

The Bones

A Novel

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PROLOGUE

Frank Bones is pissing on the world.

From the fifth floor window of the Elysium Theatre dressing room in downtown Cleveland, his eyes, bloodshot behind dark glasses, follow the stream of urine as it arcs gracefully and splashes five stories down where it lands in the backseat of a red convertible. Pleased with his aim, he lifts the bottle of tequila he's holding and takes a celebratory swig.

He's dressed head to toe in black, not having received the fashionista fatwa proclaiming its obsolescence, junior high school girls wearing all black these days. Tight black jeans, black belt with small silver buckle, black silk long sleeved shirt, the whole ensemble saying I'm forty-four years old but I rock all night. Not rock literally, since Frank isn't a musician, but rock in the sense that he can still have lots of sex with multiple partners and no day gig.

The door opens and Lou Nova, the guy promoting tonight's show, steps into the small room. Frank turns to Lou, lurching a little, the tequila evening out in his stomach. Adjusts his gyroscope and straightens his back. Tilts focus from the promoter's gut, barely contained by his too-snug satin tour jacket, up to his pudgy, middle-aged face with its attempt-at-hipster stubble to his thinning hair pulled back into a short, greasy ponytail.

Taking in the whole picture. Frank's voice rumbles up from his insides, over his tongue and through his lips from which it emerges in full snark.

"Guy's gonna regret leaving his top down."

Frank doesn't want to be in Cleveland, backstage at the Elysium Theatre with this man he hopes he'll never see again. He wants to be back in Los Angeles at his West Hollywood bungalow, in bed, under the covers, alone. Well, not alone, exactly. He'd enjoy the company of a bottle of tequila, like the one he is holding right now in Cleveland, the one making the ordeal his road life has become bearable. "Frank, five minutes," says Lou.

Frank looks out the window, feeling the humid June air fat in the room. To Lou:

"All the cars in the parking lot are Japanese. Why is that?"

"Maybe you wanna drink some coffee."

"Don't need coffee. It's show time."

Lou shrugs, inebriated performers nothing new. He grabs Frank by the arm and steers him out of the dressing room into the hallway. Frank takes a billfold from his pocket, peels off an oily five and hands it to Lou as the two of them move toward the stage.

"Camel filters, Lou. I'm trying to lower the nicotine intake. Kind of on a health kick."

"Do you remember your set?"

Frank, pointing to his head, nods sagely. "It's all right here."

The Elysium Theatre: vaudeville to jazz to rock to punk to hip hop. Seats two thousand people when the balcony's open and they don't drop a curtain behind row RR. Tonight, maybe eight hundred ticket buyers in the place. Frank and Lou stand at the side of the stage. The audience hums in the background, anticipating an evening of mirth with

America's number one bad boy comedian.

"You okay, Frank?"

No response, he's concentrating. Over the PA comes the voice of someone who sounds like *The Bible*: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Frank Bones!"

"They're waiting" Lou says, gesticulating toward the stage, Frank's commitments, his life.

"How's my hair look?"

Not waiting for an answer, Frank, talking to everyone like they're an audience, all questions rhetorical, strolls on stage. The spotlight hits him like a truck, slams through his dark glasses, his already shrunken pupils contracting to a degree barely measurable by precise optical equipment. Big applause, which Frank does not acknowledge. Not that he doesn't appreciate it, he's just preoccupied. Steps to the mic. Takes it off the stand. Hoods his eyes with his hand.

His opening line --

Lou, where are those Camel filters?

They laugh because they're supposed to. Paid \$25.50 to \$45.50, plus a handling charge, to be here and this guy's a comic so they laugh. Even though Frank was dead serious, the nicotine craving baying at the moon. Frank looks over at Lou who shrugs, thinking he's joking, being a comedian. Annoyed, Frank turns to the audience.

Good evening, Detroit.

An audience member shouts, "You're in Cleveland!"

Not if I can help it.

Frank's comeback is received with laughter and jocular booing. He squints into the

electric sun searing his eyes from the balcony. Moves to the right, as if that will get him away. The beam follows him, an escapee scuttling along the prison wall.

Could you turn up the light, please? I feel like I'm lying on an operating table and a thousand doctors are getting ready to boost my kidney.

He waits. The crowd shifts. The light is adjusted slightly.

That's better. Now it just feels like I'm having Lasik surgery. How is everybody tonight?

The audience members, knowing their part in the ritual, join their voices to create a swell of approval for this man, this avatar, this comedy deity beamed in from Los Angeles to make them forget their troubles, come on get happy for the next hour. Frank peers at them through the wall of lights, sees fat people stuffed into too-tight tee shirts, bad skin, trowel-applied makeup, big hair, bad hair, awful facial hair, dreadful clothes, porcine faces rank with pent-up frustrations exacerbated by dead end jobs, looking up at him in smiling anticipation, all desperately in need of release. He feels sick. Surges forward.

The show must flow on.

I'm not feeling too good myself. You know why? Because black people are really steamed and they're steamed because whitey is always ripping them off. The stereotype is the reverse, you know, it's the black guy in the Kangol hat running down the street with the television set he's just looted --- but it's not true.

Elvis stole rock 'n' roll from black people but Elvis gets the credit. He gets the statues. He gets Elvis soap and Elvis shampoo. The guy steals rock 'n' roll from black people, O.D.s on fried peanut butter sandwiches, then dies face down on the bathroom floor in a

*pool of his own vomit and the white man – that’s us, ladies and gentlemen, guys and gals
- the white man puts him on a postage stamp!*

They like where that one went, laughing as they arrive at the destination.

*I say that as the poster child for Acquired White Guilt Syndrome, which I’ve been
suffering from since the 1960s. I’m thinking about having a telethon. Everyone in the
business is going to have to perform so pretty much everyone’s...*

And here Frank’s brain blips, trips, skips a beat. He narrows his eyes, trying to
remember where he is. What are all these people doing in my living room? he wonders.
Then he recalls, maintaining equanimity.

You ever lick an Elvis stamp? Tastes like Vicodin.

Big laugh, drug references cheap and dependable.

I want to be a postage stamp. I want the whole world licking my ass.

Most of the audience follows Frank, already forgetting he dropped a thought in mid-
sentence, left it hanging, twisting like a seventeenth century felon on a creaky gibbet.
They’re relating to the Elvis material but feeling slightly ambivalent about the white guilt
Premise; this being a crowd of paychecks who work too hard to worry about what Elvis
did or didn’t help himself to at the smorgasbord of African-American culture. But there’s
one guy, there’s always one, who’s taking exception to Frank’s surprisingly lucid train of
thought. He’s in his thirties, a Chicago Black Hawks hockey jersey draped over narrow
non-hockey shoulders.

“Elvis didn’t steal it!”

He’s the Heckler. Too much alcohol and now he wants to be part of the show, make
his friends laugh, hunt a story for the office or the factory floor, Frank Bones paid

attention to me.

Frank thinking, Christ on a cracker, just let me get through my set.

I work alone, pal.

Wanting to go easy, not eviscerate him like a fat bass, flesh on one side of the dock, bones, as it were, on the other. But the guy won't leave it.

“Take back what you said!”

Or what?

Rising to the challenge, the atavistic comedy urge to destroy kicking in.

You're gonna come up here and instruct me on the finer points of Elvis' many diverse musical influences?

The trap laid, the fish biting, the cotton high.

“I'll come up there and kick your ass.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

Raising the ante.

Turn on the houselights.

After a moment the lights come on and Frank stares into the crowd.

What deathwish motherfucker said that?

The guy stands up as audience members jeer him. He's four red, white and blue cans of Pabst tall boys into the evening and his friends, at once mortified and titillated, egg him on.

“I did, Bones. You ain't shit,” said with a laugh, not angry, the guy just drunk, having fun.

With what he imagines to be great savoir faire, the kind that comes from being truly

and righteously stoned, Frank produces a revolver from his pocket, yes, a sidearm, a gun, a gat, and aims cool cylindrical metal at Hockey Jersey. The crowd isn't sure if this is a joke, some Surrealist attempt to carry them to new and more dangerous heights of amusement, Duchamp with a microphone, Comedian Descending a Staircase. Some think its part of the show, Frank testing the limits again. A man in seat GG 108, manager of a Foot Locker store, begins to experience heart palpitations.

You know the only thing I hate more than Elvis? And I'm talking about the post-Ann Margret period 'cause everything he did until then was cool even if he stole it from the brothers...the only thing I hate more than fat, bloated, Nixon-hugging, white rhinestone jumpsuit Elvis are his fuckin' fans.

Hockey Jersey can't contain himself and the Pabsts are talking. "You're gonna wish you hadn't said that!"

Really?

Frank squeezes the trigger, firing the gun into the ceiling, once, twice, three times; plaster flakes and falls like dry, lead-encrusted snow from the sky as everyone dives for cover under the seats, their fear mixed with old chewing gum.

Frank is a lot harder to book after that.