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Heroes

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Heroes

There was a dollar-seventy in the top drawer of the teacher, Mole Nose's, desk, and Alice wanted it. Sometime before she had counted it in front of the class, made change and doubled down when Mole Nose questioned her math. Alice was right. She had lost too much money playing blackjack with her Grandma Ross to not know how to count.

Alice looked up at the clock on the wall even though she couldn't read it, and looked back at last week's homework. Six clocks faced her with the time she needed to draw out labeled in digital time on the page. Alice wished she were at her grandma's apartment, where she knew she should be now that school was out, but no, she was in the yellow brick classroom because Mole Nose wouldn't let her go until the clocks had hands.

"I don't know what to do!"

"Yes you do. Use your brain."

There were no clocks in Grandma Ross's apartment, and the windows were never open. There were two rooms, one with a bed and the other with a kitchenette and her sticky card table. Grandma Ross loved cards and she taught Alice how to play for keeps, and even though Alice never won, she knew she could and would eventually.

She took her blue highlighter, just like the one Grandma Ross used on her lotto tickets, and drew haphazard hands on the clocks. She got ready to hand it in when Mole Nose walked out of the room.

The long hand clicked as Alice stood by her desk staring at the desk. She wasn't supposed to be here. She was supposed to be winning back the money she lost the day before. Alice put her highlighter into her black Wal-Mart backpack with the folders, papers, half a deck of "found" cards, and the carton of milk that was supposed to be returned for fifty cents, but no Mole Nose wouldn't let her return it that day. She had asked Alice if she wanted to get big like grownups and Alice had answered no, but there was no right answer in this scenario.

Alice looked at the milk at the bottom of the bag and thought about how she didn't have the money she needed to play Grandma Ross that day.

She looked at the desk and thought about her grandmother smoking and telling her one of her dozens of dog track stories. "Cleaning up and watching the chumps tear their tickets." Alice took the carton out of the bag. She wanted to be like her, to beat her. She left the milk on the desk, ripped the bag of change out of the top desk drawer, and ran out.

The card table was a cheap foldout that Grandma and Papa Ross had used since their first anniversary. It was beer stained and coated in a sticky film from the last few months of doubling as a kitchen table. It had cuts in the corners from players scraping the teeth of bottle caps into the blue felt, the initials "J.R" stenciled in with a black marker, and a half a pool stick for a leg, which was shorter than the three other metal ones.

Alice laid out the felt cover that the two used to play on while Grandma Ross tossed dishes into the sink and grabbed her cards out of the drawer that was jammed with receipts. Since Grandpa Ross died, Alice's father made Grandma Ross keep receipts for everything she bought. Every Sunday, he would examine every single piece of paper and calculate for hours, sweating under the heat of his uncut hair while Alice and Grandma Ross pretended to play rummy. It was another one of their lies, like going to a movie when they were really going to the dog track, or when Alice's father suggested getting a babysitter and Alice said that Grandma needed to see people, because she was so lonely. Each lie was carefully planned and rehearsed in the time it took for Alice's dad to buzz up to Grandma's floor.

Alice bent down and shoved a folded up Sarasota Kennel Club program under the pool stick leg of the table. Grandma Ross came over and she started to shuffle the cards as the girl laid out her stacks, keeping the extra in her pocket. She'd add some to the stack when she needed it. Grandma Ross laid out the deck and the girl cut it. She stared at the shuffling, watching the bridge build and fall.

Alice lost the first hand and the second, ten cents down. Her grandmother suggested that they switch dealer so that she could pack her cigarettes. It didn't help the girl's playing. By the sixth game she was down forty and froze with a pair of faces in her hand. It was a good hand, but she could not trust it. Alice looked into the dark green of her grandma's John Lennon's and then down at the pot. She just knew that this would be the hand to break her if she went in and her grandmother pulled a blackjack. Alice sat with her eyes staring at the

cards on the table. Alice picked up her stack of nickels and dripped them one at a time back into a pile and repeated until her Grandma Ross finally said, "Piss or get off the pot, Alice." She flicked her ash into her Cardinals ashtray for effect.

The girl looked up at her grandmother. She could see from the cool expression underneath her lucky Lennon's that she had something. Alice set her stack down and tapped the table. Her grandmother looked at it and looked at the cards in her cracking, old hand. She had a jack, a four, and a three, but she knew that the kid was more afraid of the cards she didn't see than her own hand. Grandma Ross rolled out two quarters into the pot. Alice folded.

"What'd you have?" She asked as her grandmother pulled the change toward her piles.

"You have to play to find out." Alice kicked her own chair and went back to shuffling the deck, wishing that she had played her hand.

The phone rang. Grandma Ross got up and went to the kitchen wall and picked it up.

"Yes?" Alice dealt out both hand and anteed. She wished she were as good as her grandmother. She wished she had her lucky ugly sunglasses.

Alice heard her father on the phone. Grandma Ross kept the volume on speaker so she could hear. Her dad said that he had to work late. Said that it had to do with somebody's miss-filed eleven-twenty H. He asked that Grandma Ross watch Alice for a little while longer, maybe buy her dinner and he would pay her back.

Grandma Ross said sure, and he asked her to keep the receipt, and she said that she would. She hung the phone back in its cradle. He didn't call her Mom once during the conversation.

He hadn't called her Mom since Papa Ross died and he had to nose his way into her checkbooks and her mortgage notices and the coffee can under the sink where she had hidden the cash she had won. It was empty when he found it.

Grandma Ross stared at the table. Alice was playing with her two dimes, grinding them between her thumb and middle finger.

"You hungry?"

“Kind of.”

“Let’s get something to eat.”

The clock above the counter at the gas station was stuck at with both hands in the air. There were three isles full of chocolate, chips, cookies, bread, crackers, Mexican almond bars, and colored bags of sugar. Surrounding the aisles in a capital "L" were fridges filled with milk, orange juice, ice cream, and colored bottles of corn syrup. Grandma Ross liked that the cashier burned lotus scented incense. Alice liked that her grandmother liked the cashier, a tall dark man with a trimmed up gray beard, who she called Maurice. Alice also liked the sunglasses on display next to the magazine rack filled with programs for the Sarasota Kennel Club and magazines of models drinking wine on yachts.

Alice picked up a pair of red star rimmed sunglasses. She liked that they fit her, that they didn’t run right off her short nose. She wore them while her grandmother walked through the aisles picking up the candy, looking at it, and murmuring about what kinds of idiots would eat it. Alice thought that they all looked the same kind of bland.

They went up to the counter with almond cookies, a quart of milk, and a pack of Twizzlers. Apparently, only the deranged ate Red Vines. When she lay the food on the program-covered counter, Maurice smiled.

“Anything else?” He asked.

“Give me these first.” She handed him her new debit card and Maurice slid it and handed Grandma Ross the receipt, but she didn’t take it. She was digging through the bottom of her deteriorating alligator handbag. She pulled out her torn dog-ear ridden logbook, opened it up to the month of September and put it on the counter. Maurice put the receipt and the food into a bag. She then put three dollars and fifty cents in change beside the book.

“Gimme four three-way boxes.”

“So you’re sticking to the pick threes?”

“Yes. I have—“

“A system. Say, High Hand won yesterday afternoon.”

“Don’t talk dogs, Maurice.”

Maurice chuckled to himself. Alice looked up at him and smiled to herself. Behind him was a wall of cigarettes, cigars, and new posters covered in pictures of scratch off cards. Alice saw a new game.

“Are you going to buy those glasses?” Alice’s grandmother asked her.

“What?”

“Take off the glasses. I’m not buying those.”

“Grandma, will you buy me one of those?” She pointed to the card on the sign that read BLACKJACK in exploding firework letters.

“No. We’ve talked about this. Scratch offs are a bad bet.”

“But it’s blackjack.”

“No.”

“You want a receipt for the tickets?” Maurice interjected.

“Not a chance.”

“Grandma, please.”

She looked down at the whining girl and then looked at her tickets.

“I’ve got a dollar.” Alice said. She pulled out the rest of her change.

“You really want it? All right.” She took the money and handed it to Maurice. She looked back at the girl and rolled her eyes.

Maurice handed Grandma Ross the ticket and a penny. Alice pulled it out of her hand, put it against the wall of the counter, and scratched before she read the rules. She was done before the rush was over, and when she looked down at her card her heart sank. She scratched the whole card up and busted.

“You done?” Her grandmother asked impatiently. Alice handed the ticket to Maurice. She looked at her black flip-flops.

“Ha,” Maurice said, “you got ten bucks kid!” Alice looked up.

“Yeah, see?” She did not see. She did not see that the game gave her four hands to play with and one a bonus that just gave her a ten, but if

someone was going to give her ten dollars she wouldn't say anything. Maurice pulled out a ten and handed it to Grandma Ross. She handed the bill to Alice and smiled.

Alice stared at the money through her sunglasses. She'd beaten her grandmother. She'd won. Alice looked up at the old woman and smiled. She didn't know a time when she had ever been so happy. She thought about the sunglasses, and the noise clocks make, and the milk on her desk, and beating her grandma, and she wanted another ticket.