

# STORIES

## 8 Hail Mary Pass

Jesse Thistle

*The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and violent men take it by force.*

*Matthew 11:12*

Dead silence screamed danger. The frenzied squeaks of prison-issued blue deck shoes on sealed cement confirmed it. That was, of course, followed by wet smacks, fast pops, loud cracks and finally a dull thud. Whoever that guy was who lay crumpled and unresponsive on the range floor, he wasn't conscious. His legs were seized straight, quivering uncontrollably and he had pissed and shit himself. Later, after the routine cell search and customary lock down, I heard that he had died en route to hospital. Apparently he stole a bag of chips from another inmate's canteen, but who knew? Furthermore, who cared? This was prison justice: the thief got what he deserved according to us and society—at least that's what I told myself to cope with the tragedy of this senseless act. All I knew was that I didn't know anything and I didn't see anything. I had only heard it. But I wouldn't even tell the guards that much. I had to survive, and you did that by keeping your mouth shut and turning your head. But why was this my last and best option? Why

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*Being a homeless person you're matter out of place. You're the grotesque, unwanted wildlife living in the urban-hinterland forests. Everyone stares at you, judges you and tells you to get a fucking job. The social distance that separates you from civilization also separates you from your own humanity. I know. I've lived it. Like some by-gone nomadic hunter-gatherer, you're exposed to nature's elements, starvation and disease. You're on an endless sojourn to nowhere and when your already precarious wanderings are complicated by serious injury, often times you fade away and die, forgotten and alone. I wasn't going out like that. I couldn't let it end that way.*

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When the doctor's assistant cut away the orange and black cast that surrounded my right shin and foot, she gasped. It smelled like Toronto during the summer garbage strike of 2009. Rotting meat and stale sweat filled the office. Her face told me the truth, even if she lied. "It looks all right. Excuse me one moment, Mr. Thistle, I have to get Doctor Jones." She rushed out in haste. My leg had been throbbing before I even came to the fracture clinic, my toes had turned bluish grey-green, and the back of my cast was leaking a swampy crimson. I knew things were not good so I rushed my post-surgery checkup ahead six days. It had been four weeks since I fell out of my brother's three-and-a-half-story apartment window (a causality of a drunken and drug-fuelled misadventure), and three weeks since the hospital had cast me out into the streets. My fall had shattered my right calcaneus (heel), destroyed my right upper ankle joint, broken my left scaphoid bone (wrist) and sprained my right wrist. The surgical team decided it was best to leave the wrists exposed so I could walk in crutches after they fixed the much more serious problem of my compressed right heel and ankle. They made the right decision, given my circumstances.

The lateral incision on the outside of my right foot was the typical way to fix my injury. Performed in a ninety-degree cut, it rode six inches along the back of the ankle and heel and six inches along the side of the foot. It should have worked. But I couldn't listen to Doctor Jones when he said no smoking, drinking or drugging. It's not like I didn't try to follow his orders,

I did. I just couldn't quit—I was an addict. More importantly though, I didn't have anywhere to live. Well, technically I did have a place to stay, my brother's, but it hadn't been cleaned properly in years. After my friend Alan stole the neighbour's vintage bicycle, my brother kicked me out, cast and all. Understandably, he had to do what he had to do. If he had kept me he'd have been evicted by the landlord and we both would've been homeless. When I look back now, I figure that's probably where I caught the infection that almost took my leg—and my life.

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When the doctor and the nurse came in with masks on their faces, my stomach dropped. The doctor had in his hand a tool to take the staples out, another one that looked like wire cutters, lots of gauze, a baby-blue weeping tray and some medical tape. When I finally got the courage to look down at my exposed leg I nearly fainted. The black, puss-filled blood blister on the front of my ankle resembled a giant deformed pierogi. My foot and lower leg around the wound was swollen, green, red and greyish-yellow. When Doctor Jones took the staples out, the edges of the skin peeled back, exposing fat, muscle, bone and metallic hardware. The smell was horrid. "Not good, not good at all," he remarked. "The surgery has been a complete failure. Your leg is infected and gangrene is setting in. I will clean it for now, cut away the necrotic skin and trim the bone, but you are at serious risk of losing your leg if you don't take care of yourself." With that, Doctor Jones set to work. At first I could handle the discomfort of him cutting my dead and infected flesh, but when I felt his full weight on my leg and then the sharp wet pop from his bone clipper I bellowed in agony, tears streaming down my face. My field of vision hallowed to pinpoints and then everything went glacier white. My hearing echoed and dulled, the voices of the doctor and nurse became distant, then inaudible. I was in shock. I vomited all over myself then passed out.

When I woke up my leg was again in a cast. I had on someone else's clothes and felt really weak, but I was clean. The nurse then came in and told me I was free to go but I had to speak to Doctor Jones before I left. She had in hand a prescription for antibiotics, a suction pump machine to attach to my half-dead leg to improve circulation, as well as a schedule for an

aftercare nurse who was to come and change my wound dressings twice a day. When I told the doctor I was staying at a homeless shelter, his face

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turned sullen. He knew, like I did, that it was a shithole of a place to recover in. I was used to staying there though. I had been homeless off and on for close to eight years before the drama with my leg. I had always been able to hold my own on the streets and in the shelter system, however, things weren't like before. Now I was wounded and helpless and I couldn't even walk, let alone defend myself. It didn't matter. I couldn't stay at the hospital. Unfortunately for me and others

in my situation, hospitals aren't in the business of letting people recover; they are in the business of making money. I guess the people who wrote the rules never figured that homeless people have crippling surgery too and need a safe place to recover, or maybe they did and didn't care. Who knows? All I knew was I wasn't welcome to stay.

Frightened, I grabbed the pump and script and stoically hobbled out of there. The worried look on my face, however, gave me away and told the cab driver I was scared and deeply concerned for my wellbeing. He didn't give a shit. He kicked me out halfway to my destination after he found out I didn't have the fare to pay for my ride.

The first night at the homeless shelter the pump was gone. By the third and fourth nights my prescription was, just like the expensive medical equipment, stolen. A week into my stay, the infection was back. Not surprisingly, the nurse never came. When I had the pump, my meds and my hope I could at least see the light at the end of the tunnel, I could at least dream of keeping my leg and walking on my own again. After my stuff was stolen, I just had nothing left. It was then that I totally gave up and turned to the two things that had always made me forget: drugs and alcohol. The personal needs allowance (PNA) I got every day at the shelter bought me my morning 'wake and bake' hit of crack, which killed the pain in my infected leg just long enough for me to make my way to Shoppers Drug Mart where I would steal mouthwash and razors—you'd be surprised by how much crack you can get for a pack of stolen triple blade Gillettes and how stupefied a bottle of mouthwash can make you. I became the Listerine Fiend when I drank that dental poison and Crackula when I smoked rock, but both personas were

really just masks I put on to conceal myself from the reality of my rotting leg and my pitiful homelessness.

The other homeless people on the streets who knew me tried to help my situation the only way they could. Some gave me free tokes of crack when the pain was unbearable, others shared their liquor when they'd find me passed out in the gutter. And the outreach people who knew me always gave me extra bus tickets, cigarettes and a clean pair of socks whenever they saw me. Privately though, after they left, I would breakdown and cry. I couldn't even wear both socks and the cigarettes and bus tickets they gave me couldn't fix my leg. It was around this time that I realized that I couldn't feel my toes anymore. They were cold and didn't move. Day by day the greyish-blue hue had turned waxy black. I hadn't even noticed because I had been too busy feeling sorry for myself in my hazy oblivion. The toenails fell away at the slightest tug or bump and the skin sloughed off whenever I scraped it with my finger. It was happening: my foot was dying just like the doctor had said it would. I again rushed myself to the hospital.

He looked furious. "Do you know how sick you've made yourself?" Doctor Jones said. The nurse promptly rammed a thermometer in my ear. I was sick, I could feel it. My upper leg and torso felt like they were on fire and my head had been spinning for over a week. Doctor Jones told me he didn't even have to cut the cast off; he could smell the damage I'd done to myself. "Mr. Thistle, based on your condition during your past visit and your condition today, I regret to inform you that we will have to amputate your leg. The infection is severe and if it spreads to your brain or heart it will kill you." His words thundered into my brain and made my heart sink. I don't remember thinking anything but I do remember the words, "Like fuck you are!" erupting from my mouth. They came from somewhere deep within me. They were a knee-jerk reaction to an impossible proposition. Frantically I stumbled up, mounted my crutches and seesawed down the hospital hall tossing myself out the back door. It was all automatic. Before I knew it I was in the dorm room at the homeless shelter; I don't even recall how I got there. Not wasting any time, I packed what little donated clothes I owned into a plastic grocery bag, collected my PNA and fled the premises.

The subway ride felt like an eternity. I clutched my Pyrex stem—which was loaded with pain-relieving crack I had purchased from my dealer before I left the homeless shelter—the whole way. These were narcotics I bought with the

horde of bus tickets I had gotten from outreach and my \$3.75 PNA. I had about a fifty piece. I promised myself that I wouldn't smoke it until I got to Brampton. I needed to get as far away from the hospital and the thought of amputating my leg as I could. Brampton, being where I grew up, seemed a safe and logical choice in my desperate flight.

Hopping the bus transit route 77 was easy. It was something that I used to do all the time when I travelled between Toronto and Brampton. Anyone can do it. All you have to do is tell the driver you're homeless and need to get to a shelter and they let you on every time. I had a cast on, how could the guy have said no? At Bramalea City Center, the air suspension hissed as the driver lowered the bus down for me to get off onto the platform. I promptly did so and hurried to catch the number 1A to Four Corners, downtown Brampton.

A funny thought entered my head as I coasted through my old neighbourhood. I remembered back to when I had done petty time in jail for shoplifting or for break-and-enter or breach of probation. I remembered how in jail I ate three square meals a day, I had a place out of the elements, I had all the medication I could ask for and a hot shower. I also remembered how I could rest, read and get healthy. Moreover, it was the best rehab imaginable. I then asked

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myself: Why the fuck am I wandering in the desert like a wounded animal? What I had to do became quite clear. If neither the hospital system nor the shelter system would help me, I had to force the jail system to do it. I had to use the system to my advantage, it was my only option. I knew the state couldn't let me lose my leg, not while I was incarcerated. It would make them look bad. And everyone knows that the government will spend billions not to look like fucking assholes. Besides,

and sadly I thought, no one gives a shit about a homeless guy with a rotten leg, but they do care about a guy who is willing to do anything to survive. And everybody loves a guy who is willing to sacrifice himself by throwing a hail-Mary pass in the dying seconds of the game. I had my plan.

"Last stop!" the bus driver called out as we entered the downtown terminal. With that, I stepped off onto the platform and into relief. I lit my stem. The sizzle of the stone in the chamber gave way to a milky stream of smoke that cascaded down my throat. The imaginary fire engine that howled in my ear

rang with the intensity that only smoking crack cocaine can conjure. My pupils widened and my heart raced. I found myself bravely striding towards a 7-Eleven pursuing the goal I had hatched on the bus. I had never done anything like this before. Never had I robbed someone, or even wanted to. But this was all way beyond wanting to do it. I had to. My circumstances demanded it. The hospital system didn't want to take care of me: I cost them money. The shelter system couldn't take care of me: they weren't equipped to take care of homeless people with major surgery. And I couldn't take care of me: I was a crack addict and alcoholic.

The crumbs which resembled flecks of yellow glycerine soap peppered the center of my palm. With the tips of my fingers I packed the leftover crack into my pipe and lit it. My leg had hurt slightly before but with this last blast the pain completely subsided. I was ready. I gritted my teeth, steeled my will, opened the door, walked in and robbed the convenience store; and in doing so, changed my life forever.

I robbed that store and was charged with uttering death threats and the schedule one offence of armed robbery. I served three and a half months dead time<sup>1</sup> but that didn't really matter though, because I was right: the state does care more about criminals than they do about the homeless. To prove it, I have my leg and my life. Inside, I received stellar treatment. I got all the rest I wanted, all the food and medication I needed and my leg healed up about halfway through my sentence. In court the judge told me that I had guts, that I was brave and that, given the circumstances, it was the right thing to do. A lot of other really good things have happened because of my decision on July 9. I finally entered rehab and got sober after fifteen years of hard-core addiction. I've been sober for seven years as of this point. I got married, ran multiple marathons, earned my high school diploma, got my driver's licence and currently, I am a student at York University working toward my undergraduate degree. It should be known, however, that I do not condone criminal behaviour, and this story shouldn't be read as validation to go and rob stores to make your life better. Before you judge my actions, I ask you: What would you have done if you were in my shoes?

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<sup>1</sup> Time spent before a bail hearing or after an unsuccessful bail hearing.



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Jesse Thistle

Jesse Thistle is Métis/Cree/Scot from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. In 1979, after some tragic circumstances within his nuclear family, he was taken in by his paternal grandparents in Brampton Ontario and grew up there. Jesse is happily married to the love of his life Lucie Pekarek-Thistle and is planning to have a family, fingers crossed. As well, Jesse is currently doing his undergraduate in History at York University in Toronto and is expected to graduate next year. At present, he is working on his undergraduate thesis—a regional history of Park Valley, Saskatchewan.

His work involves researching and working with contemporary Métis communities that are suffering from the effects of intergenerational trauma - mainly the Batoche area of Saskatchewan and the Temiskaming of Northern Ontario. As a consumer survivor of the streets, jail system, and addictions, Jesse keenly understands through lived experience Canadian social injustice and works at helping in those areas when and where time permits.