

## TO THE READER

Welcome to Jackalope Country.

Perhaps you have traveled the High Plains of North America and noticed spectacular jackrabbit-antelope hybrids. These fascinating, elusive creatures still thrive in the 21st century. Their postcards fill racks at service stations along scenic byways. Indeed, postcards are the earliest documentation of this species. They are closely related to the German Easter Hare, Peter Rabbit, and various American Indian rabbit beings of ancient lineage.

Jackalopes enjoy legendary stature. They look handsome—or beautiful, depending on intergender phase—against blue-enamel sky of the West. Pronghorns (or sometimes deer antlers) rise majestically from their skulls. Large rabbit ears help them detect coyote howls. They can manifest as male or female, through a rare physiological process.

In their campfire literature, rollicking humor mixes with sorrow. They share hard histories of the continent's indigenous inhabitants and desperado tales of pioneer settlers. Plotlines in their stories are as complicated as, well, a jackrabbit's love life. Belly laughs help everyone get along.

Tourists occasionally see Mr. or Ms. Jackalope, but few people linger in the wide expanses long enough to learn jackalope culture. Stories in this volume disclose adventures of Jackalope Lamat Kelley, in his, or sometimes her, rambles from Minnesota to California, with stops in the Rocky Mountains and nearby grasslands.

Jack, like other jackalopes, is a friendly creature who loves good storytellers. He might be seen listening to conversations at powwows, casinos, and conferences. Jackalopes indulge in occasional drams of distilled juniper berries, so they visit bars for quick refreshment and stay to catch up on the latest news. They often roam highways in small cars that can accelerate quickly or turn on a dime. They learned from *Huckleberry Finn* how journeys are perfect ways to hear tales and also to join the cast of players.

Perhaps the jackalope could be your author's spirit animal. She was raised in ranching country of the Flint Hills of Kansas—the largest stand of unplowed prairie in North America. She grew up in a “cowboy-and-Indian” place where horse pastures, brick streets,

peony gardens, and untamed creeks provided a perfect setting for a mixed-up child with cross-blood heritage. In the Flint Hills, equidistant from Europe and Asia, jackalopes could be as real as armadillos. They could be as real as the following stories.

#### JACKALOPE WALKS INTO AN INDIAN BAR

As he hops onto a stool, an old man yells, "Whoa. That's a jackalope." Jack freezes and waits. Then the old man laughs, "Aaay," and everyone laughs with him. Jack orders a wheatgrass shot and stares straight ahead.

"My grandfather told me about jackalopes," says the old man. "Said you smelled funny."

Jack twitches his nose. "No worse'n you," he says, turning to the old man. "Carnivore breath!" Laughter again, then silence.

"And don't you forget it," says the old man. Then his brow furrows. "So, if you don't mind me asking, how exactly did your parents *do* it?"

"Oh, they didn't. A taxidermist in Wyoming grafted antlers onto a rabbit."

"Come on, I don't buy that. You're among Indians. Tell us the truth." Everyone looks at him.

"Okay. We come from Mexico, east side of the Sierra Madre Mountains, where Rabbit and Deer are well known spirits, Sun and Moon. Somewhere north of the border, Deer changed to Antelope."

The old man nods. Jack continues, "Our clans mixed together during a shaman's peyote ceremony. The elders tell me everyone traveled to the stars that night. They saw Earth as a globe of spinning green flames." Jack glances around. Everyone in the bar is listening. He continues, "The next day we found ourselves changed. Sometimes we seem to disappear, but this is when we are returning to the sky world. Yes, we might look ordinary, but some of us still have the gift of traveling to the stars and back." Jack notices the hush as he concludes, "So we are part factual and part mythological, just like everyone else."

"I thought jackalopes were fairy tales," says a young man.

"We are all made up of stories, some true and some less true," answers the old man.

Jack enjoys the ensuing silence and the tart taste of wheatgrass served in a luminous shot glass. This is the best bar in town.

Later, a Lakota woman tells about a family dog that sat at her grandmother's bedside, holding vigil during the death watch. Thick snow fell all night. Early in the morning, the dog knew exactly when the old woman's spirit passed. At that moment, it got up and walked out the door. When the family looked along the path, no tracks could be seen in the snow. No one ever saw the dog again.

#### JACKALOPE WALKS INTO A TWITTER BAR

Jack gropes in the satchel for his phone charger. He has a primo seat, on a riser where he can see everything, plus an electrical outlet is handy. What a great idea, a bar called Twitter Time, merging social media and face time. Best of all, the place is huge—fifteen screens of trending Twitter.

Around him flash giant images. One conversation circle reads: "#OscarsRedCarpet." Fashionistas sit here, all holding pink martini glasses. On the Dungeons and Dragons screen, a giant fanged frog charges black-taloned lizardfolk. The D&D groupies sit in flickering light, not flinching at the slaughter. Beyond them is an Audubon show where giant, pixelated eagles tend gawky hatchlings.

Nice variety. This new bar splashed pop-up ads all over Twitter for weeks, and Jack has wanted to see if the hype is warranted. Yes. Everyone has a group, and loners like himself can find space. Here he can be totally anonymous.

After his gin and tonic arrives, Jack stirs it slowly and reads the screen across from him, "#DissIn4Words." A red-eyed jackal flashes by with the legend "Carrion yum-yum-yum." A grinning zombie pop-up follows, "I prefer dead sex." The live stream continues with a Chihuahua holding a sign in its mouth, "*Your* baby is ugly." Next, a simple black-and-white tweet reads, "This trend is boring." Boring, maybe sometimes, but he appreciates the free laughs.

Across the room, Jack glimpses images of soft porn. A nude couple engages in poses, strategically edited. Slo-mo camerawork displays a man's toned torso, ocean spray, and a woman's backside. Then he sees a crowd of youngsters performing uncensored charades of mating motions. They wear matching Tee shirts, "4T: TITTIE TWITTER TIME TEAM."

He turns away and takes a long sip of his one allotted drink, a medicinal juniper berry infusion, better known as gin. What a day. He cold called clients in Albany for his telemarketer company, almost ten hours straight. He is ready to shift gears.

"Excuse, me, mister," says the bartender, a young jackalope with a red bandana around his neck.

"Yes?"

"Are you Jack, sometimes called Jaq?"

"Why, yes."

"Could you sign this napkin for me? Your Twitter Time screen is one of the most popular. You're a legend." The youngster hands him a felt-tip pen to autograph the square tissue.

"Delighted, but. . . ." Jack starts to sign but stops when he sees a familiar flicker in the bar mirror. His own bare ass. "Oh, my." He finishes his scrawl quickly and turns to a side wall where enormous pictures of himself, barely clothed, cavort with last year's friend-with-benefits. Several photos flash by, with the text, "Jack and Jill walk up the hill and take a tumble." His eyes look maniacal in the large scale. It is really him. The scar over his upper lip is unmistakable.

He has to contact Jill immediately. But before he can find Jill's number, his full frontal image flashes. His enormous mouth distorts as he lip-synchs a song. Oh no, he is pantomiming "I'm Too Sexy." Jack winces. The "catwalk" part is coming up, about shaking his "tush." He cannot take his eyes off the train wreck as his trousers sink lower. He was definitely in his cups. Was it Jill who took that one? Or Gladys? The other bartender comes over, "Hey, you're Jack. Great stuff on Twitter! Can I take your picture?"

Jack stifles a groan and tries to strike a dignified pose. After all, photographs last forever on the Internet. Has he really tweeted enough private moments to create a continuous video loop? What have his exes shared? All this is happening too fast.

Then he hears his voice singing “Home on the Range.” This episode shows him buck naked in the shower. When he washes his genitals, some of the bar crowd applauds. How did that get online? The screen changes to “Watch-A-‘Lope-Poop,” and there he is sitting on a toilet with the crossword puzzle. At the end of the scene, including the messy wipe, is a credit— “Edited by #WALP.” Jack shakes his head. Some people have too much time on their hands.

“Hey, it’s Jack!” The bartender calls over a couple more friends. Soon the crowd grows in geometrical progressions, as fast as rabbits can multiply.

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