

"Lost Love"

A man ends up on a train to purgatory for a crime he committed as a child.

Cal opened his eyes to find himself on the back end of a nearly empty train car. He stretched his brain, but he couldn't remember getting on the train. Did he have somewhere he was supposed to be?

He spotted a pretty girl in the middle of the subway car who he thought he knew. He tried to place her name. Was it Caroline? Or Charlie? Or maybe Camy? Cal dredged through his memories with the intensity of a toddler committed to getting a coveted dessert from an ice cream truck. It was such a long time ago, though. Years had passed since she had entered his thoughts and a decade or more since he had killed her. Chloe. He remembered now that her name was Chloe.

A conductor with an ancient, gravelly voice made an announcement. "Next step is the sixth circle, heresy. Gather your belongings because you won't be coming back." He ended with what sounded like a misplaced chuckle.

Cal strained to remember Chloe until visions started to come to him: He and Chloe were in swimsuits, playing at the beach on an overcast day. They made mudpies and sand castles over which hovered dragons and around which stood alligator-filled moats to keep out intruders. They were soulmates of sand and water.

Then from behind a forbidding sandcastle, a dark figure appeared. The figure shouted he recognized Cal from the news and held him under the water until he couldn't breathe. Cal awoke to a lifeguard performing CPR on his parched lips. Conscious once more, he reached out to touch Chloe out of relief, but she recoiled in horror, letting out a blood curdling scream. Where had that intensity come from?

The subway car came to a screeching halt. The conductor repeated his tragicomic announcement. He noticed that Chloe was clutching a gleaming penknife which was partially sticking out of her purse. The knife brought him a shudder and unbidden memories, going further back into the past.

Cal and Chloe were participating on a playdate at his house. They were playing with dolls nonchalantly, carefree. Then he got a whiff of her perfume and he started to hyperventilate. He ran to the kitchen and took the bread knife which granny had been using to chop onions to make her famous spicy chili. She cooked better than his parents ever could. He stabbed Chloe once in the chest with the bread knife, and blood gushed out of her like a river.

Chloe had been so excited about coming to see him that day, she had pilfered perfume from her mom - the same perfume her mom had used - and liberally applied it to her body. She was smiling, her tongue on the gap between her teeth where a tooth had loosened and fallen out that morning. She had big plans of putting it under her pillow and receiving a shiny quarter in the morning from her fairy godmother. He loved that she believed all the old stories. But she smelled so much like his dead mom he couldn't bear it.

In the present, the woman on the subway car who looked like Chloe was wearing a lacy dress that exposed her soft legs. Her eyes were scrunched up, staring at her phone that was inches away from her face with its off-center nose. Cal thought maybe he was mistaken about her because the woman looked like any of a hundred on the train, mindlessly playing Candy Crush. But then, out of the blue, she smiled. Her smile was indelible in his mind, remaining long after the dripping blood that covered her and the kitchen had long dissipated. She was still missing the tooth she had lost when she was seven and they were playing with dolls.

Cal stared into her auburn eyes that were still deeply buried in her phone, absorbing videos of funny cats on Instagram or rapid texting her friends at each station when her phone got a faint hint of a signal bar. It wasn't his fault, he told himself. His parents were killed by stray bullets, one after the other, right in front of his eyes. His granny consoled him by saying, "That is what happened when you are Black and you live in Crown Heights. Deficiency by birth I call it. We just got slightly more unlucky than most. Jesus Himself would be afraid of this town."

Chloe was Black, too, but granny had a different reaction when he killed her. She said, "Poor child, it's not your fault. That's all we know here. But it's sad all the same." Chloe's parents, close friends of his granny, begged the judge not to put Cal in juvie. They cited his many deficiencies.

"It would just as sure kill her," said her father, referring to his granny. And her mother said, mournful but hopeful, "We pray that the shock of losing his best friend will be enough to make him think twice next time. He's already scarred from losing his parents."

Cal hadn't killed anyone since. He did superficially stab an old woman who prevented him from crossing the street. She had had his mother's hair. The judge again referred to his deficits - personal and emotional - and his history when he sentenced Cal to time served: three months and fourteen days. The judge was part of a movement to not cause Black people even greater harm than they had already suffered from excessive incarceration. Granny, now on her deathbed, had Cal write him a long letter of gratitude.

Chloe turned up from her phone and looked around, meeting Cal square in his deep, chestnut eyes. At first, he looked away, but her gaze was too sharp, too piercing. He felt like she was drilling a hole in his brain. Did she remember that he killed her? She was still so beautiful, though. He could have married her, had children with her. He could have had a normal life.

"Do I know you?" Chloe said, in a deeper than expected voice that was redolent of smokescreens and ash.

Cal was quiet. She continued, "You look vaguely familiar, but I must be mistaken."

Cal remained still.

"I just moved here," she said.

Cal nodded.

"But I feel something... memorable about you. What's your name?"

The question rushed at Cal like a blast of strong wind, along with her scent: raw onions and cheap perfume. The aroma was overwhelming. He had the same feeling he had had when he went to grab the bread knife.

"Cal," he said hesitantly, his voice hoarse from dryness.

"Pardon?"

He cleared his throat. "Cal. I've always gone by Cal or Callie ever since I was little."

"I knew a Cal once. We had playdates on the shore."

"Oh." Cal's early life again flashed before his eyes. The train pulled to an abrupt halt in the darkness. He heard the faint blasting of music from someone's Beats headphones and a snoring homeless lady in the background.

"Next stop, the seventh circle. Violence," intoned the conductor. He cackled again.

Cal broke the tension in the air.

"What else do you remember about him?" Cal asked.

"We were always together. We made sand castles and mud pies on the beach. I made the dragons. No matter what we were doing, Cal always made me laugh with a mischievous look in his chestnut eyes. You know, you have eyes like him." Upon saying that, she flashed, once more, her beautiful smile. It twinkled amidst the grimy conditions of the subway car. He saw her missing tooth.

"Your name is Chloe, right?"

"How could you have known that? We've never met."

"I am the Cal you remember. The one that killed you."

"Yes, that makes sense," she said in dulcet tones. "I should have recognized you from the start. You've aged well."

"You must hate me for what I did."

"No, I find it endearing that you remember me. Why would I hold it against you? We were just kids. I forgive you for everything."

"They called me a psychopath. A monster. But I was just a child."

"No, honey," she said, reaching her arm out to stroke his chin. "You're a victim, like all of us. You were in so much pain. And I caused you more."

Cal teared up. He hadn't cried at all when he killed her. Granny said it must have been shock, the same thing he experienced when he saw his own parents shot dead from the rear view mirror of the car when he was waiting for them to come back from the convenience store.

"Listen, my love. This is my stop. I have to get out here. There is a non-believer I have to take care of. I want you to know that you will do great things in life. You have so much potential. I wouldn't want you to be judged for that one thing." Before she stepped out of the train, she planted a kiss on his lips. She tasted of salt water and hope. He noticed the penknife was no longer sticking out of her purse. He wanted to ask where the train was found, but she was already gone.

Cal saw an old man was now sitting where Chloe had been, reading a paper that looked like it was in Chinese. They were still at the station. The conductor was yelling frantically at some teenager to get out of the way of the closing doors. "You can't change your destiny," the conductor said. "Time to get out."

Cal wiped the tears out of his eyes. He was a six-foot tall man that was supposed to be strong and brave, despite the horrible things that life threw at Black men, especially ones that made terrible mistakes. He knew he couldn't fix the past, but he resolved to be better than he was.

"You too young man." Cal hasn't realized the conductor had moved to his car. He looked like he was older than Methusela. "Time to vamoose."

"But I'm not even dead yet. This isn't right."

The old man pointed at Cal's well-developed chest. Right in the middle of it was Chloe's penknife. He tried to pull it out, but it only wedged itself tighter. The trickle of blood increased in volume and intensity. "No, I think you're wrong about that."

Cal looked around for Chloe, but he couldn't find her anywhere. Had she killed him? He guessed that was her right. Tit for tat justice. An eye for an eye.

"Young man, this is the last time I'm going to ask you. The train is going to be late getting to the station and they'll have my head on a pike."

Cal gathered his belongings and got off the train. His patents were waiting for him on the platform.

"Cal," said his mom, smelling of the same perfume. "I didn't expect you here so soon."

His dad said, "Hush, that doesn't matter now. The important thing is that we're all together again."

"Where's Chloe, daddy?"

"She's busy now, but she'll come around. Don't you want to catch up with your mom and dad. You've grown so tall. Will have to introduce you to all our friends."

Cal said, "Am I in hell? I should be. I took a life. But I don't understand why y'all are here. Y'all were innocent."

"Things are never that simple," said his dad. "We all have skeletons in our closet."

"Even Chloe?"

"Chloe has a special job here to put people out of their pain. You had suffered enough. You can't torture yourself forever.

"Come, let's grab an ice cream sandwich and have a swim around the lake. The weather's always perfect here."