

*Another persuasive example of the varied talents of young Vance Aandahl . . .*

## **COGI DROVE HIS CAR THROUGH HELL**

by Vance Aandahl

MY FRIEND COGI WAS LYING IN the grass and chewing on a twig.

"You should come to the station. I've been playing poker with some great big hoods."

I looked at his great, greasy mane of black hair, which curled from the top of his white forehead to the base of his neck. It seemed almost to mingle with the grass and take root.

I said, "Okay," smiling at his monstrous, grass-framed body. He arose slowly and stood unsteadily, stretching his arms. A marvelous smile, like that of a squirrel's, spread across his pasty face. Indeed, Cogi's entire physical structure was marvelous: sprouting from a towering body of jolly pink flesh was a perfectly globular head. His body was very nearly the body of a thyroid giant; but his head was the head of an intellectual, with protruding frontal lobes and gentle, lucid eyes hidden behind thick glasses. From

his appearance alone, one could see that Cogi was a creature of conflicts.

I picked up my guitar and we walked across the grass to Cogi's car. It was a 1950 Mercury, old and battered, which Cogi had bought several years ago. Most of its black paint had rusted away and its seat covers had been torn, as Cogi said, "by the teeth of hundreds of squirrels." But the innards of the car, its engine, its soul, had been renovated. Cogi's hands had not introduced a new engine, a foreign body; rather, he had fondled the car's own engine until its youth had been restored. To Cogi, the car was an entity, a living being which he had returned to health. Yet its outward appearance meant nothing to him; only the heart of the car was significant.

Now Cogi sat on the tattered seat covers, stroking the wheel before him; I sat beside him. The

warm afternoon sun was in our faces, and we were drowsily reluctant to go. Finally, I began to pluck the strings of my guitar. With the smooth purr of a jungle cat, Cogi's car wheeled away from the curb.

"These big hoods I told you about—they're members of a gang called the Stone Street Panthers. They wear baby-pink jackets and powder-blue trousers. All of them have pink and blue motorcycles."

I smiled.

"Yesterday, they came into the station for gas. We ended up playing poker. I won, so they'll be back today."

"I think you're feeding me a big hunk," I said.

"If you don't believe me, you can get out of the car right now," said Cogi, smiling like a squirrel, while the car idled at an intersection. But I didn't get out, partly because it was all a joke, and partly, I think, because I actually did believe him.

We soon entered the city's Negro district, a place of decrepit tenements and ancient maple trees. Nowhere was there grass; the afternoon sun set the dust on fire and coppered the skin of little children. We eventually came to a place where five streets met, called Five Points, where there were a great many bars and hotels, a few grocery stores, and a taxi-cab garage. Near the edge of

this place, beneath a huge maple tree, we came to Cogi's dusty gas station.

We walked past Cogi's jeep, murmured hello to the foul-mouthed, white-pated attendant, whom Cogi had hired many years ago and whose name nobody knew, and then relaxed inside the station on the two green chairs, which had been scratched, as Cogi said, "by the teeth of hundreds of squirrels." There, shuffling cards and looking at the expanse of Five Points through a wide window, we talked.

"There's something I like about this place," said Cogi.

"Five Points?"

"Not just the buildings. The people. The dust. The trees. The way it rains."

"How does it rain?"

"A big purple cloud comes jumbling over and a black wind whooshes along the sidewalk and a colorless rain skitters down and all the people run for shelter."

"I'd write a song about it if I knew what you were talking about."

"Oh, Zaba! Just shut up, will you?"

"Sometimes I wish I lived down here. Or worked here, like you. I'm always writing songs about it . . ."

Then I realized that Cogi was outside the station, rolling up his sleeves, smiling like a squirrel, gazing at a customer's car. I

watched him as he went to work, lifting up the shining hood, sinking his hands into the metalled innards, chattering all the while to the driver. The sinking sun turned the whole scene crimson: here was the young Greek Cogi, giant body shimmering, black hair flaming, as he hunched over the blood-red Lybian chariot, while the distant Roman rumblings were unheard in Carthage, while the squirrels jumped from tree to tree and the great black warriors laughed quietly. Then the image wavered and disappeared, and only jolly Cogi and a Negro's car remained. Somehow, though, when the car drove away, it seemed to move as though it were drawn by some great animal.

When he came back, Cogi giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"That man—he said that the Devil's been fouling up his car."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Cogi paused. "You know . . ."

I laughed softly, but my laughter was met only by pink, squirrel-like eyes.

We soon began to play poker: turbulent Spit in the Ocean, unnerving Seven Card Stud, spiritless Five Card Draw. Dollar chips tumbled onto the ancient table, which had been gnawed, as Cogi said, "by the teeth of hundreds of squirrels," while the skirling night-song of Five Points sprang

up in the death throes of the bloody sunset. Neon lights flickered, turned the sidewalks white and yellow and red and blue, and then coursed like fire through my veins: down fell the dollar chips, down fell the cards (which had been dog-eared, as Cogi said, "by the teeth of hundreds of squirrels"), and suddenly I found myself resting against the outside wall of the station, my singing guitar in my hands, while Cogi talked with a white-haired Negro elder.

"Rassemas."

"Cogi."

"How have you been, Rassemas?"

"Can't complain too much. My boy almost broke his toe getting on the bus the other day; he came home early and I looked at his toe and I said, 'Brother! Oh, brother!'"

"Hurt himself bad?"

"His toe is big and fat. Been bleeding, too. I guess the Devil is just out to give us folks trouble."

"Hmmm."

Black night hung dismally over the twinkling neon lights of Five Points; dark shadows crept into the tenements, and all the people came out onto the streets, under the hot lights, where the chatterings of squirrels drifted down from the trees. Watching their revelry, their happiness, their ecstasy of togetherness, I suddenly was alone.

I looked at Cogi, the ugly Cogi, the Cogi at whom white people laughed, the lonely Cogi; he was surrounded now, surrounded by great, handsome, smiling, black friends. He sat on the fender of his beloved car and talked quietly, while in the darkness the squirrels chattered. But still—he was lonely. I, too, was lonely; and I, too, suddenly wanted the friendship of these ebony people.

Cogi came and sat beside me.

"Did you ever notice, have you ever seen, that squirrels always stay on the opposite side of a tree trunk when you walk by? When any white man walks by? Did you ever notice the squirrels down here? Have you, Zaba? It's different."

I laughed at him, quietly, reverently, peering into the soft squirrel eyes that would save me.

"Everything's different. I've tried, but I'm caught in between. I can't throw off my white husk. For ten years I've worked in the heart of it, but still I'm not a part of it. What's the answer, Zaba?"

"I don't know." I sighed.

"The squirrels. The car. But not them, not the people, not the heart of it. I can't penetrate the core. I can't."

Into our abstraction came an image. The image of a child, a running black blur of coffee beans, a stumbling bundle of cheap laundry; the image of a small black face smeared with

candy and nosedrip and tears—tears like beads of frosted glass; the image of a tiny black hand darting out once, falling back, and then stretching out again, reaching tentatively for Cogi.

"Devil threw a rock at me, Mr. Cogi!"

His great black mane curling down the nape of his neck, his glasses falling from his face as he stood up, Cogi, this giant concoction of misformed flesh, arose, lifted into his arms the squirming, tear-stained child, held the child tight until his own face was covered with candy and nosedrip and tears, stood in the silent night, surrounded by neon lights and chattering squirrels, stood and wept.

Then he roared and sang and called to the squirrels. Then the rusty black car was moving, and people were jumping into the car and onto it, and the squirrels were swarming over it, and I was inside it, sitting next to Cogi, strumming my guitar; my body was crushed by flesh, my clothes were torn, as Cogi said, "by the teeth of hundreds of squirrels"; Cogi roared and sang, and the car moved into a dark street, into a dark alley, into the darkness . . .

I awoke with the fresh morning sun hot on my face. It was the light of Heaven: I was content to remain motionless, letting the

light penetrate my eyelids and flood my eyes with soft gold. Then something trickled warmly into my armpit. I lifted myself slowly to a sitting position, opened my eyes with agonizing care, and rested my forehead on my up-drawn knees. I was enveloped in a masochistic ecstasy of aching muscles. I touched my head; the brains seemed ready to burst from my skull. The warm trickle that had wakened me was blood.

Inside the station, I washed myself with cold water from a filthy faucet. I sat quietly on one of the green chairs for several minutes, contemplating the taste of acid in my mouth. Then I walked out of the station and into the alley where I had awakened. Cogi was lying there. Cogi, with a delicate spatter of blood across his forehead: it looked like fragile black lace, stretched from his nondescript nose to the very roots of his hair. Such hair! Dissheveled now, it stretched like dark seaweed, lying in thick curls on the hot cement. It rested under the back of his neck like a pillow. It flowed over his shoulders like a shawl.

"Cogi," I said. "Cogi, Cogi." I went into the station, filled a broken ash tray with water, returned to the alley, and tried to wash away the blood. When I had smeared it into a wide, crimson stain, Cogi awoke.

"Hell, Zaba. Hell."

"Hell," I whispered. "That's it." I forgot about Cogi, stumbled back into the station, and sat once more in the green chair. "We went to Hell. Cogi and I and the Negroes and the squirrels and the black car. We went to Hell."

Cogi shuffled into the station. His wound, which must have been in his scalp, had opened again; fresh blood was dripping down his forehead and off his nose.

"Cogi. We went to Hell."

Cogi walked mutely to the yellowed mirror and combed his hair. Then he sat down in the other green chair, while the blood dripped constantly off his nose.

"We went to Hell."

"You're telling me."

"No, Cogi! We went to *Hell!*"

"Oh."

"We went to Hell."

"Hmmm."

"The three-headed dog and the oily coils of the Styx and the howling Furies! Cogi, I'll write a song about it! The Devil, Cogi!"

Cogi nodded his head silently. I leaped up, rushed about the room, found my guitar in the rest room, and rushed back to the green chair. I fondled the glittering strings, tilted my head back, and sang.

"Cogi drove his car through Hell,  
Cogi gave the Devil hell,  
Cogi faced the roaring flames,  
Cogi called the Devil names!"

I looked desperately at Cogi. His squirrel eyes were blurred. He licked his thick lips with a swollen tongue. He got up and combed his hair. Then he went into the rest room and washed the blood off his face.

I walked to the window. Five Points was very quiet at dawn. Several blocks away, a single old man was limping along the sidewalk; otherwise, there was nothing moving but the clouds. They drifted slowly across the sky, tinted silver gray by the sun. I rested my guitar in the corner and went back to the green chair.

Presently Cogi returned. We pulled our chairs up to the ancient table, which had been gnawed, as it now seemed, by nothing but the elements. Cogi's eyes were no longer the eyes of a squirrel; they were carbuncles. The dismal oppression of a hang-over hung over us.

"Tell me more about Hell."

"Shut up."

"Oh, Zaba. Everybody gets drunk. Don't feel bad about it."

"It was beautiful, Cogi. It really did happen, in a sense. I believed it."

"Hmm."

"Hell."

The morning sunlight poured through the back door and onto Cogi's cheek like downy fire. I looked out the window.

"Let's go get some coffee. My head feels like a jar of dirt."

"I know how you feel, Zaba."

I felt lonely and disappointed.

As we walked out of the station, the cries of the squirrels were like stones thrown at my head. The magical purr of the black car was harsh in my ears. I rubbed my back against the seat covers; they were tattered, as it now seemed, by nothing but the elements.

There was a cafe only a block away. The waitress smiled happily as she recognized Cogi.

"Hello, Mr. Cogi."

"Hello, Janie," said Cogi. "Two coffees."

"Okay, Mr. Cogi. Isn't it a beautiful day?"

We looked out the window. The sun was higher now. It was met by a silvery cloud and obscured. We watched. Then the sun burst through the misty fringe of the cloud and rose above it, pouring golden light across its billows, through the sky, into the cafe, and onto our faces.

"It is," said Cogi suddenly. "It's a beautiful day."

Just then, Rassemas, the Negro elder, entered the cafe.

"Cogi."

"Rassemas."

"How you been, Cogi?"

"Aaaaaggghhh!" Cogi grasped his head in mock anguish.

"Poor Cogi. I'm doing better, myself. My boy got well."

"Got well?" I asked.

"Last night his toe was purple

and fat. This morning it looks good as new."

"Good as new?" asked Cogi.

"Good as new. Devil ain't gonna bother him any more."

I felt better when we walked out of the cafe into the sunshine. The black car did not bother me now, nor did the chattering of the squirrels. A pink, squirrel-like glimmer returned to Cogi's eyes.

A small boy was standing outside the station. His face was scrubbed clean and he was wearing a suit. When he smiled, his white teeth gleamed. I was not sure whether or not he was the same boy who had come running to us during the previous night.

"Mr. Cogi! Look at me!"

Cogi picked him up and put him on one gigantic knee. I went into the station, found my guitar, and came out again. Just then, twenty feet away, a car

stopped on the street. A grinning black face appeared in the window.

"Car's running fine, Cogi! Devil ain't gonna give my car any more trouble. You fixed her up just fine!"

"Yes, sir!" said the little boy.

The morning sun was far above the clouds now. It glowed on the whole expanse of Five Points, on the black car, on the backs of the chattering squirrels far above, on Cogi and the little boy, and on myself. Basking in the sun, I suddenly realized that I was no longer lonely. Nor was Cogi; looking into his eyes, I saw only contentment. I began to strum my guitar . . .

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Cogi gave the Devil hell,  
Cogi faced the roaring flames,  
Cogi called the Devil names!"



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