

# CheeseQuest

~or~

## *“Hana and Dad Float On Okay”*

Malcolm Woodstock

Six year-old Hana was almost done coloring in Princess Luchia’s ballgown—seafoam green, in the lines, because she wasn’t a barbarian—when Dad poked his head into her room.

“Hey,” he said. “Mom just went down for a nap. You wanna go to the store?” Hana looked up from her drawing.

“What are we getting at the store?”

“Feta cheese.” Hana didn’t know what that was. She furrowed her brow and bit her lip. She wanted to go, but she was in the middle of something—she still had the whole sky to color in.

“You don’t have to come,” Dad said.

“No, I... can I finish my drawing first?”

“You can finish it in the car.” Hana felt her face scrunch up in the same way it had that time she had taken a bite out of a lemon thinking it was an orange. Drawing in the car was generally awful, as it sometimes made her motion sick, and the bumpiness of the ride could mess up her lines. But...

“Well...” she trailed off.

“C’mon,” Dad said. “It’ll be fun.” And with those four words, Hana made her decision.



Dad turned over his shoulder from the driver’s seat to look back at her. “You buckled?”

“Mhm.” She was a big girl now, and was starting to get tired of Dad always thinking she wasn’t buckled. She liked doing it herself, and always made it happen right after she closed the door, so she could grab the right colored marker from her bag before the car got moving. She decided that the sky above Princess Luchia would be orange today.

“Is that Princess Rosebud?” asked Dad, who must’ve glanced at her drawing. She was too focused in on her craft to look back at him.

“No, this is Princess Luchia.”

“Oh, my mistake.” Dad turned the keys and Hana heard the sound of the engine sputter awake, then the sound of the prayer beads hanging on the stick next to the wheel “thump” against the dash as Dad moved the stick next to the wheel. “Is she the mermaid?”

“No, that’s Princess Pauline.” Scribble scribble. It was the wrong shade of orange, but she’d live with it. “And she’s not a mermaid anymore, I changed it.”

“Oh yeah?” The car backed out of the driveway and the journey began.

“Yeah. She’s a mershark now.”

“A mershark?”

“Uh huh. Like a mermaid, but a shark.”

“Gotcha.”

“Her teeth are pointier.”

“Gotcha.” Hana looked up, and her eyes followed the lines of the closest telephone wire as they passed by outside. Dad thumbed on the radio. “So which one’s Princess Luchia?”

“Oh, she’s the mean one. She’s my favorite.”

“Your favorite? The mean one?” Hana looked up at Dad, who was making a face into the windshield that she couldn’t interpret.

“I think she’s funny.”

“Gotcha...” Dad trailed off. Hana didn’t recognize the song on the radio, but it sounded nice. It was good coloring music. “Hey...” Dad continued. “You don’t want to grow up to be like Princess Luchia, do you?” Hana made a face.

“*No!*” She loved Dad, but sometimes he could be d-u-m-b. “She’s the *mean* one, Dad. You don’t want to be the *mean* one.”

“Yeah?”

“I want to be like Princess Rosebud. She’s the *best* one.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because she’s nice and she’s pretty.”

“Oh. Good.”

“And because she’s a cowgirl.” Dad chuckled, and the song on the radio petered out and something new faded in. Hana thought she recognized this one, and Dad clearly did, because he made an excited noise and slapped his palm against the edge of the steering wheel.

“Who sings this one, honey?”

“I...” Hana thought hard about it, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, marker no longer moving across the page. “I don’t remember.” Dad nodded.

“This is ‘*Modest Mouse*.’ You’ve heard this one before.” Hana didn’t recognize the name, but she didn’t have time to say anything before Dad cranked the radio up and began belting out the words. Hana thought Dad was being very silly, but she did like his voice, and that always made for a better time coloring.

The song carried them the rest of the way to the store. Dad pulled into the parking lot just as the song concluded, and he reached for one of the spare water bottles he kept in the passenger seat to cool his throat. Hana had colored everything in except for the top right corner.

Hana didn’t ask who Dad wanted to be until they made it to the store’s automatic front doors. This was because both Dad and Mom had told her that the parking lot was dangerous and that she wasn’t allowed to ask questions while holding Dad’s hand in the parking lot. To her great surprise, it was Dad who spoke first.

“Who do you want to be?” he asked when they were standing inside the strange room in between the store and the outside. And she loved him because she didn’t even need to ask.

“Princess Rosebud,” she replied.

“And who do you want me to be?”

“You can be My Trusted Advisor.” Dad nodded, furrowing his brow and rubbing a hand over his stubble.

“I think I can do that. I like that role. Are you ready?”

“What are we getting again?”

“Feta cheese.”

“No, I mean, *my Trusted Advisor*, what are we getting?” A glimmer appeared in Dad’s eye, and his posture changed to that of a more regal man, someone who held himself a little bit higher in the chest.

“We’re after the MacGuffin, my mistress,” he said in a voice that was slightly different.

“Gotcha,” Hana replied. “Lead on, then.” Dad smiled, clasped both hands behind his back, and then stepped forward through the second set of automatic doors and into the store. Princess Rosebud followed behind, moving as fast as she could to keep up with her Trusted Advisor, all the while taking long, wide steps like any cowgirl would. One hand near her hip, she remained ever ready, eyes narrowed and alert, darting around the store; because she wasn’t a barbarian—she was a princess. And that’s what Princess Rosebud did, at least.

“I’ve heard that there are plenty of bandits in this part of the kingdom, my mistress,” said Da—Her Trusted Advisor as Princess Rosebud eyed a very suspicious looking display case of strawberries.

“Bandits or goblins?”

“Both, my mistress.” Princess Rosebud shook her head.

“Can’t be both. The goblins would’ve eaten the bandits by now. Everyone knows that.”

“Ahh, quite right, my mistress. My mistake. The intel from our spy network must be compromised.” Hana didn’t know what that last part meant, but Princess Rosebud was pretty sure that wasn’t a major concern. The two passed by the fishmonger’s department, but Hana averted her eyes because she hated seeing the dead fish. Princess Rosebud, however, knew that princesses often had to make hard choices for the good of their people, and walking by the dead fish was a sacrifice she was willing to make for the kingdom. “I believe that we’re almost there, my mistress,” Her Trusted Advisor continued. “But there still may be danger afoot. There could be goblins *anywhere*...” Princess Rosebud’s heart quickened, and she felt her palms begin to sweat. The tension was killing her.

Finally, just as the milk aisle was in sight, Dad jumped in front of her and squatted down to her level, and brandished an imaginary *something*—maybe a sword or a club—at her. “Ahh! If it isn’t Princess Rosebud!” he shrieked in a high pitched voice. “After the MacGuffin, I hear? Well, if you answer these riddles three, I’ll—”

“Bang!” said Hana. Finger gun straight to the heart. The goblin didn’t stand a chance. The goblin fell back on his haunches and clutched at his chest with one hand.

“Ahh! You got me! How tragic! I only—”

“Bang!” she said again. “You’re dead. You can’t talk if you’re dead. Everyone knows that.”

“Oop! You’re right.” Dad stood back up and resumed his previous role. “Ah, Princess Rosebud! I lost you for a moment! It appears as though you’ve disposed of this goblin.” Her Trusted Advisor grimaced. “In cold blood, no less.”

“Somebody had to do it,” she muttered, staring wistfully at the spot in the concrete floor where Dad had been just a moment ago, as if the goblin was still there.

“So it seems...” Princess Rosebud placed her hands on her hips.

“This town wasn’t big enough for the two of us.” A nearby granny with a cart full of groceries chuckled, despite how serious this whole situation was. Princess Rosebud continued to brood at the imaginary corpse. One day, the people of this kingdom wouldn’t have to deal with such tragedies. Someday, things would be better. The hero would come, she was certain of it. And she’d do her absolute best to help that guy out when the time was right. Then the land would be peaceful again, and there would be no more need for gunslingers in these parts. And maybe her and the hero would get married. Hopefully he’d be handsome. That wasn’t the important part, though. Saving the kingdom. Yeah.

Hana shook her head, escaping the dream. She tugged a hand on Dad's pant leg and motioned for his ear with her finger. He leaned down, and she whispered to him, as if she had to—as if they were still “on-camera.” “You did really good!” she said. “That was such a good one!”

“You too!” he whispered back. He winked at her and gave her shoulder a squeeze.

“Are we almost there?” Dad nodded.

“It's right up here, sweetheart.” He stood back up and took a few steps over to one of the coolers, and withdrew a small green carton from one of the lower shelves. “Behold, my mistress,” he said, then handed it to her.

“Finally,” Hana replied, taking the carton in her hand. “The McMuffin.” Inspecting the carton, something finally clicked into place in Hana's mind. “Oh!” she said, holding the carton up to show Dad, as if he hadn't just handed it to her. “I *do* know what this is! This is the white cheese we eat with potatoes!”

“It is!”

“I *love* this cheese!”

“Good! Because we're having potatoes and eggs for breakfast tomorrow.” This was earth-shatteringly, monumentally important news.

“*Wow!* Thanks, Dad!”

“Yeah, you're welcome. Are you glad we went to the store now?”

“I always love going to the store with you, silly.” Dad chuckled again.

“Let's go home and bug Mom, then.” Hana beamed.

“Okie dokie.”

Hana shook the carton of cheese the entire way up to the check-out. The sound of the cheese crumbles bouncing around inside the container was really satisfying. It wasn't every day you got to shake the cheese container. The granny at the checkout smiled at Hana while Dad fished in his wallet for a few bills. She got to ride on Dad's shoulders on the way back to the car, and being that high up was always both a terrifying and thrilling experience. It wasn't every day you got to pretend to be a giant in the parking lot *and* shake the cheese container.

When they made it back to the car—and Hana had buckled up without being asked—Dad reached into the glove box and withdrew a CD, then slotted it into the player.

“Here.” He handed her a small booklet. “Page three or four. There are words for the song, there. You wanna help me out?” Hana took the booklet but made a face.

“I don't know if I can read that fast.” Dad winked.

“You'll do just fine.” Then Dad turned up the volume and pulled out of the parking lot. And the two began to sing.

*I crashed my car into a cop car the other day!*

*Well he just drove off, sometimes life's okay.*