

SHELL CREEK, WYOMING - 1973

Jackson Lassiter

Mama named me Roxanne Queen on account of her mother already being named Queen. Mama said there was only room for one queen and since my Grandma was already sitting in that throne, I would be Roxanne. But Queen would be my middle name.

Mama's always telling me to do my chores. *Chores build character, Roxie, and even seven-year-old girls need character.* I don't even know what character is, and I sure don't feel like I'm getting it. All's I'm getting is tired of chores. But I don't care about that this morning because I'm real happy. Today is finally picnic day.

I been asking Mama for this picnic for over a week. I dang near begged her every night while she and Papa watched the news. One night I heard Papa tell Mama it looked like someone name of Nixon was going to sell the country a used Ford, and then they both laughed real hard until Mama told

Papa to *hush now*. She said what's going on was a crying shame and the whole country's going to hell in a hand basket.

I lived in these parts my whole life and I pretty much know everybody but I don't know nobody name of Nixon. And Papa already drives an old Ford truck so I don't know why he needs another one.

Mama said Pearl Dickey told her there was a bunch of dog-gone hippies out on the highway. She said they were coming from all over the country, walking to the forest up above Cody. She said Miss Dickey told her they call themselves the Rainbow Family, and they planned to have a rendezvous every summer. Mama said no one knows why they picked Wyoming because we're God-fearing here.

Last night Mama must have forgot about the Rainbow People ruining everything because when we were sitting on the porch watching the swallows do loop-de-loops in the sky, she said right out of the blue *it looks like it might be nice tomorrow, Roxie, how about we have that picnic?* And now I can hear Mama in the kitchen putting our picnic together, and from the smell of things she's making pickled cow tongue sandwiches. Then she yells *Roxanne Queen Porter, it's now or never if you want a picnic!*

After we load up the picnic basket and a blanket and a book for Mama and a first aid kit, on account of I'm always getting banged up, we climb in Papa's truck. Mama starts trying to make it go, but since she hardly ever drives, it takes a few tries to get going. Her feet push around on the pedals, and she shoves that stick thing around until finally something grinds down under the truck and it jumps forward.

Pretty soon Mama gets the hang of it and we are going real fast because the thing about Mama's driving is, once she gets it moving, she just pushes the gas and keeps it going. But it makes it so a nice breeze comes through the windows.

The mud road we're on crosses over Shell Creek four times before we get to the picnic meadow. When we cross the first bridge, I see there's more water than I can ever remember, and it's the color of Grandma Queen's black tea after she puts cream in it. I figure it must be raining upstream. It must be raining a whole lot, because by the time we get to the third bridge, the creek has grown so full that the water is slapping at the planks. Mama screeches the truck to a dead stop at the bridge, and I'm scared she's going to turn around.

We sit there for a minute, Mama all fidgety and me trying to look pitiful so she won't change her mind. She looks at the bridge and then back at me,

so I make my eyes look more sorry. Her lips go real tight and she says she guesses if a bridge washes out, we can take the long way home. She looks at me again and then back at the bridge and says *hold on, Roxie!*

Mama puts the stick right where it's supposed to be and pushes the gas and we mostly fly right across that bridge. We start to giggle and we keep on giggling until Mama's got tears.

Papa warned me once about flash floods. He says the Skovgaard family had another boy before I was born, but he got carried away by a flash flood when he was little. I know the other Skovgaard kids because they ride the school bus with me, but I never got to see the one that was washed away in the flood.

Mama stops the truck at the last bridge and that's when my heart plumb sinks. That bridge is gone. The sad pushes me down into the cracked plastic of the truck seat and Mama pats my knee, but we don't say nothing. We just stare at the missing bridge like staring is going to make it all of a sudden grow back, and Mama looks up and down the creek, like maybe the bridge is there somewhere. But it's gone, and I think I'm about to start crying when Mama screams.

She yells *oh my God, Roxie, someone's in the water* and points to a pile of logs jammed up in the creek where it curves off toward Old Joe's ranch. I look but I don't see nothing at first. Then I see it. An arm lifts up out of the water and curls around one log like it's holding on for dear life. And right there at the end of the arm I can see a man's face with long yellow hair plastered wet against it. That's when I take to crying.

Mama heads toward that log jam faster than I've ever seen her drive before, faster than we flew over the third bridge, even faster than the high school boys when they race their Papas' trucks up and down Bigler's Road.

She tells me to get the rope out from behind the seat but it's like I'm froze up. I just stare at the yellow head bobbing up and down in the muddy water. Mama yells again, *Roxie, find the rope behind the seat* but I just can't make myself move even though Mama's voice is different than I've ever heard before. Then Mama backhands me real hard and that unfreezes me right up. She says *now*.

I turn backwards and start digging through everything behind the seat looking for the rope. I'm flying up and down and all around because we ain't even on a road no more, we're just bouncing across the field. I'm still crying

and the tears they sting my cheek where Mama slapped me. I hear Mama praying and I say *Amen* over and over and over again.

When I turn back around I have the rope and Mama has backed the truck up to the edge of the creek bank above the log jam. Mama yanks the brake handle and then she flies right out of the truck without even closing her door. I don't know what else to do so I fly right behind her. Mama grabs the rope and ties one end to the bumper so quick it looks easy, like she's just darning a sock or something.

I look at the man in the water and he looks right back at me and I can tell he's real scared. His eyes are wide open with the scared, and they're blue. They are as blue as Grandma Queen's bachelor's button flowers. They are as blue as the sky on winter mornings when I'm waiting for the school bus and the air hurts my nose.

He's holding on to his log real tight but all the logs are thunking against each other and I can see they're knocking him around, too. The water is swirling real bad and all I can smell is mud. I'm staring at the man and I see he's really not a man at all. He's not much more than a boy, and I figure my crying ain't helping him any. I try real hard to make my face look like a face I'd want to see if it was me bobbing up and down in that ugly water, being

hard knocked by a bunch of dirty logs. It must be the right face because he nods yes like he's saying *I know you're going to save me.*

Mama throws the rope and it flies out in big loops and lands right on his log, like Mama is some champion rodeo roper or something. Only I know Mama ain't never roped nothing in her whole life. But she sure did rope that boy because all he had to do was grab on.

Then Mama turns to me and says she's going to drive forward but she won't be able to see the boy so she needs me to be her eyes. Mama says I'm supposed to real loud yell *Go!* if everything's OK, and yell *Stop!* if anything goes wrong. She asks me *Roxie, can you do that?*

I nod my head and Mama gets in the truck. She unhooks the brake with a clank and grinds the stick into place. I look at the boy and he's all squished up between two big logs. They're pushing together so hard he's getting shoved under water and before I know anything, they swallow him up. There's no face, no arm, no hand. There's just Mama's rope going down between those two old logs into the dark water and I don't know if I should yell *go* or not on account of I don't know what's going on under that water. I just know that I'd better do the right thing. That's when I hear myself yelling *go, Mama, go!*

Mama hits the gas and the truck takes off and the rope gets tight for a second, and then just like magic, those two logs split apart and that boy flies up out of there like they're spitting him out and before I know anything, Mama's done dragged him over the logjam and up the crumbly dirt bank and she's dragging him clean across the pasture before I remember I'm supposed to yell stop. So I yell *stop, Mama, stop!*

§

First thing Mama does is rolls him on his side and whacks him on the back. He coughs up a bunch of muddy water and then he flops on his back and lays there breathing like Papa's trout do after he tosses them in his canvas fish bag. Mama covers the boy with the picnic blanket and then she sits down right next to him. I sit down, too, and we just stare at him, and he stares right back at us and breathes real hard. A couple of times he spits out some more water.

Finally he sits up and says *wow*. Mama starts right off asking him how he come to be in the water and *what was he thinking* and *wasn't it by the grace of God we happened along because otherwise he would be a goner?* She just keeps talking a mile a minute and it's all I can do not to point out maybe she's talking too much, but I know better.

Mama's telling him how she almost turned around at the third bridge but she swears she felt the hand of God and it pushed her right over the bridge. *Jesus took control* she says. Then she gets quiet.

I'm about to start asking things, but the boy starts talking and I don't know what it is about today, but he's going on like he ain't never going to be able to talk again.

He says his name is Jonah, only not really on account of his mother named him Theodore but when he went with the Rainbow Family, he wanted a more spiritual name. I can tell Mama ain't none too happy to hear he really is one of those Rainbow Family people because her forehead goes all scrunchy but I don't know what else she thought he would be. There ain't too many long-haired boys floating down the creeks in Wyoming. Even I could guess he was one of the Rainbow Family people.

But then they just keep on talking like they're going to talk forever. They talk about that Watergate thing and Nixon and for a long time they talk about God and the funny thing is, I can see that they're agreeing about all kinds of stuff. Jonah even says all the Rainbow People want is for all the people of the world to live together and take better care of our planet and he says it so matter-of-fact that Mama don't even argue. She even nods her head

yes. That's when I get bored and I start watching a meadowlark who's singing from a fencepost. He has a real pretty voice that reminds me of my best friend Fern's. Then a magpie squawks from a Russian Olive bush which is funny because he sounds just like me. I sure do wish I could sing like Fern.

Finally they both get talked out and they're quiet so I figure maybe it's my turn. I want to ask Jonah how he come to be in the creek but I don't because he's finally smiling and besides, I feel sorry for him because I can see his legs is all bruised up from the logs. I don't want to make him stop smiling so I just keep quiet. Mama's says *praise the good Lord you are safe* and Jonah just nods and says *yes ma'am*. He says for sure someone needs to be praised but from where he's sitting it looks like it's me and Mama. He says we're his angels and I swear, Mama turns a pink about the color of Grandma Queen's tea roses.

Right then Jonah jumps up and says he needs to find his friends because they think he's done got swept away to death.

Mama climbs in and I scoot to the middle and Jonah sits by the window all wrapped up in Mama's picnic blanket like a cocoon, like he's some gingham caterpillar about to become a butterfly, and we bounce back across the fields toward where Jonah thinks he fell in. Sure enough, we come up on

two girl and two boy Rainbow Family people sitting right at the edge of the flood. Only it's kind of hard to tell which is which seeing they all have the same hair and clothes.

At first they look scared when they see Papa's old Ford bouncing across the pasture toward them, but then Jonah hangs out the window and starts yelling and they all start jumping up and down and hugging each other. Before Mama even stops the truck Jonah jumps out and hightails it over to his friends and for a little while they all just laugh and dance in a circle.

Me and Mama's just standing a ways off by the truck watching and I'm thinking he plumb forgot about us but then he waves us over and all four of them hug us both and I can tell you, Mama don't cotton to no strangers hugging her. But she does it, anyway. Then one of Jonah's friends digs some dry clothes out of a knapsack and gives them to him and Jonah goes behind the truck to get changed.

That's when I tell Mama I'm hungry because saving people sure does wear a girl out so Mama hauls out the picnic basket and those Rainbow Family people all act like they ain't seen food in weeks. Jonah's chewing like mad on the cow's tongue on account of it's so rubbery even though Mama slices it real thin. He asks what it is and when Mama tells him, the one girl

named Lucy drops her sandwich. She says she's a vegetarian and can't eat cow's tongue. Mama gives her a wrinkly face, but she gives her an apple and some root beer, too.

After the picnic Mama tells them we have to get back to the farm so I can do my chores and she can get supper for Papa. Jonah and Mama hug for a long time and Mama puts our rural route box number on a piece of paper she finds in Papa's glove box and tells him to write once in a while. He promises he will. Jonah tells me to behave and I start to feel like I'm going to cry but Mama makes me get in the truck before I start.

Mama's fiddling around with the stick thing for a minute and then I notice she's the one crying and since I hardly ever seen Mama cry, I just sit real quiet until the stick grinds into place. Then we're bouncing across the pasture away from the Rainbow Family people. I wave one last time and when I turn back around Mama puts her hand on my knee and says she sure is sorry about my picnic, but she says she sure is proud of me on account of the good job I did being her eyes when we were saving Jonah. *I don't know how you knew when I should pull, but you showed real character, Roxie.*

And that right there makes me feel real special and I don't even care about my dumb old picnic any more. It was way more fun to save Jonah and

meet the Rainbow Family people, and having character sure feels good even if it wears a girl out. In fact, I'm so tuckered that I put my head in Mama's lap and just watch the clouds go by out the window, and that's all I remember before I fall right asleep.

Jackson Lassiter lives and writes in Washington, DC. His work has appeared in over 50 journals and anthologies, most recently in *Gertrude 17* and *Shenandoah Review* (after being named one of ten finalists in the Bevel Prize in Flash Fiction). He is a past winner in the Adult Fiction Category of the Larry Neal Writing Awards sponsored by the DC Arts Council, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His short story and essay collection, *Birds of a Feather*, is available on Amazon.com. Contact him at LuckyJRL@hotmail.com.