

Left at the Tracks

by Paul Hargreaves

Burt could smell the diesel exhaust from the roadside berm and could see, through the fog, the outlines of the boxcars and the crumpled wreckage. He strained to hear sirens in the distance, sirens that didn't draw closer despite the long minutes.

His ears rang with the percussion of the boxcar linkages ramming into one another and the shrieks of the train's locked-up wheels as they shuddered to a stop on the rails. They rang, too, with the hollow metallic impact of the broadside hit and of the car tumbling along the tracks. He could see where it had settled, wheels up, with the open passenger door facing him, unhinged.

His little boy Jack had been seat-belted in and so had not been thrown, but he wasn't moving. His arms dangled, pointing toward the ceiling. Burt wanted to go to him but his leg lay at an odd angle and screamed at the barest suggestion of movement.

He thought about how his ex-wife Dolores had started it — didn't she always — when he had arrived to pick up Jack for his pee-wee hockey game and she had objected. Of course it was only a suggestion, she'd said, standing in the doorway. Jack had been sniffing throughout the day, she explained, and she hated to think his cold might worsen. Besides, the roads were awful.

But Burt felt the unspoken entrenchment, knew that beneath her measured ease she concealed a resolute determination to not let Jack go.

"I'll keep him warm," he said.

"Last time you said that he was laid up for almost a week." Never mind that every other kid in Jack's school had been sick. "Had to take three days off work to watch him," she added. She shifted her weight to a more angular stance, her arms crossed box-like across her chest.

"Never miss a chance to rub that in, do you," he said. Burt hadn't worked for several months — a recurring point of contention between them.

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“Rub what in? The fact that you can't make a decent contribution to your own child's upbringing?”

Jack wiped under his nose with the back of his hand. He looked up at Burt and sniffled.

“I'm sorry Daddy.”

Burt bent down, cradled him into a hug. “Bring your stuff out to the car and Daddy'll be right there,” he said. Jack trundled out, bent under a heavy load of equipment and guilt, certain that he had somehow caused the argument. Shivering in the car, he watched his parents arguing under the porch light. He saw the smoking anger of their breath as they jabbed the cold air with accusatory fingers. He tried to look away, to focus on the quiet of the car and on the sound of his breathing. When at last he looked up again, he saw his father pointing at his watch and throwing up his hands. A chime sounded when his father opened the door.

“Sorry buddy, gonna be late again...” he said, followed by what Jack knew was a very bad word. “Buckle up,” he added, not bothering to fasten his own belt. Burt then cranked up the music and backed out in a spray of gravel. And to make the point positively clear, he leaned on the gas pedal and left an angry scar on the pavement.

* * *

The arena was on the riverbank flats on the outskirts of town, straight out past the auto mall and the new fast-food restaurants, past the hospital and left at the tracks. The speed felt good as Burt pounded a rock and roll beat on the steering wheel and nursed his anger.

The red lights started to pulse at the rail crossing and a cone of diffused white light loomed through the woolly darkness. He gauged the distance and the speeds, and quickly checked the dashboard clock. And in that moment of cultivated rage, running late, he felt certain that he could make it.

Now, amid the stillness, Burt could see the smoke from the overturned car curling upward and expiring into the fog. He could see Jack hanging limp in the overturned passenger seat. And

through the thickness of the night, he could hear the still-distant sirens.

It took forever — didn't it always — but help finally arrived. Two men dressed in white made straight for the berm, guessing he would be there, barely turning to take in the scene. They made no calls for ambulances, nor did they light flares to alert oncoming traffic. None were necessary on this clear, moonlit night.

“Feelin' okay there, Burt?” the heavy-set orderly asked. “Why don't you get up and come with us. Back to the hospital.” It wasn't a question.

“But the car — over there. Just a moment ago...”

“That was a long time ago, old buddy. Long time ago. C'mon now, let's get you back to your room.” The orderly held out his hand.

Standing up, Burt suddenly became aware of the night chill. He wrapped his arms around himself, hugging tightly, and he reached back as far as he was able.

“My leg still hurts,” was all he could think to say.

