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BURNED UP HEROES

Robert Vivian

T.R. Rose had hands that were colored different than the rest of his body, more like pink erasers that had rubbed out all his skin. The pink looked like the insides of a fish or shells you find at the bottom of the ocean that had come at so deep a price that there was no way to get back what the pink had cost him, a hundred thousand dollars in insurance money alone for the rest of his smoldering life. He took drugs to keep the pain away, but it had a strange way of fucking up his mind, the pain the only thing he wanted to communicate to other people, washing through him back and forth in waves of shifting dread. He spent his nights down at Spinner's telling anyone who would listen how he got burned and maimed holding on to Daisy Hayes as she burned up in her car.

They'd been drinking all night and were having an argument when she took a turn too fast and rolled her jeep out near Canyon Gate. Rose managed to crawl out though blood poured from his broken nose. Daisy Hayes was crammed between the ground and her seat with a broken collarbone, but otherwise she was okay because she started to cuss him out even then. Rose said one of her tits was hanging out like a wedge of quivering Jell-O a few inches above the ground. They sat there for a second in silence and then picked up the fight where they left off when the jeep caught on fire. They weren't aware of it at first but slowly the jeep kept getting hotter and hotter and then they smelled the smoke. That's when she started begging him to get her out of there, but the best T.R. Rose could do was to hold on to her throughout the fire until she curled up like a giant moth. Did it take long? Someone would always ask, but Rose just shook his head and said he didn't know. Couldn't remember, couldn't be sure. He was hazy about certain details. And though no one came right out and said it, you know they wanted to ask, Why didn't you try to put out the fire instead? But Rose insisted the only

thing he could do was not let go of her, even when she began to burn, and then he'd hold up his pink hands to prove it.

You could tell not letting go was the best thing he had ever done, the last few minutes of Daisy's melting face scorched in his mind forever. He described her burning up with such love and tenderness that it took on a life of its own, circling the streetlights outside Spinner's in halos full of gold. First her lips popped from the heat and then it was like her cheekbones were made of paper for how fast they went up in flames, her nose dissolving in front of him to leave a gaping hole like a brand new mouth. He started to tell her how much he loved her, how sorry he was that she had to die in an agonizing fireball while his own hands fried. He shouted apologies and regrets and tried to whisper sweet nothings in the wasp socket of her raging ear that nothing would ever separate them again, the fire had made them one as the smoke of her flesh and bones filled up his lungs. You wondered if he wasn't making certain parts of it up to cover himself somehow, things that kept coming back to convince him that was the way it had to be. He had those pink hands to back him up, and they told their own story, like two small trophies from a spaced-out planet, something he brought back from another world called Pain and Suffering that became his pride and joy.

I felt her agony, he'd say by way of explanation, slamming his see-through fist on the table, I was right down there in the fire with her. His hands didn't lie, testifying every day of his life to what he had been through, the morphine pills he took and the way those hands revolved around his head like sparks from a campfire. Being next to someone who roasted to death was about the only thing Rose could talk about anymore, the fire that crept up her spine and the fire that devoured her long blond hair. He must have been strong to hold on to her like he did, with the judgment of iron in them as her eyes exploded from the heat. That's when Rose started to call himself a burned up hero for the way he endured the furnace of those flames. And it was good to hear him say it somehow and believe it with all his heart because of what it meant for the rest of us, the ones without health

insurance and the ones laid off from work, the ones strung out on meth and the ones that couldn't keep their jobs. We needed a burned up hero and he provided us one with his pink hands, which were just about the only bright spot in the dim, smoky light as you kept wondering if you would have been like him and held on to the bitter end, no matter how bad the heat waves got or the flames that lashed you back and forth like hot chains.

You didn't get tired of the story and could almost smell her burning flesh mixed with cheap perfume and booze, enough to make you sick and keep you enthralled for days. Because what gives a man the courage to hold on to a burning woman or any burning thing at all but heroism that don't know boundaries, like the hard bare truth exposed for the rest of the world to see? Sometimes it got to the point where Rose told his story to no one in particular just to hear himself talk, the rest of the bar packed and bustling while he went on with his brimstone monologue, his blistered hands making gestures like semaphores on aircraft carriers waving in the planes. He'd talk hour after hour and the whole story was right there in the afterglow of his fingertips, the way they took out after you like buds from a glowing tree. He held them up like pieces of raw meat, like they should have belonged to a different person almost or a dime-store manikin because they were a hundred shades brighter than any skin should be. He lathered them up with baby oil and other kinds of ointments so they glistened like something slightly obscene, open-heart surgery or naked lobsters, something that came out of the depths of a frothing ocean.

After awhile it reached a point where you almost wanted to be burned yourself, to see if you could stand the heat or if you could only take so much before you yanked your hands away. The only other guy I knew who had been burned like Rose did it to himself after his wife had left him. His name was Rodriguez and he went down into the basement and branded his chest with a pair of pliers he heated with a blowtorch. He wanted to commemorate her leaving him so he'd never forget the pain. But even he didn't keep at it the way T.R. Rose did. With a pool cue

in his pink hands under the blinking lights of a neon Bud Light sign, he went over every gruesome part in loving detail, and though you'd heard it all before, you always came away with tingles up and down your spine and feeling in the presence of God's own judgment. Then you'd want to touch those pink hands and maybe test them out with your mouth, see what they tasted like and if they really were like skin or some other false plastic that kept the water from coming in.

After a few drinks, T.R. set himself up to be the butt of a lot of jokes, how he could go hunting without reflective clothing as long as he held his hands out in front of him, how they glowed in the dark and how the ladies came to pity him and wanted those burned up hands all over their luscious bodies because you knew they had to be soft and sensitive, smooth as glass. He had a peacock's eye for fire and no matter how painful it was to keep holding on to Daisy Hayes, he did it for her and he did it for us and everyone else across America, all these burned up heroes coming out of the woodwork and spreading themselves across the continent, feeding the flames of imagination in a patriotic fervor that never quit. We were all burned up heroes one way or another because someone was always on fire and singing their sad songs, cauterizing their wounds the best way they knew how. He never lit anything on fire on purpose, but he had to admit he liked burning little plastic Army men when he was a kid, maybe the odd grasshopper or two, and once even a live rabbit that he regretted afterward. He had to learn about fire by playing with it, to see how much pain it caused so he could build up some respect. He had no way of knowing that it would lead all the way to Daisy Hayes.

Sometimes his hands turned a slighter shade of purple, like they were pissed off or fuming about something. Then T.R.'d make one of his hands talk by holding it up in front of him. He became a one-man puppet show, and his hand would talk about rage and disappointment and the first time it had sex in the back of a car, nothing it wouldn't talk about, nothing it wouldn't say. If he got really drunk, he'd make his hand say something like,

I'm just a burned up hero. Can't you see that? The best thing about it is the afterglow, the way you remembered her face burning as the love of your life. You held on because you had to. You held on and almost passed out from the pain but then there was a clarity like nothing you had ever seen on earth, her soul rising up from her body with the roar of F-14s in your ears. You saw how the pain was killing her and then how it finished the job in waves of grooving fire that moved through pockets of air as close and intimate as a baby breathing. Then your name was written up there and burned into the rafters with all the rest who've been burned up over the years and you say to yourself, Not just my hands, Lord, but my whole body. But He chooses only to take the flesh off your hands. So hush now, Daisy. Don't tell them anything more about the fire. You're the burning Buddhist monk of my soul, except that you're an American girl, Daisy, just a burned up hero like me.

Then his pink hand would dry up and he wouldn't make it talk no more. He'd put his head down on the table, his pink hands out in front of him like a giant pair of moist, red lips. He was done talking about it for the night. But you couldn't get rid of what he had said, how his hand talked about the state of the country and the state of God's own mercy. His pink hands would sit there on the table and start to glow like embers from a bonfire as we went away one by one, fighting, fucking, and weeping our hearts out until the place died down and he was the last one to leave, sitting there in the corner by the pool table, him and the ghost of Daisy Hayes trading secrets in the dark about holding on to each other in the flames as the rest of us scattered woebegone and restless into the night, never knowing which one of us would be burned up next, which one of us was about to go down in a heap of flames no amount of rain and thunder could ever put out.