

Hollow Eyes

I've been riding this train for as long as I can remember, even before Little Johnny died, and even before my parents followed him into the abyss. Sometimes, they die. That's just the reality that you have to live with when you surf the metal tide. There's just me now, a few old timers, and about 15 kids of unknown origin and age, all of them with pupils like murky water. One lost child for every year of my life. They don't really talk much; they mostly just sit there, huddled together in their tattered and faded clothing, trying to stay warm. They look at you like they want you to save them, and their eyes are as hollow and uncertain as their futures. Their eyes are always wide open, as if they couldn't erase the horrific images that stained the back of their eyelids. I think of them as "the kids with hollow eyes."

I never call them that to their faces of course, that would just deepen their misery. Besides, I was like them once, young and scared, not knowing what the next day would bring. I guess I still don't know, the only difference now is that I don't care. We, the first group to ride the train, were among the thousands who fled north after The War. It doesn't really matter which war; there's been an increasing number of them lately. They're all the same anyway. I'm going on 16 and even I'm smart enough to know that.

It's funny, after the war, people stopped riding the train into the city. I guess there was no point in taking anything in, because everyone just wanted out. The sad thing was, a lot of people didn't even make it that far north. Like I said, sometimes they met death before they ever met freedom. Electrocution, collisions, attempting to jump, to get somewhere. These are just a few of the ways that you can meet your end surfing the train. The people who started out with us, there were *hundreds* of them. And what they didn't know then, what got them killed in the end, was

that they would be punished for trying to get somewhere. If you tried to jump, to escape your fate as a train-surfer, then you would meet your end in the fields of trash and human refuse that awaited you below.

And this big hunk of metal didn't have feelings, it didn't care that you were barely 10 years old and had two parents who loved you, a brother who worshipped the ground upon which you walked. And it definitely didn't care that he was the only thing giving you a purpose. The only thing giving you a reason to wake up each morning. Nope, it didn't care that other people would see, and lose hope. I guess it didn't know that children need hope to fuel their will to survive. Without it, they were just a bag of bones waiting to die. *I was just a bag of bones waiting to die.*

Yep, this thing was the most savage kind of beast. The *Death Express*, we called it, and we told stories to drown out the sounds of metal on metal at night, to quiet the fright that made our hearts beat fast and loud. The worst was when you tried to save the people who jumped or fell and they died anyway. And the worst of the worst was when you saw the look in their eyes just before they disappeared from sight. Here's the scary truth: they feel themselves slipping, right through your sweaty, stupid betraying fingers, and they know what's coming; they know they're going to die.

That's how it was the night that Little Johnny fell. I don't care to remember it, but no matter how hard I focus my mind on something else during the day, his face always comes back to me at night. I wasn't even around when my parents died, I had to hear about it later. I'd gone to find food for us, and suddenly, I had too much. I'd climbed down from the train whole, and returned to find a piece of myself was missing. Their faces have slowly faded in the 5 years that

they've been gone. Sometimes, I wake up in a cold, damp sweat, to the sound of the train horn, and I swear that I can still feel the pressure of his little fingers holding on to mine for dear life. Then, I remember he's gone, and I try so hard to convince myself back to sleep. Usually, I sleep with Traey, just because he's always there, two feet away, quietly looking out for me.

Today, I am thinking about my brother again, though it's been years since he died. I always do that before something potentially good happens, because I know he won't be there to share it with me, and that hurts. The absence of family is a stalker that I can't get away from. I feel the pain like a cramp that won't go away. Little Johnny would've laughed at that, told me "aw, sis, that's just hunger pangs." We've all got 'em, but I don't even feel mine anymore.

"Little Johnny" isn't just a dumb name... he was named after my father, Big John, and so we called him Little Johnny. He hated it, though. Probably because I used to make fun of him for it, and probably because it made him feel childish. Funny thing was, he *was* still a child when he died. So there he would remain, for the rest of my life, stuck as a little kid, with the ghost of his future self looking sadly on from the sidelines. But if I had to say that I was thankful for anything, it would be that I got to know him at all, even if it was for a measly 6 years. That kid was one of the goofiest people I've ever met. He was funny even when there was nothing to be funny about. I swear he was cracking jokes as we were dodging bombs and bullets, scampering like rats over body parts and massive chunks of wrecked buildings, our faces smeared with mud and streaked with tears that we didn't even know were falling. He was the only thing that kept me alive the day we all fled our home in the city.

Traey, on the other hand, was as serious as a person could be. Logical and calculating. He was always frowning, always hiding behind a sheet of onyx bangs. His face was smooth,

impassive, carved from stone, save for his frown-lines. Sometimes, I swear I can see the cogs of his imagination cranking, trying to figure a way out of all this for us. For as long as I've known him, my whole life almost, he's been alone. He showed up just after we fled the city, from some unknown wild place, and he didn't even look scared anymore. That's how I knew that he'd been to the other side and back. He did have the hollow eyes, though. He still does. Brown, beautiful eyes. And if I had a mirror right now, I'm sure that I would have the hollow eyes too.

In spite of all the hurt he lugged around, he was still one of the kindest people I'd ever met. We'd run into each other the morning after he arrived, when he offered his last piece of bread to me. Full of gratitude, I'd shared my last cigarette with him and he spoke in whispers, telling me what I'd been missing of the real world, of The Way Things Were Now. He told me of people jumping on purpose, from bridges and buildings, of jails overflowing with human waste, the forgotten members of a once-proud society. I just stared ahead, my eyes searching the darkness for a light. Neither one of us cried.

I made it my mission to repair him, to restore him to what I imagined he used to be. But he wasn't a radio, he was a person, and you can't just fix people, no matter how hard you try. And anyway, if he was a radio, he was more of a one-way radio; he didn't talk much. He didn't need to, though. We just... got each other. We spent every waking hour of our childhood together, and nights too. Eventually, nights spent whispering across the cold roof of the train to one another turned into nights spent seeking comfort in one another's arms. We didn't talk the first time. It just sort of... happened. We turned to each other and he buried his strong, graceful fingers in my short, choppy hair, pulling my face to his. His lips were hot like fire, in spite of the cool night air.

We were younger then, just babies really. But it felt right. It wasn't like we had anything else to look forward to. At that point, we hadn't had seen our families in so long, we'd started to feel empty like cornhusks without the corn inside. I guess we were trying to fill each other up again. It worked for awhile, and I even liked the way it felt, with his warm heaviness on top of me, his skinny frame pressing down on me, and his always burning-hot lips covering mine. I wanted to let him breathe for me; I didn't think I had the energy anymore. The first time we did it, it was so dark around us that the stars looked like glitter and the whites of our eyes blinded one another as we stared deeply into each other's souls and found nothing.

Cigarettes, sex, sleep. Staying alive, eating sometimes, resting your feet. Rinse and repeat. That is how we spent our waking moments, bathed in monotony and necessity, caked in dirt.

The one thing that nobody tells you about having nothing is how exhausting it can be. In the city, we had money. In the city, our names meant something. Now, we just have first names. We can call ourselves whatever we want. Our identities can be shaped only by what we tell people, by how we appear. Our surroundings don't matter, because we all share the same surroundings. The roof of the train that we ride on, it turns out, is the great equalizer. Sometimes, people get on and they look like they come from far away, that they might have had money once. Faded, stretched blouses with beads missing, and the lace torn in certain places speak of a time when the country, or what's left of it, was a wealthy place. Opportunity was always just around the corner. But The Death Express, *it* just goes in circles. Here, you don't have a purpose, something to look forward to.

About a year ago, when I was 14 and he was 15, and we finally got sick of being nothings, we decided to take matters into our own hands. When the train stopped in what appeared to be a little ghost of a town, we hopped off and started talking to the locals there. We asked them what they needed the most. Who knew that one simple question would be so hard to answer? But it's hard to know, really, when you have nothing.

Did we need seeds, to grow our own food?

Did we need better soil, to allow the seeds to sprout?

Did we need love, to nurture the life inside of us that was struggling to get out?

Or did we need more of the same? Of money, of a free market, of the land of opportunity, of pastel houses in perfect little rows, of all that which got us into this damn mess in the first place? We decided together that we'd do more than lament about the past; we'd help plan for the future. We were young, but we had a mode of transportation, brains in our heads, and shoes on our feet, even if they were dirty combat boots pulled from the feet of dead soldiers where they lay in their shallow graves near the edge of the road. Still, we did what we had to, and right then, I guess we felt that we had an obligation to help, to do something. We'd been exploring these tiny, ramshackle towns for years, strolling quietly and slowly through the dirty streets, observing the slow-moving, confused citizens tend to their wind-battered, war-tattered lives. Their houses looked like puzzles with the pieces put back wrong, and their gardens no longer grew tall and green.

So, we made friends. We brought them things: supplies, scraps of paper to write on, food, water. And what would they do with it all? Was it enough to rebuild what had been? Traey and I certainly didn't know. We'd lost everything we ever held dear. We'd done things we weren't

proud of. We'd smoked and screwed our way across the country on top of a train. We'd held on to the metal and each other for dear life through countless bumps in the night. Sometimes, on a particularly jostle-y night, it would rattle you and you would vibrate so hard that your teeth threatened to crack.

And in your heightened state of confusion, some bum would crawl up to you, rolling across the spine of the beast to get to you, and try to take everything you had left. He, or she, would take the shoes right off your feet. Traey and I slept on our bags every single night, clutching them tight to our chests with one arm, the other arm flung over each other for protection. Because sometimes, those bums didn't know you, and you didn't know them... and all that was left was your dignity, and you'd give away your shoes *and* your backpack before you'd let another man come between you and everything you held sacred.

Tonight was another freezer. It didn't bother me much anymore, the cold night air. Sometimes, it was the only thing that reminded me of my own humanity, my capacity to fail, to die, to feel. I imagine that death feels like all the physical and emotional stuff that you could ever feel, happening to you all at once. There's nowhere to go, when it comes for you, and you take it, and absorb it. Since your tiny, puny little human body can't do that successfully, you just... give in, and disintegrate, and the itty-bitty pieces of your soul re-fuse to the stardust sprinkled across the night sky.

If I told this to Traey, he would scoff at me, and turn his head so that his dark hair would swipe at my face, and shut me out. He's the reasonable one, and I'm the... me. Pretty soon, though, neither of us would have to worry about being anything. Surviving would be easy, and that would make all the difference. Sometimes, I even let myself get caught up in my daydreams,

imagining myself tending to a lush garden, closing my eyes as the sunlight washed over my upturned face, feeling the warmth of it on my freshly scrubbed skin. I imagined Traey with his shirt off, doing the same, smears of dirt punctuating his creamy, freckled skin. I imagined him happy. At the thought of that, I shifted excitedly where I was sitting and Traey stirred noiselessly beside me, but remained asleep. I didn't want to wake him up, but I couldn't contain the excitement that I felt for what was about to come. With the morning sun would appear a truly amazing sight, and I didn't want to miss it, not for all of the life left inside of me.

If it weren't for my biological urges to survive and reproduce, I probably wouldn't have made it this far. Some days, I feel as though I'll drown in the monotony of the daily grind. I even hate the work that Traey and I do, on days when I feel too depressed to go on, but seeing the faces of the grateful citizens of the former empire fills my heart with optimism. Plus, it has brought us closer to our goals, and closer to each other. One day soon, we will have children of our own, and we'll fill the rich valley oasis with laughter, with new thoughts and ideas. With hope.

For a long, long time, I wasn't sure how we'd ever find it, or if it was even real. I doubted very much that there was a place that the train hadn't been. Traey and I had seen what was left of the country, if anyone had. But then, almost overnight, more people caught on, and I started to hear whispers of such a place coming from their huts at night. Kids talked about it excitedly as they played tag in the streets, their filthy feet kicking up dirt and their clothes hanging off their thin, brittle bodies. Still, they were laughing. Sometimes they talked about hopping the train, chasing down the rumors and proving them right. *Honestly*, I thought on several occasions after hearing this, *I'll probably be dead before this place is discovered.*

But tomorrow, I'll be 16. And tomorrow, I'll be free of this hell. Because we know where the place is, and the train is going there. Tomorrow is coming fast, and I can see the outline of the orange-peel sun on the horizon, a half moon shape rising slowly up and grazing the land with light. As we approached the end of the line, I remembered clearly what the villagers had whispered to us over our meals of unidentifiable mush and dog meat kabobs, because that had been the first time in years that I'd heard it whispered of a place where grass still grew, where clean water flowed, and where wildlife still roamed free. It had sounded too good to be true, and so I'd dropped my fork and glanced at the man who first told me about it, Tito, with a look of skepticism. He'd just grunted at me and shrugged.

"I know what you're thinking," he said in his raspy voice, shot from years of smoking his thick cigars. "You're too afraid to hope, because if it's not true, you might as well be dead." Everyone looked down at their mush. His wife Ola had nodded in agreement and understanding, her best quality really, as she brushed a stringy piece of greasy hair out of her eyes and ripped a chunk of dog flesh from its skewer, soiling her apron again in the process. "Thank God for aprons," Traey used to joke after we'd left their tiny lean-to. "Or that dress of hers would have committed suicide long ago." I always laughed, but I always felt bad for doing so. We were all gross; we'd all felt the absence of running water.

Tito was the first friend that Traey and I had made since we started riding the train, apart from the odd street or train kid here and there. But those never stuck. You couldn't get too close; you never knew when someone would fall, or climb down for a supply run and never come back at all. And then you'd be out another friend. Tito was relatively safe, because he was on the ground. He and his wife had given us food and lent us a piece of floor to sleep on more times

than I could count, and *that* was the most generous offering that anybody could really make for another these days.

“Hey, kid. Wait.”

Tito had grabbed me by the sleeve of my hoodie as we were on our way out the next morning, having just dropped off the dried beans and potatoes we’d promised them. We had to hop the train now or we’d miss our chance to find what we’d been searching for. Some villagers had informed us that the train intended to go there next, to pick up supplies of lumber. They were starting to rebuild The City. The land was plentiful, fertile, they said. There were a lot of trees for shelter. We would wait there until we could return to our homes.

“I hope you find your Eden,” he said gently, looking me in the eye. “Come back for us when you’re all set up there. We’ll ride the train with you back to freedom.”

I wiped one tiny, salty tear from my eye as I hugged him goodbye. He smelled woodsy, sweaty, and his body odor hit me with the force of an anvil when he lifted his arms to hug me. I swallowed a gasp and tried to turn off my senses as I gave him a thin-lipped smile.

“Will do.”

I nodded briskly and ran over to where Traey was standing next to the train. He boosted me up to climb to the top, and I fought the urge to look back at the villagers. I didn’t want to get my hopes up. But most importantly, I didn’t want *them* to think I had gotten my hopes up. I felt responsible for all of them, for their well-being. I was the warrior on top of the train, riding it for them, for the promise of a different future, until the end of time. Or until I found a paradise where we could all start over. I risked my life so they didn’t have to.

Maybe one day, when I'm older, we can all go back to The City, and rebuild our lives again there, for a second time. A third time, really. I imagined how much better it would be then, how much more care we would take in protecting it, in defending it. The City had been our sanctuary, but this new land, it would be our refuge.

Traey broke through my reminiscent thoughts, sounding sleep-starved and hoarse.

"Mmm, good morning," he said with a wide yawn, showing a mouth full of mostly-white teeth. He rubbed his eyes furiously, and blinked them at me. They were bloodshot, and puffy.

The chilly morning air was full of dust and other allergens which caused our perpetually runny noses and strained voices. Dew rolled off of us in tiny rivulets as we began to move our stiff joints. The sounds of children waking up and making noise meant he couldn't go back to sleep, even if he wanted to. On a good day, it was hard to sleep past 6 am. Today there seemed to be something else in the air. A strange smell maybe. Traey noticed it too, I could tell. He sniffed the air delicately, a frown gracing his brow. Finally, he realized what it was, at the exact same moment as me.

"Do you smell smoke?" He sounded worried, but not frantic.

I nodded yes. Affirmative. I did smell it, but I wanted not to. Yet the dawning sense of dread that was falling over me like a dark cloud told me that it wasn't nothing. Something was happening, and it was coming from the direction toward which we were speeding. By now, the sun was almost up, sliced in half by the horizon. A thick foggy haze rolled in front of it, clouding our view and causing frantic whispers to fall from the mouths of the children and adults who surrounded us. We were all on our knees now, straining our necks to be the first to see around

the next bend in the tracks. Past that, was the Promised Land. It was so silent that I could hear the train as it rolled over each track; a hush had fallen over all of us, muting us like a blanket.

Our surprised and worried expressions soon turned to genuine horror as we realized what was actually happening. The last remaining trees whipped past and suddenly we were surrounded by open space. Miles of scorched land appeared in front of us suddenly. Stacks of smoke rose up, thick and blue, and the heavy smell of cedar choked us. We pulled our shirts up over our mouths and noses, but we left our eyes uncovered. We couldn't look away, even though we wanted to.

In the distance, we saw men in tan colored clothing, pants and collared shirts, walking toward us. They wore hats, and their heavy black boots and gas-masks stood out against the parched, yellow ground. All of the green had been sucked out from every plant and tree in the large clearing, where once a forest had stood. Beyond that, the acres of farmland that would have sustained us for years looked too sad to grow anything; they were a sick grey-white, covered in ash. Beside me, Traey's mouth was agape, and I felt that mine was too. I was literally gasping for air.

The train slowly rolled to a stop, and we could hear the shouts of the men approaching us.