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"The Eye of God"

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It's like looking into the eye of God, Billy had told us. In fact he was the one who had started this ritual over a year before, and now we all sat huddled together next to the wooden fence of the lumberyard waiting as Alex spread himself across the tracks fifty yards away. He was shaking; I could see that from where I sat. My best friend Tris sat behind me holding my elbow so tightly that it started to hurt.

"Let go you baby," I whispered as I pushed him back away from me. We were the youngest as it was, and it was only because Billy was my older brother that we were allowed to hang with them. Billy was almost a cult god amongst the kids of Montrose, New Mexico. It had been a little over a year since Billy had stayed on the tracks until the train was only ten feet away. After he rolled off, seconds before the train passed, he stood and walked over to where we all sat near the lumberyard. He looked so calm, but I was shaking. I was twelve that year.

"Sorry," Tris whispered as he pushed back behind me, "It just scares me."

"Shut up," I whispered louder. "Don't let them hear you."

"Try to keep your friend quiet," Billy said to me and then turned to the rest of the group. "He's about to bolt; I can see it from here. His body's shaking so hard, I bet he's already wet his pants." There were six of us huddled together. Tris and I were the only ones under sixteen, and Billy was the oldest at eighteen.

Across the field in the dark Montrose night, Alex lay across the tracks waiting. His body was contorting back and forth. He was getting nervous too quickly, and none of us doubted that he would bolt. The front light of the train hadn't even pushed around Hangman's Curve, which was usually the time the guy on the track started to squirm.

"He can feel it," Billy whispered to the group. "Right about now, the tracks are

vibrating under his body. You can feel a train almost half a mile away."

In the distance, we could hear its baritone whistle. It was getting close, and we all turned and looked down toward Hangman's Curve, which was a quarter mile away. No one had ever bolted before the train reached that point. The light from the train softly pushed around the corner, and then with full force, the train followed with a scream. It was a powerful sight and when someone was lying across the track, it never failed to put a lump in my throat.

Alex didn't hesitate, and as the train reeled around the corner, he jumped to his feet and ran into the field on the opposite side of the tracks. He was screaming and running, and after tripping over an old railroad tie, he got back to his feet and started running again.

"Pansy," Billy screamed as he jumped to his feet and started running in the direction of the tracks. Alex couldn't hear him since the train was now roaring between the two of them. "Yellow bellied rodent sucking pansy," Billy said as he walked back to where we were all standing. "That train was a quarter of a mile away."

July afternoons in Montrose were as hot as anywhere in the world. Tris and I sat in his air-conditioned room watching a New Mexico State basketball game on his ten-inch black and white set.

"That was hot," Tris said as he shot his Nerf basketball into the hoop attached to his door." Alex didn't even wait for the light to fall on him, and I swear that when he ran, his pants were wet."

"How are you going to expect me to believe that you could see that far?" I asked.

"I swear it," he answered as he tossed up another shot at the basket. "His pants were as wet as grass in the morning." I didn't continue my challenge, so he continued. "I'm going next week. I'm going to lie on those tracks and become a train stud like your brother."

"Give it up Tris." I didn't bother to even look over at him; his statement wasn't worth the effort. "They wouldn't let you out there even if you really wanted to."

"I'm doing it." He stopped shooting baskets and moved to stand in front of me. It

was his attempt to be intimidating. "I'm going to hang on until the train rips the shoes off my feet. I'm going to cut it so close, even your brother will bow down to me."

That was more than I would stand for. "My brother wouldn't bow down to spit on you." I stood and pushed him back against the far wall. I wasn't in the mood to look at his ugly face any longer and left.

"I'm going to do it," he shouted at me as I walked out his front door into his yard. "I'm going to be a train stud."

The heat was a blanket on my back, and walking the three miles back to my house would have been impossible without stopping for a break. The lumberyard was the halfway point between our houses, and I stopped under the lone oak tree that sat in the adjoining field. Steam floated off the tracks, making them almost look like they were breathing. I rested my head back against the tree, and off in the distance I could hear the whistle of a train.

It was still miles away, so I ran across the field to the tracks to place a penny on the rail. The train was close now. I could feel the tracks vibrating as I put the penny down, and then stepping back, I waited. It was a small train with only six cars and a caboose, but as I sat in the field only ten yards or so from where it passed, I could feel the breeze that it produced.

After it rolled off in the distance, I walked over to pick up the penny and then sat down on the rails. They burned through my clothes, but not heeding their warning, I lay back stretching myself from one side of the tracks to the other. It was power. Lying there, even without the threat of a train, filled me with an overwhelming sense of power. If this was half of what Billy felt a year before as he lay here, then I could understand why he kept coming back.

A cloud had rolled in front of the sun making the rest of my walk home more comfortable. In New Mexico, clouds were valued as much as the land itself. There wasn't a lot around to duck under when the sun became oppressive. The landscape sprawled on endlessly with only a few shrubs to break up the monotony.

I went straight to my room when I arrived home. It was my sanctuary, a place for no one but God and myself. I was lying on my bed reading a Spider Man comic when Billy walked in.

"Tris wants to do it," he said as he walked over to the pile of clothes on my floor and started poking through them. "He just called and said that he wants to lie on the tracks."

"He's too young," I answered without looking up from the comic book.

"That's what I told him, but he wouldn't give up," Billy continued. "Do you think he'll go through with it?"

"Too young," I repeated a little more loudly than I had intended. I wanted to tell Billy what Tris had said about his bowing down to him, but I decided not to.

"What about you Little Man, when are you going to lie on the tracks?" Little Man was the nickname my father had given me before he died. Billy was Big Man and I was Little Man. My father had died when I was four, and the nickname was all that I remembered about him.

"I want to," I said and turned to look at him. He was still sorting through the clothes on the floor. "I swear I want to Billy. I just don't think I can do it."

He looked up at me when he found the shirt that he had been looking for. It was his lucky shirt; the one he had worn that night on the tracks. "You don't have to prove yourself to anyone Little Man. I'll see to that."

When Friday night rolled around, I put on some dark clothes and walked over to pick up Tris from his house. We all wore dark clothes on Friday. It made it hard for the cops to see us in the dark when we would hang out by the tracks. They didn't usually bother us, but on a few occasions they chased us out of the field with their flashlights.

Tris wasn't looking good when I arrived. "What's the matter train stud?" I asked when he answered the door. "You're looking a little pale."

"Shut up," he squeaked. He sounded as unnatural as he looked. His typically baby pink skin looked as if it had been bleached. "Let's just get going, alright?"

We walked the long route to the field and stopped at the only 7-Eleven in town for drinks. We always stopped at the 7-Eleven on our way to the field on Fridays.

"Hey it's Little Man and the Pig," Jack said as we walked in. The 'Pig' was a reference to Tris' usual pinkness. "Although you're not looking pig-like tonight. What's wrong?" Jack had been our physical education teacher earlier in the year but had to quit

after suffering from a nervous breakdown.

"He's going to lie on the tracks tonight," I answered as I filled my Big Gulp with Dr. Pepper. "His paleness is almost scary isn't it?"

"You both shut up," Tris said as he looked up from a magazine that he had taken off of the rack.

"You guys still hang out at the tracks?" Jack asked. "That's a stupid way to waste an evening."

"We're not all lucky enough to hang out here all night like you do." I filled a second Big Gulp with Sprite for Tris and carried them to the counter. "Maybe some day we'll take you with us."

"No thanks," he said as he put my money into the register. As we started to walk out, he called to us, "Hey, you guys be careful. Don't do anything stupid."

The long route took us past the old Montrose mansion. Growing up, I had been told that Jim Montrose, the owner of the mansion, was the man that the town was named after. I thought it was all bull. Old man Montrose was a weasel who used to chase us off of his lawn with a garden hose. A town couldn't be named after a man like that. He had died the same year that Billy had stayed on the tracks until the last second. If the town had been named for Jim Montrose, then they picked the wrong man. The house was now vacant and as we walked past it, Tris picked up a rock and threw it up toward the porch.

"Bet the old man wouldn't have lasted on the tracks," he said. The clouds had blown in from the east causing the sky to grow darker. "You think it will rain? If it rains I'll have to wait until next week. It wouldn't be any good lying out there in the rain. I might lose my footing when I try to push away from the train."

I didn't answer him. It was more than he had said all night and I took it as a sign of weakness. I didn't have a lot of faith that he would actually go through with this, rain or not.

When we arrived at the field, I could see that the group had already gathered at the fence next to the lumberyard. I couldn't see faces, but they were definitely there. Their black outlines dotted the fence and there was a steady stream of smoke rising above it. Billy never smoked. He said it made people look stupid, and for the most part I agreed with him. Still there were a few who would light up their cigarettes every Friday as they

sat waiting and talking. I was in a hurry to join the group, but Tris kept falling behind. At one point I had to grab his arm and pull him across the field.

"So the man of the hour has finally arrived," Billy said to Tris as we sat down with the group. "Twenty minutes to the next train. You going to be ready?"

"Sure," Tris whispered, "I'll be ready."

We sat talking for the next few minutes. Billy talked about a girl he had met in school who had just moved out here from California. Tris moved to the back of the group as he was talking. He looked even paler than before, and then without warning, just got up and started walking away. Alex, who was allowed to rejoin the group after his pathetic stay on the tracks the week before, was the first to say something. "Where are you going kid?"

Tris didn't answer; he just kept walking. I thought about following him, but I didn't think that he'd want me to. Finally Billy broke the silence. "Let him go," he said. "It's not his time yet." His words seemed to take the disgrace out of Tris' leaving. Only Billy could do that.

"What the heck, I'm going to head back home then," Alex said as he got to his feet and started stretching. "If I can't watch a kid get trampled by a train, then what's the use?"

I stood to stretch while Alex was still talking, and then started walking down toward the tracks. The clouds had moved through, leaving a star-filled sky to illuminate the landscape. "Where are you going Little Man?" Billy called out to me.

"The tracks," I called back without turning around.

"You don't need to do it." His voice was tense. I remembered that he hadn't sounded tense the night he had been on the tracks himself, but now, his voice was definitely tense. "There's nothing for you to prove."

When I reached the tracks, I turned back to look at the group. They had all stayed next to the fence, except Billy who was walking toward me. I shook my head and he stopped. I hadn't expected him to see me in the dark, but I guess he did since he turned and walked back to join the others.

There were still a few minutes left until the train was supposed to pass, but I lay down anyway. The rails were as cold as snow, and as I lay my head back against the farthest rail, my body began to shake. I tried to control it because I didn't want anyone to

think that I was shaking from fear, but I couldn't overcome it. Lying on my back, I looked up into the sky to see if I could pick out the Big Dipper. In the back of my mind I could hear the voices of the others yelling over to me from where they sat next to the fence. Their words were formless as I set my mind to finding various constellations. Then the ground moved.

It was almost nothing at first, with only the faint hum of a vibration moving through the tracks and into my body. Within seconds, the vibrating had increased to the point that it surged into my lower back and neck where my body actually made contact with the rails.

I remember Billy saying that you can feel a train a half a mile away. It was close and there was no way that I was going to bolt before seeing the front light of the train push around Hangman's Curve. I would make Billy proud.

I couldn't find the Big Dipper, but Orion was shining brightly. I loved the sky. My eye caught a glimpse of the North Star almost in unison with the strong headlight from the train as it screamed around the corner. The sound was overwhelming as the tracks started biting into my back. My body tightened as I pulled myself to the tracks with my clenched fists. I wouldn't run. The sound grew almost unbearable as the light from the train raced toward me. I tilted my head slightly to see if I could catch a glimpse of Billy. He was standing; screaming. I looked back in time to see the light push down on me ... The Eye of God. The train was on me before I could think, and pushing myself off the track with my feet, I felt a pain in my arm as the wheels screamed past, inches from my head. I froze on the ground next to the tracks as the monster shrieked past.

As the train continued down the tracks, the silence returned to the still night. I was dizzy, but found the strength to stand up. It was only then that the screams began next to the fence, almost as if they had waited to see that I was alive before coming to claim their new champion. I saw Billy at the head of the group as they ran toward me. I could barely make out his words as he yelled 'train stud' while he was running.

It was then that I felt the warmth against my arm, and looking down, I could see where the train had ripped a ten-inch piece of skin off of my right elbow. The blood flowed down to my fist that was still clenched.

I was cold and my body was shaking. My mind hadn't cleared yet, and as I saw the

group moving closer, I decided to run in the opposite direction. My arm was starting to throb as I pushed my way through the field. Behind me I could hear the triumphant screams of the others, but not wanting to be caught, I kept running.