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When The Train Stops

By

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The new kid was dead.

Tommy and I were talking about Yaz and the Red Sox when Bonehead said, “Look.”

Bonehead, the meanest seventh grade jerk at Saint Oily-Fishes Grammar School, didn’t like fourth graders. With an overbite and bulging eyes, he looked like a snapping turtle.

The kid leaned against the school door with his creased gray school pants, blue clip-on tie, and freshly ironed white shirt—he might as well have held a sign: New kid! New kid! His hair was course and wiry, and his cheeks were bright red.

“Hey, Brillo Boy,” Bonehead said, but the kid didn’t look. He hugged his book bag, waiting.

When the morning bell sounded, I ran with Bonehead, but Sister Marie-Looks-Like-a Man grabbed my collar and stuck me in line. I was behind the kid, his neck and ears shiny. I figured he’d was in second grade, but his polished black shoes shuffled into my classroom and waited by Sister Marie’s desk.

Tommy said, “Fourth?”

We stared. The kid looked at his hands, whispers buzzing, until Sister came. She had hair on her lip and chin, and made us stand in the corner if we forgot our milk money or talked in class. The kid wasn't lucky to be in this class.

"Children, a new student for Saint Aloysius." Grabbing his arm, Sister tugged him forward. He was close to my desk, his warm breath on my neck. "Peter Stankowski. What do we say?"

"*Good Morning, Peter.*"

"There's a month of work for him. Anyone want to help?"

Annoying Amanda's hand reached for the ceiling, "Oh! Oh!"

"Franklin, you'll help. Peter can sit behind you."

"But that's Michael's seat," Tommy said.

Sister Marie's black eyes glared. "Were you asked a question?"

Peter put a little kid's book, *Our Friends on The Train*, onto the desk. The cover had a blue and black locomotive with smoke drifting skyward, waiting for passengers.

We recited the Pledge of Allegiance, then our prayer, "Jesus is the Light of the World, a Light which never knows darkness," to start the day.

I was nervous about helping, but after Sister collected lunch money, the morning went fast. He was good in math, but took a long time writing numbers. He moaned as he moved the pencil in short, twitchy jabs.

"Kid's smart," I said to Tommy in the cafeteria. "Just takes long."

"I was in public school before," the kid said later.

"What's with the train book?" I asked.

He shrugged. “Just like it,” he said, his fingers tangled around the spout of small milk carton.

He lived with his grandmother in a first floor tenement on Benevolent Street because his parents wanted him to, “It’s closer to the doctor’s office,” he said. “Plus, they like the school.”

“Like the school?” Tommy said. “That’s weird.”

“You sick?” I said.

“Sometimes.”

“What you got?”

He sniffed the milk. “Something I was born with.”

He took a small bite from a ham sandwich. “Going to eat those?” Tommy asked, pointing to five Oreos. He shook his head, and I felt the eyes of others upon us.

“Hey, Brillo Boy,” Bonehead said. He and his jerky seventh grade friends, Jimmy, Michael and John stared at us. Bonehead was the loud mouth, but John was scary. No one messed with him, not even the Sisters, who’d smack a kid for breathing. I laughed at him once and he grabbed my neck, squishing it like a banana.

At dismissal, the kid waited for me. I smiled, then saw Bonehead. “See you,” I said. The kid turned for home.

Bonehead and the goons ran behind a row of tenement houses. “Here we go,” Tommy said.

The kid, with his shoulders forward and chin pointed down, walked along Ascension Street. Tommy and I took the shortcut. We waited across the street under a porch until he kid came along, kicking at rocks.

Bonehead grabbed him, and they disappeared into the alley behind the fish market. We hustled closer.

John stood on the sidewalk with a cigarette.

Bonehead pushed the kid against the wall, grabbed his bag and dumped it. "Like trains, little baby?" He pressed the book against the kid's face, then dropped it. "Pick it up," but the kid didn't.

Jimmy stomped on it. "Go ahead," Bonehead said, motioning to the book. "It's okay."

The kid reached, his fingers dangling, when Jimmy slammed a knee into the kid's gut. He fell, thump, to the ground. Bonehead checked the kid's pockets. "Nothing," he said. They dumped a barrel full of sticky trash on him. We waited until they ran off, laughing and whooping.

Once they were out of sight, Tommy and I went to him. He was on his side, eyes closed. "Hey, kid," Tommy said, but he didn't move.

I grabbed the book. The cover had an oily sneaker print, and a few pages were torn. Between the houses of the alley, I saw the white Catholic cross of Saint Oily-Fishes high above the tenement rooftops, shining in the autumn sunlight.

"Kid," Tommy said, shaking his shoulder.

He opened his eyes. Pebbles stuck to the skin of his forehead, and his nose bled from a scratch. "Let's go," I said, but the kid didn't move. "Come on. There's a shortcut."

His arms and legs then jerked like someone yelled, boo! He shook his head. Dazed, he wiped blood onto his shirtsleeve.

Tommy and I ran ahead. We waited for him by the wooded opening near an abandoned cemetery. When the kid was close, we jumped into the shadows. "This way," Tommy said.

He paused and looked down at the dirt path winding into the darkness. A bolt of guck flew from of his mouth, splashing at his feet. He leaned forward, head bobbing, mouth open. Finally, he stopped, and we called to him.

Looking back at Ascension Street, he sighed. The kid stepped ahead like someone sticking a toe into cold water.

“Bonehead sees us, we’re goners,” Tommy said, walking fast. The kid followed behind, breathing hard.

When we reached the end, I pointed to Benevolent Street on the right. Blotches of mud and grease stained his pants and shirt. His face was covered with blood and snot. He wiped the streaky tears from his eyes as he walked home.

#

The kid wasn’t in the next day, or the day after. On Thursday, he came to school. After recess, Sister kept Tommy and me in the hall. “Who hurt Peter? Was it Tony or John?”

It was a sin to lie and, wow, this was a big one. “Don’t know,” I said, feeling a mark burned onto my heart.

“Tommy?” she asked. He shook his head.

“Right hands, please,” she said, pulling a thick maple ruler from the pocket of her habit. She looked at us, her eyes focused and unblinking for so long my hand began to shake. One solid slap sent a shock of pain up to my shoulder.

I stuffed my fist into my pocket and took slow breaths. Finally, she said. “That’s for lying.”

As she walked away, I whispered to Tommy, “We’re okay. We didn’t rat.”

Lucky for me, Dad was on the road. He knew when I wasn't telling the truth, and said I shouldn't play poker. If he found out about the kid, he'd make me tell Sister.

Later, in bed, I added up all the sins I'd committed, and knew I'd have to lie about them during confession. If I died now, I'd go straight to hell.

#

I woke with a plan. What was the big deal anyway? It wasn't like we didn't get picked on at Oily-Fishes—the kid'd be okay.

As it was, Bonehead didn't bother him, he knew better. The Sisters had Bonehead and his goons pegged, so they had to lay low.

Helping him with schoolwork was easy—the best part of it was the red and white peppermint candy he'd slip to me when Sister wasn't looking. Before long, we were friends. We sat together at lunch, played at recess and walked home by Park Avenue, a busy street. On Saturday, I met his grandmother, Babcia. She had white hair and kept a rosary in the pocket of a pink housecoat.

Outside, he tried my bike. I helped him onto the seat, but he couldn't push the pedals hard, so we gave up. Later, while sitting on the porch, he whispered that he liked Amanda. “Yuck!” I said, and the kid laughed like I'd tickled his belly.

He always wore new sneakers. “Got lots of them,” he said, because his mom and dad worked at a shoe factory.

“Do you miss them?”

“Yeah,” he said. “How about you? You're dad's gone a lot, huh?”

I nodded. “Sometimes for over a week,” I said. “How long you staying here?”

The kid shrugged. “Until the doc says I’m okay. Go twice a week.” He held out his right arm and pointed to the red scabs on his pale skin. “Take blood from here.”

“Does it hurt?”

“I’m used to it,” he said, hiding the marks with the flannel sleeve of his shirt.

Later, we shared baseball cards and ate sugar cookies until it was time for the kid to rest. In bed, he rolled onto his side and fell asleep. Babcia stood in the doorway, her eyes shiny.

In the kitchen she said, “Always so tired . . . Come again, okay?”

“Sure.”

I hopped onto my bike and zipped home, pretending I was on a motorcycle and the police were after me.

The kid wasn’t in church on Sunday or in school Monday or Tuesday. On Wednesday, we made get-well cards, and Sister asked if I would bring them. I said yes, and my chest swelled. I marched home.

“Not contagious, is it?” Mom asked, as I was leaving. “Don’t want you sick.”

“Nah. His arm’s broke.” *Oops, another sin.*

I knocked, and Babcia opened the door. “Brought these from school.” Her hair stuck out from behind her ears, and her face was sweaty.

The house was dark. Blankets covered the windows, and the radiators hissed. Sweat curled on her lip. “Peter’s in bed,” she said.

“Hey, Kid.” He was under the covers, sipping orange juice from a straw. His cheeks were red. “Aren’t you hot?”

I put the envelope on his blankets by the train book, open in the middle. “Can I see?” I asked. It wasn’t much, just a boy taking a train ride to visit a cousin. The conductor promises he’ll get the boy to the last stop, “Providence Station.”

“Like Rhode Island,” I said. The kid’s initials, “P.S.” stood in shaky, inky letters on the inside cover.

The boy on the train tags along with the conductor where, at each stop, a fireman, baker, farmer, doctor or police officer steps off. The conductor thanks them for either baking bread, growing food or for protecting others. As the train approaches each station, the boy asks, “Is this it?” but the conductor shakes his head. “No, it’s the *last* stop,” he says.

“But it stops all the time!”

Finally, the train reaches the Providence Station, and the conductor thanks a priest for a safe journey. The last scene is of two smiling boys standing together, the sun, bright orange, low against a wide, freckled sea.

After the kid read the cards, he smiled. His eyes were gray, and the skin around his neck sagged. “What do you want to play?” I asked. He pointed to the cap on the floor near the window.

We scaled baseball cards. He wasn’t very good, so I won easy. Sometimes he’d sigh, then rest. I wait, too, when he stared wide-eyed at something, somewhere.

Finally, I said, “I like the book. Ever been on a train?”

“No.”

Babcia brought two pieces of yellow cake with chocolate frosting. I ate my piece and the kid’s. I put the plate and one empty glass on the kitchen counter. Babcia sat in a rocking chair by a figurine of The Virgin Mary. With her eyes closed, she moved rosary beads through her

fingers, her lips moving in silent prayer. Her chair creaked to the rhythm of a ticking grandfather clock.

The kid lay curled on his bed, small like a doll. “Don’t you like milk?” I asked.

He looked at me, eyes big. “What do you want to be some day?”

“A motorcycle racer.”

“No baseball?”

“Oh. That too. You?”

“A ship captain,” he said. “Like the big ones that go all over.”

“Trains?”

“No.” He flipped to the book’s last page. He ran his finger over the setting sun. “Just like how it ends,” he said. “Plus, there’s an ocean.”

I promised to visit the next day. “Sorry you got beat up,” I said, but he didn’t answer. He’d already pulled the lumpy comforter over his shoulders, his body hidden. So small, like the world was too big for him.

During recess, Bonehead grabbed my collar. “Frankie-wankie and his little pal reading baby books.” The goons circled us.

“That kid’s creepy,” Jimmy said. “Better not go there.”

“Why?”

Bonehead pulled me closer, socking my gut hard. “Because, that’s why.”

“Sister!” Tommy yelled.

“Stay away from that leper.” John said. He punched my shoulder, “Get it?”

I nodded.

I'd been afraid before at the movies. Sometimes it was a bad dream, or a bang at night, but that's all. At lunch, John smacked his fist into his hand—pow! Bonehead and the goons got to me.

By dismissal, I'd decided. I broke my promise; he'd understand, right? *Another sin.*

Later, I sat in the living room, watching "The Little Rascals" on television. The door was locked and bolted. I stayed away from the windows, and shuffled baseball cards. I tried not to think about the kid, but I got jumpy. How would Bonehead know? He wasn't God!

Still, I waited. Tomorrow, for sure, I'd visit. I'd say, "Sorry, kid. Sister kept me after for swearing at Bonehead." He'd like that.

I felt better.

I got the willies again the next day, but went on Thursday. Wearing my older brother's jacket and hat, I took his bike. I pedaled fast, zipping through an intersection.

The blankets were down from the windows, and the kitchen was bright. *Looks like the kid's better.* Babcia came to the door. "Peter not here. Home," she said.

I stood, surprised.

"Come," she said, turning from the door.

I sat at a shiny metal table. The kid's room was empty. "For you," she said, handing to me a thank you note and the kid's book. The note, in his shaky script read, "Sister M., Thanks, P."

"Please give to teacher," Babcia said.

"The book, too?"

"No. For you."

"But, I—

She pushed it to me. She smiled and I couldn't say no. *Maybe a little kid'd want it.*

I sat for a while eating ginger snaps. Babcia brought milk.

"Peter's feeling better?" I asked.

She sighed, then looked at her hands. The clock ticked. "Yah."

"I'm glad."

Riding home, it was tricky holding onto the handlebars, and I almost chucked the book into a dumpster. I hid it in the closet under my Easter shoes, the dust making me sneeze. I'd miss the kid, but no crap with Bonehead and his goons was nice, too.

By the time we'd returned from the Thanksgiving break, we'd stopped talking about the kid.

One day, before Christmas, a ten-dollar bill fell out of Bonehead's pocket when he left the lunchroom. Later, I hid it inside the kid's book. *Another sin!*

A week before Easter, Mom and I went to Sunday Mass, and I saw Babcia. She lit a votive candle. "Mom! That's the kid's babcia," I said, as she slowly walked to the first pew.

"Who?"

"The sick kid from school."

After mass, I waited with Mom in the foyer. Babcia walked, a trembling hand on each pew, as she passed. "How's Peter?" I asked.

"Oh," she said, squinting her eyes.

"I'm Franklin's mother," Mom said.

She nodded. Babcia's eyes watered. "Oh. He's a good boy."

"I'm sorry," Mom said.

Babcia held Mom's hands in hers, squeezed, then let go. The old woman's cramped, bony fingers hung for a moment in mid-air, trembling.

Babcia turned. She stepped onto the staircase, legs bent, pointy knuckles tight on the rail.

"Sorry for what?" I asked.

"Nothing. Just something grownups say."

#

It was Bonehead who told me. "Hey, Frankie-wankie, your little leper friend croaked."

"Did not."

"Did too!"

By the time I found Sister, I had tears in my eyes. We sat in the office and waited for Mom. "I never thought he'd die," I said. I leaned against Sister, who wrapped me into the black cloth of her long habit. Later, she said to Mom, "Franklin truly was a blessing."

As the days went on I thought, why did Sister pick me to help? I was sad for a while, then decided that school stunk and the Jesus stuff was a waste of time. I got jumpy in class. Instead of doing my work, I'd look out the window, or try to get Tommy's attention.

I was fresh to Sister and talked during lessons. I called Bonehead a stupid jerk, and got a bloody nose for it. *I wasn't a blessing*. Most of my recess time was spent in the corner on my knees. In May, Mom came to school. "He's going to stay back," Sister said, "unless—

Anger exploded within me. I stood and banged on the desk with my fists.

"Franklin!" Mom said. I pounded the desk again. Mom and Sister went into the hallway, and I waited.

Hands sore, I sat, head in my arms, blackness all around.

I was weak, tired. For a moment, I felt the kid behind me. Mom shook me and said, “It’s okay. Let’s go,” and she led me by the arm.

The next morning I woke to find the kid’s book by my pillow, its shiny cover bright in the early morning shadows. I tossed it aside, the book flipping open to the last page. Written above the cousin was, “F.” The other boy had two red crayon dots for cheeks and, above his head, was a shaky gold halo like an angel’s. I smiled, the kid was funny like that.

In fifth grade, Sister Marie became my friend. I’d go to her classroom and sit when I was jumpy or mad. After school on Wednesday, I’d meet her in the chapel. I’d asked what to pray for and she’d say, “To let Jesus into your heart, and for Peter.” So I did, but it didn’t matter. Babcia had prayed, but the kid was gone.

Kneeling next to Sister, though, close to the soft whispers from her lips, I’d let my mind rest. In the hushed quiet of the chapel, I hoped I’d never die.

In sixth grade, the diocese closed Oily-Fishes. On the last day, I brought the kid’s book to school. Sister read the last page. “He was your friend. How nice.”

“I know who hurt him, but didn’t tell.”

“And still he gave you a gift,” she said, pointing to the “F.”

I nodded. “It wasn’t right.”

“Have you confessed?”

Hate filled my mouth. “No!” I said, shaking my head. “Why’d you ask *me* to help him?”

“Because you’re a good boy.”

“It wasn’t fair.”

She stood by the window, her black veil and tunic like a long, dark shadow in the daylight. “It was God’s plan,” she said.

“Great plan.”

“Some respect, please.”

“Right. So important, God *had* to take him.”

She closed her eyes, and I thought she was angry. I put the kid’s book in my bag and grabbed my cap.

She took a deep breath, and her eyelids fluttered. “It’s not for us to know,” she said, wiping at a tear.

I held my hand out—I was too big to hug anymore—and said, “Goodbye.”

She brushed my fingers aside and wrapped her arms around me. She whispered, “Be good.”

#

Tommy and I went to public school in September, and we never saw Sister again. I gave up on the sin business—too many to count. By ninth grade, Tommy was strong enough to play varsity football. In the hall one day, he slammed his shoulder into Bonehead’s chest. Tommy held him against a locker as he struggled to breathe, then let him slide to the floor. “Was that for the kid?” I asked.

Tommy, his eyes gleaming said, “Who?”

Bonehead sat on the long corridor floor, arms around his waist, as others casually walked by. I thought of the kid, a small lump in his bed, and a world too big.

#

Later, when packing for college, I found *Our Friends on The Train* stuffed into the corner of my closet. The greasy shoe print on the cover had faded, but the ten-dollar bill was clean and crisp.

I reread the story, happy for the comfort it brought him. The kid was always looking ahead, waiting and hoping. Maybe, in heaven, he was sailing a boat on the ocean.

Before leaving home, I tucked the book into my college backpack. Pretty smart of him to leave it for me, but the kid was like that. He knew darkness, but lived with light.

END