

Oklahoma, 1944: Howard Hughes Spends the Night in Jail

by Kathryn Kulpa

At least they haven't taken away his shoes. He hates wearing shoes, hates how they dull everything the ground might be saying, but here, in this cell that still holds the vapor trails of every man who slept here, pissed against the whitewashed walls, vomited not quite into the steel toilet bowl, quite possibly died here (they'd taken his belt, and would have taken his tie, if he'd had one), there's nothing the green tile floor can tell him that he wants to hear.

Here, these shoes could save his life.

There's a drain in the floor. It's a round hole with a rusted metal cover and around that hole something is growing, something wet and black. He doesn't want to look at the drain in the floor but there it is. And here he is, jailed for vagrancy, 68 cents in his pocket, a torn movie ticket stub, a brown paper bag, half a sandwich and a bottle of Coke. He'd signed for them in the office, and a woman with oxblood fingernail polish had assured him, from behind a thick glass window, that they would be returned to him upon his release. Except for the Coke, which was confiscated on suspicion of containing an intoxicating beverage. Was it being held as evidence? Sent to some laboratory for analysis?

More likely, it had been poured down the drain. He's thirsty now. He wishes he still had that Coke. There's a tiny half-moon sink against one wall. He's thirsty but he won't drink from that sink.

There's a sharp smell of bleach. There's a lightbulb wrapped in wire.

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There's a drain in the floor.

The sheriff is on the phone, calling Thompson about the hobo with the crazy story. But Thompson is not at the plant, of course. It's Sunday night. Thompson is at home. Thompson is having dinner with his family, assuming Thompson has a family. He doesn't know where Thompson lives. He barely remembered Thompson's name.

There's a drain in the floor. Something dark growing around it.

There are certain dark corners in every man's life, places the mind might be drawn to. The antidote he's found is motion.

When he flies he flies barefoot, feeling the pulse of the pedals with his long toes. When he flies the hum of the engines is loud enough to drown the ringing in his ears. Nothing else can.

He sits on the cleanest part of the bench, the part with the least writing on it. He sees the smeared edges of words that someone tried to erase. Pictures reduced to connected dots. Nothing is erased all the way.

One man died. One walked away. Nothing explains this. It's chance. Fate. Mechanical failure. He walked away, the way he always does. He's a tin roof shingled with asbestos. Nothing touches him. This is no virtue, only luck.

Luck can be courted but it will turn in the end. His gambler father taught him that.

There's a drain in the floor.

There's a body in the water.

He's in the cockpit and it's cold. Why is it so cold? This is desert country. Harper Dry Lake. Something's filming his vision, something sticky and dark like engine oil. He reaches up his hand to wipe it away and thinks it's blood, though in the dim green light it could be black, could be oil, caking under his nails. There's a moment when he's sure his legs are gone. He can't feel them, only the cold, and when he looks down his legs aren't there, only a cold blackness that's not oil, not blood, but water. He's held there, watching it rise higher, trying to understand as the water laps gently against his waist, and then he remembers, he undoes the buckle, turns to Morales in the seat beside him.

Morales isn't there.

There's a body in the water.

There's a drain in the floor.

He wipes his hands with a white handkerchief, over and over, the joint of each knuckle, the fingernails, the cuticles. No one watches him. No one cares what he does, or what he's done. He's a vagrant here. He has no name. No one in 400 miles who might remember him except *Geo. Thompson, Gen'l. Mgr., Hughes Tool Co., Norman, Okla.*

He's a vagrant here. Sixty-eight cents in his pocket. Only in his most secret dreams has he been so anonymous. He draws his feet up to the bench, his head down to his knees. Pulls down the brim of his hat. Dreams of a beach miles away from here, riding a horse through the surf, no saddle, nothing between him and that speed. That power. He was fourteen years old and all he could think of was going faster.

If he closes his eyes he could be anywhere.

A metallic clang of keys. He's shocked awake. The cell door opens.

And a face, Thompson's face, peering in at him, side-bent, quizzical, looking down at the unshaven hobo sleeping on a filthy bench in a filthy jail and trying to think back to an awards banquet six years ago. Trying to remember. And Hughes wills himself to be forgotten, to be nobody, a habitual vagrant, a drunk, who having spent his night in jail will be turned out to wander the world with 68 cents in his pocket, unseen, unremembered. But now Thompson is at his side, stammering, apologetic; now the look on the sheriff's face changes from bored contempt to curiosity, staring through the bars of the cell like a man who's caught and caged some exotic beast he has no idea how to keep.

And he stands, lets them lead him out, takes back the life he checked at the desk, walks away.

