

Carl and Lefty's Rough Ride
by Todd Hertz

No one noticed as Carl and Lefty boarded President Theodore Roosevelt's personal train to rob him.

"What did I tell ya?" Carl whispered. "Walk with confidence and ya can get anywhere."

Lefty huffed. "Come on, boss. You promised not to bring up my confidence issues."

Carl sighed; they went through this whenever Carl mentioned his Three Rules of Nicking.

Rule One: Act like you belong.

Carl and Lefty could pass for government men. Why not? They had purposeful strides and fine 65-cent Hill Brothers shirts. The chaos of the day made it all the easier. 3,000 people crammed around Roosevelt's idling train at the Geneva station. Choirs sang. 500 school children marched around with Illinois and U.S. flags. All while a downpour pelted the crowd. Perfect distractions.

Rule Two: Know what you want.

The adoring public showered the president with gifts at each whistle-stop. It'd been in all the papers. A women's group in San Antonio gifted him a silver cup. A Montana town presented him a sapphire vase. And a young girl from Kansas gave the president a badger. He named it Josiah.

Sure, Carl would take any of that—well, maybe not that badger—but he was here for one specific item. The people of Colorado had given Roosevelt a one-of-a-kind heart medallion made of pure gold.

Rule Three: Get in, get out.

According to the papers, Roosevelt spoke from the train's rear platform for about five minutes. That allowed Carl and Lefty plenty of time to slip onto the storage car and get to work.

Lefty dug into trunks. Carl scanned stacks of boxes, barrels, and crates. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

GRRRRRRRRRRR. Carl's shoulders tensed at the guttural rumbling. *What in the world?*

A furry pointed head jutted out between two steamer trunks. It bared long, sharp teeth at Lefty.

"Wolverine!" Lefty screamed. "Run!"

"Badger," Carl corrected.

In a flash of white and brown fur, the badger pounced onto Lefty's chest.

"ARGGGGH!"

The badger's long claws dug into Lefty's 65-cent shirt. Carl leapt over the trunk, seized the badger's rough fur, and yanked. The animal tumbled to the floor and scampered away.

“They got guard wolverines!” Lefty yelled, his shirt leaking red.

“Badger—”

CLICK. The far door unlatched. “Hide!” Carl dove behind a large picture frame. Four or five men entered the car.

“...it talked too slow. Maybe just needs oil, otherwise....”

The opposite door creaked open and shut. No more footsteps. Carl and Lefty were alone again. With the badger.

“We can’t go back the way we came,” Carl muttered.

“Well, we can’t stay here!” Lefty rushed the far door. Carl followed him out to the railroad coupling.

The rain subsided. Roosevelt’s speech was over. The train would move soon, but the good stuff had to be in this final car. Lefty opened the door.

Jackpot. This was the car they’d been looking for. On a high shelf waited the vase and silver cup. Jackpot. Now, where was that golden heart?

“Go on in,” Carl encouraged. Lefty didn’t move.

“No.” Lefty asserted, staring in. *But at what?* A sole person sat impossibly straight on a bench. President Theodore Roosevelt.

“Gig’s up, boss,” Lefty hopped down to the tracks. “Get in, get out.”

He glanced at Roosevelt and then back to Lefty. No, not yet.

“You go; I’ll catch up.”

Lefty nodded and vanished into the crowd. Carl stepped in; the door clicked shut. Carl was alone with Roosevelt. The president didn’t budge.

“Umm....Mr. President?” Carl’s voice cracked.

He scanned the car. Where would it be? There, the felt box on the oak table. Carl inched closer. Sure enough, set inside the black felt was the Colorado heart. He slowly stretched his arm toward the medal. No reaction. He waved his hand. Was Roosevelt asleep?

No harm in a closer look.

“Sir, Higgins sent me...” Carl lied, inching toward the president.

Roosevelt’s eyes were open. Lifeless. His skin was perfect, flawless. Smooth. Too smooth. Carl scrunched his face, edging closer. And then, he poked the President in the cheek. It was cold and spongy.

The train lurched violently and crept forward. Carl couldn't leave yet. *What is this thing?*

Carl glanced to Roosevelt's dress shirt. Odd shadows lurked beneath. Hands trembling, Carl unbuttoned the top two buttons.

There was no skin. No hair. Not even that squishy material of his face. Instead: a framework of polished bronze filled with what looked like the inner-workings of pocket watch.

Theodore Roosevelt was a Machine-Man.

Carl staggered backward. *How could this be?*

Something deep within the machine whistled. The monstrosity stood.

"My friends and fellow citizens," Roosevelt bellowed. "My friends, I am dee-lighted to..."

Carl dashed out the rear door and onto the iron platform. The earth rushed past underneath.

Nowhere to go. Jumping would be suicide. Then, the trees turned into clearing. Wait. The bridge was coming. The Fox River would be his savior. As soon as he saw water, Carl threw himself over the edge of the railing. Falling. Wind. And then, a blast of frigid cold enveloped him.

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Another night, another tavern, more humiliation. Carl huddled over his glass as the other laughed. He knew the world's greatest secret—and no one believed him. Not even Lefty.

The bar grew quiet. Too quiet. Carl looked up. A short, stocky figure stood at the edge of his table. Carl stiffened, sharply sucking in air. *No, no, no.*

President Theodore Roosevelt plopped into the opposite chair. "By Godfrey, you must be Carl!"

Carl leapt up, chair clattering to the floor. Words wouldn't come.

"Well, I am bluer than indigo that I frightened you. Please sit down." Roosevelt waved at an empty chair. Carl sat.

"I want you to get a good look at me," Roosevelt said, his arms wide. "I am 100 percent human: big and strong as a bull moose. Therefore, your president is no machine. Still, the more you talk about what you saw, the more you threaten my real secret."

Roosevelt reached into his coat. Carl winced. He pulled out a closed felt box and set it on the table.

"Too often, the difficulty of a thing is not in the doing. No, the difficulty is in finding the right course. There are secret threats to America. I am charged with finding how to stop them. Some do not need Theodore Roosevelt the president. No, they require a Rough Rider."

"But—," Carl stammered. "The Rough Riders disbanded after Cuba."

“That is what the people need to believe. But in the shadows, we are there. The day you were on my train, America needed the Rough Riders. Yet, it’s best she never knows why. That is why my metal doppelganger was on the train.”

Silence. Roosevelt opened the box. The golden Colorado heart.

“If we have an understanding, this is yours.”

“If I say no?” Carl shifted in his seat.

“I brought the badger.”

Carl stared at the medal. He knew what he wanted. *Now, act like you belong and get out.*

“Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. President.”

As he stood, Carl snatched the medal from its box, flipped it once, and strode with confidence out of the tavern.