

Hollywood Roadkill

by

Cat Sparks

We were lucky to find her. Lu was dirty but she wasn't sick. Skinny but not malnourished, a rarity since the new lanes got added and fresh produce became a half-remembered dream. As if living Roadside wasn't already tough enough.

I'd been looking for someone like Lu for a long time. She needed training, or course; who didn't, but if my team pooled its resources I figured we could get her cleaned up enough to have a real shot at success. Shira had the legals covered, Derek still had memories of med school and Jase? Jase was muscle. When we got across, I'd take care of the press. We could have done with a style consultant, but style was a little thin on the asphalt this side of the Road. No, We didn't need style, we were going to play the kidnapped waif card -- provided the codes I'd bought were good. That was why I needed Derek. Lu was going to have to get hit. It had to look messy or else we'd never get our sixty seconds, let alone our hour in court. The trick was gonna be roughing her up without doing any real damage. No marks on her face -- just a little blood and a few scratches for sympathy. Maybe crack a couple of ribs for effect. There were tricks to bouncing off a hood and rolling out of harm's way. Derek was training her up for it. He'd gotten girls across the road before, he said.

Lovely Lu: Tallulah as I had re-badged her, was gonna be our ticket out of here. Our job was to get her across the road. Hers would be to get me through the city gates. The others too, if they could keep up. There'd be casualties. We weren't all gonna make it. It didn't do to care too much. Getting too attached to your running mates could be fatal.

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It's Friday night and I find myself staring across the faceless grey expanse of Road, past the fires and occasional gunfire of the median strip and up into the brilliant outpouring of neon, laser, crystal and chrome that makes up Hollywood City. I think maybe I was born there amidst the shiny turrets and spires. I have memories of manicured lawns and children laughing. Children dressed identically in little plaid-print uniforms. Children with neatly-combed hair and plump, ruddy cheeks. Not the scrawny vagabonds that slink across the darkness here, squeezing between the tarpaulins and shacks, fighting each other in the mud for scraps of garbage. Roadside, if you're still a child at eight years old you might as well be dead, especially if you're slow on your feet, too weak to scavenge or too ugly to sell yourself. Most of us Roadsiders grew up somewhere else and backwashed here on a tide of filth. Hollywood city rubbish barges hover overhead, pausing to dump waste on us from the sky.

But me, I'm from Hollywood City. I just know it's the truth and one day I'm going back there, straight across the Road. Tomorrow is that day.

Tallulah's asleep now, drowsy from the extra food. The rest of us are buzzing on meth. Just enough to mask the hunger and keep us on the wire. There's no lights at all this side of the Road. Nothing to tell you what's coming or going but the whine of servos and the rumble and growl of engines. Jase says he can feel the big wheels trembling through the asphalt. I believe him. Jase doesn't talk much but when he does, it's always about stuff he can feel. He's big, Jase, big and solid despite the relentless gnawing hunger. Reckon he was built that way, although he's got the same chip extraction scar as the rest of us. When his skin gets cut, he bleeds, but he heals up fast. I wonder what he was, and what he did to wind up Roadside.

And Lu -- I wonder about her too because she hasn't got the chip scar on the top of her neck. No scar, yet she can't have been born here. She looks too damn good for that. No, she's from somewhere else -- beyond the spires of Hollywood city perhaps. Makes me wonder what else there might be out there. Maybe tomorrow I'll find out.

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Derek says its time. I expect Shira to argue, but she just nods and stares across the Road to the city lights, all neon rainbow-jewelled and winking coyly at us as if to say *come and get it baby -- its all yours*.

Shira knows she was a lawyer in the way-back-when. She didn't lose everything when she lost her chip. Stuff you learned yourself before they chip you, you get to keep all that. Some city folks still raise their kids the old fashioned way. I would too now, if I had kids, knowing what I know. I've watched too many Roadside wash-ups tumble out of the garbage chute with shit in their pants, incapable of speech because their folks all chipped their babies instead of teaching.

I go to wake Tallulah. Her face is framed with soft brown curls. I wish I could leave her sleeping peaceful as an angel but it's time to do it -- and if we don't go now we never will. Jase says this is the quietest time. Fewer road trains and overlands. Less chance of getting hit. Automatic trucks run on sonar rails. They don't need light for sight like we do.

We've told no one we're going but a small crowd has gathered. No one strong enough to mount a challenge or try and steal Tallulah for themselves.

This kid's standing a few feet away with his scabby mouth hanging wide open. Like he can't believe that we're gonna make a run for it. I look away. Part of me doesn't believe it either - or want to remember the set of circumstances that brought me to this point. And there's another part of me; deep down and dark, trying to force its way to the surface. The part that wants me to throw myself under the first set of metre-wide treadlinks that comes hurling at us from out of the black. Half the folks at Roadside check out that way, eventually. So much quicker than starvation or disease. No shame in it either. The Roadside folks always make the sign, pretend like the runner was trying to make the median strip at least. No shame in it at all, but me -- I take another snort of meth and focus on those gleaming neon spires.

Tallulah's eyes glisten with crystal-meth tears. Jase stands by the asphalt listening, his head cocked to one side. I take a final look over my shoulder at the slum I've called my home. The shack I built from scrap metal with my own bare hands. The shack I traded for a batch of numbers. If the 'Roach has ripped me off I'll be running all the way back here just to punch retribution into his face. Which one of us is more desperate? I'm betting that it's me.

I clasp Tallulah's hand in my own, smile at her as reassuringly as I can manage, and then suddenly Derek says, "Run for it," and so the five of us run.

I think I hear a cheer go up behind us, but I can't be sure. Might be the wind in my ears or the palpitations of my heart, but it sounds like cheering, and there we are, all five of us running forward into the night. Striding with purpose because we have some place to go.

Minutes in, we hear the thundering screech of a road train in the blackness up ahead. Jase stops and so we all stop, still and nervous like rabbits. We can't see it but we feel the blast of hot air as it hurtles *en route* to its programmed destination.

I grip Tallulah's hand tighter, trying to reassure her that we know what we're doing. Trying to remind myself what I am doing here. The Road is cut deep into the earth. Too deep to see the city lights. We can see each other bathed in the tepid yellow haze of the torchpins clipped to our belts. We're taking a risk with that. The 'pins make us easy targets. But somehow I doubt the trucks and trains are programmed to scout for runners. What are we to them but roadkill? Bigger than rabbits, smaller than bears -- and even rogue bears are too small to mess up the front of those titanium bullbars.

Jase gives the word and then we're running again. Faster this time, by some unspoken consensus. We can hear vehicles on either side of us now, but Jase keeps on running and so we do too. I need more meth but I'm not stopping for it. Nothing's gonna stop me till we reach the median strip.

Looking at the outline of Jase's broad back in the smudge of available light, I realise something I should have guessed before. He's military issue, plain as day. More machine than human, whether he bleeds like us or not. I wonder why he got discarded, what he did to piss them off, but then suddenly my ears are filled with the screech of metal. The acrid stink of chemistry. I don't know what it was that missed us, but it was damn close. I felt the heat of it's engines on my cheek as it hurtled past into the night. Tallulah stumbles. She can tell how close we came to getting splattered. I grip her hand tighter. Too tight, I know, and I pull her forward towards the bobbing firefly glows of the others' pin lights. She's barely keeping up, and I think she's crying. Maybe she's too buzzed to get the tears out properly, or maybe she just doesn't want me to know.

Fires burn up ahead on the median strip. We're so close. I get excited, relax my grip on Tallulah's hand, then give it a little squeeze. She squeezes back. She's still with me. She still believes we can do this thing. We don't run straight toward the fires -- I drilled the other four on this before we left, but I didn't tell them why. We veer to the right and run alongside the median strip wall for a kilometre. I let go of Tallulah's hand and push her in front of me. We're safe from traffic in single file so long as we stick to the wall.

I'm thinking about the foil of meth in my pocket when suddenly Jase stops. He uncoils the line from across his back, steps out onto the road and starts to swing the grappling claw around and around. When it gathers enough momentum, he lets it fly. We wait, straining our ears for traffic sounds, nervous at how far out on the dark road Jase is standing. The claw clatters against rock and falls. Jase reels it in and tries again. This time it catches. He tugs twice to make sure it'll hold, then moves towards the protection of the wall.

Jase goes up first, then Derek. I send Tallulah up next, then Shira, then me.

The wall is a pastiche of cement and brick work, easy enough to climb once I'm off the ground.

They're all crouched waiting for me at the top, but I don't see them. All I see is Hollywood City blazing like a nebula. I have to blink, my eyes water from the overload. So close. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I want it, more than anything. It was my home, I know it was, and it'll be my home again.

Hollywood light pollution means we can find our way along the median strip. It also means that others can see us -- and there are others here. Renegades like us, outward bound, half a road away from liberty.

Tallulah sinks to her knees and I realise its time to eat. Crossing the Road burned up all our calories. Derek shares out what we have. It isn't much, and once again we give Tallulah most of it. Nobody complains. She's our ticket to freedom. Without her we're homeless now as well as helpless.

A few mouthfuls of food make us all feel a whole lot better. Shira hands me her canteen and we share the last few sips of dirty water. We watch as Derek takes Tallulah to one side and runs her through her routine again.

"My name is Tallulah. I was kidnapped from my apartment," she recites with a trembling voice.

"Blink now, widen your eyes. Innocent and hurt," he says, "that's it ... that's the *sense* we're going for ... the *vibe* ..."

"You've got to help me. My parents don't know where I am. It was Ganglanders took me. I saw their leader's face. I think I've seen him on TV ... "

"Good, Lu darlin', that's very good," says Derek. "Don't give up on the blinking now. Gotta keep those wide brown eyes clean and clear. We need them to believe you."

I fix my eyes on Tallulah's silhouette, cool black against the blazing lights of Hollywood. So beautiful, both of them -- the city and the girl.

"You know she's gonna have to get hit," whispers Shira. "And even if she doesn't, once inside the city, you'll never see her again."

"I'm not in love," I tell her -- and I mean it. There's no place left in my heart for love after six years Roadside. And there's something else I don't tell Shira. This is not my first attempt to cross the Road. I've run before -- twice, and I've got scars to show for both times, inside and out. I don't tell the others. I don't want them to know how bad our chances really are.

But this time is different because this time I've got a plan. A *modus operandi* and a slim strip of numbers in my wristband that means they've got to open the gate. Got to check out Tallulah's story, no matter how bogus it sounds. Got to patch her up after her accident and pay off her "friends". Once the media drones have fixed on her, even half a chance'll be enough.

I snort another pinch of meth and offer some to Shira. Its dirty stuff but it bucks me up like a punch in the face. My precious city blurs for a moment till I wipe away the tears with the back of my hand.

"We're moving out," I say and the others scramble to their feet and prep for action.

I haven't told them about the spiders -- or whatever those multi-limbed things are that patrol the median strip walls. No point in freaking out my team. They know to run from anything that moves. If we're trapped by one of those things, running won't make any difference.

The median strip is maybe half a K wide, thicker in places, thinner in others. The surface is uneven so we have to watch our feet. There's nothing grows on the 'strip at all -- no regular garbage deposits like we get back Roadside. Nothing to eat except rats and runners.

Jase goes ahead scouting for fissures. A deep one could lead us straight to the far side of the 'Strip and to an easy climb down onto the Road. I keep Tallulah in my sights but she's moving as well as the rest of us. Derek must have dusted her up.

We run in silence, breathing deep and slow. Hoping we're far enough away from the fire to pass unnoticed. But I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched. There's no evidence of

anything. Just a sensation in my gut. The ones that live on the Median Strip, they're barely human any more. Caught between the coming and the going, living and dying. Ran out across the road, too terrified to make it back. Or there's those who got thrown back from the city gates. Maybe that's what the spiders are for -- to keep the runners in, not out.

I'm sure we're being watched, but we run on regardless. Jase leads us to a section of far wall where the cement is ragged and torn. Rusted metal beams protrude like ribs. Easy enough to climb down without the grappling claws.

Only ten lanes remain between us and Hollywood City. A shudder of exhilaration wracks my body. This is the farthest I've ever made it. First time, I never even made it up the side of the 'Strip. Second time ... I trace my index finger down the length of the burn scar on my thigh. I don't want to remember. This time is the only one that matters. This time I'm going all the way.

Derek goes down first, followed by Shira, who grips Lu tightly by the elbow to make sure she doesn't fall. I'm about to follow when I hear a noise behind me. Something that sounds like metal sliding through soft flesh. I turn in time to see Jase fall, a sharpened spike protruding from his chest. Blood pours from the wound. Jase's mouth opens. His eyes widen and I know that he's taking in the bright lights of Hollywood City with his dying sight. Something yanks him backwards. I don't wait to find out what. All I do is pray he's really dead as I scramble down the jagged concrete fissure for my life.

At the bottom, the others see that Jase is not behind me. They don't ask. All of us turn our faces to the Road and make the sign. We all know the risks, and it's not over yet. There'll be time for grieving on the other side.

This stretch of Road will be easier than the first because this time we have light. Ten lanes illuminated by Hollywood City lights.

We move in single file parallel to the wall, trying to gain a bit of distance from the place where we lost our Jase. We know we have to run soon, just in case whatever took him's still hungry.

Seems like there's more traffic here than on the other side, but maybe that's just because we can see it. Road trains: massive tanks of chromium and grey, barrelling through the night, stopping for no one. Mixed among them, occasional ancient rattlers of rust and grime, ploughing forwards at maximum throttle until the day they shake themselves to pieces and can run no more.

I've got that feeling of being watched again. The traffic flow increases every hour closer to dawn. Its now or never.

"Run!" I shout to the others. And we run.

Derek and Shira have Lu between them. It was supposed to have been Derek and Jase, but Shira knows what has to be done.

Soon comes the hardest part of all. We'll take our lovely Tallulah and bounce her off the hood of an oncoming car. Something small -- a private vehicle. Once we have a drone recording, she'll say her spiel and blink her big brown eyes. The drone will suck up the pieces of code I'll feed it -- code for persons on the official "missing" list. Unnamed, uncertain, yet we'll have to be checked out. They'll open the barrier field for missing persons, especially one whose bloodstained face has been broadcast citywide. Whoever's car she bounces off is going to want the problem fixed. They're gonna want us inside the city, far away from freelance TV eyes.

There's nobody guarding the city gates. No need for human guards since the barrier field went up.

I spy the burnt-out shell of a vehicle. My heart lurches. If there's been a smash here recently then no one's gonna give a fuck about our Lu. But when I step closer, I realise the wreck is old, it's interior thick with damp moss. Things must be very different here. Back Roadside, the moss would have been eaten long ago.

Derek's briefing Lu again. I can see that she's terrified beneath the mask of meth. I scan the skies for drones -- wouldn't do to get ourselves recorded before we're set.

We're just about ready to do it when Shira speaks my name. We're not alone. There's a figure watching us from the shadow's edge. I think it's a man, but when he steps forward into the light I can't be certain.

Man or not, he wears articulated armour hammered from scrap steel, decorated with blood and bones. He stinks of oil and rust and war, even from ten paces off. Bone Man is not alone, but his companions skulk in the shadows waiting for his word.

Shira and Derek shove Lu between them as they draw their knives and prepare to fight for her life. We are no match for these urban warriors crouching beneath the city gate. They will kill us for our meat, throw our bones and gristle to the traffic stream. Hell knows what they'll do to Tallulah. If it comes to that I'll kill her myself.

Precious moments trickle past. As my eyes adjust to the arrhythmic pulsing and flickering of the city lights, I count the figures shrouded in the darkness. More than a match for us. We are dead. And yet the slaughter does not begin. Why is this?

"So," the person of blood and bone before me says at last, "How youse planning to get inside?"

I won't tell him. I may have to die, but I don't have to die for him.

"You got a plan," the figure states. "Them that makes it this far always do."

Suddenly there's a high-pitched squeal. Above us a media drone slingshots into view. I can hear the whirr and chitter of its servos, the steady hum of its all-weather 'tronics. I don't look up. Neither does Bone Man. He unholsters his weapon, aims above my head and fires before I have time to flinch. Tiny flecks of burning metal score my cheek as the drone disintegrates.

"I'm betting you got gate codes," says Bone Man. "Give them over and I maybe let you go."

Go where, I think, wishing to hell I had a gun in place of the pathetic blade taped to my ankle.

We can't stand off here forever, I'm thinking. Any moment there'll be another drone, or worse.

"The codes are in his wristband," says a gentle voice. My heart breaks.

"Nice work Lu," said Bone man. In one swift movement his tribe surrounds us. Lu pats us down for ordnance. I expect her to avoid eye contact, but when it's my turn she stares straight at me, eyes as cold as glass.

"Strip off your clothes," she says. "All of you."

As I shed my filthy rags, I realise the thing that's killing me most is that I don't remember anything good about my life. All I know in detail is six years Roadside and some vaguely coloured, half-remembered images from childhood. Little plaid uniforms and soft green grass. Laughter fades, and that's it.

Now I'm naked save for the sickly neon shine coming off the gate. Shira's weeping. Of all of us, she was the one who stood the best chance. Derek's face betrays no emotion. I think he died a long time ago. But me, I was living, kicking and screaming for a chance right up until this final moment.

They're going to have to hack my wristband. I'm not telling them anything. A gust of wind brushes my face, a stray current belched from a passing rig. In a second I'm up and running towards the Road, running as fast as my legs can carry me. All I see is the dazzle of oncoming headlights -- the blazing fires of evermore. Time slows, tyres screech and darkness pulls me tight into its breast.

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