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**STREET SCENE**

AARON SLID SEVERAL 37-cent Harry Houdini commemorative stamp sheets back into their manila envelope and put the envelope back inside the book about Houdini, right at the page with the picture of the great escape artist dangling upside-down from a lamppost, the photo taken from the back of the crowd that surrounded him. 1916? 1917? The first time that Aaron opened to that page—grainy, grey, the backs of a hundred men, a sea of fedoras and caps and derby hats, everyone intent on the figure of Houdini trussed and and swaying by his ankles in a canvas and leather and iron straitjacket—he had felt as if he were actually in the crowd, standing beside the unseen photographer. A trick of perspective, the eye persuading the body to believe itself elsewhere, not at the post office, eating lunch on the loading dock, but jostled by the throng of spectators, watching Houdini shed his restraints in seconds. The photographer must have made a fortune, thought Aaron—a knack for making people believe themselves there—making Aaron believe himself there, in the midst of a crowd that had dispersed a century gone.

The funny thing was that the scene had ceased to feel like an imagining and worked on him now as a memory: he remembered turning to the photographer—who wore a cap, the brim low on his forehead as he bent to the camera, its bellows extended, its lens trained toward Houdini and his crowd—and saying, “Travel much?”

“So much,” the postcard photographer replied, “that no one knows where I really am.”

The Harry Houdini stamp sheets that Aaron tucked into the book had been issued a decade or more ago. The portrait of the escapologist—his head turned toward the viewer and his arms wrapped across his chest as if still bound by the straitjacket—had a latent, secret image. What didn’t reveal itself to the unaided eye were the chains that wrapped around him. To see those one needed a special decoder lens, nearly as thin as a credit

card and about that size. Aaron kept his in the book, in the pocket now stamped *DISCARD* that used to hold the book's library circulation card. Seen through this special lens—designed to appeal to nine-year-old boys and the philatelically-minded—the chains shimmered and crisscrossed Houdini's chest and folded arms like an iridescent pattern in the weave of his dark frock coat rather than appearing dimensional, like the kind of chain he was often pictured with, links big enough to secure sea-going vessels and immense dangling padlocks. At first, Aaron had been disappointed in the subtlety of the stamp's hidden image, but then realized it was perfect this way. Chains are just part of the invisible weave of things.

Aaron put *Harry Houdini: Illusions of the Master*, his field manual, in his rolling duffel suitcase.

#### *ILLUSION OF THE MASTER I: JENNIE THE ELEPHANT*

Houdini had an elephant named Jennie and he could make her disappear—the eight-foot, self-contained mountain of her, all three thousand pounds of her. In front of a hall filled with people. Gone. And that was what Aaron wanted, a disappearing act on that scale. He didn't want to make an elephant disappear, he wanted to *be* the elephant, dropped through the floorboards or enveloped by curtains or concealed by clever mirrors.

He had been on the road six weeks. Long enough that his vacation time had run out. Long enough that someone at the post office must have called his sister—*What's up with Aaron? He's a no-show*. Long enough that his sister had let herself into his apartment with the key left over from when the apartment was their dad's to see if Aaron was back. She would find the lease expired and his things boxed and labeled for Goodwill and a few brochures for Arizona on the window sill, if his landlord hadn't already cleaned the place out.

*Why Arizona?* asked his sister—his half sister—when he let her know weeks before he ostensibly left on vacation that he was taking a trip. She was two years younger, the daughter of their mother's second husband, Joe Hardine, the man who had adopted him, the man he had called *Dad*. He and Ceci had been raised together—the Hardine kids, sharing the same backseat, watching TV stretched out on the same tan rug—but since elementary school she had never referred to him as anything but *my-half-brother-Aaron*. If half of him were her brother, what was the other half, he'd wondered. But he actually knew. He was in part her brother, but mostly he was chubby and

awkward. There had been no getting away from that. *My half-brother seems to have skipped town, she might eventually say. Left for Arizona on a vacation and never came back. A family habit, his side of the family, she could add. And she would be referring to his biological father.*

Disappearing was an old family stunt and Aaron had been a lifelong apprentice to an act he never knew the full details of, leaving him to improvise when it was his turn. *Well, Pop, he would ask aloud as he was gathering his gear and making his plans, what was finally too much for you?*

In his first weeks and months on the road, Aaron bought postcards of all the places he had been—none of them within a thousand miles of Arizona. After a while, he bought a camera.

#### ILLUSION OF THE MASTER II: MAIL SACK ESCAPE

Handcuffs, padlocks, straitjackets, mailbags, beer barrels, packing crates, jail cells—Houdini could escape from all of them, but it was the mail sack that eventually caught Aaron's eye, gave him the idea. Years ago, someone, inspired by Houdini's escape from a mail sack—sail cloth and a leather strap pulled through metal staples—tried to duplicate the maneuver, deceived perhaps by the simplicity of the mail sack, a bag with no more fearsome task than to deliver letters. The attempt ended with pleas to be let out. *No air, he gasped when he was released. It had probably seemed easy until the bag was cinched and locked with the formidable patent Rotary Government Mail Lock. From the outside, getting out had looked easy, as if thrashing around fiercely enough would do the trick, or that a simple in-the-dark fingering of seams would happen upon some workable release.*

*No air.* Some traps and restraints were clear in their intent and possibility—chains and handcuffs—others were not—mail sacks, post office service counters. The certainty that he would be asked to play Santa at work, the certainty that he would say yes to wearing the hat and beard when he worked the counter on Saturdays. *Thirty-two, he thought, thirty-two and I've been playing Santa since a skit in fifth grade. Ho Ho Ho.*

Maybe he could mail himself away. Toward that end, he left work on his last night before his announced vacation with a mailing box, a small one requiring \$5.80 in postage. He bought a \$5.60 stamp. He'd make up the difference with stamps he already had.

The failed attempt at wriggling free from Houdini's mail sack was understandable. Folk figures had magic helpers; so did masters of escape,

defiers of canvas sacks and wooden crates. In Houdini's case, he had the key to the lock, which was not as easy a solution as it seems, since the lock was outside the sack and Houdini and the key were inside: the genius was in how to use it anyway.

As for Arizona, Aaron never went, just like Jennie the elephant had never actually left the stage. He had taken the train, as if to go south to pick up the airport shuttle bus. Instead he got off at the first stop, rolled his duffle onto the platform and sat down to wait the hour for another train, with a ticket that read *Aaron White*. *White*—the name he had been given at birth, the one that disappeared during an adoption that had happened before he could speak in full sentences. His biological father's last name. Marc Louis White, born in Ottawa, Canada, the true and original disappearing act; gone, according to family legend, with one suitcase and no parting word. Aaron had found the birth certificate after the death of his adopted father. The slip of paper was, for Aaron, like a concealed skeleton key, which would begin to move the pins in the lock's tumbler. The first key necessary to reassembling an identity from what had been uncoupled, shed.

#### *ILLUSION OF THE MASTER III: ESCAPE FROM THE STRAITJACKET*

The key to many escape tricks was dislocation: brace a hand and elbow against the inside of the crate or barrel or steel canister and dislocate a shoulder. This uncoupling from within was how Houdini could wriggle free from the canvas and iron chrysalis of the strait jacket and shed the restraining skin above an amazed crowd. Even if one were to watch the dislocation, the illusion would be wholeness. Dislocation was a talent: either you could invisibly release the linkage from inside or you couldn't. There was no willing the escape into being. Aaron knew his skills were not field-tested, but trusted his instincts. He had learned early to let go. He had, after all, let go of the idea of ever being chosen for the team—any team—any playground, even the adult versions. He had, after all, let go of both parents—all three if you counted the first father to elude him. His mother's death had been sudden, but his father had lingered, as they say. And during that time, Aaron had let go of elements of his own life, modest as they were, to care for him. He moved into his father's spare bedroom for those last days that became those last months until they became more than a year of last days. Aaron had eventually and even willingly let go of his own place, the ordinary elements of his days including sleeping with one ear alert to the sound of monitors.

There were other binaries of being an escapologist—a short but deal-breaking list of either-you-can-or-you-can'ts. Houdini, as a kid, could bend over backwards and pick up a pencil with his teeth—a talent that earned him his first 5-cent circus job. Either you had a fundamental talent or it was all just card-and-coin tricks. Either you could perform or you couldn't. Playing Santa, of course, wasn't the key to this. Santa had just been the hat, though Aaron knew you should never underestimate the power of costume. The thing you needed was a showing forth of who you were, but it had to be as natural as breathing fire was to a dragon—simply a matter of opening your mouth. Astonishing for being unearned and beyond any notion of easy replication.

Aaron's talent had been invisible, even to him, for years. He had volunteered for every Autumn Festival Community Breakfast since he was a kid, when it had been his parents' idea. He could do pancakes—light and perfectly golden on both sides—for an entire rec hall of people on folding chairs. He ran the summer craft fair food concession—from buffalo burgers to falafel—and never got an order wrong or forgot a topping, even when the soccer team showed up. Cooking for large numbers didn't seem like a hidden talent—after all, he did it in public. It had seemed natural to everyone, given his girth, but his talents had nothing to do with his appetite: he wasn't good because he liked food. He was good simply because he was.

His job application tactic on the road developed a kind of showmanship. *Let me work the morning for free*, he'd say, standing on the linoleum-tiled floor of a diner while the owner looked at him from over the cash register. *See how I do*, he'd say, pulling a folded white apron from a pocket like a bunch of flowers from a sleeve, and shaking it out like a matador-magician before tying it around himself and becoming, instantly, the cook—their cook. *Let me cook you all breakfast*, he might say to the owner and her staff—and they'd sit up at the counter as if for a show. He would perform the sleight of hand of perfect pancakes—silver-dollar size or immense, blueberry or chocolate chip—expert wrist flips stacking them on plate after plate, steam still rising. He could deliver simultaneously three lofty omelets, both eggs and toast still hot. They would let him finish out a full-morning trial, hire him, and marvel at his seeming ability to do half a dozen things at once. Some performances were tricks and illusions, some were simply a walking forth of talent. In his case, that was holding in awareness a bank of full toasters, a hot grill, a pitcher of pancake batter, a Belgian waffle maker and three omelet pans.

After the breakfast run one morning in a New Hampshire town at

a restaurant called Jolene's, Jolene herself sat down next to Aaron as he perched on a stool in front of a plate containing three slices of turkey and a boiled egg. She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. "I'll cook something for you," she said, "if you're tired enough of the grill that you don't want to make yourself anything."

"Gastric by-pass," he said. "Small meals only. Lots of protein. Lots of fluids." Jolene got up and poured him a glass of ice water.

Aaron shrank some at Jolene's and shrank more as he traveled. He gave up baggy chinos for jeans. He hadn't had a by-pass. He'd figured that the trick to gastric by-pass was not the surgery, but the diet. Couldn't afford the surgery, surely couldn't have managed the comments at work or his sister trumpeting it all over town. Certainly couldn't take time out while his dad was dying. Now his life on the road was a traveler's approximation of what he had read about the by-pass diet: bowls of oatmeal in diners and yogurt from supermarkets. He abandoned soda. He skipped the fries. *If you're not hungry*, he'd say to himself, *it's not working*. Shrinking and disappearing had a natural link—a new wrinkle in the vanishing act. He was hungry a lot, but then he was hungry a lot when he was eating all he wanted.

#### ILLUSION OF THE MASTER IV: THE MANACLED DIVE

After he dropped a size and was working his way toward dropping another, he took a detour: all his explorations had been east, but for a three-day turnaround trip, they would be west. The plan for his disappearing act involved the small self-adhesive box he had brought with him from the post office: priority mail, \$5.80. The return address was a fabrication or a resurrection—the South Clark Street address of the Hotel Morrison in Chicago where Houdini had once stayed, a place that had been razed fifty years ago. In the box was Aaron's Santa hat and name tag: *Aaron Hardine*. All that was left of Aaron Hardine was going home. He used his \$5.60 stamp, added a 37-cent Houdini stamp with its secret, encoded chains and mailed it at the counter.

He had thought at one time to leave his USPS fat clothes—voluminous pleated grey trousers, standard window-service short-sleeve shirts—beside a big lake with no opposite shore in view, the implication being he had taken the long swim, or on a bridge, as if he had taken the big dive. Houdini had once jumped into the North Sea, off Aberdeen, Scotland, in manacles. A trick in which the act disappears under the waves, never to emerge, had to be considered a failure: Houdini had breached the surface waving and

free of handcuffs. A vanishing act—like any feat of illusion—had to be clean, capable of being released by the collective mind of the audience after the stunt was over. The elements of a vanishing act—surprise, disbelief, laughter, release—were not ultimately part of a sucker’s game; a trick was illusion, not swindle. Their money was still in their pockets. Their sense of the mystery of it was easily released when they walked away from the performance. *Maybe the release would be a little harder for sisters. Maybe a little less hard for half-sisters*, he thought. In his head he heard Ceci say, *What was he thinking?* She would be standing at the post office counter talking to one of his former co-workers when she said it. *Where do you think he really went?*

The first part of the escape was hardest—the part that involved the stashed key to the mail sack lock or the innate ability to dislocate your shoulders. After that, you had to settle into a little discomfort, say, a trip to Chicago on a quick turnaround for the sake of mailing a package. This was, simply, the work of it. Like building a crate for Jennie the Elephant was work, the crate that had complicated mirrors or a trap door or a secret compartment.

*I won’t be needing these*, he wrote in his note to the post office. To his sister, a postcard with its own Houdini stamp. *My things can go to Goodwill, if they haven’t already*, he wrote, and signed it: *love, your brother, Aaron*. The image on the other side was a view of Lake Michigan. These were just card tricks, but even card tricks had their modest place in the arsenal.

#### ILLUSION OF THE MASTER V: STREET SHOW

In the late summer, he found a kind of touring cap in a men’s store in New Hampshire, a flat cap in a dark waxed cotton, able to repel weather. Not unlike the photographer’s cap in his imagined memory of Houdini’s mid-air escape from an iron-clasped hold. Settling it on his head was a three-part action that involved initial placement and a small back-front, two-handed maneuver—brim between thumb and closed fingers and the other hand holding the back in place as it was angled into adjustment. The hat came with its own three-second ceremony, its own gestures of greeting and departure. Somewhere, from one of the boxes sent to the thrift shop from his father’s apartment, his old rib-knit burgundy toque—the one he used to wipe off his head and stuff in his pocket as he entered the post office—had found a new home. What no magic book revealed was how visible disappearing made you feel, visible to yourself. How *there*, how feet-planted-on-the-sidewalk *there*, you felt. And how visible the world became.

In a small town in Vermont he took a photo of the train trestle that led out of town. It was autumn, and the maples on either side of the curving track were shining orange and red. The name of the town was visible on a sign that had been dinged substantially by target practice. He took a photo of the library's book sale, a gala event it seemed, including baked goods and local poetry readings. He bought no brownies, no cookies, no chunks of carrot cake. He hadn't so much given these things up as released them.

Later, he took a photo of the variety store that also sold fishing gear. Hanging from the bottom of its commercial light-box with its glowing soda ad and the words *Shoreline Variety Store* was a jiggled-out, white-painted pine board shaped like a fish—a three-foot trout interpreted with a saber saw. Suspended from thin chains, it offered a single, hand-lettered word: *BAIT*. In the store window, a neon sign blinked *OPEN*, first in red, then green. A trifecta of signage. He took a number of shots. At a farmers' market, his camera caught a cider press operation at work. Days later, back at the Shoreline Variety, he offered the owner a stack of fifty postcards of the store and its remarkable trio of signs. Did she want other local designs? More could be purchased: he flipped over the postcard and circled his web address for Signs of the Times Postcards.

Just after the anniversary of his second year as Aaron White, he found himself arriving at a town in the midst of its street festival. He settled in with his camera, shoulder against lamppost, on the raised terrace of a restaurant. Just below a fire breather, bare-chested, bent deeply backwards, shot a plume of flame three feet, four feet up, surrounded by two dozen watchers. Beside him was a sandwich board sign: *Dragon's Torch*. Across the street, standing on the low window ledges of the bank, two boys looked over the heads of the crowd. One block up, a busker in a long dress played a vintage mother-of-pearl accordion. The art store had unfurled its exhibit banner and over the fire department's brick front a sign proclaimed the summer street fair. Aaron felt his feet on the hot brickwork of the terrace and watched the street festival unfold, frame by frame.

Postcard photographer. Breakfast cook. Around the holidays, sometimes, depending where he was, he worked at boxing and shipping centres. The thing with escape was that you had to practise. Escaping—the art of escaping—wasn't a means to an end, like a jailbreak. Nor was it a trick. It



was a turn of mind and a talent. A reassurance. A thing to enact again and again, for the art of it, the joy of it, the poetry of release, for the moment after, when you are free, the elephant no one can see, the escape artist who can pick the locks, dislocate, relocate, de-locate. Disappear. Disappear. Disappear.