

Driving Wheel

In 1963, the same year I watched John F. Kennedy's black-and-white head explode into the Dallas sky, I was five years old. That December I rode a Portland-bound Christmas train out of Seattle's King Station. While the train rocked gently and the T.V. cameras rolled and some fifty fat grownups and their pie-eyed children laughed at me from behind the bright white klieg lights, I sang "Jingle Bells" to a local children's television personality who accompanied me on the accordion and sweated through his gray wool suit like my father did when he needed a drink or just wanted to be somewhere else. I had practiced my Christmas song for a month in anticipation of this performance before my Television Hero and now my cheeks were burning with shame and I felt dirty. My song was rapidly becoming desperate; I looked into the eyes of my accompanist and saw nothing but two black holes; his lips stuck drily to his gums as he forced a yellow, vacuous smile, the smile that says nothing, the condescending smile that adults give to children that they will not love.

Who were these indifferent, disembodied faces waiting impatiently for me to finish my number? We all know that there are no emotions as intense as those of a child. Why had they let me come this far without telling me what a sham it all was? Why had I gotten on this train? Why did I continue to sing for these ingrates?

My heart beat loud and fast, contrapuntally to the steady "chunk-chunk" of the big metal wheels on the rails below me; now I listened to this music and could no longer hear myself sing.

By Vancouver the spectacle had been disassembled and I sat alone, my hot cheek pressed against the window kept cool by the Northwestern rain. I stared straight down at the ground outside and, as the train shot toward its destination, the woods in the distance swirled slowly around the rocking Pullman; the closer the land got to the train the more quickly it was sucked into the rails.

When I was seven, we moved to Minneapolis. We continued to watch the blood pour from our old 19" Emerson TV. I remember clearly that amazing footage of the Saigon police chief calmly pointing his pistol at a bound Viet Cong prisoner and squeezing off a round — the grimacing prisoner's hair blew out from the side of his head before he dropped to the street. Then it was as though someone had turned on a faucet. The blood was black.

Martin Luther King, that nine-year-old kid in Watts, Kennedy — they brought his body home from California on a funeral train and several people died when they tried to get too close to the tracks and got sucked under.

Nighttime in the switching yard.

Burlington Northern coupled cars in the yard across 37th street. Whistles blew constantly: four short blasts — Call for Signals; two long blasts — Release Brakes and Proceed; one short blast — Apply Brakes. Stop; a succession of short blasts — Alarm! Persons or Livestock on the Track!

When the cars coupled they sounded like Honeywell fragmentation bombs falling out of the sky. Maybe some of those cars contained such materiel. My room was on the second floor of our old, rented, frame house. Sometimes, at night, the cars crashing in the yard would shock me from sleep and, before I knew what I was hearing, I would panic. It was the Apocalypse, World War III, and they had dropped the first bomb on Silver Lake Road. Oh, I was afraid, and I would pray feverishly to the Lord Jesus Christ to save me and my family from a fiery death. I had seen films of the burn victims from Nagasaki and Hiroshima on an NBC special. But . . . I was still cold! Perhaps I was mistaken; it wasn't Armageddon after all. The red glow flickering on my bare white walls was the reflection of the warning lights from three U-50 B diesel locomotives moving in a triple hook-up over in the yard. I padded across cold wooden floorboards to my bedroom window; the frost on the glass splintered those engines into a thousand jagged shards. My mouth was dry with fear, and I absentmindedly licked the thick ice. Where I licked I could see more clearly, and, wrapped in my blanket, I watched the men in the yard assemble trains until the sun came up. Then I got dressed, ate breakfast, and went to school.

There was an older, disabled guy in our neighborhood whom we called Saint Sid because he always had on this holy glow; and he was dark, like a clean-shaven Jesus. When Saint Sid was younger, he used to play under the Silver Lake Bridge over by the yard. We all did. But Sid, a big boy, had been a daredevil; he used to jump the trains and ride them for a few blocks, things like that. Sid's craziest trick was to roll under slow-moving flatcars or boxcars and then roll out the other side. Once clear, he'd throw big cinders back at us and taunt us to follow his lead. Of course, we never did.

One August afternoon, Sid was doing his craziest trick, trying to set a new personal best for the greatest number of successive rolls. His white T-shirt was brown from rolling in the cinders and he was bathed in sweat — it streaked his blackened face. He was trying for his sixteenth roll, the new record, and he was halfway there, lying flat between the tracks, when the train began picking up speed. Sid had to roll out or he'd be dragged to his death; feedcars have a much lower clearance than boxcars, and a string of them was approaching. Terrified, we all yelled at him. It was amazing — he didn't look worried. He just lay there,

musing on how to get out. Then, with both of his strong hands, he grabbed an iron bar passing above him and started moving with the train, his cowboy boots bouncing off the cross-ties as the train continued to pick up speed. We ran along side the train, wondering what he was going to do next. The train rolled out from under the bridge into the hot summer sun. Sid was laughing! He must have realized the futility of hanging on; either that or he just got tired because he let go suddenly and tried to roll out. He didn't make it. Jesus. The humid Minnesota day blended the stench of creosote, fresh blood, and diesel held down by the heat. Everyone else ran home. I ran up the hill to the Conoco station at Apache Plaza and dialed 911. Sid lost a leg, an arm, and three fingers on his other hand. It took him a year to recover. Trains don't care.

By the time Sid was released from Unity Hospital, he'd already mastered his prostheses. No one dared call him a cripple — his fake arm was as hard as a baseball bat. And when someone gave Sid a hard time, he'd chuckle and say "How'd ya like a wooden foot up your ass?" But Saint Sid wasn't bitter or mean. He kept moving, and he earned his name. He was nice to *everybody*. When we played baseball in the vacant lot on Penrod Lane, Sid could no longer run through the knee-high weeds. But he could still hit; he swung the bat with one arm and I ran for him. When the horns blasted over in the yard, Sid would jerk his head toward the noise, his deep, brown eyes would cloud, and we'd have to yell to get his attention. The rest of us still played beneath the Silver Lake Bridge, but he wouldn't go down there.

There were lots of kids at St. Anthony's who were into hitting up and I'm sorry now to say I was one of them. It has *nothing* to do with how you're raised; I mainlined with kids from every socioeconomic background — privileged and poor. In the winter, we'd take the bus down to Hennepin and score, ride back, go down below the bridge, cook up, and watch the trains shoot by on their way to Chicago or points west. Heroin. Cocaine. Crystal Methedrine. Seconal. We were in Junior High. Minneapolis was on fire.

One day at school, a bunch of girls I knew shot downers and began to O.D. all over the place. We kept hearing ambulance sirens outside as they took someone else away. I was walking to class when this crazed, red-haired beauty we called Sparky fell to the ground in front of me; her head cracked against the linoleum. I don't know why, but I just stepped over her and kept walking. She went into a coma at the hospital and died two days later. That's how it was then. Half the people at her funeral were high. The dirt they shoveled onto her oak coffin was mixed with brown snow.

Later that winter, I fixed by myself, always a mistake, below the Silver Lake Bridge. I was sitting there on an old railroad tie, looking at the gray tracks on my pale, thin arm. I was wondering why they were called tracks. I thought maybe it's because they scar their bearer the way the railroad scars this land. I thought I could see the blood running through me, and it was running the way a train runs — now slow, now fast, always rhythmic. I rolled down my sleeve and put away my works; I didn't want to get them dirty in the snow. A troop train rolled by, and a hundred clean-cut soldiers stared out at me from Pullman windows. I raised my right arm and extended my middle finger. One recruit saw me, smiled, saluted, and raised his arm high and made the "V," the peace sign. Then the train was gone, rolling west. I felt flushed, ashamed. It was 1970. I walked home through the snow, got a shovel out of the garage, and headed for the lot on Penrod where I'd run bases for Saint Sid. I was the The Cripple now. I dug beneath the snow, beneath the dead foxtail, into the wet loam. I took the works, rubber surgical tubing, bent aluminum lunchroom spoon, spike, syringe, and what was left of the junk out of my pocket and tossed them into the hole. I filled up the hole. Then I prayed, and went back home.

But I still went below the bridge sometimes, when I wanted to think. I'd read the desperate, obscene messages spray-painted on the struts and walls in fluorescent oranges and blues:

JANE MULDOON is a NYMPHO,

i balled jane muldown on this spot — 11/22/69

I luv Janey Muldoon (Reggie)

You and the U.S. Navy, Reg!

White Bear Cagers Pulled a train on Jean Muldoon

Homecoming, 69

Jane Muldoon moved to Owatonna

Shit!

I prayed that Jane Muldoon's reputation hadn't preceded her.

Overloaded helicopters wobbled into the air from the embassy in Saigon. We watched desperate Vietnamese cling to the runners, then fall to their deaths. Other helicopters, like so many albatrosses, were thrown from aircraft carriers into the South China Sea. It was the height of the recession. My family moved to Iowa. For the first time, we owned land. Our property line bordered the Chicago-Northwestern right-of-way. But the trains only went by twice a day; and their muted, ribbon-track rhythms were soothing now. In the morning, I'd jump the slow train and ride it to school.

I fell in love.

Carol had red hair, too, but she was tall, strong, and quiet. It was simple. I was comfortable with her. There are no big deals.

The morning before our first dance, I went to the bank and bought two silver dollars. I stuck a wad of Bazooka gum to one side of each coin and then went out the the backyard and stuck the coins to the railroad track and waited. The morning train rolled through. When it passed, I went out and picked up the flattened ovals of silver. I took them into the house, stripped off the gum, polished them, and drove a tenpenny nail through the top of each one. Then, I looped a fishing leader hook through each hole and attached a gold earring wire to each of the leaders. I stole an old velvet-lined earring box from my mother, put the earrings inside, and wrapped the box in red-and-green paper. Carol wore them to the dance that night. She still wears them.

We don't have any children because I'm sterile and she doesn't want to adopt. But sometimes we babysit my brother's one-year-old son. We take him out to the tracks to watch the trains roll by, and he reaches out toward the cars as though he's trying to grab hold of something. Trains aren't a bad thing, because *things* aren't good or bad. I know that now.

Some of our friends went down to that anti-nuclear demonstration a while back; one of the railroads was hauling warheads through southern Iowa to Nebraska. We watched television footage of the State Police hauling away several of our friends. The demonstrators got arrested, but they didn't stop the train.

And we still read about train wrecks in which pollutants such as anhydrous ammonia, or chemicals used in germ warfare research, contaminate towns and occasionally kill someone. But we have to *live*. Do you understand? Carol jokes about it sometimes, saying things like "Guns don't kill people, *bullets* kill people." And we laugh, but we know it's only half true.

And sometimes, on a hot August day, Carol and I get crazy in a good way and hop a flatcar bound for Sioux City. We get off there and hike down to the Missouri River, where we swim until the sun goes down. We get a cheap hotel room and ride home the next day. And sometimes, we go to church. And I kneel down and pray.

by Eric Nelson