

# HELL TRAIN

A SHORT HORROR STORY

COMPLETE STORY, FREE TO READ

## HELL TRAIN

By Nathan Seals

Content note: domestic abuse, sexual assault discussed in a non-erotic context, suicide, gore, and child endangerment.

[DOWNLOAD PDF](#)

[SUPPORT THE WORK](#)

## HELL TRAIN

The first time I ever remembered being afraid, I was about seven years old. I think. I'm not positive. What I remember very vividly is hearing, clear as day, the sound of that horrible train. Its horn screamed up out of the distant abyss of the night, calling to me.

Haunting me.

The sound made no sense, especially considering our little Midwestern town had long since abandoned its tracks in favor of a cheaper alternative. The old rails ran straight through the center of town, rusted over, overgrown with weeds nobody cared enough to pull.

Maybe it was because it was so late at night. Maybe it was because I wasn't expecting it. Either way, the sound of that horn made my very soul leap, and the fear it left burned itself down somewhere deep with no hope of ever leaving. I remember feeling hopeless. Lost. Dreading something I had no name for.

That is my earliest memory.

I remember mentioning it to my mother. She told me she hadn't heard anything; probably just a semi-truck on the local highway, honking at some fool. I wasn't convinced, but I never pressed the issue after that. Not that the sound cared whether I pressed it. Night after night I heard the horn, and night after night I hid myself under my dinosaur covers.

The sound was unsettling.

The sound was terrifying.

And for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why.

///

My mother was a homemaker in the truest sense of the word. She stayed home all day and cooked and cleaned, kept the house spotless and dinner on the table for whenever my father came through the door, and she normally had me in bed before that happened.

My father was a burly, hardworking man with a giant bushy brown beard, a man who liked working with his hands and was probably the hairiest human being I have ever known. He loved butterscotch hard candy; you always knew where he was in the house by the rustle of the wrappers. His name was Robert, but he went by 'Bob'. Bob also enjoyed shouting at the television whenever his team wasn't playing up to his expectations, or whenever a reporter wasn't telling the truth as Bob understood it. From what I've gathered, he was one of the most liked and respected men in that tiny ass town.

Kind of ironic, all things considered. Especially knowing what I know now.

He worked long shifts, and most days we barely saw him. Usually I was asleep before his boots hit the porch.

That's how I knew him.

I didn't. Lucky me.

I wasn't aware of it at the time, but as the years went by I worked out that after a long shift at the factory, my father went to the bar and drank. So when he got home at night with the alcohol on his breath, my mom would go quiet and nervous and wait on him hand and foot until he collapsed into that gray recliner of his and slept like something shot, then woke without a word and took himself to bed.

When my father got home early, he'd smack me upside the head and call me a 'little shit'. He'd yell when I refused to sit on his lap and tell him about my day, yell when I wouldn't hug him. Maybe it was because he was basically a stranger to me. Maybe it was because I never knew which man was coming through the door: the one who wanted to be my best friend, or the one pulling his belt out of its loops. Mom said the moods were probably just an effect of the old factory he'd worked in most of his life.

Maybe I did enough to deserve it. Maybe it was my fault.

I don't know...

Another thing I remember is his smell. Most people remember their father's smell, I guess. His was death; like his body was rotting from the inside out. I'm a grown man now, and when I catch a whiff of anything close to it, my whole day goes quiet.

One night, when I was four, my father caught my mother 'allowing' me to color on one of our walls. He slammed me against that wall hard enough to knock the wind out of me, and he screamed on top of his lungs that I needed to stop being so childish, and he spat in my face, and he swore at me. Mom stood back, silent, and didn't try to stop him.

Not that she could have done anything.

Later that same year, late on Christmas Eve, my father drank more than he had ever managed before, came home, and dragged my mother into their bedroom. I was asleep in the room underneath theirs, and the noises woke me, and I climbed the stairs hoping I would catch Santa laying out my gifts.

I caught my father instead, on top of my mother, and my mother crying and begging him to stop.

I called out for her. She covered her mouth, in horror and in shame. And when my father saw me standing there, he called me a little pervert for wanting to watch, and he did not stop. I could not move. My legs simply declined the conversation. I stood petrified in that doorway while my mother begged him, for the sake of 'our son', and got nothing for it.

After that night, mom stayed inside her bedroom as much as she could, and my father came home later and later.

Then one day he showed up ranting and raving about a train horn going off somewhere, demanding to know which of my toys had made the sound. This caught my attention like a hook, because he was the only other person who had ever heard it. My mother gave him the same speech she'd given me, the semi-truck on the highway, and my father backhanded her for talking back.

That was the night he started hitting my mother, and the night she began to lose the rest of herself to him. He grew more rage filled with every month that passed. I learned to avoid him. Whenever he came home I slipped into my bedroom and blocked the door with an old rocking chair, and there I'd sit for hours, playing with my GI Joes and trying not to hear my mother's

screams through the wall. I would stare at those figures and ask them to come to life. To help me. To protect mommy and me.

No help ever came.

///

I spent a lot of time in my room. When I turned twelve I was allowed a bit more freedom outside the house, and I took every inch of it, roaming the streets after school on an old Schwinn my parents had bought for fifty cents at a yard sale. I'd ride for hours, meet up with a few friends, make the town's usual small trouble. Anything to stay away from the house.

Kids in our town had a curfew, and the curfew was the street lights in the square. "Head home right when the lights turn on, whether it's dark or not," mom always said. "You make your way right home when the lights come on."

I usually beat the lights home. I wanted to be there in case my father got off work early; I had appointed myself something, though I couldn't have told you what.

One day I came through the door to a shout and a loud thunk on the floor. From my bedroom door I could see into the living room: my mother weeping on the floor with a bloody nose and one eye already swelling shut, and my father storming out, slamming the door hard enough to crack its window.

I'm pretty sure that window is still cracked.

Heh.

I ran out to her, but she just lay there with a vacant expression, her breath shallow, and she did not respond to me at all. Not to my voice. Not to my hand on her shoulder.

She was broken.

That night I knelt beside my bed and prayed to God. I asked him to kill my father and save my mom.

///

Months passed without much change. Then Dad showed up one evening ranting about the train horn again, and my mom hastily agreed that she'd heard it too, though she'd heard nothing. It became a pattern: he'd show up, mention the train, and pass out in the recliner. Mom grew worried for him, God help her. I grew curious. I hadn't heard the train myself in years.

Eventually mom suggested, gently, that he see the local therapist about his drinking, and my father, ever prideful, promised to murder her if she ever suggested something that stupid again.

She complied. And that was when he asked her where dinner was.

My bedroom had a clear line on the kitchen, and I peeked out the door. Mom told him the truth: she'd stopped cooking dinner months ago, because most nights he ate at some restaurant in the city and came home fed and drunk.

"But I wanted to eat your shit cookin' tonight," he shouted, and grabbed her by the throat, and squeezed. He shoved her up against the counter, pulled the gun out of the drawer (the one reserved for emergencies), and pressed the barrel to her forehead.

I watched my mom beg for her life.

Her pleas landed on nothing. He grabbed her by the hair and hauled her across the room. "Say you're sorry."

"I-I'm sorry."

"Sorry, sir."

"I'm sorry, sir," mom sobbed, while he waved the gun around like a madman. Then he cocked it and pushed the barrel up under her jaw.

"Why are you not cookin' now?" he growled, hate in his very soul.

"We... I... didn't have enough money to go to the grocery this week."

"Why the hell not!?"

He didn't want the truthful answer. She knew better than to give it to him, so she shook her head and invented some story about being loose with the money he'd given her, and I ran out of my room to stop him from doing something rash, and he hit me, and I went down and cracked my head against the tiled floor.

Hard.

And through the ringing I heard it: a strange chugging in the distance, and then the horn. The train. Years gone, and now plain as day, and louder than it had ever been. Every time the horn sounded my father flinched toward the window, muttering, sweat pouring down his face and neck.

I begged him to stop. My voice came out weak; my head was fog.

The gunshot filled the whole house.

It was loud.

So loud, in fact, that my right ear has never heard quite right since. Her blood ran off the counter and pooled out across the floor and soaked into my khakis and my spider-man tee. Her body hit the ground with a sound I will not describe, because I have never found words that

deserve it, and I looked on in shock while my ears rang and the train screamed somewhere out in the dark.

My dad turned to me. Blood was spattered across his face and shirt, dripping out of his beard. He pointed the gun at me, and his eyes were blank and full of hate at the same time, which I would have told you was impossible. He was no longer the man he once was.

He was something else.

And he was going to kill me.

"You shoulda stayed in bed, you little bastard," my dad growled.

I got my elbows under me and kicked his bad leg in as hard as I could. He dropped with a howl, and the gun clattered loose and slid away under the china cabinet, and I was up and running. My heart pounded through my chest; the train horn blared in my ears, or maybe that was the gunshot still ringing. I've never been sure. I kicked the front door open, rolled out onto the porch, came up with a twisted ankle, and didn't let it matter. I could feel my dad rising up somewhere behind me. I jumped onto the old Schwinn and rode, gritting my teeth through the pain.

It was after dark. I followed the street lights, those same curfew lights, as far as they went. The town was empty; nobody in that place went out after dark, so there was no one to flag down, and at the houses of the families I trusted, my knocking woke nobody. Door after door after door.

Then I was standing at the old tracks. You know the ones.

In the dark they stretched out into nowhere in both directions, enchanting and mysterious, rusted rails running toward whatever salvation might sit at the end of the line. Something in them told me to follow; to walk away from every horror behind me and just keep going until the tracks decided I'd gone far enough.

So I did.

It was a cold night. I could see my breath. I walked the Schwinn along beside the rails, one hand on the seat, because if I stopped moving my dad would find me, and murder me, and I did not intend to be murdered. The blood on my pant legs had frozen stiff by then and stuck to my skin, horrifying and uncomfortable in a single gruesome package.

Several miles down the line, I heard the train again.

I turned, fully expecting a headlight bearing down the tracks behind me. Nothing. No light anywhere in the distance. When the horn blazed again, louder than ever, I jumped off the tracks and swallowed the lump climbing my throat.

And the darkness melted off the night like mist.

The engine tore down those dead rails toward me with a bright red light burning at its face, and I threw my arms up against the glare. I had stepped beside the tracks instead of off them entirely, so when it went screaming past, the wind of it slapped me off my feet and onto my ass. The Schwinn went down the embankment into the ravine below. It would be years before anyone found that bike.

To be fair, I was a bit distracted at the time.

The train was beautiful and horrifying. My jaw literally dropped. The engine was massive, shiny chrome etched all over with gothic designs, strange symbols, gargoyles, smokestacks ranked down either side, and a plow of great spikes at the front built to impale anything that dared stand in its way. Behind it came passenger cars in reds and blacks lined with orange, one after another after another, melting back into the shadows down the line until counting them stopped meaning anything.

The wheels locked. The train skidded to a halt in front of me, and the screech of it sounded less like brakes than like the cries of the damned.

It was the Hell Train.

I watched, in awe, as the ornate doors of the car in front of me rattled open and let out a gout of gross looking smoke that puffed into the cold air and disappeared.

The first thing out was a foot. A gross, dark red foot, stepping down with incredible confidence, its black nails long and pointed and untouched by maintenance for at least a century. The foot belonged to a red skinned goblin-demon about five feet tall, wearing a fancy black vest, a hat, and a bowtie knotted tight around its neck, with a lantern strapped to its belt where some strange orange specter wisped about inside the glass like smoke.

It had pointed ears, skin plagued with warts and weeping rashes, and a smile of yellow needle teeth jutting up out of purple gums at every angle God never intended. A monument to poor dentistry, and easily its most distinguished feature.

Privately, immediately, I named him Snaggletooth.

The demon extended its hand toward me and spoke in a rough, raspy voice.

“All aboard, kid.”

Of course I hesitated. But I was in awe of the thing, and twelve, and out of doors to knock on. I reached out and grasped the demon’s hand.

I was going to go on an adventure.

///

Before I knew it I was pulled up into the train, and the doors closed behind me, and the wheels began to roll.

The car was beautiful. Gold everywhere; the chairs, the tables, the trim, all of it lined in gold. A dining car, clearly, for those who could afford to ride in such luxury.

"Name!" the demon called out, licking his thumb and fumbling through the papers on a clipboard, several dozen names checked off in neat little rows.

"U-uh..." I managed. "Jimmy. Jimmy August."

"There is no ticket for James August on 'ere for damn near..." The demon stopped and cackled, tapping one black nail on the clipboard. "Oh, I see. It's the mother that we have. I have her ticket right here."

He lifted a small black ticket with one word sprawled across it in bold red letters.

HELL.

I stared at him for only a moment, because the sounds of the other passengers pulled my attention out into the car. They sat at the golden tables, chattering happily, sipping tea, eating whatever was placed in front of them. And they were hard to look at. Blurry, like someone had smeared them on a photograph. In the corner of your eye they resolved into people; stare straight at them and they smudged away again. It was odd. They didn't seem to notice, or mind.

"I suppose you should come with me, then," the demon sighed, starting toward the door at the back of the car. "I have to make sure she's not already on board."

"She's dead, though. She died. I saw it."

The demon sneered and tapped his pen on the top of my head, condescending as a Sunday school teacher. "Is she, now?"

"Well," I asked, "where is she?"

The demon grinned. "You want to see her?"

"If she is here."

Snaggletooth smacked my head with the clipboard. "My clipboard is rarely wrong, son."

"Then take me to her. I want to see her." I rubbed the bump rising on my scalp. The grin drifted off his face for a moment; he looked down at his clipboard, and back at me.

"What is this place anyway?" I asked, mostly to keep him from thinking too hard about my intentions. My mother was not supposed to be headed to hell, and I was not going to allow it.

"This is the express VIP car," the demon answered, some distraction still in his voice. "Either way, you are not allowed in it. I'll take you to your closest family until the corporation tells me where to file you."

"Oh." The specters went on feasting around me. "Then take me to my mother."

"Fine. Fine." He grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door, held it open, waved me through. "Go through, go through. We don't have all eternity."

"Who are you?" The curiosity had filled me to the brim, and the questions had started pouring out on their own.

"I'm the conductor of this fine train," the demon replied, pride rasping through the words as we passed into the next car, another VIP car by the gold of it. "Chrichom is the name. But you can just call me 'Conductor'."

He was pretty chipper, for a demon. I'd always imagined them dark and seedy, rubbing their hands together, growling about tearing your limbs off or making you shove a scorpion up your own ass, or other things of that nature. The Conductor looked the part, but he carried himself with a bit of regal charm, calm and happy, hands folded behind his back.

Which was actually kind of unsettling.

"Why can't I see the people?"

Snaggletooth blinked, glanced at the specters, then back at me. "They're the wealthy."

"Wealthy?"

"Yea. The ones who spent their lives gathering points for the afterlife, tending to no one but themselves, keeping their own lives comfortable while the rest suffered. A greedy lot. But VIPs nonetheless. They deserve only the best." The Conductor cackled and dragged his fingernails across the gold plating as we walked.

One of the passengers rose from her seat as we passed. The Conductor shoved her aside without breaking stride, and I stared, confused, because these were honored guests; they'd earned their places, hadn't they, being some of the wealthiest people in the world. And then I noticed the chains. Golden chains, elegant as jewelry, locked around every ankle in the car and bolted to the tables they sat at. The passenger who had risen tried to follow us, hit the end of her chain, made a sound like a suddenly released hiss of wind, and was back in her assigned seat as though she had never left it.

We passed through several more cars like that one.

Around the fifth or sixth, the train changed.

The gold stopped. These cars were charred black, with ash drifting through the air and screams of rage echoing down their length. A red mat ran along the left side; the right side was all compartments, heavy metal doors latched shut, and the windows on the left had been sealed over with welded plates so that no light got in at all, save for the light that escaped the Conductor's lantern.

Two things became abundantly clear to me: these people were being held here, and I had no idea what to do with that information. So I followed Snaggletooth. The things inside the compartments screamed and hit the metal hard enough, some of them, to bow the doors outward, cursing, then begging, then returning to their screams.

It reminded me of a mental asylum. At least the ones I'd seen in movies.

The demon stopped at the compartment before the very end of the car and began unhooking the latches on its big metal door.

"Well. Here we are, kid."

///

Inside was the shell of an elderly woman.

She was bruised and bloody, her dark gray knuckles shredded down to bone from too much skin on metal contact. She was naked, parts of her covered in some black oozing liquid, pieces of her skin lifting slowly away from what was underneath. Her eyes were missing. In their places, cavities of dark ooze that leaked down her face like the memory of crying. She breathed in heaves, and when the door opened her head tilted toward us, sensing what she could no longer see.

The moment she heard the demon, she snapped. She came up off the floor screaming, bony fingers stretched out to strangle him, and my heart leapt as the decomposed thing charged at us. Snaggletooth snapped his fingers. Fifteen barbed wires shot out of the walls and ceiling, caught her mid-lunge, and dragged her to the rough bench on the right side of the compartment.

The rest of the compartment was thick metal, clawed and bloodstained, hung with rags of gray skin. The ceiling dripped the same black ooze that covered her, and the floor held an ankle deep pool of the stuff, warm as chewing gum worked too long between your fingers, and just as reluctant to let go. I had to wade through it to follow him in.

"Sit," Snaggletooth commanded.

I sat, on the far bench, eyes wide, while the old woman shrieked against the wires.

"You too, you old bat." A wave of his hand, and the wires forced her down onto the bench across from me, slicing deeper the harder she fought. She screamed and panted with a rage that had nowhere left to go.

"What's the matter?" Snaggletooth asked, with a feigned little note of concern. "Don't you recognize this wretched woman?"

I nodded, staring down at the ooze so I wouldn't have to stare at her. "It's my grandma."

"It certainly is," Snaggletooth cackled, brushing a bit of crust from one large nostril.

“Why is she here?”

Snaggletooth sat down next to me and draped his arm around my shoulders like we were old war buddies. “You know that you and your mother abandoned her, after she began to lose her mind. Shame of it is, she knew. Knew all along that she’d been left, and she didn’t take it well. But she isn’t angry at everyone, boy. She’s angry at someone in particular. Now who could that be?”

“Dad wouldn’t ever let us see her. He said she was a bitch.” I aimed the blame where it belonged, or where I wanted it to belong; the lump of guilt in my throat had its own opinion.

“Well, he wasn’t wrong,” Snaggletooth replied, watching the writhing woman with professional appreciation. “But I don’t think it was him she screams about.”

My grandma howled and threw herself against the wires, and they tightened, and her leathery skin folded over them, blood running down her body into the black tar.

“It was you! You fucking prick!”

Her empty sockets bulged toward me. Snaggletooth cackled with glee at what I imagine was a very visible view of my heart stopping in my chest.

“If it wasn’t for him knocking her up, she wouldn’t be with him anymore! Abusive asshole kept her locked in that house and forced me to die alone!”

My eyes filled while the old woman berated me, and it built to the last thing my grandmother ever said to me:

“She never even wanted you. You were a mistake we couldn’t afford to get rid of.”

“Alright, kid.” Snaggletooth slapped his thighs, casual as a man leaving a lunch counter, and stood. “I’ll be back when we get word on how to file you away.”

“I don’t want to be here,” I said. The tears were coming freely now. “I want to see my mother.”

“Well, too bad. I don’t know where she is.”

“I. Want. To. See. Her.” I growled it at him through the snot and the tears.

Snaggletooth snickered and took my chin in his hand, black nails biting my skin, and turned my face back toward my grandmother, who was still spitting curses at me while the wires slithered and cut. Three hooks held her: one in each shoulder, one in the back of her skull. She leaned into all of them to get at me.

“It’s unfortunate,” the demon said. “She could not bear knowing her little girl was suffering at the hands of a man like him. And it was, funnily enough, entirely your fault.”

“Shut up!”

I was on my feet, fists balled, whole body shaking. One step and I swung and clobbered the demon square in the jaw. He flew back and hit the wall and dropped into the ooze, and I was over the door sill and slamming it shut behind me while he spat and howled.

“My fucking tooth!”

I ran.

///

I needed distance from Snaggletooth, and I needed my mother before it was too late. *Maybe I can save her.* I remember thinking it over and over, car after car after car of ash and cells and rage.

I don't know how many cars I passed through before I reached the different door.

It was rounded, bowed outward, with a small set of bars where the other doors had windows, and smoke poured out around its seams into the car I stood in; whatever ran this next car, the whole train breathed its ash. The handle was a spin lock, the kind you crank several full turns before anything gives. It took me several tries. Then the door unlocked with a loud clang, and I hauled it open with all of my might.

The light hit me like a wall.

The car was aglow, a brilliant burning orange, the same color that lived inside the Conductor's lantern. I shielded my eyes and pushed in anyway, calling out as I crossed the sill.

“Mom? Are you there?”

The door slammed itself shut behind me, and I was lost in a void of burning oranges and reds. The heat was overwhelming. Sparks burst up off the ground and stung my face while I stumbled around looking for a door that wasn't there anymore.

“Mom?”

No reply. Only the roar of flames, and the sweat pouring down my forehead faster than I could wipe it. The car drank me dry; my knees wanted the floor, and I nearly gave them their way and surrendered to the flame. Somehow I kept pushing forward.

Through the shimmer, a thin naked figure of a man came stumbling toward me, arms twisted up into a pose of surrender, and from it came a moan that I understood only much later to be pure and utter despair. His skin was burning off in patches, embers riding the peeled edges. His long gray hair was mostly gone, and what remained burned too, and his sunken eyes had gone bubbled and bloated with the heat. I stepped back and my hands came up into some sort of karate stance I'd absorbed from television.

He wasn't coming for me.

Another figure joined him, a heavysset woman ravaged the same way. Then two or three more, and more behind them, and I understood: it was a line. Single file, shambling through the car, moaning in one endless chorus, and that chorus was the roar I had taken for fire. I stumbled along through them, and one of them clipped me and simply moaned and adjusted its path around the obstacle I was.

I panicked. I ran, shoving through the burning bodies, faster and faster, until I ran straight into a naked woman and went down with her on top of me. I screamed. My heart threw itself against my ribs over and over.

“Mom?”

The woman tilted her head. Her eyes were red and bubbling with the heat, and she was crying; the tears turned to steam as they left her, and she screamed her torment inches from my face. She couldn't see me. The back of her head was gone. A chunk of her forehead was missing, dead center.

“Mom! Everything is going to be okay, alright? Everything is going to be...”

Her left eye burst. It splattered across my face and into my mouth, sizzling where it landed, and her screams and mine braided into a single sound. I tried to crawl out from underneath her, and couldn't. She was too heavy. I was pinned flat, face to face with my dead mother.

Then a great pike punched through her right shoulder and slammed into the floor beside my head. She croaked, shrieked, and rose into the air on the end of it, hoisted up and presented like a trophy by a demon in rusted armor with a bandana knotted around its head. The armor looked less like armor than like a boiler with ambitions, and the thing wearing it looked less like the goblin Conductor than like an overweight, mutated man with glowing eyes and forty odd piercings.

“Heretic!” the monster boomed, over every scream in the car at once. “Into the furnace with you!”

Its laughter shook the floor. It swung my mother around on the pike and flung her, limp as a rag doll, onto the mound of burning bodies heaped into a furnace that chose that moment to reveal itself to me: a mouth of iron, stories tall, stuffed with the writhing and the screaming, the ones on the bottom pinned under the weight of twenty more.

I was up before I knew I was up, hammering my fists against the demon's armor to make it look at me.

“Let my mother go! She did nothing wrong! She was murdered!”

The demon laughed and shoved me back with two fingers. “All that are guilty claim innocence. Why does no man claim his own guilt? Her fate is her own.”

I couldn't believe my ears. Some part of me had decided this was a dream, that I was making it all up somewhere safe. But there she was.

Screaming.

Burning alive.

"She is my mother..." It came out a whisper.

"She worshiped the man she called 'husband'. He was her god, and for that she is damned to serve as fuel for the fires of this train. For all of eternity." The demon smacked the butt of its pike against the floor, punctuation for the sentence it had just handed down. Then it turned and raised one fat finger at my head.

"Same as you."

I took several quick steps back as the meaning landed. Then I turned and ran. The floor shook under its charge behind me; I slid across ashen embers, tripped over a fallen body, got up, kept running, blind, no direction left in me except away. A door found me before the demon did, the twin of the one I'd entered through. I cranked the lock over and fell through it.

///

The door slammed behind me with a loud and final clang.

I lay panting on the floor of a darkened car, waiting for my eyes to adjust, and pushed the matted hair off my face. My palm came away from my forehead sticky.

Not soot. Red.

Blood.

I put my hand back down and found the floor slick with it, thick and old. I stood, too exhausted for horror to work properly anymore, and heard the whispers: all around me, swelling and fading at random, almost a chant and not quite. A fresh tide of blood slid lazily in across the floor, lapped over my shoes, and drew back out. The car was breathing it. In the fresh red, faces formed, and their chant arrived inside my head rather than through my ears.

Son.

I shook my head clear and looked toward the far end of the car, and what I saw there caught me off guard and made perfect sense at the same time, in the way the worst things do.

The entire car was crimson: floor, walls, ceiling. Grates in the ceiling corners dripped at random, and the deeper into the car you looked, the fresher the blood ran. At the very end sat a large wooden throne, soaked in it, old blood under new. And on the throne sat a huge naked figure, drenched, staring down absently at the tide as it breathed in...

...and out.

The blood in the whole car moved to match its breathing.

Every hair had been plucked from its body. It had been gutted, the innards drawn out of its stomach and strung along massive chains draped and bolted across the walls of the car, hung like Christmas lights. Its bound hands lay useless in its bare lap. And the throne itself was built with spearpoints angled inward, so that the figure sat impaled on its own seat, held upright by the things going through it.

I swallowed hard, and stood, and could not stop staring at its face. Parts of it were familiar. I couldn't place which parts, and the not-placing became its own obsession, and then my foot bumped something metal: a large rusty lever, standing up out of the pool of blood, primed to be pulled.

Everything in the car was quiet except the breathing.

I stopped in front of the throne. My mouth opened, and nothing came out; it waggled through the shapes of words I hadn't chosen yet. I closed it. Gathered what there was left of me to gather.

"I want my mother back."

The figure raised its head and looked me directly in the eyes.

The grip that closed around my soul then, I cannot describe. My legs locked. My lungs stopped taking suggestions. Because I knew the face.

He was my father.

His face was almost normal, save that the hair was gone, and the lower jaw had been split and folded wrong by the gunshot, the outside of his face pressed somehow into itself. He coughed up a rope of blood and rolled his head to keep from gagging on it, and his tongue moved loose in the ruin of his jaw as he tried to make words. He had been crying. He was in more pain than I have ever seen a living thing endure.

I stared at him. Angry. Confused.

Terrified.

Every muscle in him tensed, and he jolted against the spears toward me, tears still running, drool sliding down the red mess of his chin, and I stood there in pure shock while my father whimpered like a whipped dog and repeated one phrase over and over until my ears finally agreed to parse it.

"Kill me. Kill me. Kill me."

The whimpering broke into coughing. Across his chest I counted maybe ten holes, and every one of them exhaled dark blood with each beat of whatever still beat in there. Somehow, between the holes and the chains, I found enough steadiness to ask him the question I had carried through every car of that train.

“Why did you kill her?”

He mumbled. I hit him, one swing into his chest, and he screamed as the throne’s spikes took the movement out of him in trade.

“Mom was the most loyal, beautiful, kind woman I’ve ever known, and you destroyed her. I watched you destroy her and I couldn’t do anything about it. You’re sick. You’re pure evil, and I hate you. I hate you.”

Dad mumbled again, the words drowned somewhere in the wreckage of his mouth. I turned away and scrubbed the tears and the blood out of my eyes, because I was not going to sob in front of my bastard father.

The car began to fill.

Blood ran in from the ceiling grates at every corner and rose up out of the floor itself, and above the sound of it I heard him again, clearer now, begging.

“Kill me. Please.”

My eyes found the lever between us.

The blood reached my ankles. I put my hand on the rusted metal, and I knew, the way you know things in that place, that one pull would end him. Free him. He whimpered. He begged me to pull it.

I took my hand off the lever, and stepped back.

My father stared at me in shock as I walked past his throne, ducking through the chains and the strung guts hung across the car. Behind me he began to writhe and scream, cursing me while the blades peeled him for struggling.

He screamed that I would never amount to anything.

That I’d always be the son of a murderer, and that he would find his way back and slaughter me and anyone I ever dared to love.

And then, as I passed out of his sight, he broke. He wept, and begged forgiveness, begged for release, begged to die.

Begged me to do anything at all.

I looked back at my father one time.

"You chose your path. But you don't get to decide how I live the rest of my life."

The blood had reached my chest by then, and the far door was a swim rather than a walk. I found a thin crack in the wall beside it and kicked, ten heavy kicks, until the metal split from floor to ceiling and I could force my fingers into the seam. I pulled with everything that was left in my arms.

The car filled to the top. My last breath went with it.

Hooks whipped out of the dark on their chains and bit into my body, hauling me backward while I tore at the metal, and the blood closed over my head, and the world went out like a lamp.

///

Three days later, I woke up in a hospital bed.

They'd found me lying beside the old tracks several hundred miles out of town, covered in blood and bruises, several limbs broken. The story they settled on was that I had fallen from a bridge into the stream below, and that it was only by the grace of God that a local farmer found me at all.

I learned, soon after, how the night had ended back home. After my dad killed my mom and I got away, the police finally came, and my father put the gun in his own mouth and used it. There was a joint funeral. A handful of people attended. The town's memories of my father have all but faded into obscurity, which is its own kind of verdict.

As the years passed, I'd still catch the horn sometimes, far off and quiet, and I'd remember my father and that night. I have always known in my heart where my mother is, and I hate it. I hate it so much. Some nights I even hate that I left my father on that throne. I lay awake with all of it, more nights than I'd like you to know.

///

Son.

I'm married now, to the love of my life, and I am living a good life. Better than good. I have come to forgive my father for what he did, as much as a man can, and I've spent the years since on better things: movies on the couch with your mother, biking in the mountains with you and your sister, hours in the woodshop making something new and beautiful out of something that got cut down. I even stopped hearing the train, mostly.

You are about to turn the age I was when all of this happened to me. That is why I am writing it down now, and why my hands are shaking a little while I do it.

I pray that I have been a better father to you than mine was to me. I have tried to be everything I could for you, and I know I have not been perfect, and I can only hope you'll forgive me the difference.

Here is what I know that I did not learn from a church or a book. The train comes for each of us, in some form, no matter what we do; the good we manage, the harm we cause, the ugly things we hide. Your grandfather spent his whole life listening for it, and the listening drove him mad long before the train ever stopped for him. I decided not to live that way. What we get is the time before the horn, and the people beside us in it, and whatever we build with our hands while the light lasts.

So whenever you hear a train somewhere off in the night, remember this: live all the way. Love the people in your car. The line is longer than anyone tells you, and no one rides for free.

With much love,

Your Father