

The Owl and the Ghost Rider ...

Late one weekday morning, Owl Man found himself in downtown Seattle, in the vicinity of the old Tully's coffee shop. As he meandered back and forth in front of the familiar spot, three prim ladies, all similarly dressed in high heels, bright wool suits, and mink wraps, went stilting and rat-a-tatting down the sidewalk, the three of them looking askance as they passed the old scholar, who was leaning against the former Tully's pillar, the one in fact that had played such a prominent role in Owl Man's extraordinary creative life.

Judging from the comments of the ladies, however, he must have resembled a hobo, what with his white beard and leather cap, his well-worn corduroy coat with its collar turned up, and a slightly-torn seam and frayed area on the right, leather-elbow-patch of the jacket. The right elbow was the one he called his "thinking elbow."

"Good morning, ladies," Owl Man said to them most courteously, and he tipped his hat.

"Well, I never ..." said one of them, whose name was Agnes, and she turned her head away.

"They think they can just take over," said another, whose name was Enid, sniffing.

"Just wait until 'the Donald' builds his new jails. Then, this ... this scum ... will be singing a different tune," said the third, whose name was Dolly O'Day.

And the indignant ladies huffed off to their luncheon appointment.

Truth be told, Owl Man missed his old haunt, and would occasionally find himself loitering like a panhandler, as it were, outside the familiar old coffee shop with its huge pillar looming just outside the entry door. Tully had sold out to other coffee purveyors, in order to open his smashingly successful spirits bar; but whenever the Owl was in the old Tully's neighborhood, he always passed by, though he could never bring himself to enter this poor-facsimile of a replacement. The most he could do was to loiter outside, nursing his memories, which were just too happy and vivid to ruin by entering the new establishment.

The scandalized group of ladies had long since disappeared, and now Owl Man was keenly aware that the batteries in both his laptop and cell phone were scraping bottom at 2% charge, and no AC outlets were visible along the sidewalk. Besides, he had left his AC chargers at home. Out of obsolete habit, he looked for a coin-operated payphone, but they had all long since been ripped out and sold for scrap. So, he was forced to step into his other favorite haunt just down the street from the old Tully's—the Dunkin' Donuts, which was still as lively as ever. He asked the attendant, his old friend Cherisse, if he could use the house phone for a quick local call.

“Sure, Owl Man, help yourself. Just don't run up a huge phone bill, OK?” she joked.

“Thirty seconds or less, Cherisse—guaranteed,” affirmed Owl Man.

Owl Man dialed Heron Man, who answered after the first ring.

“Where the hell have you been?” shouted Heron Man, who had been worrying about Owl Man and his recent melancholic demeanor.

“Oh, I'm just at Dunkin' Donuts, you know, getting a couple of glazed donuts and some coffee”—which was an outright lie, and Heron Man knew it. Owl Man just wanted to hear a familiar voice—and borrow Heron Man's AC chargers while he was at it.

“That's pure bullshit and you know it, Owl Man. You've been moping because Tully's closed and you don't have Jasmine twirling your hair while you have your morning *macchiato*.”

“Yes, that too,” admitted Owl Man reluctantly. “Anyway, I just wanted to talk to you about—”

At this point Owl Man stopped abruptly, as if frozen.

Heron Man, shouting again, yelled, “Hey! Don't disappear on me again, Owl Man!”

But it was too late. Owl Man's attention had been ripped away from Cherisse's—well, Dunkin' Donuts'—hard-line telephone and re-directed to a loud, bizarre sound emanating from the sidewalk outside. It sounded like halves of empty coconut shells, or cobblestones, being clopped together like on the old radio shows where they made their own sound-effects.

“What the—?” began Owl Man, when he suddenly saw an enormous brown-haired muzzle with huge nostrils, fogging the plate glass window at the front of the donut shop. The clapping sounds began to diminish, and in their place Owl Man heard a hearty, chesty voice calling out, “Whoaaa, whoaaaa, big fella. Steady now.”

The brown muzzle slid against the fog it had just created outside the window and in the smear of cleared glass Owl Man managed to catch a glimpse of a red-checked plaid flannel shirt, a pair of leather gloves with broad cuffs holding dark-brown leather reins, and a blue-and-white bandana floating, as it were, beneath a white, ten-gallon felt cowboy hat.

He couldn't be sure at first, but having seen the slightest blush of an unmistakably bright red face between the blue bandana and the ten-gallon hat, he began to think—though it had to be impossible—that he might actually be seeing none other than Fex, riding up the sidewalk in downtown Seattle, on a 16-hand pinto horse, and *dressed up in full cowboy regalia!*

Owl Man slammed down the phone, thanked and apologized to Cherisse in one motion, and was out the door in a flash. He actually slid to a stop and looked up toward the sullen Seattle sky where, ten feet at least above the concrete sidewalk, he gazed past the enormous brown muzzle and into the serene face of Fex, who seemed to be having the time of his life. This, it would seem, was Fex's most glorious prank, his wittiest joke, although the steaming dollops of manure that the huge horse dropped onto the sidewalk erased all thoughts of jokes or pranks. Horse manure of that magnitude was serious business indeed, at least for the City Sanitation Dept. crews.

Owl Man was stunned, but not so much that he couldn't shout with a bit of annoyance, “Fex? Is that you? What the bloody hell are you doing in Seattle riding this gigantic horse and dressed up like Tom Mix?”

“Whatsa matter, Owl Man? You don't like my get-up?” Fex was obviously toying with Owl Man and having the time of his life. “Ya got somethin' against cowboys? Or did that *Brokeback Mountain* movie make ya nervous?” And Fex let out a raucous howl of laughter. There was nothing he loved better than goading Owl Man, “my main bird brain,” as he called him.

Owl Man couldn't help but caress the warm muzzle of the pinto horse, who, for the time being, had stopped dropping road apples on the sidewalk and nuzzled closer to Owl Man's corduroy jacket, sucking in huge lungfuls of the corduroy aroma.

"OK, Fex. Enough with the jokes. What are you doing here? No. What are you doing here in that outfit, on this horse?" And he waited for Fex to quit snickering, and give him a serious answer.

"Ya really wanna know, Owl Man? OK, I'll tell ya. I was reading the *Variety* want ads the other day, and somebody got word to me that some dim-witted writer in Seattle needed a "Ghost Rider." So I thought, hell, that's right up my alley. I mean Maury and me got all kinds of stuff in the lobster pot—treatments and pilots and stuff—so I thought I'd take some time off, come up and give you a hand. 'Course I gotta take a cut, and Maury too, but, yeah, I can help you out. What is it you're trying to do? Lemme hear your pitch."

Owl Man was dumbstruck. Yes, he had been considering writing some articles in a more *popular* vein—possibly even a screenplay—but he *never dreamed* that Fex would have any involvement "helping out" in those projects.

Or had he?