
The Devil's Stopwatch

Kill the lights, lower your voice, and hold a flashlight under your chin. Imagine all the ways you might become a ghost.

On a day like any other, a boy is walking along the railroad tracks, swinging a stick and probably thinking of ham sandwiches, when off in the distance a wonder appears: a great black engine trailing black clouds of fire and ash. It hurtles to a stop beside him, and who but the devil steps from the car.

"Why is it always a boy?" the older girls ask. They are right, of course. Aren't we tired of boys winning bets with the devil, golden fiddles and whatever, while the girls are set up to lose? Consider Eve, the rotten apples she'd throw at this whole opening.

Consider your audience—two stepdaughters, nearly women now, and one child you made yourself, barely out of diapers—their upturned faces like Before and After pictures of girlhood. Remember that stories are scripts.

The devil shines a rotten apple on the lapel of his three-piece suit. He tells the girl her time has come to board then pauses mid-bite, examining her pigtails and skinned knees with doubt. He pulls a conductor's timepiece from his pocket and shakes his head. "Too early" he mutters and turns to climb back aboard—when the thought of a bargain crosses his mind.

What is it you love about ghost stories? What is it you love about trains? Are the answers the same?

Outside the Union Pacific freight train is moaning through a crossing a few blocks north, its ghostly Wooooo Woooooo lingering in the dark. Close your eyes and think of all the other worlds it passes through. You've always struggled with presence.

Grinning his salesman grin, the devil tosses the girl his watch. "You've a good piece left and many joys to come. Stop the watch at the perfect moment, and live in it forever." The girl cannot believe her good fortune. The fob trembles in her hand. The devil smiles, "But choose your moment soon, my girl. If the black train comes before the watch stops time, it will carry you straight to hell."

If they ask "What is hell?"—say, the past and its recurrence. The future and all the people we could become but won't. Our own raging versions slamming doors, rattling the pipes.

If they ask "What is heaven?"—say nothing. Think of them sleeping in the room across the hall. The baby's mouth silently working, still dreaming of the nipple. Your husband's feet holding yours beneath the covers. Cracked moonlight through the blinds, a tree's dark fingers reaching.

As the devil promised, the girl has many good years ahead and more than her fair share of joy. At first, the simple pleasures: the June sun on her face. A whole mess of fish, the smell of them frying. Then the years bring deeper and darker delights: the wet thrill of a boy's mouth, his hands running shivers through her hair. Deeper still: their wedding day, the birth of their daughter, the girl's first steps, first words, first loves—and then the years speed onward, faster and faster, until the woman can hardly tell her todays from tomorrows.

Good thing you let a woman handle the train of Time. A mother knows it runs in all directions: sleepless time, to-do-list time, forgotten time, ritual time, habitual time, interrupted time, circular time, the looping imperfect present. Can you catch it? Are you awake?

She traces the fob with each passing joy, but the woman holds strong. Surely greater moments are still to come. And come they do, thickened with sorrow: her husband's eyes dimming, his hand in hers wilting. Her love growing despite it all. "Too early!" she says, sure that he will make it another day. When he does not, she throws the watch out the window. It stays there for a long time.

What is it you love about ghost stories? What is it you love about trains? The thrill of holding someone close. The promise of an Other Side.

She finds the watch again when her daughter has a daughter, and she oils it with a salve made of poetry, shredded to a pulp and wetted by the child's own mouth. As the days rush ahead she finds they each contain new hopes that hold her thumb from the stopper: a dogeared Ishiguro novel, two baristas flirting behind the counter, an especially tricky crossword. Try as she might to be satisfied, she knows the best is yet to come.

How do you live forever? Start now. And now. And now.

And then, on a day like any other, the earth splits open and a great black train trundles up from the deep. The old woman sighs and holds the timepiece, thumbs its worn crown. She tips her hat to the devil, climbs the steps, and—clever girl that she is—

presses the stopper just before he follows her aboard. They say the devil's still out there, walking the tracks, just waiting for his ride home.

If they ask "So what happened to the old lady?" hug them close and whisper —

You mean the little girl? Well of course, she's the new conductor. And don't you know she's not stopping. She knows something the devil doesn't about that smoking, speeding, whistling, ghost-run train. It is home.

In the morning, after all the candy is gone or stashed in hoodie pockets, after the tea lights have gone out in the mouths of pumpkins, the collective sugar hangover still dissolving in the bright autumn sun, you will all loaf to the living room to play the game your toddler invented called "Car!" For the thousandth time, prop your elbows on the back of the couch where the cushions meet the window, and watch for a car to pass. When it does, yell "Car!" and take turns high-fiving the girl in footie pajamas. See her face already pressing back against the glass: radiant, waiting.