

North Of Diddy-Wah-Diddy

The train to Hell don't stop in New Jersey. It pulls out of Grand Central Station at midnight, moving slow at first but steadily picking up speed as it passes under the Bay, and by the time we hit the refineries, it's cannonballing. We don't stop for nothing. We don't stop for nobody. And if you step in our way expecting Old Goatfoot to apply the brakes, well, pardon me for saying it, but you're going to get exactly what's coming to you. We don't stop and we don't slow down once that gleaming black-and-silver locomotive leaves the station. Not 'til we get to where we're going. Once we're rolling, there's no second chances. And no exceptions neither. So that night the train did stop, I knew straight off that we were in for some serious trouble. We were barreling through the Pine Barrens, shedding smoke and sulfur and sparks, when I heard the air brakes squeal. The train commenced to losing velocity. I was just about to open the snack bar, but right off I heard that sound, I flipped around the CLOSED sign, grabbed my cap, and skittered off to see what the matter was. The damned were slumped in their seats. Some of them stared straight ahead of themselves at nothing in particular. Others peered listlessly out the windows or else at their own grey reflections in the glass. Our passengers are always a little subdued in the early stages of the trip. "Oh, porter!" one of the damned called to me. She was a skinny little white woman with a worried-looking kind of pinched-in face. "Would it be all right of me to open the window just a crack, so I could get some air?" I smiled gently into those big pleading eyes of hers and said, "Why, bless you, honey, you can do whatever you want. What difference could it possibly make now?"

She flinched back like I'd hit her.

But I reached over and took the window clips and slid it down two inches. "Don't go no further, I'm afraid. Some of the lost souls might take it into their heads to try and . . . you know?" I lowered my voice in a confidential manner.

Timidly, she nodded.

I got a pillow out of the overhead and fluffed it up for her. "Now you just let me slide this behind your head. There! Isn't that better? You relax now, and in a couple minutes the kitchen will be open. When I come back, I'll give you a menu. Got a nice selection of sandwiches and beverages. You rest up and have a comfy ride."

All the while I was talking, I was just about dying inside of curiosity. Through the window behind the old lady I could see that we'd stopped in a small clearing in the pines. We were miles from the nearest town. The only light here was what came from the moon and the greenish spill from the windows of the train itself. There were maybe half a dozen dim figures out there. I could see them hoist up a long crate of some kind. Somebody—and who else could it be but Billy Bones?—leaned out from the caboose with a lantern and waved them forward.

The damned stared out the windows with disinterest. Most likely they thought we were picking up more passengers. Only the crew knew different.

Still, I take pride in my work. I fussed over that little lady and by the time I left her she was actually smiling. It was only a tense little smile, but it was a smile still.

People can fool themselves into believing anything.

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Soon as I got myself clear, I made straight for the baggage car. I had got me a real bad feeling about what was going on, and I intended to pry a few answers out of Billy Bones. But I didn't get beyond the door. When I tried to slide it back, it wouldn't budge. I seized it with both hands and applied some

muscle. Nothing.

It was locked from inside.

I banged on the door. "Mister Bones!"

A silence, and then the peephole slide moved aside. A cadaverous slice of Billy Bones's face appeared. Flesh so tight it didn't hide the skull. Eyes as bright and glittery as a rat's. "What is it?"

"Don't you give me that what-is-it bullshit—why did we stop?" The pines made a dark, jagged line against the sky. I could smell them. If I wanted, I could step down off the train and walk into them. "Just what kind of unholy cargo have you taken on?"

Billy Bones looked me straight in the eye. "We ain't taken on no cargo."

"Now don't get me started," I said. "You open up and—"

He slammed that little slide-door right in my face.

I blinked. "Well!" I said. "You may think you've had the last word, Mister Billy Bones, but you have not, I assure you that!"

But I didn't feel nowhere near so brash as I made out. Billy Bones was a natural-born hustler down to his fingertips, the kind of man that could break you a quarter and short-change you a dollar in the process. Ain't nobody never outbluffed him. Ain't nobody never got nothing out of him that he didn't want to give. In my experience, what he didn't wish to say, I wasn't about to hear.

So back I strode, up the train, looking for Sugar. My old stomach ulcer was starting to act up.

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"Diddy-Wah-DIDDY!" Sugar bawled. He strolled briskly through the car, clacking his ticket punch. "Diddy-Wah-Diddy, Ginny Gall, WEST Hell, Hell, and BeluthaHATCHie! Have your tickets ready."

I gave him the high sign. But a portly gent in a pinstripe suit laid hold of his sleeve and launched into a long complaint about his ticket, so I had to hold back and wait. Sugar listened patiently to the man for a time, then leaned over him like a purple storm cloud. The man cringed away. He's big, is Sugar, and every ounce of him is pure intimidation.

"I tell you what, sir," he said in a low and menacing way. "Why don't you take a spoon and jab it in your eye? Stir it around good. See how clean you can scrape out the socket." He punched the ticket. "I guarantee you that a week from now you gone look back upon the experience with nostalgia."

The man turned grey and for an instant I thought he was going to rise up out of his seat. But Sugar smiled in a way that bulged up every muscle in his face and neck and the man subsided. Sugar stuck the ticket stub in the seat clip. Then, shaking his head, he came and joined me between cars.

His bulk filled what space there was pretty good. "Make it brief, Malcolm. I got things to do."

"You know anything 'bout why we stopped?" Those dim people were trudging away into the pines. None of them looked back, not even once. They just dissolved into the shadows. "I saw Billy Bones take on a crate and when I asked him about it, he clammed right up."

Sugar stared at me with those boogiemane eyes of his. In all the three-four years he'd been on the train, I don't recall ever seeing him blink. "You ain't seen nothing," he said.

I put my hands on my hips. "Now, don't you start in on me! I was a porter on this train back when your mama was sucking tittie."

Sugar seemed to swell up then, a great black mountain with two pinpricks of hellfire dancing in his eyes. "You watch what you say about my mother."

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. But I didn't back down. "Just what you intending to do?" I shook my finger in his face. "You know the regs. If you so much as touch me, you're off the train. And they don't let you out in Manhattan, neither!"

"Can't say I much care." He put those enormous hands on my shoulders. His voice was small and dreamy. "After this run, I don't much care whether I keep this job or not."

All the while he spoke, those hands kept kneading my shoulders. He laid one huge thumb alongside my face and shoved my head to the side. I didn't much doubt he could crush my bones and snap my spine, if he wanted to. He was that strong. And I could see that he'd enjoy it.

"I ain't said nothing!" I was terrified. "I ain't said nothing about your mama."

Sugar considered this for a long time, that sleepy little smile floating on his face. At last he said, "See that you don't."

And he turned away.

I exhaled. I can't say I knew Sugar at all well. He was a recent addition to the crew; the conductor before him took to visiting the juke joints and gambling dens of Ginny Gall during stopovers and lost his precariously-held spiritual balance. But if ever anyone was meant to be a badman, it was Sugar. He was born just naturally brimming-over with anger. They say when the midwife slapped his bottom, the rage in his voice and the look on his face were so awful that straightaway she threw him down on the floor. He was born with a strangler's hands and a murderer's eyes. The rest of him, the size and bulk of him, just grew, so's to have a package big enough and mean enough to contain all the temper there inside.

And they also say that when the midwife lifted up her foot to crush Sugar to death, his mama rose up off of the bed and thrashed her within an inch of her life. She was one of those tiny little women too, but her love for her baby was that strong. She threw that midwife right out of the room and down the stairs, broken bones and all. Then she picked up Sugar and put him to her breast and cooed at him and sang to him until he fell asleep. That's the kind of blood flowed in Sugar's veins, the kind of stuff he was made from.

There was a sudden lurch and the train started to move again. Whatever was going down, it was too late to stop it now.

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With Billy Bones and Sugar refusing to talk to me, there wasn't any chance none of the girls would either. They were all three union, and Billy was their shop steward. Me, I was union too, but in a different shop.

The only remaining possible source of information was Old Goatfoot. I headed back for the concession stand to fetch a bottle of rye. I had it in a paper bag under one arm and was passing through the sleeper cars when a door slid open and a long slim hand crooked a red-nailed finger.

I stepped into the compartment. A ginger-colored woman closed the door and slid between me and it. For an instant we just stood there looking at each other. At last she said, "Porter."

"Yes'm?"

She smiled in a sly kind of way. "I want to show you something." She unbuttoned her blouse, thrusting her chest forward. She was wearing one of those black lacy kinds of bras that squeeze the breasts together and up. It was something to behold.

"If you'll excuse me, ma'am," I said uncomfortably. "I have to get back to work."

"I got work for you right here," she said, grabbing at me. I reached for the doorknob, but she was tugging at my jacket, trying to get it open. I grabbed her by the wrists, afraid of losing a button.

"Please, ma'am." I was just about dying of embarrassment.

"Don't you please ma'am me, boy! You know I got what you want and we both know I ain't got long to use it." She was rubbing herself against me and at the same time trying to shove my head down into her bosom. Somehow her brassiere had come undone and her breasts were slapping me in the face. It was awful. I was thrashing around, struggling to get free, and she was all over me.

Then I managed to slip out of her grip and straight-arm her so that she fell on her back onto the bunk. For a second she lay there looking rumpled and expectant.

I used that second to open the door and step out into the hall. Keeping a wary eye on the woman, I began to tug my uniform back into place.

When she realized I wasn't going to stay, her face twisted, and she spat out a nasty word.

"Cocksucker!"

It hurt. I'm not saying it didn't. But she was under a lot of pressure, and it wouldn't have been professional for me to let my feelings show. So I simply said, "Yes'm. That's so. But I'm sure there are plenty of men on board this train who would be extremely interested in what you got to offer. The dining room opens soon. You might take a stroll up that way and see what sort of gents are available."

I slipped away.

Back when I died, men like me called ourselves "queers." That's how long ago it was. And back then, if you were queer and had the misfortune to die, you were automatically damned. It was a mortal sin just being one of us, never mind that you didn't have any say in the matter. The Stonewall Riots changed all that. After them, if you'd lived a good life you qualified for the other place. There's still a lot of bitterness in certain circles of Hell over this, but what are you going to do? The Man in charge don't take complaints.

It was my misfortune to die several decades too early. I was beat to death in Athens, Georgia. A couple of cops caught me in the back seat of a late-model Rambler necking with a white boy name of Danny. I don't guess they actually meant to kill me. They just forgot to stop in time. That sort of thing went on a lot back then.

First thing I died, I was taken to this little room with two bored-looking angels. One of them sat hunched over a desk, scribbling on a whole heap of papers. "What's this one?" he asked without looking up.

The second angel was lounging against a filing cabinet. He had a kindly sort of face, very tired-looking, like he'd seen the worst humanity had to offer and knew he was going to keep on seeing it until the last trump. It was a genuine kindness, too, because out of all the things he could've called me, he said, "A kid with bad luck."

The first angel glanced up and said, "Oh." Then went back to his work.

"Have a seat, son," the kindly angel said. "This will take a while."

I obeyed. "What's going to become of me?" I asked.

"You're fucked," the first angel muttered.

I looked to the other.

He colored a little. "That's it," he said. "There just plain flat-out ain't no way you're going to beat this rap. You're a faggot and faggots go to Hell." He kind of coughed into his hand then and said, "I'll tell you what, though. It's not official yet, but I happen to know that the two yahoos who roused you are going to be passing through this office soon. Moonshining incident."

He pulled open a file drawer and took out a big fat folder overflowing with papers. "These are the Schedule C damnations in here. Boiling maggots, rains of molten lead, the whole lot. You look through them, pick out a couple of juicy ones. I'll see that your buddies get them."

"Nossir," I said. "I'd rather not."

"Eh?" He pushed his specs down his nose and peered over them at me. "What's that?"

"If it's all the same to you, I don't want to do nothing to them."

"Why, they're just two bull-neck crackers! Rednecks! White-trash peckerwoods!" He pointed the file at me. "They beat you to death for the fun of it!"

"I don't suppose they were exactly good men," I said. "I reckon the world will be better off without them. But I don't bear them any malice. Maybe I can't find it in me to wish them well, and maybe I wasn't what you'd call a regular churchgoer. But I know that we're supposed to forgive our trespassers, to whatever degree our natures allow. And, well, I'd appreciate it if you didn't do any of those things to them."

The second angel was staring at me in disbelief, and his expression wasn't at all kindly anymore. The first angel had stopped scribbling and was gawking at me too.

"Shit," he said.

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Three days they spent bickering over me.

I presented something of a political problem for those who decide these matters, because of course they couldn't just let me go Upstairs. It would have created a precedent.

The upshot of it was that I got a new job. They gave me a brass-button uniform and two weeks' training, and told me to keep out of trouble. And so far, I had.

Only now, I was beginning to think my lucky streak was over.

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Old Goatfoot looked over his shoulder with a snarl when I entered the cab of the locomotive. Of all the crew only he had never been human. He was a devil from the git-go, or maybe an angel once if you believe Mister Milton. I pulled the bag off of the bottle of rye and let the wind whip it away, and his

expression changed. He wrapped a clawed hand around the bottle and took a swig that made a good quarter of its contents disappear.

He let out this great rumbling sigh then, part howl and part belch, like no sound that had ever known a human throat. I shuddered, but it was just his way of showing satisfaction. In a burnt-out cinder of a voice, Old Goatfoot said, "Trouble's brewing."

"That so?" I said cautiously.

"Always is." He stared out across the wastelands. A band of centaurs, each one taller than a ten-story building, struggled through waist-high muck in the distance. Nasty stuff it was—smelled worse than the Fresh Kill landfill over to New Jersey. "This time, though." He shook his head and said, "Ain't never seen nothing like it. All the buggers of Hell are out."

He passed me back the bottle.

I passed my hand over the mouth, still hot from his lips, and took a gingerly little sip. Just to be companionable. "How come?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. They're looking for something, but fuck if I can make out what."

Just then a leather-winged monster larger than a storm cloud lifted over the horizon. With a roar and a flapping sound like canvas in the wind, it was upon us. The creature was so huge that it covered half the sky, and it left a stench behind that I knew would linger for hours, even at the speeds we were going. "That's one ugly brute," I remarked.

Old Goatfoot laughed scornfully and knocked back another third of the bottle. "You worried about a little thing like that?" He leaned his head out the window, closed one nostril with a finger, and shot a stream of snot into the night. "Shitfire, boy, I've seen Archangels flying over us."

Now I was genuinely frightened. Because I had no doubt that whatever the powers that be were looking for, it was somewhere on our train. And this last meant that all of Heaven and Hell were arrayed against us. Now, you might think that Hell was worry enough for anybody, but consider this—they lost. Forget what folks say. The other side are mean mothers, and don't let nobody tell you different.

Old Goatfoot finished off the bottle and ate the glass. Then, keeping one hand on the throttle all the while, he unbuttoned his breeches, hauled out his ugly old thing, and began pissing into the firebox. There were two firemen standing barefoot in the burning coals, shoveling like madmen. They dropped their shovels and scrambled to catch as much of the spray as they could, clambering all over each other in their anxiousness for a respite, however partial, however brief, from their suffering. They were black as carbon and little blue flames burned in their hair. Old Goatfoot's piss sizzled and steamed where it hit the coals.

Damned souls though they were, I found it a distressing sight.

"Y'all have to excuse me," I said uneasily. "They'll be opening the casino round about now. I got work to do."

Old Goatfoot farted. "Eat shit and die," he said genially.

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Back in the casino car, Billy Bones had set up his wheel, and folks that on an ordinary day gambled like there was no tomorrow had pulled out all the stops. They were whooping and laughing, talking that big talk, and slapping down paper money by the fistful. Nobody cared that it was a crooked game. It was

their last chance to show a little style.

Billy Bones was in his element, his skull-face grinning with avarice. He spun the wheel with one hand and rested the other on the haunch of a honey in smoke-grey stockings and a skirt so short you could see all the way to Cincinnati. She had one hand on Billy's shoulder and a martini and a clove cigarette both in the other, and you could see she was game for anything he might happen to have in mind. But so far as Billy was concerned, she was just a prop, a flash bit of glamour to help keep the money rolling in.

LaBelle, Afreya, and Sally breezed by with their trays of cigarettes, heroin, and hors d'oeuvres. They were all good girls, and how they got here was—well, I guess we all know how good girls get in trouble. They fall for the wrong man. They wore white gloves and their uniforms were tight-cut but austere, for they none of them were exactly eager to be confused with the damned. Sally gave me a bit of a smile, sympathetic but guarded.

We had some good musicians died for this trip, and they were putting in some hot licks. Maybe they sensed that with the caliber of competition Down Below, they were going to be a long time between gigs. But they sure were cooking.

Everybody was having a high old time.

This was the jolly part of the trip, and normally I enjoyed it. Not today.

Sugar stood by the rear door, surrounded by a bevy of the finest honeys imaginable. This was nothing new. It was always a sight how they flocked to him on the southbound platform at Grand Central Station, elegantly dressed women who weren't even dead yet, rolling their eyes and wriggling their behinds something outrageous. Sooner or later one would ask, "You ever seen . . .him?" and then, when he squinted at her like he couldn't quite make out what she was getting at, "You know—Lucifer? The Devil."

At which point Sugar would say, "Seen him? Why, just this last run, I had a private audience with His Satanic Majesty. Sugar, he says to me, You been talking mighty big of late, I guess it's time to remind you who's boss."

"What did you say?" They would all hold their breaths and bend close.

"I said, Drop your pants and bend over, motherfucker. I'm driving now."

They'd shriek then, scandalized and delighted. And when Sugar opened his arms, two of the honeys would slide in under them neat as you please.

Business was brisk at the bar. I tried not to let my thoughts show, but I must've made a bad job of it, for I was just thrusting one of those little paper umbrellas into a frozen daiquiri when a hand closed upon my shoulder.

I whirled around, right into the most knowing smile I'd ever seen. It was a smart-dressed lady, all in red. She had on a bowler hat and she smoked a cigar. Her skirt went all the way to the ground, but there was a slit up one side and you could see the silver derringer stuck into her garter.

"You look worried," she said. "I wouldn't think the crew had much of anything to worry about."

"We're human, ma'am. Subject to the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to." I sighed. "And I will confess that if I weren't obliged to be here behind the bar—well. What's your pleasure?"

For a long moment she studied me.

"You interest me," she said at last, and vanished into the crowd.

Not much later she was back, steering a shy little porcelain doll of a girl by the elbow. "Missy can tend bar," she said. She slipped one hand between the girl's legs and the other behind her shoulder blades and hoisted her clear over the bar. It was an astonishing display of strength and she did it with no special emphasis, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "She's had more than sufficient experience."

"Now hold on," I said. "I can't just—"

"Missy doesn't mind. Do you, little sweet?"

The girl, wide-eyed, shook her head no.

"Wait for me here." The lady leaned down and kissed her full on the mouth—full, and deep too. Nobody paid any mind. The festivities had reached that rowdy stage. "You come with me."

I didn't have much choice but to follow.

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Her name, she said, was Jackie. And, when I'd introduced myself, "I'm going to help you, Malcolm."

"Why?"

"I have observed," she said, "that other people are often willing to accept whatever events may chance to happen to them, rather than take an active part in their unfolding. That's not me." She glanced scornfully back at the casino car. "I am no gambler. All my pleasure lies in direct action. Tell me your problem. Make it interesting."

When I'd told my story, Jackie took the cigar out of her mouth and stared at it thoughtfully. "Your friend's attention is currently given over entirely to the pursuit of money. Can't you just go back to the baggage car now and look?"

I shook my head. "Not with Sugar standing by the rear door."

We were in the space between the casino and the next car forward, with the rails flashing by underneath and the cars twisting and rattling about us. Jackie put a hand on the bottommost rung of the access ladder and said, "Then we'll go over the roof."

"Now, just a minute!"

"No delays." She frowned down at her skirt. "As soon as I can arrange a change of clothing."

Up the sleeper car she strode, opening doors, glancing within, slamming them shut again. Fifth one she tried, there was a skinny man in nothing but a white shirt working away on top of his lady-love. He looked up angrily. "Hey! What the fuck do you—"

Jackie pressed her derringer against his forehead and nodded toward a neatly folded bundle of clothing. "May I?"

The man froze. He couldn't die here, but that didn't mean he'd relish a bullet through his skull. "They're yours."

"You're a gent." Jackie scooped up the bundle. Just before closing the door, she paused and smiled down at the terrified face of the woman underneath her victim.

"Pray," she said, "continue."

In the hallway she whipped off her skirt, stepped into the slacks, and zipped them up before I had the chance to look away. The jacket she tossed aside. She buttoned the vest over her blouse and tentatively tried on one of the man's wing tips. "They fit!"

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I went up the rungs first. The wind was rushing over the top of the train something fierce. Gingerly, I began crawling across the roof of the casino car. I was scared out of my wits and making no fast progress, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked back.

My heart about failed me. Jackie was standing straight up, oblivious to the furious rattling speed of the train. She reached down and hauled me to my feet. "Let's dance!" she shouted into my ear.

"What?" I shouted back, disbelieving. The wind buffeted us wildly. It whipped off Jackie's bowler hat and sent it tumbling away. She laughed.

"Dance! You've heard of dancing, haven't you?"

Without waiting for a reply, she seized me by the waist and whirled me around, and we were dancing. She led and I followed, fearful that the least misstep would tumble us from the train and land us broken and lost in the marshes of Styx. It was the single most frightening and exhilarating experience of my entire existence, moreso even than my first time with that traveling man out by the gravel quarry at the edge of town.

I was so frightened by now that it no longer mattered. I danced, hesitantly at first, and then with abandon. Jackie spun me dizzily around and around. The wind snatched sparks from her cigar and spangled the night with stars. Madness filled me and I danced, I danced, I danced.

At last Jackie released me. She looked flushed and satisfied. "That's better. No more crawling, Malcolm. You and I aren't made for it. Like as not, all our strivings will come to nothing in the end; we must celebrate our triumph now, while yet we can." And somehow I knew precisely how she felt and agreed with it too.

Then she glanced off to the side. The dark wastelands were zipping past. A ghastly kind of corpse-fire was crawling over the muck and filth to either side of the tracks. "A person might jump off here with no more damage than a broken arm, maybe a couple of ribs. We can't be more than— what?—two hundred fifty, three hundred miles south of New Jersey? It would not be difficult for a determined and spirited individual to follow the tracks back and escape."

"Nobody escapes," I said. "Please don't think of it."

A flicker of sadness passed over her face then, and she said, "No, of course not." Then, brisk again, "Come. We have work to do. Quickly. If anybody heard us stomping about up here, they'll know what we're up to."

We came down between cars at the front of the baggage car. There was a tool closet there I had the key to, and inside it a pry bar. I had just busted open the padlock when LaBelle suddenly slammed through the door from the front of the train, wild-eyed and sweaty.

"Malcolm," she said breathlessly, "don't!"

From somewhere about her person—don't ask me where—Jackie produced a wicked-looking knife.

"Do not try to stop us," she said softly.

"You don't understand," LaBelle cried. "There's a hound on board!"

I heard it coming then.

The hounds of Hell aren't like the Earthly sort: They're bigger than the biggest mastiffs and they bear a considerable resemblance to rats. Their smell is loathsome beyond description and their disposition even worse.

LaBelle shrieked and shrank aside as the hound came bounding down the aisle.

With something between a howl and a scream, it was upon us.

"Go!" Jackie shoved me through the doorway. "I'll handle this. You do your part now."

She slammed the door shut.

Silence wrapped itself about me. It was ghastly. For all I could hear, the hound didn't even exist.

I flicked on the electric and in its swaying light took a look around. All the usual baggage: cases of fine French wines and satin sheets for the Lords of Hell, crates of shovels and rubber hip boots and balky manual typewriters for the rest. But to the rear of the car there was one thing more.

A coffin.

It was a long, slow walk to the coffin. I thought of all the folks I'd known who'd died and gone where I'd never see them again. I thought of all those things it might contain. It seemed to me then like Pandora's box, filled with nameless dread and the forbidden powers of Old Night. There was nothing I wanted to do less than to open it.

I took a deep breath and jammed the edge of the pry bar into the coffin. Nails screamed, and I flung the top back.

The woman inside opened her eyes.

I stood frozen with horror. She had a wrinkled little face, brown as a nut, and you could tell just by looking at it that she'd led a hard life. There was that firmness about the corners of her mouth, that unblinking quality about the eyes. She was a scrawny thing, all bones and no flesh, and her arms were crossed over her flat chest. Light played about her face and lit up the coffin around her head. I looked at her and I was just flat-out afraid of what was going to happen to Sugar and to me and to all of us when word of this got out.

"Well, young man?" she said in a peppery sort of way. "Aren't you going to help me up?"

"Ma'am?" I gaped for an instant before gathering myself together. "Oh! Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am." I offered her my hand and helped her sit up. The little shimmer of light followed her head up. Oh, sweet Heaven, I thought. She's one of the Saved.

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I opened the door from the baggage compartment reluctantly, fearful of the hound that must surely wait just outside. Still, what other choice did I have?

There was Jackie, spattered from head to foot with shit and gore, and her clothes all in tatters. She stood

with her legs braced, a cocky smile on her face, and the butt-end of her cigar still clenched in her teeth. LaBelle crouched by her feet—she shakily stood up when I emerged—staring at something in the distant marshes. Away off behind us, a howl of pain and rage like nothing I'd ever heard before dwindled to nothing.

The hound was nowhere to be seen.

First thing the old woman said then was, "Young lady. Do you think it seemly to be walking about dressed as a man?"

Jackie took the cigar butt out of her mouth.

"Get rid of that filthy thing too."

For an instant, I thought there was going to be trouble. But then Jackie laughed and flung the cigar out into the night. It was still lit and I could see by the way the old lady frowned that she'd noticed that too.

I offered her my arm again and we made our way slowly up the train.

She was Sugar's mother. I never had any doubt about that. As we walked up the train, she questioned LaBelle and me about her son, whether he was well, was he behaving himself, did he have a special lady-friend yet, and what exactly did he have in mind for her and him?

LaBelle was all in a lather to tell us how Sugar had arranged things. He'd kept in regular touch with the folks back home. So he'd been informed how his mother had spent her life just waiting and praying for the fullness of time so that she could die and get to see her baby boy again. Nobody'd had the heart to tell her about his new job. Sugar and his relations figured that since Divine Providence wasn't going to bring them together, it was up to him.

"He got it all worked out. He saved all his money," LaBelle said, "enough to set himself up in a little place on the outskirts of Ginny Gall. You'll like it there," she assured the old lady. "People say it's not half bad. It's where the folks in Hell go for a big Saturday night."

The old lady said nothing. Something about the way her jaw clenched, though, gave me an uneasy feeling.

* * *

The casino car fell silent when we entered.

"Mama!" Sugar cried. He ran to her side and hugged her. They were both crying, and so were the girls. Even Billy-B had a strange kind of twisted smile on his face.

Mrs. Selma Green took a long, slow look around the car and its inhabitants. She did not look content. "Sugar, what are you doing in such raffish company? What bad thing have you done to bring you to such a pass? I thought I'd watched over you better than that."

Sugar drew himself up proudly. "I never did a cruel or evil thing in all my life, Mama. You know that. I never did nothing you'd've disapproved of." His eyes swept the room disdainfully, and to the damned and the crew alike he said, "Not because I much cared, one way or the other. But because I knew what you expected of me. There was bad company, at times, tried to mislead me. Wicked women urged wicked things upon me. But never was a man big enough or a woman sweet enough to make me go against your teachings."

Personally, I believed it. A man like Sugar—what need had he of violence? People just naturally made

room for him. And those who wouldn't, well, that was only self-defense, wasn't it?

But his mother did not look convinced. "What, then, are you doing here?" And there is absolutely no way I could do justice to the scorn with which she said that last word.

Sugar looked abashed. "I dunno," he mumbled. "They just didn't like my looks, I guess."

"The truth, boy!"

"I, uh, kind of mouthed off to the Recording Angel, Mama. That's how I wound up here." He grew angry at the memory; you could see it still rankled. "You oughta be grateful we're letting a roughneck like you squeak by, he said. Don't bend no rules for me, I told him. I'd expect a little more gratitude than you're showing, he says. Ain't grateful to man nor angel, says I, for something I earned on my own right. Oh, that angel was mad enough to spit nails! He wanted me to bow and truckle to him. But I got my pride. I told him I wouldn't play nigger for nobody. And I guess that's what brought me here."

"We don't use that word," Mrs. Green said smartly. Her son looked puzzled. "The N-word."

"No, Mama," he said, all contrite.

"That's better. You're a good boy, Sugar, only sometimes you forget yourself." She allowed herself a small, austere smile. "You've got yourself in another fix, and I guess it's up to me to see you right again."

She yanked the emergency brake cord.

With a scream of brakes that could be heard all the way to DiddyWah-Diddy, the train ground toward a halt. In the blackness of the night I heard monstrous things struggling toward us through the shit and filth of the marshes of Styx. I heard the sound of dangerous wings.

"Oh, Mama!" Sugar wailed. "What have you done?"

"Deceit don't cure nothing. We're going to have it all out, and bring everything into the open," she said. "Stand up straight."

* * *

So there it was.

The trial was held up front in the locomotive, with two Judges towering over the engine, and the damned crowded into the front cars, climbing up on each other's shoulders and passing every word back so those in the rear could follow. To one side of the engine crouched Bagamothezth, Lord of Maggots. Two long, sagging pink paps hung limply down over his hairy belly, and living filth dropped continually from his mouth. A rank wind blew off of his foul body. To look upon his squirmily tentacled eyelids and idiot gaze was to court despair.

The other judge was an Archangel. He shone whiter than house paint and brighter than an incandescent bulb, and to look upon him . . . Well. You know that awful feeling you get when you look through a telescope at some little fuzzy bit of light that's maybe not even visible to the naked eye? Only there it is, resolved into a million billion stars, cold and clear and distinct, and you and the Earth and everything you've ever known or thought about just dwindles down to insignificance? That's what the Archangel was like, only infinitely worse.

I found myself staring at first one Judge and then the other, back and forth, repulsed by the one, repelled by the majesty of the other, but unable to look away. They were neither of them something you could

turn your back on.

Bagamothezth spoke in a voice shockingly sweet, even cloying. "We have no claim upon the sanctified Mrs. Selma Green. I presume you are declaring an immediate writ of sainthood upon her?"

The Archangel nodded. And with that the old lady was wrapped in blazing light and shot up into the night, dwindling like a falling star in reverse. For a second you could see her shouting and gesturing, and then she was gone.

"Sugar Green," Bagamothezth said. "How do you plead?"

Sugar stood up before the Judges, leaning forward a little as if into a great wind. His jaw was set and his eyes blazed. He wasn't about to give in an inch. "I just wanted to be with my—"

Bagamothezth clucked his tongue warningly.

"I just—"

"Silence!" the Archangel roared; his voice shook the train and rattled the tracks. My innards felt scrambled. Him and Sugar locked eyes. For a minute they stood thus, longer than I would've believed any individual could've stood up to such a being. At last Sugar slowly, angrily bowed his head and stared down at the ground. "How do you plead?"

"Guilty, I guess," he mumbled. "I only—"

"William Meredith Bones," the Archangel said. "How do you plead?"

Billy-B squared his shoulders and spoke up more briskly than I would've expected him to. "All my life," he said, "I have followed the dollar. It has been my North Star. It has proved comprehensible to me in ways that men and women were not. It has fetched me here where human company would have brought me to a worse place. To the best of my lights I have remained true to it." He spread his arms. "Sugar offered me money to smuggle his mother on board. What was I to do? I couldn't turn him down. Not and be true to my principles. I had no choice."

"How much," asked the Archangel in a dangerously quiet voice, "were you paid?"

Billy Bones lifted his jaw defiantly. "Forty-five dollars."

Those of us who knew Billy roared. We couldn't help it. We whooped and hollered with laughter until tears ran down our cheeks. The thought of Billy inconveniencing himself for so paltry a sum was flat-out ludicrous. He blushed angrily.

"So you did not do it for the money," said Bagamothezth.

"No," he muttered, "I guess not."

One by one, LaBelle, Afreya, and Sally were called upon to testify and acknowledge their guilt. Then I was called forward.

"Malcolm Reynolds," the Archangel said. "Your fellows have attested that, out of regard for your spiritual welfare, they did not involve you in this plot. Do you nevertheless wish to share their judgment?"

Something inside of me snapped. "No, no!" I cried. I couldn't help noticing the disgusted expression that twisted up Billy Bones' lips and the pitying looks that the girls threw my way, but I didn't care. I'd been through a lot and whatever strength I had in me was used up. Then too, I had seen what goes on in

Diddy-Wah-Diddy and points south and I wanted no part of any of it. "It was all them—I had nothing to do with any of it! I swear if I'd known, I would've turned them all in before I would've let this happen!"

The Judges looked at one another. Then one of them, and for the life of me I can't remember which, cleared his throat and passed judgment.

* * *

We got a new crew now. Only me and Goatfoot are left over from the old outfit. The train goes on. The Judges ruled that Sugar's love for his mother, and the fact that he was willing to voluntarily undergo damnation in order to be with her, was enough to justify his transfer to a better place, where his mama could keep an eye on him. LaBelle and Afreya and Sally, and Billy Bones too, were deemed to have destroyed the perfect balance of their souls that kept them shackled to the railroad. They were promoted Upstairs as well.

Me, I'd cooked my own goose. They accepted my plea of noninvolvement, and here I remained. The girls were pretty broken up about it, and to tell the truth, so was I, for a time. But there it was. Once these things been decided, there ain't no court of appeal.

I could've done without Billy-B's smirk when they handed him his halo and wings, like he'd outsmarted all the world one more time. But it was a pure and simple treat to see LaBelle, Afreya, and Sally transformed. They were good girls. They deserved the best.

With all the fuss, we were all the way to the end of the line in Beluthahatchie before anybody noticed that Jackie had taken advantage of the train being stopped for the trial to slip over the side. She believed, apparently, that it would be possible to backtrack through three hundred eighty miles of black-water marshes, evade the myriad creatures that dwell therein, the least of which is enough to freeze the marrow in your bones, cross the Acheron trestle bridge, which is half a mile high and has no place to hide when the trains cross over, and so pass undetected back to New Jersey.

It made me sad to think on it.

And that's all there is to tell. Except for one last thing.

I got a postcard, just the other day, from Chicago. It was kind of battered and worn like it'd been kicking around in the mails a long time. No return address. Just a picture of a Bar-B-Q hut which, however, I don't expect would be any too difficult for a determined individual to locate. And the message:

If one boundary is so ill-protected, then how difficult can the other be? I have a scheme going that should reap great profit with only moderate risk. Interested?

J.

P.S. Bring your uniform.

So it seems I'm going to Heaven. And why not? I've surely seen my share of Hell.