

Last Train

The cities were on fire, and Benito's lungs were too. The flames burned high, visible all those miles away. The heat they spoke of was already here, though.

He pulled himself up the steps onto the station landing, the hot metal of the hand-rail yet another infliction. There was ash across the concrete pad, and he could see only two other figures waiting track-side, their progress scribed in the gray particle layer from the stairs at the opposite end.

A man and a small boy stood waiting for the same potential escape that had brought him here, their attention called away from the uphill metal traces by the sound of his arrival. They looked apprehensive, so Benito put a hand up in greeting and croaked out,

"Peace. Any sign of it?"

The man shrugged as the boy stepped into the perceived safety of his shadow. His reply was nearly as desiccated as Benito's, as he patted the child absently with one hand.

"Nothing yet. One hopes, though. Any water?"

Benito smiled at them as he approached, and pulled a plastic water bottle from his pocket.

"A little."

He handed it to the man, and could see the desire in the other's eyes as he took it. Yet he gave it to the boy first, and they both watched the liquid inside it disappear in a child's desperate gulps. Benito and the man exchanged lifted eyebrows that said between them,

What else can you do?

And,

What else would you do?

"Thank you, amigo." The child's ward was grateful, but Benito could hear the unassuaged thirst in his words. He resisted a sigh, and pulled out the last of his water, presenting the final bottle as though it was a small thing. It was not.

"Your turn, amigo."

The man, to his credit did hesitate. Benito didn't blame him though when he couldn't not take it, and make it disappear as quickly as his diminutive companion. It was what he'd wanted to do himself for many hours. He focused on the present situation, letting words through a dry throat be a way to move forward.

"How long have you been here? Any trains?"

It was a stupid question. They wouldn't be here if there had been one, but sometimes a foolish inquest was the way. Interestingly enough, the boy spoke up in answer.

"Nana said there would be one more. It's late, though. We made it in time, right, Papa?"

The older man looked conflicted, as though to address the question in front of a stranger would affect the outcome. He looked down at the empty water bottle in his hand before answering, his response meant for Benito, not the boy when he looked back up.

"My wife worked for the railroad her whole life, senior. If she said a thing, it's a true thing. And so we wait."

For Benito, the statement raised more questions than answers, but the world was burning down around them. To add to the flames, three men climbed up the steps he had so recently climbed himself.

They were indistinct and generic in the way that an IED is. It represents itself as something non-threatening, until it doesn't. Benito had known such men and their intent, and knew them now for what they were. The first of them up the steps was also the first to speak.

"Hola. Any water?"

Benito looked at the old man, and gestured with his eyes, hoping it would not go unnoticed. It didn't, as the man moved slowly toward the edge of the track, herding the boy with him. Benito wished he'd had something to drink, but interposed himself between the other two and these new three. He kept his voice neutral.

"No, señor. Not much of that around, though we've looked. You?"

"No. Any trains?"

"Not so far."

The lead man was as hard as Benito would have expected, and the other two were duplicates. They were takers, and it was time for him to act if he was going to.

As if in reply to the urgency, the sound of steel wheels on steel track became audible, and everyone except Benito looked towards the source.

He did not. He launched.

A fist to the windpipe took the first one down, and momentum carried him close enough to the second to try again. He knew he was fast, but life was capricious, and it didn't always break your way. The next man blocked his strike, and hit back. Benito slipped under it, but couldn't deliver the ending needed. Now he had two on him, and that was probably more than he could counter. Life wasn't a movie.

But he had to try. Why not? At the end, who was he going to be?

As he re-adjusted his stance and lashed out again, connecting this time, Benito felt their eyes upon him. The old man and the boy watched as he put the second man down, even as the third one shoved a knife between his ribs.

The juxtaposition was as cold as the world was hot, it seemed. The disappointment of his father, and the hope his son had placed in Benito was somehow worse because neither of them were here now to bear witness. There were only these stand-ins that he had watered at his own expense, and now fought to protect.

He drove his elbow down, separating his last attacker from the weapon and tearing a larger seam in his own flesh at the same time. Pivoting, he back-handed the man and followed with a closed fist to the right eye. Bones broke on both sides, and he and the last of the hard men dropped to the ash-covered concrete. Benito's blood poured out of him, moisture granted to a world that didn't have enough of it.

The train pulled up to the station, the wipers across the bifurcated front windows smearing enough to hide the shape of the driver. And, most likely occluding his full view of what was happening on the platform.

The old man started forward towards Benito, a question articulated.

"Señor?"

Benito waved him off. This was his destination, after all. He just hadn't known it until now.

"Go. Take the boy, and live."

The man looked as if he would say more, but in the end, didn't. He only nodded, and turned away. He ushered the boy through the open train door, and neither of them looked back.

Steel wheels turned, and the last train disappeared into the smoke.