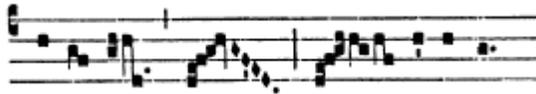




THE WHITE MAN

Excerpted from **THE MEGAPODE**

A novel by Michael Finley



ELIZABETH FRYE SAT IN HER NURSE'S UNIFORM for a last smoke before heading back to critical care. From the pinched pocket of her purse she drew the crumpled pamphlet Marty had left with her, explaining why it was a mother's honor to surrender her sons to Christ. She held her cigarette in her affected movie-star way, as if she were blowing a kiss with it, and she frowned. This was typical of Marty's style of communicating -- communication by dropped crumb, and "ME -- A PRIEST?" was a dropped crumb if anything was. She stubbed out her Newport, projecting her distaste for the the pamphlet's prose into the ashtray.

People in French Creek imagined that Elizabeth was some sort of atheist or other. And while this was true for most people's purposes -- vicious

gossip -- it was not true in the strictest sense. Elizabeth knew first-hand that there was a God, and that He resided in Heaven. The problem was that the two of them never saw eye to eye.

From birth the tall woman had suffered from a curvature of the spine, a scoliosis just severe enough to suggest to her father, August Hunter, filling station proprietor of Portage County, the kind of laziness or indifference which he had trouble enduring, so instead of enduring her he beat her up. Gus Hunter was religionless apart from a vague reverence for the principles of internal combustion, and so his wife Eugenia, an inventive woman with a kernel of devotion but no place to plant it, played peacemaker between father and daughter. She did this by smashing gin bottles against the cast-iron stove until Gus let the girl go. Gus did not dare lift a hand against Eugenia -- she was a tree of a woman, with fists like smooth coconuts.

And smart -- it was her idea, once crook-backed Elizabeth turned twelve and required only a beachball to balance on to look exactly like a question-mark, to have Gus take the girl in the Model A down Highway 44 past the crossroads and have The White Man have a look at her back. It was an idea which Gus, knowing the genial string of taverns along that trunk road, was not indisposed to entertain.

Twenty-seven miles later, The White Man's wife met them and ushered them onto the porch. A washed-out little woman with a limp cotton dress, she had a look of exhaustion about her, as if she had a lifelong hankering to be covered up with dirt and done with the world of physicality. She was regarded in the county as a saint of considerable magnitude. Elizabeth thought she looked like a dishrag, however; life with The White Man could not be an easy one.

"Go on up," the woman said, pointing through the swing-door. "He ain't gone nowhere."

What Elizabeth beheld in the little house took her breath away. Inside the screen door she saw the kitchen, one wall of which had been torn out, and a three-sided Airstream trailer parked up against the hole. The air pressure in the trailer tires provided the springiness for the great bed which lay inside, consisting of a foundation of cinderblocks, two immense planks of oak laid side by side over the blocks, and a half

dozen mattresses sprawled one over another, and resting atop them all the great man himself.

It was common knowledge that The White Man never left his trailer or, as he called it, his chariot. It was a convenience to him, inasmuch as he had to preach twice yearly at the county seat in Ravenna anyway, at Pentecost and the Fourth of July, not to have to get into and out of bed all the time. In addition to which, The White Man was not all that well. Everyone knew he had been dying for upward of nineteen years, and that it was all the great albino and his little woman could do to keep his working weight at 820 pounds, sunup.

His flesh swam everywhere across the giant bed, honoring only the dictates of gravity and a subtler tug, perhaps of the moon. His muscle tone may not have been the best, but his color -- what color an albino can muster in the first place -- was worse, a dreadful chalky white, except for the blue of his lips (which Elizabeth guessed might weigh in at a half-pound apiece), the pink of his right eye and the crimson red of his left. All in all, he looked like a beached whale in bleached bunting.

Unsophisticated people might have thought The White Man was the victim of an awful curse from God Himself, were it not for the remarkable healings The White Man wrought, healings for which modern medicine could offer no cogent explanation. The White Man was a kind of Giant Jesus -- "He saved others, himself he could not save." [Mark 15. 31] -- troubled within by demons specializing in disorders of the pituitary and thyroid.

When he inhaled, Elizabeth saw, his cheeks shook like shuddering sails, and when he exhaled they filled again, and when he finally took notice of the stooped-over girl, and gestured to her with a finger that was too chubby to completely crook -- more a bulb than a cylinder -- she was not comforted.

"Daughter," The White Man asked in a feeble, high-pitched whine, "are you washed in the blood of the lamb?"

Elizabeth, perplexed, glanced at her father. Gus mouthed something she could not make out.

"How do you mean, exactly?" she finally answered. She knew she

lacked training in such matters, and did not want to misspeak.

The crimson eye found her, and it jiggled with passion. "Are you saved?" he squeaked.

Gus had come forward by now, and put his hands on his daughters's shoulders, trying to force her into a kneeling position. This only succeeded in riling up the girl.

"Saved? Pa, what the hell is he talking about? Let me go! "

Gus propitiated The White Man. "Oh, we're believers, Gene, we just ain't goers, leastwise not recently anyhow."

Both the pink and the red eyes closed, like sunset on Saturn. "Why, then," the voice rose out of him like fluted smoke, "do you rage against your infirmities?"

Elizabeth pulled away from her father's kneading insistence, saying, "Listen here, Mr. White Man, this ain't my idea, you know."

"Elizabeth here's just a girl," her father put in. "Help her and I personally would be much obliged. And that'd be a help to you, too."

The suggest of subornation was more than the great teacher could endure. Violating a number of highly-regarded laws of physics, The White Man bolted upright on his bed, the trailer rocked like a boat in a storm, and the great white hand stretched out over the terrified girl.

"The mark! " the excited teacher squealed, "the mark be upon you and your generation, yea, unto seven times seventy times! "

Elizabeth gazed up at the frightful face, the white hair spilling over it like milkweed stuff. Her own jaw tightened irascibly.

"Then! " the teacher pronounced, "and not until shall ye enter the Temple! In the name of Christ Jesus! "And he foundered back into his mattresses like a steamer into the icy waters off the coast of Newfoundland.

The little limp woman rushed to his side, not alarmed but with an air of practiced emergency, taking a two-by-four from under the bed and levering it under his head to prop the mass back up onto the grimy,

unwashable pillow, and held it with all her might until she heard wind reenter his form.

Gus Hunter was so caught up in the rescue operation that he did not notice when his daughter, her eyes afire with indignation, thrust out her elbows and held out her fists, and in one swift motion stood straight and uncurled from head to toe. Gus turned only in time to see her stalking out the door and out to the car, upright and defiant.

"Well I'll be," her muttered, scratching his chin, "a goddamn miracle."

Gus stopped off halfway home, explaining to the stern-faced girl beside him that his pals at the Palomino Grill would be as anxious to hear the stunning news as her mother; and he left her in the front seat to go in and sing hymns with the boys, little suspecting that his daughter had changed in ways more fundamental than a simple straightening of the sacroiliac.

Little lights spun round and round in Elizabeth's head. Was the whole world crazy, she wanted to know, or was she alone in believing The White Man was a perfect monster, stupid and ugly and evil and cruel, and if God did the bidding of such as that, then He was not much better. Let God come and take away her sons, she said, stuffing her fists in her pockets. God would work His wonders, she would work hers. And may the better of the two prevail.

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