

The Caboose

by John Olson

Arnold Gunderson lived in a caboose on the outskirts of an old mining town in the mountains. The caboose had not been in service in many years. The rails on which it rested were overgrown with grass and wildflowers and could not be seen. Arnold had worked in the mine until the mine closed and decided to resume his original decision to become a painter. His wife had succumbed to cancer a few years back and his kids were grown and living elsewhere in the world. He rarely saw them. He lived on social security and the money left over from the sales of his house. His paintings hung in the town's taverns and restaurants and a few were offered for sale on commission at several gift shops. Arnold liked the impressionists, Monet in particular. His paintings were pretty good. Better than the crap that hangs in motel rooms. Arnold liked painting outdoors but lately he'd come down with a bad cold and was resting indoors. His doctor had given him a prescription for cough syrup with codeine in it for which he was extremely grateful. The over-the-counter meds for cold and flu were worthless. Their active ingredients were mostly just antihistamine which dried out your sinuses so much they desiccated like parchment and bled. The codeine helped Arnold sleep. His throat still burned and his muscles ached but the codeine put it at a manageable distance. He sank into delicious sleep and was awakened some minutes later by a terrific jolt and the crash of metal. It sounded like the railroad company was reclaiming their caboose, hooking it up and carrying it away. Arnold found this development deeply disconcerting, to say the least. He had always assumed the caboose was abandoned. The railroads didn't even use cabooses anymore. But there it was, the sensation of movement. He could hear the wheels groan into action, the eventual clackety clack clack of the rails. He could feel an immense power pulling the caboose. Where would he be when he woke up? Where was the railroad taking the caboose? How far would they be traveling? Would he be kicked off when he was discovered? Would he be

arrested? There was nothing he could do now. He would have to deal with it in the morning. He went back asleep. He awoke intermittently, feeling as if he and the caboose were in outer space, drifting among the stars. He no longer heard metal on metal. There just the wonderful feeling of floating and the blissful disconnection of manacles and chest. He felt disburdened and free. He imagined the train as a giant eel writhing blissfully in the railless hugeness of open space. Or was the train gone? Had the train deposited him and the caboose somewhere? Light flooded the caboose. It felt warm and good. The next morning Scott Callaghan pulled up in his van with a load of groceries for Arnold, a routine delivery. Scott knocked on the door of the old caboose but got no answer. Maybe the old man was out painting. He shouted. There was no answer. He checked the door. It was unlocked. He let himself in and discovered Arnold's body lying on its side with his face toward the wall. Scott got out his cell phone and called the police. The coroner concluded it had been a simple heart attack.

