Hell or High Water

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Hell or High Water

A Wade Simpson Concoction
This work is dedicated to
Michael J. Kirkpatrick and Detroit, Michigan. Both R.I.P.

The author gratefully acknowledges the wisdom and support of the various instructors at The Center for Cartoon Studies, without whom this project would have remained locked in the ether. You know who you are.

Special thanks to Mark Schultz, a skilled artist and thoughtful mentor, whose classic mannerist style preserves the rich tradition of newspaper adventure series for the next generation of cartoonists.

Others who deserve nods of sincere thanks: Colin Brant and Sarah Harris. One taught the author how to paint life and one taught him how to enjoy it.
New Year’s Eve is the best night of the year because of the great parties.

And the key to a great party is to get all the right ingredients.
Chapter One

INGREDIENTS
When I think of the place that I grew up, I remember a perfect world. A land of milk and honey. Of hot fudge and ginger.

Detroit, 1917

I recall the smell of soda pop, the touch of fresh spring grass and the whisper of the breeze from the Boblo boat.

Everything that was fun was also popular. There was a natural organization of city wide kinship.

The most gifted architects, with design manifest, created Detroit out of labor and love.

But even Heaven has its share of sinners.

It was Heaven on Earth.
'Father Kirkpatrick. Lit up like the commonwealth. Disgraceful.'

Best get over to church, pastor. Sunday mass is about to begin!

Don't fret, people. I'll make it on time, with my trusty steed.

Nobody cares. If I'm not there, the choir will just keep singing.

...Oh my God, oh my God! The blood... There's so much blood!

Hey hey! Officer! It looks like the other motorist is alive. He's a friar!

Hey! Watch out!

Clear these folks back. Get this traffic moving.

Did anyone see what happened? Check the driver in the other auto.
Eww! Wheel looks like the padre's body, made lame with whisky, went limp at impact. Might've saved his life.

Hey, I think my boots flew off somewhere. Would you forget about your damn shoes...

...a woman has been killed!

Bishop Foley... I'm not sure I know what's happened.

What happened was you came racing off Campus Martius and slammed into their automobile like a damned cannonball.

This man, the deceased's husband, survived by a miracle. And by the hands of these passing surgeons. They've given him morphine for the pain.
Don't worry, Brother Kirkpatrick. You will join the Washingtonians. The Diocese will protect you...

What are you doing, Sergeant? We gotta clear the street.

Hold your horses, Chief...

I thought I saw something...
THIRTEEN YEARS LATER.

C'est l'heure verte?

Oui, Papa. The green hour is nigh.

Is there more?

'Fraid not.
Luis, my dear...
I need it!!

I know, Papa. Relax. Not another word 'til the cube melts.

You will get more? From where? When?!

Don't worry. I've got a good plan.

And a winning personality.
How long do we have to sit here?

'Til shift change. Our guys believe the daytime straight-shooters and we roll into the United States. Simple, eh?

I hope that's soon. My fingers are like ice. 'Guess that makes you a good rum-runner, huh? A tolerance for cold.

Nah...

Not getting caught makes me a good rum-runner.
What do you see?

Alrighty, Kid... You're 'bout to be baptized.
This is Jones. I'm showing him the ropes.

Wanna open up the back then, take a look.

"Take a look?" Aint ye spoke with Tutha? Sure, I spoke with yer boss...

Well...?

Since when do you eyeball the merchandise?

It's a new year, Harrison.
I take it this is just for theater?

Christ! The Mother Lode!!

'Strange brew for the River Gang.

That's what Lula told me to move.
What's the hang up, eh? Usually it's one-two-three zip...

I know you're getting the raw deal, but-

If you have a license for this shipment, we're gonna have to see it now.

A license, oh?
Sure...Absolutely.

This shit's a medicinal tonic for a children's hospital. Buncha kids got sour stomachs.

Lemme just grab it. It's under my seat.

What's wrong?

Hang onto my hat.
STOP!

AAARRH-EEE!

SSUSHaaaa

MOOSH

Pah HOO

Kap

Nuts! I missed 'em.

Nuts

SNAK CRINKLE

Pah HOO

Honk Scree
Now my fingers are warm.
GRAK  AAAASH

SKRAK

HACK - CRUNCH
YOO HOO! Didja see me ventilate 'em?!

Ya ain't that smooth, Kid. There's actual jail time for killing lawmen.

They were going to arrest us anyway. Weren't they?!

Yeah. They were. 'Cpt it don't quite add up. The River Gang's been dealing with these border goons for months. They was bona fide.

We'll have to worry about that later. Right now, we gotta get this bucket of bullets off the road.

TARFU.

What's tarfu?

It's an acronym. Things Are Really Fu-

WWEEEE!!
What now?

I'll show ya how we did it in the old days, eh? Before they built the Ambassador.

Is it safe?

Over the ice.

You didn't get into this racket to play it safe, didja kid?

The snow's falling fast.

We only have to cross the ice.
We're buried up to the axle.

So this is how you did it in the old days?

Okay, here's the plan—
Hof Hof cough—
I'll cross to Detroit on foot.
Fetch Blackie or Wingtip.

Whoever I find first, they'll know what to do, eh? And they know how to zip their lips.

What'll I do, eh?

You stay here with the cargo.

Fuck that plan! I'm not gonna be left out here to freeze or get caught red-handed! No way, Jose!

Okay, Rookie, but you best not slow me down.
After dinner, guests may be served a small glass of liqueur as a digestif.

The "Coffee Pusher" should pour the drink carefully as to show the different layers.
Appendix

POUSSE-CAFE
GENERAL NOTE - Research for this project was heartwrenching. Everytime I needed reference for a specific Detroit location, the internet search engine would always send back two types of images. One of beautiful art deco downtown, steeped in lively crowds and another of a dilapidated, depressed and often empty relics. It was shocking to realize that the images were of the same place. Just different times. And although I am saddened by the state of my home city, I was very pleased to depict Detroit at its “high water” mark.

Special thanks to Wayne State and the Walter P. Reuther Library for research assistance, and to Bob Metzler and The Dartmouth Letterpress Workshop.

PAGE 8 - Sanders Confectionary, Vernors ginger ale, Belle Isle and the Boblo Boat are all Detroit classics of a bygone era.

PAGE 8, PANEL 6 - The Chair of Justice used to reside in Cadillac Square.

PAGE 9, PANELS 5 & 6 - Father Gabriel Richard was revered in Detroit, and here in the old City Hall building (long destroyed), his statue once stood on the southern facade.

PAGE 10 - Father Joe Kirkpatrick never existed but Bishop Foley did. Foley ran the Detroit Diocese until his death in 1918.

PAGE 13 - The classical, French preparation of absinthe is to run icy water over a sugar cube on a slotted spoon. The sugar deliquesces into the goblet and creates a waft of anise.

PAGE 14 - Many homes had radios, but in 1929, car radios were rare. Only police cruisers and criminal get-away vehicles had radios at this time.

PAGE 15 - The Ambassador Bridge was completed in October 1929, just one month before the stock market crash, and three months ahead of this story.

PAGE 15 - My grandmother, Dorothy Simpson told me stories of smuggling butter under her car seat from Canada as a child, in the early nineteen thirties. Many “ingredients” were brought over.

PAGE 17, PANEL 7 - Absinthe was banned long before American Prohibition. It was vilified a generation prior and it would have been very strange indeed for a border patrol to discover cases of absinthe from the old country.

PAGE 18, PANEL 6 - Trucks and autos from the early twenties are in no way similar to modern cars. Model T’s have three pedals, none of them are the brakes. The middle pedal which Harrison is depressing in last panel, is dedicated solely to reverse.

PAGE 23 - This action is the essential imagery I wrote this story around. Years and years ago, my dad told me about trucks full of booze at the bottom of the Detroit River. This story came from the question, “How did it get there?”

PAGE 24 - The winter of 1929/1930 was especially fierce. Snowy and bitterly cold.