

True Crime

After my ma's boyfriend Gih-rhaggs died, I got farmed out to anyone on the reservation who could and would take me. My ma still needed to bring in whatever bucks she could, cleaning house for the white ladies. The wad Gih-rhaggs left us when he wrapped his car around a tree seemed like it should have lasted us forever by my reckoning, but I was eight. What did I know about bills? We were back to inventing food in no time. Ketchup soup thickened with day-old bread began to taste good after a while.

The most consistent places I wound up were with families that had these high school girls hoping to latch onto my cousin Roland the star lacrosse player who had made it home from Vietnam, smiling for most as if he had not seen and done the things over there that he had. He hated being named after his ma Rolanda but it was her revenge for being named after her father, and even before the United States Army snagged him with its draft, Ike and Tina Turner had already nailed him, and he became Roland on the River the instant that tune hit the Billboard Top 100. I didn't know of the girls' interest at the time, of course, and figured it was my own charming self that brought them all to fawning on me, but I figured things out soon enough. After a

while if it seemed like their attention was on the wane, I would casually drop that he'd maybe asked about one of them the last time he'd been over to my ma's place.

The houses changed depending on which girls were free when my ma needed them to be, but I had my preferences and these were the girls I dropped the most information to: Roland's favorite foods, what he liked to watch on the TV when he was over, when he might consider spending time down on Moon Road. I didn't know what went on there, but it was a popular place at night with only one house and no electricity poles chasing its ditches. I spilled that kind of stuff, but I never told them the things I had overheard my mom and Auntie Rolanda say about Roland's time in Vietnam, the things he wrote home about and those they could only guess at.

Only one of the girls, Margaret, had a car and since she was the least likely candidate to win Roland's attention, she was never all that hip to having me along when they went out cruising. She was Gih-rhaggs' daughter with another reservation woman, so that rift was never going to heal now that he was dead. She thought I couldn't tell, but I knew, when she showed up at Dusty and Lena's and just kind of stood around for a while before getting up to leave, that she had originally come to pick those sisters up to go "snagging for mens."

"Well, kiddo, you blew it for us again," Dusty said the last time it happened. "We could have gotten us a nice time tonight. You gotta give us some information now." She was all smiles when she said it, handing me a Creamsicle from the freezer, but she meant business.

"I don't have anything new."

"We could call her back and leave you here with my ma and dad and the dolls," Lena said. Their parents were always around, usually working their trade in the back of the house, emitting clouds of blue smoke under the bare bulb and the amber strips thick with flies hanging over the kitchen table. You could hear three things continuously coming from that kitchen: their coughing, a radio station drifting in and out, and the last fading buzz of the most recent fly to join all the others. "And you know how funny things can get with the dolls."

To drag her point home--like that was necessary--she lifted one of the cornhusk dolls from the high shelf above us and held it in front of me. It was wearing a traditional ribbon outfit, beadwork and velvet collar and cuffs, leggings. Their parents made an okay living doing the craft show circuit and exercising their treaty rights of being members of a sovereign Native nation. As such, they were able to sell souvenirs to the tourists who came to the U.S. side of Niagara Falls, the closest city to the reservation. My mom and I, on the other hand, were exercising our treaty rights as members of a sovereign Native nation by living in a house that would have been condemned and bulldozed anywhere beyond the reservation's borders.

The trinkets Dusty and Lena's parents made and sold were horn rattles, beadwork ornaments, jitterbugs, and yes, the cornhusk dolls that troubled me so. "I might just have to take this magic marker and draw a face onto this one here before we leave, too. My mom says we're not supposed to do that, but we don't always do exactly as we're told." I knew what they meant. A lot of people said that if you put

a face on a cornhusk doll, it would capture a soul and come alive and you were taking your chances with whose soul the doll was housing. Could be a nice old lady, could be a killer.

"He wears colored underpants," I said.

"Huh-uh."

"Yeah, dark blue, mostly. Some black ones and green too, like the kind I wear, but only colored." It was a piece of information I had saved for a long time, discovering it once when Auntie Rolanda and my ma went to the laundry together. I knew these girls had really wanted to go out with Margaret, and they would have been surly the rest of the night if I hadn't hacked up something good to keep the husk doll away.

"Blue underpants," Dusty said. "Like this blue? Or this one?" She pointed to various blue items in the house, a jar, a throw pillow, a beaded pincushion in the shape of a fancy ladies boot. I hadn't memorized Roland's underpants so I pointed to the pincushion and conceded it was probably something like that color. I knew this detail would be something these girls would like. They were the kind who always made sure they timed their ladies room visits during Clan League basketball games so they might catch a glimpse of some players still changing their clothes in the old gym's locker room while others ran out onto the court. I knew these things because sometimes the girls hypnotized themselves while they were watching me, and they would forget I was with them as they talked their secret talk. This usually happened in their room upstairs above the kitchen, when they got out the scissors.

Most of the money they got from my ma for watching me seemed to have been spent on magazines and though my ma's employers sometimes gave her their old magazines when they were done with them, I had never before seen the kinds Dusty and Lena had in their room under the eaves. They allowed me to flip through the ones they had already finished with as they poured over new ones, deciding what warranted the scissors and what didn't. The cut-up magazines weren't all that interesting since my reading skills were negligible and the best pictures had already been removed from the pages.

The walls in this room were unfinished, slats covering corn-cob insulation, so they always smelled like a spent field at the end of harvest, those remaining ears and stalks left to compost for the next year. These girls, though, were no more interested in the next year than they were in the ways their dad abandoned finishing the house. He worked on it until it was livable and then I imagine he took up residence at that kitchen table, monitoring the flies as they wrapped up their own business hanging from the ceiling.

"Which one do you like best?" Dusty asked. She was never satisfied to just make and love this work herself, and always wanted comment on it, but who was I? An eight year old kid was hardly an expert on art. I still generally favored the super heroes and had followed their lead, cutting pictures from my comics and trying to play with them like toys. Spider-Man's legs, though, curled under and tore within a half hour of my releasing him from the page, much like the legs of a fly when you held onto them. The flies hated so much to be held down that they ripped their own legs off to escape, but they

never seemed to figure out that I had tied them with sewing thread before I held them by one leg.

"Well?" Dusty demanded. I studied all the pictures and headlines she and Lena had Elmer's Glued to the walls. I knew they both wanted me to give a different answer and that seemed like a cheat to me. If they were really asking my opinion, then I felt an obligation to give it.

"This one," I said, pointing to the same one I had every time they had asked the question of me.

"You always say that!" they both said, rolling their eyes and getting up from the beds pushed against the slats.

"What about this one?" Dusty asked, tapping a newer one with one long red lacquered nail. A vague film covered this one. I think they had been attempting more advanced collage with glue sticks or shellac to impress me. This was a picture of a woman running a vacuum cleaner over a white carpet, but the woman, wearing a dress and heels and pearls, also had a pair of antlers. She wasn't wearing them in the way a chief of the Nation wears them, ceremonially, mounted on a Gustoweh, but the way a deer wears them, erupting fiercely out of the top of her head, as natural as could be, ready to rip out an enemy's guts if need be. A man from a Sears catalogue was glued on top of the picture, so it looked like the woman's vacuum was going to pull the front of his underpants right up its hose. One of them had written my cousin's name below the picture of the Sears man with an arrow pointing to him. The sisters had cut out letters from a variety of

magazines to caption this one, so its one word title, SNAGGING, looked like those kidnapping notes you see on TV.

"No, this one, still," I said.

"These new ones are so much better," Lena said, pointing to several others. "That one you like, it was nothing. All it took was four cuts for the picture and four more for the words."

"Then don't ask me," I said.

"We might have to get the dolls."

"You go ahead. It ain't changing my mind. I'm not saying this one is the best. Just the one I like the best. Those others are like the museums," I said, hoping to make them understand in ways they already knew the world.

Among the ways they tried to snag Roland was to go to every lacrosse game he played in at the arena across the border on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, which wasn't that hard to do, since most of the reservation did the same. They were not all that interested in the game, though enjoying the view of him running around the arena in the satin shorts that were a part of his uniform. As you no doubt can imagine, this limited view could only hold attraction briefly and they'd wander from the building by half-time to hit the tourist area called Clifton Hill. Again, believing that treating me right was leverage, as if Roland could somehow know they were showing me a good time while he chased a hard rubber ball across an arena floor, body-checking other men who got in his way, they brought me along to check out all the bright lights and exotic happenings.

Most places to spend money on the hill were flashy museums, offering lurid sights within on vivid posters surrounded by flashing lights all over their exterior walls. The girls generally liked to take me to the Hollywood wax museum, believing I would be impressed by the likeness of The Beatles and Batman, who were pretty much the only figures I recognized there. They always claimed the Indian warrior was Fred Howkowski but I had seen pictures of him at his mom's house and I knew these girls were dreaming or blind if they believed that, and I had doubts about their vision anyway. I always had a careful eye and what they recognized as a passable Batman costume I could see was exactly that. The belt was wrong, the blue parts not satin and the glamorous Pow! and Bam! spray-painted on the wall behind the dummy could not convince me that Adam West had ever worn the outfit.

We would go in, I would nod and then we would shortly head back outside, where the Hill was more interesting anyway. People wandered the street, crossed against traffic, stared straight into the air at the statue of a tightrope walker suspended over one of the crosswalks, watched the short films and other free exhibits outside all the museums vying for our attention and dollars, which usually involved daring us and casting aspersions on our endurance levels for the intensity of their exhibits.

I generally tried to coax the girls away from the side of the street where the Frankenstein museum hunched on the corner like blight. I'd always been attracted to the place, with its balcony where monsters like the Wolf Man and the Mummy would randomly burst forth from rickety looking doors and leer at us from the second story,

daring us to enter. The girls had tried to get me into this place about a year before, had paid the admission and we'd gotten to the steps leading into the basement entrance when I bailed.

It was knowing that monsters ran free on the second floor that bothered me the most. I didn't mind the kind of monsters that stood immobile behind velvet ropes so you could admire the workmanship, but the idea of some prowling around the same hallways I might travel had been too much for my younger brain. By now, I knew of course that the monsters were men, probably college students working their summers in sweaty masks and costumes, sneaking beers and catching a feel occasionally from attractive museum-goers all in the name of fright. I was no longer alarmed by the second story monsters, but was still deeply afraid of the ways the girls would resurrect my cowardice from the year before for their own amusement, re-enacting the way I had flown up those stairs, fleeing the entrance to the Chamber of Horrors.

"We saw something new at the museums the last time," Lena said, and when I asked her what it was, she acted purposefully obtuse, suggesting that if I got them invited to a family picnic some time, they might consider showing me their secret during the next lacrosse game. I made no promises. My family generally kept to itself and my ma tolerated others only as long as they contributed something to our general well-being. These girls were already being paid.

"So I heard a different reason the cornhusk dolls don't have faces," I said, trying to deflect the conversation's direction.

"Oh, yeah?" Dusty said, raising her drawn-on eyebrows. Mrs. Crews, our Indian language class teacher occasionally wandered from

her lesson plans and told us subversive traditional stories instead of the number, animal and food lists she generally saturated us with. She told us she wasn't supposed to stray from her curriculum, but I think she just said that so we'd pay closer attention, because being bad seemed more exciting than learning the four ways to say someone was eating. I liked her alternate version of the doll's history, that the original doll had been given by the Corn Spirit for children's enjoyment, but that she was too vain and was always sneaking off to a pond to check out her own reflection, and after being sufficiently warned about her activities, the Creator snatched her face away with one quick pull, so she could serve her intended purpose without distraction.

"So where'd you hear that crock of shit?" Lena asked, cutting something new from a fresh magazine, planning her next wall panel.

"School," I said.

"School!" Dusty shrieked and laughed like I had just told her the dirtiest joke ever made up. "That old bitch doesn't know what the hell she's talking about. She probably read that in some Indians of America book. Don't believe everything you hear, kiddo. You know what she was before she got all black-dress-and-string-of-pearls on us? A housecleaner!" She realized what she said just a couple of seconds after it was out of her mouth. She looked to Lena, who immediately began glue-sticking her new cut-out on the wall, letting her know she was alone in this one. "You know what?" she said suddenly. "I'm gonna call Margaret this instant and see if she'll drive us across the border so we can take you to see the new secret."

I wasn't above bribery for the most part, but her thoughts about people who clean houses did not escape me. I was cutting her off the Roland Information Hotline immediately, which she probably already knew, but she also could guess that she'd just potentially put her income in jeopardy. Neither of us knew then how precarious my ma's financial situation was and that she would send me to stay with anyone reasonable so she could put food on our table and kerosene in our stove. She didn't put me with derelicts mind you. What I'm saying is she wasn't scouring babysitting résumés with the same intensity as she did the kitchen sinks of Lewiston's finest citizens.

"You know, she didn't mean anything by it," Lena said when Dusty went downstairs to use the phone. We could hear her negotiating with Margaret, promising all kinds of things if Margaret would change her plan of watching TV and drive over the border so they could go see this new thing. After a little silence, she reluctantly confirmed that I was still there too. She came back upstairs a few minutes later, smiling, saying Margaret would be there shortly.

As we pulled up to the Customs and Immigration Booth a half hour later, Margaret and Lena rolled down their windows and turned their heads in a studied casual way, refusing to remove their sunglasses, though it was nearing dusk. The guard in the booth leaned over and asked our citizenship.

"North American Native," Margaret said, which Lena and Dusty repeated. Normally, I came across the border with my ma and Auntie Rolanda and only met up with the girls once we were inside the lacrosse arena. It had become popular on the reservation to say what

the girls said at the border, with Indians suddenly waking up to their own hipness in the early seventies and attempting to enforce treaties many of us saw as incidental, and they were enforcing the Jay Treaty's acknowledgement that Indians lived on both side of the border and did not recognize the separation between two countries.

"United States," I said when the guard turned his eye to me. My ma always said letting authorities know you were Indian was a dangerous proposition as far as she was concerned, and so I had spoken the phrase she had taught me to use whenever we crossed the border to or from Canada. Lena smacked me and informed the guard that I was a North American Native too, and just too young to know it, like I didn't have eyes or live in my ma's condemned-anywhere-else house. The guard asked if that were true, and I conceded that it was, which held the sting of betraying my ma a second time that night. He told us to move along.

A few minutes later, we were on the Hill, chasing down whatever secret it was the girls were planning to reveal. We passed the Houdini museum which featured films of his greatest escapes and some of the actual props he used to constrain himself, chains, trunks, a cage, a glass water tank. I liked to stop at this one and watch their sidewalk display, a crystal ball on a table, somehow showing a little movie inside the ball of an actor claiming to be Houdini, inviting us in to unlock his secrets. Dusty believed that the film was just projected on the curtain behind the crystal, a trick so primitive it was not worth even a sliver of her awe. We apparently had other secrets to unlock ahead of us, as the girls didn't even stop to chat

with Houdini's movie head as they usually did, making lewd suggestions as he begged us to cough up the admission price.

We turned the corner and ran into a huge crowd, totally congesting the entrance to the Believe it or Not! Museum. We had been to this place before, had already checked out the glass skull from some ancient past, the real skull from the man who lived with a railroad spike embedded in his brain, and other skull variations from around the globe, among other things. This museum had never really warranted a second look in my book. It wasn't so much an issue of whether I believed or not, more one of whether I cared or not.

Whatever was there, I was not likely to see it, given my age and height but the girls had a way of working crowds, somehow easing us in as if those other people had merely been keeping our places in line until we got through Immigration. We burst out near the front and though I still couldn't see what the exhibit was yet, Margaret could. "This is what you dragged me out across the border for?" she said, glaring at Dusty. "That's disgusting. How can she go in public like that? I could be home watching All in the Family right now."

"Shut up. I told you I'd make it worth your while. I'm working on getting us invited to some party where Roland's going to be," Dusty said, lying, knowing she had already ensured that was never going to happen. "You ready?" she asked me, lifting me by my armpits to her height. I could not believe my eyes, searching for the trick mirrors, listening for the motors, studying movements to discover where the extensions began. "You wanna go meet her?" she asked, moving us up in

the line, crossing into the open entryway of the museum with the same confidence that had got us here in the first place.

The Giantess sat before me in what an announcement recording said was a specially designed chair made especially to accommodate her nearly eight-foot dimensions, constructed of concrete with accent pillows fastened to it. The seat was at normal seat height, so the Giantess had to sit with her knees much farther up than they should have been, looking somehow like a humongous bird on a flimsy branch. She was also a courteous Giantess in that she tried to sit in as ladylike a position as she could manage, given the limitations of her furniture. This chair was clearly a marketing ploy, as a little further inside the museum's foyer, not so discreetly hidden, was her enormous wheelchair which, aside from its scale, seemed to be constructed of average wheelchair materials. However, the fact of her size could be, in no way, a fabrication of anything other than her own genetic signature.

"Hello young man. Would you like an autograph?" she asked, in an alien, strangely deep voice, holding out her enormous hand to shake mine. I initially resisted, seeing the potential for pulverization should the conversation not go well. She was unlike the giants I had seen on TV, Ultraman, Godzilla, The Amazing Colossal Man, the Lost in Space Cyclops, who all were on average twenty-stories tall but who, more or less, were shaped like average human beings. I had no doubt the Believe It or Not! Giantess was almost eight feet tall as her announcer claimed, but the realities of gravity and physics had done things to her bodily structure that Hollywood had not taken into

account, curving her bones and weighing her down, her mass pulling her body away from her collar bones. Her clothes were designed to minimize these marks of her history, but anyone with a careful eye would know the world was never going to be kind to this woman.

A small sign near her, next to a stack of glossy photographs of her in her concrete chair, said autographed photos could be purchased for five dollars. I told her I didn't have any money, but Dusty offered to buy one, mostly because the crowd behind us was growing more annoyed with Dusty's pushing and cutting ways the longer we hogged the Giantess's time. I asked the Giantess if she received any of the money that was paid out to the museum for her autograph.

"You know, you're the first person to ever ask me that question. I live here, honey, and in return, this is part of how I help keep the place open," she said, smiling. "You understand?" I nodded, picturing her being wheeled back to some secret room in the museum after closing time, watching all the lights of Clifton Hill blinking off, maybe even seeing Houdini's movie head wind down as they switched off the projector, making him disappear. "Now, do you want that picture?" she asked, taking one from the stack and fastening it to a clipboard that had been resting on her lap. She took a ridiculously huge pen, somewhat like the pencils they gave us to use in Kindergarten, and asked my name. I told her and she signed it to me, turned it over, made a tiny X mark in one corner, handed me the picture and told Dusty to show the checkout person the X.

"Can you believe that freak?" Dusty whispered as we walked away, but not necessarily out of hearing range. "How creepy. If you don't

want that picture, I'll put it on the wall next to the deer-head woman," she continued. When we got to the counter, the attendant told us the photo was ours, compliments of the Giantess.

"I want to keep it," I said, knowing it was mine free and clear, a gift from the Giantess. I wanted to go back and thank her, but she was busy greeting new people with that same smile and offer of a big handshake and an autographed photo.

"Suit yourself, but I don't know why you wanna keep that, when you reject all my new wall pictures. They're a lot freakier than her in pictures. Look at that. All you can tell by this picture is that this bulky woman is sitting in a chair that doesn't fit her. I could take my own picture that way in a little kid's chair. Keep it. I don't care." All the way home, I wondered about what the Giantess did with her free time, what her bed, or her bathroom looked like. I was pretty sure she didn't have an outhouse like we did. She couldn't really go out in public, walking up and down the Hill without causing a stir. Her life seemed limited to endlessly shaking hands and signing her name with a gargantuan ballpoint pen. She could never not be The Believe It or Not! Giantess.

One of the other stories Mrs. Crews had told us in language class was about Tallman, who lived in the woods and only came out late at night to peek into upstairs bedroom windows around the reservation and try to minimize his loneliness by stealing kids who were still awake, offering them their dreams come true if they would just step out the window and join him. Even if he came to my window, I didn't think my dreams would be worth it. I was not a big thinker. Tallman and the

Giantess might have been a good pair if they could ever get together, but they lived on opposite sides of the border and probably the Jay Treaty didn't cover the shadowy figures who haunted our nights.

Margaret let us off at the road and headed on as we walked up the driveway. It was right about the end of news-time on a Friday night and we watched the Mummy chase noseey archeologists on the late night movie shows. Later, in bed, when we heard Lena start her dainty snoring, Dusty whispered in my ear, asking me which piece on the wall I truly liked best.

I held fast and told her the same one I always pointed to, a grainy black and white picture of a headless man's body lying in a ditch among the slugs and bugs, a dark pool of blood saturating the fallen leaves while his head looked on from a few feet away. He was wearing a suit and aside from being headless, he looked perfectly normal, like he had fallen asleep in the ditch. I had seen guys do that around home, with their heads still attached, of course. Dusty had read me the story from the magazine, even as she cut the picture from it and stuck it on the wall. The investigators speculated that the man might have had car trouble and flagged down the wrong car or had picked up the wrong hitchhiker but they were only guessing. The dead man remained anonymous and the killer at large, living a life with secrets only he knew, the gurgling of the man's throat as it was slit maybe playing in his nightmares, a song of regret.

Dusty never understood why I preferred that picture over the ones where she placed animal heads on human bodies, or why I could never introduce her to Roland or why that night, I no longer cared if she

drew a face on any of her cornhusk dolls. I could take my chances. There were monsters and heroes everywhere and nowhere, all at the same time and you never knew who was who. I fell asleep eventually, listening to the flies buzzing on the glue strip in the kitchen, growing softer and softer as lights went out on both sides of the border, keeping my eyes closed in case anyone came peeking in that upstairs window. Some nights the offer to step out through the pane and into a new life is more attractive than others.

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