

REEFER AND JESUS

Dave Swan

Back in the late '70s, you could usually find Jesus lounging on the porch of the old Victorian house on 16th Avenue South in Southside. Reefer was around too but he was the shy one, apt to be camping out under the kitchen table or snoozing in the big antique fruit bowl when it was empty. Jesus was big and black as a country midnight. Every Halloween, Ellie put on a witch's outfit and she and Jesus greeted the delighted trick-or-treaters together.

Of course, the names were a constant conversation piece. If somebody wanted to know what possessed her to name an orange tabby cat after an illegal substance, Ellie always replied, "Because no matter how dry it gets around here, I'll always have Reefer." When asked the same question about Jesus, she'd say that when he was a kitten he was just the sweetest thing she'd ever seen and was the only living being who loved her unconditionally, not asking for anything in return. So she decided it fit.

There was talk about Ellie, too. The prevailing story was that she was a Deadhead who'd fallen away from the mothership. Some people even claimed she'd had an affair with Bob Weir, who was the best-looking one in the band. She did love their music; on any given night you'd hear *St. Stephen*, *Uncle John's Band*, or *Ripple*, her favorite, drifting out of the windows. But mostly she was in a perpetual in-between state, sometimes working at a bookstore, other times waitressing at different spots. She'd gotten her teaching certificate but then discovered, as she put it one night over beers at Grundy's, "I just couldn't make those kids plow through all that junk and waste their time like I wasted mine."

Her boyfriend Luke was sort of like her, as he had some education past high school and figured he'd get more someday, but in the meantime was a welder at U.S. Steel. On their first date, when she said without explanation that she found Jesus down by the railroad tracks, he grinned and said,

"It never happened in church for me either."

Later that night, he woke up, saw Reefer staring down at him from the headboard, and felt sweet Jesus curled up around his feet.

But the next year, layoffs started and Luke couldn't cover his share of the rent, moved someplace cheaper, and pretty soon they weren't together at all. Ellie struggled too and even tried teaching again, but could only get hired as a substitute once in a while. She was spending a lot more time on

that porch with the “boys,” and folks still stopped by and fussed over them, but people who walked by late at night sometimes thought they heard crying.

Then in August they were all out there one evening when the phone rang. Ellie ran to get it and while she was talking, a late-summer thunderstorm suddenly blew over the mountain. Before she could get them inside, lightning lit up the whole sky, a massive *crash!* shook the earth, and Jesus and Reefer, spooked, bolted into the night.

In a panic she called Luke and he came with a couple of his friends. They rounded up a few more, and soon the posse was out all over Southside, seven or eight or maybe a dozen eventually, peering into yards and trees with flashlights and calling, “*Reefer! Jesus! Reefer! Jesus, honey, where are you? Is that Reefer? I think I saw Jesus over there! Here, Jesus! Here, Reefer! REEFER! Can you see him? JESUS! Reeeee-ferrrrr! Jeeeee-ssuuuussss!*”

The police got more than one call, but had real emergencies to tend to after the storm and never responded. After about an hour, one of Luke's buddies spotted Jesus under a shed. Ellie came and gently lifted him out, hugging him and stroking his soaked fur and crying all at once. They didn't find Reefer before they finally called it a night, but a few days later there he was on the front steps like nothing happened.

They all left town soon afterward. A couple of years later, a letter arrived at the last place Ellie waitressed, where some of the rescue party still worked. Inside was a picture of her and Luke standing in front of a little house with Ellie holding the cutest little baby girl.

The letter said Reefer had recently died at the fairly ripe old kitty age of 14. Jesus had disappeared in the woods near the new house some time before. Ellie wrote that she'd been all broken up, but when she first held her daughter she felt just like she had when she got him, and so the baby was named Jessi, the closest girl name she could find. She also had two new tabbies and was thinking about calling them Fred and Barney. Or maybe Jerry and Hunter.

*“Reach out your hand if your cup be empty,
If your cup is full may it be again,
Let it be known there is a fountain,
That was not made by the hands of men”*

—*Grateful Dead*