



END of the Rainbow

R. j. h0yle

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End of the Rainbow

(A Sample Edition)

R.j. hOyle

Dedication

My family and friends.

KRIS

CLAY HAD A BURNING CRAVING for something . . . in his haste to leave, he forgot his nicotine patches at home. He needed a cigarette. He rubbed his belly and frowned. His skin was a ruddy, deep tan, and small flakes of dry white skin dotted his cheeks and hands. He had passed out at a pool party the weekend after the layoffs, and his former co-workers were too drunk and too uncaring to notice that his skin had turned a searing red.

The last pink threads of the sunset had disappeared, and Clay felt a sharp nip in the air. He zipped his thin blue jacket shut. The itch to smoke increased, so he left the pump to turn off on its own, and he strolled up to the cashier's booth.

Behind a dim yellow window, under garish yellow lights, the attendant, a gaunt, old man sat swiveling back and forth in his chair.

Clay spoke into the oily silver grate, "Pack of Marlboro's, please."

"Clay?"

He had barely glanced at the man when he walked up, but the voice sounded familiar. Clay paused and blinked before responding. "Hi . . . I'm sorry. It's been awhile since I've been here . . ."

Clay frantically scanned the man's face and clothing. The old guy wore a rumpled black T-shirt with a faded death metal band insignia, but no employee nametag. He gave Clay a lopsided grin, slapped the shelf in front of him, and chuckled as he reached above his head for a pack of cigarettes.

Clay thought he looked at least 65. Ragged lines zigzagged across the man's face, his shaved head had outcroppings of bristly, patchy stubs, and his tinted glasses did little to hide his cloudy, bloodshot, eyes. Clay visibly winced when he noticed a few seeping, bubbly blotches on his neck and forearms. When he turned back and opened his mouth to cough, Clay saw that he only had a few teeth.

The attendant popped Clay's cigarettes into the turn box, and drew his chipped, stained fingernails across his scalp.

In a hoarse voice, he said, "It's me Kris. Kris Fenton. Remember? We used to live next door to each other!"

"Shit, Kris! Sure, sure, how *are* you man? I'm sorry. My mind is in other places right now. How've you been, Dude?"

"Hell, you look great! I've been doing fine, fine. Been living outside of town in the lakeside trailer park with my third wife. You remember, Tracy? Captain of the cheerleader squad?"

"Yeah, yeah. Cute girl. Blonde, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. That's her." He glanced nervously around his booth, "But, uh, I only been working this job 'cause I'm kind of in-between jobs." He twisted his shoulders one way then the other, and said, "You know how it is in a small town."

Clay bobbed his head up and down in an effort to look sympathetic and said, "Sure, sure, I know. It's tough everywhere."

Clay darted his eyes to the side and dug his thumbnail into his leather wallet. He and Kris went way back, they used to scoot around the neighborhood every day after elementary school getting into all sorts of trouble. Later, in high school they played on the football team. Kris wasn't his closest friend, but he had been a good friend—at one time. As Clay looked at Kris's eager face, he wanted to fill the void that had spread between them for far too long. "I just lost my job too. You know, outsourcing, downsizing, that kind of thing."

"Aw, man, sorry to hear it!"

Kris smiled, leaned forward on the shelf, and started talking fast, telling Clay about his latest wedding. As Kris spoke, Clay couldn't understand what had happened to him. He last saw Kris at Clay's mother's funeral—but this was not the Kris he remembered. Girls used to fight over him because of his flowing white-blond hair and timid blue eyes.

Clay kept scanning Kris's face. Then he noticed Kris avert his eyes and put one hand over his mouth. To deflect the uncomfortable moment, Clay faked a coughing fit, and then laughed too loudly.

The phone in the booth rang. Clay watched in surprise as Kris leaned back, lifted up the receiver, plunked it back down, and continued on with his story.

When he finished, Kris asked, "So, I hope you're here for the reunion, huh?"

"Yeah, thought it'd be a distraction, from, you know . . . stuff." Clay chuckled self-consciously, and glanced down at his wallet again. "And I wanted to see what everyone's been up to." He pulled out some bills and slid them into the tray.

Kris passed him his change, and said, "Cool man, I'll see you there! Hell, things have changed for sure."

The long trip had caught up to Clay. He felt exhaustion closing in, and he needed to get off of his feet. He figured he would find out later what Kris meant by "change."

Clay lightly tapped on the booth's window and said, "Great, great, we'll catch up more then."

As soon as Clay's back was turned, Kris stopped smiling. He clicked on the loud speaker, and in a dull tone said, "I'll be here all night—if you need

anything!"

Clay turned part way around, and gave Kris a short salute as he walked back to his car.

After getting the pump receipt, Clay waved to Kris as he drove past the booth. Kris smiled, bounced in his chair, and waved back, but then his smile collapsed as he watched Clay pull out of the station.

When Clay got onto the main road, he said, "Jesus! Jesus freakin' Christ, what the hell happened to him? He looks twenty years older than me!"

Angie

CLAY CHECKED INTO THE DREAMY NIGHT INN, and when he entered his room, he dumped his bags next to the bed. The dusky pink room had a slight musty odor. Erratically ridged wallpaper covered the back wall. It looked as if someone had skinned a large, sick lizard. He rooted through the drawers and closets, but no leftover goodies remained. Sometimes, when he travelled on business trips, and if the maids were lax, he found money, books, or unopened booze. He perched on the end of the bed, flicked through the channels on the TV, then pulled out a flask of scotch from his bag, and took a few slugs.

"Figures; no porn," he grumbled. So, he smoked a few cigarettes. When he finished channel surfing and smoking, he curled up under the duvet. He intended to take a short nap, but when he woke up, it was 5 AM, and his stomach burned and growled.

He left the hotel to look for an all night fast food joint. When he got to the hotel parking lot, he found a thin layer of gritty frost on his car. As he drove down the main drag, he felt buoyed to see a few neon lights blinking and fluttering near the highway ramps, so he pulled into an old favorite haunt from his youth, the Chik-Deal-Ee-O. It was a family-owned, statewide franchise chain that setup locations in small towns near highways. It stayed open twenty-four hours a day, every day. In high school, after partying all night, he and his friends used to order heavy bags of soggy fries and grease-caked chicken. They hung out in the side parking lot eating their food, and teasing each other until they sobered up enough to head home.

A laconic female voice came over the menu board's scratchy speaker and asked, "Help you?" After he placed his order, she asked, "Do you wanna Mega-Bang your drink?"

"What?" he asked.

In an impatient tone, she said, "Mega-Bang your drink, Sir?"

"Wha—no, no thanks."

As he drove around the corner, he mumbled, "What the heck is a Mega-Bang?"

He eased up to the pick-up window, and when he rolled down his car window, a blast of chilly air stung his cheeks. Behind the shuttered film-covered window, a white-haired, fifty-something-year-old woman stood dreamily scratching her arms. When she cracked open her window, Clay saw

that she had big brown bags beneath her eyes, and pallid, puffy skin. She wore the Chik-Deal-Ee-O uniform that had not changed in forty years -- a mud-brown polyester pantsuit with dull yellow stripes running down the sides. It wrapped her chubby frame in an unflattering embrace.

Clay said, "Sorry, I couldn't hear. How much is it?"

"\$18.53," she said.

As Clay rooted in his wallet for his debit card, she leaned sullenly against the window, and gnawed on a piece of neon green gum that darted in and out of her mouth like a small nervous animal seeking escape.

The window squeaked as she cracked it open a little wider. "Clay?"

He looked up quizzically and nodded. Here was another person who recognized him, but he didn't recognize her.

The woman leaned forward, and said, "Hell, Clay, you look great! What'cha doing here?"

The window was thick with condensation, so he could not read her nametag.

Clay handed her his credit card and pitched his voice a little too high as he tried to pretend to recognize her, "Hi! How you been? Ah . . . I'm here for the reunion."

As she turned to process his card, she said, "Just a sec."

Clay desperately searched her face for a familiar feature. Then he recognized a telltale half-dollar sized jagged scar on the side of her neck. It was Angie, a girl he once had a *major* crush on in Junior High. When she was nine, she almost died when she ran into a sliding glass door, and a broken shard sliced her throat near her carotid artery. The scar never went away.

She nudged the window open all the way, and as she handed him his food and card, he asked more confidently, "So, Angie, how . . . how are you?"

She stared into the distance over the roof of his car, and feverishly scratched her arms. "Oh, you know, been doing this and that."

Then she leaned out of the window, squinted at him with a gapped-tooth grin, and said, "So, the reunion, huh? Well, I ain't going to that. Kris is shacked-up with that whore, Tracy. Me and him used to be married, you know? So, I don't wanna go an' see them two. Besides, I don't do no more of the crap they get into. It ain't no fun for me." She paused and moved her tongue around in her mouth.

Clay blinked and nodded. He was not sure what to say.

She cleared her throat with a raspy, congested cough and spit into a tissue. "That bastard dumped me soon as the money my dad left me run out. It only run out 'cause Kris was using it on all sorts of . . . shit."

Clay realized that it was best not to mention his earlier conversation with Kris, so he said, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. No, I didn't know you all got married."

He paused and looked down at his bag. He cradled the toasty sack, and it warmed his thighs and chilly hands. The inside of the car windows clouded over from the steamy food, and the smell of chicken made his mouth water. His stomach contracted into painful, loud spasms.

He decided to offer her some vague, polite support, so, he looked up and stared through his windshield, and said, "I kind of know how tough that can be . . . I mean how tough divorce can be."

"Huh. Yeah, well, it sucks," she replied. "You gonna be here long?"

His stomach contractions made him wince, and he said, "No, not long." When he glanced up, he saw that she was frowning at him, so he asked, "How's your Mom?"

"Aw, well, she died a few years ago. Just me and the two kids in a trailer in the back of her old house. I rent the house out for a few bucks to keep the mortgage payments up. This job don't pay shit," she said as she waved her hand around.

"I can imagine," Clay grunted as he maneuvered the bag of food securely onto the passenger-side floor. "Hey, by the way, can I have a few of the smoky-barbecue packs?"

She leaned out to hand him the packs, and he caught a whiff of a foul stench coming from her mouth.

His turned his head slightly and said, "Hey, sorry about your Mom though."

She said, "Yeah, well—"

A loud beep went off to alert Angie that a new customer had arrived at the drive-through menu board. She rolled her eyes, jabbed the speaker button, and barked, "Just a second!"

Clay said, "Well, you're busy, I won't keep you. But, hey, Angie, nice seeing you again."

She put her head through the window and called out as he pulled away, "You too! Come on by the house an' visit if you can."

He waved out of the window and called back to her, "Will do, take care. Thanks!"

Between the smell from her mouth and the uncomfortable conversation, he wanted to floor it out of there, but he didn't want to look too rushed, so he gave the gas a light touch as he tootled out of the parking lot.

He waited until he had pulled into the hotel parking lot before he popped open the Chik-Deal-Ee-O bag. He didn't want to stink up his room with the

oily smell of fast food, so he stayed in his car to eat and drink the last of the whiskey in his flask.

As he chewed, he thought about Angie and Kris, and said to himself, "What the fuck is going on around here?"

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