

## The Cattletruck

*“They flutter behind you, your possible pasts  
Some bright-eyed and crazy, some frightened and lost  
A warning to anyone still in command  
Of their possible futures to take care  
In derelict sidings the poppies entwine  
With cattletrucks lying in wait for the next time...”*

-Roger Waters (Pink Floyd, *The Final Cut*)

I watch as the child approaches, swaying and lurching down the aisle as she combats the car's tricky contortions.

She and I have been sneaking looks at each other since I was helped aboard by sickened porters several hours ago.

“Man, you sure in rough shape,” one of my dark, uniformed aides had mumbled.

I saved myself some pain by just nodding. The skin on my face is so tight that the slightest movement causes it to split open. Despite my efforts the blistered skin voids a good amount of purulent matter into the gauze wound about my head. The dried pus acts as a mortar, encasing my face in a painful *papier mache* mask.

There will be no relief forthcoming. The shortage of medical personnel means that I must travel alone, untended, forgoing luxuries like periodic changes of

dressing. It will be a long, excruciating trip to...wherever. There is a large displaced persons camp out on the prairies but I hear food is short even in the breadbasket of the world.

*“Listen,” the doctor insisted, “you can’t stay here. We can’t do anything more for you and we need the bed. It’s as simple as that.” I stared up at him. He kept his eyes on his clipboard as if reading from a prepared statement.*

*“You must have someone somewhere. Sisters? Brothers? They can take care of you. We’re just overwhelmed, you understand?”*

*I turned my face to the wall.*

*“It says here you’re from out west originally. Well, there you are. They didn’t get it too bad out there.” He waited for me to say something but I wouldn’t oblige him. “We...we’ll keep you here tonight but tomorrow you’ll have to leave. I’m sorry. And I want you to know I wish you the best.”*

*I heard his shoes squeak on the gymnasium floor as he moved on, his arrival at the next cluster of patients greeted by cries of relief, pitiful pleas for morphine.*

*Don’t ask for too much, I thought, because people who need too much—*

The train is slowing.

Immediately I recall the reports I’ve heard of the recent resurrection of a lost art: train robbery. Bands of people crazy with hunger are tearing up tracks, deliberately derailing trains, burrowing through the hissing wreckage for a morsel, a mouthful, anything to line their acidic stomachs with.

They might like me, I come pre-cooked, ready to serve.

The train picks up speed again and the part of me (it grows more persuasive each day) that wants all of this to be over is disappointed.

During my reverie the child has advanced a few more steps, her gaze frank and penetrating.

She is a little charmer, this one, her antics earning indulgent smiles from the adults around her. She's headstrong and determined to move about at will. Not shy either. I've enjoyed watching her but have dreaded the moment when her inquisitiveness drew her in this direction.

Somehow she has summoned the courage to shamle toward me—one finger tucked reflectively in her mouth—and for that she is to be congratulated. But I curse her too because I can picture the scene that is about to transpire: the little girl wailing and crying, her mother rushing to her side to protect her from the mangled boogeyman, the reproachful glares of my fellow passengers...*as if it's my fault.*

I shake my head.

She pauses.

I thrust out a wrapped hand, waggle it in a shooing gesture. The concealing mitten only further piques her curiosity. She takes another step.

I sigh.

She's close now, close enough to smell me. Her little nose wrinkles daintily. But she doesn't run away and doesn't scream or cry.

“You look...funny,” she says.

And giggles.

The statement is so unexpected, so cogent, so anti-climactic that I have to laugh along with her, a sibilant wheeze escaping from between clenched teeth. Good laughter, not bitter. I welcome to pain that flushes my features.

“That’s because I *am* funny,” I grate, “the biggest joke of all.”

“What do you look like, underneath all that gunk?”

“Funny,” I shoot back.

She cackles. “I know, but what do you *look* like?”

I think about that.

Recalling the poor souls pressed into service as assistants, orderlies, nurses and sometimes even surgeons in makeshift hospitals throughout the city. Men and women who had to maintain their composure no matter what, even as they cut away dressings and uncovered a person whose humanity had been distorted or even *erased* by fire or flying glass. A few revolted against the demands imposed on them by the carnage. A big fellow, over six feet tall and swollen with muscle, broke down as he removed the last layer of my bandages. He vomited all over the bedclothes, fell to the floor where he proceeded to kick and flail at anyone who tried to restrain him.

“*He’s a meatloaf! A fucking meatloaf!*”

How do I look?

“I look like...like there are big blobs of melted plasticine all over my face.”

That earns me an “Oooooo.”

I see the little girl’s mother preparing to rise from her position opposite a young couple.

“You’d be great at trick ’r treatin’, y’know,” she advises me.

“Oh, yeah, I do it all the time.”

“Really?” Her expression is dubious.

“Sure. Got some peppermints off this guy the other day.” Actually, they’ve been in my pocket for ages. “Would you like to have one?”

“Sure!”

“Rachel?” Her mother is calling, craning her neck, trying to see the current object of her daughter’s attention.

“In my coat,” I urge her.

She’s torn between obeying a parent and the promise of a treat. Finally, she moves closer, reaches into the coat and comes up with the twist-wrapped candy.

I expect her to retreat from me quickly but she lingers. She reaches down, strokes my wrist, my fingers, cradling my palm, careful not to press.

“Does it hurt much?”

“Oh...sometimes.”

She draws the hand up, plants a placating kiss on the yellowed wrapping.

Hot and salty, the tears slip down my cheeks, emblazon a crooked path of pain to my chin.

Stinging.

Burning.

“RACHEL!”

Her mother wrenches her away, a swift, snatching motion that startles us both. Rachel begins to cry.

“I’m really sorry—”

“It’s okay, she was just—”

“—won’t happen again, I’ll—”

“—really, we were only talking—”

“—for any inconvenience—”

“—please—”

The woman speaks to the conductor who helps her stuff Rachel’s toys into a shopping bag before escorting the two of them from the car.

My hands contract into tight, angry fists.

*I wasn’t going to hurt the kid—*

I bring my hands up to my face, stare at them.

Up until moments ago, charred skin tissue and soldered cartilage prevented all but the slightest movement of either hand. My fingers had been fused together, ensnared in a web of tough, violet flesh. I required assistance for the simplest tasks like zipping up my coat or using the washroom.

But now...

*I open-close-open-close* my hands, marveling at the transformation. I can hardly bring myself to believe such a thing is possible, even with the evidence right here in front of me. A revelation of liberated flesh.