

Colossus

I was twelve the first time I jumped a train. Did it on a dare. The train had slowed to a crawl and I climbed up on it and then she started rolling too fast for me to jump off. My friend ran after as far as he could, but we were out of sight in no time. I kept looking over my shoulder. I disappeared around a bend and into the darkness of a tunnel and hoped I hadn't stumbled upon the dead-end street we all end up on. That train rolled on for eight hours and four hundred miles with me just hanging on.

Cold and stupid is a bad way to feel.

The train stopped in the predawn stillness of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Fog hugged the ground and I jumped down. The chill in my bones kept my teeth from chattering. I hitched back and it took me two days. I can imagine me as a wide-eyed vagabond stumbling along the side of the road with my thumb out. Why anyone other than a serial killer picked me up I haven't a clue. But this old fella in an International Harvester pick-up truck stopped. "Where you headed, son?"

"Montpelier," I said.

He didn't bat an eye. "I can take you as far as Milford."

I nodded and climbed in. He put the truck in gear and we were on the road. He elbowed a red plaid thermos next to him. "Got some coffee, if you'd like."

I thanked him and poured a bit. My foster folks didn't drink coffee, but I'd always liked the smell. The warmth of it helped too, even though it made my stomach do back flips.

When I got home my folks didn't say anything about where I'd been for the last three days. Foster parents receive a reimbursement check each month, and a social worker will only come around if someone makes a report. In this instance, none was made. That was probably a good thing.

I laid awake that first night back, dog-tired but still buzzing from the ride. My bed was too still. I felt the sway of the railcars, the lean of the roads in the vehicles I hitched a ride with, and my own plodding gait. It all piled up as I lay there. I reckoned it was akin to how sailors felt with the ship always moving under their feet and then they're on *terra firma*, feeling odd from the stillness. It reminded me of a book one of my social workers, Miss Carol, gave me. The book was called the *Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*. It had the pyramids and the hanging gardens of Babylon on the cover, but what I remember most was the Colossus of Rhodes, a huge statue of Helios that straddled the entrance to the harbor. He was the sun god and he held a flaming caldron up to the sky in tribute, but it also acted like a lighthouse for sailors. It must've been both frightening and comforting to see that giant as you approached and entered the safe harbor.

The feeling of going somewhere, to be rocked and always moving, that's something hard to quit, and so I didn't. After a few days I went out again. I was a little more prepared and brought a jacket and a knapsack with some food and a flashlight. Once on the train, I crawled over a few tankers and made my way to an empty flatbed. The wooden slats were splintered and dark with creosote, but I found a smooth spot and lay down. Tree tops that hung over the track flew by like dark creatures trying to hide the stars from me. As I lay there between the shift and shuffle of the train and the stillness of the sky above I felt big and small, like a colossus who'd eventually crumble into the sea.

My foster folks weren't too happy about my second excursion and tightened the screws on me. I'd made it back the next day, but they saw a pattern developing and weren't going to

abide it. Foster dad Bob said, "B.Z., you can stay put or I can call DCF to come pick you up." He took his cap off and attended to an itch. "They may find another foster home for you, or you might just stay in custody until you turn eighteen."

He'd always been fair with me, more than I can say for some of the others, so I agreed. But that feeling, the one I had on the flatbed car with the stars overhead, held me in its hand for years. Eventually, I gave over to it.

I stayed in Montpelier for a summer and a bit after high school. I moved out of foster dad Bob's house and got a job as a gravedigger at St. Augustine's cemetery. My boss was Father Duncan and he let me sleep in a little shed on the property. I learned how to drive one of those small Bobcat tractors and how to make sharp lines for the grave. He was a nice enough man and the work wasn't too hard, but something turned in my gut every time I saw a casket lowered into the hole. As fall began to give way to winter, I went and talked to him.

"I hate to leave you in a bind, Father."

He waved his hand in the air to dismiss my concern. "We can guesstimate the demand for graves and dig them beforehand. That is if you can stay on for a few more days."

I nodded, but wondered how he would decide which graves to dig. Turns out, most folks in the parish had family plots, and Father Duncan knew who might or might not make it to spring. And when he was unsure, a phone call or visit might cleared up the picture for him.

"I appreciate your understanding, Father."

"Do you know where you're headed, B.Z.?"

I didn't want to lie, but I also didn't want him to think I was going just to go, even though that was pretty much the reason. "California," I said. As soon as it came out of my mouth it sounded like a tired cliché. But I didn't care about Hollywood or being a rock star, it was the

ocean, the Pacific that called my name. I'd seen the rocky slate of the North Atlantic and wanted the warmth and blue of the west coast.

Father Duncan nodded. "Many perils lay on that road, son."

"I'm aware, Father."

The next week Father Duncan directed me to certain plots and I dug four graves. I wondered about those holes in the ground, if their future occupants knew they were there waiting for them to die. My last day at St. Augustine's it rained. When things let up a bit I took a walk through the cemetery one last time and looked into those vacant graves. A puddle had collected at the bottom of one and it reflected the bright grey sky like a mirror, each drop rippled rings outward. I stood there for a bit and then noticed my own reflection. The rain turned to snow and it fluttered down and covered the greenness of the grass with quiet persistence.

I cleared my things out of the shed and left a note thanking Father Duncan. I walked out the cemetery and headed west toward the rail lines. I had money in my pocket and could've bought a ticket, but that wasn't what I wanted. I had rail maps I'd studied and was eager to ride the roads my fingers had traced for years.

I jumped a Norfolk Southern train just as it was pulling out from the yard. I tried a boxcar, but it was buttoned up tight. I found an empty coal car and settled in. I pulled my roll out and covered up against the chill. I rode through the night, watching the stars. I was nowhere and everywhere at the same time and it ground into me like the steel of the wheel and rail.

After sunrise I peeked over the edge of the coal car and saw we were riding next to a river in a city, then I saw a sign for the Philadelphia Zoo. We slowed down a bit and I gathered my things in case I needed to bolt. We pulled onto a side track and stopped. A double-decker Amtrak whizzed by and I saw faces in the windows looking down on me. If I'd been asleep

surely they would've thought I was dead, but looking right back at them must set something in their perfect world on edge.

We sat in the yard for a while and I dozed off and on. It was too bright and there were too many yardmen about for me to move, so I just stayed put. The train moved slowly and I could feel the jerk and tug as new cars were added. As the sun set we started moving again and traveled west. I saw a few horse and buggies waiting at the crossings, stern faces framed by blackness. We were in Pennsylvania Dutch country.

The stars were bright against the Bible black curtain of night. The brightness plucked something in my chest, and as I rocked to the rhythm of the rails. But then we slowed and hurried feet crunched the ballast next to the rails. In a flash, two people were up and over and into the car with me.

The boy, older than me but still newly a man, wore a straw hat and a straggly beard. His eyes readied when he saw me. He pushed the girl back behind his body and she fell down hard on her bottom, her eyes wide and white in the starlight. She wore a bonnet and blue smock dress, a satchel hung by her side and she seemed ready to reach for something. He held out his arm like a football running back.

People, as a thing, get pretty scary when they're frightened.

"It's okay," I said and showed my open hands.

"Who are you?"

"I'm riding west, just like you." He was uncertain for a bit. "My name's B.Z." I said. He still looked uncertain, as though he'd just plopped down into a snake pit. But I wasn't no viper. At least I didn't think I was. I sat down next to my pack and pulled out an extra blanket. "Here," I said. "It'll be chilly once she gets back up to speed." He took the blanket and sat down next to the

girl. She whispered something to him and he shook his head. She cocked her head to the side and he shook his head *no* again.

She turned to me. "Thank you. You're very kind."

The train picked up speed and we settled back. She unfurled the blanket and leaned against the boy's shoulder. He kept his eyes on me.

We rode southwest, into the mountains of West Virginia, and I was sure we were about to fly off the tracks. The boy never took his eyes off me, even though the girl dozed soundly as the tracks and train jostled her about. I finally closed my eyes and got some rest. They were Amish, and even if they were on the run like criminals, I couldn't see that boy doing me any harm.

I woke early and she was already up. The boy's head lay in her lap as she stroked his hair. Her face was hidden by the brim of her bonnet.

"Are you alright?"

She didn't look up but nodded.

The air was cool and she'd wrapped the boy in the blanket. Thin clouds streaked the blue sky as the amber of dawn faded. I stood and peeked over the edge of the car. As best I could tell we were still in West Virginia, which worried me. Empty coal cars don't stay empty too long in this part of the country.

"So, what's your name?"

"Ruth," she said. "This is Caleb. He's my brother."

I nodded. "So where you two headed?"

"We're trying to make it to New Orleans."

I laughed and pain shot across her face. No amount of apologizing eased things, but then the engineer blew five short blasts and the train began to slow. I popped up and took a look.

We were heading into a coal loader, a tall corrugated tin building straddling the tracks with conveyors leading up to it.

"Wake up Caleb, unless you want to get buried under a load of coal."

She just looked at me.

"Do it!"

She shook her brother. "Caleb, come on. Wake up."

The train slowed and then stopped. Coal thrashed into a car ahead of us and dust filled the air. It sounded like the end of the world. I grabbed my gear, picked Caleb up off his sister and flung him over my shoulder. I pulled up at the corner and swung his feet over the edge.

"Give me your hand," I said to Ruth and pulled her up. Caleb groaned and his eyes rolled about like he was possessed. I slapped his cheeks. "Caleb! Got to wake up, buddy."

He came to and looked around. "What—"

"No time. We've got to jump down. Can you do it?"

He looked over at his sister.

"I got her."

The train lunged forward and a plum of coal dust hid everything.

"Jump!" I said.

And he did. I grabbed Ruth around her waist and jumped too. We landed hard on the ballast and rolled out. I stumbled to my feet and helped them up. We scurried away from the loader toward a grove of trees not far away. We looked back at the car we'd been riding as it brimmed with coal.

"Jesus," I said.

Caleb caught his breath. "Please, don't. Thank you for what you did, but don't do that."

"Alright," I said. "I understand." I stood up and looked around. "I was just getting ready to thank him is all." I smiled, but they didn't care for the humor.

We were just north of Bluefield, West Virginia and decided to walk southwest a bit to a yard I had marked on my map. Caleb and Ruth were farm folk and accustomed to doing what needed to be done. We walked along a road named Country Girl. The asphalt road was old and tired; it dumped us out where an overpass sat with no roads—at least no paved road—leading up to it. I remembered hearing about a bridge to nowhere a few years back. I wondered if this was it. A bit further on we came across a pond and decided to take a rest and have something to eat.

Ruth opened her burlap satchel and pulled out some apples and cheese.

"I've heard about *Rumspringa*. Is that what you're doing?"

Caleb shook his head. Ruth poked him and gestured with her head toward me.

"It's okay. Didn't mean to be nosy," I said.

We sat there for a bit on the banks of the little pond and listened to the birds. There was nice breeze and I laid back in the tall grass and let the earth hold me still for a bit. The sweetness of the apple lingered on my tongue and reminded me of a time back in Vermont when Miss Carol had brought a sack of Macintosh apples to foster dad Bob's house right after I was placed with him. She told me the story of Johnny Appleseed. I envied the thought of wandering, meeting folks, and leaving something behind that may be of use one day.

In the distance I heard a train horn and I looked over at my companions. Caleb was picking at his nails and Ruth seemed to be praying. "You two ready to move on? The yard's not far."

Caleb didn't say anything but stood up and stretched out his back. Ruth gathered her things and I led the way. Country Girl Road ran alongside the rail lines, separated by a narrow

band of trees. On the other side of the road were weather stained mobile homes and dingy clapboard houses. Barefoot and kids played in grassless front yards, and then stood slack-jawed as we passed. No one said anything, but it was clear they weren't used to strangers.

We reached the yard and found a place to watch the trains move in and out, the only problem was all were heading back into the hills and mountains we'd just left. As the day waned and purple and pink streaks sketched out across the sky a BNSF train came in heading the right direction.

"This one," I said and nudged Caleb. We stood up but stayed crouched over. "You two did this the other night, so I know you can do it again."

They both nodded.

"I'll go first. Ruth, you next, and then Caleb you follow up and make sure your sister gets up." I secured my pack so it wouldn't jostle. I looked back down the line of cars and searched for an open boxcar door. "That one." I pointed.

I ran hard and grabbed onto the lip of the car and vaulted my feet up. I swung around on by belly and reached out for Ruth. She grabbed my hands and I pulled her up off her feet. Her eyes bulged and she let out a yelp. Then I turned and saw Caleb. His face was grim and pale. "Come on!" I hollered loud enough for Ruth to hear me.

He lowered his head and pushed on.

I wanted him to fall. In my mind I saw him pull up and lose his legs, fall headlong and not look up as we rounded a corner. Gone.

His hand slapped the lip of the car and I grabbed him by the wrists and yanked him up. We were all out of breath and moved to the back of the car to gather ourselves. Ruth began to pray and Caleb looked over at me. He nodded a thank you. The train horn blew a couple of blasts and the shuffle of the train smoothed out as she built up speed.

I took off my pack and spread out a blanket. Ruth and Caleb sat against the wall of the car and watched me. "Best make yourself comfortable," I said. They nodded, but didn't say anything or move.

My head still buzzed from the excitement; I couldn't sit still. After laying out my spread I walked over to the open door and watched as the landscape rushed by and felt the wind in my face. The dim glow of streetlights and neon signs for bars quickly gave way to the darkness of the woods and mountains as we traveled into western Virginia. Red oak, maple, and poplar trees lined the railroad along a twisty-turny path as it cut through gorges and crested hills. Distant sparkles of lights from homes up on the hillside appeared and disappeared. Houses closer to the tracks glowed cool blue from televisions. Deeper into the wilderness the stars in the night sky brightened. The air was cool and the sharp smell of pine mixed with a the dusky smell of decay and something sweet.

I looked over and Ruth had laid out a blanket for her and Caleb. Just as the night before, he lay with his head in her lap. She prayed and I couldn't help but wonder. They'd given me no reason to suspect they were lying, but they seemed closer than a brother and sister. I went over and sat on my palette and watched Ruth pray. She must've been feeling the spirit; she kept it up for a good while. When she finally finished she looked up at me.

"Pardon me for prying, but why on earth are you two headed to New Orleans?"

Ruth looked down at her brother. "I made him a promise."

I nodded. "I think you missed the Mardi Gras."

She shook her head. "Caleb dreamed of flowing down the Mississippi to where it emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. Back home we're only supposed to read the good book, but Caleb came across an atlas when we were cleaning out an old house when we were kids. He hid it under his shirt and brought it home. Kept it hidden under his mattress while growing up."

She ran her hands through her brother's hair. "About a month ago Caleb and other men from the community were at a barn raising. He keeled over on a warm September day and they brought him home. The next day he seemed better so he went back to work.

"About a week later on his way home it happened again. His rig veered into traffic and caused a wreck. They put the horse down right there and took Caleb to the hospital. The doctors ran some tests and found out he had a tumor." Her head slumped.

"There wasn't anything they could do?"

She shook her head. "Our bishop felt prayer and traditional remedies were best."

"So they just sent him home to die?"

"Pa said he needed to have faith, but it didn't stand a chance against knowing."

I'd encountered people of faith who tried to tell me there was a purpose to my time being a ward of the state. It would've made my life easier if I could've believed in what they were saying. Ruth looked at me and sighed. "Caleb married less than a year ago and his wife, Judith, has already started wearing black."

I couldn't help but think back to the graves I'd dug before leaving Montpelier. Those gaping wounds in the earth waiting to be filled by some soul who'd run his course. Father Duncan was a practical man, but something seemed wrong with the idea of preparing for a death yet to occur. The image of Caleb's wife already in mourning felt the same way.

"Caleb came to me a week ago and said he'd accepted God's will, but before he left this Earth he wanted to find that place he'd dreamed about for years. The place in his atlas where the snaking and wandering Mississippi is finally released from its banks, where it becomes part of something so much larger."

We rode for a bit in silence. I leaned forward a bit and watched the stars, hoping we'd soon be heading south. Her brother slept soundly as she comforted him.

We got as far as Baton Rouge, to the banks of the Mississippi. Caleb looked at me, measuring his words. "I think we've got it." His eyes shot to the river and he reached back for Ruth. The rest of their journey was their own. Ruth didn't look back, as much as I wanted her to. They'd found what they were looking for, and so that's where the story ends.

Later that night, I climbed up into a car on a Union Pacific train heading west. I wasn't sure things would turn out for them, but they had each other. Now, I carry Ruth deep inside me as I travel across the country and when the rocking of the train pushes my loneliness to the surface, I see myself with my head in her lap, her hands caressing my hair as I drift away into the vastness of the world, looking for that colossus with a glowing caldron held aloft.