

SUCKER PUNCH

by Carolyn Rose

"I saw Harry Houdini once. You ever see Houdini, Bub?"

The metallic voice snapped my head around.

"Harry Houdini was double-jointed. Some thought he was truly magical, but he was just double-jointed."

The man with the implanted voice box lowered himself onto the vinyl seat beside me. "Wriggled right out of them chains. Had a key up his keester for the handcuffs. Ha. Ha. That's how he escaped." He twiddled with a knob on the black box hooked to his belt and a wail of feedback drowned out the muzak in the mall.

A woman on the next bench gave us a look of distaste, gathered up her shopping bags and trotted away. But there was no easy escape for me; the old guy splayed nicotine-stained fingers across the folded paper resting on my knee.

"Guess you're too young to remember Houdini, Bub. Don't look more than fifty, mebbe, with that baby fat round your middle."

Self-consciously I tugged at my shirt. I'd just turned forty-three.

"I'm ninety-four years old, doncha know? Ninety four. Bet you guessed younger, huh, Bub?"

Why me, I wondered? There had to be thirty people sitting on these benches. All I wanted to do was wait for Eva, and try to break my Saturday crossword puzzle speed record. Now, with seven minutes to go, I was trapped, listening to this dotty old codger ramble on about the key up Houdini's butt. I turned to get a better look at my tormentor.

He was thin, but not painfully so. A baggy blue chambray work shirt topped gray cotton pants. The sparse flecks of white in his brush cut hair denied his years. His eyes met mine for a moment and he offered a wan smile, 'spanged' his throat clear and continued.

"Portland coppers chained up old Harry. Hog-tied his ass. Handcuffs, ankle cuffs, chains padlocked every which way." The sharp-edged words seemed to have electronic dividers between them. There was something hypnotic about the syncopation inflicted on him by the machine. "It was a cold day, but a couple thousand people hiked up onto the Burnside bridge to watch."

The question appeared on my lips without warning from my brain. "What was he wearing?"

"You talk! Good. I thought I was wasting a good yarn on a deaf mute." A dusty, electronic cackle drifted from his throat.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. "He wasn't naked, was he?"

"Swimmin' suit," he chortled, "skin tight. Pretty racy for them days. Lotsa ladies hid their eyes. Or pretended to. Some of 'em peeked. Even sweet Betsy, the girl I was courtin', snuck her an eyeful. Couldn't blame her, though. Houdini had him some muscles. He was a fine lookin' man. No way a bone-skinny doughboy like me could compete."

I laid the paper aside. What the hell, the puzzle could wait. I'd run a stopwatch on myself when I got home.

"Then they threw him in the river?"

"Nope. First he gave a little speech. Said not to blame the police if he didn't make it. Said if he did come out okay, we was to come see his show. Half a buck for grownups, quarter for kids." He took in a ragged lungful of air.

I nodded, watching him savor his moment of high drama.

"Houdini gave a sign and they lifted him overhead and passed him along like a big medicine ball. They shoved him over the rail and we watched him flip, ass over teakettle, all the way to the water. It was a long way. Seemed to take forever. Every man, woman and child heard him hit. "

He paused again for effect. "KERSPLOOSH!"

A sharp squeal from the stressed out amplifier in his throat turned heads all around us. He squelched it quickly with a sharp twist of his thumb and forefinger. The other mall sitters shifted on their benches, lengthening the distance between themselves and us.

"We was all peerin' down through the fog to see if he would surface. But he never did. Leastways, nobody saw him."

"How long did you watch?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes maybe. Then we hear a man's voice behind us bellerin' hysterical-like: 'Ohmigod, he's drowned! Harry Houdini's drowned himself in the Willamette River. Call the newspapers!' We all turned around and..."

"Houdini?"

"Himself. Wearin' a bone-dry pinstripe suit and a shit-eatin' grin. Every hair on his head combed perfect. There was a gasp you coulda heard in Vancouver. Then somebody started clapping and the rest of us joined in whistlin' and stompin' our feet in appreciation."

"Wow! How'd he top that in his show?"

"Never found out. Time we got there, it was sold out. So we bought a bottle of gin and snuck into Betsy's boarding house. We made a little magic ourselves that night. "

I chuckled, glanced over, and tried to imagine him as a randy young man, just back from the war. World War One it would have been. Off fighting the dirty Hun. Long before I was even born. But it was just like yesterday to this old gentleman.

"Know how Houdini finally bought it, Bub?" I snapped back to the present to find his face just inches from mine, the stale spiciness of his cheap aftershave assaulting my nostrils.

I felt it coming and turned aside just in time. "Waaaahchoo." The sneeze exploded from my nose. Digging for the neatly ironed white handkerchief Eva always stuffed in my back pocket, I pressed it across my face like a mask, blowing hard and blinking. "Sorry," I gasped, and looked up to see my wife, a short distance away up one of the mall's corridors.

She was window shopping at Macy's, two glossy bags dangling from her right arm. Perhaps sensing my gaze, she turned toward where I sat. Our eyes met, and she flashed the impish smile I loved so much. She wiggled a come hither finger, signaling lunchtime.

I answered with my own "just a second," hand sign and turned back to hear the rest of the Houdini story.

"So how did...?" The question fell on air. He was gone. Only a lingering trace of his cologne remained. How long had I been distracted? I swiveled, checking every possible avenue of escape. Not a glimpse.

"What the hell...?" I muttered and scrambled from my seat to meet Eva halfway.

She gave me a warm hug. "Hi, darling. Who was that you were talking to a few minutes ago?"

"It's a long story and...did you see which way he went?"

"No. I stopped to look in that window and when I turned around he was gone. Why?"

Sensing her curiosity about to shift into high gear, I negotiated. Let me have a pastrami on rye for lunch and I'll tell you all about it." I tried to sound mysterious.

"Okay, but no french fries, no mayo, and you trim all the fat off the edges."

I trimmed, and as we ate, I told her about the old man who'd insisted on calling me Bub.

"Didn't Houdini drown when one of his tricks went wrong?" She asked, munching thoughtfully on a forkful of her virtuous salad.

"Sounds right. I'll look it up at home."

It was when I attempted to pay for lunch that I discovered my wallet was missing.

"Crap, crap, crap," I ranted. "That old phony lifted my billfold. I'll be damned. What a dope I am."

Eva wisely didn't agree with me, not aloud at any rate, and paid for our lunch.

We went through the drill, reporting the loss to mall security and the police. Not much hope for my cash and credit cards, but they said with a little luck he'd dump the wallet in the trash and I'd at least get my pictures and I.D. back.

Luck, hah! I visualized a Monday spent cancelling plastic and standing in line for a driver's license photo with that special Charles Manson quality. Ugh. By the time we got to our car, I was neck deep in self-loathing. I fumbled with the keys, jamming the trunk key into the door lock. I was trying to wrestle it out when Eva tapped my shoulder and pointed into the car.

"Mark, look. Isn't that your wallet?"

I peered down at the driver's seat. My billfold was tented squarely in the middle.

"How the hell...?" I finally managed to find the right key and popped the door open.

Eva was at my shoulder. "See if anything is missing."

I nodded numbly and reached for the wallet. As I picked it up, I saw the note underneath. I snatched at it. It had been folded in quarters and as I grappled with it Eva prodded me.

"Read it Mark. What's it say?"

I cleared my throat, and read the greeting at the top of the note. Dear Bub. Eva stifled a giggle.

I glared and continued. Nothin's missing from your billfold. I got no need for money. Just keepin' my hand in, so to speak.

Eva couldn't resist the chance for a zing. "Guess he thought you'd be easier than a moving target."

I gave her my "that's twice" glare and she made a zipping sound and drew her hand across her mouth. I leaned against the car and read on.

The way I heard it, Houdini useta show how strong his stomach muscles were by lettin' guys punch him. 'Cept this one time he wasn't ready. Wise ass college kid punched him too early. Ruptured his appendix. No keys up the wazoo'll save you from that one.

Eva was peeking over my shoulder but couldn't read the handwriting because her vanity wouldn't allow her to wear the bifocals she needed. "Look, Mark, there's more. A postscript. What's it say?"

I moved my eyes to the bottom of the page.

Thanks for listening to my story, Bub. Most won't. They just roll their eyes and walk away. One other thing. Next time you visit your Grandma Elizabeth at the group home, tell her Amos says long time, no see. And ask her if she remembers the day she saw Harry Houdini.

Copyright 2006 by Carolyn Rose
All Rights Reserved