

DEMON TWIST

The boxcars always roll in around midnight. Makes a twisted sort of sense considering their contents. We're perched just above the rail line, on a berm littered with refuse from prior encounters: ragged clothes, shredded shoes, the occasional pair of glasses, and always the bones; freed from their original owners, gnawed on and scattered about—animal and human. The teeth are the most disturbing: individual incisors embedded in red clay, smiling bridges biting into their perches like dirty vampires, yellow stained and chalked white alike, yet carefully arranged in some imperceptible pattern.

Our boneyard. Our failure. We arrived too late.

"11:58," I'm nudging Cheryl.

She grimaces, nudges back harder—*ouch!*—shoots me an *I-know-that-dumbass* glare, tapping the face of her scratched-up Mickey Mouse watch. An involuntary tingle rolls down my stomach.

I'm shivering, the dampness of early summer's humidity lays heavy. No matter how many times Cheryl and I have watched the boxcars spill their ugliness, the thrill and danger never subside. We've always escaped before, once or twice narrowly, and not only from them, but

from our parents' watchful eye. Yet here we are again, in the summer between the thrill of leaving middle school and the worry of entering high school, and the show is about to begin.

Why, you say? Because we're the designated witnesses, our counterparts serving from the opposing side, eventual overseers to their own de-gorging. We'll gather afterwards, make our notes, debate strategy, adapt our battle plans, as our adults blissfully go about their business; enraptured and imprisoned in and by their own minds, too 'grown up' to dispense with logic.

Because youthful flights of fancy are the only weapons against thine enemy.

Before I can mouth "midnight", the screeching of wheels on rails thump against the night air. Emerging from the mist hunched over the tracks to the east, gray bulks of mangled metal bang and clank towards us, rocking to some dark rhythm - no engine leading them, no cabooses trailing behind - behemoths carrying evil and death and unknowable terrors.

This we know: demons don't want to be named, to be told what they are by the naming. That would imply we have power over them, that we can predict their paths, their behaviors, their habits, even their goals. Of course, it's best we define them, to neutralize their power, to know them better than they know themselves. Those who resist the naming will morph and mutate so as never to fall into our traps; they are the most powerful, and the most dangerous. The rest will unknowingly assume our namings while the escaping nameless shall remain proudly so, if I can attribute such a human thing to them.

Cheryl and I steal a glance, and under the glow of a full moon, Cheryl is luminous, pale skin aglow, opal eyes trapping my gaze. *There's that tingle again.*

I love her, but I'll never tell her so.

The boxcars grind to a halt beside the darkened station, red sparks erupting from their wheels like bloodied electrical arcs, their creaks and moans deafening in the silent night as they settle into their final resting spots. Cheryl slides ever so innocuously over until she's brushing up against me, her shoulders now even with mine: arms scrunched together, fingers tightened into fists, mounted under chins. The tingling comes back, almost making me forget where I am.

The doors rattle open in unison via unseen hands. There is a never-ending blackness within; if we were closer, I'm convinced vertigo would set in, sucking us into a nothing soup, never to be heard from again.

"Sam! There! Look!" Cheryl whisper-shouts into my ear, index finger pointing to the first boxcar.

An orange-ish mist emerges, sinks to the ground, crawls amoeba-like into the surrounding brush before dispersing.

"Fanta!". *Our fav soda.* As is our proven tactic, we name them as quickly as they appear to gain immediate advantage.

"Second one", Cheryl moans. Green mist, amorphous, flittering about in all directions. "Goop?" I nod approvingly.

Four more.

The third car belches out a blue ball of dust motes, bouncing down and over the berm, rolling towards the major boulevard like possessed soap bubbles.

"Burp!" I spit the word like a warning. "We'll have to watch that one for sure."

Fourth car: thick crimson pool, dripping down the sides. Blood. *No, too easy.* "Period!" Cheryl blurts out. I stifle a nervous laugh.

Fifth: purplish puff of smoke. *Grape.*

Sixth and final car: mottled yellow, floating glob. *Lemon.*

“Over. Done.” I let slip from my parched lips. Cheryl pats me on the small of my back.

Pleasant tingle again. Blushing, my cheeks hot.

Cheryl pushes herself up on her knees, stretches, lets out an enormous yawn. I roll over on my back, sit up, brush myself off.

“Need to git before my pops makes his bedroom rounds.”

“Yep,” Cheryl mumbles, her eyes scanning behind her, wary of being spotted. No telling where the demons are hiding at this point.

The boxcars jerk forward then, momentarily startling us. The mist rises on the west tracks, consuming the approaching cars as a big fish might swallow a smaller one: quietly, and without the other’s knowledge.

I spot our counterparts across the way, a boy and a girl our age: Tim and Beth. They wave, we wave back. Tonight is not their night, but they want to make sure what they’ll be up against. They are careful like us, so have not ended up in their own version of the boneyard.

Yet.

Cheryl and I face one another, uncertain in the moment. The kiss comes suddenly, without effort. We mesh, become amorphous, sensing only our lips touching. We part, no words exchanged, eyes holding one another’s gaze in the afterglow, before silently rolling off our perch.

We were lucky tonight. None avoided our naming. But one night, we will let one slip away unawares; it has happened too many times, to those who came before us, or worse, they will sense us there, watching, and escape by naming us first.

This war may go on forever, death unavoidable, even inevitable for some. But not us. Never us. Our names give us power. Planning, determination, even arrogance; those are our strengths.

As we spill over the berm, like smoke on a windy night, we will mark these new demons tomorrow. Like our forbearers, we were here first; we know the terrain; we assume the proper forms.

We have the advantage.

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