

Mark has difficulty understanding how the nerdy people he went to school with and made fun of bought The Gas Company. He harassed them so long ago that they probably forgot all he did to make their lives miserable. It doesn't matter. Eighteen years of seniority means they can't do anything to him now.

When the new owners take complete control of the business, they terminate Marks's employment without notice despite promises made to former owners. His heart traces as he reads the termination letter attached to his paycheck. The typed words on it are short and to the point. What goes around comes around.

While losing a longtime job to people he tortured in school is terrible, Kelly's finding something new to complain about will be worse.

Arriving home, he hesitates before opening the pickup truck's squeaking door, watching for signs of movement through the front screen door. He only sees movement from a passing bird above their rusting metal awning over the porch.

Warm afternoon smells from the neighbors' frying chicken stir his hunger as he walks away from his old truck and toward the wooden porch across ankle-deep grass. Entering, he eases the door shut and bends to remove his work boots before leaving them on a small, stained rug.

Looking toward the living room, he finds his longtime girlfriend resting on their couch, unconcerned with his arrival.

"Kelly, I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what? You never apologize to me about anything."

"They fired me."

“What?”

“I know...”

“What did you do this time, Mark?”

“I didn’t do anything. They just fired me. Can you not show a little sympathy just this once? You and your sister are constantly complaining about anything I do. I knew we would have another fight. It’s like this every night with you.”

“You’re lying! You did something wrong. They didn’t fire you without a good reason!”

The front door slams as Mark leaves. “I didn’t do anything! They just fired me!”

Following him out the door, Kelly screams, “Don’t use that tone of voice on me, Mark! Come back here right now, or don’t come back at all!”

Mark flips her off and walks past their parked truck to the road, muttering to himself as he moves farther away from their house toward the setting sun.

Prodding through the darkness along a solitary dirt road beside railroad tracks helps Mark calm down and reflect upon the wasted years of his youth. Now he’s over forty with nothing to show for those years. He doesn’t even own anything. The house, his truck, and everything else are in Kelly’s name except for his clothes and a guitar.

Looking up into the night sky, Mark feels worthless and unappreciated. Finding another job in this area of Mississippi will be impossible.

“I can’t do this anymore. I’m tired of Kelly always bitchin’ at me. If only I were dead.”

He sits on the railroad tracks near a berm as the night slips into early morning. There is nothing worth staying in Mississippi for. No one wants him.

A southbound train's horn sounds from miles away, ensuring Mark's sad decision. "It's best for Kelly. I've been with her since junior high school. She'll find someone else."

"I'll write my last thoughts on the back of the termination letter." "I Love You, Kelly. You haven't been happy with me in years. I deserve better, and so do you."

Folding the letter, he wonders where to leave it.

Deciding to place it wedged under a large stone, he eases closer to the railroad tracks as the horn's cry becomes louder. It will be the last sound he hears.

Looking around the headlight of the approaching train, an effulgence appears from a berm under the train as the engine car reaches it only fifty meters away. He becomes overwhelmed by the radiant light, followed by indescribable harmony and calmness with more peace than imagined.

His attention is on the light; he waits too late to take the two steps, placing him in front of the train. He tries to step into the side of the train, but something pulls him back. The train passes close enough to touch, almost blowing him down. The termination letter becomes dislodged, carrying it upwards until it seems to reach the stars. The effulgence disappears after the last car crosses over the berm.

Rushing to the origin of the light, he finds nothing. "Man! What happened? I feel so different."

Turning to watch the train disappear into the night, he bumps into a man in a bright red leisure suit holding a lantern.

“The train almost hit you.”

“Who are you?” Mark asks.

“I’m Fire Chief Joseph Farto. Just trying to get home.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Sit with me over here on the warm tracks.”

“What?” Mark says.

“I know it’s uncomfortable, but the story I’m about to tell is not that long. It’s about a little boy who always wanted to be a firefighter.”

“So, it’s your story?”

“Are you telling this story, or am I?” The fire chief asked.

“I don’t listen very well,” Mark says.

“Let me finish. As I was saying, firefighters were my heroes. It took a while, but I became a firefighter, living my dream. I married Esther. Esther brought me good luck, and things went my way for a long time until I got in trouble for something everyone was doing. I left the only person to love me behind and ran away. It was a decision that left me wandering from place to place without a home or wife.”

“Do you need a ride or something? I’ve got a truck.”

“Hold on. I’m almost done,” The fire chief says.

“I made a hasty decision a long time ago. The decision put me on the wrong road, and I haven’t recovered. Take a deep breath and remember the peace you felt only a moment ago. Mark, it’s beginning to fade. Whatever it takes, after it’s gone, find that peace again.”

Mark sits next to the fire chief without saying anything while trying to understand what to do.

“I want to go home. Esther is waiting for me to come back,” The fire chief says.

“I’m going to get my truck and Kelly. We’ll take you to Esther.”

“Are you sure? It’s a long ride.” The fire chief says.

“I want to do this!”

“I’ll wait here until you get back with the truck. If it’s ok.”

“I’ll be back. Just wait, right here. Where are we going?” Mark asks.

“Is Key West too far?” the fire chief asks.

“Key West... Florida?”

“Is there another?”

Hesitating, Mark says, “Wait here. I’ll be back.”

Kelly has been unable to sleep after their disagreement hours ago. Looking outside into the early morning darkness, she sees Mark’s truck is still in the driveway. Despite being miserable, she is worried about him. She calls her sister to do what she usually does after a fight with Mark.

“Dianna. I’m sick of him! Mark got fired.”

“They can’t do that! What could he have done to cause them to fire him?”

“I don’t know. I made him mad, and he walked away before telling me. He’s been gone all night.”

“Kelly, you’re my baby sister. I love you. You have a temper, and Mark screws up. You’re both miserable with each other. You’ve been together too long. It happens. Come on home, and we’ll make a plan. You can live here with me. Mom and Dad’s house is too big for one person. It’s lonely here. You’re too high-strung ever to be happy with Mark.” I’ve been where you are now, remember?” Dianne says.

“I’ll talk to Mark. He’ll be back; he always comes back. He’s got nowhere else to go without me. I hate him but don’t want him to find someone else.” Kelly says.

“If he doesn’t come home by sunrise, call me,” Dianne says.

Kelly begins pacing back and forth as she waits until she finds a chair and sits down, too tired to be angry but not forgetting he no longer has a job.

Mark arrives outside and peeks through a small window to see Kelly sitting at their kitchen table, looking toward the back door. Taking a deep breath, Mark eases the door open and steps inside. Surprised by his upbeat attitude, Kelly uncharacteristically rushes to her longtime best friend and embraces him before remembering he had been gone all night.

“Kelly. Something happened. I saw a light under a train..., and then a fire chief was there and asked for a ride; I think he might have pulled me away...and I’m taking the truck to pick him up.

“Oh, Mark! What do you mean?”

“Listen to me, Kelly. The train was coming; the grass began to move as I’d never seen, and the most beautiful light... the light burst from under the train. Come with me, please. I’ll get a flashlight... the fire chief is waiting. I’ll show you.”

“Now? Do you want to go now? It’s still dark!”

Yes. We have flashlights. Help me find em’!”

“You can’t find something if it’s right in front of you. I’ll get the flashlights. Wait here.”

Disregarding Kelly’s instructions, Mark follows Kelly as she moves to a small closet near the front door. Kelly locates two flashlights and hands one to Mark. Kelly follows Mark to the truck, barely able to keep up, as Mark’s voice breaks with each word, continuing an excited description of the calmness and peace he felt. Hearing Mark’s story, Kelly becomes irritated with him again.

Driving along the dirt road beside the railroad tracks, Mark stops where he left the fire chief.

“He said he would wait on me. I don’t see him.” Mark says.

“I’m taking the truck and going home, Mark. I’m so tired of everything you do. You’re such a loser. Nothing is here like you described. No man and no light. Are you coming?”

Without a word, a defeated Mark follows Kelly to the truck, and she drives them home.

Frustrated, Kelly goes to bed, leaving Mark alone on the couch in their small living room. He wants to fall asleep but cannot—he’s too miserable.

Mark hears the distant sound of a train’s horn as the morning sky brightens. Rising from the couch, he runs to his truck and drives to where he left the fire chief. No one is there. A freight train passes within minutes, emitting multiple blasts with its horn. Mark’s peaceful feeling does not return.

Mark sits beside the tracks and relives the night's events before returning to the truck and falling asleep in the front seat.

Hours later, another freight train passed, awakening a snoring Mark.

Remembering Kelly and her disappointment with him, he drives home to face what he feels will be another scolding from Kelly. He arrives to see her car is gone. Opening the door to his house, he's shocked to see Kelly has packed up and left, leaving only a note written in large red letters.

“Mark - I've had enough. You take me for granted. I want wonderful things. I like to dress up, eat out, have friends, and not fight. You cannot take care of yourself or me. Find another place to live. K”

He drops the note on the wooden floor, sits on the floor, lowers his head, and folds his hands. Minutes pass as he wonders what to do.

Attempting to busy himself, he locates a television remote. Pressing the power button repeatedly does nothing. He remembers removing batteries when the remote control didn't work the last time he used it. “It's just one thing after another.”

Finding his guitar, he begins to play along with music transmitted from a small radio in the bedroom. Hearing the song “The City of New Orleans” causes Mark to stop playing his guitar and remember the train he saw.

Driving to the town library, he researches and writes pages of notes about local trains and their schedules.

Hours later, the librarian asks Mark to leave so he can lock the doors and go home. Mark returns to his truck.

Searching his pockets, he discovers the truck keys are missing. Retracing his steps and scouring the ground are fruitless. He gathers the research papers from the truck's seat and turns to leave before being surprised to see the truck's keys are now in the ignition port. "Mark, get it together!" He Bangs his fists on the truck's steering wheel.

Two days pass while he uses the train schedule to plan when to return to the railroad tracks. Mark waits until the sun sets on the third day before leaving his house carrying an old lawn chair, guitar, and flashlight. He spends hours sitting directly in front of the berm, strumming his guitar, and waiting for trains to pass before falling asleep.

Early in the morning, a distant train's horn awakens him. His heart pounds as he sees the noisy, roaring train and hears the engine's rhythm, followed by fifteen-passenger cars. "It's *The City of New Orleans!*"

A brilliant radiance, more beautiful than before, appears before him. The light flows from a small tunnel under the tracks. Shielding his eyes and looking up, he sees a familiar figure dressed in bright red watching him from one of the train's windows. The last car passes, and the tunnel closes. The fantastic spectacle of light disappears with it.

Sitting on damp grass, he feels the same overwhelming peace he experienced before. An hour later, another train's horn sounded. The freight train roars past. There is no tunnel and no light.

Arriving home, the peace he felt from the light under the train remains without Kelly around to interrupt it.

With this understanding, he realizes it's time to travel down a different road—without the best friend he has loved and hated all these years. Since he hasn't heard from Kelly in days, he decides not to tell anyone goodbye. “No one cares.”

Mark lays the truck keys on the kitchen table, straps his guitar to his back, and walks away, wondering if Kelly misses him.

Agonizing days away from Mark have turned into weeks, bringing a realization to Kelly.

“I can't live without him. I'm going home, Dianna.”

“My offer stands, Kelly. You're welcome here. Mom and Dad left both of us this house when they died. There's room here. You and Mark should not be together.”

Kelly's short drive home finds excitement as she enters through the front door of her and Mark's house. The door slams behind her as she calls his name. The joy she felt at seeing his old pickup truck in the driveway turned to fear and worry. There is no sign of Mark. It looks like he hasn't been home in days. At first, she only sees the mess of an unkept house and the many handwritten papers on their bed. All of his clothes seem to be there. The note she left, written angrily, is beside the other documents on their bed.

Knowing she had ordered him to leave, she began to worry about where he had gone and why he hadn't taken the truck.

Asking everyone if they have seen him finds one neighbor with news. He noticed Mark walking on the dirt road beside the railroad tracks the previous Monday. She runs to the tracks, wanting to find him there while praying he's not injured. Kelly covers her ears when a northbound freight train passes and sounds its horn.

Kelly decides to return to their house and wait for Mark to return. As the day turns to night, her phone rings. “Did you find him?”

“No, Dianna, I’m afraid something has happened!”

“Calm down, I’m calling the Sheriff. They’ll find him. Come back here. Come home.”

“I am home, Dianna!” Don’t be like this! I want to be here when Mark walks in the door of our house! I’m not giving up!”

Disregarding more calls, she searches the house before remembering the research papers and Mark’s handwritten notes about the train schedule. She calls Dianna back to apologize for her earlier tone and asks if she will purchase a ticket for *The City of New Orleans*.

Dianna drives her to the Memphis train station. “I hope you find what you’re looking for, Kelly.”

“I’ll call you Dianna.”

After locating an unoccupied seat, she moves into it as someone sits beside her. “I’m Joseph.” Kelly ignores them. The train lurches forward and begins to roll. Glancing at the person sitting beside her without looking, she thinks it’s a heavy-set man dressed in a red leisure suit, which is odd. “Can I talk to you? It’s important,” He says.

She puts her hand in the air, signaling she does not want him to talk to her.

He doesn’t.

Kelly watches Memphis streetlights fade from her window seat as the train reaches the Mississippi Delta. The rhythm of the train’s movement causes Kelly to relax. It’s not long before they approach the area Mark had shown her.

As the train gets closer, grass and short trees sway violently before a brilliant light appears from under the train—a light more beautiful than she has ever seen. Rising from her seat to look down as the train roars past, Kelly sees overwhelming colors from the light. Her excitement causes her to think she’s having a heart attack as she collapses back into her seat.

“Oh, Mark! You were right!” Turning back inside, she knows Joseph is still sitting beside her. Kelly rudely moves past him without looking at him, fumbling for her phone as he begins talking.

“I’ve been trying to get back to Florida. My wife is there. I wish I hadn’t left her, but I’m stuck on this train. I need to talk to you.”

His words make her uncomfortable. She looks at him for the first time. His smile seems genuine, yet he’s a stranger on a train babbling nonsense, and she’s alone. She turns her head and walks away.

Watching Joseph over her shoulder, she calls Dianna. “I saw it! An amazing light! I’m getting off in Greenwood. Can you pick me up?”

Dianna brings her home as Kelly describes her train ride, the heavenly brilliance from the light, and the strange man in his leisure suit, gold chain, and rose-colored glasses. “He said he’s stuck on the train. What does this even mean?”

“He’s probably drunk or high, Kelly. We’re supposed to be kind to strangers even if they talk nonsense. I never can do it. You did the right thing by getting away from him.”

Kelly is now more intent on finding Mark than before. She knows Mark is telling the truth and doesn’t want to believe him. His words are ringing in her ears.

Dianna attempts to dissuade Kelly from returning to the railroad tracks the following two nights. “You’re all I’ve got, Kelly,” Dianna says, holding back tears. “Mark’s gone to who knows where. I hope he never comes back.”

Their goodbye embrace is longer than usual. “I’m going after him, Dianna. Wherever he went, I’ll find him.”

The days passed, and it was indeed a tiring search.

She looked for Mark everywhere between Memphis and New Orleans, day and night, as Dianna waited at home. Ultimately, Kelly returned without Mark.

“Dianna, I dream of the same place every night. I see Mark there in my dream. It’s a...”

“Kelly. Stop! Is it a statue?”

“Yes! It’s underwater!”

“I looked it up, Kelly! It’s in the Keys. Key Largo!”

“We have the same dream! Do you see Mark?”

“No. I see the statue and sharks swimming around it.”

“I don’t see Sharks, Dianne. I see Mark on a fishing boat and the statue below. Do you want to go with me?”

“Let me say this. It’s eating at me. It might be my fault Mark lost his job. The Gas Company was left to both of us when Mom and Dad died. I decided to sell it. I sold it with the promise Mark would always have a job. It was a verbal promise. You know what happened. The new owners never liked Mark and broke their promise.”

“Dianna. You don’t have to explain.”

“I had to say it.”

“Get me to the Keys. The answer is in the Keys.”

“Kelly. Listen! The Sheriff found Mark. I spoke to him on the phone. He doesn’t want you. It would be best if you let him go. Trust me on this.”

“Dianna, is he in Key Largo?”

“Let him go, Kelly. If you genuinely love him, let him go.”

“How? How do I do this, Dianna?”

“Everything in life ends. Everything! Nothing makes it out of here alive, and Mark left us without saying goodbye. I’ve been where you are now. There are no happy endings. We can’t treat people any old way and expect good things to come of it. You know I’m right, Kelly.”

“I Love Him, Dianna.”

“He doesn’t love you, Kelly. We caused him to leave. Try to stop crying. He isn’t worth the tears. Enough of your life has been wasted with him. He doesn’t even have a job.”

The first night was the worst for Kelly. Her sadness turned to anger, and she couldn’t move past her memories of Mark.

Nights turn to months as Kelly seeks revenge for her broken heart by recklessly dating people she knows too well and others she doesn’t understand. She regretted every single date. The people she dated cared nothing at all about her. Unhappiness and rejection followed her night and day. Even Dianne could not help as Kelly sunk into an abyss of depression.

She knew now that Mark was the love of her life, and she didn't understand it.

On one snowy December night, in a moment of loneliness, Kelly walked down the dirt road beside the railroad tracks to the berm Mark had shown her.

She climbed to the top of the berm and balanced on one of the tracks. Feeling dizzy, she began to lose balance as her head began to spin. She turned the light off and sat on the snowy track. The snow soaked through her clothes. She didn't care and stared down the tracks to the north. Imagining Mark's voice, Kelly remembered a train schedule she had memorized.

Cold and alone, shivering from the wetness of her clothes, she moved to a spot below the berm as *The City of New Orleans* drew closer.

The tracks shook as the engine car arrived just above her. The tunnel under the berm awakened; the effulgence appeared, causing the magnificent light to surround her. Immediately, the revelatory manifestation Mark had struggled to make Kelly understand during what seemed like only a moment ago entered her soul.

The train rolled past as Kelly hurried to the top of the berm. She tried to touch the last car. The man she had ignored during her train ride, dressed the same, was standing upon a small rear deck at the back of the caboose. She reached out with both arms to Joseph. He turned away and stepped inside the door of the caboose. Stopping, he turned to look back at her.

Dropping her arms, Kelly yelled loudly, "Joseph! I know what to do! I'm letting Mark go!"

The train's horn sounded three short times and continued its rhythmic odyssey.