

Vanishing Horizons

By J.P. Voss

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Royce Culhane stared through the reinforced wire mesh window, past the bars, and beyond his vanishing horizons. It was August of '61, his nineteenth birthday, and Royce was in transit from the county lock up in Jackson Mississippi to the Federal Penitentiary at Leavenworth Kansas. He'd been sentenced to eight years for *Interstate Transportation of a Stolen Vehicle*, and *Transporting a Minor Across the State Line for the Purpose of Immoral Acts*. His crime—his only real crime—was that he loved Milford W. McKenna's seventeen-year-old daughter Velma.

Things had been good for Royce during the first few months of 1961. Life had been especially fine that first week of May.

Royce soaked in the easy Mississippi morning as he headed over to Velma's in his chopped '33 Ford. The sun was still low in the southern sky and the shade from the lush landscape, flushed with hundred-foot Magnolia Trees, kept things cool to the touch. The Magnolia branches were thick with green glossy leaves, and what must have been a million Mockingbirds. The Mocks were really tuning it up that morning, and Royce could hear their rapture over the rumble of his Flathead Ford.

At the McKenna's, Royce came to a screeching stop, hopped out, and ran for the front door. He started up the porch steps, and the front door fell open.

Velma sashayed out on the veranda with two tall glasses of icy lemonade. She delivered the refreshments with exaggerated southern elegance, a curtsy, and a delicate twirl. Suddenly, she reared back and studied the young man with cautious eyes. "Royce Culhane...my daddy says you're dangerous."

"Your daddy is right." Royce moved in close, ran his index finger gently along the seam of her cotton Capri pants then placed his hand firmly against the small of her back. Velma twisted her supple frame, slipped from his grasp, and feigned retreat. When he advanced, she dipped behind a column, and disappeared from sight.

Royce stretched out on the porch swing, sipped his lemonade, and soaked in the grandeur of the McKenna family home. The mammoth entry, wrap-around balconies, and colossal Greek pillars, reflected the power and wealth of Jackson's most prominent citizen, Milford W. McKenna. He watched Roosevelt, the McKenna's colored groundskeeper, while Roosevelt tended the prize-winning roses. When Roosevelt moved

toward the garage, Royce caught sight of Mr. McKenna's new car, a fat black '61 Fleetwood hardtop.

Velma stomped out from behind the column and stood in a state of righteous indignation. "Well Royce Culhane, I do declare. If you're going to give up that easily, maybe my daddy's right. I think I'll take his advice and start dating one of the boys from the country club. I really don't know what I see in you. Goodness gracious—you're not even a Southern Baptist."

"Stop playing Scarlet O'Hara." He turned to the window, checked his reflection, and combed back his deep black Brilliantine hair. He pulled up the sleeve of his tight white t-shirt, flexed his strapping bicep, and admired his new tattoo, Woody Woodpecker smoking a cigar.

"Stop admiring yourself in the window," Velma said. She slipped next to Royce on the swing, took his hand, and fixed eyes. "Lord help me—I love those eyes. They're like a nice warm cup of Chicory Coffee, creamy brown, with just the right amount of sugar."

"Your daddy better not hear you talking like that," he said with a roguish smirk. Royce pulled a pack of smokes from the shaft of his scuffed Redwing boots, flipped open his Zippo, torched a Camel, and gazed into Velma's eyes. They were pure blue, faultless, like a set of perfect blue diamonds. And her hair, in the morning light, was the colors of caramel, apricot, and wheat. His eyes drifted along her supple neckline and paused on her full femininity. "Let's head over to Vicksburg before your daddy comes home. If he catches me here he'll shoot me."

"Don't you worry your pointed little head about my father. Momma and him took the train to Memphis. They won't be home until late tomorrow night. Beside—what's your hurry—all you want to do is go out to that old battlefield and neck—and I'm not that kind of girl."

Royce squeezed Velma's knee, cupped his hand behind her neck, and pulled her to within a breath away. Those creamy brown eyes of his turned black like a baby rattler.

Velma jumped up, stepped into the yard and called out, "Roosevelt, what on earth are you doing working out here on such a beautiful Saturday morning? I can finish trimming those roses tomorrow morning after church. You go on now and take care of your family. Lord knows you spend enough time taking care of us." Velma gave Royce a snotty look then turned to Roosevelt and said, "You don't have to worry about me Roosevelt. If this hoodlum over here gives me any trouble—I'll just call the police."

"Don't believe a word of it," Royce said. He stepped off the porch and snatched up some garden tools. He looked back at Velma. "Why don't you go get ready? I'll help Roosevelt clean up, and then we'll all get out of here."

Roosevelt, a handsome man close to sixty, whose full smile glowed in the sun, heaved a fifty-pound sack of potting soil over his shoulder with ease and moved effortlessly toward the storage building behind the house. Royce followed. They talked about Delta Blues as they walked. After they put away the tools, Roosevelt's voice took on a more serious tone.

"You're a good man Royce Culhane. I believe Mr. McKenna is going to see that. You just have to give him a little time." Roosevelt started walking away, stopped, and turned back. "Be cool young buck...just be cool."

When Velma returned, she pointed to Royce's hotrod. "I'm not going all the way to Vicksburg in that old jalopy." She pulled the keys to her father's new Cadillac out of her purse and tossed them to Royce.

Royce fondled the keys to the new Fleetwood, gave it a second thought, then looked at the Caddy and said, "Let's go."

Royce revved the big Detroit power plant while he adjusted the radio to a colored station. The sound of the Delta poured from the speaker and Muddy Waters wailed: *Baby, please don't go.*

Velma slid next to Royce and snuggled "Let's elope. We can head down to New Orleans and get married by the justice of the peace. Mother and father would just die." Velma commandeered the rearview mirror and pulled back her hair in a ponytail. "Take me away from Jackson. You're going places; I just know it. You have the voice of an angel—and the way you play guitar. You're going to be a big star like Johnny Cash or Elvis. My father may not see it, but that's just because he's an old fuddy-duddy." Velma laid her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. When she looked up, they were crossing the Mississippi River into Louisiana. "Where are we going?"

"I'm kidnapping you. We're headed to New Orleans to get married. Won't your daddy be surprised when we get back?"

Velma slugged him in the arm as hard as she could and Royce let out a laugh that could be heard forty miles away in Jackson.

He said, "I'm just taking a little detour over to Tallulah to see a friend of mine. I can't wait to see his face when I pull up in this new Cadillac." Royce pulled off the highway onto a broken street lined with shotgun shacks.

She cried out, "Where are you taking me!"

"Right here," Royce said, pulling to a stop in front of a broken down house. The old place tilted slightly to the left, and with its narrow front, it looked like an old packing crate. There was a colored woman shucking peas on the front steps, and a couple of children were playing with an old truck tire in the front yard.

A dapper young man, wearing an all black cowboy outfit, including boots, Stetson, and bolo tie, strolled through the screen door and called out, "Well if it isn't Royce Culhane."

Royce dragged Velma out of the Cadillac and introduced the man. "This is Sonny Jack Johnson. He's the grandson of the great blues musician Son House, and he's the best damned harp player in Louisiana."

Sonny Jack tipped his Stetson and smiled. When Royce opened the driver's door and ushered him in, Sonny slid behind the wheel, honked the horn a few times, and called for his wife. The racket got some of the neighbors coming out of their houses, and it wasn't long before a crowd started to gather around the car.

A couple of Madison Parrish Police cruised by in their squad car. When they stopped, things just plain went bad. The cops told Royce he looked like a 'Juvenile delinquent'. When his license and the car registration didn't match, they accused him of 'Stealing the car and trying to sell it to a nigger'. The local cops really didn't like that a white girl, with no identification, who looked underage, was hanging around a colored neighborhood. When Royce got belligerent and told them 'It wasn't any of their damn business', the cops got tough and hauled everybody in. It was Velma's father, Milford W. McKenna, who arranged for the federal prosecutor to step in. When the feds took

over, the local cops, who didn't like Royce to start with, just went along. Royce never got out of jail. He was held until trial, given a first year court appointed lawyer, and blindsided by the full force of the prosecution.

Leavenworth Kansas was unholy hot in August of '61. The white-hot summer sun blazed across the open plains and baked the stone prison. Inside C cellhouse, Royce Culhane was finding out first hand why they called Leavenworth Penitentiary the "Hot House". There was no air conditioning, and the sluggish brown fans only swept the burning air against his boiled flesh. Wearing only prison issue boxer shorts, he sat on the top bunk of his five-and-a-half-by-nine-foot concrete cell surrounded by gray walls, dirty floors, and the putrid stench of bitter men. Defiant convict banter, and cold steel slamming against reinforced concrete, echoed throughout the cellhouse.

"The name's Chauncey Logan in case you're interested," called out the old con from the bottom bunk. Chauncey was a hard looking forty doing life on the installment plan. He'd spent most of his adult life in some kind of county, state, or federal lockup. Although he preferred armed robbery, he was not by nature a violent man. He wasn't psychotic, prone to fits of uncontrolled rage, and he wasn't some kind of pervert. As things go, Royce could of done worse.

Two men wearing only shackles, escorted by two pasty faced overweight guards, stopped on the gangway in front of his cell. The lead prisoner, a white man, had the guard's attention. He was covered in tattoos, all done in prison issue blue and green ink, and across his back in three-inch gothic letters he had inked "Hate is Purity". His gnarled muscles strained against the restraints, and when the guards released him from his shackles, he had to turn sideways and duck to get inside the cell. The second prisoner, a pint-sized colored kid, kept his head down until the two guards started to unchain him. When the guards forced him into the cell, the colored kid looked like he was going to the gallows.

"You see that?" Chauncey said. He swung out of his bunk and took a piss. "I knew if that faggot Kennedy got elected President we'd be in deep dog shit." Chauncey took one last hard hit off his roll your own, flipped the butt through the bars, then zipped up his pants. "Looks like he's going to try and integrate the federal joints right away. Can you imagine? A white man having to live with a nigger?"

He'd heard the same kind of talk from the guard who'd fingerprinted him that morning. The tired old guard, a rail of a man whose uniform hung out of kilter, and whose bad teeth gave him road kill breath, told Royce his version of why Leavenworth was under twenty-four-hour lockdown. 'Some dumb nigger tried to stab a white man. They ought to hang all them niggers'. Growing up in Jackson Mississippi, he'd heard it all before. Outside, it was a lot easier to ignore. In Leavenworth, you didn't get to choose.

Chauncey spit in the toilet and then looked back at Royce. "You got a name kid?"

"Names Culhane... Royce Culhane," he replied, looking at his pale white skin.

Chauncey sat hunched on the side of his bunk, rolled a smoke, and filled Royce in on the current situation. "The hillbilly in the next cell, the one screaming 'Get this nigger out of here', that's Big Bill Jaco. Watch yourself around Jaco. Smart cons make it a point not to piss him off. If he gets his mitts on you, you're in trouble. I've seen what Jaco can do

to a man; that son of a bitch is a sadist. He had himself an Indian girlfriend. Asshole got drunk and beat her to death. He did it while her four-year-old son watched. Jaco's a stone killer. And he hates niggers. There's going to be a race riot for sure when he kills that little pickaninny." Chauncey stretched out on his bunk and asked, "What you in for kid?"

Royce told his story, and when he mentioned to Chauncey he'd been convicted of stealing a Cadillac, Chauncey genuinely perked up.

"I started stealing cars when I was ten," he said. "I switched to armed robbery because the money's better and there's no middle man, but my first love is grand theft auto."

They talked about cars for a while then Royce told the old con that he hadn't seen Velma since he'd been arrested.

"What did you expect? You're lucky that girl dumped you. I see guys in here with families. It rips their guts out. No room for love in Leavenworth."

The lights went out, and Chauncey gave Royce one last thought for the day. "The golden rule—Don't trust anyone. If someone does something for you in this place, it's because they want something. Don't be fooled; there are no nice people in Leavenworth."

The next morning after chow, prison officials called off the lockdown, and Royce got his first visitor. He arrived at the visiting room late, and while he scanned the overcrowded room looking for a friendly face, he could feel the unspoken fear of the broken families that filled the tables. His eyes went side-to-side, front-to-back, until he spotted a colorless young woman seated alone in the back of the room. Her face was obscured by the shadow of her scarf, and with her eyes hidden behind some oversized Havana sunglasses, she looked like one of those movie stars trying desperately to hide from their fans. Until she stood up, he didn't even realize it was Velma. He hadn't seen her in court during the trial. She hadn't visited during the three months he was in the County Jail in Jackson. She hadn't returned his letters. After three months in county jail, and two days in Leavenworth, he didn't even know what love was anymore—all he felt was hate.

"Nice of you to show up now," Royce said, taking a seat. "Where were you during my trial? You were my only witness. They gave me eight years!"

"I know how you must feel, what you must think of me," Velma said. She lowered her sunglasses. "I couldn't come to the trial; I couldn't leave the house. As long as I was a minor my father had complete control over me." Velma pulled a new Mississippi Drivers License out of her purse and pointed to the birth date, "I turned eighteen five days ago. I've moved out of my father's house, and I'm staying with my Aunt Birdie in Tupelo. I've retained counsel, and our lawyer has already petitioned the court for a new trial. He says he should be able to get you out of here in a couple of days. Chances are—there won't even be a new trial. Our lawyer thinks the appeals court will dismiss the charges."

"What about your father? He's not a man who likes to be challenged. And he's not just going to let me go free without a fight."

"Yes he will. If he ever wants to see me again." Velma took his hand. "Please understand. My father was trying to protect me. He just went too far."

Royce smiled that day for the first time in three months. And after the visit, as he walked back to his cell, he thanked God that he wouldn't have to end up like the hardened-convict Chauncey, or have to spend the next eight years living in constant fear

of men like Big Bill Jaco. When Royce got back to his cell, Chauncey was his usual pleasant self.

“What you smiling about?”

Royce told him about Velma.

Chauncey only scoffed. “Don’t bring that pie in the sky bullshit in here. You’re in Leavenworth youngster. No one gets out that easy.”

Royce stepped out onto the gangway and lit a smoke. Someone yelled, “They’ve got control of C cellhouse.” The cellhouse rumbled, and a guard screamed, “Lock down, lockdown now.” Light bulbs, toilet paper, magazines, and anything else that wasn’t tied down started flying out of the cells. Royce ducked back in his cell.

Chauncey pulled a metal shank from under his mattress and slipped it behind his back. Pushing Royce aside, he stepped to the cell door and said, “Be cool Jaco, you got no problem here.”

Big Bill Jaco stood just outside the cell; his primitive eyes boiled with rage. Clamped in his claw-like hand was the beaten and bloody shell of the young colored kid. Jaco held him effortlessly by the neck with one hand, and the kid looked like a dead rabbit hanging in the jaws of a wolf. Jaco dropped the kid on the concrete gangway, and the battered young man sobbed. Jaco kicked him in the ribs, and the kid rolled down the gangway.

Royce grabbed Chauncey by the shirt. “He’s going to kill that kid.”

“Better him than me,” Chauncey said, pushing Royce away.

“Give me the shank.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Give me the shank damn it.”

Royce grabbed Chauncey in a bear hug, and yanked the crude weapon from his waistband. Bolting out of the cell, he slipped on the concrete gangway, and crashed to the floor. Jaco’s foot was close enough that the smell made Royce gag. Jaco was crushing the colored kid’s windpipe with his foot. Royce drove the steel shank; the jagged blade pierced Jaco’s heel. Royce rolled back, and his adrenalin-fueled grip pulled the steel blade, ripping through Jaco’s Achilles tendon. Crippled, Jaco dropped to the floor. Royce jumped up and swung out over the railing. As he dropped to the next tier, a shotgun blast shattered the frenzied air, and tear gas canisters exploded throughout the cellhouse.

Leavenworth was under strict lockdown after the riot, and for a few days, Royce sweated it out in his cell. No one talked, and without fanfare, he was released five days later. Jaco was in the infirmary for a week, and Royce slipped out without him even knowing about it. Royce heard the colored kid made it. He was in Intensive Care for two days, but he’d been downgraded to critical, and by the time Royce was released, the prison odds makers had stopped taking bets on whether or not the kid was going to live.

Royce spent Labor Day of ‘61 pulling catfish, one right after the other, out of the Tallahala River. He soaked in the sun, savored a can of Schlitz, and watched Velma pick up river rocks with her toes. It was warm, just as warm as a day can be without being hot. And in the afternoon, when it almost got hot, a nice breeze came up and kept things cool around the campfire while the catfish sizzled. Things were perfect until Velma reminded

him, “We need to be at my parents by seven o’clock. I promised my mother we’d watch the Labor Day fireworks with her and my father.”

Royce looked like he’d swallowed a bug. He reeled in his line and said, “Can’t wait.” He wrapped up the catfish, took a swig on a beer, and didn’t say another word until they pulled up in front of his house. “Damn...can you believe it? My father can barely pay the electric bill, and he goes and buys a new truck. Wait here. I’ll just run these fish in and be right back...can’t keep Milford W. McKenna waiting.”

Across town at the Plantation, that’s what Royce called it, things were unusually quite. When they stepped through the carved Mahogany doors, into the grand entry, he looked down the great hall to the back door and whispered to Velma, “I don’t think anyone is home; we’d better leave.”

Velma grabbed him by the shirtsleeve and led him down the great hall, past a half-dozen rooms, to the double doors leading into her father’s library. Velma kissed her father on the cheek, turned to Royce and winked, “I’m sure you two gentlemen can keep each other amused while I find mother.”

Milford W. McKenna faced the gilded marble fireplace and read the Hinds County Gazette. Dressed, as always, in a fine cotton dress shirt and conservative tie, he was a determined looking man in his late fifties. With Royce behind him on his left flank, he did not turn, nor did he address Royce directly.

“It looks like one of your associates from Leavenworth has escaped. Did you have the pleasure of breaking bread with a...?” Milford thumbed through the Gazette and focused on small article toward the back. “William Jaco, A.K.A. Big Bill. It says here that he killed a guard. Two days ago, while in route to his trial in Kansas City, he escaped.”

“Jaco is a stone killer,” Royce said in a cold-blooded tone. Leavenworth was no joke, neither were the men in it, and Royce wasn’t amused by Milford’s backhanded comments. “He’s a sadist who kills for the fun it. And thanks to you—I’m on Jaco’s list of things to do.”

Mr. McKenna never looked up and Royce drifted out the door unnoticed. He crossed the hall, looking for Velma, into a southern ladies sitting room. Filled with antebellum furnishing, flowered fabrics, frills, and lace, it didn’t seem real as memories of Leavenworth flooded his mind. On the opposite side of the room, the south side of the house, there were three glorious stained glass windows. Cut glass leaded windows of brilliant red and blue flowers set against a green background, made it impossible to name the silhouette that traveled past on it’s way toward the back of the property. Royce, not knowing, curious, was headed out the back door when Velma danced down the stairs.

“Is your mother outside?”

“No—she’s upstairs freshening up.”

“Then who’s walking around outside.”

“It’s probably just one of the neighbor boys,” Velma said. “They’re not hurting anything. It’s a short cut. Or it might be Roosevelt. He’s likely to turn up any time, day or night.” She looked into Royce, kissed him lightly, “You seem upset. Are you Ok?”

“It’s just something your father said.” Royce laid his palm against Velma’s cheek and smiled. “I’m going to take a look out back.”

Royce eased out the back door and scanned the acreage. There was a storage building about fifty feet back, and Royce kept an eye on it while he moved along the back

of the house. He cautiously rounded the corner, headed up the south side of the house, past the stain glass windows, until he could see all the way down the driveway and out to the street. His hotrod was parked behind the infamous black Cadillac, and behind the hotrod was a new pickup, just like his dads. Behind the truck was a car he didn't recognize blocking the driveway? When he came around to the front of the house, Royce noticed the front door ajar. He slipped through the front door then quickly down the hall toward the back of the house.

"Velma," he called, looking up the stairs. He checked the library and heard laughter coming from the ladies sitting room. Royce interrupted, "I think there might be trouble, and I'd like you ladies to go sit in the library with Mr. McKenna."

"Father told me you had a problem with a man in jail," Velma said. "Is that why you're so upset?" Velma poured another cup of tea. "Why don't you sit down with mother and me and have a cup of this wonderful Dancing Blossom tea." Velma held out the cup. "That man escaped all the way up in Kansas. How could he possibly find you here?"

"It could be nothing," Royce said. "But in the driveway, there's a new truck, just like my father's. Why would my dad come over here? Whose truck is it? Where's the driver?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

Royce said, "Jaco could of easily gotten my last known address from my prison records. After he escaped, he could have stolen a car in Kansas. My dad's address is in the phonebook. Even a clown like Jaco could find it. He might have been watching the house. I was in and out so fast; he just didn't have time to make a move. He could of easily switched cars at my dad's house. Jaco has a serious score to settle with me."

"Why don't you go in the library and call your father," Velma said. "I'm sure I don't know whose truck that is in the driveway."

The last light of day passed through the cut glass casement windows that bordered the front entrance. Royce flipped the hall light switch. Mr. McKenna was standing in the library doorway. Royce pushed passed him and picked up the phone. His father didn't answer. After ten rings, he hung up. When he set the phone down, a muffled crash came from under the house.

"That sounded like it came from the basement," Royce said. "Let me borrow a gun and some shells."

Mr. McKenna's brow furrowed. "Young man—you've just been given a conditional release from Leavenworth. Those charges have not been dropped. I will not allow you to handle one of my firearms." Mr. McKenna unlocked the gun safe, pulled out a Remington over-under twelve gauge, broke it down and tossed in a couple of magnum shells. Milford W. McKenna was taking control of the situation.

With Royce behind him, Mr. McKenna marched down the hall. He flipped the shotgun safety lever to off before he opened the door to the basement stairwell. He had a shoot first—ask questions later—look in his eye. Light in the stairwell seeped in from the hall, and down in the basement, it was damp, musty, and dark as hell. There was no light switch, so Mr. McKenna cradled the shotgun against his shoulder and groped for the pull chain. Bright white light blared from the clear bulb and launched a thousand dusty shadows across a room filled with things long forgotten. Supported by massive wood beams, the basement spanned the entire breadth and width of the palatial home. Something moved behind a stack of boxes, and with the shotgun poised to kill, Mr.

McKenna stepped down. Third step down his foot slipped, he lunged for the railing, and the shotgun went off. Royce reached for Mr. McKenna's arm, seized the shotgun, and Mr. McKenna took hold of the rail. There was noise in the hall. Someone burst through the door. Royce turned quickly. He didn't even pull the trigger. Gun just went off. Lead buckshot, blasted from a high velocity magnum shell at over a thousand feet a second, tore through his chest. Roosevelt was killed instantly.

Labor Day Fireworks exploded in the distance, and Royce, in cuffs, stared from the backseat of the patrol car. He strained to hear as his father, and Mr. McKenna, gave their statements to the Jackson City Patrolman.

His dad told the officer how he had urgent news for Royce about a job. It started the next day, and he couldn't find the McKenna's phone number. It was just a coincidence that Roosevelt, who needed to borrow some gas lamps for a family barbecue, had pulled up right after him. Roosevelt was obviously in hurry, so Royce's dad offered to help. The two men had gone back to the storage building when they heard the shotgun blast.

"It turned out to be a possum in the basement," Mr. McKenna said. "The shooting was just an accident."

"Doesn't look like an accident to me," the Patrolman said. "This boy just got out of Leavenworth, and he admits he shot the man. I'm taking Royce Culhane back to jail."