

## The Itch

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*In late summer of 1901, my great grandfather boarded a train bound for a log cabin settlement deep in the San Juan Mountains of Southern Colorado. The settlement was called Howardsville.*

*Its remains still stand outside of Silverton, the home of Hillside cemetery, where his wife was interred without him. There was no body to bury—*

*He never made it home.*

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A dying man looks out a frosted window.

He watches the world trail away as the Rio Grande chugs out of Salida, grinding away from the platform. It departs with a screech owl trill, spewing a fountain of ash and steam between the morning's bony fingers. Day breaking on the Sawatch turns granite mountains' saw teeth into crowns and halos that rake at the bellies of clouds turned hard and cold by the arrival of September. He watches as the view melts away, hidden behind the curtain of rising slopes; trees, peaks, and open spaces passing away, quicker, quickening, as the railroad departs from the Arkansas to faster flee the sunrise. The dying man watches the saw teeth halos go, doubled over in his seat.

The bandage patching the hole in his chest scratches his skin beneath his clothes. An old shirt. It had been nice when he bought it; a new travelling shirt for a new family in a new world. It was white, then. When they were in Italy. White, like snowcaps made of stitching. There were

no mines in Italy, nothing to turn the fabric black. But it's an old shirt now, gone black as his lungs.

The bandage beneath, however, is orange and brown. It hurts more than the hole; his ragged edge skin *itches*. Itches under black and orange and brown. Under the Mine Colors. He's dressed in his work, looking like oxidizing copper, or tailings poured down the hillside: like the mountain's viscera spilling from man made mouths between weatherworn wooden teeth, between cart tracks and support beams and meandering tramlines. The bandage even smells like the mines, like metal and rot. Like what his lungs must smell like. Like the dust that chokes the valleys, that shivers in the vibrations of sledge on spike. Shivers like the windowsill of a passenger carriage on the Rio Grande railroad, somewhere outside of Salida. A town whose name means *Exit*.

Salida.

They'd given his knife back at the hospital there. Here are your things. Here's some money, a new ticket. Go home, you have a family. All of your things. You have a family. All of your things.

The knife included.

It had stung, sinking into his chest. As he'd carved himself a path to freedom, a path away from sunken eyes. Skull eyes. Blue, Udine eyes, in blue sockets, in a blue face. Blue skin and black lungs. Like a bruise. A bruise with eyes, a knife, and a train ticket.

The other passengers won't look at the living bruise. They stare out their respective windows, into their respective laps, avoiding the death's head sitting beside them with the itch in his bandage and hole in his chest and the mine in his shirt and his lungs. The soot of death caught

in his entrails and in his clothes. It hurts, that soot. That black. Rough silicon and granite edges scrape him to pieces until he coughs, coughs, coughs and the other passengers look up from their windows with pleading, accusatory eyes. They want him to die quietly. At home. A good Catholic man dies on God's schedule. A good employee works till he dies. A good father dies when his children are grown. A good man doesn't carve the black out of his chest himself, in Salida. *A good man dies at home.*

But those silicon swords in his insides, in his lungs—they'd *needed* cutting out, cutting out of his body, cutting out of his heart. Out of his soul. *A good man.* He'd *needed* to do it out himself. In a fit of madness, the doctors said. A fit of madness in a town called Exit. Just a fit, he hadn't meant it. Because a good man dies at home. *A good man dies at home.*

But the black.

But the *knife*. The knife in his chest, a little too low, a little too centered, a little too shallow to do the job. They'd pulled it out in a hospital, but left the black inside him. The blue. The bruise. They'd patched him up—leaving the specter of the mine to haunt his lungs—and put the bruise back on the train. *You have a family.*

The dying man thinks of them as he assesses the gorge outside. The colors are turning early this year, subject to a September cold-snap brisk to the point of frost. The freeze has been trapped in the windows' glass, preoccupied now with turning passengers' breath to fog. It splinters across the panes in the shapes of weak-willed clouds.

When the man coughs against his window, the cloud he makes is small, temporary. Like ocean fog it lays across the glass, superimposed over yellow-tinged quaking aspen all a-shiver in the dawn, over trunks white as bone riddled with eyes made of black scars. They return his stare

as he passes them, their leaves shaking to the tune of wheels on track, of screech owl trill in the daylight. Of the coal-swallowing, steam-hissing, smoke-bellowing Rio Grande.

The train. His bones ache atop its rattling. The ache worsens the itch. The itch aggravates the bruise, and he coughs. Again. A child whimpers across the aisle, and his mother glares. *Die at home*. The window fogs. His ribs feel like they're ripping. They groan against the effort of expanding and collapse too far when he exhales, imploding inward on the rot they encase, stabbing at his heart and the inside edge of his self-inflicted wound. As he struggles to inhale again, they sit there, stuck, clenched. Like a mangled pile of kindling, like tangled sticks with the added misfortune of having already been burned. Charred bones on a man who is also a bruise. A man who, if he were good, would ask God to make the coughing stop instead of clutching the knife in his bag, who would die at home. It is a hard, chilled promise masked by rucksack fabric. *A good man*. With a serrated edge like Sawatch saw teeth. *Die at home*. That knife could have cut it all out, should have cut it all out.

But it failed him. He ought not rely on it again. It's given him nothing but ache and tired, left him soaked in hospital smells like bad flesh and cold metal and soap. Gifted him the newer nightmare of his weakness. *Die at home*.

His wife will want to know who carved him up when he returns. The wife he brought from Italy. The wife he once gifted a treasure chest jewelry box with tiny wire handles, a treasure chest fashioned by hand out of old cigar cases. The wife who is raising his children. His daughters and his sons, who have her brown eyes. Daughters who will marry miners who will turn to bruises. Sons who will marry girls just like their mother, who will watch them catch the black in their lungs and suffer until they cut it out on a platform. In Salida. In Exit. In a moment of madness, unable to wait.

He holds the traitor-knife through his rucksack and coughs until he sleeps, thinking about his children. He wakes again with a fever.

Heat in his head melts the ice-glass of the window. The effort of lifting his head reveals that the passengers have parted before the state of him like water before God. They can't catch the black from him—it's the mine that gives and takes that—but fevers spread, especially on trains, and so they've left a space around him and the look in their eyes has changed. Never mind home; better he die loudly and die here, *die now*, than live long enough to give them the fever he's given himself. They want him to *stop*. To end. To *exit*. Their fear based loathing and his fever send him melting against the window, squashing his cheek, his eyelid, into the cold.

The aspen outside are nothing now but clouds in green and yellow. The form of things is fuzzy even through his open eye. His head is hot, the window frigid. The itch has turned to burning. The fever tightens its hold. He coughs, shaking himself loose from the world between sleeping and waking for a moment, and wonders which will kill him first. The new burning, or the old bruise.

If the burning does it, he'll never have to tell the children, or his treasure chest, brown-eyed wife, where the itch beneath the bandage came from. Where the hospital fever came from. If the bruise kills him, it will take time—he'll have to keep breathing through the tinder of his ribs. Keep coughing up the black that matches the ash floating past the window. Soot from the engine dragging him towards home, spewing smoke and hissing steam and chomping through the frost between wheel and railroad. The Rio Grande gnashing through frost the way animals chew through flesh. The coal guzzling Rio Grande.

He watches it and ponders. The fever. The bruise.

And the knife. Though it's failed once already, there is no hospital on the railway to undo his work should he try its saw tooth edge again. No civilization for miles. But there would be another hole in his body to show, if he did it that way. Two holes. One for each brown eye of his treasure chest wife. Unless, of course, the passengers threw him out once he was dead. Tossed him over the edge of the hairpin, into the heart of the gorge, to get the fever out of the car. The knife, the fever. The bruise.

He coughs into the rucksack. His ribs splinter a little more. The train hears him, the fever seeping from his temple to the windowpane, carrying his thoughts along with it. It releases one of its long and echoing screech owl trills, exhales a puff of smoke, and calls back to him across the hairpin. A black, train-shaped blur among the streaky colors of quaking trees. He hears its voice in his fever dream.

*Quick and sharp, it says. The better option, previously ignored: he could fall out. Fall on the tracks, and if he did his treasure chest wife would never see the gaping evidence of his escape attempt, his brown bandage itch. She'd never have to know what he'd done. His cowardice. A good man. A good man dies on God's schedule. But he could die on the train's.*

Thundering up the rails, it makes the dying man a promise to crush the kindling ribs. To tear the mine out of him in long ribbons of flesh between heavy cars' wheels, hissing steam and screaming its Rio Grande scream to drown out his crunch, crunch, crunch and thunk, thunk, thunk. To drown the wailing of passengers who look like they want to throw him out the window as it is. To throw the death's head into the gorge because he is a reminder, like all bruises are, of a universal wound. Of the death that will come for them, too. It would be easier for them, if they weren't reminded.

The knife, the bruise. The *train*. In the fever burn, he wonders, heat in blue skin melting frost from glass between coughs, which way is best to go.

A good man dies on God's schedule, but he is not a good man. Not since carving out the black in Exit. Since betraying the trust of a cigar box, treasure chest wife. In the fever burn he thinks of her and children and of passengers with frightened eyes. Of the screech owl screaming in the daylight. Thinks of the knife in his rucksack. *Die at home*. But he plans it. *A good man*. Plans for screech owls and cold steel and coughing. Plans, as he sinks into fever haze and heat; as he coughs up his tinder ribs, his ash lungs. His black lungs. A living bruise with three flavors of inevitability before him. *A good man*.

The steam engine calls. He chokes on breathing. *Three from which choose*. A good man, who will not make it home. A dying man, leaning against a frosted window. Thinking *the train, the knife, the bruise*.

The train, the knife, the bruise.