

The Witch of Banneker School

by
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HAWKER BROWNLOW
E D U C A T I O N

1 THE DEAFENING RUMBLE of the trains was like music to Marc Moffit and his grandfather. About once a month they came to walk through Union Station. They almost always came on Sunday afternoons. And it was always just the two of them.

Marc loved trains. He loved watching them speed past, like sleek greyhounds. He loved gazing down the rails that seemed to stretch to the end of the world. He loved the names too: *San Diegan*, *Desert Wind*, *Western Fury*.

Most of all, he loved hearing the conductors sing, "All aboard!" in their deep voices.

Every time Marc heard that call, he longed to leap on a train. Yet he'd ridden on a train only once in his life. Four years ago, when he was six, Grandpa had taken him on the *San Diegan*. That trip had been the most exciting two hours of Marc's life.

"I'll tell you, Marc. This terminal here is the most beautiful station in America," Grandpa would say. "And I should know.

I've seen a good many of them."

Marc knew what would come next. Grandpa often repeated stories about his days on the rails. And Marc loved every word of them.

"Started off as a brakeman. Then moved up to engineer. Rode the rails from one side of this country to the other . . ."

His grandfather's voice would rumble on—much like the rumble of the trains. He had so many wonderful stories about his thirty years working for the railroad. Marc never tired of hearing them. He often walked over to his grandfather's apartment just to "talk railroad."

Grandpa stopped and put his hand on Marc's shoulder. "What's going to happen next summer? Right here where we're standing?"

Marc looked up at the tall, white-haired man beside him. "You and I are riding the *Sunset Limited* all the way to New Orleans, Grandpa."

His grandpa smiled. "You've got it, son. And nothing will stop us from taking that trip! All the way to New Orleans.

And what will we do once we get there?"

Marc had played this game with his grandfather as long as he could remember. These were the rules: Grandpa would ask him question after question. But they were questions to which they both knew the answers. So Marc would *always* give the right answers.

"We're going to the Railroadmen's Reunion! And we're going to hear some Dixieland jazz!"

His grandfather laughed out of sheer joy. "That's right!"

Marc gazed at all the people milling around the huge station. Some stood waiting for a train. Others sat on benches, anxiously peering about for family or friends. Still others raced to their gate, hoping to beat the final "All aboard!"

There was wonderful excitement in the air. Marc could hardly keep himself from leaping aboard the *Sunset Limited* right now.

But he had a nagging doubt that he might not get to go. He'd had trouble keeping his summers free. Every year

Marc thought he'd done just well enough at school to slip by. But the last two years his teachers had advised summer school. And his parents had agreed. Marc hadn't had a free and easy summer for what seemed like forever!

"Grandpa," Marc hesitated. "What if I have to go to summer school again? What if I can't get good grades? Then I won't be able to go."

"Nonsense," Grandpa growled. "You can do whatever you set your mind to. Why, when I was a boy, I went to the worst school in creation. I walked through swamplands filled with alligators just to get there. My school had dirt floors, no maps, and hardly any books. And my teacher was as mean as one of those 'gators."

Grandpa shook his head at the memory. "But I made good marks because I had a goal, Marc. I wanted to be a train man. And they weren't about to hire any dumb fools."

Grandpa tapped Marc's arm. "Goals, son. That's what got me out of the

backwoods. You just set your sights on some goals and buckle down. You want anything bad enough, you'll get there."

Marc and his grandfather walked around for a while longer. Then they caught a bus for home. Grandpa's apartment was just a few blocks from the Moffit's house.

As they headed back, the Spanish-style railroad station filled Marc's mind. He could hardly think of anything else.

But fifth grade started tomorrow, and he had to get ready. He had a brand new teacher this year: Ms. Shelton. Marc just hoped she wasn't like some other teachers he'd had at Banneker School. Marc felt he was overdue for a really nice, easy teacher. He needed a break in the worst way this year.

Later Marc's two best friends, Randy Ames and Jay Lawson, dropped by. They invited Marc to play basketball at the Banneker playground.

The playground was empty when they arrived. Marc took the ball and charged for the basket. He sank his shot and