

Wonders of the World

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His favorite thing about sitting at the top of the monkey bars was that he was up so high; it felt like he could see everything. All of the other kids playing around him, the seagull skimming over the surface of the lake, the reflected gray of its wings swallowed by the encompassing reflection of the clouds, the dog on one side of the park and the two older kids on another. They were too old to still be kids, one a boy and the other a girl, but they were not quite adults yet, either; they were both waiting in the between time. Right now the boy was sitting in the chair swing watching the girl, who was holding her shoes in her hands while she walked on the edge of the water. From his perch atop the monkey bars, Jared could not tell what the boy was thinking about, but he felt sure he was thinking about something. It had been a long time since he had moved.

Jared had watched several other boys, and even a few girls, jump down from the top of the monkey bars. It looked easy when they did it, like falling was the simplest thing in the world. Jared knew it really was, and it was not the falling he was scared of; it was in the seconds of waiting to let go that he always decided to climb down instead. That was how he had gotten up in the first place, which meant he would not have to do anything he had not done before, even though he had to do it backwards.

He walked around the swing set, where kids were jumping off and flying—but only for a few seconds, of course. The dog was at the end of the parking lot, his leash wrapped around a pole while the owner bought a bottle of water from a vending machine. They had just sat down to share the water when Jared walked past them. He liked most dogs, but this one was big and looked like he could be dangerous. Water splashed on the ground as the dog lapped it from the bottle.

There was no sidewalk on the road back to his house, so Jared walked with one foot on the curb and one in the grass. He only stayed on the road until it ran into the railroad tracks, and then he walked beside those. His parents had told him about the shortcut a long time ago, before he was old enough to walk to the park by himself.

While he was walking along the base the small gravel hill beside the tracks, he heard what he thought was the sound of someone crying, or rather, the sounds someone makes when they are almost finished crying. He looked around but did not see anyone on his side of the tracks, so he climbed up the gravel to see if it was coming from over there. A few feet in front of him, an old man was lying on the tracks, his shoulders not quite touching the rails on either side of him. The sound

had come from him.

“What are you doing?” Jared asked. “Are you hurt or something? I can try and help you if you are.”

The old man put up his hand. It looked like a flower growing out of the tracks. “I’m not hurt. I’m just lying here, that’s all.”

“Why?”

“I’m waiting.”

Waiting was not a bad thing, but Jared was pretty sure the old man had not picked a very good place to do it. “Isn’t it dangerous to wait here? A train could come by.”

The old man sat up. He was about as old as Jared’s grandfather, and he had been holding a pair of glasses in his hand. He put them on and said, “Yes, you’re right. Waiting here is dangerous, mainly because a train could come by.”

“Why are you waiting here, then? There’s lots of safer places to wait.”

“I’m waiting here because I have to.”

Jared tried, but he could not think of a reason why that could be true. “I don’t understand,” he said to the old man.

“No, I don’t expect you would. You’re too young.”

“But I’m pretty smart. I get all A’s, actually.”

“That’s not the kind of young I was talking about. I meant that you haven’t lived enough to understand.”

“Well, even if I won’t understand, could you tell me what you’re doing anyway? I would like to know.”

The man pulled his legs toward his chest and rested his elbows on his knees. His clothes were dusty from lying between the train tracks. “I was lying here waiting for a train to come. I’m going to let it pass over me.”

“That’s dangerous! Do you even know if you’ll fit? You’d die if there wasn’t enough room.”

“I know that this is dangerous. And no, I don’t know if I’m going to fit or not. I think I will, but I’m not entirely sure.”

“You could check, though. I bet if you went on the internet you could find out just how high off the ground the cars are.”

“You’re probably right about that.”

“So why don’t you check, then?”

“Because if I knew, it wouldn’t be dangerous anymore.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I told you you wouldn’t. You’re too young. When you’ve lived as long as I have and know as much as I do, there aren’t many dangerous things left in the world. There are a lot of stupid and foolish things I could do, but they wouldn’t be dangerous. I’ve either seen them done, or heard a story from someone who’s done of them, or learned about them, and I would know what would happen before I even started. With this, I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t understand what I’m doing now. Maybe you will when you’re older.”

“Why maybe?”

A train whistled. The man lay down and said, “Because you might be braver than me. Now you need to get out of the way.”

Jared went to the edge of the gravel and sat down. He would be safe there, and he wanted to be there to help the man afterward.

The train did not look like it was moving very fast at first. As it got closer, though, its speed seemed to keep increasing until, by the time it went over the man, it felt like it was flying. The words on the cars flashed by too quickly for Jared to read them. He hoped the man would be all right.

It was louder than he would have believed, even if a really convincing person had tried to tell him about it. It was a constant noise, like sitting at the shore of the ocean if every wave crashed with the force of a thunderbolt. There was a kind of pulse to the noise too, because air was pulled through the gap between the cars and came whooshing out above him. A new gap flashed in front of him every second, but it somehow seemed slower than that.

When all the cars had finally passed, Jared wished the train were longer, because each car meant that he had to wait a little longer to go up and look at the man. He had never seen real blood up close; he had scraped his knees and elbows before, but that was different somehow. He knew what how that would look—could figure it out by how far he had slid or onto what surface he had fallen—without having to actually see it.

There was no blood. The man was shaking, but it was not like shivering in the cold. There was a reason for that kind of shaking and a remedy for it, but if there was a remedy for the old man’s shaking, Jared did not know what it was. His ears and even his lips were quivering just as much as his feet and hands. Whatever had happened to him, it was happening to all of him.

“Are you okay?” Jared whispered in the old man’s ear.

The old man did not answer. He did not appear to have even heard the question, or to have noticed the boy standing above him. His eyes stared. Jared did not know if shaking him would help, and he thought it might even make him worse, so he did not try.

The man’s body continued to shake. A tear from Jared’s eye fell onto the man’s cheek. He wanted his parents here, to explain what was happening and tell him it would be okay. They were good at explaining things to him, even hard things like why seawater has salt in it. But there was a fear in him, and he was crying because the fear was that even his parents could not explain the old shaking man lying between the rails.

His body finally stopped shaking, and his arm went into the air. It took a minute for Jared to figure out, first, that he was not dead, and second, that he wanted help getting up. After he had helped the man to his feet, which took a long time because he was heavy and stiff, Jared asked him again if he was okay. The

man pointed to his ears and shook his head. Losing his hearing was his price for lying under the train.

He was smiling, though. It was not a huge smile, like he was seeing his grandchild for the first time or had just heard an extremely funny joke. His smile was smaller and more private, as if he knew a secret and was not going to share it with anyone, no matter how many times they asked. It was also the kind of smile that lasts longer than a normal one. Jared wondered if he could have told his secret, even if he wanted to.

The man patted him on the back and started walking away. Jared watched him to see if he would look back, either at him or at the tracks, but he did not.

Just before he got home, Jared saw the same man and dog from the park. They were walking on the opposite side of the road, so he had to speak loudly to ask if he could pet the dog.

“Sure you can,” the owner said. “His name is Cairo, and he loves children. Come on over.”

While Jared was petting the dog’s head and scratching his throat, Cairo licked his face, which made him laugh. That was his price. He was still smiling when he thanked the owner, and when he went inside, and even after he had washed his face and hands for dinner.

**Third-place Winner, Fiction Category
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