

Bones

“Half baked” was used to describe those who didn't quite fit in, in this town of 200. Melvin was at the top of that list. “There goes Mad Melvin and his bones” was repeated almost daily to the surprise of any out-of-towners, until they saw him walking quickly, swinging a large white bone. The men who gathered at the Country Kitchen scattered at first sight of Melvin so as not to get cornered by him while he told of how his dog Murphy had brought up another bone. “I'm gonna find these bones” Melvin would say in a slurred voice. Everyone knew he'd been drinking, but it was actually a mini stroke that caused his words to slur. If Melvin cornered someone he would hold up his bone of the day and tell the story of how his dog showed up one morning after the Perseid Meteor Shower with a bone. “He's a good dog, been bringing a fresh one to my porch every morning since.” Sometimes, between the milk and the beer cooler, at the Country Kitchen, which served as both a restaurant and convenience store, Melvin would corner an out-of-towner, pinning them in place with his wide eyes, dancing eyebrows and that white bone moving erratically to the cadence of his story as if he were the conductor of an orchestra located just out of sight in some other dimension of reality. Melvin would pick up where he left off with the last person he tried to tell his story to “I tried following Murph, wasn't any use, he always sniffs me out.” As he said this Melvin would do a sniffing motion in the air, sticking his nose up and stretching out his neck. “Then he'd just sit staring at me and wouldn't go.” This scene was a treat for the regular customers who would creep out from their hiding places, peeking between bags of potato chips to get close enough to see the eyes of the out-of-towner frantically searching for a means of escape. Melvin was oblivious to all of this and forged ahead “Even tried sneaking out at dark, Murphy, he sleeps right there at the front porch. I'd sneak out back you see, crawling low, I'd hide out there in the woods, waiting. I knew the way he'd go, so I was waiting all quiet, hardly breathing” Melvin was leaning in close now and then let out a big laugh that made the customer jump “and here he comes sniffing at my feet and barking, can't fool old Murph for nothing.” Just about the time Melvin's

prey was about to make a run for it or pull out their phone to dial 911, Jessie the store clerk would intervene trying to hold down her laughter, "Melvin, I've got your breakfast over here." While Melvin was preoccupied she had quietly collected Melvin's breakfast which consisted of a Mountain Dew and a package of Grandma's Country Crackers which were actually cookies cooked by a dear old local they called Grandma Jones. The cookies were packaged in sandwich bags and their name written in permanent marker across the front with the flavor of either peanut butter or chocolate chip written in parenthesis. Jessie was always on the lookout for Melvin and about the time he would normally come around she would collect his breakfast and have it waiting to present to him just as he was starting into his story. Melvin liked to talk with his hands and having both hands full seemed to disrupt the flow of his story. Jessie's second tactic to keep him off balance was to lay on some charm. Melvin would begin trying to find some money to pay but with a bone in one hand and breakfast in the other he would get flustered. She would say "Oh don't worry about it Melv, it's on me, my treat." Melvin would smile "Aww Jess you didn't have to." All of the redirection would usually break the cycle and Jessie would finish it off with a silent stare that would send Melvin awkwardly, walking half way backwards, out the door. Jessie discovered that if she didn't change this routine up Melvin would develop a kind of immunity to her tactics and just launch straight into his story. To combat this she came up with several different sudden exclamations she could throw at him that would usually send him running. One that she particularly enjoyed was to shout out just as Melvin was going into his story "There goes a dog with your bone!" or "That man's got one of your bones!" "There's a bone in the back of that truck!" Any exclamation with bone in it usually worked and Melvin would go running out the door, sometimes dropping his breakfast. One day nothing seemed to be working. Melvin was deep in his story and was even adding some new layers to it about rubbing his body with cow manure to fool Murphy and making a ghillie suit out of moss and sticks just like he'd seen a sniper do on tv. Jessie got this idea and said "Melvin why haven't you taken all of these bones and put them together to see what kind of creature they came from?" Melvin's eyes got wide at this new thought and he shot out the door and

wasn't seen again for several days. Jessie became something of a celebrity for making Melvin disappear. The town cop even offered to make her an honorary deputy and gave her a copper badge. During this time Melvin was hard at work organizing his bones to see how they fit together and joining them with glue and screws and tape and wire until he had a spectacular structure that any forward thinking museum curator would gladly display as a modern piece maybe under the title "The Swing." The structure looked very much like a swing set with its swing dangling down and rattling with the wind right in the mid section where the stomach might would be. Melvin would stand looking at the beast for hours, knowing but not wanting to accept that the configuration was not right. Then while sitting on the porch petting Murphy, he came to the realization that mostly all the bones were the same shape and size and were most likely all leg bones. He wondered long and hard about this. How could so many leg bones come to be in one place? He decided to watch some tv to ease his mind. During a baking show, as the flour was being sifted, he thought about how the flour was the same color as the bones and how the bones could be crushed into dust and the thought of dust made him think of stardust and that made him think of the Perseid Meteor Shower which made him think again of the bones. He knew that the bones and the meteor shower had to be connected and he could "feel it" as it were. As the daylight faded and the blue-gray glow of his tv filled the room with a remake of Metropolis playing itself out, Melvin came to the only possible conclusion. The bones were not of this world. Some creatures from space had used the meteor shower as cover to come to this planet carrying the awfulness of a virus that only afflicted their legs. They had to leave the virus and their legs in a place where they could never return, amputating and burying them deep beneath the earth where only Murphy knew how to get to. Melvin was immensely satisfied with himself and showed up back in town with a bone and a new twist to his story which firmly established his reputation and struck fear in the hearts of many children and some adults. The new connections which had to be made in Melvin's brain to come up with the new twist to his story set off a kind of chain reaction search for other connections. The story continued to grow, but the rest of it grew in secret and Melvin smiled at his secret from time to time

when he entered the Country Kitchen.

Grandma Jones was Melvin's closest neighbor. He had made a well worn path the whole quarter mile through the woods that led to the Jones' farm house. Melvin and Mrs. Jones had been friends since grade school, a fact which she had kept quite secret from the rest of the town. Well before his title of half-baked, Melvin had helped her come up with the recipe for her famous cookies. He would sample each batch and help her fine tune the subtle flavors that really set them apart. Melvin had taught himself about all kinds of wild herbs and how each one had its own benefits. How yarrow could induce sweating and was good for treating fever and cold, elderflower extract was good for treating the flu, a compound of dandelion root helped with digestion and the list went on. Melvin would bring samples of his remedies for Mrs. Jones to try and sometimes include in her baking. She had grown so accustomed to trying out Melvin's remedies that she didn't have a second thought when Melvin arrived one morning with a bag of freshly ground flour. Melvin told her that it was organic. He convinced her to try it in a batch of her cookies. After several batches they both agreed, with some excitement, that this flour added some subtle, indescribable richness to her cookies. Melvin did not reveal the secret source of his organic ground flour and Grandma Jones, so pleased with the results did not bother asking. The secret story that Melvin smiled about had to do with connections he made between images of the meteor shower, the star dust, the space creatures and the power that must lie within the strength of their bones. Melvin salvaged many things and they were all piled up in heaps around his yard. Once the connections were made, Melvin worked feverishly, dragging out old motors and cords, pieces of angle iron and a metal drum. The completed masterpiece was a kind of hammer mill made from the metal drum, turned round by the motor with ball bearings banging over and over inside. The drum would turn and bang all day long like the sound of the empty stomach of one of his space beast. The sound would continue until the sunrise when Murphy would leave his prize and Melvin would feed it to the hungry beast to quiet it down. Grandma's Country Crackers had become quite a hit in town so that a fresh batch had to be made every day. All those half baked bones went into

the drum where they were beaten into a fine white powder so that Grandma Jones could cook them up and serve them to all the fully baked town folk who happily washed them down with a smile and a glass of milk.