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## *King of the Apes*

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Walt Whitman  
“Song of Myself”

*New York City. March 19th, 1953.*

**E**dgar Rice Burroughs died three years ago today. Despite my relative penury, I take no pleasure in being he who laughs last.

Burroughs’s funeral was in California. Just before he died his attorney notified me of his failing health. I said I’d try to make it out there, maybe, if it was possible. I’d have to check my schedule.

My schedule. Paperback discourses on Milton and Malthus. A bottle of rye. Half an intention to see the triumphant Leonard Bernstein and the Philharmonic do Shostakovich’s Leningrad Symphony.

I left that night. The trip was unremarkable. The train translated the vastness of a continent into a ceaseless thumping

below my seat. People came up to me, asking for autographs, wanting to know what I thought of the train. I secretly wished for a way to express that being an old man was a universality comprised of common detail.

My window saw half the world as a long view that never changes, only dims at night as if sleeping. I finished the unread books I'd brought with me: *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, and *Advertisements for Myself*. Existence was several cold sandwiches bought for a dime each in the dining car, cigarettes bummed from other passengers and smoked while stretching my legs by the toilets where the cars are joined. The journey was long enough for Edgar to die before I saw the ocean.

The other mourners had already left by the time I finally trod the pink carpet of the funeral home entryway. It was just me, the mortician, and Edgar, still laid out for final viewing. Somehow I'd always known we'd be left alone, at the end, like a man and his shadow.

No one has ever bothered to ask me how I'd prefer to have my remains disposed of. For the record, I'd like them shipped back to Africa, in case that isn't obvious. No embalming. Send me to any thick mass of jungle where animals and insects can devour what's left of me. Somewhere private and dark, where leaves will rain from the canopy and obscure the place I lie until the embarrassment of my flesh has fallen from my bones.

Once, against his explicit demands, I went to see Edgar. I read that he'd be in Philadelphia, to give a reading in a bookstore. I enjoyed the engagement immensely and afterward I waited at the end of a long line to have him sign my copy of his latest novel, *Synthetic Men of Mars*. When he saw me he stood up and excused himself to the next person in line, then grabbed me by my coat sleeve. The great author led me behind a tall shelf of books, until we were both out of sight.

He was tense, to say the least. “What are you doing here? Haven’t you been getting your checks?”

I smiled, trying to act jovial. “Oh, yes. Of course. I just came to hear you read. And to have my book signed.” I’d worn a beautiful tweed coat with a high collar and kept my hat on, the combination all but veiling my face from anyone who might recognize me.

“You really must leave me alone,” he hissed. “Things are very hectic these days. Legal matters and whatnot—it must all seem very confusing from your side.”

I had no idea what he meant. By his tone it seemed he expected me to apologize. But for what? It wasn’t as if I’d expected preferential treatment. I’d waited in line with everyone else. “I don’t mean to intrude, Edgar.”

“You know, fame isn’t as illustrious as it may appear. To the outside.”

This I did understand, as I was briefly inclined to remind him. But instead I offered, “I can imagine.”

He snatched my book and flipped it open. “Don’t go seeking celebrity. You won’t like what you find.” He scribbled on a page, snapped it shut, pushed the book into my chest and went back to his table, already smiling at the waiting faces.

I opened the front cover. He’d signed his name with such force, the impression sank for six pages.

That night I called his hotel room. I was a little drunk.

“Hey, Edgar. It’s your buddy. Your muse.”

He sighed as if I’d been nagging him for hours. “Yes.”

“What, am I annoying you?”

“Okay, what is it? You wanna bump gums, Tarzan?”

“Don’t call me that. You know I had my name changed. Legally it’s Thomas now.”

He sighed. “Okay Thomas Now, what can I do you for?”

“Remember when—well, remember that time you said you were thinking about writing a story where Tarzan rescues Jane?”

“Tarzan always rescues Jane. I think that ground’s been

covered.” I could tell then he was also a little bit lit.

“No, I mean a whole novel—a real literary affair where Tarzan has to find Jane. He has to seek her out. Possibly cover hundreds or thousands of miles. A story that spans the globe. He tracks her down, Jane, who’s in this kind of spell, or a haze, or a hypnosis or something. So Tarzan has to save her, not just from the darkness, but from herself, Edgar. A story where Tarzan reaches inside Jane to keep her from falling off some rocky precipice in her own heart.”

“Jesus, Mary and Joe. What have you been reading?”

“What, me? Usual things, same as everybody. Invisible Man. East of Eden. Giant.” The silence on the other end stopped me before I could list *The Caine Mutiny*. Had I offended him by naming best-sellers?

“It’s all scratch for you, boy-o. You’re cursed by the grace of Enkidu and Samson.”

“Ed, what? What’s the meaning of—?”

There was a long pause, but I could hear him breathing. When he finally spoke, he told me I was pathetic. A woman laughed in the background. Then he hung up the phone.

Even if you’ve never read the books, or seen the movies, you’ve still probably heard of me. I’m Tarzan, King of the Apes. Not that I ever mean to incite fanfare. Those who manage to recognize me are usually disappointed. It’s been some time since I left the jungle. My thinning hair has long since turned gray, and I stand slightly hunched. Age has put a shuffle in my step. More of a hobbling limp, really, with each first frost of winter.

I hardly leave my apartment, and never without my coat and hat. By September I need a thick scarf wrapped around my mug. People who manage to attach my face to their childhood memories always give the same strange, incredulous look. As if they’d expected to see me crossing 59th and Lexington clad in nothing but a loincloth and a feral expression. But mostly, probably, they’re surprised I’m still alive. These chance encounters

are usually middle-aged men who for some reason find it unfathomable that I can articulate myself with more than bestial grunts and fragmentary sentences even though I've been in paved America for over four decades. To think the things I'm obliged to explain! That I like my steak well-done, that I've taken to a bit of tobacco after supper, that I no longer ride elephants, and no, I don't live with Jane. In fact, I'm not entirely sure what became of her.

Being Tarzan, I possess the dubious honor of being an American icon. A household name, an inspiration to the silver screen. But as ludicrous as it all is, the legend does hold some truth.

At the end of the previous century my father, who once rubbed elbows with Cecil Rhodes and the Guggenheims, was a relatively young man existing on the last fringe of his inheritance. Despite canon, *ex libris*, he was no Lord. Formerly the proprietor or backer of several failed ventures (a fledgling shipping line out of Liverpool, an Austrian chemical laboratory, a spent coal mine in Wales), he travelled from North London to West Africa, where a fortune in ivory was sure to be his. Instead, he found my mother, a beautiful young missionary who'd had a crisis of faith upon witnessing the living conditions under the Belgians in the Congo Free State. It's fair to say that they diverted each other from their respective intentions. My father assumed what he thought would be a less dangerous vocation running a small ferry operation in the Congo River Basin.

They were killed when I was only two. Our little steamer was attacked by savages while moored in the eastern reaches of the basin. Left for drowned, I was rescued and subsequently raised by a troop of chimpanzees. Pan troglodytes. In Bantu they are called Tshiluba kivili-chimpenze. In my memory, they were my first and only family. As I grew older it became obvious that I afforded them a certain advantage, and yet I could not have survived without their care. What de Bary called 'symbiosis.' In retrospect, it seems so improbable that I would become their

leader, and that through the chimpanzees I would gain such a powerful mastery of the jungle. But I never questioned a moment of my existence. Not until I met Jane Parker.

Jane was the daughter of an American hunter, some fool on safari. I found them while foraging at the periphery of my range, the southwest fringe of the jungle, where the trees deteriorate into savannah and sudden miles of land without shade or cover. Land where—pardon the cliché—hunters too often became the hunted. Jane and her father had been abandoned by their sensible Khoisan guides, who knew traipsing through that reach of bush was suicide, even for armed men. When I arrived, Jane was in shock, having just witnessed the mauling of her father by a pair of ravenous lionesses who were hunched, and still eating a few paces away from her on a clearing of hard earth all but hidden by high grass as dry as kindling. I wove through the grass, silently, keeping them all windward until I was a dozen paces off, then, with a heavy stone in my hand, I ran shrieking. The cats hesitated. When they finally pounced, Jane and I were nothing but a shadow.

I have met many anthropologists and in old age can recall fewer names than theories. My favorite was offered by a young man at a Boston dinner party. He proposed an explanation for the phenomenon (as he claimed) that most young boys think there are monsters in their closets, while most young girls are afraid of monsters under their beds. The young man—a very promising graduate student and a nephew to the Secretary of the Interior—pushed his glasses higher up his nose and claimed that primitive men tended to leave home in hunting parties, sleeping in opportune caves, whereas women stayed at home, high in the trees. For men in caves, sudden beasts lunged from the shadows, but for domestic females, deadly predators lurked below. He claimed that there is some part of modern girls and boys that remembers this, instinctually, as they lie down to bed. Everyone at the table nodded thoughtfully, some openly smiling at his insight and at the impressiveness of his theory. I nearly choked on

my food and had to excuse myself. Later, in a cloud of pipe smoke and cognac intoxication, I tried to explain to him that only fools sleep in caves. And once you are in a tree, boy or girl, you fear nothing except the things that climb. "Still," he retorted, "They still come from below, don't they?"

Jane had nowhere to go, so I led her deeper into my jungle. We spied wild herds of giraffe and gazelle, crouched breathlessly in the shadows as headhunters crept by and bathed in steaming rivers. We shared the fruit of the ackee tree, which is too toxic to eat except at the exact moment of its ripeness. Jane's was the first ivory body I had seen beside my own. I know how Adam must have felt, to be so alone and then to be able to possess and to know.

When Jane's stinking clothes finally fell into rags she covered herself in leaves until I could steal a lion pelt from a hunter's cache. She taught me how to speak some of her language. And of course, she gave me so much more than that. For a brief time, the jungle flowered into paradise. We forded streams on the backs of elephants and slept in the shade of acacia trees.

After several changes of the moon, Jane must have grown weary of our life in the jungle. Her eyes no longer glowed to see the sunset from a perch atop the canopy, and the corners of her mouth began to wrinkle when she smiled. In awkward English intermixed with a stuttering Swahili, she said she missed her mother. She wanted to go home, to New York City, a faraway stone hive across a vastness of water. She begged me to join her, but I refused. I told her I couldn't possibly leave the troop. After all, I was the leader of seventy apes. Even though, in truth, I'd seen less and less of them since finding Jane. She said she would return, and listed the strange gifts she would bear.

I walked her as far as Garoua, where she stole some clothes from a campsite and found white men who spoke her tongue. They were ivory traders with an iron boat. We met them as they filled the steamer with their corpse freight. They agreed to take her down the Benue, and then to the great ocean. The men had



guns and looked fierce enough for the voyage. They disappeared into the mists of dawn, Jane crying as she waved goodbye, the traders thinking she was waving to nothing but mist-coated trees until I howled and the selfsame trees shook with my sorrow.

The seasons changed, as they imperceptibly do on the equator, and I began to wait for Jane. Two seasons passed and I became anxious. Rains came and left. I lay awake under the stars, listening to the night calls of the jungle, counting the stages of the moon, agonizing over what had become of my love. I snuck into hunters' camps while they slept and stole small river rocks from the edges of their fires, caressing the stones as if it was still Jane's smooth, warm skin in my hands.

I found my troop but soon woke to find them gone. I realized I had scarcely eaten or slept in months. They must have thought me ill, unfit to lead or settle disputes. In truth, chimpanzee society is just like any rude democracy. As the alpha male, my position was purely ceremonial, an honorary title at best. The troop was actually ruled by a cabal of beta males who crouch and plot behind impotent rulers. It was their sudden vacation that made me realize I had lied to Jane. The chimps didn't need me. I'd simply been afraid. It was difficult enough to survive in the Congo, what would I do in New York?

Jane had said in New York men make their own stones, which they pile higher than any tree. Beasts live only in cages, and man hunts only other men, but not for food. In New York men eat only birds from cages and oxen grown on special savannahs. Lightning had been harnessed like fire. It sounded like madness, or witchcraft.

It was at this time that I encountered Dr. Alfred L. Kroeber, an anthropologist from Columbia University. An expert on the American Indian, Dr. Kroeber was in Africa on hiatus from his specialization, just finishing an innovative study on primate behavior. He seemed ecstatic to meet me, and eagerly attempted to enlist my services. Forgoing the usual formality of nets and tranquilizer darts, I agreed to accompany Kroeber back to New

York.

When I arrived at the university, I found that I had already gained considerable notoriety. I was lavished with attention and soon became the focus of a hotly-debated issue: namely, which is the dominant factor in the constitution of a man: environment or the predestination of heredity? I was something of a marvel, uniquely qualified to contribute to this cogitation. Some poor scholars thought I was the walking answer to their every question, and I confess that shortly after I learned to use the telephone, I learned to disengage its wire.

My days at Columbia were full. I was not as free to seek Jane as I'd hoped. For all I knew she was back in Africa, searching for me but finding nothing but my old troop. I did think of her constantly, though. At least at first. I would lie awake in my cold little room, imagining what she looked like after all the time that had passed between us, what she would say when she finally saw me, and if she would be pleased with my sudden fame in her world.

The research proved tolerable, and in exchange for extensive tests I received an education. In fact, I can recall the first newspaper headline I ever read aloud without a single mistake: Earthquake in San Francisco.

Kroeber had me fitted for a suit. We toured. I assisted Kroeber with his research and lectures, I gave demonstrations in university museums, and in effect transmitted all I could remember of my previous life in the jungle.

Traveling was strange. Everyone I met had already heard of me. Everywhere I went, people were happy to see me. Despite the ubiquitous reporters and their explosions of flashbulbs and the same questions shouted at me whenever I climbed down from a bus or train car, I found a kind of happiness.

Then I received a letter from Jane, at last. She'd read about me in the Times, the Saturday Evening Post, and of course, National Geographic. Although Jane was happy for my new success, she was not necessarily pleased that I had followed her to America. She would not be on the next train to New York. She hoped we could speak again, someday. She closed with a long apology, and signed her name in bold, flowery script. In the

postscript she stated that she'd married a real estate agent and moved to Des Moines.

Oh, naturally I was bitter. But I was too deeply incarcerated by my new lifestyle to let anyone know how I actually felt. I mean, I wasn't about to go shouting on the steps of the school chapel, beating on my breast like a goddamn gorilla! When I told Kroeber of my heart sickness he laughed and slapped me on the back. "Oh, my boy. There are lots of Janes here, don't worry. They're simply thick on the ground."

In private I was prone to fits of fuming anger. I discovered whiskey, which soon transformed from novelty to analgesic to fuel for a rage that burned like fire. My wrath turned furniture into varnished splinter. Then I would sit, in some shadowy recess of whatever room confined me, and I'd go over everything, one more time.

Years later I developed a little scene that still runs through my mind. It's populated by images glimpsed in magazine advertisements after I first arrived at Columbia. It takes place in a backyard, in some Iowa suburb. I can hear a cocktail party, collins glasses tinkling with ice cubes as bourgeois elite converge on a balmy Saturday afternoon. The smell of sausage grilling over coals, the shriek of children playing. Someone mentions the movies and then Jane's asinine husband puts her on to tell everyone how she knew Tarzan, she really did. Biblically. Ha! Tarzan, nothing. Now just a crazy thing she did when she was young. A colorful anecdote. I'm sure Jane and her husband are decent folk, but—oh—how I wanted to take their faraway domestic bliss and gnash it between my teeth!

My handlers, as my entourage of graduate students came to call themselves, grew increasingly uneasy. I began to miss speaking engagements. An entire lecture circuit hitting all the major universities in the Northeast was thrown in jeopardy when I had to be drunkenly escorted off the train one dark night between Cambridge and New Haven. They brought Franz Boas down to lecture me. He told me if I carried on this way I'd be lucky if I wasn't put down like a sick animal, no one to protest when the Museum of Natural History petitioned to have me put on display,

stuffed with rags and sawdust.

I left Columbia shortly afterward. Dean Van Amringe and the anthropology department were decent about it, the official story that my residency had terminated as planned, in conjunction with the completion of all major studies of my person. In confidence, over scotch and cigars in his home library, Kroeber explained that the irony of my depression and uncivilized outbursts was proof I had become too civilized, as it were, and was no longer of any real use to the university. As far as the debate on nature versus nurture, I can't recall who won the day.

Kroeber, my first white friend, gave me two hundred dollars and a copy of *Frankenstein*; or, *The Modern Prometheus*, perhaps as an apology. He then fled to California to study a wild Indian named Ishi, the last of his tribe. A true novelty.

I took a brief summer residence in Central Park, until I was arrested for vagrancy. Then I drifted as far as Kansas, where a pleasant and portly fellow named Smith recruited me to be a star attraction in P. T. Barnum's Museum, Menagerie and Circus. 1910 took us to Texas, Tennessee and Oklahoma. I shared a tent with the snake charmer, the sword swallower, and a man who ate glass. People paid a nickel to see us. I was once again an official oddity.

The next year I met Edgar Rice Burroughs, a pencil sharpener salesman who'd reinvented himself as an amateur author of science fiction. He doffed his hat when he first met. "Just a scribbler, really," was how he actually introduced himself. He'd been triumphant in the wake of his first published novel, *A Princess of Mars*. Unfortunately there was a glut in the cheap fiction market and Burroughs' publisher unexpectedly passed on his second effort, *The Outlaw of Torn*. Burroughs panicked. He was afraid his sudden success would evaporate as quickly as it had blossomed. He needed a good idea. That's when he saw me in the freak show.

He eagerly petitioned me to relate the unabridged story of my life, upon which he intended to base a novel. After a quick discussion of payment, I agreed. It turned out the circus didn't

pay nearly as well as Mr. Smith had led me to believe. That same night Burroughs and I held a clandestine meeting in the strong man's tent. The snake charmer, who was studying law through the mail, drew up the contract.

My story first came out as an All-Story serial at the end of 1912. I was a little disconcerted. I was expecting something Gothic and confessional. The material I supplied, I felt, could have produced a work akin to *Frankenstein*. Instead it was a simulacrum of my life, a heavily fictionalized account festooned with a purplish poeticism which ran roughshod over the facts and clear-eyed observations I had diligently reported to Burroughs over the course of three weeks. "Relax," Burroughs later told me over a long-distance telephone call. "What I wrote is good stuff. It sells paper." Two years later, when the *Tarzan of the Apes* manuscript was republished in book form, the sales vastly exceeded both our expectations. In our increasingly infrequent meetings, Burroughs began to grumble about contract renegotiation.

Each time Burroughs sold another *Tarzan* book, or signed off another hackneyed screenplay, I received a flat sum and a fractional percentage of royalties. For my original inspiration and for my continued silence, I still receive a very healthy quarterly stipend from Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc. The checks arrive inside folded stationery with the imprint, "Edgar Rice Burroughs. Creator of *Tarzan*." But such is life. Twenty-six books and countless films might be his legacy, but they are my immortality. He gave me more years in printed pulp and celluloid fantasy than I ever could have expected in the jungle.

When I do leave my small apartment, it's just for a brief errand or to stretch my tired body. On walks I often pass the Orient Cinema, which shows the new *Tarzan* movies. I can't help but pause before the vivid posters, regarding the ridiculously clean-shaven and muscular jungle man before me. Then I catch my own reflection in the glass between us: I am large, old, inept, unkempt and overweight. An aimless, lurking man whose greatest ambitions include twelve-year-old scotch, a decent pastrami on

rye, and the warm cradle of anonymity.

I have learned to stay in at night. It seems that there is a greater frequency of recognition when passersby have had their bearings greased by smoke and drink. Once a woman beat her chest emphatically while her date sang that inane children's rhyme about the monkey man and his rubber band. Caught off-guard and unable to pretend I hadn't noticed, I simply forced a smile, nodded assent, and continued on my way.

I take the ferry to New Jersey when the weather's nice, to see the dog races. I always lose money but it thrills me to no end that the rabbit the dogs so enthusiastically chase is nothing more than a mechanical ghost.

When I was a younger, after I quit the circus and it seemed like the Tarzan money was burning holes in my pockets, I'd take in the city sights. Sometimes with dates set up by one of my few acquaintances. I usually ended up with buxom Jewish girls from Brooklyn, secretaries and bookkeepers for lawyers. Sometimes I'd get Jimmy, the overnight doorman, to call one of those services for me. And sometimes I'd go looking for any lipsticked tobacco-stink of a woman I could find in whatever bar I stumbled into, and I'd talk into her ear until she agreed to step outside with me, drunk and hanging from my arm. We'd do the town.

At night, the observation deck of the Empire State building is a narcotic. All those lights twinkling in the darkness. I'd go up there in the summer, usually alone, when I felt especially ensnared by my shirt and suspenders, dead drunk on gin, usually after an afternoon at the Natural History Museum, gazing at the mannequin mammals. (If I'd been to the Bronx Zoo, by nightfall I'd be too drunk to get past the Empire State Building's doormen, and I'd leave to try the Chrysler.) I'd take the elevator calmly, but once on the deck in the night sky, I'd tear open my shirt and howl my famous cry to the beasts and the birds, my chest heaving, the buttons of my shirts bouncing over the concrete deck like a broken string of pearls. I've been thrown out three times, but I can always go back. I'm no Mickey Mantle, but I'm still somebody.

New York is the final ape kingdom: the subway, the great concrete gorge, trillions of bricks stacked into phalluses, crawling anthill taxicabs and the sudden subterranean stench of piss puddles and dumpsters. The airport, the seaways, the mounting proof of failure. The city is a hopeful mistake, Adam's poison. Like stepping into the jungle at night, like slipping into muddy water. To walk these living tombs means to breathe dust and ash. Hire a car to weave through manhole stigmata. Each aching breath is a wish carved into bone and left at the foot of a tree.

Come back, Jane, come, please, see this with me, this brick-walled folly drawing me closer to you ever still. Retire with me to my small room, we can sit by the window and the whistle of the radiator – ignore the screams from down the hall, it's just my echo, still traveling, still coursing through the west by train, giraffe necks protruding from the clicking cars, my soul slumbering between a snake charmer and an eater of glass. Allow me to pour the tea, to make the bed. It can be like before, I promise, when we didn't speak... If my shell offends you then wait until I have left it; come here in mourning, come here in black, summoned by the news of my passing. Let my bone smoke hang like a wreath from your fingers. Trace these alleys and lanes, your legs wrapped in steam, see my face reflected in potholes of murky rain. Hear the stampede of traffic, the distant drumming of diesel engines frothing the brown East River; climb these towers and look below, I dare you to claim your quickening pulse reminds you of nothing. The lights below are more beautiful than the stars, because here every light is a life, while the stars above drift through fields of frozen dust. The stars, the stars, my only constant the stars. As empty as anything, as hollow as intention. If I leap from the gargoyle's mouth tonight, I will awake in the jungle tomorrow, and I will see you from across a stream, through a white mist. Your dark hair will be damp, sticking to your neck. I will swim to you, will cleave your body into mine and we'll climb into the canopy. There I'll feel your breath on my body, your legs draped over mine as we lie back to watch the trembling bloom of day, the red and gold ripples of the sun quaking in the warm

breeze—

My latest trip to the Empire State Building is outwardly unremarkable. The security guard at the observation deck seems relieved by my somber condition and amiably bids me good night. On the way down the elevator operator tells us all about the giant springs at the bottom of the elevator shafts. How they were designed to save us if the elevator cables ever snap. “But it wouldn’t work,” he quickly adds. “Not from this height. No way Jose.”

I go home to my sparse apartment. I hang up my hat and coat. I switch on my bakelite Boomerang radio just in time for *This Is Your Life*. I pour myself a scotch and soda, the sweet and sour of peat filling the room as liquid becomes gas. For an audience of millions, the life of vaudeville actress Fifi d’Orsay recommences from the beginning. I pack my pipe from a tin of Edgeworth and watch the ice crack and melt into amber.

Last week I thought I saw Jane in the subway. Through a bustling mass of people, I swore I spied her stepping onto a train, her delicate legs calling to me from beneath the hem of her fleeting skirt. I cried her name, desperately, pushing and bulling my way through the hopelessly tangled crowd until I was out of breath, gasping as the car doors slid shut just beyond my reach. I watched her in the illuminated car as it shuttled off. She was reading a newspaper. She never even saw me. Then I realized the young woman I saw couldn’t possibly have been Jane. She would be old now, like me.

The crowd dissipated as I stood there, doubled-over and wheezing in the damp cool of the subway platform. One more nameless, broken-down old fool buried alive under New York City, just struggling to catch his breath, to die with whatever dignity might still hide under layers of pocket lint. The train shrieked as it pulled further away. I finally caught enough breath to stand and with effort I peered into the abyss of the tunnel, to last car of the retreating train, watching the red lights disappear.