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Heroes and Villains

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LACEY ROWLAND

HEROES AND VILLAINS

I guess you could say my father was a magician. He could make things disappear. Heartache, tears, a quarter behind the ear. A bottle of bourbon. Paychecks. He'd figured out how to make his heart stop once, but couldn't make it start again. His death was not an illusion. I didn't know how to feel about it at the time because I hadn't seen my father in over a decade. "It's true," my mother said. "Housekeeping found him in a room at the Barton's 93. Of course he'd be at Barton's," my mother said. "Where else would he go?"

When people die, you learn things you never knew before. For example, when my father died, I discovered he'd been living in his truck—a camper shell for a roof. He'd fashioned a bed from a pile of old clothes. No one told me this. I saw it for myself.

When my father wasn't at the casino, he was hustling. Selling found items to strangers out of the back of his truck in parking lots. He'd collect crystals found in creeks, fashion necklaces of hemp and leather, work the bins of Goodwill discards for treasure. When an item wouldn't sell, it'd collect dust in the shed. Once, when I was little, he gave me a plush toy hamster that was missing an eye. My father blamed cheap manufacturing, grumbling with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. They just don't make things the way they used to. What made my father

successful in selling junk was the story. It was also how he sold himself to my mother. He told her stories of the desert, of the haunted pasts of men on the range. He enchanted her.



THE FUNERAL HOME transported my father's body to Twin Falls, Idaho, the closest point of civilization north of the Nevada border. My mother moved to Boise from Twin after my father left, she couldn't handle the small-town stares, the feeling of failure that lingers over the place. I still know people there, kids I went to school with, and not much has changed. Twin has an Applebees now.

Though my father's body was waiting for me in Twin, the rest of his things—his truck, his clothes, an outstanding motel bill—were waiting to be settled in Jackpot. The motel asked my mother, who in turn asked me, to take care of "it" meaning the shit my father left behind. He'd made camp in that place, stranded himself there.

I'd been to Jackpot before. On the map, Jackpot is a pin-prick right on the line that separates Idaho and Nevada. You might scratch at the paper and mistake it for a crumb. My father took me there as a child to swim in the pool at Cactus Pete's while he spent his afternoons in the betting lounge or at the blackjack tables. He was never much for the machines, but sometimes he'd let me pull a handle on the penny slots while we waited in line for the buffet. He told me the key to getting the

most bang for your buck was to put a twenty in one of the machines at the bar and bet the minimum, nice and slow, so you could get more free drinks.

“They’re all rigged, baby,” he’d said. “But what you’re really going for is the booze. If you play it right, you can come out on top.” And some afternoons, after spending all day on the casino floor, we’d check into the Horseshu and sleep off the buzz. If his luck had run out, we’d sleep in the truck, the arid heat bearing down on us through the windows. He knew a lot of the dealers, knew their stories, and he’d tell them as he drifted off to sleep. Bedtime stories. All the dealers wore nametags saying where they were from, which made me sad and wonder what shit they had to go through to wind up here. Frank from D.C., Ines from Bosnia, what brought them to Jackpot no one but my father seemed to care. To my father, these people were heroes and villains. Peter from Russia was a spy, but he’d defected and was laying low in Jackpot to avoid assassination. His name wasn’t even Peter, Dad said, that was just a cover. As a child, Jackpot seemed to me as good a place as any to hide. Maybe the stories were true, but maybe what brought those people to Jackpot was the same thing that brought my father there, isolation and drink and the hardness of a past you can’t ever escape.

On one of our trips to Jackpot, my father scored one of the nicer rooms since it was comped by the casino. He ordered steaks and we ate them in bed with our fingers. He rubbed the A1 off his lips with the back of his hand, tasting the remnants on the tips of his fingers with

loud smacks. We sat cross-legged on the covers, wore napkins for bibs, and stayed up late watching Leno. My father laughed at jokes I didn't yet understand.

After the steaks and Leno, I went to sleep, and my father went down to the casino. This was our little routine, sleep and gambling and cable television, things we indulged in in excess, in Jackpot, but nowhere else. I woke up to my father dumping a bucket of nickels on the covers.

"Look, Nikki. I hit the jackpot in Jackpot," he said. I remember him scooping the nickels up with his cupped hands and letting them slip between his fingers like a shining waterfall. The sound of change clinking and plunking on the mattress.

"How much is it?" I asked.

"Enough, my love."

In the dull lamplight of the room we swam our hands through the pile on the bed, feeling the cold against our skin, feeling like it was some kind of miracle. Like Jesus turning water into wine. I jumped on the bed and watched the winnings bounce and take flight, some landing on the floor, some sticking between my toes. We scooped them into the bellies of our shirts, like Scrooge McDuck, and carried the weight around the room. The next morning my father bought me a silver ring with turquoise dolphins from the gift shop and I wore it all the time even though it turned my skin green. I wore it until it didn't fit, and after that I put it in my jewelry box with the WWJD ring that my fifth grade boyfriend gave me, and the cocktail earrings I'd snuck from my mother's

vanity. I'm sure she knew I took them, but never said anything. It wasn't long after that trip, when I was twelve years old, that my father crept out of the house in the middle of the night and left us for good.

I don't know what my father told my mother about our trips to Jackpot. Whatever it was, it must have been convincing because she never seemed to complain. I've asked her, and she hedges. Eluding complicity by not admitting to anything. I imagine our brief absences were, in a way, a relief. A chance for her to breathe, or to be with someone else. Or to be someone else. I used to blame her for him leaving—as children often do when adults do things they can't understand—but I've come to realize that there's always more than one version of a story.

• • •

TWO DAYS AFTER I got the news of my father's death, I took the Party Bus and made it to Jackpot in the late afternoon. There is excitement on the coach to the casinos. People aren't yet broke and hungover. Most passengers are elderly. Too old to drive, too cheap to fly to more glamorous places to waste their money—Reno, Vegas. The reservation casinos in the Panhandle are an even more treacherous drive, roads that wind and sometimes snow. Jackpot was built for convenience.

When I arrived it was too early to get started on the slots, too cold to swim. There isn't much to Jackpot. A couple casinos, a couple hotels, a gas station and a trailer park where most of the employees live.

The rest is desert. I checked into the hotel, feeling as if at any moment, my father might emerge from one of the rooms and call off the trick. The flashing lights and ringing bells of the casino radiated in the hotel lobby, drawing you in with the promise of the win. A glowing, plastic Dolly Parton with a cinched-in waist and breasts that were somehow larger than the real-deal sat atop a row of slots a few feet from the check-in desk. Elderly men and women with oxygen tanks and fanny-packs meandered around the casino floor or warmed up slots for the later crowd.

The woman at the counter handed me the keys to my room and a flyer highlighting the various amusements of the weekend. An oldies cover band, a comedian. Lessons at the craps tables and a poker tournament at ten. I took my bag up to my room, opened the blackout curtains. The room was nice, better than the cheap rooms my father would get us at the Barton's. They'd remodeled the tower at Cactus Pete's, updated the rooms with contemporary furnishings that were sharp and said to patrons *You will win*. Even if you didn't, the crisp linens and flatscreen televisions were a salve to your empty wallet. This must have felt like luxury to my father, it did to me. The room smelled like vinyl and new carpets, not the mixture of bleach and tobacco from my childhood. Both versions unpleasant in their own way.

Around the hotel was a walking path that skittered between the pool, the hotel, around the parking lots and down by the golf course. The golf course had turned the color of manila folders or tooth scum. It sunk in spots. Water collected in tepid puddles. I walked around the

places I'd never explored as a child. Around the dormant plants, the rusty playground by the trailer park. It was hard to imagine Jackpot as a town where people could actually live. The place always felt temporary. As if when my father and I weren't there, it didn't exist at all.

I wondered if that's how my father felt when he finally left us for good. If once he drove away in the night, my mother and I stopped existing. For my mother he only existed in the junk he left behind that she had to clean up—spare car parts piled up, a dune buggy with springs poking through the seats. Books that he could barely understand, but was determined to finish anyway. When he first left, I'd convinced myself that he would come back, and that when he did, things would be better. There was no blowout between him and my mother, rather a silent, festering bitterness. I imagined he had other families, and that he'd fulfilled his duty with ours, and it was time to move on to the next. Another little girl that needed love too. I didn't tell my mother my theories. My father's absence left us both mute for some time after. I'm sure she had her theories too.

The day he left was remarkably ordinary. My mother had gone grocery shopping. Our fridge was full. My father had been to the Flying J to sell a roto-tiller he'd gotten off an older woman who was downsizing to move to a retirement home. He left that night. The next morning, waking up to him gone felt like a slap in the face. Abrupt. Without reason. No note. We knew he was gone when the coffee wasn't made and his side of the closet was empty. My mother smoked cigarettes all morning, tipping her ash into the sink, spewing air between her lips like a broken whistle.

She wore her floral robe that had gone thin and transparent with age. I remember being able to see the outline of her body. That night we stayed with my mom's sister in Buhl, and I had pancakes with chocolate chips for the first time.

My mother didn't go looking for my father. She wouldn't have had to look that far.

• • •

ON THE FOURTH of July after my father left, my mother took me to Shoshone Falls where the water roared and you could see the ramp in the distance where Evel Knievel attempted to jump the Snake River Canyon. It was fenced off at the time, but my mother remembered when he came to town when she was nine years old. She remembered the crowds gathered to watch, and Evel Knievel's white jumpsuit, blue stars dashed across his chest. But most of all, she remembered how his chute released too early, and how some were disappointed he didn't make it, while others were disappointed he didn't die.

At the edge of the canyon, we watched as others hiked farther down the trail to get a better look. I watched the glint of rainbows form in the basin of the falls, the water storming over grey rhyolite. Everything else seemed monochrome.

"Your grandad had a lot of money riding on that stunt," she said.

"How come they don't tear down the ramp?" I asked.

“Why bother,” she said. “A lot of work for nothing.” She leaned against the railing that lined the trail, looked out over the edge.

“Has anyone tried it since?”

“Probably not. Lot of people were upset about what happened. Don’t think anyone wants to dredge up that mess.”

We watched as two men scaled the Perrine Bridge. I’d never seen anyone jump before. People on the trail pointed and some waved. One man jumped, and I held my breath thinking he was going to die, that he would hit the water and never come up again. His arms spread wide while we watched him freefall until he pulled the cord and his chute bloomed above him. We watched him drift down like the cottony white seed of a dandelion.

Years later I learned that after the failed stunt in the Snake River Canyon, Evel Knieval lost notoriety. He fell out of love with his fans. He attempted a jump over a tank of sharks and crashed into a cameraman. After so many failed stunts and broken bones, he retired. He beat his wife and kids, did drugs, went to jail. He converted, got baptized on TV and then later that year he died. But nobody ever talks about that. Nobody ever talks about the attempts made to make things right, only the attempts that failed.

After the falls, my mother took me to see the fireworks show at the park in town. The loud boom of explosions rattled my chest. The fireworks in the sky, the hot white and burning orange, blanketed my mother with a sort of happiness. When I closed my eyes I could still see

the lights, the fountain of sparks burned black. We ate shaved ice and she showed me a trick my father had taught her. She massaged the edges of the empty styrofoam cup, working it like putty. I watched her pinch and push until eventually she had worked the cup inside out. She was still wearing her wedding ring then.

“This always makes me think of your dad,” she said, holding the inside-out cup. Smoke from the fireworks settled into whiffs of clouds, leaving everything smelling like rotten eggs and spent matches. Two boys ran up with crackling sparklers, pretending they were swords. My mother handed one of them the cup, and the little boy threw it away.

• • •

AFTER I HAD settled into my hotel room, I walked across the highway that cuts through Jackpot to the Barton’s 93. My father’s things were tucked away in motel storage behind the front desk along with spare clubs and a rack of cleaning supplies. A box of lost and found items, visors and single mittens and a bikini top. His bag rested on the floor, and the desk attendant brought it out onto a table for me in the employee breakroom.

“Should all be there,” the desk attendant said. He was birdlike, with thin arms and waxy, pale hands. His polo shirt was too big which made him look like a child playing dress up.

“Sure, okay,” I said.

“Doesn’t seem like much, does it,” he said. His voice was high-

pitched and it cracked. He peered into the bag. “I’ll give you a minute.”

The desk attendant shut the door while I emptied out my father’s bag. Pulled each item out, one at a time, taking an inventory. My father’s wallet, a soft supple leather, worn for years in a back pocket, the outlines of credit cards embossed on the side. Deep brown and curved. Placed on the table, it made the sound of a cat’s paw on tile. I could picture him leaning in his chair to retrieve it, the familiar posture of men going to pay the check. The bowie knife sounded like knuckles knocking, a brief rap of the handle on wood. His clothes made almost no sound at all.

I imagined the life that had happened with these belongings. How many times those shirts had been rolled at the sleeves, washed in laundromats or motel bathrooms and hung to dry. The number of packs of cigarettes tucked into the breast pocket over the years, and how many smoked or given away to strangers. Bills nestled in the fold of the wallet, how many had been spent, or lost. I opened the wallet, picked through its meager contents. No cash. An Ameristar loyalty card and a condom that had expired two years before. Tucked into one of the side pockets was a picture of my mother. Faded and worn on the edges, creased and straightened out. She was wearing a party hat and tight high-waisted jeans. Her arms crossed over her bare breasts, leaning suggestively toward the camera. The date on the back was from before I was born, with a note in my mother’s handwriting, *Happy Birthday, Cowboy*. A series of Xs and Os and her name written in flowery script.

I collected his things, put them all carefully back into the bag.

The desk attendant handed me the keys to my father's truck, which still had the rabbit's foot keychain. I remembered rubbing the fur obsessively as a kid, how the little foot still had its nails attached that clicked when I fidgeted with them.

"The truck's parked behind the building. Seems to be leaking a little fluid," he said.

"I'm not taking it too far."

In the parking lot, crows worked away at a fast-food bag. My father's red Dodge was parked in the corner, the same red truck he'd always had. I was surprised he hadn't sold it.

I lifted the back hatch of the camper shell and saw the nest my father'd made. An old sleeping bag tangled up among clothes. A box of rocks in a corner. His own miniature hoard. It smelled stale, so I cracked the side windows and left the hatch open. I checked the oil, like he'd taught me, cleaned the dipstick with an old sock from the pile. It was and wasn't difficult to believe my father had lived like this. He had refused to succumb to the kinds of things my other friends' fathers did. Refused to have a regular job, refused to cut his hair. Refused to settle down. He'd described it once as an itch in his toes he couldn't scratch. My mother called him selfish. He was like the stray cat we had, too feral to bring inside. A little brown farm cat with a clipped ear and a crooked tail that would come around for food and leave dead snakes and little birds at the door. Sometimes he'd be sweet and let you pet him, other times he'd bolt and disappear into the weeds.

With some coaxing, the truck rumbled to a start. I drove it over to Cactus Pete's so I wouldn't have reason to go to Barton's ever again.

• • •

AS A KID, I'd come up with present-father-scenarios. In moments when I missed him most, I put him there. Dragged him from wherever he was and made him be with me. I came up with elaborate present-father-scenarios where I'd imagine my father in the bleachers at my volleyball game, trying to pawn estate sale rings to the moms in the stands or at night sitting on the edge of my bed telling me how he'd met Evel Knievel at the grocery store buying rhubarb for pie. "Can you believe it?" I imagined him saying. "The guy who jumped fourteen Greyhound buses makes pies."

He always looked the same.

At the bar in the casino, I developed a present-father-scenario for old times. Brought my father back from the dead. He was wearing the flannel shirt my mother got him one year for Christmas. I asked him why he left, and he told me a story about when he was a young boy, a story I'd heard before as a child.

He'd been walking a creek, he couldn't remember where exactly he was, only that he'd been there before. That day, though, he followed the creek farther than he'd ever gone. The trees were thick, only letting light in on the water. When he started getting tired, he noticed a clearing close by.

In the clearing was a shack. No one was around and he got the feeling that maybe he shouldn't go there. He wanted to turn back, but something was drawing him to the shack, like someone had put a magnet in his belly that dragged him closer and closer to the clearing.

Inside the shack, plants hung in bundles from the ceiling and tin cans were stacked against a wall. He remembered wood burning in a pot-belly stove. It was dim inside, and musty, as if when he went through the door he'd gone underground. Behind him he heard a noise, a crack or a snap—he didn't know the right word for it—and when he turned around there was a man standing in the doorway, gun slung in the crook of his elbow. The man told my father he could have whatever he wanted, but that it was all poison. At that moment, my father became very thirsty, more thirsty than he'd ever felt in his life.

I ordered another beer for my father at the bar. He took a long swig.

My father said that this was the day he met the devil. He said at some point in your life, you will meet him face-to-face. You can never be ready for it. Once you meet the devil, he said, he never quite leaves you.

He drank the man's water from an old soup can because he was so thirsty. He'd never been so thirsty, he said. He said the water made him forget what happened next, he only remembered running back through the woods, branches scratching his face, his arms. He remembered his mother being angry about a tear in his pants, and how when she asked where he was, he couldn't tell her.



I WALKED DOWN the highway to the trailer park to clear my head and to get away from the chaos in the casino. It was that in-between time of twilight, when the sky can't decide whether it wants to be purple or blue or orange, so it's all of them. In the trailer park, I heard children laughing and yelling. The sounds of children made me curious, like when you smell familiar laundry soap on a stranger's clothes. Like something to be investigated. I walked down the gravel road that splits the rows of double-wides, littered with tricycles and t-ball stands and jumpropes and hula hoops. There were about seven or eight kids, circled in the middle of the road. A young girl looked up from the huddle, split off from the group and came toward me. She wore shorts and had dirt-stained knees, dirt in the creases around her mouth like she'd been wandering the desert for days. Without speaking, she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the group.

The only time I'd ever seen children in Jackpot before was at the casino pool or the buffets or in the hotel hallways. Children of guests. As a kid, I would try and make friends with other kids at the pool, offer up a game of Marco Polo or chicken, but I was mostly ignored and avoided.

A boy and another girl were battling it out with rock-paper-scissors.

"We're playing Cops and Robbers," the little girl said, still holding my hand. "You can be a robber."

“How do you play?” I asked. The girl cocked her head, as if I’d asked her a question in another language.

“It’s easy, you just run away from the cops.” She shrugged her shoulders, rubbed her nose with the back of her hand.

“Are you a robber?” I asked. She nodded her head. I was instructed to hide, while the two cops counted to one-hundred. I hid behind a car. From my hiding place I could hear whispers and flip-flops clapping on bare feet. Another kid shouted you better run. My heart raced. I knew it was just a game, but in that moment, it didn’t feel like one. The little robber grabbed my hand and tugged me into a trailer. “Isn’t this against the rules,” I asked.

“You just can’t leave the neighborhood,” she said. In the trailer, an old man slept in a recliner in front of a television. *Wheel of Fortune* was on and the rest of the trailer was dark. She peeked out the window through some curtains, and I froze. We ran back out of the trailer, the door slamming behind us, and crouched behind another car. Someone yelled Gotcha, and another kid whined in disappointment. It felt like we’d been hiding for hours when the little robber turned to me, grabbed my arm and said, “Gotcha.” She smiled and laughed, and I realized I’d been conned. The ultimate betrayal. It became clear to me what it must have felt like when an undercover cop finally broke his cover, and the jig was up.

“That’s cheating,” I said. “You can’t be a robber one minute, and a cop the next. You can’t just do that.” After saying that, I immediately felt silly.

“No way,” she said, arms folded across her chest. “You don’t even know the rules.”

One of the other captured robbers, a little boy, said he didn’t want to play anymore, that the game was stupid. And just like that, the game was over just as quickly as it’d started. In the distance, I could see the red glowing letters against the tall black silhouette of Cactus Pete’s.

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WHEN MY MOTHER called to tell me my father was dead, she asked me if I’d ever wondered about what it would be like if he’d stayed. She said in that moment, she was glad he hadn’t because it made the pain of him being gone for good easier. I told her I had imagined what it would be like. In my imagining my father would have gotten a job at the cheese factory. He’d come home late at night, hang his white coveralls in the closet by the front door. Some nights he would plunk down on the couch and my mother would pick bits of dried whey out of his hair. He’d be sober, but could never quit Jackpot. Old habits die hard, I’d imagine him saying as he’d load up his truck for a weekend away. But I wouldn’t join him.

And his death would be the worst thing that ever happened to me. The worst thing that happened to any of us.

On the other end of the phone, I heard a crack in my mother’s voice as she said she should stop wondering about the what-ifs and might-

have-beens. I didn't tell her how I'd spent years living off what could have been.

• • •

ONE NIGHT WHEN my father and I were in Jackpot, he stayed out all night and didn't call, didn't tell me when he was going to be back.

I didn't sleep that night. I tried watching TV, tried reading Gideon's Bible. For a while I watched out the window. I'd considered going into the casino, but I didn't know which one he'd be in or how to find him once I got there. I must have been eight or nine years old at the time. I took an inventory of survival items in the room, things that would sustain me if my father didn't come back. It didn't occur to me to call my mother or to tell the front desk or to call the police. Instead, I thought that a girl could survive off Biscoff wafers, water from the sink, and when I ran out of complimentary snacks I thought newspapers wouldn't be so bad to eat. After hours of waiting and watching out the window, I saw my father in the parking lot below. He'd never stayed out this late before, he'd always come back before the sun came up. But the sun had been up for a while when he finally made it back to our room.

When I heard him put his key in the lock, I ran to the bed and buried myself in the sheets, pretended I'd been asleep all along. I tried to slow my breath, slow my heart because I didn't want him to see me afraid. When he came in, he went straight to the bathroom and turned on the

shower. I listened to the water run, listened to my father shout and sob and punch the wall. Then after a while I heard the quick squeal of the faucet knob turning and the water shutting off. My father got into bed and continued to cry so quiet I thought he was laughing to himself. I didn't move, didn't say anything. But it was getting close to check-out time and I was worried they'd charge my father more money, worried they'd send someone after us.

This was the only time I conjured a present-father-scenario when my father was actually there. I imagined my father packing his things, tidying up the bed. He smelled like complimentary motel soaps, not stale cigarettes and sour beer. In my scenario, he would make a pillow pile on the mattress and then scoop me up in his arms and toss me on the bed. I imagined us eating breakfast in the motel restaurant and dipping the corners of my toast in egg yolks.

But none of that happened. We checked out and didn't have to pay extra. While my father slept off his losses I packed his things and loaded them into the truck. On the way back to Twin we got a flat tire. And we didn't go back to Jackpot for a while.

• • •

MY MOTHER ONCE showed me an old newspaper interview with Evel Knievel. He talked about destiny, and balance. About how if he would've made the stunt, people would think it was too easy, if he'd died, they'd

have said that was the daredevil's grand finale. But he didn't do either, and he didn't have anything to say about it, other than he lived. In the black and white picture in the paper, Evel Knieval wasn't smiling. His mouth was open as if he was trying to say something.