

Days of the Gandy Dancers

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BACK then, oh maybe fifteen–twenty years ago, we had a thing we called Gandy Dancer’s Day. It wasn’t any kind of a celebration we was inclined to look forward to, like the county fair or Sheldon’s Carnival, and it didn’t help none to know how good our chances was to get two or three days of it. The cops and the taverns and the bus depot got the worst of it—we run the depot—but it wasn’t very safe for a citizen to be on the streets, either. They was some crew, them Dancers.

It was damn sure to be hot, too. Ain’t it always hot the third Saturday of August? This particular Gandy Dancer’s Day was a corker. We got a good fan, and awnings, but that old sun was layin’ through the windows at nine o’clock in the morning till you was breathin’ steam. You picked up a newspaper and you left a hand print on it—clothes stickin’, salty sweat runnin’ into yesterday’s prickly heat. It was hot.

Usually we didn’t catch a Dancer till maybe ten o’clock. They didn’t get paid off till eight, and then they got to walk four blocks past six taverns and a liquor store. This day we ain’t hardly got the nine o’clock bus off for Des Moines before the first batch is comin’ up the way, cuttin’ up and hollerin’ and laughin’ to beat the cars. They got this one guy in the middle, and it looks like they are givin’ him the business. Furthermore, they are sober, anyways it looks like it. There ain’t a paper bag in the bunch—which is the way they smuggle in the booze.

It looks like this guy in the middle is maybe a couple years younger than the usual run, but I sure wouldn’t want nobody quotin’ me on that. This heavy boozin’ levels ’em out so you can’t hardly tell a twenty from a sixty-year-old

if any of 'em *did* live that long. I will say, that morning he looked a cut better than most, not quite as gray in the skin or quite as skinny, but mostly it was he didn't have the shuffle. You take a drunk, a real honest-to-god drunk, he don't pick up his feet.

Well sir, they all come bustin' in the depot, pushin' this guy in front of 'em, hollerin' and laughin'. "Go to it, Brownie. . . . Give 'er hell, Brownie Man, she's a-settin' by the telephone bawlin' her head off Hell, she ain't neither. She's down at the station waitin'. . . ." More of the same.

Brownie, he stepped up to the counter real sharp. "Gimme a one-way to Omaha." Now he really is dead sober. Them others, when they come in a little closer, I can smell they had a snort or two, but nothin' serious yet.

"Omaha?" says I. These birds are 100% Chicago Skid Row. 100%. Oh, I know what you're thinkin'. What you got in mind is them *show* Gandy Dancers—they big ornery black-eyed Polacks and bandy-legged hellin' Irishmen or seven foot o' shiny black man layin' track in the middle of a desert and the temperature a hundred-sixty in the shade and then cuttin' up on Saturday night.

No, all these here guys got in common with them old time characters is layin' track. The Northwestern picks up a bunch of 'em in May, making allowances for maybe half of 'em not makin' the season, gets 'em dried out, herds 'em on a boxcar, and from then on till Gandy Dancer's Day, you might say they was in the clink. They don't even get out on Saturday night.

The reason these guys put up with this treatment is not that the food is good. They got no expenses—it don't cost 'em a nickel all summer—and at the end of it they are ready to lay up comfortable for the winter with no problem of supply and many friends. You can see the three months is no joke, so it is not no ordinary drunk we get, but the elite and responsible Skid Row citizen.

One thing they do not do is they do not buy no tickets to Omaha at the end of the season. The reason they are buyin' tickets at all is the Northwestern is too darn smart to haul them back to Chicago.

“Omaha. That’s what I said,” he says. He is tryin’ to keep a cool front, but you take a drunk—if there is one thing he is, it is sentimental, and he figures on the rest of the world goin’ with him on that. “I figure on goin’ home,” he says, pretty sure I’d be impressed.

I was in a way. This here was a wrinkle I hadn’t never come in contact with before. What I mean, these guys have a number of ideas on how to get on that bus feelin’ no pain. The bus don’t pull out till noon, and they have all morning to work on it. Like the first thing, they try to buy the tickets first and get drunk after. Now, they know this ain’t going to work. First, no one is going to sell the tickets till two minutes to twelve, and the driver ain’t going to let them on the bus with a snoot full anyways. Well, then they try the one where you please sell them the ticket and keep the rest of their dough under the counter so they can’t fall into temptation and it is your fault if you won’t and they do, but they are holding out a couple bucks. And then there is the one where they pay off one guy, who is perhaps smaller or sick, to hit the sauce lightly. This character is sent in to buy tickets for his happier friends who are loitering just out of sight. This one does not transpire till the bus is in the slot ready to pull out. We seen everything they can think of twice.

Usually it winds up a few of ’em make it out the first day, and some of ’em hole up with no trouble. The rest, first we put up with a lot of loud-mouth nonsense, and then we call the cops, and the Dancers get dropped off at bus time the next day by the prowler car. Or the day after. And if they don’t sneak off and get a jug or a bottle of Bay Rum then we are lucky.

No, whatever the deal was I didn’t want any. “Now buddy, you know you ain’t going to buy no ticket. Why don’t you go out and set on the bench and take your pals with you?”

The little guy behind him who’d been blowin’ the hardest hooted. “Hell, sure he is! He got a wife and a bunch o’ brats in Omaha. Ain’t gonna smell a cork again. By God, he ain’t. That’s right, ain’t it Brownie? Hey, that’s right, ain’t it Brownie?”

Brownie felt real proud. He stood up straight and swelled

out his chest. Any average Dancer would of busted that little squirt in the snoot for that kind of talk, and it took me a minute to figure it out. By golly, they were serious. The whole darn bunch of 'em were pullin' for ole Brownie. It was like they invented him, or like he was goin' home for the whole crew.

I guess I went soft in the head for a minute. The next thing I know I sold him the ticket. One-way to Omaha. I want to tell you he was tickled. Him and the rest of 'em went right out and picked up the paper sack they had stashed under the bench—darned if I know how I missed it before—and had a snort around. All except Brownie. Well, it was no skin off my teeth. None of *them* had a ticket. But instead of gettin' right down to business the whole gang went off down the street—the wrong one. There ain't a bar on Story Street. I kind of forgot about them. They was only one mess of fish in a long morning.

Like I said, Gandy Dancer Day we keep busy. I had one real ornery cuss—most of 'em are more persistent than nasty—and the usual run of malarkey, but I only had to call the cops once. None of the Brownie bunch turned up for the Chicago bus, and the west bound don't get out till one, so it was quiet when they come back. I guess maybe there was five or six of 'em and they was so loaded down with boxes and bundles they couldn't hardly get through the door. They had a panda bear and a little wagon and a tricycle and God knows what all. They must of cut a real chunk of that soft winter living. There's quite a few gallons of wine in one o' them panda bears alone.

Okay, they about had me convinced. Brownie stepped up to the counter grinning like before with the whole gang shoving from behind. Still stony sober. "Hey, lemme have a couple bucks worth o' quarters, buddy. I gotta call the ole lady."

I fished the change out and set to studyin' the guy. He wasn't very big, maybe five-seven or eight, and skinny. His face was the usual pasty, waxy, and the little veins around his nose and eyes were red. Now you're going to say how come he's pasty after all summer in the sun. Darned if I

know, but they always was. Maybe after about so many years on the sauce the snap goes out of the skin, I don't know. Anyways, like I said, except for lookin' a few years younger and bein' full o' beans at the moment, he's just a Gandy Dancer.

Well, he went back to the phone being pushed from behind as usual, and I sure didn't fix to listen in, but he left the doors of the booth open and you couldn't of missed listenin' without leavin' the store. I admit I was curious.

Right off, it took twenty-five minutes to get his party. By the clock. He went around with the operator. "Lady, I guess I know my old lady's name. That's what I said, 1815 Linn, apartment 2 . . . you're kiddin' . . . what'd she want to do that for . . . well let me talk to the landlady."

Every once in awhile one of 'em would come up front for another load of quarters. You could see the sass goin' out of 'em. But about the time I'd give up on it myself, he got ahold of her. The whole bunch cherked right up, and from the sound of his voice you'd a thought he found the pot o' gold, he was that relieved. "Maisie!" he hollered. "Well, by darn, it sure is good to hear your voice . . . Whatchamean, who is it . . . who in hell did you think it'd be . . . ? Brownie . . . Lord sakes, I am . . . I mean I'm comin' my ownself . . . why, tonight . . . Now Maisie, damn it, you don't mean none o' that stuff . . . I never *said* nothin' about comin' before"

The shovin' and hollerin' was gone out of 'em. You could pretty well hear every word she was sayin' back in Omaha. I got to strainin' the ears myself so as not to miss nothin'. She was sure givin' him one rawhide lacin'. "In a pig's eye," she'd say. "Do tell. I suppose I should rush right down to the depot. Or was you comin' by carrier pigeon . . . ? I sure would bring a tricycle for Jamie if I was you. He's eleven . . . sure we miss you . . . the last eight years . . . I am *not* kidding. What do I want to kid about that for?" She got to either laughin' or cryin', you couldn't tell which, but whatever it was it was loud.

This went on for about three dollars worth. The gallery was real discouraged. So was I, but Brownie hung right in

there. He didn't even quit grinnin', but you could see it was gettin' harder. Somehow or other I found myself back there dustin'. The way it wound up, she said, "Well, suit yourself, only don't expect nothin' out of me."

"Maisie, I'll be there. You'll see. I got almost five hundred bucks and I ain't had a drink in three months. It'll be different. You wait."

"I been waitin' for fifteen years, and it ain't for you. I'm waitin' for Santa Claus. I told you, do what you want. I don't care." That time she hung up.

You could see him screw up his courage to come out of the booth, but his buddies never said a word. Oh, except, "You still figure on goin' Brownie?" Stuff like that.

"Sure, I'm goin'. Whatcha think? Hell, you got sense enough to know the ole woman ain't goin' to exactly fall all over me, ain't you? She ain't had any bed of roses." He had a wet film over his face and wide, damp spots under his arms.

I went back up front, and after a bit he come up and handed me his wallet. "Hey, stick that back, buddy. Me and the boys got some business to tend to. What I got . . . about ten minutes?"

I wouldn't take the dough. If he couldn't make it for ten minutes what's the odds. They stopped outside to pick up the paper sack and that was that.

The rest of 'em got put on the Chicago bus Sunday noon, courtesy the police department, but I never did see that Brownie again. Kinda watched for him, too. I figure he must of rode the rods back in. Once in awhile the railroad dicks let one of 'em get away with it—hardship cases.

We give all them toys and junk to the Lions. Didn't know what else to do with it.

