

# The Big Touch

By Jordan McPeck

Even though I'd just stuffed my belly with a platterful of perogies and kolbassa, fresh strawberry-rhubarb pie could not be denied. The waitress told me the berries and rhubarb came straight from the garden out back. The piece she brought was small, so I had to have a second, but I skipped the ice cream on that one. I had to lean back in my chair after I finished, sip my iced tea and suck my teeth for a bit. This was truly a good day. Everything went well this trip: smooth, easy, no troubles. All my problems solved, all my stress gone. I felt like taking a nap. Isn't that what you do when you've got no worries? Another hour and half to Winnipeg, then nap time.

I left more than I needed to for a tip and lined up at the cashier. A couple chocolate bars and a diet cola made their way on to the counter along with the check and a fifty-dollar bill. Gonna need a few bursts of energy to keep me awake for the rest of the drive home. The cashier nodded to the pumps outside and asked if I had gas, and I told her I paid for it on the way in. Then I rubbed my belly and told her I'd probably be paying for it all the way home, too. She didn't smile – probably owned the place.

After I got in the car, I undid my belt, unbuttoned my pants, and unzipped about halfway. I checked to see if the classic rock station from Winnipeg was in range yet; good, it was. Tunes pounding, I put on my seatbelt, opened my diet cola, and pulled on to the highway heading south. The air poured in through the open windows as I accelerated through the first big bend of the S-curve leaving Eriksdale. There's nothing better than a cool evening breeze after a scorched prairie day.

The sunset turned the sky a rich pink to the west, but the dark clouds directly above looked nasty. And just like that, the rain started. Within seconds, it was so heavy my wipers couldn't handle it. I closed the windows, leaving a crack for air.

I barely hit highway speed coming out of the second big bend when I saw him. He had a pack on his back almost as tall as he was, and had his thumb sticking out. The rain streamed off his elbow. Nothing but flat fields and a few clumps of skinny trees for at least a quarter mile in any direction. Poor guy. I hit the brakes.

I watched in the rearview mirror as he ran up and banged on the trunk, pointing to his pack. I shook my head and reached over to open the back passenger door. He threw the pack in, took off his cowboy hat and threw that in after it, and got in the front. I pulled back onto the highway, spraying gravel.

"Whoo-wee!" He grinned like a lottery winner. "T'anks a lot, bye. I 'aven't seen a rain like dis since I left the Rock." He shook his head hard, and I recoiled at the spray of water.

"Hey," I barked.

Honest wrinkles covered his face. "Jaysus Lard t'underin'! What am I doing? Sorry 'bout dat, bye, I'm just a chucklehead. You can let me out right 'ere if you want, right now."

"No, don't worry about it. It's just water." The guy looked about mid-forties, small, wiry build, close-cropped hair turning gray. His face had deep weathered lines, especially around the eyes, which had a permanent squint. His teeth were so crooked I wondered if he was able to eat solid food.

He thrust his hand out. "I tell you, I mean I can't tell you 'ow much I appreciate dis ride, bye. The name's Joe Nikkel."

I shook his hand, then turned down the radio. "Andy Robertson. I couldn't leave a guy standing out in the middle of this downpour."

"Yeah, I was kinda glad it rained actually. I get more rides when I look really miserable."

"Where you headed?"

"Anyplace you're going dat gets me closer to the bus station in Winnipeg'd do me just fine."

Something about this guy made me smile. "Sure, I can go by there. You been on the road long?"

"You mean today?"

"Sure."

"You're my second ride today, and the second in three days."

"No kidding. Where you coming from?"

"I was over in Russell a few days ago. I was 'eading over to find someone near Gimli, but don't need to no more. Say, do you mind if I close dis window? I'm wet enough already." He started playing with the door lock button.

I used the window controls on my side to close them. He said thanks. The stink of stale sweat filled my nose, but it wasn't too bad. In fact, I think it was me more than him. Funny. I didn't think hitchhiking and bathing got along so well.

"So you're from the Rock. Isn't that Newfoundland?"

"Sure, bye, dat's 'ome. But I been on the road a few weeks now."

"Off to see the country?"

"Nope. Don't much care for it. Never been off the Rock before, and now that I been off, I'd rather go back. I'm 'eaded for a job up in Fort McMurray."

"Alberta? You're kidding. Couldn't you find some work closer to home?"

"Not much point looking for anyt'ing back dere, not since the goddamn government killed the fishery. Let me tell you, it was a sad day on the Rock when dey shut it down. Mighty sad day."

"So you're a fisherman, eh? I've never even seen the ocean myself."

"All me life. All me daddy's life and all me granddaddy's life, too. I tell you, dey shoulda just taken us out and shot us instead a shutting it down."

"Couldn't you find something else?"

"Dere ain't nuttin else in Rodger's Point. Dat's the outport I come from. No way in or out 'cept by water. Sixty-seven people and three boats we 'ad. Actually, two now. I own one of 'em. One of 'em went down with my brother and my father and my neighbor two years ago."

I smiled. "You're kidding."

Joe frowned and looked straight ahead. "You sure must think I'm a funny man, 'cause you sure do think I'm kidding a lot. Bye, I'm telling you the truth."

I struggled to wipe the grin off my face. "No, no, look I'm not laughing at you. Like I said, I've never seen the ocean, and I've never met a fisherman, or anyone who knew anyone on a ship that sank, or anyone who's hitchhiking across the country for a job, or anyone from a town with sixty-seven people. I'm a lifelong Winnipegger. What's

a guy from a city in the middle of the Prairies know about what you're telling me? This is fascinating stuff."

"Well, I 'aven't quite 'itch'iked across the country."

"So how'd you get this far?"

"Took the bus to T'under Bay. Dat's where me money ran out. 'Cept for what I needed to keep for food 'til dat first paycheck."

"So what's a fisherman do for a paycheck in northern Alberta anyway?"

"Logging. We always do our own back 'ome. A lot of guys 'eaded out west to do it full-time. One of the guys told me about Mr. Olsynski dat runs the place. I got ahold of him and he said to come on down, dere's lotsa work. So I packed up me chainsaw and 'eaded out."

I snorted a laugh. "Wait a minute." I turned to glance at his pack. "You mean I picked up a chainsaw-carrying hitchhiker?" My grin wasn't going anywhere this time.

He wrinkled his eyebrows and spoke slowly. "No, I left it on the bus at T'under Bay. COD to Fort McMurray. It's too big to lug around with me. I'm hoping Mr. Olsynski will advance me some pay to pick it up."

I wrestled my grin under control. "Sorry, this is just getting to be too much. Hitchhikers have this serial killer image as it is, and then you tell me you've got this chainsaw, on top of the rest of this story, and man I just can't help but enjoy it. It's kind of like being in a slasher flick."

Joe nodded a grunt and turned to look out the side window.

Touchy little fella. Needs to work on that sense of humour. Maybe he's never seen a slasher flick. "Look, I'm sorry, really. But it's almost like you're pulling my leg. I guess truth is stranger than fiction, ain't it? Damn near as entertaining though. Please, keep going. Like why are you headed the wrong way? Russell's almost in Saskatchewan, so why'd you head east from there?"

My cell phone rang. I checked the number. "Just a minute, I've got to get this." I opened it up. "Hey, Jimmy. How's it going?"

"Where are you?"

"Heading home. About an hour out of Winnipeg." I picked up my bag of sunflower seeds and offered them to Joe. He took the bag and studied the label.

"How'd it go?"

"Good, in the end. Had some trouble finding her. I forgot the directions to her house, so I looked her up in the phonebook. Wouldn't you know there's a M. Baron and a M. Berrin live out there? I drove to the first one and it's this crappy trailer, all run-down. I figured no Chief of a whole reserve would be living in a place like that. So I went to the next one and it's just as crappy." Joe put a few seeds in his mouth and started crunching. I pointed to an empty coffee cup in the console.

"You idiot." A big sigh came over the phone. "But you made the delivery?"

"Oh, yeah. I went up to the second trailer and asked the kid who answered the door if the Chief was home. He wasn't, so I gave the kid the package and told him to make sure it stays in the fridge, just like you said." Joe shook out a few more seeds and put them in his mouth. "Just a minute, Jimmy." I took the phone away from my ear. "Joe, what are you doing? You're supposed to spit out the shells. Use that coffee cup." I put the phone back to my ear. "Sorry, Jimmy. Guy here never had spits before, I guess."

“Who the fuck is that? Have you got someone in the car with you?” yelled Jimmy.

“Yeah, I--”

“Stop the car! Stop the fucking car! Right now, you stupid shit!”

I slammed on the brakes. We fishtailed into the oncoming lane and back again before we smacked anything. We hit the gravel shoulder going way too fast. We should've rolled but somehow stayed upright.

“Okay, we stopped.” Inside, I felt like the ground had disappeared, and I was flying top speed into pitch black. I could hardly breathe.

“Get out of the car. Don't say another goddamn word until you're alone.”

I got out of the car. I held my pants up with one hand and the cell phone with the other. “Wait here, Joe.” My clothes were soaked by the time I ran 20 meters down the shoulder, holding the phone with my ear and doing up my pants as I went. Should've grabbed Joe's hat, would've kept me from drowning when I opened my mouth to speak. I bent over to talk to Jimmy.

“Jimmy, it's pouring like you wouldn't believe. I picked up this hitchhiker. I figured why not? I'm not carrying anything. He was getting soaked.”

“Holy shit, I can't believe how stupid you are. I don't care if he's on fire, you're on a job for me, you don't pick up passengers, you fucking idiot.” I heard the sound of the phone banging on something hard. “Sure, you're not carrying anything and he doesn't know you from Guido. But didn't you just tell me all about the job you just did? So if this jerk sees a headline tomorrow that says Chief Berrin went boom this morning, you don't think he might link you to it? And you to me, since you called me by my fucking name, you fuck?” More phone banging. A semi went by, spraying me and almost blowing me over.

My mind racing, I paced around the shoulder. I stepped on to the pavement. An SUV blasted me with the horn and swerved. I jumped back. “No, Jimmy, no, it's not that bad. He doesn't know anything. He's a fisherman from Newfoundland on his way to Alberta. I'm dropping him at the bus station. This time tomorrow he's going to be cutting trees somewhere around Fort McMurray.”

“Shut up. Let me think a minute.”

“Sure, Jimmy, sure. No problem.” He put me on hold. I straightened up and let the rain stream down my face. I hardly noticed. Joe was watching me from the warm comfort of my car. Why the fuck am I standing out here? It's my car. I stared at him. With the rain gushing down the windshield it could've been the devil himself sitting there for all I could tell. Each time the wipers pumped I caught a clear view of him for a split second. Looked like he was staring right back, unblinking, unmoving.

“Okay, Andy. Drop him off at the bus station. This problem better go away quick or you become the problem.”

“It will, Jimmy. Don't worry. I got it covered.”

“You're such an idiot. You better not fuck up again next time.”

“Jimmy, what do you mean next time? I thought I was free and clear. Do this job and I'm done, remember?”

“Do a job right and you're done. Another fuck up like this and you're done in other ways.”

I put the phone in my pocket. I was standing on solid ground again. Maybe not as solid as it was when I left Eriksdale, but solid enough.

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I slid into my seat, dripping all over. I grabbed a sweatshirt from the back and toweled off. Joe cleared his throat. Silence. I pulled back onto the highway. My pants were cutting into my stomach, but I couldn't unzip. The things I put up with for this guy. After he cleared his throat for a third time, I told him to keep going with his story. Better than trying to explain what just happened.

Joe spent nearly the next hour telling me, or maybe I should say continuing, the wildest story I'd ever heard. He left eight school-age children and a pregnant wife back home. Took him a week or so to thumb it from Thunder Bay to the east side of Winnipeg. He couldn't believe how difficult it was to get a ride. All those empty cars going by and hardly anyone would stop.

He camped in a field by the highway the night before coming into the city, and shared his tent with a young hitchhiker who came along in the rain. They ate beans and sardines and played crib all night. The kid took off after breakfast. Joe thought it was rude for him not to help tear down the camp. He didn't notice until he was set to go that the kid had robbed him. All his cash was gone.

That's when I started to think this was a set up. Sob story here we come.

After the robbery, Joe spent the next three or four days in Winnipeg and didn't ever want to go back. Winnipeggers are the most selfish people he'd ever seen. He asked everywhere for help. He tried explaining his situation to people on the sidewalk downtown, but they wouldn't stop, they'd walk by like he wasn't there. A few people gave him tickets for the city bus or the odd cigarette, but he didn't smoke and where was he supposed to go on the city bus?

His food ran out after a couple days in Winnipeg. He managed to hitch a ride to Russell, but it took over a week. All he ate the whole week was a couple sandwiches and an apple one driver gave him and a truckers' breakfast another driver bought him at the Husky truckstop in Brandon. Apparently, he was so hungry he "coulda eat the arse of a low flying duck."

If that's not a hint for a handout I've never heard one before. But he kept going.

He found a phone in Russell and called Mr. Olsynski in Alberta to explain why he hadn't arrived yet. Mr. Olsynski told him to find a guy named Walter Thorlakson on a farm near Gimli and tell Walter that Mr. Olsynski would cover a loan for \$200. He spent three days walking straight east, through the Lake Manitoba Narrows. Only one short ride, slept at the side of the road, fed a lot of mosquitoes.

He made it to Eriksdale yesterday morning. Helen from Helen's Restaurant – he seemed to think I knew her – gave him a lunch special for cleaning up the garbage in the alley and cutting down some bushes. He told his story to Helen while he ate his hot pork sandwich at the counter, and by the time he was done an old couple got up from their booth and invited him out to their farm.

"They don't know you from Guido and they took you home?"

"Yeah, those Eriksdale folk are the nicest I met outside of the Rock."

And the biggest suckers too, I'm thinking. "What'd you do at their place?"

“Well, first off, Cindy insisted I call home. Den dey told me I was their guest and I shouldn’t worry about finding dat Thorlakson fella, dat dey’d give me the loan. So me and Myles played crib and drank lemonade while Cindy did me laundry. I had me first real bath in three weeks and slept in a bed for fourteen hours. Then this morning when Myles dropped me off at the bus stop, he gave me his ‘at, said a man needs a ‘at if he’s gonna to be outside as much as me.”

“If Myles was such a super guy, why’s he making you hitchhike into the city?”

“The bus wasn’t coming for a couple hours. I started thinking if I could get a ride I’d be dat much further a’ead. So once he drove off, I started walking.”

I turned to stare at him. Christ. It’s hard to tell if this guy’s for real or not. He does look a little embarrassed.

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I turned into the tiny parking lot by the bus depot. Here it comes, the big touch. I couldn’t wait to hear how he topped off this story.

He turned and looked me straight in the eye. “T’anks for the ride.” He offered his hand.

I looked down at it, shook it. “Hey, no problem.”

Joe got out and pulled his pack from the back seat. I couldn’t believe it. That’s it? After all that set up, and he doesn’t top it off with a big touch? He’s about to head off as if he’s on top of the world. He’ll be lucky if that two hundred bucks is enough for the bus ticket. But he’s not going to ask for anything? Like he’s got enough? I thought about giving him some cash anyway. A guy like this could make fifty bucks go a long way, even twenty. Wouldn’t hurt me none. The guy doesn’t even know how rough he’s got it.

Fuck that. It’s all a scam. That’s how he’s topping it off. Big story, lot of thought put into it. Of course, he’s going to skip the classic buddy-got-a-quarter routine. If you ask for something, it’s gotta be small enough that the mark won’t miss it. Big story, big payoff. It’s all a play for suckers, make the sucker think he’s being a hero, make the sucker want to cough up big, make the sucker think it’s his idea when really he’s being scammed. He’s probably run this con a million times. He’s good though. Real good. But I’m better. I got to enjoy the show without buying a ticket.

I watched him shrug into the backpack. He leaned into the car. “T’anks again. Maybe you Winnipeggers ain’t all bad.”

I smiled at him. “Yeah, maybe.” We ain’t all suckers either.

He didn’t move, his eyes darted around.

“Well, good luck then.” I put my hand on the gearshift.

“Yeah, t’anks...umm...say, I ‘ate to ask...” He drummed his fingers on the seat. Okay, finally, here it comes. I love it when I’m right. “...but I notice you got a couple chocolate bars sitting dere, looking lonely. Be alright if I grabbed me one?”

“Sorry, bud. I promised them to the neighbor’s kids.”

“Sure, sure. Kids love ‘em.” He backed out, shut the door, and gave me a big smile and a little wave. I nodded. He turned and walked to the entrance. I waited to see if he’d come back with a last ditch attempt. He didn’t even turn around. Thinks I’m going to run after him.

As he got to the door, I saw two of Jimmy's goons hop out of a car. They hustled in after Joe. Two more stayed in the car.

Wow, four goons. That means blood or bones or both.

Goddamn con. Deserves whatever he's going to get. I turned the radio back on and pulled back into traffic. I ripped the wrapper off a bar and started munching. Next time, no hitchhikers.

*Jordan McPeck fills his days as an accountant for the Canadian government. He fills his nights with his wife and two kids. The link between Jordan's two worlds is the daily bus commute, which he fills by reading noir fiction and radical politics. Occasionally, the urge to write overtakes him -- The Big Touch is only the third story he's ever written. Blue Murder and Spinetangler published his first two stories online in 2000 and 2007.*