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24 January 2022

One Way Trip

The man stood motionless on the train platform, cold-bitten hands stuck deep into his thick jacket pockets. The steel tracks were laid on the ground just in front of him, the metal rails gleaming brightly in the moonlight that shown proudly and unhindered in the cloudless, unpolluted night sky. A painted sign hung above the man's head, squeaking slightly as the wind swept past it, reading in golden, chipped letters *Hastings*. An inky blackness weighed heavily in the air, making visibility anywhere beyond the openness of the railroad impossible, even with the pinpoints of stars stretching far past the silhouetted tree line. The man shifted from foot to foot in measured impatience, the only other source of light coming from the singular lantern that swung rhythmically on the nearby post that held up one part of the wooden structure that formed the ticketing office.

The flame inside the glass flickered sporadically, its movements unpredictable as the man's head turned to peer over his shoulder at the dimly illuminated clock. He could just make it out through the station's dingy window where a clerk could be seen eyeing him up and down critically. He quickly whipped his head back around.

8:00 it read.

Taking one of his tingling hands out of the warmth of his coat pocket, the man opened his fist and once again glanced down at the ticket that he held tightly, foggy breath obscuring his vision briefly as he struggled to read the script that he had already memorized in the poor lighting. He shuffled closer to the lantern.

Hastings, MO → Buffalo, NY – 8:45 departure

One way trip

The ticket itself was barely readable despite the less-than-optimal lighting conditions of the station. The paper was riddled with an innumerable network of creases as though it had been rolled up into a small ball and then straightened out again multiple times, not unlike it had been used for target practice. The edges were close to tearing, the paper impossibly thin, and the ink was flaking and fading in some spots at the obvious abuse. Quickly, as though not wanting it to be stolen straight from his grasp, he hastily tucked the ticket back into the safety of his palm as it clenched into a fist, fingers shaking faintly as the hand and ticket once again disappeared in the confines of the fabric of his dark jacket.

A heavy silence hung in the air, the effect of which was almost unbearable combined with the loneliness of standing solitary on the platform. A tapping foot soon accompanied his shifting as the silence became too stifling for the man to bear as it stretched on after three seemingly endless minutes. The renewal of the creaking of the sign did nothing to relieve him, however, and he had the sudden and strong desire to reach above his head and rip it off its rusted hinges to break it over his knee as a rush of ire at the sound hit him.

A low chiming suddenly could be heard in the far distance, and the man's head snapped up from where it had been looking unconsciously and distractedly at a discarded weeks old newspaper off to the side of where he stood. Eager he leaned as far as he possibly dared over the edge of the station's platform, peering to the left down the path formed by the illuminated tracks just in time to see the unmistakable beam of the train round the corner, the light blinding him with its sudden intensity making his eyes water. His free hand that was not in use appeared rapidly out of his pocket to grab the handle of his small, tarnished suitcase which had been sitting patiently by his feet as his other hand fiddled with the ticket restlessly, passing the paper back

and forth between his fingers, as if doing so would make the train arrive to its destination faster by his will alone.

As the second whistle pierced through the air, more loudly this time as the locomotive came closer, an older looking gentleman came to stand to the right of him, appearing next to him so suddenly it was as if he had arrived from thin air. Startled, as if not expecting someone else to want to board a train while waiting at a train station, the man tilted his head down pointedly, using the shadow created by the brim of his hat to obscure the exposed part of his face as though he was suddenly bashful of his own appearance. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that his new companion was reading the most recently published newspaper from that morning.

“Crazy things happening in the news, eh?” the gentleman said conversationally, his voice gruff with age. The man simply jerked his head rigidly in response, and the newcomer huffed, slightly peeved at the obvious dismissal at his attempt to start small talk.

Every crinkle of the newspaper seemed to set his nerves alight anew as he jerked at it minutely, his ears hypersensitive to the seemingly unthreatening sound. The gentleman read on peacefully with a quiet cheerful tune passing his lips, unaware of the rampaging stress the simple action was causing the younger stranger standing next to him. The once compressing silence before the gentleman’s arrival would seem welcome to the man now as the pages were slowly read with some hums and sounds of disapproval mixed in between his melody and then flipped one by one, the stack becoming increasingly thinner as time crept by. After what seemed like an eternity of crinkling and flipping, the train finally came to a stop in front of the pair, the wheel’s steady chugging decreasing and decreasing in speed until the noise disappeared altogether with a final screech that signified the train had arrived.

Not waiting to be hailed by the conductor to board, the man practically leaped onto the now immobile steps leading to one of the car entrances, grip white-knuckled and sweaty around his suitcase. The door to the cabin swung open with a snap, and before the conductor could even open his mouth to either welcome him aboard or ridicule him for his hastiness, he was pushing past the worker rather rudely before he could even utter the first syllable in order to find out, heading for the shadowed spot in the far back corner of the car, tucked away from the other riders who sat idly reading books or sharing quiet conversation. His eyes quickly flicked around the car, and his shoulders relaxed in evident relief. No newspapers could be seen.

No one else had boarded after him, but he could still spot the other gentleman standing on the rickety platform, his large stature highlighted partially in the warm light of the lantern. His sharp gaze took the gentleman in, from his portly belly to his bushy mustache, and he felt no lack of delight watching him freely from where he now was situated safely behind the glass of the frosty cabin window and not directly by the rotund man's side. As he watched, the gentleman flipped the page and-

There it was. The moment the man had been waiting for. It was almost comical how the gentleman's eyes widen to a seemingly impossible size, mouth dropping open in shock as his jaw went slack while staring unblinkingly at the page in front of him. The man's mustache twitched as though it was a living thing apart from its owner's pale face, and then the gentleman was yelling. The newspaper flew from his grasp as his arms began to wave around wildly, the papers so neatly folded together flying into the air and catching in the wind as they fluttered down and covered the floor of the platform. They looked almost like ghosts as the lantern light caught the white of the sheets as they floated for a moment in the air.

The gentleman began to run for the train, his muffled shouting growing in intensity and clarity as he attempted to board, but he was too late. The rhythmic rumble of the wheels had already begun as the train was spurred into motion and quickly began to gain speed. The man settled further into his plush seat as he watched with a smile plastered largely across his face as the sight of the gentleman chasing unabashedly after the train. He even felt giddy enough to give a lighthearted wave at the sprinting man as their eyes locked for a brief moment before the gentleman was forced to stop running unless he run straight off of the platform's edge onto the rocks below.

As the platform began to grow smaller and smaller the conductor from before approached the man, smiling, albeit tightly, despite the rudeness he previously received, and the man could not help but smile back at the friendly face.

"Ticket, sir?" the conductor asked, hand extending towards him expectantly. With steady, stable hands he removed the crumpled ticket from his pocket, smoothly handing it over with a second smile, not a hint of nervousness to be found.

"Of course," he said in return, grip loose and relaxed as the ticket was taken from his hand.

In wake of the retreating train, the gentleman slowly picked up a piece of his newspaper from where it now sat innocently on the ground.

Jack Barlow: Wanted for Multiple Counts of Murder in Saint Louis

The picture of the mysterious man he had only just seen on the platform glared back up at him, the light of the lantern making the image writhe evilly.