The image shows the interior of an old, empty train car. The car has a curved wooden ceiling and walls. Rows of dark, worn seats are arranged on both sides of a central aisle. A single light fixture with three glowing bulbs hangs from the ceiling. The lighting is warm and orange, creating a nostalgic atmosphere. The text 'S.L. FUNK' is at the top and 'THE ACCORDION TRAIN' is at the bottom.

S.L. FUNK

THE
ACCORDION
TRAIN

The Accordion Train

By

S.L. Funk

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Acknowledgements

Yes, this short, sad, and scary story has some nice people behind it that I want to thank.

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Thank you to Derek Stephans of editingbyderek on Fiverr for the edits and encouragement! Your help was essential to getting the ending right and I look forward to working with you more in the future. Also a quick and generous thank you to Kamila of amberstudios, also via Fiverr, for the impeccable cover art. Thanks again for sitting with me through the process of finding just the right essence for this little story.

Lastly, thank you so much to my Mom, Laurie, who read this spooky and unnerving little tale and still loves me after the fright I put her through. I know that you probably didn't picture you little Christian girl writing horror like this, and I promise it won't be forever. Regardless, your love and support for this nightmare means a lot to me. Also, I want to thank my sisters for their input as well, seeing as some of the material addressed in this book is a very real and traumatizing reality that too many young women experience. Love you!

P.S. A special little shout-out to the late Lionel Walden, the artist behind the inspiration of this story, *Les Docks de Cardiff* (1894). If you wake up in the night with nightmares of clowns chasing you on a passenger train, you partly have him to thank.

Trigger Warning!

- ◆ References to a previous sexual assault and scenes of related distress.

- ◆ Neck-breaking that results in death, with details relayed through a third-party conversation and aftermath is shown.

- ◆ A trippy scene that has claustrophobic elements.

Please do not continue to read this story if any of the above may cause emotional distress or bring up unwanted trauma. My intention is not to cause anyone pain and was never the purpose behind this story.



Les docks de Cardiff by Lionel Walden (1894)

The Cardiff docks were misty and chilly as the train finally pulled into the station. Elena clutched her valise to her chest tighter and tighter, a cold sweat coating her body.

"Almost there. Almost there."

She repeated the words over and over; a vague message that brought her marginal comfort as she awaited the safety of a passenger car.

"Almost there. Almost there. It's almost there."

The train screeched to a stop at the platform. Outside the train shed canopy, the barge horns bellowed in the night, signaling the closeness to home that Elena desired. But not home. Never again for Elena. There was no home but the Ringmaster's circus on the other side of town. The circus ring was home, the high platforms, and the big top tent was home. It had been home

for so long, she couldn't rightly remember a home before she'd found her family in the Ringmaster's circus. It was somewhere she never wanted to be again. Anywhere else would do.

The station platform became suffused the steam, mist, and smoke of the locomotive when it finally rested to allow boarding and disembarking.

She breathed a sigh, "Almost.." She clung to her valise so hard, her knuckles turned white; every last thing she had in the world within it.

"th-there..."

The only thing she didn't have, the last thing she needed in her world was Jac. Her brazen and loving Jac. She closed her eyes as the clouds on the platform lulled her into one of her core memories.

She could see his sweaty, flushed, and beaming face in her mind's eye, even now. His hand calmly held out to her as she finished a final flip fifty feet in the air. Jac's legs hooked the trapeze bar. He was never scared. Never. That poor fool.

"All aboard!" The voice came from the first car behind the locomotive.

Elena snapped out of her reverie. The clouds and the cheering crowds were gone in an instant, all that remained was the passenger car door swinging open before her.

This was reality, wasn't it? She wouldn't wait around to find out.

Once onboard, everything seemed to be normal again. She placed the valise on the seat beside her, determined to always have it within arm's reach if anything should unexpectedly change. Elena plopped herself into a booth seat beside it and looked out a platform-side window. She had to be sure, positive, that no one had followed her. Her escape would be ruined if anyone found out too soon. And then what? Elena shuddered to think about it.

She knew very well what would happen. She would beg for the end if the Ringmaster got his hands on her again. Those grubby, maniacal hands. If home was the endless hours of practicing, stretching, drilling her routines forevermore, she could take it. She could take that hell if she could go through it with Jac.

But those days, the never-ending cycle of her circus life, always ended the same. Clammy, nasty, and cold fingers all over her body. That drunken stench abusing her nose and mouth, and the tallowy taste of his essence. It would stick to her for days. When she could properly wash, he'd always interrupt her and take her again. The thought alone made her skin grow cold and tears pushed at the backs of her eyes.

She would dream at night of finally being away from him, but he always had a way of finding her again. There was always the sound of an accordion playing somewhere nearby when her dreams of freedom eerily turned to nightmares.

That nauseating *hee-ing* and *haw-ing* always reminded her of mocking laughter, as if the rest of the Ringmaster's cronies were laughing at her on the other side of the tent canvas. When she'd awoken, whether or not the nightmare was real or just imagined, Elena could still hear the droning of the accordion.

She blocked as many unpleasant memories as she could with another deep sigh. Instead, she focused on the voices and noises from the other train passengers.

A haggard-looking man sat at the front end of the car. He all but fell into his seat.

"Haaah. Finally! I'm so tired."

Just across from him, just ahead a few rows from where Elena sat was another, younger man. His mustache was large enough to be seen from behind, curling on either side of his head. He looked at his shiny pocket watch repeatedly.

"It's a quarter to ten. We should be off soon."

A lady, wearing a feathered hat and expensive furs around her shoulders stood out the most from the others. She looked out a harbor-side window and shivered. Under her breath, she murmured, "Where is my muff? It'll be cold when this train stops again. "

From a few seats ahead, the young mustachioed man groaned, "When will drinks be served?"

"I wonder when I'll be able to fall asleep?" The haggard man at the front mumbled.

Elena considered this idea herself; a bit of sleep, free from distraction or interruption seemed like a fine thought. All alone, without so much as a—

"Tickets please!"

The voice jolted her attention forward. The familiar tone tenor came from a man in a weathered train guard uniform, hat, and gloves. He carried the ticket punch in his left hand.

He stopped at the first seat and punched the ticket of the tired man.

"Tickets please." His gait seemed easy, but drooping as he approached the young man with the pocket watch.

"When will food and drink be served?" He didn't hesitate in asking, ignoring what the train guard just said.

"Quite soon, sir. Once we're away from the station and everyone's tickets have been punched. Your ticket, sir?"

Next, he would shuffle his way over to the wealthy lady on the harbor side of the car. Elena riffled in her trench coat pocket for the ticket.

"The train will be leaving soon. I'm almost there. I'm almost free." Her nervous habit of repeating things to herself took over again; it always happened when she had to stand on the opposite platform from Jac and wait for her cue.

"Oh, Jac. Why didn't you come with me? Why?"

"Ticket please!"

"Huh?"

"Your ticket, madam? You have one, yes?" The train guard looked down at her through round lens, framed in an old bronze wire. His brown eyes reviewed her and her valise with an unamused wrinkle.

Stuttering, Elena pulled out the ticket. The ticket that would help her escape the Ringmaster forever.

But there were two. Two tickets in her pocket. In the end, she only needed the one. It had cost her everything to get these tickets. Everything.

"Here."

The conductor took it with a sneer and punched a hole in the paper.

Handing it back to her, her fingers grazed his gloved ones for a moment and the image of Jac came back to her in a spark.

The world whizzed by her eyes and the usual jolt of her stomach from the descent filled her. His voice was as docile as ever. "I've got you, Elena. I've always got you."

She sprung from the trampoline and caught Jac's hands as he swung by. It wasn't a lie, he was always there for her. She had a pensive disposition, and it seemed to cost Jac nothing to be a reassuring light in her life. She had said the words she'd thought privately for years, making the most of the quiet corner of the ring. "I know you do. But I want to help you too."

She'd brought up the matter one night after a long routine practice and Jac shook his head.

"You know this is our home, Elena. Where else could we go? We don't know how to do anything. We'll be a laughing stock, you know that right? "

"I don't care! I'd rather be made fun of for the rest of my life making an honest living somewhere else than stay here another year."

Jac looked over his shoulder and back to her. "Elena. You're not serious, are you? "

Her voice squeaked higher than she meant it to, "Deadly! I can't do it anymore. I'll die before I let him touch me again!"

He grasped her shoulders. "Keep your voice down."

Her face remained resolute. "I'm leaving, Jac. With or without you. Please come with me! You're my only friend."

"It's true, and as your only friend, you know I'll protect you. I've got you, always. It's going to be alright. "

Elena shook her head in dismay. "No. No, it isn't, Jac. You are so stubborn and brave. Please! I'm going to get tickets tonight after the night watch has passed. I want you to have one too."

"Elena, no!" This time, it was his voice that rose higher.

"I have to. You have to believe me, Jac."

"I do. I do." Jac sneezed her shoulders. "Please, stay in my quarters tonight, so that you'll be safe. Just stay hidden."

"I can't do that, Jac. You'll be beaten or worse if I stay with you. He always finds me, always. "

"Elena, listen to me. "

"You can't protect me from him. You know that. If you genuinely got me, then come with me. It's the only way."

He said nothing, his hands falling to his sides again.

"Please, Jac. Please."

The loss of contact came with the blink of an eye and Elena was back in the train car. She took back the ticket and looked sorrowfully through the punched hole in the paper, down to her feet.

There was always room. She'd made room for him, and yet that wasn't enough to convince him. That poor, brave, stubborn fool. She'd never forget him. She pressed the unused ticket to her heart and sat with tears threatening to fall.

"Tickets please."

Behind her, the conductor spoke with the last passenger in the car. The anticipation to be off clogged the air in the car. It made Elena's stomach feel sick with regret.

The last time she'd seen Jac, he was smiling, but it wasn't the beaming, excited smile she'd known him for. It was a disguise, a smile hiding the distress and dismay of her decision to leave. He'd have done almost anything to convince her to stay. Everything except rat her out to the Ringmaster. Even he wasn't that foolish. But it hadn't been enough to save him too.

That very night, as she snuck past the elephant cages and slinked to the edges of the grounds, she heard two of the night guards talking.

"Did you hear about that acrobat?"

"No. What happened?"

"His neck was broken. Poor bastard. "

Elena's ears perked up at that, but she stayed hidden behind the large wheel of the mobile cage.

The other guard spat on the ground. *"Damn. How'd that happen? In front of everyone?"*

"Fortunately no. No audience as far as I know. But the poor man died. Some say it was a crime of passion. That guy wasn't one to slip or run away. There must've been a fight. "

Elena slinked further under the cage and sidled away. She didn't want to hear any more.

Back in the train, with Jac's ticket still pressed to her heart, the tears were finally allowed to fall.

Nearby, a passenger snored and another grumbled under his breath, anxious to be off.

And ever so quietly, a humming was coming from behind Elena. Barely noticeable, but it seemed to be moving up and down in pitch, rhythmically, hypnotically. It must've been the last passenger snoring, Elena thought.

It blended into the background of the other sounds of the station and docks of Cardiff. Elena let the noises wash over her, but the images and nightmares of the past, real and imagined, kept bombarding her mind.

She could see Jac's dead body on the ground, outside the Ringmaster's quarters.

"Get him out of here." Came the gruff inflection of the Ringmaster, a bottle in his left hand.

Cronies surrounded Jac's shocked and purple face and picked him up, snickering all the while.

"You there!" he called, *"Fetch Elena, now! "*

A strong man, off by the big top canvas wall put down his dumbbells and strode towards her.

The sound of the accordion faded into the air, frenzied and upbeat, as the strong man picked up Elena and carried her, kicking and screaming, under his arm to the Ringmaster's tent flaps.

"No! No! I won't go!"

The music grew louder and more loathsome with each step the strong man took. The Ringmaster was waiting in the lamplight, eyeing her like some delicious meal.

Elena flailed, *"No! I'd rather die! "*

They were before the Ringmaster now. Their eyes met as she dangled from the strong man's arm. *"What was that now? You'd rather what?"*

Elena's tear-streaked eyes lifted to the disgusting man's face.

"I said I'd rather die than be with you! You killed Jac!"

She spat in his face.

As if on cue, the accordionist appeared from behind the disgusting man and played louder. The *hee-ing* and *haw-ing* of that accursed instrument was suddenly the laughter of the other misshapen cronies of the Ringmaster.

All of them were laughing at her. All of them, except the accordionist. He simply stared at her with cheerful wickedness in his eyes. He looked like he enjoyed her suffering.

Ringmaster breathed out the noxious stench of drink and tallow, wiping the spittle from his face.

"So? He was a menace. Are you going to cause trouble too? Are you going to run away, little Elena?"

They all laughed again at her, mocking the tears that streamed down her face.

"I'd like to see you try. Go then, little Elena, flee and never return!"

She kicked and screamed and the strong man's arm grew tighter around her chest. The cronies and their master continued to laugh. Nearby, the corpse of Jac eerily joined in, shadows dancing on his face, his mouth bent into a hideous grin.

She thrashed furiously as the squeezing grew tighter every moment. A warm light bled into view from her peripheral vision, and with a cough, she was back in her booth seat on the train.

The accordion song and laughter still boomed in her ears. She looked up and saw the other passengers turn to look at her, their faces painted like clowns and animals. They laughed and laughed at her, to the sound of the accordion.

Behind her was the accordionist in the last seat in the car, keeping that defiant gaze and a wicked smile on her without breaking.

"*No! No!*" Elena choked. Her chest felt like it was getting squeezed over and over by the bellows of the accursed instrument. Her knees were pressed into her chest by the seat before her.

The haggard man with the face of an old, tamed lion droned at her. "She's so pathetic! What a little worm!"

The young man tittered and looked like a devious little monkey, his mustache curling wickedly.

He screeched, getting up from his seat. "She's a bigger fool than that other trapeze boy!"

"No one leaves the circus. Don't be such a fool!" The lady turned to her from the window, her clown makeup running down into the furs at her neck.

The wrinkled train guard appeared from behind the ghastly passengers, his regular gloves and cap of a train guard replaced with the yellow, leather gloves and mangled top hat of the Ringmaster. The smell of tallow, drink, and death consumed what little air Elena could breathe.

"No! No..." Her lungs fought against the compression of the train car.

Somewhere from inside the train car, Jac's disembodied voice croaked... "Gotcha."

As she choked and got pressed closer to the crony passengers, the accordionist played over her shoulder, just out of reach. The Ringmaster, in his conductor disguise, got in her face.

"There's no escape, Elena. There's no leaving the circus. I own you, body and soul. Don't be a fool. Just listen to the sound of the accordion and come with us to bed."

Elena screamed as the train car constricted impossibly tighter, enveloping her into a realm of darkness, where only the accordionist held sway.

From behind her, in the darkness, a spine-chilling voice of the accordionist purred.

"Sweet dreams."

All was dark, and Elena could only feel the press of the villains around her. It relentlessly pushed against her, and her breath came in gasps and spurts. It wasn't enough that she couldn't see or move - her arms were pinned to her sides, and the circus cronies were breathing on her face. There was nothing she could do to stop this... was there?

"Please wake up! Please wake up! Please wake up!" she shouted to herself amid the madness.

It wasn't a dream. It was a nightmare in the realest sense, but not a figment of her imagination. Elena felt herself starting to lose consciousness, and soon it would be a dream. She would be back at the circus. This time, it would be forever. And without Jac.

"No."

She threw her head forward in the darkness and made contact with something - someone else's forehead. A shrill cry resounded all around her, and she recognized it as the Ringmaster's. Something fell against her face with the blow of alcoholic and tallowy breath. It felt like a coil of something hard and round. It was hanging from her mouth when she felt a release in the compression that threatened to take her out.

Without thinking or strategizing, Elena moved on pure adrenaline, desperate to either escape this madness or die of her own volition. She grasped at the wiry thing in her mouth; and

her hands made out the shape of the train guard's wire spectacles. The sharp edges of the frames and hooks poked at her palms and the light of the train car returned.

Elena could see the Ringmaster and his crew coming for her. The compressing walls of the car were closing in again. The lamps overhead flickered and sparked with the pressure.

"You little imbecile. I'll show you not to defy me!"

The Ringmaster turned back to look over his shoulder at her again, blood dripping from his grisly and broken nose. She flicked her head around to look at the booth seat behind her; the accordionist was there, still playing and lost in his evil and maniacal music. He was just out of reach.

Quickly, Elena kicked the seat back in front of her and pushed herself off and over its back to reach the evil instrument. She didn't snatch it out of his hands, nor did she fear or heed the commotion coming from behind her, but she slashed the wire-framed spectacles at the bellows as they filled and expanded.

Rip!

The wind that blew from the open wound in the accordion blasted forth in a torrent that threw Elena back to the other end of the car. When she hit the opposite wall, the last thing she

heard was a scream from the accordionist and the dying wheeze of the arcane instrument he carried.

Elena came to and coughed violently. She scanned her surroundings and found nothing like the nightmare she'd just experienced. The lamp light above was dimmed and the motion beneath her seat indicated that she was moving. Everything was moving. The train was clicking away down the tracks to the north - to a new life and home. The cloudy skies of the Welsh countryside obscured the sunlight as it shone down on her through the window.

Around her were new passengers, no tired man, no mustachioed man, and no fancy lady with melting makeup. Only common folks, like the kinds she would see in the audience back in the old days. Were they really the old days though? She wasn't at the station at the docks, and there were no villains to come and take her away like before. And most importantly, to Elena's astonishment, there was no accordion music anymore. Only the occasional snoring and clinking of silver and glass. Was someone having a whiskey nearby?

Elena turned around and boosted herself up to look at the booth seat behind her. There was no accordionist, and no ripped accordion - only an old man eating an in-trip dinner. She huffed back into her seat with a sigh. Could this be reality? Was it all over?

Instead of wondering about it further, Elena sat back in her seat and closed her eyes. Every time she opened them, the train car remained the same. She even slept a bit and the train

car remained quiet and normal. Elena breathed deeply as much good air as she could fill her lungs with, relishing the new feeling of space. With every breath, her memories of Jac came back and played through her head. The good and happy memories flashed through her mind with bright color, and when she saw his grinning dead face at the end, she imagined flowers growing around it, poking out of his ears, nose, and eyes. It was sad, and it still brought a chill to her skin, but she preferred to remember him this way, with nature and new life growing around him.

At the end of the line, Elena stepped onto the platform and looked out over the fields of green grass and flowers, allowing the crisp air to dissipate the lingering anguish in her head, though it would take years to leave her heart.

FIN

Thank you for supporting me and my new authorship!

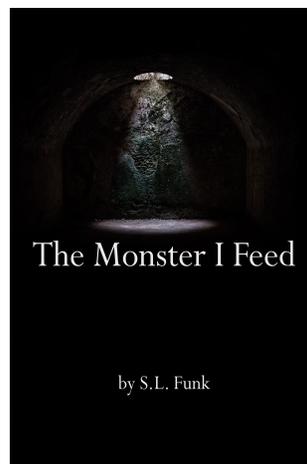
I have big plans for the future!

My debut story from StoryFire, *The Monster I Feed*, is set to be published in September 2022!

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Book launch is expected to begin in April.



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