

## THE JOURNEY TO OMPAH

by Tim Wynne-Jones

My dad is so polite that his pants caught on fire. Okay, just the once. And it was the bird's fault, a bird that had no business being in this part of the world. Then again, you have to wonder . . . . If it hadn't been for the bird and the cute reporter and the burning trousers . . .

But let me start at the beginning. Let me take you there.

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The whole weird trip starts on a beautiful midsummer morning. The blazing pants are still hours away. I'm sitting at the kitchen table checking out the movies in the newspaper. I have a date tonight. I wonder if maybe Dad does too. He's washing a purple shirt in the sink. Except he isn't really washing it—he's watching it. Just leaning on the counter as if he isn't sure what to do next. I've noticed that a lot lately.

"It won't wash itself, Dad."

He tosses me a smile that is two sizes too small. He says, "According to the directions, it will." Then he holds up a pink bottle, *Feathery Soft for Delicates*. It makes me think of Mom's stuff hanging in the bathroom. Only not our bathroom, anymore.

"It's silk," he says. "Doesn't like to get roughed up."

Just then the timer on his wristwatch buzzes, and he returns to his delicate task. I observe. Since the breakup, I've been observing him a lot. When I'm at Mom's, I observe her. I'm trying to figure out how we got to this trial separation thing. How, six weeks ago, just plain here became here and there.

"He's too polite, that papa of yours."

I watch him rinse the shirt out under cold water.

I open up the dictionary, and I say to Mom, "Polite as in having good manners or polite as in refined, cultivated?" She screws up her face. "He has always been the perfect gentleman, of course. But lately, he's . . . how should I say . . . intimidé. He's nervous all the time, as if he's having an affair."

"But he isn't."

She shrugs. Pouts. "He's too finicky," she says.

Gingerly, he wrings out his shirt. Is this what she means?

I look up "finicky." "So he concentrates too much on small and unimportant details?"

"Michel," she says, frowning. "Enough with the dictionary."

"I'm trying to understand."

She wraps her arms around herself. She looks as if she's trying to understand as well, leaning on her own counter in her own kitchen.

"Suddenly, it is 'everything in moderation,'" she says. "But this . . . this *contrainte*. This is not moderation. It is . . ." But language fails her. Two languages fail her.

I watch him slowly wrap his fragile shirt in a fluffy, yellow towel.

"'Moderation: the limiting, controlling, or restricting of something so that it becomes or remains moderate.' And that's bad?"

Now she glares. "He wasn't always like this, Michel. Just the last year or so." She pours herself a glass of wine. "Everything in moderation is fine. But you have to moderate moderation with a little *joie de vivre, non?*" She sips the wine. "He used to be a passionate man, your father."

I close the dictionary. I don't want any more definitions. But I lie in bed later that night trying to think what happened in the last year or so to change things. I became a teenager. Is it me?

Dad stands back and regards his handiwork, pleased with himself in a modest kind of way.

The phone rings. He picks it up and his eyes get big. "No!" he says. And I am rigid with fear. Something has happened to Mom. But now I see that his eyes are big with wonder, not alarm. "You're kidding!" he says. Wonder transforms his face to a grin the size of July. "Really?" he says. "*Archilocus alexandri?*"

I should have guessed. It's about a bird.

"What now?" I ask. "Someone spot a dodo walking up Yonge Street?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing so large," he says. "But rare. A black-chinned hummingbird."

Right on cue, a ruby-throated hummingbird zooms to the feeder outside the kitchen window. I can see it hovering, its wings a blur, just beyond my father's shoulder. It's not such a big coincidence. They feed around every three seconds. They're the only birds in the world with ADD.

"So this black-chin; there's only a few left?"

Dad shakes his head again. "It's not an endangered species. It's just that they summer in Texas, not eastern Canada. This little fellow is thousands of kilometers from home."

He rubs his hands together. It's as if his whole day just took on a brighter hue. Then he glances hopefully my way.

"Want to come?"

I groan inside. When I was little, I enjoyed clambering around in other people's hedges to spy on wrens and warblers, but the thrill has gone.

Oh, but the look on his face. I check my watch. It's only ten. And after all, I want to do my part toward bringing about world peace, if only in the Whiticar family. "Okay," I say, a little slow on the uptake. "As long as we're back by dinner."

From the look on Dad's face, that's not an option.

"Ottawa?" I say, when he explains where this tiny Texas fugitive has been sighted. "That's like four hundred kilometers away."

"Not quite Ottawa," he quickly adds. "Some little place in the country northwest of there. Bob is going to fax me a map. A place called Elphin."

I try to imagine what kind of a road map leads to somewhere called Elphin. "Can we put it off until next weekend?"

He explains that it's a very rare occurrence and I explain how getting a date is a very rare occurrence and he explains how there'll be plenty of dates down the road and I explain that there'll be plenty of birds down the road—and then he's about to play his next card, but he stops midsentence, takes a deep breath, and says he understands.

That's something else he does a lot lately. We hardly ever get up a good head of steam on an argument anymore before he bales. I see a flicker of tension along his jaw and realize how much this understanding costs.

Then the phone rings again. Good, I think. It's Bob to say the sighting was a hoax. But the joke's on me. It's Della, and the date is off.

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So there we are—Dad and I are speeding along old Highway 7 northbound on an adventure! Bob canceled. Maybe he suddenly remembered he had a life. It's all rough-and-tumble up here. Bush as far as the eye can see. Rocks and pines and wetlands. There is a lake around every curve of the highway. Some are little more than beaver-dammed ponds littered with the gray trunks of dying trees. I find the Tragically Hip on the radio and then lose them again. Even radio waves get lost in these endless woods.

This is the fringe of the Canadian Shield, the oldest mountain range in the world, but worn down to low-slung hills. I wonder what that little hummingbird thought when he landed here. This isn't Texas anymore, Toto.

Dad smokes. He never used to. It's a nervous habit, and being alone with me in the car seems to make him nervous. He cranks open his window and hangs half his torso outside in an attempt to save me from secondhand smoke. But that doesn't save me from the secondhand worry. I remember Mom's word. *Intimidé*. I intimidate him. And I don't know why.

He closes the window and gabs about faculty politics at the university where he teaches math. Now that we only see each other every other week, he saves up this stuff. I try to be interested, but it's pretty dull and it never stops. Then, suddenly, it does.

Which is how I must have missed the signpost, I realize later.

Dad stops talking. I see his hands tighten on the wheel. There is panic in his eyes. I'm afraid he's having a stroke.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says, too quickly, training his eyes on the road. He looks as if he's going to say more, and I wait. That's how I must have missed the sign. Too busy observing Dad.

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You've heard of the back of beyond? Elphin is beyond that. It's like a trip back in time. We're climbing up into the Lanark Highlands, and I keep expecting to see some Ojibwa hunter standing on the shoulder staring at the cracked and pitted pavement of County Road 36 and wondering how it got there. So it is all the more astounding to come upon so many cars after kilometers of nothing. Twenty-three vehicles I count, pulled well off onto the shoulder under a canopy of maples alive with the summer breeze.

In a clearing is a tidy little log house, obviously owned by the Three Bears. This is the object of our pilgrimage? No. Something buzzing around that neat little house. Something the size of a sugar cube, a sugar cube with attitude. There are license plates from as far away as Quebec, New York, and Vermont. There's even a van from a TV station.

Dad gathers his camera equipment together, and we head off to join the eager throng. Except that Dad sees a candy wrapper and has to stop to pick it up. He pockets it. He has this thing about litter.

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The birders wait patiently by the roadside until they are invited, in small clutches, to see THE BIRD. Dad bides his time, chatting with fellow birders and occasionally stooping to swoop up a gum wrapper.

The Three Bears turn out to be three nice hippies: Papa Hippy with a ponytail, Mama Hippy with a longer ponytail, and Baby Hippy with the longest ponytail of all. They seem to enjoy the company. Mama Hippy has baked brownies, and Baby Hippy shows everyone his tree fort.

Black-chin, clearly, does *not* enjoy the company. He's in a foul mood. But then, in my limited experience, hummingbirds are always in a foul mood. You'd be in a foul mood too if waking up in the morning was enough to kill you. It's true! Hummingbirds sometimes have heart attacks just waking up.

The little heart-attack-in-training darts around, dive-bombing the birders and dive-bombing the local rubythroats as well. The weird thing is, it takes me a long time to distinguish this accidental tourist from the locals. I was hoping for something neon yellow with racing stripes. But black-chin looks just like the rubythroats as far as I can tell: long beak, bad temper. In a reverent whisper, Dad points out the purple band around the stranger's throat.

For a purple band we have driven 317 kilometers?

Finally, our turn is up, and we head back out toward the road.

Goldilocks is waiting.

She's in red high heels. She's got a microphone in hand, a cameraman on a chain, and from 20 meters away you can see that she's singled out Dad from the herd. He immediately lights up another cigarette.

I observe him through the smoke. He looks calm enough. No one else would know that he was nervous. And I am too, because I can't help noticing how good-looking he is. It's not supposed to matter how your father looks. But I see Goldilocks fuss with her hair, and it makes me jumpy.

"You don't have to talk to her," I whisper.

"That would be rude," he whispers back. He takes one last long drag on his cigarette and bravely smiles for the camera.

"Ornery little cuss, isn't he?" asks Goldilocks, flashing a hundred-watt smile. There are introductions all around, but Goldilocks only has eyes for Dad. "The bird attacked my cameraman," she says. "And he only weighs three grams."

Dad grins pleasantly. "He looks to me as if he weighs closer to ninety kilograms."

"Oh, that is so funny," squeals Goldilocks. "Did you catch that, Ray?"

The cameraman holds up his hand to indicate that he's rolling, and Goldilocks puts on her TV face. "I'm talking to Terry Whiticar, who drove all the way up here from Toronto with his son to witness this rare event. What do you think brought this little fella our way, Terry?" she asks.

Dad shrugs. "Maybe someone in Houston sneezed," he says.

Goldilocks is in raptures. She's getting good tape. I figure that this must be a big step up from weather girl.

"Some people say he might have lost his sense of direction," she says. "Others say he got caught up in a trade wind. What's your take, Terry?"

Dad looks back across the lawn to where the latest gaggle of birders is gathered in silent awe. His face becomes thoughtful. "Maybe it wasn't an accident," he says.

Goldilocks looks surprised. "Really?"

Dad turns to her, and his face is serious, almost pained. "Maybe things were just so bad back home that he had to get away."

And that's when his pants go up in flames.

Well, not flames, exactly, but they sure as heck are on fire. Remember the cigarette? Dad slipped the butt into his pocket along with all of the other trash. He just didn't quite put out the butt first. Suddenly he is dancing around, hitting himself, and I'm running after him, hitting him too. All I can think is that I've got to put out Dad!

Sure enough, Mr. Black-Chin gets in on the act, chasing us, his wings making this low, whirring whistle over our heads, until Papa Hippy solves everything with a bucketful of water. It's well water from the cold, clear depths of the oldest mountains in the world.

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Ray gets the whole song and dance on tape. Goldilocks takes Dad's address so that she can send him a copy. Right.

"That was so stupid," I shout when we're back in the car. "You could have seriously hurt yourself." Dad turns the car around, and we head back down to the world.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"I don't *want* you to be sorry," I shout. "I don't *want* you to understand. I don't *want* you to be so polite that you go up in flames."

There's silence for around three tenths of a kilometer. He reaches for his cigarettes and then changes his mind. He clears his throat.

"I'm sorry for apologizing," he says.

It's a joke. I *know* it's a joke, but for some reason I bellow at him to shut up, and then, before I know what's hit me, I'm crying. It's totally absurd. I sob and snifle and basically dissolve right there on the passenger's seat.

"Where's Michel?" Mom asks. "Oh, he dissolved—sorry."

Dad is smart enough not to say anything. It's not about the fire. It's about everything. Anyway, it is through a veil of stale tears that I see the road sign. The one I missed on the way up.

"Oompah," I say, like a tuba.

Dad says nothing.

I turn as we pass the sign and read it out loud. "'Turn Right for Oompah.' Why does that ring a bell?"

Still nothing. But I notice Dad's hands tighten on the wheel. He's wearing pants that he borrowed from Papa Hippy. Faded yellow jeans with crazy patches on them. His face looks kind of yellow too. We're driving into the sunset.

"It's Oompah," he says at last. "To rhyme with stomp."

I sniff and wipe my wet face. "You mean to rhyme with stompa," I correct him.

His smile is grim. He shakes his head as if he's trying to jiggle something loose in his skull. Then all of a sudden he slows down the car.

"Dad?"

No answer. We just roll to a stop. My window's down, and the evening air is filled with cricket songs and the screech of blue jays.

"The Ompah Stomp," he says. "The big end-of-summer hoedown."

Then I remember. "Ompah. Of course! That's where you grew up."

He shakes his head. "The road to Ompah," he says, as if there is an important difference. He seems lost in thought. I sit back, feeling empty and exhausted.

I notice that we've pulled to a stop right at the intersection of Highway 509, the road to Ompah. There's a big homemade sign at the intersection. "Blue Skies," it reads, with an arrow pointing north.

"So that's where those blue skies went," I say.

I look at Dad. He's ticking. It's his brain, I think, ticking like a time bomb. Then I notice that it's just his fingernail on the steering wheel. His eyes look as if he's watching a horror movie and it's come to the scene with the knife and the bathtub. I want to reach out and touch him, but I resist the urge. I don't want him to go off.

He must be remembering his parents. They died years and years ago, as far as I know. There are no pictures, no cards. I don't think he was a happy kid. Watching him now, he doesn't *look* like a happy kid.

He clears his throat. "*Archilocus alexandri*," he says, so quietly that I can hardly hear him. The hills get a little older, erode just a little more, before he speaks again. "Maybe that bird was sent to me," he says.

Now I'm really worried. Can a fire in your pants actually fry your brain? But he chuckles—seems to guess what I'm thinking.

"Sorry," he says. "I'm not making much sense."

I shrug. "Yeah, well, join the club."

It turns out that he's still thinking about the black-chin. "Nothing else would have brought me up this way," he says. "I don't know why I've avoided it for so long." He looks at me squarely. "Do you mind if we pay a little visit?" he asks.

I groan, partly from hunger and partly from apprehension, but I keep it to myself.

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There's another homemade sign a little farther up the road. "You're almost there!" it says. Blue Skies, I guess. Is that where we're going? Looking at Dad's bleak expression, I don't think so.

Then, suddenly, he puts on his indicator light, slows down, and pulls off 509 onto a dirt driveway. I catch sight of the name on the battered black mailbox. The letters are cracked and peeling, but the ghost of them remains. "Whiticar," it says.

The driveway climbs through stunted trees and moss-covered granite glowing pink in the setting sun. The bush closes in around us. Tall weeds brush against the sides of the car. Then we come to a clearing, littered with cannibalized cars and scrawny chickens that flutter out of our path as we come to a stop in a cloud of our own dust. Before us sits a rambling, tar-paper shack. There's a porch with a bowed and rusted tin roof held up by arthritic log posts. A man is standing in the shadows on the stoop. He steps out into the sunlight. His shadow is a lot longer than he is. He's wearing filthy gray overalls with the bib down and a T-shirt stained yellow around the armholes. He comes down the steps. He's got a farmer's tan; his lower arms look oven-roasted; his upper arms are as white as bone. He's got a grizzled gray beard, a balding head, and there's a scowl brewing on his face. I glance nervously at Dad for some clue. An uncle? A second cousin 300 times removed? Dad is staring straight ahead at the unfriendly-looking geezer, as if he's in a trance.

This other Whiticar is making his way toward us, kicking at chickens that cross his path. Dad opens the door and steps out, and quickly I do the same. We slam our doors shut simultaneously, as if we're Starsky and Hutch arriving on the scene of the crime but in a white and timid-looking Honda.

Mr. Chicken-Kicker may be short, but he's as solid as a drum. His arms and rounded shoulders look strong, despite his age. He's got a long rod in his hand.

Some part of a tractor, I guess: oily and rusty, with a chain at the end. He stops, looks Dad up and down, his scornful eyes resting on the faded yellow hippy jeans.

"Does this look like a music festival?" he asks. He sounds like he just ate a bucketful of gravel. "It's another mile to Blue Skies," he adds. Dad doesn't answer. "Are ya deaf?" the old man shouts. "Or just stoned?" He has reached the front of our car now, and he raises his rod as if he's going to strike the grill.

"How about I put your lights out," he shouts. "Will that wake ya up?"

He brings his improvised weapon down hard on the ground. I gasp, and a smirk lights up his face. And then it dawns on him who he's talking to, and it dawns on me at the same instant, who this swamp creature must be. My father is slim and tall, but the flecks of gray in his black hair are the same as the gray of this man's beard. My father will one day grow bald in the same way as this man. And, looking at my father now, I see an exact reflection of the other's anger. He is my grandfather, and he is anything but dead.

"Well, well," he says. "What brings *you* here?"

"I was in the neighbourhood."

Grandfather cackles. With the salutations out of the way, he turns his attention to me. "This yours?" he asks, as if I was a used car.

"This is Michel, my son," says Dad. His voice is brittle.

The old man assesses me the way a butcher might weigh up a side of lamb. "He looks soft," he says. He makes the word sound like the first symptom of a terminal disease. "Is that why you gave him a girl's name?"

"He's a good boy," says my father. "A wonderful boy. But I wouldn't expect you to recognize that."

Old Mr. Whiticar doesn't favour his son with so much as a glance. His eyes are trained on me and are filled with mischief. "Hear the way he talks to his old dad?" he asks. "Nice, eh?"

I don't answer. I feel as if I've fallen down a rabbit hole. The Mad Hatter is moving now, coming around to my side of the car.

"He bad-mouth me a lot, kid?"

Even if I could speak, the words would never make it to the top of this pit I'm in. He leans against the car.

"You're a meek little wimp," he says. "Does he beat ya?"

I look at Dad. I want him to do something—to at least say something—but his mouth is clamped shut. I see that flicker of a pulse along his jaw, like a worm under the skin. I turn to his father and shake my head.

"He hit me once," says the old man, rubbing his belly. "Can you believe it?" he sneers. "He only tried it once."

He slides his oil-stained hands along the car as he comes toward me. I back up—can't help it—until my hand is resting on the door handle. He smiles a bully's smile of satisfaction. And it's like a toehold for me—somehow, at the very bottom of my pit, I start to climb.

The man sidles up closer, glancing sideways to assess how this is going over with Dad. Dad observes, nothing more. Now, Grandfather Whiticar is close enough that I can smell the sourness of him. At close quarters I see the bitterness in his pale gray eyes. "I'd watch him, if I were you," he says in a stage whisper. He indicates my father with a wag of his head. "Got a temper on him like a wild turkey."

I clear my throat. "I can see where he gets it from."

Grandfather's amused face darkens. "What's that, boy?"

I let go of the door handle and step up to him. "If my father has a temper, I can see why."

The old man rubs his bearded chin. He looks hard at me. "Your dad there, he got real insolent round about your age." His face is right up close to mine, except he's shorter, and he has to look up. "Don't pay to be rude to me, boy," he says, poking himself in the chest.

I nod. "I think I understand."

"Good, good," he says, backing off a step, as if I've passed a test. And now he looks across the car toward my father. "Big shot over there never did. Thought he was something special. Thought the sun shone out of his butt."

I interrupt him. "I meant that I think I understand why my father never talked about you."

"He didn't?"

"Never."

"Why?"

"Because you aren't worth talking about."

I see his hand jerk—the one holding the weapon—but I'm quicker than he is and plant my foot on the chain. The whole rusty thing leaps from his hand and clatters to the ground.

"Little mongrel," he says. And he steps toward me with his meaty hand raised. Dad shouts and stops the old man in his tracks.

"Michell!"

He sounds so angry.

"Apologize to your grandfather," he demands.

I can't believe it. I turn toward my father. He's staring at me intently across the hood of the car, and there is rage in his eyes.

"Are you crazy?"

He nods. "You bet I am!" he shouts. And he looks it too. His eyes are on fire. "Do as I tell you, ya hear?"

My jaw drops. Did he really say, "Ya hear?" I turn to the old man. His jaw has dropped. We're on the jaw-dropping side of the car. Dad, on the other hand—his jaw is set. Firm.

Fine. Two can play this game. Now I'm angry. Furious.

"I am not going to—"

"Oh, yes, you are!" Dad fires back at me before I can even finish. His voice is huge. He brings his fist down hard on the roof of the car. And maybe that's what wakes me up. I'm just about to mount the attack when, suddenly, I understand.

A whole tumble of things makes sense all at once. His rage is not for me. And there is more in his eyes than rage—a lot more. There is a furious spark of defiance and a wicked glint of humour. *I get it.* I get it all in one atom-splitting instant. And I know *exactly* what I have to do, only I'm not sure that I can pull it off. I turn to face my aggressor. I try to talk, but I have to clear my throat first. I try again.

"I'm sorry, Granddad," I say, as humbly and submissively as I can muster. "I didn't mean to be impolite."

It's amazing. It works like a charm. It is a charm—because when I glance quickly at my father, he looks as if he's been released from a spell. It's as if my apology has slammed a door in the old man's face. He can't get at my father anymore.

When we turn the car around to go, he's still standing in the same place, still rubbing the wrist of his right arm. But, in my last glimpse of him in the side-view mirror, he looks old. As if anger was all that was holding him together. All of his beautiful wickedness.

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As the summer evening settled around the car, Dad tells me about the time that he punched his father. The old man had been terrorizing Grandma, and Dad couldn't take it anymore. He hit him and knocked him down. Then he left and never came home again. He was 13, like me. He wrote to his mother, worried about her. She wrote back and told him that she could take care of herself but she could not take care of him, so it was just as well that he was gone.

Silence descends—but a companionable silence. Dad never once reaches for his smokes. It's a long time before he talks again.

"When we started fighting, it frightened me," he says.

"I bet it did. He's so strong."

"I mean, when *you and I* started fighting," says my father.

I turn to look at him. "Fighting? Us?"

"Arguing," he says. "You know. Questioning me. Expressing your own opinion. Suddenly, everything I said wasn't automatically right anymore. It caught me off guard. Outraged me. And my outrage frightened me. I was afraid that I was becoming him. And I couldn't let that happen."

I stared out through my own reflection at the night. It was all beginning to make some kind of sense. I looked back at Dad. "You are allowed to disagree with me, Dad," I say to him. "Just as long as you realize that I'm *always* right, we'll get along just fine."

His face breaks into a moonlit smile. "I understand," he says. But when I look at him a little later on, he's not smiling anymore. He's thinking about his father, I can tell. Something is over, maybe. The spell may be broken. But when things get broken, there are always those bits and pieces of whatever it was lying around. Dad looks as if he's looking at all those bits and pieces and wondering what happened.

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He wakes me as we fly down the Don Valley Expressway. He's found an oldies station playing "Wouldn't It Be Nice?" by the Beach Boys.

"I was thinking that we should get a pizza," he says. "Maybe drop by your mom's place. You think she'd be up for a party?"

I rub the sleep out of my eyes and check the clock. "At two a.m.?"

He nods enthusiastically. "I'm talking about a really big pizza, Michel. With hot peppers and anchovies and both kinds of olives. What do you say?"

I nod. Apart from the anchovies, it sounds great. We can argue about that at the pizzeria. I look ahead down the empty freeway. It won't be dawn for hours yet, but I think I can almost see the light.