. It was nice, Bob. I was with good people. Jackie, euchre. They were all behind us. We were all happy. We were a family, Bob. Not like your family—that would be disgusting—but a family nonetheless. If you don't got family, Bob—you know what I'm saying?

I wish I woulda known it, but the tide flipped when Hazel started coming over in the middle of week. Just her. Wednesdays, at first, then whenever she could get out. And me and her started our secret love affair. Sure, we were doing it with the rest of them on Saturdays, but during the week, it was our secret. Of course, Bob, I liked it. It was an opportunity to devote my full attention again to one woman, and Hazel was a beautiful woman. I shoulda known, Bob. It never works out between me and one woman. You know that, and we just met, for Christ's sakes. But I was blinded by love, Bob. Damn.

So this thing continued on for a little while, and honestly I don't think that the other three suspected a thing. She came over, we found ways to pass the time, and then she left. Three or four months just like that.

Little did me and Hazel know, though, that Enos was doing the same weekday thingamajig with Meryl Pedretti. Now this is all fine and dandy, and our torrid love affairs are hittin' the spot. But if you put two and two together, Bob, you realize it's not working out here. Sure, I suppose if Jackie was in the mix, her and Sweaty Pedretti could've had an affair themselves, but she was in the nuthouse stuck on mute as you well know.

The next thing I knew, Bob, I walked in the front door of the Follensbees' one Saturday night, and I see a nineteen inch Magnavox shootin' through the air toward the general vicinity of my head. I got out of the way just in time before the boob tube took out the screen door and crashed on the front stoop. Nate was a little drunk, and I didn't really blame him. That afternoon he came home from a matinee—he's a big movie guy—walked around back to check on his tomato plants, and found Enos Follensbee nailing Meryl, his *wife*, to the sliding glass door that leads to the patio. Sweaty Pedretti didn't say a thing, and from what I could gather headed straight to The Remedy to get plastered. He saved his rage for that night.

Well, Bob, obviously I hadn't put this all together with just the flying TV, but I had a hunch, with Nate being the fifth wheel and all, that that's was what was going on. So I said, "I know what's going on here, Nate, you being the fifth wheel and all."

Enos goes, "Fifth wheel, Wheel?"

Hazel waved to me to shut up.

Nate mumbled, "What the hell you talkin' about?"

I was like, "Uh..."

Meryl was the one who figured it out, "You and Hazel?"

Then *Enos* picked up the VCR, and pitched it at my face. Shit, Bob, I shoulda asked what was going on first. I managed to avoid the VCR, and then pretty much everybody started yelling and screaming and throwing things, though nothing bigger than the VCR, mostly records and knickknacks and shit like that. When everything finally got quiet, Meryl told Nate she was sorry. Nate generally threatened all of our lives, then busted out the front door, tripping over the TV. He got up and stumbled away.

The four of us looked at each other. Now, Bob, we were genuinely sorry about everything that had happened. It wasn't our intention to break up marriages here. Enos admitted to Hazel that he loved Meryl. Hazel admitted to Enos that she loved me. I shrugged and realized we probably weren't gonna do it that night.

Hazel asked if I would leave so she and Enos could talk some more. Meryl was going to stick around, seeing that Nate probably wouldn't welcome her home with open arms that night. They said they'd call me when they figured things out. I decided to walk home, Bob. I was a little riled up, having my affair exposed and considering all the home entertainment devices heaved at my head. It was really a big mess that I never should've got mixed up in. I should've went the normal route, Bob, the straight and narrow. No orgies. No adulterous affairs. I should've said no, Bob, and walked away.

And I was gonna. Right there. I was gonna just keep on walking and start over—leave all the crap that's happened to me behind—and start over, Bob. I left my car at the Follensbees' and started walking. I got to the edge of town, to the highway, and kept walking. Well, it seems, Bob, that you might think that that's about where this story should come up to speed. You pick me up. I tell you the story. I wish that were the case.

The problem was I started thinking about Hazel. I had feelings for her, Bob. Plus, all my stuff was still at home. I should at least get a goddamn moving van. So I turned around and went back to my house.

I got home, stepped inside, flipped the lights on, and you'll never guess who was sitting on my sofa.

Jesus, Bob, you're good. Yeah, it was Sweaty Pedretti. I said to him, "Hey, Nate."

He was still drunk, sitting there with a goddamn Louisville Slugger on his lap. He took a big swig of something. Then he says, "You've got a message on your machine."

"All right," I told him, and I went over and played my message. It was Enos. He said him and Meryl were leaving town, that night. He asked if I'd come over and be with Hazel.

As soon as it ended, Nate says, "I'm going to kill them."

And I says, "Nate, I don't think that's the best idea in the world. Can't you just break their legs or something?"

And he says, "This is bullshit, Wheel."

And I says, "It sure is, but that's the breaks, man. "

And he says, "Fuck off, Wheel. You started this whole thing."

And I says, "What?"

And he says, "Everything was fine until you came into this thing."

For Christ's sakes, Bob, they *asked* me. I was just having sex here. Sweaty Pedretti got up. He says, "I'm gonna kill you. Then I'm gonna kill that son-of-a-bitch Enos and my wife." He didn't say anything about Hazel. He walked over, took a giant swing, and whacked my shoulder. I fell to the ground, Bob, because it fuckin' hurt. Fortunately for me, Sweaty Pedretti was so drunk he thought a whack on the shoulder would kill me. He kicked me. He might've spit on me, I can't remember *every* detail, Bob. Jesus. Then he left.

I lay on my floor for a minute or two, throbbing. Of course, Bob, I realized then I had to get off my ass and stop Sweaty Pedretti from killing Meryl and Enos. I rolled onto my knees and crawled over to the phone. I dialed the Follensbees', and Hazel answered. I told her to tell Meryl and Enos to get hell out of there. Hazel said they wouldn't leave her by herself.

And I says, "Nate's gonna kill them if they don't."

And Hazel says, "Help, Wheel."

And I says, "Well shit, I'm on my way."

I busted out of my house and ran to my driveway. Fuck a duck, Bob! My car was still at the Follensbees' place. I started double-timin' it, and let's not forget, Bob, that I'm still in a lot of fuckin' pain. Sure, I got hit just on the shoulder, but it was still a hearty whack. The Follensbees' was about a mile away. I felt like it took me about three or four minutes, but let's be honest, Bob, it was probably more like ten.

Sweaty Pedretti's car was up on the lawn, door open and headlights still on. Sweaty Pedretti was in the middle of taking a full swing at Enos' car's rear window. Enos and Meryl were inside that car. Hazel was on the front stoop, next to the TV, dangling a set of keys in her right hand.

Nate was screaming, fuck this and fuck that. He expanded his attack on the car to all the windows, well, pretty much the entire exterior.

Hazel says to me, "Wheel, do something. They forgot the keys!"

I took a step toward the car and realized, Bob, that in my haste I had nothing to defend myself with. I says to Hazel, "Hazel, you got a gun in the house or anything I can use?"

And she says, "Do you think if we had a gun, we wouldn't have used it by now?"

Now, Bob, you understand that this was not the ideal time for sarcasm. I tell ya, women are difficult in times of distress. I says, "Just get me something!"

She ran inside. Meanwhile, I had to get Nate away from the car, so I says, "Hey, Nate. Get away from the car."

He turned and saw me for the first time. He looked surprised I was there. That didn't last very long, and he marched over to me, bat in hand, saying, "Goddammit, you're supposed to be dead."

Hazel comes out of the house and hands me a chair. A goddamn chair, Bob. Jesus Christ in a crapshoot, what the hell was I supposed to do with a chair? I grabbed it out of her hands just in time to block Nate's swing at my head. He almost fell over he swung so hard. That gave me a chance to jab him in the back with the back of the chair. That did knock him over.

I dropped the chair and dove onto him. He somehow got some leverage with the bat and hit me in the back. I punched him in the face, and, shit Bob, that hurts way more than it looks on TV. Anyway, it was hard enough that he dropped the bat. Hazel got in there and picked it up. I tried to hit him again, but missed.

Then I rolled off him, right onto my sore shoulder. I remember screaming in pain. The next thing I saw was Hazel shoving the bat in my face and saying, "Hit him, Wheel."

I got up. Nate was still on the ground. He looked unconscious. Meryl and Enos where out of the car by now, watching along with Hazel. I says, "He's out. Let's just call the cops."

And Hazel says, "Wait a second. No. You've got to hit him."

And Meryl says, "Yeah. Wheel, he almost killed us. And don't think he won't."

I looked right over at Enos because he was real quiet about it, and he just nodded his head.

I lifted up the bat, Bob. Now I said before that I used to pitch. And sure I was in the American League with the DH and all, but I knew how to swing a bat. Well, I hit him hard, Bob. In the head. Then I hit him again. And again. The other three didn't say a thing. We all just stared at Sweaty Pedretti laying on the ground. Then I ran. Out to the highway. I took the same goddamn route I had walked when I left there the first time. I'm not sure I'll go back this time though.

It was cold out there walking. Of course, I'm out there in the dark and cold, by myself, and I can think about just one thing: I just killed a guy. Ain't that creepy, Bob? I mean, that's John Q. Family's worst nightmare, a killer walking along the dark and lonely highway. That's when I started praying, and thank Christ you came along and picked me up.

What, Bob?

Yeah, I'm sure I killed him. I hit him three times. Hard.

Of course I could've just broken his legs, but he was gonna kill us. You understand that, don't you? Well, Jesus, Bob. You don't have to get so goddamn testy about the whole thing. It's not my fault. It was self-defense, for Christ's sakes.

Well, I ran because I just killed a guy. Bob, come on, buddy. You don't think that—what are you thinking?

Hell, Bob, you're giving *me* a ride. That doesn't warrant your murder, do you think? Hardly. No, Bob, you're safe with me. And really, you're aiding and abetting of a fugitive is, in a sense, incidental. I mean, when you picked me up, you didn't know I killed a guy. I wasn't wearing a sign that read, "BOB, I KILLED MY SON-OF-A-BITCH FRIEND SWEATY PEDRETTI." It's not your fault.

Aw, come on, Bob. I just need a ride to Blue Bluff, just a few more miles. Jesus, I'm a nice guy, Bob. I mean, fuck, here's some gas money. I thought that, man, I thought you were the answer to my prayers, a blessing in a Dodge Stratus. I don't get it, Bob. I thought we were friends.

Fine. Jesus, Bob. Well, thanks for nothin'. I hope your wife'll teach your kids some compassion because I'm sure you won't.

Aw, man, I didn't mean that, Bob. Thanks for getting me this far. Good luck to you and your family, Bob. If you don't got family, you don't got nothin'. Well, see ya around, Bob.