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# A SMALL PRAYER FOR WESLEY DAVIDSON JR.

by James Champion

A young man of about seventeen with wild, stringy hair wandered about the benches at a train station. There were very few people around. It was that early hour between night and morning. The hour where the neon lights on the low ceiling have to strain especially hard not to flicker.

The young man was bending forward to read the names on the benches and he paused, at what seemed to be intentional intervals, to check his wristwatch.

Now, he stopped in between benches and pulled out a program with train departure and arrival times on it. He compared it with his wristwatch. Then, abruptly, but not without finality, he crumpled it up and threw it into a trash can.

He went to go to the next bench, but found that the memorial plaque was blocked by a small woman. Her bangs made a charming halt right above her eyebrows and her hair was short and jet black. She was reading a magazine with a close-up on the cover of a very rosy-hued pair of lips.

“Would you mind scooching over just a tad?” the young man said. “I’m reading all the names on these benches.”

“Oh,” the woman said, and she said it with just enough of an inquisitive air to make the young man reply, “Yes,” and then explain, blushing, “They’re all dead. Nobody reads their names, they just sit against them.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry. For, hmm…” she looked over her left shoulder, “For Mr. Wesley Davison Jr. here.” She patted the plaque behind her and then resumed her reading.

The young man looked disappointed at not being the first to read the name. “I know you’re kidding me,” he informed her. “I know sarcasm.”

“Oh, but I am sorry. I’ll even try to say a prayer for Mr. Wesley Davison Jr. next time I sit in front of his name,” she said. She spoke in a frighteningly even, undramatic tone.

The young man turned back towards the benches he’d already surveyed, bit his lip, and turned back to the woman.

“I’m an artist,” he said.

The woman put her magazine down on her lap; open, with the cover up so the lips looked up at the young man, who frowned at them. “I’m the President of the United States,” the woman said.

“I know you’re not. I know sarcasm,” the young man reiterated. “I’m a painter.” He let out a quick, nervous laugh, “Sometimes I confuse myself for what I’m painting. I walk around for days thinking I’m a mountain or a river or a little girl holding a red balloon. Sometimes I just wish someone would come and hang me up. In a way, these people who have their names on benches are lucky.”

He paused to check his wristwatch. “I think my train left early,” he said. “My name is Abe. I’m seventeen. How old are you?” he asked, sticking out his hand.

The woman took his hand and gave it one light shake. “Hello, Abe. I’m Violet Summers.” She hesitated. “I’m twenty-nine.”

“You don’t look it. You look my age,” Abe said. Violet snorted. “You do,” he said. He made his forefingers and thumbs into right angles, as if framing her face. “You’re very photogenic,” he said. “There’s a great amount of symmetry in your features. And your name sounds like the title of a poem.”

“Thank you,” said Violet.

A train was now passing behind them. Abe waited. After it was gone, he walked over to the edge and looked down at the tracks.

“How many people would you say have fallen in here?”

“What a horrid thing to think about,” Violet said.

“How can you not, though? They make it so easy to fall in here, with nothing guarding the edge, I mean.”

“Yes, but most people have common sense.”

Abe peered over the edge. “Sometimes I think I don’t, though. And I’m just one person. Imagine how many other people like me in the world come here.”

“I imagine very little.” Violet said, her tone implied more that he was strange than any sort of compliment to his uniqueness. He smiled, though, nevertheless, and turned around.

“You have very good posture,” he said. “Are you a cellist?”

Forming the word “No” with her lips, Violet shook her head slowly from side to side.

“I know several cellists,” he said. “And they all have great posture like you do.”

“They sound magnificent,” Violet said. “Are they very close friends of yours?”

Abe hesitated. Violet’s eyes flickered, as if remembering a secret, and she said, “Do you want to know something? My haircut is a trick to keep my posture. If I’m off center at all my hair will skim one side of my shoulders, and if I’m sitting perfectly upright my hair will hover above my shoulders just so.” Palms down, she put her hands on both shoulders to show the slim distance between them and the tips of her hair.

Abe squinted. “That’s genius. It’s very artistic.” He put his hands up again, making the frame. “I think I could paint you fairly well.” He looked around. “It’s too bad there’s no wind, though. The best paintings have wind in them.” Violet let her chest expand slowly, then blew a steady stream of air upwards to make her bangs lift.

“Good,” Abe muttered, nodding. His eyes caught the “W” of Wesley behind Violet’s shoulder. He looked back at the benches he’d come from. “You have to wonder, though. These people really only exist as names now. What I think about is, do they ever confuse themselves for benches?”

“I reckon they might. They very well might,” Violet said.

“If I was a bench—” But Abe’s arm was seized suddenly by a tall, anxious looking woman with bright blonde hair.

“Abe. Don’t ever do that again. Do you think that’s funny? To worry me like that?” she said. She still had not let go of Abe’s forearm. Then she noticed the bench and Violet sitting on it. “Oh. Hi. I hope he hasn’t troubled you too much,” she said, just barely loosening her grip.

“No,” said Violet slowly. “Abe was just telling me about his art.”

“This one? This one here?” The woman said, raising Abe’s arm. It hung limply in the air. “He’s never made a piece of art in his life!” She looked at Abe as if he was in on some sort of fantastic practical joke with her. He looked at his shoes. “He makes messes for me. He does that grandly. He’s the grandest mess-maker I’ve ever—”

“I know sarcasm,” Abe said firmly.

The woman looked at him carefully. “Oh,” she said with sincere distaste, “your hair’s an absolute mess.”

“It was windy earlier,” Abe said.

“All right. Let’s go home.”

“Next time my train won’t leave early,” he muttered. “Next time I’ll be in Siberia by now.”

The woman dragged Abe by his wrist past all the benches he’d already inspected. Violet could see him arching his neck to look back at the plaques. She watched Abe until he was out of sight, then picked up her magazine. But she put it down immediately. There seemed to be, pulsating in front of her, an absence as big as a mountain, or a river, or, oddly enough—an absence as big as a little girl holding a red balloon.

## James Champion

James Champion (he/him/his) is from Whitehall, Michigan. He likes skiing, walking, and traveling. In other words, he is frightened of stillness. However, he is also enthralled by it. This balance might well be an accurate summation of his writing. You can find him online at @jameschampion on Instagram or Twitter. His writing has recently been published by Something Involving A Mailbox! and Scapegoat Review, and is forthcoming in Coffin Bell.



## TEN BEDTIME STORIES

“Once upon a time a psychic by the name of Precious identified a man named Stone as the person who kidnapped a girl named Emerald who was subsequently rescued by a detective named Gold. Many years later the man named Stone was apprehended by a policeman named Silver who discovered that Emerald had not been kidnapped by Stone but, in fact, had been abducted by his identical twin brother Granite who it turns out by that time was married to Emerald’s identical twin sister Sapphire.”

– David Sheskin



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