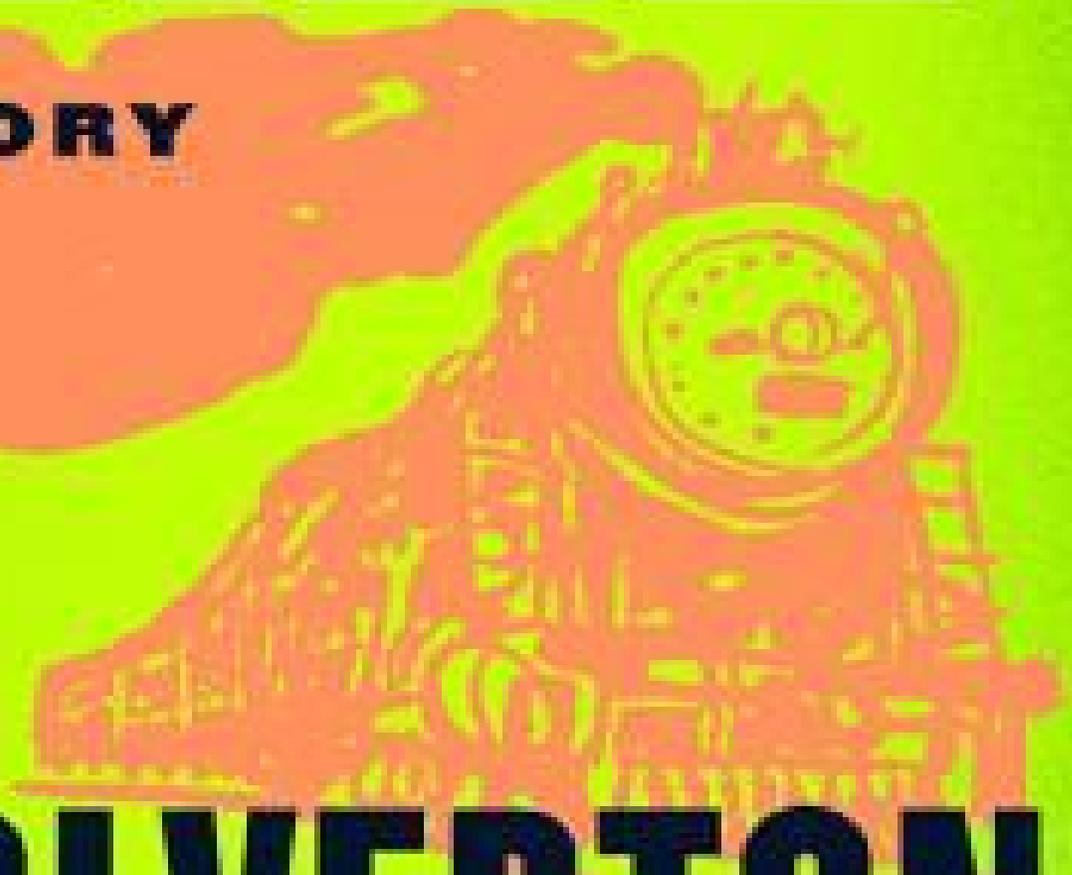


**JOE**

**HILL**

**A STORY**



**WOLVERTON  
STATION**

# **Wolverton Station**

*A Story*

JOE HILL

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

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# Wolverton Station

SAUNDERS SAW THE first wolf as the train was pulling in to Wolverton Station.

He glanced up from his *Financial Times* and there it was, out on the platform, a wolf six feet tall with a scally cap tucked between his bristly, graying ears. The wolf stood on his hind legs, wore a trench coat, and held a briefcase in one paw. A bushy tail whipped impatiently back and forth, presumably poking out from a hole in the seat of his pants. The train was still moving, and in a moment the wolf blinked out of sight.

Saunders laughed, a short, breathless sound that did not quite convey amusement, and did the reasonable thing: looked back at his paper. It didn't surprise him, a wolf waiting on the train platform. The devil would probably be at the next stop. Saunders thought there was a good chance the fucking protesters would be parked in every station between London and Liverpool, parading around in costume, hoping someone would point a camera at them and stick them on the telly.

They had staked out his hotel in London, a raggedy-ass pack of a dozen kids, marching back and forth on the sidewalk directly across the street. The management had offered Saunders a room in the rear, so he wouldn't have to

see them, but he insisted on a suite up front just so he could look down on them. It was a hell of a lot more entertaining than anything on British TV. He hadn't spotted any wolfmen, but there had been a dude on stilts in an Uncle Sam costume, with a three-foot rubber dong hanging out of his pants. Uncle Sam's features were stern and hateful, but the dong was scrubbed and pink and had some cheerful bounce to it. Slammin' Sammy carried a sign in both hands:

UNCLE SAM PISSES IN A CUP  
& WE ENGLISH PAY TO DRINK IT  
NO JIMI COFFEE! NO SLAVE CHILDS!

Saunders had a good laugh at that, had enjoyed how it trod the line between righteous anger and mental deficiency. "No slave childs"? What had happened to the legendary British educational system?

The other protesters, a gang of self-important hipsters, were hauling signs of their own. Theirs were a little less amusing. They showed photos of barefoot, half-naked black kids, standing by coffee bushes, the children staring bleakly into the camera, eyes dewing over with tears, as if they had just felt the foreman's lash. Saunders had seen it before, too often to really get angry, to be anything more than irritated, even if those signs perpetuated an outrageous lie. Jimi Coffee didn't use kids in the field and never had. In the packing plants yes, but not in the fields, and the plants were a hell of a lot more sanitary than the shantytowns those kids went home to.

Anyway, Saunders couldn't hate the hot little hipster girls, in their stomach-baring Che Guevara T-shirts, or their fashionably scrungy, sandal-wearing boyfriends. They protested today, but in three years the hipster girls would be pushing baby carriages, and the half hour they spent in Jimi Coffee gossiping with their girlfriends would be the best part of their day. The scrungy hipster boys would be shaved and chasing jobs in middle management and would run into Jimi every morning on the way to work for their all-important double shots of espresso, without which they could not make it through the most boring day of their lives since the day before. By then, if the hipsters allowed themselves to think about the time they had picketed to protest the arrival of Jimi Coffee on British shores, it would be with a bemused flush of embarrassment at their own pointless and misplaced idealism.

There had been a dozen of them in front of the hotel the night before and two dozen in front of the flagship store in Covent Garden in the morning, at the grand opening. Not great numbers. Most passersby never so much as glanced at them. The small few who did take note of them always flinched at the sight of Uncle Sam with his rubber prick hanging out, the thing twitching back and forth like the great fleshy pendulum of some perverse, surreal grandfather clock (grandfather cock?). That was all anyone would remember—Uncle Sam's strap-on—not what was being protested. Saunders doubted that the marchers would register as anything more than a single sentence at the end of a minor story buried in the business section of the *Times*. Possibly someone would be quoted about Jimi's

business practices, practices Saunders himself had helped to develop.

The way Jimi worked, they found a neighborhood mom-and-pop coffeehouse that was doing good business and opened up across the street. A Jimi franchise could operate at a loss for months—years, if necessary—however long it took to put the competition out of business and claim its customers. And this was looked upon as an outrage, a borderline criminal act, and never mind that the mom-and-pop usually served watery, third-rate instant in thimble-size cups and couldn't be bothered to keep a clean bathroom. As for child labor, the protesters didn't like it but were apparently at peace with children starving because there was no work at all.

Saunders couldn't hate them. He understood their mindset too well. Once upon a time, he had marched himself . . . marched, smoked weed, danced in his underwear at a Dead concert, and trekked in India. He had gone abroad looking for transcendence, a mantra, *meaning*, and goddamn if he hadn't found it. He had stayed for three weeks in a monastery in the mountains of Kashmir, where the air was sweet and smelled of bamboo and tart orange blossoms. He had walked barefoot on ancient stone, meditated to the ringing drone of the singing bowl, and chanted with all the other potheads who had wound up there. He had given himself over to it all, trying to feel pure, trying to feel love—he even gave himself over to the food, daily servings of a mealy rice that tasted like waterlogged chalk and bowls of what appeared to be curried twigs. And there came a day

when at last Saunders received the wisdom he had come looking for.

It was a scrawny, raven-haired kid from Colorado named John Turner who pointed the way toward a higher purpose. No one prayed longer or more intensely than John, who sat through the guided-meditation sessions, stripped to the waist, his ribs showing in his painfully white sides. They were supposed to focus on something beautiful, something that filled them to the brim with happiness. Saunders had tried picturing lotus petals, waterfalls, the ocean, and his San Diego girlfriend naked, without feeling that any of it was quite right. John seemed to get it, though, right away—his long, horsey face shone with rapture. Even his sweat smelled clean and happy. Finally, their third week there, Saunders asked him what he was visualizing.

“Well,” Turner said, “he told us to picture somethin’ that filled us with happiness. So I been imaginin’ the fuckin’ Quarter Pounder with Cheese I’m going to sink my teeth into when I get home. A couple more days of eating sticks and spiced dirt, I think I might be able to visualize a bag of the flavorful motherfuckers right into existence.”

Saunders had gone to India in love with a blond-haired girl named Deanie, *The White Album*, and ganja. By the time he got back to San Diego, Deanie was married to a pharmacist, Paul McCartney was touring with Wings, Saunders had smoked his last-ever joint, and he had a plan. Or not a plan, exactly, but a vision, an *understanding*. Reality had briefly slid aside one of its black, opaque panels, to give him a glimpse of the gears that ticked behind it. Saunders had discovered a universal constant,

like gravity or the quantum nature of light. No matter where you went—no matter how ancient the traditions, no matter how grand the history, no matter how awe-inspiring the landscape—there was always a market for a cheap Happy Meal. The Lotus Way might lead to nirvana, but it was a long trip, and when you had a lot of miles to cover, it was just natural to want some drive-thru along the road.

Three years after he left Kashmir, Saunders owned five Burger Kings, and upper management wanted to know why his restaurants turned a profit 65-percent higher than the national average (his trick: set up shop across from skate parks, beaches, and arcades and grill with the windows open, so the kids were smelling it all day). Thirteen years later he was in upper management himself, teaching Dunkin' Donuts how to repel Starbucks (his plan: make 'em look like snobs and outsiders, play up the New England angle, total market saturation).

When Jimi Coffee offered him a seven-figure salary to help the company restructure and take its franchise international, Saunders agreed after mulling it over for less than twenty-four hours. He especially liked the idea of helping Jimi to go global, because it would offer him a chance to travel; he had hardly left the States in the years since India. Maybe he could even get them to open a Jimi Coffee in Kashmir, right across the road from his old monastery. The seekers would probably appreciate the many vegetarian offerings on the Jimi menu, and a vanilla cappuccino would make the sunrise chants a whole lot more palatable. When it came to producing a state of focus, quiet contentment, and inner peace, Zen meditation ran a

very distant second to caffeine. Your average suburban white-bread Buddhists could manage without their daily yoga class, but take 'em away from their coffee and they'd be animals in no time, absolute—

Saunders folded back one corner of the paper and took another look at the platform.

The train was yanking itself to a stop at last, in little hitches and jerks. He couldn't see the joker in the wolf suit anymore, had left him well behind. Saunders sat in the frontmost car of the train, the first-class car, and he had a view of one corner of the platform. A metal sign, bolted between two stone pillars, read WOLVERTON STATION. It was a good thing most activists barely had the money for the cardboard, Sharpies, and duct tape they needed to make their protest signs; the last thing Saunders wanted to do was share the otherwise empty first-class car with the crazy son of a bitch dressed like the Big Bad Wolf.

*No, thought Saunders. Fuck that. I hope he comes right in and sits down next to me. He can sit there in his asshole wolf suit and lecture me about all the little black kids who suffer under the baking sun in East Africa picking our coffee beans. And then I can tell him we don't let the kids pick and that Jimi Coffee offers full scholarships to ten children from the Third World every year. I can ask him how many kids from the Third World his local mom-and-pop places put through college last year, when they were getting their coffee from an outfit of Samoan slavers, no questions asked.*

In his years in management at Burger King, he had earned the nickname "The Woodcutter," because when

there was a hatchet job that needed doing, Saunders never shied away from wielding the ax. He had not made his sizable personal fortune (his largest assets being a house on twenty acres in New London, Connecticut, another in the Florida Keys, and a forty-three-foot Sportfisher that ferried him between the two) by avoiding confrontation. He had once fired an eight-months'-pregnant woman, the wife of a close friend, with a two-word text message: YOU'RE TOAST. He had closed packing plants, put hundreds out of work, and had stoically endured being called a soulless cocksucker in Yiddish by a red-faced and shaking old woman who had seen her little chain of kosher coffee shops systematically targeted and taken out by Jimi. But this was, of course, exactly why Jimi hired him—they *needed* a woodcutter, and he had the sharpest hatchet in the forest. Saunders had been all for peace and love in his twenties, and he liked to think he still was, but over the years he had also developed a hankering for the rusty-salt flavor of blood. It was, like coffee itself, an acquired taste.

The train sat for a long time, long enough so that after a while he put down the paper and looked out at the platform again. For the first time since boarding at Euston Station, he was irritated with himself. He should've hired a fucking car. The journey by train had been an impulsive, sentimental act. He had not been in England since the years right after college, had spent two weeks in the UK, on the first leg of the world tour that would eventually dump him in a decaying heap of stone in the breezy mountains of Kashmir. He had come because the Beatles were there; if not for the Beatles, he believed he would've

killed himself in his teens, in the bad days after his father had left his mother. He arrived in London with a craving to *feel* the Beatles in some way, a restless need to put his hand against the bricks of the Cavern Club, as if the music they had played there might still resonate in the warm red clay. He rode the rails north, packed into coach, on his feet for hours in the hot stale air, pressed up against an auburn-haired Edinburgh girl in blue jeans, who he didn't know when the trip began, and who he was half mad for by the time they reached Liverpool. It was maybe the happiest memory of his life, all the reason he needed to go by train now.

Saunders tried never to think about what had happened *after* he got off the train. He and the Edinburgh girl had split up, making a loose plan to meet at the Cavern Club that evening; Saunders had stopped at a mom-and-pop for some fish and chips, but the fish was greasy and spoiled, and he spent the night in a sweat, shaking in a hostel, unable to stand. In the days that followed, there was a continuous sick fizzle in his stomach, as if he had gulped down a cup of especially bitter coffee, and he couldn't go more than half an hour without running for the can. He could not shake the grim conviction that something special had gotten away from him. When he finally made it to the Cavern, the night following, the Edinburgh girl wasn't there—of course she wasn't—and the house band was playing fucking disco. The branch of Jimi Coffee being opened in Liverpool was not actually built on the ruin of the mom-and-pop that had served him rancid fish, but Saunders could pretend.

The platform was lit by fluorescents. He could see nothing of the world beyond. It seemed as if they'd been sitting there for a long time. Although the train was not quite standing still. It rocked now and then on its steel wheels, as if someone were loading something heavy into one of the rear cars. In the distance he heard someone braying, a man's loud, lowing voice, oddly steerlike—*Stop!* he yelled. *Stop it!* Saunders imagined two movers trying to lug an oversize dresser onto the train and being yelled at by a conductor . . . reasonably enough, this wasn't a freight car. A woman's voice rose in a sob of laughter, then faded away. Saunders had half a mind to get up and walk to the back to see what was happening, but then the train jerked forward with a loud bang and began to struggle out of the station.

At the same moment, Saunders heard the door of first class open behind him with a smooth, steely clack.

*Well—that's him,* he thought, with a certain grim satisfaction. The protester. Saunders didn't look back to confirm it and didn't need to. When he glanced sidelong at the window across the aisle, he could see the dim, blurred reflection of the guy: tall fella with the pointed ears of a German shepherd. Saunders lowered his gaze, fixed it on his newspaper, and pretended to read. Anybody who dressed in a getup like that did it because he wanted to be noticed, was hoping for a reaction. Saunders had no intention of giving him one.

The new arrival in first class started down the aisle, his breathing loud and strained, what you would expect from a man stuck in a rubber mask. At the last moment, it came to Saunders that it was a mistake to be occupying the window

seat. The chair to his left was open and empty, a kind of invitation. He thought of moving, shifting his ass over to the aisle seat. But no, the protester would relish the fear that such a move indicated. Saunders stayed where he was.

Sure enough, the protester took the empty seat beside him, heaving himself down with a heavy sigh of satisfaction. Saunders willed himself not to look over, but his peripheral vision filled in a few details: a wolf mask that covered the entire head, furry gloves, and a bushy tail that was apparently controlled by a hidden wire, because it swung to one side when he sat. Saunders exhaled a thin breath through bared teeth and realized for the first time that he was grinning. It was something he did automatically when he was in for a fight and knew it. His first wife said it made him look like Jack Nicholson with the ax in that movie. She had called Saunders “The Woodcutter,” too—initially with coy affection, later when she was being bitchy.

The protester shifted around, getting comfortable, and one hairy-gloved hand brushed Saunders’s arm. That casual touch was enough to throw the switch on Saunders’s well-practiced rage. He snapped down one corner of the newspaper and opened his mouth to tell Lon fucking Chaney to keep his paws to himself—and then his breath caught in his chest. His lungs seemed to bunch up. He stared. He saw but couldn’t make sense of what he was looking at. He tried to see a protester as hard as he could, a protester in a rubber wolf mask and a tan overcoat. He *insisted* on it to himself for a few desperate moments, trying to make the perfectly reasonable notion in his head match the perfectly unreasonable reality beside him. But it

wasn't a protester. All the wishing in the world wouldn't make it a protester.

A wolf sat on the seat next to him.

Or if not a wolf, then a creature more wolf than man. He had the body, roughly, of a man, with a broad, wedge-shaped chest that swept down to a sunken stomach and a narrow waist. But he had paws, not hands, wiry gray hair on them. He held a copy of the *Financial Times* himself, and his hooked yellow nails made audible scratching noises as he turned the pages. His nose was literally buried in the paper, a long, bony snout that ended in a wet, black nose. Old, stained fangs protruded over his lower lip. His ears were proud, furry, stiff, his scally cap shoved back between them. One of those ears swiveled toward Saunders, like a satellite dish revolving to lock in a signal.

Saunders looked back at his own paper. It was the only thing he could think to do.

The wolf didn't look at him directly—he remained behind his paper—but he did lean into him and speak in a gravelly bass. “I hope they bring the dinner trolley through. I could do with a bite. Course, on this line they'll charge you two quid for a plate of lukewarm dog food without blinking.”

His breath stank; it was dog breath. Sweat prickled on Saunders's brow and in his armpits, a hot, strange, disagreeable sweat, not at all like the perspiration he worked up jogging on the treadmill. He imagined this sweat as yellow and chemical, a burning carbolic crawling down his sides.

The wolf's snout shriveled, and his black lips wrinkled to show the hooked rows of his teeth. He yawned, and a

surprisingly bright red tongue lolled from the opening, and if there had been any doubt in Saunders's mind—there hadn't been, really—that was all for it. In the next moment, he fought with himself, a desperate, terrible struggle, not to issue a soft sob of fear. It was like fighting a sneeze. Sometimes you could hold it in, sometimes you couldn't. Saunders held it in.

"Are you an American?" asked the wolf.

*Don't answer. Don't talk!* Saunders thought, in a voice he didn't recognize—it was the shrill, piping voice of panic. But then he did answer, and his tone was his own: level and certain. He even heard himself laugh. "Hah. Got me. 'Scuse, do you mind if I use the bathroom?" As he spoke, he half rose to his feet. He and the wolf were in chairs that faced a spotted Formica table, and he couldn't quite stand all the way up.

"Right," said the wolf. He said it "*Ro-ight*," had a bit of a Liverpudlian accent. *Liverpudlian*, Saunders corrected himself mentally, randomly. *No, Scouse*. They called it Scouse, which sounded like a disease, something you might die from after being bitten by a wild animal.

The businesswolf turned sideways to allow Saunders by.

Saunders edged past him toward the aisle, leaving behind his briefcase and his eight-hundred-dollar overcoat. He wanted to avoid making contact with the thing, and of course that was impossible—there wasn't enough space to get by without his knees brushing the wolf's. Their legs touched. Saunders's reaction was involuntary, an all-body twitch. He flashed to a memory of sixth-grade biology, prodding the inside of a dead frog with tweezers, touching

the nerves and watching the feet kick. It was like that, a steel edge pressed right to the nerves. He could keep the fear out of his voice, but not his body. Saunders believed that one atavistic reaction would be met by another, and the wolf in the suit would lunge, responding to his terror by grabbing him around the waist with his paws, opening his jaws to sink his fangs into Saunders's belly, hollowing him out like a skinned pumpkin: *Trick-or-treat, motherfucker.*

But the wolf in the suit only grunted, low in his throat, and twisted even more to the side to let Saunders past.

Then Saunders was in the aisle. He turned left and began to walk—*walk*, not run—for coach. The first part of his plan was to get to other people. He hadn't worked out the second part of the plan yet. He kept his gaze fixed straight ahead and focused on his breathing, just exactly as he'd been taught in Kashmir, way back down the long and winding road. A smooth *in*, drawn through parted lips. A clean *out*, puffed through his nostrils. *I am not going to be killed and eaten by a wolf on an English train*, he thought, quite clearly. Like the Beatles, he had gone to India as a young man to get himself a mantra and had come home without one. On an unconscious level, though, he supposed he had never stopped yearning to find one, a single statement that resonated with power, hope, and meaning. Now, at sixty-one, he had a mantra he could live by at last: *I am not going to be killed and eaten by a wolf on an English train.*

In and out went his breath, and with every step the door to coach was closer. In eight steps he was there, and he pressed the button that opened the door to the next car.

The lights around the button turned from yellow to green, and the door slid back.

He stood looking into coach. The first thing he saw was the blood. A red handprint had been planted in the center of one window and then dragged, to leave a long, muddy--ocher streak across the Plexiglas. A mess of other red smears and splashes made a Jackson Pollock out of a window directly across the aisle. There was a red swipe dragged impossibly down almost the full length of the ceiling.

Saunders saw the blood before he saw the wolves—four in all, sitting in two pairs.

One pair was on the right, in the back. The wolf who sat on the aisle wore a black tracksuit with blue stripes, honoring a soccer team. Saunders thought it might've been Manchester United. The wolf who sat by the window sported a worn white T-shirt advertising an album: WOLFGANG AMADEUS PHOENIX. They were passing something wrapped in a napkin, something brown and circular. A chocolate doughnut, Saunders decided, because that was what he wanted it to be.

The other pair of wolves was on the left, and much closer, only a couple yards from where Saunders stood. They were businesswolves, but less well dressed than the gray wolf in first class. These two wore sagging, wrinkled black suits and standard-issue red ties. One of them was looking at a newspaper, not a *Financial Times* but the *Daily Mail*. His great black furry paws left red prints on the cheap paper. The fur around his mouth was stained red, blood streaked back almost to his eyes.

“Sez Kate Winslet ’as broke up with that bloke of ’ers wot made *American Beyootie*,” said the one with the paper.

“Don’t look at me,” said the other businesswolf. “I didn’t ’ave nuthink to do with it.”

And they both yapped—playful, puppylike yips.

There was a fifth passenger in the car, a woman, a *human* woman, not a wolf. She was sprawled on her side across one of the seats, so all he could see was her right leg, sticking into the aisle. She wore black stockings, a very bad run in the one that Saunders could see. It was a nice leg, a handsome leg, a young girl’s leg. He couldn’t see her face and didn’t want to. She had lost her heel—it had dropped into the heap of her entrails that were piled in the center of the aisle. Saunders saw those entrails last, a glistening pile of fatty white coils, lightly basted with blood. A string of gut stretched back out of sight in the direction of her abdomen. One of the woman’s high heels rested on that mound of intestines, set there like a single black candle on a grotesque birthday cake. He remembered how they had seemed to wait at Wolverton Station forever, the way the train shook now and then as if something were being forcibly loaded into coach. He remembered hearing a woman’s sob of laughter and a man yelling orders, *Stop! Stop it!* He had heard it the way he wanted to hear it. He had known what he had wanted to know. Maybe it was always that way for almost everyone.

The businesswolves hadn’t noticed him, but the two louts in the back had. The one in the rock T-shirt elbowed Manchester United, and they rolled their eyes meaningfully

at each other and lifted their snouts to the air. Tasting the scent of him, Saunders thought.

One of them, Wolfgang Amadeus Phoenix, called out. “ ‘Ey. ‘Ey there, mate. Comin’ to sit with the lower classes? Goin’ to roost with the plebes?”

Manchester United made a choked sound of laughter. He had just had a bite of that glistening chocolate doughnut that he held in the white napkin, and his mouth was full. Only it wasn’t a napkin, and it wasn’t a doughnut. Saunders was determined to see and hear things as they were, not as he wanted them to be. His life depended on it now. So. See it and know it: It was a piece of liver in a bloodstained hankie. A woman’s hankie—he could see the lace trimming at the edges.

Saunders stood in first class, fixed in place, unable to take another step. As if he were a sorcerer who stood within a magical pentagram and to cross the line into coach would be to make himself vulnerable to the demons that waited there. He had forgotten about breathing, no clean in-and-out now, just that feeling of paralysis in the lungs again, a muscular tightening that made it difficult to inhale. He wondered if anyone had ever suffocated to death from fear, had been so afraid to breathe that he’d passed out and died.

The door between cars began to slide shut. Just before it closed, the wolf in the Manchester United tracksuit turned his snout toward the ceiling and uttered a derisive howl.

Saunders backed from the door. He had buried both his parents, and his sister, too, who had died unexpectedly, when she was just twenty-nine, of meningitis; he had been

to a dozen stockholder funerals; he had seen a man collapse and die of a heart attack at a Jets game once. But he had never seen anything like guts on the floor, a whole battered train car painted with blood. Yet he did not feel any nausea and did not make a sound, not a single peep. The only physical reaction he was aware of was that his hands had gone to sleep, the fingers cold, tingling with pins and needles. He wanted to sit down.

The door to the bathroom was on his left. He stared at it in a blank, thoughtless kind of way, then pressed the button, popped the door open. An eye-watering smell hit him, a disheartening human reek. The last person through hadn't bothered to flush. Wet, filthy toilet paper stuck to the floor, and the little trash can next to the sink was overflowing. He considered going in there and bolting the door shut. He didn't move, though, and when the bathroom door closed on its own, he was still in the first-class aisle.

That little bathroom was a coffin—a coffin that stank. If he went in there, he understood he would never come out, that he would die in there. Torn apart by the wolves while he sat on the toilet, screaming for help that wasn't going to come. A terrible, lonely, squalid ending, in which he would be separated not just from his life but his dignity. He had no rational explanation for this certainty—how could they get the door open if it was locked?—it was just a thing he knew, the way he knew his birthday or his phone number.

His phone. The thing to do was to call someone, let somebody know (*I am on a train with wolfmen?*) he was in trouble. His cold, dead hands sank to the pockets of his slacks, already knowing that the phone wasn't there. And it

wasn't. His phone was in the pocket of his eight-hundred-dollar overcoat—a London Fog overcoat, actually. Everything, even clothing, had, in the last few moments, taken on heightened meaning, seemed significant. His phone was lost in a London Fog. To get to it, he would have to return to his seat and squirm past the businesswolf, something even more impossible than hiding in the bathroom.

There was nothing in his pockets he could use: a few twenty-pound notes, his ticket, a map of the train line. The woodcutter was alone in the deep, dark forest without his ax, without even a Swiss Army knife, not that a Swiss Army knife would do him any good. Saunders was seized by an image of himself knocked flat on his back, the wolf in the scally cap pinning him down, his wretched breath in Saunders's face, and Saunders raking at him frantically with the dull, ridiculous, inch-and-a-half-long blade of a Swiss Army knife. He felt a laugh rise in his throat and choked it back, understood he was quivering on the edge not of hilarity but of panic. Empty pockets, empty head—No. Wait. The map. He jerked the map out of his pocket and unfolded it. It took an effort of will to focus his eyes . . . but whatever his other flaws, Saunders had always had will to spare. He looked for the Liverpool line and began to follow it north from London, wondering about the stop after Wolverton Station, how far it might be.

He spotted Wolverton Station about two-thirds of the way to Liverpool. Only it wasn't Wolverton Station on the map, it was *Wolverhampton*. He blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear some grit out of his eyes. He supposed it was possible

that he had misread the sign at the last stop and that it had *always* been Wolverhampton. Which made the next stop Foxham. Maybe there would be foxes waiting on the platform there. He felt another dangerous, panicky laugh rise in his throat—like bile—and swallowed it down. Laughing now would be as bad as screaming.

He had to insist to himself there would be *people* in Foxham, that if he could get off the train, there was a chance he might live. And on his map, Foxham was barely a quarter inch from the Wolverhampton stop. The train might be almost there, had been rushing along at a hundred-plus miles an hour for at least fifteen minutes (*No. Try three minutes*, said a silky, bemused voice in his mind. *It's only been **three** minutes since you noticed that the man sitting beside you wasn't a man at all but some kind of werewolf, and Foxham is still half an hour away. Your body will be room temperature by the time you get there.*)

Saunders had gotten turned around and started, unconsciously, to walk back the way he had come, still staring at his map. At the last moment, he realized he had pulled abreast of the wolf reading the *Financial Times*. At the sight of the giant dog-faced thing on the periphery of his vision, he felt icy-hot skewers in his chest, needling toward his heart: Saunders, the human pincushion. *You aren't too old for a cardiac arrest, buddy*, he thought—another notion that wouldn't do him any good right now.

Saunders pretended to be lost in the study of his map and kept walking, wandering down to the next row of seats. He looked up, blinking, then settled into a seat on the opposite side of the aisle. He tried to make it look like an

absentminded act, a thing done by a man so interested in what he was looking at that he'd forgotten where he was going. He didn't believe that his performance fooled the wolf with the *Financial Times* in the least. Saunders heard him make a deep, woofy-sounding *harrumph* that seemed to express disgust and amusement alike. If he wasn't fooling anyone, Saunders didn't know why he went on playacting interest in his map, except that it felt like the safest thing.

"Did you find the loo?" asked the businesswolf.

"Occupied," Saunders said.

"Right," the wolf said. *Ro-ight*. "You *are* an American."

"Guess you could tell by the accent."

"I knew by the smell of you. You Americans have different accents—your southern accent, your California-surfer accent, your Noo Yawk accent." Affecting an atrocious faux-Queens accent as he said it. "But you all smell the same."

Saunders sat very still, facing straight ahead, his pulse thudding in his neck. *I am going to be killed and eaten by a wolf on an English train*, he thought, then realized that somewhere in the last few moments his mantra had turned from a statement of negation to one of affirmation. It came to him that the time for pretend was well past. He folded his map and put it back in his pocket.

"What do we smell like?" Saunders asked.

"Like cheeseburgers," said the wolf, and he barked with laughter. "And entitlement."

*I am going to be killed and eaten by a wolf on an English train*, Saunders thought again, and for a moment the idea

wasn't the worst notion in the world. It was bad, but even worse would be sitting here letting himself be taunted before it happened, taking it with his tail between his legs.

"Fuck you," Saunders said. "We smell like money. Which beats the hell out of stinking like wet dog." His voice shaking just slightly when he said it.

He didn't dare turn his head to look at the wolf directly, but he could watch him from the corner of his eye, and he saw one of those erect, bushy ears rotate toward him, tuning in on his signal.

Then the first-class businesswolf laughed—another harsh woof. "Don't mind me. My portfolio has taken a beating the last couple months. Too many American stocks. It's left me a bit sore, as much at myself as at you lot. It aggravates me that I bought into the whole thing, like everyone else in this blighted country."

"Bought into what whole thing?" Saunders asked. A part of his mind cried out in alarm, *Shut the fuck up! What are you doing? Why are you talking to **it**?*

Except.

Except the train was slowing, almost imperceptibly. Saunders doubted that under normal circumstances he would've noticed, but now he was attuned to fine details. That was how it worked when your life was measured in seconds: You felt your own breath, were aware of the temperature and weight of the air on your own skin, heard the prickling *tic-tic* of the rain on the windows. The train had hitched, slowed, and hitched again. The night continued to blur past the windows, some rain splatter sprinkling against the glass, but Saunders thought there

was a chance they were closing on Foxham, or whatever was next down the tracks. And if the businesswolf was talking to him, then he wasn't attacking.

"The American fairy tale," the wolf said. "You know the one. That we can all be like you. That we should all *want* to be like you. That you can wave your American Tinker Bell dust over our pathetic countries and abracadabra! A McDonald's here and an Urban Outfitters there and England will be just like home. *Your* home. I am honestly humiliated to ever have believed it. You would think a bloke like me, of all people, would know it isn't true. You can stick a Disneyland T-shirt on a wolf, but it's still a wolf."

The train hitched and slowed another degree. When Saunders looked out his window, he could see brick town houses flashing by, some lights on behind a few of the windows, and bare trees tossing in the wind, clawing at the sky. Even the trees were different in England. They were the same varieties you found in the States but subtly unlike American trees, more gnarled and bent, as if twisted by colder, harsher winds.

"Everyone is dead in the other car," Saunders said, feeling curiously removed from himself, from his own voice.

The wolf grunted.

"Why not me?"

The wolf didn't look at him, seemed to be losing interest in the conversation. "This is first class. If you can't get civility here, where can you get it? Besides. I'm wearing a Gieves & Hawkes. This suit set me back five hundred quid. Wouldn't do to stain it. And what's the point of riding first class if you have to chase down your own grub? They bring

a trolley through for us.” He leafed to the next page of his *Times*. “At least they’re supposed to. They’re taking their fucking time about it, aren’t they?” He paused, then added, “Please pardon my language. The thing about civility—it’s hard to maintain when you’re barking mad with hunger.”

The conductor said something in a choked, wolfish voice on the intercom, but Saunders couldn’t hear him over what his own wolf was saying to him and above the roar of blood in his ears. But he didn’t need to hear the conductor anyway, because Saunders knew what he was saying. They had arrived at the station at last. The train was slamming ungently to rest. Saunders grabbed the seat in front of him and lurched to his feet. Outside, he had a glimpse of a concrete platform, a brick breezeway, a glowing old-fashioned clock stuck up on the station wall. He began walking swiftly for the front of the car.

“ ‘Ey,” laughed the wolf. “Don’t you want your coat? Come on back and get it.”

Saunders kept walking. He reached the door at the end of the cabin in five long strides and hit the DOOR OPEN button. The wolf barked a last laugh at Saunders’s back, and Saunders dared a final glance over his shoulder. The businesswolf was disappearing behind his paper once more.

“Microsoft shares are down,” the wolf said, in a tone that somehow combined disappointment with a certain rueful satisfaction. “Nike shares are down. This isn’t a recession, you know. This is reality. You people are finding out the actual worth of the things you make: your sneakers, your software, your coffee, your myths. You people are finding

out now what it's like when you push too far into the deep, dark woods."

Then Saunders was out the door and on the platform. He had thought it was raining, but what came down was more of a weak, cold mist, a fine-grained moisture suspended in the air. The station exit was across the platform, a flight of stairs to the road below.

He had gone no more than five paces before he heard loud, derisive yipping behind him and looked back to see two wolves descending from coach. Not the wolves in suits but the one in the Wolfgang Amadeus T-shirt and the other dressed for a Manchester United match. Manchester United clapped Wolfgang on the shoulder and jerked his snout in Saunders's direction.

Saunders ran. He had been fast once, on his track team in high school, but that had been fifty years and five thousand Whoppers ago. He didn't need to look back to know they were behind him, loping across the concrete, and that they were faster than him. He reached the staircase and leaped down it, three, four stairs in each step, a kind of controlled falling. His breath screamed in his throat. He heard one of the wolves make a low, purring growl at the top of the stairs. (And how could they be at the top of the stairs already? It wasn't possible that they could've closed so much distance so quickly, it *wasn't*.)

At the bottom of the steps was the line of gates, and the street beyond, and a taxi waiting, a black English taxi straight out of a Hitchcock movie. Saunders picked a gate and ran straight at it. The gates: a row of chrome dividers, with waist-high black Plexiglas shutters between them. You

were supposed to stick your ticket into a slot on the top of the chrome dividers and the shutters would swing open, but Saunders wasn't going to fuck with it. When he reached the Plexiglas shutters, he went right over them, in a graceless scramble, followed by a tumble to the ground.

He sprawled onto his stomach, facedown on the rain-spattered concrete. Then he was up again. It was like a skip in a piece of film, so it hardly seemed he had gone down at all. He had never in his life imagined he could recover so quickly from a spill.

Someone yelled behind him. Every set of gates in every train station in the UK had an officer to watch over them and take tickets manually, and Saunders thought this had to be who that was. He could even see him out of the corner of his left eye, a guy in an orange safety vest, white-haired and bearded. Saunders didn't slow down or look over. A joke floated unbidden to his mind: Two hikers in the woods come across a bear. One of them bends over to lace his sneakers. The other hiker says, "Why tie your sneakers? You can't outrun a bear." And the first hiker says, "No shit, asshole. I only need to outrun *you*." Pretty funny. Saunders would remind himself to laugh about it later.

He fell against the back of the taxi, clawed for the door lever, found it, popped it open. He collapsed into the black leather seat.

"Go," he said to the driver. "*Go.*"

"Where are we—" said the driver, in the thick accent of western England.

"Town. Into town. I don't know yet, just go. *Please.*"

“Right then,” the driver said. The taxi loosened itself from the curb and pushed off down the avenue.

Saunders twisted in his seat to look out the rear window as they left the train station. Manchester United and Wolfgang Amadeus had stopped at the gate. They crowded around the ticket taker, towering over him. Saunders didn’t know why the ticket man just stood there staring back at them, why he didn’t recoil and run, why they didn’t fall on him. The taxi carried him around the corner and out of sight of the station before he could see what happened next.

He sat in the darkness, breathing fast and hard, incredulous at his own survival. His legs shook, the big muscles in his thighs bunching up and uncoiling helplessly. He had not shaken the whole time he was on the train, but now it was as if he had just climbed out of an ice bath.

The cab glided down a long, gradual hill, past hedges and houses, dipping toward the lights of a town. Saunders found one of his hands feeling in his pocket for the cell phone he knew he didn’t have.

“Phone,” he said, talking to himself. “Damn phone.”

“Need a phone?” said the driver. “I’m sure there was one at the station.”

Saunders glanced at the back of the driver’s head, peering at him in the dark of the car. A big man with long black hair tucked down into the collar of his coat.

“There wasn’t time to stop and make a call there. Just take me to someplace with a public phone. Someplace else.”

“There’s one at the Family Arms. That’s only a couple blocks.”

“Family Arms? What’s that? Pub?” Saunders’s voice cracked, as if he were a fourteen-year-old in the throes of puberty.

“Best’un in town. Also the only’un. But if I’d known that’s where you wanted me to drive you, I wouldn’t have taken the fare. It’s easier walking, see?”

“I’ll pay you triple your usual rate. I’ve got plenty of money. I’m the richest man that’s ever sat in this fucking cab.”

“Isn’t this my lucky day,” said the driver. The ignorant country moron had no idea Saunders had just almost been torn apart. “So what happened to your regular chauffeur?”

“What?”

Saunders didn’t understand the question; in truth, he hardly registered it, was distracted. They had stopped at a light, and Saunders happened to look out the window. Two teenagers stood necking on the corner. They had a couple dogs with them, who stood at their sides, whisking their tails nervously back and forth, waiting for the kids to get done kissing and start walking again. Only there was something wrong with those two kids. The taxi was moving again before Saunders figured out what it was. Those tails, fretfully whisking from side to side—Saunders hadn’t actually spotted the dogs attached to them. He wasn’t sure there had been any dogs there at all.

“Where is this?” Saunders asked. “Where am I? Is this Foxham?”

“We isn’t anywheres near Foxham, sir. Upper Wolverton, this is,” said the driver. “Which is what they call it because ‘The Middle of Nowhere’ don’t sound as good. Edge of the known world, really.”

He eased the cab to the end of the next block and swung in at the curb. There was a pub on the corner, big plate-glass windows, bright squares of gold in the darkness, steamed over with condensation on the inside. Even shut into the backseat of the cab, Saunders could hear the noise from within. It sounded like an animal shelter.

A small knot of people loitered outside the front door. A carved and painted wooden sign, bolted to the stone beside the door, showed a crowd of wolves standing on their hind legs gathered around a table. In the center of the table was a great silver platter, with an assortment of pale human arms laid upon it.

“Here you go,” said the cabdriver, turning his head to look into the rear. His snout moved close to the glass that separated the front seat from the back and breathed a filmy white mist on it. “You can make your call here, I ’spect. Have to fight your way through a bit of a crowd, I’m afraid.” He made a low chuckling sound that Saunders supposed was meant to be laughter, although it sounded more like a dog trying to cough up a hairball.

Saunders did not reply. He sat in the black leather seat, staring at the crowd outside the door of the Family Arms. They were staring back. Some of them were walking toward the cab. Saunders decided not to make any sound when they pulled him out. He had learned in Kashmir how to hold on to silence, and if he was strong, he would only

need to hold on to it for about a minute and a half, and then it would be holding on to him.

“Good little mum-and-pop place, this is,” his driver told him. “They serve up a right fine dinner in here, they do. And you know what, mate? I think you’re just in time for it.”

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

*Note: The first draft of "Wolverton Station" was written entirely while I was riding English trains—the first part on the rails from London to Liverpool, the second while en route from Liverpool to Manchester, and the conclusion on the Manchester-Nottingham line. The author wishes to thank the people of England for not devouring him while he toured their country.*

—Joe Hill, April 15, 2010

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**Joe Hill** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels *NOS4A2*, *Horns*, and *Heart-Shaped Box*, and the prizewinning story collection *20th Century Ghosts*. He is also the Eisner Award-winning writer of an ongoing comic book series, *Locke & Key*. You can learn more at [www.joehillfiction.com](http://www.joehillfiction.com), or follow Joe on Twitter, where he goes by the inspired handle of @joe\_hill.

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