“Hey Okey, wake up!” An ungentle nudge awakened the sleeping man. His eyes were greeted by near darkness, with only a slice of fading light to alert him that the sun would soon set. Fetid scents of unwashed bodies made him crinkle his nose before he realized he was smelling himself. Wiping his face with his hands, he felt the stubble from several days of beard growth. Rising slowly, he noticed the rhythm of the wheels was changing, slowing. The train, along with its forgotten riders, would soon stop.

While the train had been idling in an Alabama railyard that morning, he’d hopped onto it as a whim. He didn’t know where these train tracks would take him, nor did he care. Already a veteran hobo, Asher Ganit had no single destination in mind, yet there was one place that must be avoided at all costs. He’d fallen asleep almost as soon as the train began its rocking motion forward. The light streaking in gave him no indication if the train had travelled north, south, east or west.

“Anybody know where we are?” Asher asked the group of four men who were huddled into the railcar alongside him. Life on the rails was not for the weak. Running along the rocky train tracks, racing the escalating speed to pull into a railcar at the perfect time, jumping out of those cars into unknown territories. Not the mention the insecurity of food, clean water, warm and safe shelter. This lifestyle could age a man by a decade within a couple of calendar years. One of the riders looked to be 80 years old, but Ash figured the man was likely in his mid-forties. It was this man that responded to Asher’s query. “Our last stop was Covington, so I reckon this one is Madison.”

Madison, Georgia: Touted as “The Town Sherman Refused To Burn”. Resplendent with its stately antebellum houses, many of the historic buildings continued to be vibrant family homes or corporate office spaces, instead of being converted to cold, staid museums. Yet this town was too close to the farm where his wife had grown up with her loving, though protective, parents. It was too close to the memories that would never burn away. Madison was the next town over from Dogwood, which was the one place Asher Ganit had sworn he would never revisit. He could have kicked himself for jumping on this train.

Indecision poured over Asher. Should he exit and smell the sweet air of Morgan County? Should he stay on the train and hide from his past? Would he crumble into a pile of ashes if he stepped foot on this revered soil?

His compatriots did not notice the agony written on his face. They had their own cares and worries. Though it was part of the hobo creed to help another, the first commandment was to save yourself. Asher peeked out of the door, towards the old train depot, looking for a sign. Hobos all over the country used their own language, one that included hastily scrawled symbols on moldering depots. If the symbol told him this was a quick stop, he would stay on the train and punch down his quelling pain. If not, he had no idea what he would do.

It was the old-timer who drew Ash back to the present moment. “Here’s a good a place to stop as any. Won’t be here no more than half an hour. Time enough to take a leak. Maybe grab a drink of water from the pump behind the flour mill. There’s a grocery distributor on the corner. Might can find us something for our supper. Won’t stop again until Augusta.”

One by one, the men departed the railcar and went about their personal business. Though Asher had travelled to Madison several times with his wife, Glennis, he’d never had a reason to enter this part of town. He noticed the swirl of finely milled grain within the mellow late afternoon breeze, but had it come from the flour mill or the feed warehouse? Another few paces took him to a street crossing. Set back from both the potholed asphalt and the rigid rails sat the depot. Like so many others across Georgia, it refused to fall, despite years of non-travel related use. Asher had seen old depots used as storage for everything from old court records to rodent filled hay bales. As he drew closer, Ash noted that this one had earned a designation on the National Register of Historic Places. He read the sign indicating the Madison Train Station had been the first brick depot built in Georgia. ”Built by John B. Walker on land donated by Adam Saffold”. Interestingly enough, Federal troops had, point in fact, burned it during the War Between the States, but the damage had been quickly repaired. Its windows were shuttered, the sidewalk in front was snaked with grass, and the paint was peeling in sheets. The depot looked the way Asher felt - abandoned. Symbols had indeed been etched on the walls closest to the track. They told Asher that he needed to hurry.

Across the tracks, parallel to the decaying depot, Asher read another sign crisply painted and outlined in white: **McDOWELL GROCERY CO.** Lights on the upper floor were off, but the lower floor was still well lit. Asher wandered closer, curious. Through the barred windows, he noted a young boy struggling with a 50lb bag of something. Might have been rice, but with the flour mill next door, it was most likely all-purpose flour. The boy had a determined look on his face, as if he meant to finish this chore before it was time to close shop. Ash quickly scanned the crowded floor of the grocery distributor. There were pallets of vegetables – corn, peas, and beans. Other pallets were full of dry goods such as rice and boxes of spaghetti noodles. Asher didn’t care for spaghetti, but that was due to the fact it was not a dish his mother had ever prepared during his own boyhood. Ash would choose fish and grits over spaghetti and meatballs any day.

Walking behind the facility, Asher looked for the dumpsters. It was possible he could find something for himself or even something to trade. He was disappointed to discover they were empty. “Must have been pick up day” Ash thought to himself. Deciding he could use some fresh water, he began to walk towards the flour mill next door. An old- fashioned water pump, with a bucket beside it, could be easily seen. Autumn leaves of yellow and gold blanketed the ground, scattering easily in the evening wind. Yet before he could take a step, he heard a voice.

“Hey Mister, you lookin’ for somethin’?” It was the boy from the first floor. Asher noted the furrow of his brow, the smudges of dirt across his cheeks. He took his time in replying, knowing that he must look a fright. “Just gonna get a drink of water from the well. Is that OK?”

The boy swiped his hands across stained blue jeans. “I reckon it is. Everybody needs water.” Asher’s memory immediately jumped backwards to when Great Crisis had truly begun - a dry Texas night when water had been desperately needed. A rainstorm had arrived suddenly, but neither provenance nor luck had summoned the necessary water. Asher had used his own connection with the earth to quench the raging fire, but lives had still been lost. The sight of the flames and the frightened calls for help refused to burn away.

The stilted quiet encouraged the child to continue speaking. “Hey, uh Mister? I was putting up this bag of flour but it’s got a hole in it. My dad, he’s the one that owns this place, and he says I have to throw it away. If you want it, you’re welcome to it.” As Ash contemplated what he could do with an opened bag of flour, the boy interpreted his silence differently.

“If you don’t want it, that’s fine. I’m pretty sure it doesn’t have any bugs in it since it was bagged this morning but I’ll just toss it in the dumpsters.” The boy turned to re-enter the building.

“No” said Asher to the boy’s back. “I’ll take it off your hands. Saves you a trip and it might come in handy.”

A gap-toothed smile filled the boy’s face. “That’s just great! Uh, I’ve also got a few dented cans that I’m supposed to throw away. You want those too?” An affirmative nod had the child running back inside. Upon his return, a heavy sack balanced across one narrow shoulder and a grocery bag rattled in his other arm. Wind began to whistle around him, threatening to topple his meager frame.

The pair shook hands after the items were placed on the ground. “By the way, I’m Rob. Rob McDowell. Like I said, my dad runs this place now, but my great-grandfather started this company, way back in 1926. Dad says if I work real hard, maybe one day, I’ll run it too.” In return, the elder of the duo stated that he was known as Okey, because he knew the Okefenokee Swamp like the back of his hand.

Realizing that the train would be pulling out soon, Asher thanked the young man for the goods. As he headed back towards his railcar, he wished he could do something more for the boy than offer his gratitude. Stopping midstride, he turned around. “Rob? Whose job is it to rake those leaves by the well?” Rolling his eyes, Rob replied, “It’s mine, but they’ll have to wait ‘til tomorrow. I’ve got an order to finish filling and this breeze won’t make that chore any easier.”

Asher smiled as a western zephyr crossed the tree tops before swooping in behind the warehouse. Yellow, red and gold patches spun up through the air, dancing in the wind. Rob protected his eyes from loosened gravel, but once the airflow normalized, he could only gape in astonishment at the freshly swept area. Looking to the clearing behind the mill, Rob caught sight of a neatly piled stack of leaves, patiently waiting for a bonfire, roasted marshmallows, and tall tales.

“Okey! Did you see that? Now I’ve got one less job to do!” With a whoop, the child went back to finishing his day.

As Asher crossed back to the depot he thought, “Sherman should have focused more on burning leaves and less on burning train depots.”