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It was the kind of snow skiers call champagne powder—light, crystalline. In other circumstances, in someone else’s life, it might have been beautiful.

To Rollie, it was stinging, blinding agony, lashing his face, forming little clumps of ice in his untended beard. With each step, the cold hammered him, the wind taking his breath away.

He’d fallen asleep on the number 6 bus. On an ordinary night, it would’ve barely been an inconvenience. Tonight, in this God-forsaken wasteland, an old district called Derbytown, it might mean his life.

At first, he thought he’d be able to find shelter after only a modest walk, perhaps in the residential area he’d noticed before falling asleep. Now he was lost.

The area was industrial—warehouses, factories, unidentifiable buildings—unfamiliar. They all looked forlorn, forbidding.

Rollie didn’t pay much heed to weather reports, instead taking each day in stride, trusting his instincts and numerous contacts on the street. He didn’t know that tonight’s weather had been labeled a winter storm alert. Temperatures were expected to drop well below zero. With the wind chill factor, it was a night that could kill.

The snow grew deeper, the wind more cutting. The streets were empty; no pedestrians like himself; no cars, trucks, buses or trains—nothing but the blinding snow.

Rollie dragged the bandana he wore over his head down across his mouth, shifting from pirate to bandit. He gathered the

collar of his thin, second hand parka close around his neck, burying his hands in the pockets of his flimsy khaki trousers. He wore only battered tennis shoes, the tips of his toes already well past numb.

Even after the night's extended binge, Rollie knew that he'd better find shelter, and soon. He wasn't quite as old as he felt, nor as old as he appeared, but his legs were slowing down, and he was growing more sleepy by the moment. He knew what that meant.

He stopped and looked around. There were a handful of shabby buildings on the street; all with wire mesh on the windows and metal doors. A couple hundred yards away, he glimpsed the outline of another building against the lurid back lighting of the city's glow. It stood isolated in the midst of an open field, grasping skyward like some soaring weed.

It was tall, four stories at least, topped by a tower crowned with an old-fashioned mansard roof. And *vast*; seeming to span entire acres. In the wind, he heard a faint squeaking; perhaps an open door or window. The sound drew him towards the dark structure.

Drawing closer, he saw that the building was red brick, obviously old and covered with decades of soot. Closer still, he was able to see the faded ghost sign that advertised the building's former function: Exeter Packing Company.

A slaughterhouse.

There was something vaguely familiar about it.

The squeaking was louder now, seeming to come from somewhere to the building's rear. Feeling his way along the wall like a blind man, Rollie eventually found the source: a window swinging on its rusty hinges. Rollie was no criminal, for all his faults. He didn't believe in damaging private property, or in stealing. He felt uncomfortable breaking in, but what other choice did he have? Only wandering the streets until he slowly froze to death. Joints protesting, he stooped down to the window's level, lifting the heavy pane. The frozen metal stung his hand. He slapped his fingers against his thigh to restore feeling.

He peered into the pitch blackness beyond the window. The building was silent, a faint, animal scent seeping from within. Though it probably wasn't much warmer inside, perhaps he'd be able to scavenge together a fire or something to cover himself. He might not have to die tonight after all.

He squeezed himself through the open window, falling in a heap, the ten foot drop stinging his feet but causing no injury. He stood still, allowing his eyes to adjust to the gloom. After a moment or two, he was able to make out a vast concrete floor, high, naked walls; some sort of basement, largely empty.

Rollie fumbled in his pocket, blessing his own habitual pragmatism. Yes! Four matches left.

He struck one, the darkness partially retreating before its flickering orange glow. There were piles of refuse here and there, the ceiling above a maze of pipes, drains and beams. He tried not to think of their original purpose.

The match burned his fingertip. He lit another, carefully approaching the nearest pile of refuse. The pile was composed of cardboard boxes, old newspapers and two or three wooden pallets. The match burned his finger again.

Working blind—only one match left; no use in wasting it—he dragged the tinder into what felt like a large open space. Feeling his way, he crumpled the newspapers and arranged them into a round pile. Atop this, he placed pieces of torn boxes, making sure that air could get beneath them. When the pile was sufficient, he placed the pallets on top, leaving them intact since he didn't have the strength to tear them apart.

When he struck the final match, a sudden draft of air from somewhere within the sepulchral packing plant nearly blew it out. But somehow the flame took hold. He held it against the newspapers here and there, starting little fires until the matchstick was spent.

It worked; the small flames converging, blazing. In a matter of moments, Rollie felt the first warmth he'd felt since he left the bus.

He basked in the glow, the numbness slowly leeching from

his tired bones. The fire represented nothing less than life, and he was grateful for it. Damn, he was *hungry!* But that could wait 'til morning. For now, the fire was luxury enough.

As the fire grew, he was able to discern more of the room. He peered through the gloom at the odd piles and stacks that were placed haphazardly around. He was accustomed to life on the streets and the rails; had long since learned to improvise with whatever materials made themselves available.

From the look of things, Rollie was the first visitor here in years: The floor had an even layer of fine dust, the air stagnant, faintly laced with that indeterminate animal musk.

He rose from the comfort of the fire, filching a stick from its base. It burned at its tip; as good a torch as he was likely to find in this place. He walked into the coldness of the open room, following the faint glow of his stick. To one side, he saw a long ramp leading upward into darkness. He wouldn't worry about that for now. Later, perhaps.

He approached the nearest pile; a structure of old cans and bottles; boxes of files and correspondence, all entombed in layers of thick cobweb. He picked up a stained calendar, illustrated with a leggy blonde. The date read 1945. He tossed it back into the pile. Nothing useful here.

He turned his attention to another pile heaped against the far wall. There had to be something . . . he stopped in his tracks. *Jesus*. Rats; at least a hundred, all dead; bodies dried to furry husks, blank holes where eyes once glinted.

What the hell had happened here? It was as though they'd died scabbling over one another in suicidal panic; legs outstretched, intertwined, their tiny mouths gaping open.

Rollie turned away, not wanting to think about it, or indulge the ghastly sight any longer. He returned to the fire, in need of its warmth and security, resuming his seat on the hard floor.

He removed his jacket, draping it over himself as a makeshift cover, then positioned himself as comfortably as he could. He was dog tired, but not yet ready for sleep. He grew

languid and dreamy, and began to think about things he normally didn't think about.

Maybe it was some sort of omen—running across this place—maybe it was time to start thinking about the life he was leading. He'd nearly *died* tonight, and for what? His own damn stubbornness? His rebellion against living the life that his father had lived? What was so wrong, after all, about working 9 to 5 in a foundry for four decades?

At least his father had a place to sleep every night; a meal to eat; a paycheck to collect every Friday. What did Rollie have to show for his own years, beyond the shabby clothes and pathetic possessions he carried?

Perhaps tomorrow, tomorrow when the sun comes out and the snow starts to melt . . . maybe there'd be somewhere in town he could clean himself up, maybe even get work . . .

He still wasn't sleepy. Now he began to fixate on something that had been bothering him since he approached the slaughterhouse—the name: Exeter. Why was it so . . . ? Ah, now he remembered: A story he'd heard as a child, half-forgotten now, save for the dread it had set curdling in his belly.

It was years ago. Apparently the place was abandoned, even back then, save for three Dobermans that served as guard dogs. They were left alone at night to keep intruders out . . . *intruders like me*. One morning, the caretaker found all three dogs dead in a bloody heap on the sidewalk in front of the building. Windows in the third story had been shattered, the glass scattered around their corpses. Sometime during the night the dogs had leapt to their deaths.

Were they chasing something when they plunged from the tower, or was something chasing *them*?

Rollie listened to the crackling fire, slowly drifting into sleep at last. He dreamed of rail cars; a consistent subject. He'd spent much of his youth as a hobo, crisscrossing the country in boxcars and hoppers on the main lines. He had pleasant memories of those days, and usually pleasant dreams too, but not tonight.

Tonight, he dreamed of something he'd seen in Omaha many years ago when he jumped off the train in the yards—a man's body strapped to the top of one of the cars. Not exactly unusual; many hobos tied themselves down to keep from falling off when they fell asleep. But somewhere between here and there, something terrible had happened:

He'd been beheaded, perhaps by a bridge or tunnel.

It was the last train Rollie had ever hopped. The sight of that headless body never left him, nor did his dread of trains, which began that day. He'd never ridden a train since.

He screamed as he jolted awake, the sound echoing throughout the basement. He was disoriented at first, forgetting where he was. For a moment, he thought he could hear the sound of a train; that dreadful whining, clacking noise they made in the night. But the sight of the smoldering fire brought him back to reality. He remembered where he was.

Then he heard it again.

He was awake this time, and listening intently. There was no mistaking that sound. It was far off in the distance, a lonely, restless wail; that damned clicking noise as the wheels caressed the track.

Getting closer.

The concrete floor began to vibrate. A burning ember rolled off the fire.

It must be outside . . . hadn't he crossed a couple of nearby tracks to make it here? Nothing to worry about; it would be over in a few minutes . . .

But the din continued to escalate, the vibrations beneath his feet almost throwing him off balance. He thought he could hear tiny bits of mortar crumbling from the walls, shaken loose by the disturbance.

And then he saw the beam.

Like the sound, it was faint at first; perhaps a reflection from outside? No . . . the light focused to an intense glare, growing brighter and brighter with every heartbeat. Motes of dust danced in the light; fragments of the mortar he could still

hear shaking free of its moorings. *Like a cinema projection . . .* No . . . no; not like a cinema projection. *Real*, and closer than he'd presumed . . .

Not outside; the light was coming from *within* the slaughterhouse, its glare so bright now, it was painful to look at.

The heat and stink of diesel, a churning engine, shrieking wheels . . . the thunder of its approach shook him to the marrow, stealing his breath.

No!

He didn't believe it, yet couldn't deny it. Rising from his seat beside the fire, he ran. In the close confines of the basement, the acidity of diesel fumes choked his lungs and stung his eyes.

He ran as fast as he could, the basement seemingly endless, stretching into black eternity. After a while, as the train's lamp thrust him into ever sharper relief, he felt like he was running in painful slow motion.

Everything seemed to freeze momentarily, and Rollie felt a presence nearby. He began to turn, hoping to catch some glimpse of the intruder, but never did.

He hit the wall at full speed. He felt his nose smash into the bricks, his teeth shatter. As if calling out to him, the train behind screamed one final time.

That scream was so deafening that Rollie thought his ears would burst. He turned to face his pursuer; caught only a glimpse of the winged emblem emblazoned across the monster's nose, and the fierce, blinding light of its one Cyclops eye.

It was not a painless death.

Outside, the snow fell relentlessly on Derbytown, and on the old slaughterhouse. All was quiet. By midnight, the footprints Rollie had made in the champagne powder were lost forever.