

## THE LEGEND OF INWICK

by Brian Dunning

JUST NORTH OF SANTA ROSA we found a hidden little town called Inwick. Hidden, I say, because it is literally true. From a hundred yards down the road it cannot be seen; partly because of the density of the forest and partly because the road takes so many dips and sweeps that one is lucky to keep any bearings at all. No road signs announced the approach of Inwick, no rows of decaying mailboxes marked its overgrown side streets, no population sign pronounced any presumptuous verdict that Inwick was anything but a hamlet.

For some time, all eyes had been on our fuel gauge, which had already entered the red and was threatening to touch the little white line. Twice, deer sprung out of the fog and soared across the road in front of us, reminding us of the remoteness of our location, deepening our dismay, and exaggerating the apparent hopelessness of our situation.

Finally we passed a horse, a tall, handsome black fellow, saddled and standing quite still between two of the poplar trees lining the left side of the road. Seeing a saddled horse was like going back in time, as indeed it seemed we were; it was easy to fancy that the deeper we drove into the woods, the further behind we left all that was familiar; until at last we had reached a time when wood stoves were used instead of electric heaters, and horses took the place of cars. Nevertheless, this stately fellow roused a cheer among our sensible selves. Horses mean civilization, and civilization means gas.

Inwick's red frame buildings appeared at the roadside only a few moments later. We pulled into the first dirt turnoff, our headlights fell upon an ancient cantankerous gas pump, and the map was produced.

A jolly figure appeared at the screen door, cocking his head and pulling his overalls straps back onto his shoulders. The yellow light from inside cast a shadow larger than himself upon the screen, making it appear as though he possessed a strange aura. Clouds of mist blew between us, turning that yellow light into bright rays that shot out from all sides. He swung the screen door open and shuffled down the steps with some urgency, looking like he had room for five inside those abundant overalls. I rolled down the window and he presented his round, red face.

He studied us for a moment, much as one would peer through a peephole in a San Francisco front door, when you're not sure if it's the pizza man or the serial killer of the week.

"Can I get you some gas?" he asked with earnest concern, as if my answer meant his family's livelihood.

"Please, and also some directions."

He straightened, threw his shoulders back and peered toward the house. Then he bent back to my window and said:

"I'll have to get Ted to fire up the pump." His brow begged me not to be put off by this inconvenience. "It'll only take a few minutes."

We looked at one another. Eyes rolled and sighs were blown. Faces wrinkled into grimaces. Reared in the big city, we were not wise enough to hide our obvious impatience with these back woods hicks, and the tremendous bother waiting for Ted would impose.

He sensed our disapproval and looked down for a moment, his face pressed into deep concentration.

"We'll be glad to offer you anything you'd like if you'll come inside for us." And he smiled expectantly, proud of his grand solution and the happiness it would bring us.

Our eyes rolled again, more sighs were blown, and with shrugs all around, we reluctantly pulled the handles to open the car doors.

Jubilant, he jogged toward the house, gesturing for us to follow, and assuring us that he'd "fetch Ted straight off."

The house was a picturesque affair, built with a wooden facade that we thought had gone the way of plank sidewalks and shutter doors. The gravel driveway was wet and shiny from the thick fog blowing over it all the time, and it made a homey crunching sound under our feet. A sad-eyed hound dog perched by the front door tipped his head back to make it impossible to pat him without getting a lick on your palm. Home and service station were one and the same; it was no more trouble to provide us with a bed and hot cider than it was to fill our radiator and check our tires. We pulled the screen door open to reveal a crackling fire casting dancing orange light over shelves of motor oil, a rack of candy and an exquisite old fashioned cash register. There was a mousey little fellow of about fifty years sitting on an ottoman in front of the fire, and he whirled with alarm as we entered. After quickly running his eyes over every inch of each one of our persons, he turned away and went back to what he was doing--whittling chips into the fire.

Our attendant had disappeared down the back hall on his quest to fetch Ted, which left us standing there uncomfortably. The whittler absorbed himself in his work for a few moments, then he spun around again, examined us fast and thoroughly, then spat out the words:

"Have a seat."

We looked around and found resting places on flour barrels and stacks of newspapers. Dan snatched the only easy chair, and John looked disgusted at his options and elected to stand.

We spent a moment taking in the surroundings and drumming on our thighs for lack of other diversion. I wondered what had become of the offer of "anything we wanted." Dan leaned forward toward the whittler sitting on the ottoman at his feet and inquired:

"Is it always this foggy here?"

"Eight or ten moons out of the year."

We wrinkled our brows and smiled at the queerness of his answer.

"New moons," he continued, gesturing at the sky with his whittling knife, "it's dark as sin in the woods, but clear as a bell. Vicious cold, too. A lot of stars, not a shred of cloud. But when the moon's waxing full, like it is now,

this soupy fog pours in thick and fills the valley like molasses..." His tone indicated that he would continue, but his voice trailed off, and he poised himself holding the knife up and staring at the window.

Not a sound came from outside. The fire hissed and popped, but those drifting gray clouds of mist deadened anything from outside. We listened for a moment in perfect stillness, and finally the dog out front coughed. We heard it very plain and crisp.

"Dog's out," he said; "that's good." And he returned to his work.

At this moment, our attendant poked his head into the room, offered us a reassuring grin and said:

"Ted's working on it. Give him fifteen minutes, and we'll have you on your way."

"Thanks."

"Don't listen to old Dover while you're sitting there. He ain't told the truth in sixteen year."

Dover dropped his whittling to lean back and snarl at him. "That's fine, Hank Blake; spoil the evening for a bunch of strangers that never done you no harm."

Hank wandered back down the hall, spouting bursts of laughter. Dover motioned for us to lean close and he whispered:

"Old Hank's had a mean streak in him ever since he lost his girl back in '59."

"How'd he lose her?"

Dover looked around to see that the coast was clear, then he said to John:

"Shut the door."

John complied, then pulled up a barrel and joined our little circle. Dover smiled as a pleasant memory warmed him, and he turned his happy eye on us. We waited a moment for him to begin.

"Her name was Marisol. Seventeen years old, straight black hair, thin as a rail, freckled head to toe. She'd only just immigrated from Scotland with her folks."

"But Marisol is a Spanish name."

"Named her after her grandmother, they did. She came from Barcelona, and had a secret way of making her own perfume. She taught it to her daughter, and she in turn taught it to Marisol. The base was whiskey; the smell came from mint leaves, bay leaves and a particular kind of toadstool that don't grow here, so Marisol substituted and threw a new flavor into the family tradition."

"She must've smelled like a garbage truck."

Dover grew very serious, and held up his hand to ward off the remark. "Don't you say it. She was a good girl, and that aroma sort of stood for her. And it wasn't unpleasant. Sort of smelled like a spice cupboard, made of cedar, that's been part of someone's home for a long time. She stayed at home, and was part of the family, and part of the home; and now whenever I go into someone's home, and catch a waft of that particular little bit that makes a home smell different from, say, a store; I think of her. Hank he says the same thing.

"Marisol's family brought two horses with them from Scotland when

they come. One was a dinky little miniature fellow, the color of cinnamon, with a mane the color of cream. The other was a big stormy stallion, black and glossy as obsidian, eyes like a blowtorch. No one ever liked that horse much, as he didn't have any kind of a personality. He was Marisol's; raised him from a pup. They were what you might call a matched pair, on account of both of them having the same black hair. He'd be raising havoc in his stall, bouncing and kicking the walls until the dust dribbled out between the cracks in the wood, no one venturing to go in and calm him. Then Marisol would trundle up, that horse'd settle and whinny approvingly; and the two of them would saddle up and trot off into the forest.

"Hank he tried to learn to ride the miniature one, but it wasn't in the books for him. His feet could touch the ground, but if he lifted them into the stirrups, he and the saddle would roll right off and dump onto the hard dirt. Hank sure had some flowery language in those days. Anyway the little horse didn't much like for a big fellow like Hank to try and ride him, so he'd scoot off and leave Hank a-chasing after him carrying that big clumsy saddle. So the times when Marisol went riding were the times that Hank couldn't be with her, so he'd stay around the barn and huck clods at squirrels.

"So it was for a few months. The winter set in and Marisol went riding more often, partly, I believe, because Hank liked to take advantage of the cold weather with her, if you know what I mean. He'd put his arm around her, and give a shiver, and say, 'Blamed if it ain't a crisp one tonight,' or perhaps hunch up next to her and say, 'Here, this way the draft won't slip in between us and snatch away all our heat.' So she generally went down to the barn about sundown, and liked to be gone until fairly late.

"Well it was that kind of evening one time. Hank had got frustrated and took the truck into Santa Rosa for something, and Marisol was out riding that big black horse. It was about ten o'clock, by which time Marisol would usually be back, and I was the only one around the place. Presently I heard that big horse's hooves right outside that window, crunching along in the wet gravel, and he fetched a whinny. I didn't know what Marisol would be coming here for, because the barn is down the road a piece. So I rose up and went out the front door.

"It was Marisol's favorite kind of weather. Cold to your bone, foggy as last year's cider and bright gray from the moon shining up beyond the clouds, and illuminating all the fog. Consequently I couldn't see three feet, and so I called out to her:

"Marisol?"

"I heard the horse take another few steps through the gravel, so I walked that way and said again:

"Marisol?"

"That horse lumped itself and trotted away. I could hear him. His fresh hoofprints were in the gravel at my feet, and there was a little mud around the edges. Well blame it all, I thought, that horse has got loose from the barn and been wandering all over tarnation. I knew I'd have to catch him, me being the only one around, so I buttoned up my collar, shoved my hands into my pockets and went after him.

"That horse just trotted along, crunch crunch crunch, until he got off the driveway and into the brush. Then it was swish swish swish, and a few

snaps and splinters of broken switches and twigs and things. I hollered at him once or twice, but since I didn't know what to say to make him stop, I figured it was best not to risk scaring him off."

Here Dover paused. His face didn't change, as if he was still going over the story in his head. Finally he smacked his lips, kicked at the floorboards, then shuffled to his feet. He crossed to the window and looked out, toward the woods.

"Don't hear Ted and Hank out there. Wonder what's become of them."

"Well what happened?" Dan asked, a bit impatiently. Dover smiled and looked down again. He snorted out a bit of a snicker and said:

"Oh, not much."

"Did you catch the horse?"

"No, but I'll get him yet."

We looked at one another. John counted on his fingers and said "You mean you've been chasing him thirty years?"

Dover didn't hear him, or at least gave no sign. His attention was riveted at something outside.

"There," he said at last. "Ted's got the pump running. Shouldn't be long now."

"What ever happened to Marisol?"

Dover drew a long face and trundled back over to his ottoman, opening and closing the blade on his knife. He sat down, stared into the fire for a long moment, then resumed whittling with long, broad strokes.

"I didn't find her. I followed that horse upwards of an hour, always just out of eyeshot. I spent a miserable, cold, damp hour in the murkiest woods you ever see, chasing after the hoofsteps of a happy-go-lucky horse that didn't have the sense to come in out of the fog. Or, that's what I thought of him then."

Dover cast a glance over us, to be sure he had regained our attention. Then he continued:

"I was getting pretty angry at him. A couple times I stopped, hunted around in that thick grey gloom for a throwing rock, and then chucked whatever I could find at him. But I didn't hit nothing. Those hooves just kept crashing on through

the brush. Sometimes I got close enough to see the branches still waving, but I never did spot the horse. By then I was fed up. I stopped, and made up my mind to head back for the house. Privately I used some language to describe just what I thought of that horse, but I'd take it all back now, as I feel awful sorry I said it.

"It was a little clearing where I'd stopped. The big redwoods were all around me, like I was standing in a Greek temple or something. You know it's one thing about a redwood grove: the boughs are so thick up above that enough light don't get through for any undergrowth to breathe, so it's just a soft carpet of brown pine needles. I stood there and caught my breath, looking just like a statue set in the middle of that odd grove of cold black trunks, with puffs of that fog sliding on through just as if the trees weren't there. I looked up and saw the moon, almost full, just for a second, as a hole in the fog went by; and for that second, it got real dark, because

there wasn't any fog to reflect the light. It was just like if you have a dimmer knob for your dining room lamp, and you twist the lights real low, and then twist them back up again. Only when that grey light come back up, the place was different somehow. I didn't hear the horse no more. The fog was fuller, more solid, and didn't blow anymore either. Mostly, there was that smell; the smell of a spice cabinet, that homey smell of Marisol's spanish perfume; smells of cedar in a grove of redwood, smells of a sweet girl where no sweet girl has any business being."

A coal popped, startling us, and landed on the boards at Dover's feet. Without looking or changing his face, he crushed it out and then went on:

"That's when I got scared. I was half terrified I might spin around and be looking into her face, or that she might come prancing out of the bushes and scare the bewhoozles out of me. I didn't dare call out; the sound of my own voice would've turned me white. Finally I panicked and up and run off; and that snapped me out of it, and I flew through the trees like a rabbit, and didn't look back and didn't want to. Thirty minutes later I was sitting right here, on this very stool, wrapped up in that blanket yonder, staring into this very fire. It was a night more than thirty years ago, a night just like this one, with the same moon, and the same fog, and the same eerie grey light."

Just then the door slammed open, and our hearts jumped out of our throats, and if we hadn't all reached out and caught them, we would have died then and there. It was Hank, wiping his hands on a rag, smiling broadly. "Old Dover telling you one of his stories?"

I started to speak but gagged on a dry lump in my throat. Finally I croaked "Yes, about Marisol and her horse."

Hank lost his smile. He tossed the rag away and shrugged sadly. "It was too bad, she so young. Dover, I wish you wouldn't always tell about her. Makes her like a circus freak or something."

"Did she die? What happened?"

Hank pointed out the window. "There's a lake about six miles up this creek. She went riding up there one night, on this crazy horse she had, past dark in the low water season. Both of them got sucked down in the quicksand. They pulled the horse out, and buried him by the lake, but they never found anything of Marisol."

Hank mumbled to himself and started for the door. He caught himself just as he got there and said, with a quickly engineered smile:

"Oh. Ted's got your tank filled. You're all set to go." "Thank you."

Hank stepped out, the screen door banging shut behind him.

In the ensuing silence, all eyes fell once again to Dover, who had returned to his whittling.

Dan looked skeptical, and was rubbing his chin to aid concentration. "If that horse died in the quicksand with Marisol," he asked, "how is it that you followed it through the woods that same night?"

"Followed it many times since, too." There was not the slightest hint of anything but earnestness in Dover's tone and expression. "That big fellow comes here every foggy moonlit night, and crunches around in that gravel outside that very window, until I step outside to follow him. If I'd

followed him all the way the first time, maybe I could have pulled Marisol out. But I didn't understand, and even now he's trying to fetch help for her."

John rose and dusted himself off. He wore a bit of a smile. "Course I'll put an end to it now," Dover continued, surveying the whittling in his hand. "That horse will be gone to his rest a month from now."

"How's that?"

"Oh, I've only got another dozen bones to go." He showed us what he was whittling: it was part of an animal's femur. "Dug him up in the spring. Once the last of him's shaved up and burned away, he won't be pestering me no more."

Something like ten seconds later we were standing out by our car, hanging our jaws like idiots and listening to Dover laugh like a donkey from inside.

Hank was dragging a squeegee across our windshield, and when Dover's laughing died away, Hank's squeaking was the only sound. John studied the moon, which flickered as clouds of varying density slid past it. Dan stared around to the side of the house, as if watching something in the trees. I just twiddled the map with fingers that seemed white as a corpse in the moonlight.

Hank shook the excess water from the squeegee and wiped it dry with a blue rag. I caught him watching us with a twinge of anxiety, as if he was worried for our sanity or something.

"You fellows look like everyone else he tells that yarn to." "It's only a story."

"Only a story." Hank shoved his hands into his pockets and kicked at the glistening gravel. "Every thought you boys ever had is as real as that tree there. Maybe it ain't only a thought in your head, but that tree ain't only wood and bark. And every story ever told is as much a part of this world as the Boston Tea Party or Custer's Last Stand. Now you know about Marisol. She's part of you now; she's in your head, just as she's in my head from when I knew her."

Our car was there before us, waiting to take us to face whatever was to happen next.

"You fellows wanted some directions?"

"Yes, please. Where are we?"

"Where you headed?"

"Freeway. Any freeway."

Hank furrowed his brow deeply, as if that was just too many for him. Finally he shook his head.

"You can't keep on through Inwick. You'll have to head back the way you came in."

We looked at the car again, then back down the road.

"Back that way," I asked, "past the buildings?"

"Ain't no other way."

"And down that crooked road, where there's poplar trees all along the left side?"

"That's it."

We all looked at one another. Each face was a blank; we stood there

motionless in the fog, hands in pockets, collars zippered tightly to our necks.

Hank burst out with a laugh. "You boys have a nice drive," he blurted loudly, then slapped his thighs and moseyed toward the house, guffawing all the way.

THE END