

## Short Story

### *Departing*

By Benjamin Marshalkowski

“It’s good work. Suitable for a young lad like yourself. You’ll work with your hands and the pay is good...”

A room lined with mahogany, smelling of cigar smoke. A glass of cognac in my hand. The shelves are lined with leather-bound books, even older than the men in their dusty tuxedos that mill about the room. One living fossil with yellow-tinged hair and jaundiced fingers jaws at me about exploratory drilling in Madagascar or Massachusetts or on Mars. I’m not really listening.

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The lurch of the train jostles me awake. I remember lying in my compartment for what seemed like hours, staring at the ceiling. I must have dozed off. I glance out the window as Yester Station slides back and away. Whenever I take this ride, I feel like I’ll never see Yester again, with its quaint Victorian buildings, its post office with one window, its kiosks with weathered signs reading, “Phone to be installed next week.”

Yester Station was a mill once. Makers of millstones. They’d cart huge slabs of granite from the quarry just outside of the town proper and fashion them into great circles, mighty and irrelevant. Now the working floor had been filled with benches. The shipping rooms were transformed into platforms. The iron beams and pipes and rails had all been painted over to give the place a quasi-modern look the County Rail Authority held so dear.

I remember wondering, when the old mill finally closed up, whether I would stop getting sand in my eyes when I slept. My mother had always told me that was where it came from: the excess, the chaff from the millstone mill. She had passed away by the time the mill closed, so I had no one to give me an answer. The next morning, when I woke up to a crusty corner of my eye, I learned a lesson about the stories parents teach their children.

Yester Station is long behind me now. A man in County Rail uniform knocks on my compartment door, apparently a courtesy as he slides it open.

“Ticket?”

He reminds me of the old man who was drilling in Mozambique or wherever it was. I hand him my ticket.

“On your way to Day, eh? Nice place. A lot happening. My niece works at a gift shop in one of the museums in Day. I always forget if it’s art or history...”

Christ, this guy likes to talk. Just like that mustard-tinted old-timer. It’s strange how well I remember that man. Usually dreams fade away with waking, exposing that brief stretch of psychological film. Only the outside borders of a half-sketched world, or a feeling of hope or

dread will stay with me. This time, every detail remains, more like a memory than a dream. But I don't hang out in smoking lounges with men like that—evidenced by the pajamas I remember wearing, though no one seemed to care. The old man from County Rail presses the punched ticket into my hand, finished with his story and ready to move on to the next car.

I look at the ticket. Stark text tells the story. “DEP YESTER 2315, ARR DAY 0830.” Nine hours and change until the next great turning point in my life. The kind of moment you wait for weeks or months, then it passes unceremoniously, but its connotations are so much deeper if you understand them. An interview for a new job, in a new town. Hell, compared to Yester, it might as well be a new country. The future always is, though. It's an exotic locale where you don't speak the language, but if you're lucky, you learn a few snippets to keep you alive until the next stop.

My eyes close and I concentrate on 8:15 in the morning.

8:15

8:15

8:15

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Back in the smoking lounge. The yellowed man, with his work for me, sits in the corner. His faded eyes, just barely tinted gold, are wide and glassy. His hands tremble.

My attention turns. New guy in front of me. He's tall and pale and sharp, like he was carved of shale. If the old man was yellow, this man seems to be shaded blue. His heavy-lidded eyes, with their immense pupils, look down an alpine slope of a nose at me. He speaks by raising just his upper lip in a sort of sneer. Something in my head tunes into a new frequency to hear him.

“...That is the key to success. Hard work. A willingness, not just tolerance, to get one's hands dirtied. You cannot simply glide on the currents of fortune and caprice; you must forge ahead with your own sense of purpose and drive yourself into the future. Shovel your own coal and power your own engine.”

His voice devolves into the tinny sort of trumpeting, barking a military fanfare over the murmurs throughout the lounge. This man oozes with pride, from his attitude to his very stature. Not the pride of his hard day's work, but pride of being “better than.” And he carries a certain amount of surety that I will never reach his level of cachet.

But why not? I'm here in this lounge, with these captains of industry and culture and ars politica. Albeit in my pajamas, but that's for some psychologist to worry about. And I've never once been to a psychologist. I'm not even sure if I've met one. Psychologists and I don't go to the same parties.

I want to punch this man. It's my dream, after all. And I don't care for his tone. But something bothers me. I'm not certain, like the blue man, but I'm confident any action I take will have consequences.

“And anyway, what have you done with your life?”

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8:15

I wake up.

The sun is just beginning to creep over the buildings in the outskirts of Day. Now this is a city. A place where things are happening. Even in these outskirts, where the buildings aren't quite as tall, there's a vivacity running through the streets. Banners and lights are hung over the intersections. The sleekest cars are parked at the meters, while trucks labeled with the names of all sorts of businesses move with purpose down the roads.

The train seems to have no interest in slowing down. I angle for the best view I can get from the window. We'll be at the station soon, but we're plunging ahead like we've got miles to go.

I burst out of my compartment and scan the narrow passageway for the County Rail man. I see his uniform at the back end of the car. On approach, he's a different man, but he wears the outfit, so he'll do.

“Excuse me. Aren't we stopping at Day?”

The man turns and looks down at me. How could I have mistaken him for the jocular ticket taker? This man is much taller, sharp, so pale he is blue. The resemblance is uncanny to the man in the lounge. He looks me up and down. I do the same and realize why. I must have changed into my pajamas before falling asleep. I shuffle a bit, giving emotional ground before I even realize it.

“No, young man. This train is express to Morrow.”

“Express? To Morrow?”

“Yes; it was a late change. Sorry for any inconvenience.” There's a smugness to his delivery that sucks all the believability out of it.

“I can't go to Morrow. I need to be in Day this morning; it's important.” What to do what to do what to do. No other option. My future is in that meeting. Got to get off the train.

I push past the tall man, leaving my suitcase. No time. Nothing that can't be replaced. The door slides open and I step into

The lounge. I'm standing amongst these men in their tuxedos, me in my pajamas, as they chat over the future of men and carve up the world for themselves. The yellowed man is slumped in his chair, his hands drooped over the armrests. I'd like to think he's fallen asleep, but I see no evidence, no clue to offer me such comfort.

The blue man is conversing with a short stocky man with rosy cheeks. Not the friendly kind of rosininess, but harsher. Like a ruddy orb in a black suit. They both glance at me, the taller lifting a slender, birch branch of an arm to point at me. The round man waddles to me and starts driving his finger into my sternum.

“You see? This is what becomes of you! Just idling along where the world will take you. And now you have the audacity to barge in here, dressed like a common tramp!” They're all staring at me, except the yellowed man. He hasn't moved. The rest of them leer with disgust. “What sort of legacy is this to leave? A man who drifted until he drifted out of the world. What a sad tale to tell.”

It must have come from thin air—a knife plunges into my chest. I let out a grating gasp and drop to my knees. The ruddy man steps back, the knife lands with a thud, tip buried in the dark oak floor. A white-hot finger, tearing flesh and scoring bone, remains in the trunk of me. My eyes are wide; I cannot blink. I look around for help, but most of these men have returned to their conversations. Gravity swings around me, tugging at me from all sides. I move my arms just in time to keep my face from crashing to the floor. Steadying myself, I reach with one hand to try and stop the bleeding.

My hand is filled with sand. That same forgotten grain from the mill, now pouring out of me. It has piled on the floor already, a small bucketful. It pours down my shirt and chokes me in my throat. More sand coughs up as I try to cry for help. The men only raise their voices. I should be drowned in my own blood, but I'll suffocate instead. My fingers begin to go numb and I roll onto my back, staring at the ceiling.

The sand continues to pour out around me as the lounge (or the train?) rocks from side to side, then settles. The conversation around me ceases. The room rocks again, as if something has slammed into it. The lights flicker and the sound of men screaming floods my ears. My head pounds and feels weightless at the same time. I'd vomit if I could.

There is a pause. The men go silent. The lights return to normal. The room is pervaded by an unbearable sense of waiting. There is a groan of metal under duress and a smell of electric dryness in the air. A furious slam, the room topples to its side and everything goes

Dark.

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Light.

Fluorescent. Above me. I'm lying back. I know where I am. The familiar rhythm of a heart monitor. No one mistakes that. Who am I here to see?

My head is pounding. My mouth is stuffed with cotton. No, it just feels that way. I turn my head slowly, unprepared for the rush of pressure and pain. I shut my eyes. It helps a little.

“Ow.”

“Take it easy.” The voice is female. Not matronly, but maternal. Not my mother, but it reminds me of her.

“What happened?”

“You overdosed on sleeping pills. You’ve been out for two days. You’re lucky you were found when you were.”

“Two days?” I missed—

“Yes, well. How long is not important right now. I’d like to talk to you about the why. I’ll come back when you’re feeling better, but I wanted to make sure someone was here when you woke up.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m the hospital psychologist.”