

Homecoming  
by Eric Cecil

I keep circling, but it's no use. There's a sickness coming. Collapsed lung. Aneurysm. Maybe a heart attack. Any of these might strike at any moment. Panicked, I ease away from the town square and pull the car to the curb, shifting into park. Tom asks me what's wrong.

I don't feel well.

He shakes his head, laughs behind a smile tight with contempt. Don't feel well? he says. I'm the one who just got out of the hospital.

I know. I'm taking you home.

If you keep stopping, he counters, we'll never get there.

I shift back into gear and prepare to circle the roundabout again. Though I expect abundant downtown traffic, the streets are totally empty. All the drivers are gone.

So is downtown. The roads there have fallen to gravel, ceded to sinkholes, gullies, towering weeds. Fronds of prairie grass tremble like flames in open and untenanted windows. Still more greenery plumes from darkened storefronts: a shuttered salon, a crumbling bingo hall, the hollow entrance of an old theater.

Tom looks on as I make a sudden left and turn down an improbable dirt road. It winds us past the skeletal remains of an old playground. Immediately beyond it, there's a parking lot riddled with abandoned cars. The crooked frame of a restaurant slants at its far end. I explain to Tom that I once bought cigarettes there as a teen. He acknowledges this with a detached nod. He doesn't speak again until we bound over a set of railroad tracks, at which point, he shouts: Slow down.

I thought you wanted me to hurry.

There's no answer. Instead, he looks out the passenger's side window, muttering to himself. It's worse here, he says.

It is. Dense vegetation roils his neighborhood. Thick vines overtake small outbuildings and readymade sheds, and sullen willows, their tresses knotted in the upper reaches of colossal shrubs, drape over the few rooftops that remain. The growth is so intense here that I can barely find the curb in front of Tom's house. When I ask him where to park, he tells me it no longer

matters, that I might as well leave the car in the middle of the street. There's no one left to find it, he says.

We quit the car and wander into the shell of his home. It's damp, ruined. Nearly unnavigable. Tom doesn't seem to notice. He leads me through a maze of spoiled rooms and pauses at a window hickeyed with fingerprints. This one is set in the wall of a cramped study, and it opens onto a backyard as full and forested as any wilderness I've ever seen. Twin railroad tracks, scabbed with rust, slab through the humid flora. I wonder if they're the same tracks we rode over earlier. Maybe, I think, they belong to another line: one that might lead us to a neighboring town, a city that hasn't yet turned.

I look to Tom for answers or guidance. He offers neither. Relax, he says. He taps two cigarettes from his pack, lights them both, passes one to me. I consider telling him that I quit smoking years ago. Instead, I drop the lit cigarette into a glass of water on a nearby desk. It hisses as it dies.

A louder hiss issues from the woods outside. The sound quickly builds into a repetitive huff, so orderly and rhythmic that it must be mechanical. I peer through the window again and spy the glacial movement of a hulking mass among the trees. With some difficulty, I make out the shape of a polished locomotive. It drags a chain of passenger cars, each as black and shiny as a beetle. The caravan slows to a halt amid a bank of pines, and the doors heave open, revealing scores of men in sable coats.

Tom, I whisper. I point to the window. Look.

He shrugs.

There are men out there.

Probably some in here, too, he says.

As if on cue, there's a shuddering elsewhere in the house. I hear the chimes of breaking windows, the thud of a door buckling off its hinges.

We've got to hide.

Tom frowns, shakes his head. He tells me I can do whatever the hell I want. As for me, he declares, thumbing his chest, I have to get moving.

Where are you going? I ask.

With them. He nods to the doorway, where several of the men have already gathered. We're headed back to the hospital, he adds.

When I ask why he has to return, he smirks and drops his cigarette into the glass. There's another hiss, another butt floating in the jaundiced water.

Collapsed lung, he says. Aneurysm. Maybe a heart attack.