Off The Rails

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Long before I ever met Will Davis, I heard the story of the train that vanished. The train went in one end of a tunnel but never came out the other side, so everyone has their own theory, and until some explanation is given each is as valid as the next. Perhaps I’ve been among the patients too long and some of the crazy has rubbed off on me during my stay here, but I’m convinced I’ve finally figured it out.

Picture for a moment an ant sealed inside a paper cube, surrounded on six sides by impenetrable white walls. Now to the ant there seems to be no way out, no perceivable way in its mind for the borders to be breached. The interior of the box is all there is. However to we higher dimensional beings the solution appears so obvious, so simple: just step outside of the cube and it’d be fine, free to step back inside any time it wished. Now let’s extrapolate that one step further and think of ourselves trapped within the boundaries of time and space, prisoners of the present. Would it not be possible to imagine that stepping
outside of these restricting parameters could be as simple as the ant escaping its box? My theory is just that. That this is what happened to the train which in 1869, shortly after the pounding of the golden spike, vanished with over one hundred passengers aboard. The ant escaped the cube.

The key to it all, in my mind, is the rock the tunnel was cut through. Though the project was much too far along to cease construction, it was noted that within the core of the rock there were strange magnetic occurrences. Workers grew sick and complained of pains, some even suffered strokes or brain hemorrhages after prolonged shifts. There were numerous accounts of metals moving on their own, and even one death as the result of a worker being in the way when a large hammer and some spikes seemed to propel themselves off the ground and pinned the man against a rock wall. At the time most workers attributed these occurrences to ghosts but grumbled to one another it was somehow the foreman’s fault.

There were more than a fair number of grievances and several more injuries – most unreported – but jobs were not easy to come by and most every man on the crew had hungry mouths depending on them. Eventually they punched through the other side of the rock and the rest of the job laying tracks, while physically draining, was easy in comparison. Though some of the men were drifters, – and it was not unheard of for one or two to
simply not show up one day - a total of fifty laborers vanished without a trace constructing what came to be known as The Gateway. Stranger still, most of these men were reported to have shown up for a shift and went into the tunnel, but never appeared again back at the worker’s camps, some leaving behind what few possessions they’d clung too. An old man appeared in the tunnel one day, and was raving about other worlds and warned all the men to flee before the Owl came for them. This facility wasn’t up and running then but he was sent somewhere very similar. The tales reached far beyond the labor camps and before long the place had quite the reputation.

While the gateway was far enough away from heavily populated areas, occasionally a drifter would wander across it or a group of kids would dare one of their own to cross through the pitch black passageway. For though the tunnel was planned to cut straight through, it was long and bent quite a bit in the middle. Warped to the point where, looking in from either end, you could see no light at the end of the tunnel. Most children who accepted the dare made it part of the way through and ran back, while a brave few made it through to the other side, shaken but fine otherwise. Liam Davis was not so fortunate.

Liam always tagged along with his older brother William and his friends. Despite Will’s protests, their mother’s insistence
always won out. Liam was sworn to secrecy hundreds of times and tattling was discouraged with threats, ranging from simple beatings to disgusting middle-aged torture techniques, most of which Liam was convinced his brother learned just to impress his friends. After Liam remained silent following an accidental fire the boys started with cigarettes, Will had to know he didn’t need to scare Liam in order to keep him quiet. Yet each time he joined the older boys there were gruesome new acts described in detail, should he dare to fall out of line. Liam knew his brother was harmless and suspected likewise of his friends. He didn’t really mind being their verbal punching bag, was just pleased to be included.

His friends got used to the tag along, but of course they still preferred when they could get away without Will’s younger brother. On the day Liam entered the Gateway, he caught Will along with his friends Charles and Teddy - two boys who looked like Laurel and Hardy, or a before and after weight loss photo - attempting to push the car from the house before starting it. While this technique worked without alarming the boy’s mother, it was not as successful when it came to young Liam. He caught up to them as they neared the main road a quarter mile from Will and Liam’s home.

Come on! Every time, Teddy said.

Go to the house, Liam, said Will.
No, listen, I -

Not this time, just go back.

Why? Liam asked, smiling. What are you guys doing? Something too dangerous for brats and I aint takin another whoopin cause you got a scratch.

Fine, you’ll just get beat for leaving me, and for taking the car.

She knows about the car, Will lied. Plus I can handle those whoopins if it comes to it. If I hurt mommas little baby though? Hell, I may as well just put a fire out with my bare ass.

Teddy and Charles laughed but the two brothers remained staring at one another, speaking wordlessly as only siblings can. Whatever silent communication took place worked in Liam’s favor, for the next moment Will did a total about-face. This was the usual routine and was no surprise to his two companions.

Fine but you do whatever I say and I mean it, Will said. You speak when spoken to and if you breathe a word to momma, I’ll cutcha belly open, hook your guts up to a crank and slowly pull out your insides.

Charles and Teddy laughed again, adding their own unimaginative torture techniques. Liam couldn’t stop smiling as he climbed into the car and took off with the three older boys. He rubbed the coin he wore around his neck and thought of driving with their father.
The tunnel wasn’t too far from the Davis property and in just over an hour they were approaching the massive stone monolith the Gateway cut through. The rock the tracks went through were gargantuan, a mountain of stone which resembled a sleeping giant. The Gateway’s dark opening was large enough to swallow freight trains but it appeared as no more than a mole upon the face of a Titan. Knowing the amount of stone bearing down over you was one of the things which made the long walk in the dark so terrifying. The road met the tracks a ways away from the tunnel, so the boys parked the car as far off to the side as they could and closed the remaining distance on foot.

The closer the boy’s got to the mouth of the Gateway the slower their footsteps became. The eagerness which Liam felt coming off the older boys in waves as they jumped from the car gave way to something he was less familiar with, fear.

What is this place, anyways? Liam asked his brother.

He knew what it was of course, had heard all the same tales and spook stories the other boys had but thought talking about it might help. Had the topic of discussion been anything else he may well have been correct.

It’s called the Gateway. Some fools claim hell lies in the middle, others say that it’s actually heaven and you can see the light of angels. I even heard a story once that the devil
himself waits in there, dancing with the dead, and if you see
them you have to join in.

It’s the truth, said Teddy defensively. My brother told me
so.

Charles and Will laughed and a half second later Liam
joined in.

Okay, said Liam, so what do you think is really in there?
I don’t know. Wager it’s nothing but a train tunnel.

Haven’t been in it yet though, have I?

So we’re really going in there?!

Yes, we’re really going in, Will said, gesturing to
Charles, Teddy and himself.

Aw, come on. God, I swear –

No.

But I never –

No! Not even a chance. Just be lucky we let you come.

Besides, Charles said, somebody has to stay back and be on
train lookout, that’s the most important job.

No it’s not.

Hell it ain’t, son. You don’t shout a warning our way and
we’ll all get smashed in the dark. Then there goes your ride
home. So keep a real good eye towards the east there, and if you
see so much as a sliver of what might be smoke, you shout. You
better yell loud too, otherwise I swear I’ll haunt your ass.
And miss dancing with the devil?

Charles laughed a little. He’ll have to wait for pretty old me.

Wait though, couldn’t you two just watch while the other goes?

Shut up, Liam.

They walked the last stretch without talking and then the four of them stood in silence. A different silence followed Liam’s next question.

So, who’s first?

After a short time Will pulled a small piece of chalk from his pocket, twirling it between his fingers as he spoke.

Alright, so we each go in alone, as far as we can, and when you decide to head back you just take this and make a mark on the wall. I’ll do a triangle, Charles you do a circle and Teddy you make an 8. Whoever gets the farthest gets the rest of that whiskey, fair?

They all nodded in agreement, even Liam. The boy thought how there was no real way to see who’d gone the farthest. Despite needing a lantern to check, somebody could simply walk thirty feet in where they couldn’t be seen and sit a spell, until they got up and returned claiming they’d ventured the furthest. The incentive wasn’t all that special either. None of it truly mattered though, since any time one of the boys managed
to snag any liquor or tobacco or anything else, they all shared it. All but Liam, of course.

So he played his part, keeping watch for the rare sight of a train approaching and one by one Charles, Teddy, and lastly Will took their turns venturing as deep as they dared into the abyss. As far as who actually went the longest distance from the entrance they couldn’t know for sure, but Will took the most time by far and none of the others dared challenge his honesty. The other two returned at a brisk pace but when Will at last emerged he was jogging and his forehead and top were drenched in sweat, his eyes frantic. As he caught his breath and drank some water, Will kept looking back towards the darkness. Teddy seemed excited and inquired in serious tones if he saw the devil or angel lights or ghosts, while Charles just stood there waiting. Liam cut through the noise with the right question.

So, how far did you get?

The worry faded some from Will’s eyes as he began to brag of how deep he’d ventured.

Towards the end I kept expecting to come out the other side, but I never even saw the light. The dark fools you into thinking you’ve walked farther than you have. That, or somehow it’s bigger on the inside.

Did you see my mark, asked Teddy?
Yeah, he laughed, about ten steps in. And Charles, yours wasn’t that far past his. Must say I was a little let down, could still see both of your marks from the glow of the entrance. Hell, Liam probably would’ve gone farther than you two cowards.

Coward was a step too far for Teddy, who got defensive when you said his hair looked bad.

Fine, Teddy said, let’s find out then. Go ahead, Liam, show us cowards how the big Davis men do it. Just try not to run away like ya daddy did. At the mention of his father, Liam fingered the smooth coin around his neck.

Will could throw every curse and insult your way and you knew you were fine but when he went silent, that was when you knew to worry. Liam recognized that deadly silence and ignored the slight.

Let me go, Will. I bet I can beat him, just watch.

Will just shook his head and kept staring at Teddy, who was doing his best to keep staring right back.

Please.

Come on, Will. Just let the kid do it, Charles said. Like you said, we didn’t make it too far so it’ not likely he’s gonna.

Maybe you didn’t get that far but I swear –
Shut up Teddy, it don’t matter. So I’m saying, Will, even if he makes it near our marks without running back here like a baby first - which I doubt - he’ll still be right back like we was. Besides, somebody’s gotta check to make sure you ain’t just bullshitting us, right, and now we got a volunteer. So go ahead little man, show us how it’s done.

Liam was so eager to bolt into the dark he almost leapt at Charles’s words, but he knew enough to look to his brother for final say on any and all things.

Will finally moved his gaze from Teddy. Yeah, alright fine. Just make it quick and if you hear anything, anything that even sounds like us yelling, you run back here fast as you can. Ya hear me?

Liam nodded, smiling. Finally, he would be able to prove himself. The boy’s smile was infectious and Will couldn’t help but return it. He mussed his brother’s hair and punched him lightly in the arm.

Okay, just hurry it up and hey, you mind me now, don’t go too far. You ain’t got nothing to prove to nobody, especially not assholes like these. Hear me?

Uh huh.

Here ya go then, be careful, or it’s my ass. And if I have to take one more whooping cause of you, I’ll cut you open,
squeeze out your balls and suffocate you with your own little sack.

Liam took the piece of chalk from his older brother and headed towards the dark. He turned back and asked, Is that a real one? Can you really suffocate somebody with their sack?

The other two were laughing but Will just smiled and said, Take care or we’ll have to find out.

Liam’s smile held until the shadows consumed him, then little by little eagerness and determination gave way to fear.

Though Liam was alone in that tunnel, his brother knew every detail of his venture. When finally he opened up to me and shared this tale, I knew he spoke the truth, I only wish I understood how he could know. I have heard of twin’s having psychic links, and there is of course much in this world we do not yet understand. At first I suspected it was more wish fulfillment for closure on the part of William, rather than anything supernatural or magical. Then again, I am a man without a brother, and perhaps it is that simple. It has been decades since the day they entered that tunnel on a dare, but Will’s account of his brother’s trek remains unchanged. I put it down here now as he has always told it.

The further he walked, the darker it became, until the empty space seemed to shrink and he felt the unseen walls
closing in around him. The Gateway was the same size all the way through, he knew this and kept reminding himself of it. But when fear takes hold what we know doesn’t always matter, and despite his inner reassurances he felt more and more claustrophobic with each step. The air was noticeably cooler and the smell of desert flowers faded slowly. He resisted the urge to look back. It was like the ‘don’t look down’ advice which was supposed to help with heights. Liam knew if he looked back and saw how far he was from any light that he would either freeze or flee.

On he went into the dark and as blackness embraced him, visions bloomed in his mind; Visions of crazy old men and killers crouched, cloaked in shadows, waiting. From the formless, formed subterranean monsters with oversized teeth and grotesque claws, hungry for children, and the darker it became the clearer these terrors were. Vivid images seemed to populate the void. Liam’s pace slowed a bit and he began wincing with each half step that he took, fully expecting to bump into a butcher or some hairy sharp-toothed reptile so large it had to crouch to fit in the tall cavern. He could see it so clear, bent over with its yellow teeth dripping saliva and its nose shifting and twitching as it gathered the scents of its oncoming meal. He could almost smell it.

To help assure himself the tunnel wasn’t shrinking he reached his shaking hand out and placed it against the rock wall.
as he went. To drive the phantasmagoric images from his mind he began reciting a little mantra from a story his mother used to tell him. It was his favorite because it had a story within the story. In the tale, there is a young man who must travel through the dark cursed woods alone in order to retrieve medicine that would save his dying mother. The boy heard tales all his life of the wicked things which live beyond the village, knew it is common knowledge that there were creatures lurking all around him as he went. The woods above were so thick they blocked out the moonlight, and the lamp he brought with him contained so little fuel that he was forced to travel with it off, save for occasions when he absolutely must illuminate the abyss swirling around him. With each step in the dark, the familiar noises of branches breaking and leaves crunching underfoot all became more alien and threatening to his ears, filling his mind with visions of all the horrid predators standing just before him. To keep his mind occupied, the young boy began repeating words his mother taught him from an ancient story. A tale of a brave dragon slayer, who himself used the words to draw strength as he approached the mouth of the dragon’s lair. The memory of these timeless words caused Liam to stand up just a little straighter as he repeated them in his own mind.

Don’t fear shadows in your track, walk on through them, don’t look back. Again and again and again he repeated these
words. The words echoed so loud in his head that they began escaping his mouth in mumbled whispers. Just as they had empowered the young man, and the dragon slayer before him, now little Liam Davis too drew strength from them. He walked on with renewed confidence, as he heard the words in his head pounding like a war drum pushing him onwards, a beacon shining in him, fending off the dark. He almost wanted to bump into whatever vile creature would dare block his path. Almost. The fear, though diminished, was of course still there. It whispered of threats and imminent doom but this treacherous worm was drowned out by the words reverberating in his mind like a battle cry.

Refusing to look back towards the light enabled Liam’s eyes to adjust quickly and the in that void, silhouettes of stone appeared clearer for what they were. Only a short walk into the tunnel he knew victory was his, as he passed first one then another small chalk mark on the rock wall, the white seeming to glow against the dark stone. Smiling, he went on, thinking how pathetic it was that that was as far as Charles had made it, he hadn’t expected much from Teddy. He felt grateful that he knew the story, that he possessed the words which kept him strong. How wonderful it is that make-believe can help us to deal with the unreal. Then and there Liam made up his mind; he would pass his brother’s mark as well and keep on, maybe all the way to the other side. The dark ahead looked endless, it seemed to go on
forever, but he knew that it couldn’t last. He’d learned earlier than most that nothing is forever.

He got far enough that the rock felt cooler against his palm. The gateway held an aroma of dust and remnants of smoke, which he presumed must’ve been coal residue on the ceiling. The only noises in the dark were the shifting of the earth and rocks beneath his steps and the sound of his breathing. Louder than both of these, louder than the booming silence, was the drone of words beating away with a driving rhythm. Don’t fear shadows in your track, walk on through them, don’t look back. The words seemed to serve as some mystical incantation and he felt as though he had the strength to face anything. Had his father known the words from the old tale, he wondered? Surely not, for if his dad possessed the type of strength he felt now he would never have ‘run like a coward from his responsibilities’ as their mother liked to put it.

If only adults took the time and told each other stories, the way they do for children, perhaps they’d be stronger and maybe the world would be a better place. Everybody knows kids are braver than adults. The connection seems natural enough between diminishing courage that comes with aging and the depletion of stories. Stories make us stronger. Liam told himself that he cared dearly about the world being a better
place and all, but the truth he felt inside was he’d watch the world burn if it meant he’d have a dad again.

Even with his eyes adjusted as well as they were, it was so dark he nearly walked right past the large white triangle mark his brother left. He wondered why Will would have turned back here, and why he’d ran all the way back. He turned and squinted his eyes, and realized there was only a fingernail sliver of light left, resembling cracked door with the sun behind it. Liam figured he had to be at least halfway through the Gateway, if not farther and the thought of actually making it all the way through to the other side was such an intoxicating idea he didn’t see how he had much of a choice at all. The endless glory, the eternal bragging rights, never having to defend tagging along again, it was all a bit too much to resist. There was a small worry of why he could not yet see light from the other side, for even though the long tunnel curved it was not by so much that this far in he should still see only dark ahead. He walked on. As he gazed forward into the abyss he felt it gazing back into him and thought he spied a ring of day light, as though some disc or perfectly spherical boulder blocked out all but a hint of the light. Unable to make sense of such a strange site, the boy shook his head to clear it away and then once again saw only a mesh of shadow. With the words to fuel him and
the wall to guide him, Liam headed on past his brother’s mark further into the darkness, searching for daylight in shadows.

A pain started in his belly and then spread to his head. He repeated the words louder and louder until he was screaming them out in his mind, and though they made him feel brave they did nothing to soothe him and his nausea increased, until he fell to one knee. When he looked up again the dark shimmered before him. Liam always wore a flattened coin around his neck, a remnant from a trip with his father to the train tracks near their place. After Liam was caught too close to the tracks, his father showed him what a train could do to metal, warning his boy to keep bones and skin far away from the tracks. The piece of metal began to lift off Liam’s neck as though it were being pulled towards the shimmer, then just as quickly as it had appeared the shimmer in the darkness faded and the coin fell back against his chest. It felt much colder than it had just a few moments before. Liam still felt ill but noticed the sensation slowly fading.

The voices of his brother and mother and even his father competed in his mind, telling him it was time to stop, time to go home, that enough was enough and it was okay to head back now. After briefly considering turning back he decided to press on, feeling positive he’d almost certainly never venture this far into the Gateway again. Already he was feeling great regret
at having gone as far as he had, fearing he wouldn’t have enough
time to make it back should he hear a warning. If it came to it
he would run for the other side and hope for the best. Mostly he
felt bad thinking of Will, sure his brother must be worrying and
doing his best to hide it in front of his friends, and that odd
shimmer…but he pushed those thoughts from his mind and focused
only on the words…don’t look back, don’t fear shadows in your
tracks, walk on through them, and don’t look back. Don’t look

The sound frightened him for a moment before he recognized
it was as the sound of his own voice, and realized he was
mumbling the words aloud again. They felt good on his tongue and
he repeated them over again, chanting them a little louder and
then a little louder still, until they were as steady as his
breathing. It sounded as though he spoke them in defiance, as
though it were some sacred script or a series of forbidden curse
words known only by the few allowed to speak them. Words passed
down from the ancients in many languages long dead, containing a
mystical protective power. The boy pictured a soft glow around
him in the dark, a shield against the encroaching abyss.

He was so focused on his chant and so deep into the heart
of the Gateway that he did not at first even notice the noises
from behind him, confusing them with the voices in his mind.
Even after he recognized them for what they were he struggled to
make them out. It sounded like wild howling animals warning of a predators approach. Then Will’s strong voice cut through Charles and Teddy’s screams and the single syllable word was clear.

Train, Will was shouting. Train! Train!

The word paralyzed his body but sent his mind into overdrive. He tried to focus as a thousand thoughts raced inside his head, colliding into one another, shattering into a million more. How far was he into the tunnel? There was no real way to gauge. Did he have time to make it back before the train entered or was it safer to bolt for the other side of the tunnel? There was no light in either direction now, but there did seem to be a faint shimmer in the dark behind him. Again he heard the faint echo of voices warning of a train. This time the word had the opposite effect and freed him of his motionless state. He shouted back through the dark.

Which way? Yet as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Liam realized how ridiculous they were. Will and the others had no way of knowing how deep he’d gone, so couldn’t very well suggest which direction he should run in. Will did answer however, with the same message he had been yelling.

Train! Run! This time however the calls were much clearer and louder and more frantic. Come on!

The voice was again slightly louder and clearer. Then it hit him, Will was coming after him. He hadn’t moved fast enough
and now because of his hesitation, they might both die. He thought of how the coin looked before and after its encounter with a train. Knowing Will was in peril sparked his mobility and he took off running in the direction of his brother’s voice, keeping his right fingers in contact with the wall to guide him as he went.

Go back, I’m coming!

Will just kept shouting train though and didn’t seem to hear him. The sound of his warnings grew ever closer until they were just around the bend. Liam picked up his pace and ran as fast as he could, he took his hand from the wall and tripped almost immediately over one of the wood beams the tracks were laid over, falling hard.

Liam’s necklace began to lift off his chest again. He looked up as he got to his feet and saw his brother’s silhouette growing larger as he neared. Upon realizing he could see at all again drove a spike of fear into his heart as he was certain the light in the tunnel was from the train entering the Gateway, and that it was too late. Then he heard the train’s whistle and could tell from the sound that it was still a ways off.

The soft glow was the shimmer he had seen a glint of before, a little brighter now than it was at first. Liam could see through it, but despite its transparency he could still see the thing itself, like a window pane or a soap bubble. It was
beautiful, like faint water colors painting over glass. Colors swirled in it and formed fragments of unfocused scenes before dissipating again. Will reached the spot on the other side of the strange wavering light and stopped. The brothers stood there sharing the briefest moment of wonder before the shimmer, like the fragile soap bubble it resembled seemed to pop out of existence, leaving the boys in darkness once more. Liam put his arm out and when nothing happened, ran through the spot where the thing had been and hugged his brother.

Let’s go, come on, Liam said.

What...what the hell was -?

The rails were vibrating harder, Liam found his brother’s hand in the dark and shouted, Come on! They could barely hear the other two boys screaming over the repeated train whistles. They started to run again towards the sound of their voices. That was when the light from the train’s headlight filled the tunnel as it entered the Gateway. They stopped and Will tightened his grip on his younger brother’s hand as Liam spoke both their thoughts out loud.

There’s no time.

Once in a book Liam read, there was a man who was trapped in a train tunnel just like them with a train approaching. In the story, the man is able to find a crevice in the rock and squeezed into it as the train sped past close enough to fray his
clothes. It was all Liam could think of and a story helped him once already that day.

Quick find a space in the wall.

What?! Are you crazy?! Let’s go, Will said. We gotta run the other way. Go!

Liam tried to pull his hand away but Will tightened his grip and said, I’m serious, run the other way now or I’ll –

Shut up, we can’t! We can’t outrun a train.

He ripped his hand from Will’s strong grasp and began feeling along the cool rock for their only chance. The walls were far from smooth and along his trek he’d felt more than few large divots and hoped he could find one big enough for both of them, or else two where they could each squeeze in. Frantically he rubbed his hands over one wall.

Help me. Feel for big dips.

Will started feeling along the opposite wall. They had to scream to be heard and could no longer hear the voices outside at all, only the pounding of the train and its whistle screeching at them. It sounded like a thousand elephants led by a howling banshee. The rails were shaking so hard it caused the boys’ teeth to rattle.

Here! Over here, hurry, hurry!

Will followed his brother’s voice, waving his hands about until he found his shoulder. The moment he touched him, Liam
grabbed him by the arms and pushed him back against the rocks, into a spot just large enough for him to squeeze into alone. He went to move but his younger brother shoved him back again.

Stay, he said, sounding as if he was reprimanding a dog.

They were screaming to be heard over the train as Will tried to argue. But you-

There’s...other one...ight...ere...e fine.

Those were the only fragments Will made out before the light of the train lit up his brother’s face, revealing a look of determination and fury, but no trace of fear. Liam nodded at him and Will returned the nod. Then Liam was gone, once again feeling along the wall. Will leaned his head out slightly and saw his brother’s lips moving as he moved his hands all over the rock, as if searching for some switch to a hidden entrance. The train was barreling towards them; the sound of it echoing in the tunnel forced Will to cover his ears.

Will thought the light from the train suddenly reflected off a surface just beyond Liam, who with his focus on the wall failed to notice it. Will yelled something but couldn’t even feel the vibration of his own voice, let alone hear it. The shimmer was back and much brighter and Liam was moving closer and closer to it, only inches away when he looked back towards his brother and the approaching train. Will pointed and Liam turned and saw the shimmer, and tilted his head as he gazed into
it. Then he turned, smiling, the look of fury and determination replaced by that strange infectious grin. He spared one last look at Will and shouted something to his brother. The he smiled again, turned and walked through the light and disappeared into the shimmer. For a moment after, it appeared to burn much brighter, forcing him to look away. Then his brother and the shimmer were both gone. A bare track illuminated by the train’s light.

Before Will even had time to react to what he’d just seen or shout his brother’s name the train shot past him like a black bolt of lightning and the thunder followed. He pressed himself hard against the wall as the iron monster roared past. The train screamed in his face and Will couldn’t help howling back at it. He stood there pressed against the stone, screaming as loud as he could and not hearing it. As the end of the train passed, there was another brilliant flash of light where the shimmer manifested, and then it was gone. The train vanished around the bend and its sound slowly diminished until a still silence returned to the Gateway. Will stood in shock, wedged in the crevice his brother had found for him, his ears ringing. After a moment he dared to lean his head out again and looked where his brother last stood, and saw only nothingness. He ran to where his brother had walked into the light and felt around in the air but nothing seemed different, except that he felt slightly

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nauseous. He collapsed to the floor, panicking, and began to weep, crying out his brother’s name again and again and again. His voice gave out long before he did.

After both refused to go in unless the other came along, Teddy and Charles walked into the dark tunnel entrance. They called out for Will and Liam but received no response. A little deeper in they heard muffled crying and followed it to find Will, crouched in the fetal position, rocking back and forth. He was mumbling to himself nonsensically and repeating something they couldn’t recognize at first. After searching and failing to find Liam, they assumed the worst. They pulled Will to his feet and led him back towards the light.

When at last they managed to get him to speak a few words it was a cold monotone which escaped his lips. In his poor mind state, Will made the not-so-advisable decision to share with his friends exactly what he had experienced. This was also the first time he detailed word for word what Liam had experienced on his own, saying he could feel what he felt and see what he saw. Both boys figured Will had seen his brother crushed by the train and gone mad. Water was all they had to offer him in the way of consolation.

Not another word was spoken by any of them as they led him back through the desert to the parked car and drove home.
their surprise there was no protest. Will sat unblinking, eyes fixed on nothing and that was how he remained for three more days before he would even take a sip of water on his own. Despite his mother’s pleading, demanding and physical assaults he did not waiver. He was a living statue for days.

During that first week people searched best they could based on what Teddy and Charles told them. After combing the tunnel however, no traces of Liam were ever found, not one drop of blood or scrap of clothing. It was at this point that the two boys’ stories changed. Teddy told anybody who’d listen the crazy tale Will shared with them after they pulled him from the Gateway, tossing in plenty of embellishments, as if the real story weren’t fantastical enough. Charles on the other hand seemed unable to recall any part of the story. He stated only that Will was rambling when they pulled him from the tunnel but that he hadn’t paid much mind to it. He never spoke again about what happened that day and ignored anybody who asked.

To everyone’s surprise it was Will himself who stated that despite its flaws, Teddy’s account was the more accurate version. Will would do anything to find his brother, so despite Charles’s warning of what would happen, he went on and on to anybody who would listen. One day a man came to town just to hear the tale from the source firsthand. The man, it turned out, was the owner of the train which passed through the Gateway that
day and was attempting to decipher a mysterious disappearance of his own. The very last train car did not arrive with the rest of the locomotive. They back-tracked the whole route but after finding no sign of it anywhere wondered how a train car vanished without a trace. After hearing about the missing boy, the man thought perhaps there was a connection. Remembering the second flash of light in the tunnel, Will sat up and listened more intently as the train’s owner described how the car connector appeared to have been severed clean through, another impossibility. It was this new development which turned Will’s despair to hope. If it opened again shortly after, then perhaps the shimmer inside the Gateway wasn’t closed forever, as he feared. Will clung to that hope. They never found any clues of what might have happened and after only a few days, trains were once again passing through the Gateway. For Will, every time he heard a distant train he imagined bulls trampling through a graveyard.

Eventually nearly everybody in the southwest knew ‘Poor Will’s story’ but let him be, mostly out of pity for his loss. The boy becoming a man couldn’t work and more than once was hauled out of the Gateway, where he was chasing trains into the tunnel and ‘trying to find the opening’. Whatever happened to his brother nobody knew for sure, but one thing was certain,
that whatever happened Will never stopped blaming himself for it and never gave up his search.

About a year after Liam - and the caboose - disappeared, the passenger train with just over a hundred people aboard was seen by two ranch hands entering the Gateway. The train never came out the other side. No remains were ever found. It to date is still the only recorded incidence of a train just vanishing. The families and the public were terrified at first and infuriated once they learned the previous incident, involving a child. As a result the Gateway was decommissioned and both entrances were blown and sealed off.

Aside from the few who knew him well, most folks assumed Will would be glad nobody else would be hurt, but instead he threw a fit when he heard the news, pleading that if they did have to close it off, to do it with him inside so he would at least have a chance of seeing his brother again. The man who came to town the first time remembered Will, and it was during the damage control for the passenger tragedy that he was placed into hospitalization, after a generous donation was made to those charged with determining whether somebody was dangerous crazy or just the normal kind. He lost his mother in the years between Liam vanishing and the passenger car following suit, so without family or any real money he didn’t have much of a chance of ever getting out. And once they saw such a harmless sweet man
locked up so easily, everybody followed Charles’s lead and made an effort to forget his crazy story altogether. When the passenger train – and the passengers – never turned up, there were whispers of Will being right. Unfortunately, alone in his quarters here, Will never heard them.

When I checked myself in here it was mainly for financial reasons but also because I was feeling a little overwhelmed and thought a rest would help. Will had already been here for decades and had attempted several breakouts, including one on his 65th birthday, but by the time I got here he seemed resigned to his fate. He wasn’t as keen on being alone as he used to be, but not so many people knew it. We both played a good game of chess and were well read. Once I revealed I was usually in possession of some liquor, we became friends. I paid attention to him and didn’t drool or piss myself, so I had a one up on a good number of the competition. Nor did I rudely talk to myself while he was speaking. I listened.

One late night over a game and some whiskey, I asked how somebody like him ended up in there, so he told me. I started crying when he finished, couldn’t help myself. He asked if I believed him and I told him that of course I did. He wasn’t a liar. I knew him well enough by then to know that much. I offered my help.
What could you do? he asked.

So I told him. I can get you out of here. You don’t belong here anymore than I do.

He smiled and told me he was probably too old for a jail break, old Indian.

I couldn’t help but smile back. Nothing so fun, I’m afraid.

After a long pause he seemed to understand my offer was genuine and I saw a glimmer of reserved hope return to his tired eyes. He asked if I could really help him, and I told him that I really could.

How?

Owning a hospital has more perks than just free room and board, I said.

We left the building together in the morning and ate blueberry pancakes from an old diner near the hospital that I knew well. A place called Coffee Cantata. Over breakfast, as he enjoyed his first cup of coffee, Will’s uneasiness wore off a little bit at a time until he seemed to accept this was not just some cruel jape. We discussed what came next and for Will it was a pretty single minded effort. There was only one thing he still seemed to care about, Liam.

Despite his eagerness and insistence that we just grab some sledgehammers, pickaxes and torches and head for the Gateway at once, I convinced him we needed to be better prepared.
I checked into the status of the place but also looked into which metals are magnetic, what types of rock the tunnel was cut through and several other factors I thought would prove important or at least interesting. Most fascinating though was the impact and geology records for that area.

The second night after leaving the hospital, I caught Will trying to sneak out with my car keys. I asked him why he was in such a rush, that surely after all these years he could wait a few more days. Will revealed he had a reoccurring nightmare. He told me that he’s had it ever since they sealed off the Gateway, decades prior.

In the nightmare, it is always midnight and Liam returns as the shimmer returns, Will said. He appears the same age as when he vanished, still wearing that flattened metal coin around his neck. Only seconds have passed where he went while decades passed here. Liam looks ecstatic to be back, but once the shimmer fades he is left again in the darkness of a moonless night, all alone. He manages to make it first to one end of the tunnel and then the other, only to find his escape blocked off, and with a boy’s strength and no tools he’s got no hope of breaking free. He calls for me at each sealed passageway. As he walks, the time he avoided catches up with him and he ages years at a time. He used to repeat this rhyme our mom taught him, annoyed the hell out of me and finally he got tired of me making
fun of him for it - he only said it when he got scared, you see - so he stopped saying it all the time. Even after he stopped, though, I would catch him late at night in the dark whispering it sometimes in bed. He just kept repeating it over and over in the dream, as he walked and turned from a scared young boy to a hopeless old ghost he repeated that rhyme, each time his voice growing more strained. He just kept on with that old rhyme...Don’t fear shadows in your track. Walk right through them, don’t look back.

I sent a team ahead of us without telling Will, to clear away rubble and report what they found. The image of his brother trapped and withered with age, alone in the dark catacombs was haunting. They didn’t find anything - of course they didn’t. I just needed to be sure. I just needed to know that whatever we found there, it wouldn’t be that.

We came prepared to wait. Plenty of food and water, and more than enough light. It was still well over a week before the shimmer reappeared, just after midnight. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I was peeing outside the tunnel, looking up at the moonless sky and admiring the Pleiades, when I heard Will call for me and I came running with my light in hand, though I had no need of it. The shimmer was exactly as he’d described it and illuminated the tunnel with light from inside itself. Will looked at me and the smile on his face transformed him back into
the young boy who, though his body remained, vanished along with his younger brother, all those years before. He was elated and looked angelic bathed in the light of the real gateway.

We have to go, come on. It doesn’t stay open for long.

I…I don’t…it’s so beautiful.

He turned back towards it, and after a second tilted his head slightly as the colors seemed to form some type of fuzzy landscape image. He turned back to me and I saw a tear in his eye as he said thank you. Then he laughed a little and walked through the shimmer. I wanted to follow him, but I didn’t. It wasn’t that I had anything keeping me here. I just never was one for riding my bike with my eyes closed, or swimming at night, if that makes any sense. But the second after I saw him vanish I knew I wanted to go and needed to move right then if I wanted to make it. I didn’t move though, I just stood there and watched the shimmer flash out, leaving the tunnel lit only by the pathetic light in my hand, the brilliance of the real gateway muted once more.

I don’t want to say how long I’ve been here waiting, it’s a little embarrassing, but some things are worth waiting for. What I will say is that I wanted there to be some record, of what really happened to Liam and Will Davis, and perhaps what happened to me, if I’m lucky enough to get a second chance.
I don’t know for sure that the shimmer will open again, but if it does, wherever it leads, I hope that it’s as beautiful as I imagine, I hope that if I tilt my head slightly that the image comes into focus for me, and I hope I get to see my friend again. I hope.

THE END