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THE LINES

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An old man asked me to sit next to him. He knew my name but I didn't know his. A cyclist soared by between us, as did a girl walking her dog. The sun shone brightly. So I sat down.

The bench was damp and bowed under our combined weight. It was set back from the path, amidst overgrown bushes and tangled gatherings of wind-strewn rubbish. The old man smiled.

"You seem ill at ease, son."

His voice was smooth and gentle, unlike the creases that scored his face. He peered at me and seemed to know more than just my name.

"I'm fine," I said, "It's just this path.."

The old man barked a laugh. Birds took flight from nearby trees.

"Thought as much. Sensitive to these things are we, son?"

He hoisted an arm up onto the back of the bench. His thick black rain coat opened to reveal a crumpled suit of greens and tired browns.

"Things?" I asked, noticing the clump of knotted leaflets in his inside coat pocket.

"All this," he waved toward the world. The tress, the bushes, the passers-by. "The things around you."

The things around me? Remembering myself I glanced at my watch.

"I'm walking to work. Always a bit depressing. Better be off." I made to stand but was pinned by his words.

"Not as depressing walking another way though, is it? Did you think you'd come this way for a change, for a bit of early morning fresh air? Bit of green, bit of nature?"

"That was the idea."

"And yet," he said, turning his welcoming gaze to the colourful sight of a passing jogger, "all it's done is unsettle you and you don't know why."

I checked my watch again. What time did I have to get there by?

"That's true," I said, squirming for comfort on the rotten, uneven wood. "Why is that?"

He turned to me and smiled. I saw leaves fall, flowers wilt and smoke bellow; all in that smile.

"Did you know," he began, his eyes two dark sea-caves, "that this path was once a railway line? That for nearly one hundred and fifty years great steam engines huffed and puffed their way along a track that lay just before your toes? Did you know that, son?"

I was lost in that look. "No," I said, weakly.

"Well, it did. One of the first railway lines in the country. It stretched for miles back there.."

A nod of his head one way.

"...and went on for miles down there."

A nod of his head the other.

"Time was, two gents like ourselves could have sat by the tracks, just as we do now, and seen a train pass by every few minutes. What a sight that would have been, eh son?"

"What happened?"

"Progress, son. Can't stop progress. They shut down lines, open new ones. This one was closed decades ago, this stretch of it made into a nature path to give young men like you a chance to see a bit of green."

He looked into the undergrowth around us. I took a breath. Did I have somewhere to be?

“Of course,” he continued, slower now, sadder, “you can’t change the energy. Not even progress can kill that.”

“Energy?”

“The energy. One and a half centuries of chugga-chugga chugga-chugga chugga-chugga can’t be undone overnight. Something like that, something predictable and regular and powerful is attractive to certain creatures. And once they’re here, they’re difficult to shift.”

“Creatures,” I said, catching a glimpse of a squirrel darting along a branch. He laughed again.

“No son, not that kind. Creatures you’ve never heard of and never will, if you’re lucky.”

“I don’t...”

“This place at night,” he said, his eyes snagging me once more, “come down often?”

“No, never. Bad area at night. Crime and...”

“Yet you stroll happily along during daylight hours.”

“It’s different during the day.”

“Why, do you feel any safer? Is there a police man watching all who pass from behind that tree? The sun shines bright, yet you’re still afraid. Kinetic energy, that’s what attracts them. If they can’t feed on the passing of trains and carriages, then they’ll feed on people. That woman there,” he pointed to a young girl, dressed for serious business, “she passes by here at the same time every day. Even at weekends. Her energy is predictable and regular.”

“She’s crying.”

“Oh she weeps. She weeps everyday and for no knowable reason. She thinks she’s depressed, unhappy with her job, her life. One day she’ll snap, go elsewhere, or go nowhere at all.”

He smiled.

“These old rail lines, they etch the land with secret highways. Some are visible only to God and satellites, reclaimed by nature and overgrown. Still there though, still navigable to those sensitive to the energy. The rotting sleepers, the rusting iron fences, the crumbling concrete pillars; all relics of a by-gone civilization, an ancient world now forgotten by most, but one that your parents and grandparents lived in, built.

“Their use now? Empty ditches, dark hidden spaces fit only for corpses. They build homes on them which never settle, nature trails that draw crime and foul deeds.”

This old man knew my name. I suddenly didn’t.

“Why did you ask me to sit down?” I asked. The bushes and trees around us began to thicken.

He stopped smiling.

“Never seen you here before son, and yet you felt it immediately, didn’t you? Sensitivity like that is rare and not something we’re comfortable with.”

He placed a wrinkled hand upon my shoulder. Green encased us. And I was taken.

THE END