

# The Six-Buck Fortune

*Helen Walker Jones*

I REMEMBER THAT DAY PERFECTLY—every violet plum with its orange smudges, the rim of the huge blue canning kettle smeared with thick yellow slime and little tatters of purple peel. It was the day I first knew Sackler would be dead before I was old. I believed it, just as I believed in eternal families and the principle of tithing and that Mother would run off as soon as I had somebody bringing his paycheck home to me on Friday nights.

Sackler was my fiancé then, but I'd never told him I loved him. Like now, I was a washout at saying those three little words. Could I tell this aloof boy, just off an aircraft carrier, "Touch my lips with your fingers, put your shirts in my laundry, and I'll scrub the collars with my long hair"? I couldn't walk sometimes, I loved him so much. I want to tell him that now, twelve years later, but he's sitting there with his nose in the hockey scores. I'd be a fool to say, "I'm crazy for you, Honey," while he's concentrating on the Black Hawks.

We were engaged to be married then, and Sackler was sitting at the white table in my mother's kitchen. Mother hadn't run off with the meat-packing foreman yet. That would happen the next month.

"I hate shell macaroni," Sackler was saying. "My mom always used elbow." Bits of pasta clung to his moustache. He hated my cooking. He had just taken up skydiving, and I wondered if that's how he would die: one day his parachute wouldn't open and his bones would lie in a jumble in a coulee out by Mexican Hat.

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I wanted to tell him, "I love you so much it kills me." Instead I said, "Honey, I went down to Z.C.M.I. this afternoon and bought two plates in our ironstone pattern. Stephanie, it's called."

He said, "Dishes have a name?"

He always made fun of my bridal interests. "I had my fortune told today," I said, changing the subject. "The gypsy had two black teeth, but no crystal ball." The tile floor felt cool and sticky through my stockings. Mother had spent the morning conjuring jelly out of squashed plums, pectin, and sugar; and I'd mopped the floor haphazardly before leaving for the skull reading.

Sackler's hands were cupping his chin. "Don't tell me," he said. "The gypsy had tapestries on her wall. Of John F. Kennedy. I saw places like that in the Navy. Bedspreads hung in place of walls."

"You had your fortune told?"

"Yeah," he said. "In Singapore. She told me I'd meet a mysterious dark woman. You. And marry for money." Sackler tilted his chair back on two legs and scratched his armpit through the yellow t-shirt. "So much for the money," he said, glancing around the kitchen, grinning.

"She was wearing this blue mask like a doctor operating," I said. "And when she breathed, it sounded like a dying man."

"Like this bosun we had. He'd lean over the side of his bed and spit twice, then try and put his teeth in but they wouldn't fit." I'd written out the spelling of "boatswain" once, on a restaurant napkin, but Sackler had refused to believe me.

The gypsy's hands had smelled of garlic and chocolate, and her fingernails were press-ons. On my plate, plum jelly was oozing over the edge of my toast. One of the bottles hadn't sealed, so we were eating its contents. The clear preserves reminded me of an amethyst birthstone necklace I'd gotten in the fifth grade. "She knew I was getting married. And no lie, Sackler, I hadn't mentioned you."

"Your ring," he said. "Your diamond. She's not blind." Sackler turned his hand over and stared at the palm. "She's not a scientist or nothin'," he said.

Still, she'd charged six bucks, so I was convinced he would die. The Relief Society sisters would lay him out, wondering if white clothes were appropriate for an inactive person. They'd marvel at his lanky legs, his heart pumping even after death — wanting me — his hair already transformed to a dazzling halo. "How handsome he is in white," one sister would say, looking down at his folded hands. "It's a sailor suit," someone would call from out in the foyer.

I ran hot water into the green plastic dishpan, remembering all the gypsy had told me. I looked at the plate through the angle of the

water, suds floating off to one side like an island. When my fingers turned red, I let them bounce like inner tubes on the surface while I pictured a wedding gown so white that its shadows were silver instead of gray. A few months earlier, during a fight, I'd screamed at Sackler and smashed my hand down into the water, cursing him and slicing my tendon on a broken saucer. For weeks, I'd worn orange rubber gloves till I got the bandage off. I pulled my bare hands out of the dishwater, amazed at the shock of cold air, wondering if the gift of telling the future startled the brain in just the same way.

After supper that night, Sackler and I put on our matching parkas and drove downtown to the movies, circling the block till somebody backed out right in front of the theater. We were across the street from the gypsy's storefront window. It was the night of the first frost. I sat in the car, shivering, while he walked around to open my door.

As I slid across the seat, I wished the gypsy would appear out of nowhere and rush up to us and say, "This isn't the boy."

But it didn't turn out quite that way. The woman *was* there, across the narrow street in front of her shop, the blue surgeon's mask hanging loose around her neck, her sleek hair pressed tight over her ears.

"Honey," she hollered when she spotted me. But it came out "Hawney." She wasn't wearing a coat, and her arms were folded so that her breasts were squeezed together, the flesh pooching slightly over the neckline of her peacock-blue bodice. I tucked my hand inside Sackler's pocket and felt the lining's frayed threads.

The gypsy's hands fluttered to the crease of her breasts as she pulled out a lace-edged hanky, wetting it with her tongue, then dabbing at the air as though she were applying spittle to each of my cheeks.

"To protect," the gypsy woman shouted, her head nodding like a sprung toy. She glanced at Sackler, then turned and began pacing in front of the lit-up shop windows, looking at her feet. Something about the way her backless shoes were worn down at the heels or maybe the way her hips ballooned under the cotton gathers of her skirt reminded me of my mother.

The gypsy's blue dress swished around her bare calves. Gypsies didn't own stockings; I'd forgotten to tell Sackler that. He was standing behind me in the ticket line with his hands up under my parka, cupping my breasts. I wondered if anyone had noticed. His hands were large with thick fingers, greasy under the fingernails and in the creases of the palms because, at that time, he assembled automatic transmissions all day and the grease was always there unless he sanded the top layers of his skin with Lava soap.

I love this man's hands. They do something for me that white tea-cups and notes in my lunchbox and even drunken confessions of desire don't do. I hate to admit that about the drunkenness, but Sackler is so sweet and romantic on Friday nights when he comes home from Better Days reeking of cigarette smoke and Jim Beam. I've always liked the smell of bars.

His touch felt so comforting to me that night in front of the theater, especially since I was suddenly, blindly convinced that the six-buck gypsy knew what she was talking about.

"It wasn't true what she promised," I said quietly to the dark street, wishing my hands back in the dishwasher, for warmth. "I'm not going to lose you, Honey." I turned my head so that my mouth touched his shoulder. In light from the marquee I saw the shadow of my own hair, wispy and long, flipped up like elf boots against the faded gray of Sackler's parka. I could almost feel the imprint of the gypsy woman's fingers on my scalp—the heat, the pressure, the comfort of thumbs working in the hollows just behind the ears. I could feel Sackler's breath in my hair, and I thought of a dying man.

My husband would die, and my babies would die, and I wondered if there were two bright red spots on my cheeks where saliva had touched them. It was like the time when I was ten, and I saw President McKay outside the west entrance to the Tabernacle. He reached out and touched the top of my head for a second, and for months afterward it seemed like the hair in that one spot was no longer dead but living tissue.

My eyes were burning, the people around me were blurred, and I felt faint with helplessness. Sackler was staring at the pretty girl in the ticket booth. The glass around her was dark green like bulletproof glass on a limo. I wondered if ticket-taking happened to be a dangerous job. I wanted a column of bottle-green glass around Sackler so nothing could ever take him away. I wanted to draw him deep into my body, to give him a dozen babies, to keep him above ground, out of caves and mines so that the prophecy could never come true. How was I to know he'd take up skydiving, or still drive drunk at age thirty-one?

I pressed the weight of my body against him, from his chest to his thighs. "Let's go home," I said.

"Your mom'll be there."

"Forget the smell," I said. "Forget the blood." Just that week, Mom had hired on at the meat-packing plant as a sausage girl. The pay was great, but it was dirty work. Her shift ended at ten P.M., and I knew how the house would look when we came in. A trail of stained clothes would start just inside the back door and end at the bathroom: lum-

berjack boots, levi's, a t-shirt saying, "Damn, I'm Good." My face was wet. I wanted to say, "If you're going to die, let's jump out of that airplane together."

I hoped he wouldn't ask what was wrong, and he seemed to sense the "No, No" ticking behind my teeth so, instead of talking, he kissed me right there in the movie line, the cold metal button on his levi's pressing against my hip bone while everybody around us whispered.

When Sackler looked at me again, holding my face inches from his own, he had a sweet, helpless look that charmed me so much I couldn't bear for anyone else to see it. We left the movie line and drove home. He carried me into the back bedroom, ignoring the smell of dead meat in the house, ignoring the shower running on and on through my mother's multiple latherings. It broke my heart to know my white satin temple wedding had just flown out the window, but I couldn't stop myself.

Five weeks later, we were married on the rag rug of a justice of the peace in South Salt Lake. Our honeymoon was nothing to get excited about. We drove my mom's abandoned station wagon out along I-80 across the Nevada line and had twenty bucks apiece to gamble with. Driving to Wendover, my hands practically melted to the wheel, it was so hot. I could see that gypsy's eyes on fire in the headlights, hypnotizing me into believing my new husband was dead, when I knew very well he was right beside me on the green plastic upholstery. He was just out of the Navy, and I pictured him shipwrecked, seaweed plastered to his hair, spiny shells stuck to his throat and chest like leeches.

My mother had skipped town the week before, leaving this note pinned to the ironing board: "I love you, Hon, but I love this man more." She'd run off with the foreman, her boss. By that time, my period was a week overdue, so what was to stop me from eloping with Sackler?

Going to Wendover, you realize the Great Basin is just a desert. Even in October, the temperature can go over a hundred. We ate in restaurants where the cooks wore cowboy hats and sang onstage after the meal for our listening pleasure. Afterward we lay around in the motel room, wondering how the chandelier stayed hanging up there by such a thin wire. When I complained of boredom, Sackler asked what did I expect—I'd be jewel-bedecked, ascending the stairs to the Ponderosa Grill and Casino? "After all," he said, "it's not Niagara or the Poconos." I had showed him pictures in my bride's magazines of people kissing in the mist and lathering each other's backs in heart-shaped tubs.

"Are you still mad it wasn't in the temple?" he asked me.

"It's okay," I answered, remembering that night when I'd first kissed my virtue good-bye.

He promised, "We'll have it solemnized next summer." I loved the weightiness of that word.

"I'm sorry I ain't no returned missionary," he said. "Just a washed-up swabbie. I can't speak espanol or show off my miniature llamas or quote scriptures or nothin'."

"It's all right," I said. "I picked you of my own free will. Marty got a sincere 'Dear John'."

When they found out we were newlyweds, the waiters brought us each a foil-wrapped mint and a roll of nickels. I took Niagara where I could get it after that. My mom's old green station wagon just sat in the parking lot filling up with hot green air. The baby was stillborn at eight months, complete and blond, but he never breathed.

That was the star-spangled beginning of my marriage, and so far it's lasted twelve whole years. Tonight, my husband's buff-colored Afro springs full-blown above the evening paper. He's faceless. I'm staring out the dark window, wondering why I can't carry a baby full-term when it happens every day to sixteen-year-old, malnourished illegal-alien hookers.

Twelve years ago, I didn't know this was how my life would turn out: something went wrong with five pregnancies; my mother ran off with the hot dog king, sticking me with the mortgage; my husband has always been an apprentice to somebody or other.

He races motorcycles and skydives and hotrods on Highway 57 every Saturday night with the drunk teenagers, even though he turned thirty-one last October. We never had the marriage solemnized in any temple. I sit through sacrament meeting alone, polite and solitary in my white cotton gloves.

On nights when Sackler's working late, I sit on the porch swing, wondering just when I'll become a widow. The fortune teller told me my husband would die young. Her predictions ruined my honeymoon. I was afraid to leave him alone in Wendover for fear he'd be crushed to death by a falling one-armed bandit or executed in a gangland slaying. It was her face I saw in those headlights.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not one of those crazies who believes gypsy women were once spirits who lived in fire, or that they cause the skies over Glacier Park to light up with aurora borealis. My brother's wife thinks I believe that stuff, but I don't. She's Relief Society president in Richfield, and a couple of times a year she calls and shrieks at me to run look out my kitchen window at the white and pink streaks soaring through the black night like blood poisoning creeping up an

arm. She doesn't say it that way. She just says, "Go look at the gypsy sky, Sheila." She teases me because, even though I'm not superstitious, I did visit that gypsy and, as a result, I've been a nervous wreck for twelve years.

"It don't sit well with the priesthood authorities when you start messin' with the supernatural," she always says. "We had a couple of priests in our ward started foolin' with ouija boards and such. They ended up in the psych ward, Sheila. Don't you forget that."

No matter how many times I tell her, she doesn't understand that all of that is way in the past. When I was nineteen years old and had the bumps on my skull read, I actually believed in that fortune telling stuff. I wasn't even the same person I am now. When I think about that girl, it's not me.

The gypsy said all our babies would be boys, and that my husband would work in a coal mine or someplace under the ground. This month he's learning to be a brick mason, and so far he's stayed out of tunnels and caves. Half her prediction has gone to the dogs—those boy babies never materialized except as half-formed pieces of gray and pink tissue that were suctioned out of me with sterile vacuums. They don't let you list those kind on your family group sheets, and anyway not a single one would have been born under the covenant. I won't mention the one that looked like a baby and almost breathed and who, to ourselves, we called David.

But if half the prophecy isn't true, why do I still worry so much about the other part—about his dying and leaving me a widow? There's no way I believe what that gypsy said. But maybe it swirled in my head for too many years, sliding in and out of my dreams, haunting me at the ironing board as I starched his coveralls. Once I even tried to iron his parachute, on "delicate" so it wouldn't scorch, and all the while I pictured it malfunctioning and Sackler, freefalling to his death.

Yesterday was our twelfth anniversary, so in honor of the occasion Sackler made love to me until he was so exhausted that he lay trembling on his back, his breathing ferocious, muscle spasms jerking through his thighs. He was a little drunk and fell asleep right away, so what could I do but simply lie there beside him, sharing a pillow, moonlight whitening the mounds of my breasts and the bony ridge of my pelvis, out of which only one baby had ever come, wholly formed.

Half an hour later, I pulled on my blue jeans and Brigham Young sweat shirt and drove down to the packing plant just in time for the midnight shift. It was Braunschweiger night.

When I got home this morning, Sackler was gone, his imprint still on the pillow. I washed my hands in Clorox diluted with streaming

water, shampooed my hair four times in the shower, and stripped naked to sleep, so that none of the smell would stay on me.

I put my head deep into Sackler's pillow, brushing the hair from my cheek like he does. "How about some dinner, Baby?" I whispered, to hear myself say it. It's what he says when he wants to make love. This past week, his hands have smelled of mortar. He's building a prison wall. Really. In the feathers of this pillow I smell mortar and spice and blood even after four latherings. Nothing goes down our bathtub drain except our baby boys, drifting slowly underwater, their lungs filling up, their beds cold and wet, the sacraments unsaid.