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The Gold Rush

The green fluorescent light snapped, reminding Neil that his Siamese fighting fish, Lou, hadn't gotten his dinner. On a kitchen shelf, the fish pirouetted as Neil approached with a tiny canister of shrimp-flavored beta pellets. The fish was Neil's only companion in his South Florida apartment.

"Hungry, aren't you?" Neil asked Lou.

Neil crouched down to eye level with the red flamenco-dancing fish. You're supposed to be intimidating, he chuckled, thinking about how elegantly Lou's skirt fluttered.

Running his finger through the condensation on Lou's tank, Neil was reminded of his inability to adjust to Florida's humidity. Streams of condensation ran down the glass, pooling on the shelf. The apartment's thick sticky paint clung to everything it contacted. Neil questioned whether or not the paint had ever dried. Despite the quirkiness of the stucco walls and the perpetual whir of too many ceiling fans chopping thick Florida air, he enjoyed living just steps away from the Florida East Coast Railway.

His grandfather had loved trains; therefore, Neil loved trains. This love began twenty-seven years earlier when his grandfather bought him his first model train. It was perfect: a Special Edition Gold Rush Model, with a red cattle-catcher, a cobalt smokestack, and a working headlight. As a boy, Neil imagined boarding a full-size version of the train. Even though he didn't understand what Gold Rush meant: to him, it meant freedom.

But more than loving trains, Neil loved when his grandpa picked him up and drove half an hour to the train tracks. On the hood of his grandpa's 1972 Chevy Chevelle, next to a corn field, they would sit and eat peanut butter sandwiches: the peanut butter and bread clinging to the gaps in Neil's baby teeth. Neil stood and began waving minutes before the lumbering train even appeared.

Returning home, Neil would imagine life working on a train: the soot settling deep in pores, the dust and cool air whipping up around the engine, filling his lungs with the sense of something bigger. Neil always wanted to be a train engineer, but a modest scholarship and practicality sent him to college. So, Neil became a web-designer.

And in school, Neil met Tanya: a nice girl with ivory hair and China blue eyes. She never understood Neil's joy of train watching. She'd shudder at the thought of him standing stiff, in the dead of winter, as one would barrel past. She also couldn't comprehend why Neil insisted on moving to Florida after his grandfather died. So Neil moved to Florida alone.

He kept track of the train schedule, scratching the time and engine numbers on a large chart he kept next to his fridge. In the move, Neil had only kept a few model trains, including the Special Edition Gold Rush that sat on a shelf next to Lou.

Picking it up, he released it from the sticky paint and stared deep into the blackness of the smoke stack.

Lou, I left a note for Lori to feed and take care of you.

Setting the train back down, Neil methodically pulled down a familiar bag of Wonder Bread and the jar of peanut butter. He smoothed the creamy spread onto a fragile slice. He folded the slice in half, kicked on a pair of slippers, checked his timetable, and headed towards the tracks.

Slowly, he chewed the sandwich, while remembering an engineer from his childhood: the one with a coffee colored mustache that not only waved, but sounded the horn every time he saw Neil and his grandpa waiting.

Deep in thought, surrounded by damp air, Neil sat on the tracks, until, with peanut butter clinging to his adult teeth, the warm, flood of light engulfed him. And for a brief moment, when the horn screamed, louder than he'd ever heard, Neil imagined his grandfather. His grandpa was not standing on the edge of a corn field, but in the face of Lou, circling next to the Gold Rush, back on the gummy kitchen shelf. In just a moment, Neil was gone, and the beta fish gracefully swooped, circled, and danced, trailing his blood-red flamenco skirt in his wake.