

Handcar Blues

Clem and Jeb had been on the handcar for most of the afternoon. One of them, neither would admit who, had forgotten to fill the water tender for Old Mule, the railyard's switching engine. A telegram came in late the night before requesting they transfer the small locomotive to a rail head seventy miles down the line. Something about a boiler explosion and stampede. Clem couldn't read the whole message, he only knew enough Morse code to send a few curse words as a prank. Mr. Sutherland, the yard telegrapher, snapped at him once that he sounded like an epileptic tapping his foot trying to keep time with that drunk banjo player down at Betsy's. Clem didn't much care for Mr. Sutherland.

They'd gotten up before dawn with Frank, the engineer, to build up steam in Old Mule's boiler. At sunrise they set off down the line at the eye-watering speed of twenty miles an hour. She could go faster, especially since she was only pulling her tender and a hand car, but the track this far west of the yard was so poor that they didn't dare get her going any faster. Old Mule was an Army surplus S100 0-4-0 model and didn't have anything in the way of suspension, which meant every dip or wide spot in the rails made her teeter side to side something awful. Jeb complained about his ass puckering up every time she wobbled. An hour into their all-day ride, and Clem was already sick and tired of hearing about Jeb's ass, puckering or not.

Around lunch time Old Mule started losing pressure and slowing down. She made a few odd slurping noises then slowly squeaked to a stop as her steam petered out to nothing. The only sound that followed was the pinging of cooling metal and Frank's confused profanity. He nearly had a stroke trying to find the problem. When he worked his way back to the water tanks on the tender car and found them dry, he flew into a rage. He'd told them time and again to make sure the water tanks on the tender were full. Frank turned on the two useless men with murder in his eyes. He chased them a hundred yards or more down the track with the coal shovel before he staggered to a stop and dropped the tool with a clang. Standing there hunched over his knees, Frank clenched his heart as his eyes bugged out wide and white. Clem and Jeb stopped running and turned around when they heard the odd rattle in his breath. Jeb muttered something about the devil, and made the sign of the cross like he'd seen preachers do. Clem just stared with his mouth agape. Frank was trying to get a word out, but couldn't quite manage. Then, just like Old Mule, he ran out steam and fell flat on his face. Dead.

Now Clem and Jeb, soaked in sweat from fleeing down the track in the merciless Missouri heat, methodically pumped the handles of the hand car up and down in a slow rhythm. It was faster than a walking pace, but not by much. Neither one liked the idea of carrying Frank, but felt bad about leaving him there on the tracks. Truth be told, it was easier to heave him up onto the hand car than it was to try and get his fat ass back up into the cab of Old Mule. The engineer's body was wrapped in a scrap of canvas and tied on one side of the car like a bundle of tools. Any pity they might have had for the man quickly evaporated in the torpid heat. As Frank's corpse grew stiff, it started to smell. Jeb made the mistake of bumping it at one point and the fart released was enough to run both men off the hand car retching. It was funny at first, but the odor never really went away, and it made breathing difficult for a few hours until they got used to it.

Eventually they'd run out of things to talk about. Now they stared at one another as the handles endlessly went up and down, up and down, up and down. *Squeak-squank...squeak-squank*. Clem had tried counting each *squeak* for a while, but kept losing count cause of Jeb's God-awful singing.

Eventually the heat got to be too much for even whistling and Jeb finally shut up. Every time one of them thought about taking a break in a shady stretch of track, they'd look at the dead engineer and remember that dark was coming on. They didn't like the idea of spending the night with a body out in the middle of nowhere. Jeb had seen two bears and a mountain lion on this stretch of track back in the spring.

As the shadows lengthened and the day began to grudgingly cool, Clem and Jeb picked up the pace. They only stopped once, at a low trestle bridge to cool off in a muddy creek and get a drink. Somewhat refreshed, they continued on up the line, creaking and squeaking as the handles rose and fell. Clem was facing east with the setting sun to his back. Jeb kept shifting around trying to stay in Clem's shadow to keep the light out of his eyes, but he couldn't move any further over and stay on the tiny hand car. Eventually he just squeezed his eyes shut. Clem was left to study the unshaven and craggy lines of his buddy's face. They hadn't really dried off after the dip in the creek, just sort of gone from being wet to sweating. It made Jeb's face all shiny. Clem couldn't help but notice the fine and intricate details, especially since their faces were about a foot apart on account of how they were leaned over working the handles. After nearly six hours he'd become intimately familiar with every line, whisker, and pockmark. The man's breath was well beyond horrendous, and what teeth he had left weren't long for this world. But Clem didn't have much room to complain about looks or odor, hygiene wasn't a high priority for him either.

Lulled by the rhythm, Clem was leaning in closer toward Jeb trying to decide if the mole at the corner of his left nostril had gotten bigger, or if it was just the shifting light. Then, without knowing why, at the moment when the handle bars were level, Clem kissed Jeb on the cheek. It was a sweet kiss, almost gentle. Jeb's eyes flew open in shock as he snatched his head up. Clem reared back in confusion as well. There they stood, still awkwardly pumping away as they tried to maintain as much distance from one another as they could, staring wide eyed. The *squeak-squank...squeak-squank...squeak-squank* of the hand car became an ominous sound in the last moments of light. As the burning orange sun finally fell below the western hills, a chill ran through Jeb. He stammered in his tobacco and whiskey roughened voice, "Wha... w-w-why'd you d-do that?" Clem was at a loss for words. The only man that had ever kissed him was that preacher fella who'd baptized him in the river back home. The old man planted one on the top of his head like papas do their babies. Clem was so hungover that day he didn't much care what anyone did if he thought it might cure his head.

"I... I don't rightly know..." was all he could say. There wasn't even a whisper of wind in the deepening twilight. The air was as still as Frank's dead body.

Squeak-squank...squeak-squank...squeak-squank echoed out over the plains.

Clem was only slightly faster on the uptake than Jeb, but before he could finish working through the implications of his actions, they hit a wide gap between the ends of two rails. The hand car jounced hard as Clem was on the down stroke and he lurched forward. Jeb, still wanting to keep his distance on the tiny platform, recoiled and fell backwards off the car, which promptly rolled over him. The car weighed about five hundred pounds empty, and while Clem was skinny as a post, Frank came in around two hundred fifty. Their combined weight on the car kept it rolling on the gentle down grade unimpeded...except by Jeb. Judging by the uninterrupted stream of profanity coming from underneath the car, it sounded like Jeb had gotten part of himself tangled in the drive mechanism. Clem might have been able to stop them sooner, but he was busy untangling himself from the handle bars, which were

still pumping due to the car's forward progress. He finally got clear and stomped down on the brake lever.

When they ground to a halt, Clem threw a loop of rope around the handles to hold them still and act as a hill brake. Jeb was obviously still alive because he was still spewing foul language the likes of which Clem had never heard. Some of it didn't even sound like English. He jumped down and reached under the car to grab whatever he could get hold of and started pulling. Jeb's voice ran way up like a squealing pig. Clem felt something give, and with one last mighty yank Jeb tore loose and slid from under the car.

He was a sight to behold. Bloody, greasier than normal, and squirming in the dirt like one of those poor bastards who ran out of that morphine stuff before they could get to a doctor. It took a minute, but Clem finally got him calmed down enough to see that Jeb had broken his left arm and mangled that hand. "Why'd you *DO* that, Clem?" Jeb wailed. He was mad and hurt enough to be crying a little.

"I don't know Jeb, I'm sorry. Here, get up on the car." He reached down to haul the other man to his feet, but Jeb wasn't having it. He pushed up on his one good arm and levered himself up onto the edge of the hand car. He was glaring at Clem with distrust. "I'm sorry Jeb. I am." Jeb tried to wipe the tears and dirt from his face. Not knowing what else to do, Clem walked back around to his side of the hand car and got them moving again. It was harder work doing it alone, but his buddy wasn't in any shape to help. Darkness fell and it took Jeb a while to get their one tiny lantern lit. A full moon rose some time later and bathed the world in an eerie pale light.

Squeak...squank.

Squeak...squank.

Squeak...squank.

"Clem?" Jeb finally said after what felt like forever.

"Yeah, Jeb?"

"We been friends a long time, right?"

"Since we was little."

"Well... that was sweet an' all."

"Yeah."

"But don't do that again. Ever."

"OK Jeb." Clem let go a sigh of relief he didn't know he'd been holding in. After another long while he spoke again. "Hey, Jeb?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell nobody about that, OK?"

"I won't." Jeb sounded emphatic about it, which was fine by Clem.