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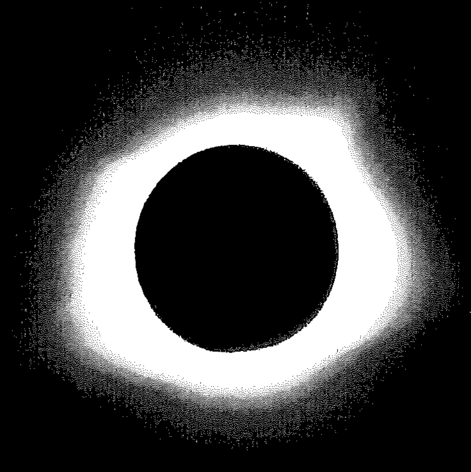

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Railroad Man

Clay Reynolds

> *I like trains that whisper your name.*
> *– Fred Eaglesmith*

MY FATHER WAS a railroad man. That isn't a particularly startling statement, but there was a time when to say such a thing was to define who I was, who *we* were as a family, and certainly who *he* was. To be a railroad man was to be something special in a community, especially when the community, like thousands of communities across America, was a railroad town. I was born and grew up in a railroad town, and my father was a railroad man.

In the western environs of the United States, a peculiar phenomenon is that small towns along major highways are almost consistently thirty miles apart. This isn't something a lot of today's motorists notice since they are whizzing by at seventy-plus mph, smoothly skirting around many if not most of these tiny bergs that sprang up out of the prairie over a century ago, flourished, and died when urbanization conquered the agrarian lifestyle of America and lured away the best of its people to much less rewarding and less fulfilling lives in the cities. But if one is astute, one notices this consistency of distance between them and might wonder why.

The answer is simple: Thirty miles was about as far as a steam-driven "bullgine," as steam locomotives were sometimes called in the latter half of the nineteenth century, could travel without having to stop for water. The term given these railroad towns was "jerkwaters," or possibly "whistle stops." They were places where trains would sound their whistles—long-short, long-short, long-short—as they approached grade crossings, making a huge cacophony as they slowed to pass through a gate and crossed a switch then ground to a tenuous halt and soughed and sighed in smoking, steaming impatience while the "deadhead," or fireman, jerked down the trough from a siding tower and replenished the water in their boilers so they could then blow themselves back to a boil and grind into movement once more for another thirty-mile run.

In the early days of telegraphy, thirty miles was also about as far as an electronic telegraph signal could travel without having to be received and retransmitted to some more distant destination. Usually, this is where a depot—and then a town—would be built, each umbilically connected to the next by steel rail and telegraph wire in a time when roads tended to run to impassable mud when it rained and were uncertain in the best of weather. Hence, the thirty-mile rule applies throughout the U.S. Anything shorter was called a "milk run."

The steam locomotives and the trains they pulled were an inexorable part of the American landscape; the din they made signaled arrivals and departures from the outside world. Whistles, bells, screeching steel on steel, the hiss of airbrakes and rumbling clatter of cars jumbling and shouldering their bulk up and down the track behind a smoking leviathan was a celebration of sorts, a festival of noise and excitement. They had names: The Aristocrat, The Diplomat, The Silver Star, The Texas Express, The Pioneer, The Mountain Queen, Denver City, Fast-Flying Vestibule, The Overland Flyer, The Dixie Flyer. Their trails of black smoke, even seen from afar, were indicators that things and people were on the move. They were the conduits through which a whole nation flowed. They brought mail and produce, people and animals, all kinds of freight when they came and took it all away as they went. Soldiers and salesmen, politicians and princes, students and scoundrels, lovers and newlyweds all made their way onto and off of the platforms next to the country's rails and caught their first and last sight of hamlets and towns, farms and factories from the observation platforms mounted on cars ornate and plain.

Just as churches were to the villages of medieval Europe, depots and the trains they served were the center of everyday life in every city and town of any size in America for nearly two centuries. They told the time, reckoned the moment, were monuments to salvation and symbols of unimaginable power; they reminded everyone that they were part of something much larger and more important than themselves.

In a lesser way and in fewer places, they still are some of these things, but they've lost their romance. Now, trains are drawn by diesel-powered, electric engines. There's no spewing steam, no billowing stack of black smoke, comparatively little noise, and not much in the way of whistles and bells. Pullmans, smoking cars, dining cars, observation cars, mail cars, and cabooses are mostly gone. In times past, any child could define on sight a flat-car, tank car, boxcar, refrigerator car, cattle car, and a host of other rolling stock. Today, it's all sort of an inconsequential homogeny. The magic is gone.

My father started working a local rail line in 1936, the same year he finished high school. His elder brother, my namesake, was already working for the company, and he probably got him the job. It was a good job; in those years of the Great Depression, it was a *great* job. The labor was hard and dangerous, the hours were long, and the future didn't offer much, really. But the work was steady, the wages were good, and the union was strong and protective. He was able to buy a new Ford after only two years of working for the railroad.

Except for the years when he was in the Army, overseas, fighting Nazism in Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, Belgium, and Germany, doing his bit as a corporal in the combat engineers, he worked for the railroad most all of his life. One would think that the Army would have found an assignment for him that had to do with railroad work; they didn't. His official designation was "carpenter." He was, by his own admission, "all thumbs," never a carpenter of any sort. But that's the Army's mentality. What he actually became was a rifleman, a rifleman who built bridges and made roads when he wasn't fighting and being shelled and bombed. He told me, "The engineers were the first ones into any area. As soon as we cleared the mines, built a bridge or dug some emplacements, then they'd send in the tanks and the infantry and, of course, the generals."

He didn't have to join the Army. Being a railroad man meant he was protected from conscription, that he was doing "essential war work." But he enlisted, anyway. He said one of his good friends came home from work one afternoon and found a dead chicken hanging from his mailbox. He joined up the next day; so did my father. He'd never been farther than a couple of hundred miles from home, but he was soon on his way to more distant places than he'd ever imagined. He was gone nearly three years. He was wounded, contracted malaria, won five Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart, and saw and did things he never wanted to talk about.

He came back changed, and when he died at age sixty-six of a combination of heart problems, diabetes, and neurological ailments, it was at least in part because of his combat experience. He suffered from insomnia, migraines, and "a case of nerves" for the rest of his life; but he never complained, and he seldom mentioned the war or that he had been a soldier. He gave me and my brother his medals to play with, and we soon lost them, of course. He threw away his uniform, and he never joined any organizations like the VFW or American Legion. He once told my mother he didn't want any honor or recognition for what he had done. He later told me he never regretted going. It was his duty. He also told me that he had no respect for others who should have gone but didn't. He said he had less respect for those who came back and then either bragged or "complained" about it. If I asked him a question about it, he would change the subject or make it into a joke. On a visit home from college, I found some V-Letters he sent home to his mother from the front. They were very short, and his handwriting was awful. When I chided him about it, he said, "You never write home, and your handwriting is worse. And you're not in a foxhole with artillery exploding all around you."

A few years later, it appeared I would have to serve in combat in a tragically wrong war in Southeast Asia. I came home to tell him I was now 1-A and liable for the draft, depending on the lottery draw the next weekend; if my number came up, I didn't intend to go. I arrived late, and my mother had already gone to bed. He met me in our tiny kitchen. My father was not a drinking man, not in the least. But on the table there was a pack of Lucky Strikes, a new pint bottle of bourbon, and two glasses. Although I'd not seen him for two months, he said nothing except for me to sit down. He broke the seal and poured and we sat there in silence, smoking and drinking together. I was too shocked to say anything, and I dreaded the speech I figured he was about to make. He divided the dregs between us and said, "Never drink whiskey with anything but water. It'll give you the bellyache." Then he looked out the window and said, "I didn't go through that so you would have to go through this." He told me to eat something, and he went to bed. As it turned out, my number was very high, and I didn't have to go; I'm sure he was relieved. But he never said any more about it, and I never saw him drink whiskey again.

Years later, I gave him a tape recorder and some blank cassettes. I asked him to record all he could remember of his war experience. My mother told me he diligently sat down at the dining table each night, and with the machine running talked for an hour at a time into it. He would only do it if she was out of the house, maybe in the yard, out of earshot. It took him two months, and he filled up six tapes, ninety minutes each. But one afternoon, she told me, she came in to find him running the machine with the microphone taped over. She asked what he was doing, and he just shrugged. He re-recorded over all the tapes, with silence. When she asked him why he did that, he told her he didn't want to remember it. She told me he never wanted to be a soldier.

He also never wanted me to be a railroad man. I could have been. There was a "legacy" program, whereby the son of an employee would go to the top of the list for any opening. He told me I was going to go to college and get a job using my head, not my hands. "You're going to go to college if I have to go around with holes in my britches," he always said, "I'll be damned if you'll spend your life working for the goddamn railroad."

But he was proud of being a railroad man, even so. When he returned from the war and married my mother and had two sons, bought another new Ford and used the GI Bill to build a small house, he traveled some eighty-five miles to the nearest large town—we thought it was a "city"—and opened a charge account in a large department store. Revolving charge accounts were very new then, and not many people qualified for them. When he filled out the application and wrote down his annual salary, he told me, the clerk behind the desk asked him to wait; she then brought out the store manager to shake his hand and thank him personally for his business. He liked to tell that story. It illustrated the pride he had in being a railroad man.

I don't know, exactly, what job my father started with on the railroad. At some point, I know, he was a "car catcher," or an "end man," a brakeman who rode in the caboose and sometimes served as a "bull," or the man who threw bums and hobos off the trains when they climbed on for free rides. Once, in passing when we heard a reference to "railroad bulls" in a movie or on a television program, he shook his head and said he didn't like that work, so I know that at some point he did it. But he advanced to conductor; I think that was after the war, and it was on a passenger train. The line he worked for soon ended its passenger service, though, and he returned to being a brakeman. He said once he didn't want to be a freight conductor, since the work was the same as being a brakeman but the responsibility was greater. Freight conductors usually rode in the caboose. By the time I knew enough to be aware that he was a railroad man, he was a "head man," or front brakeman, who rode in the engine with the engineer and fireman. He also was responsible for jumping off the engine and running ahead to throw a switch while the train continued to move forward.

A caboose (sometimes called "a shack" or "a "doghouse" or a "crummy" and other things less polite in railroad parlance, but never a "caboose") were drafty and uncomfortable. Being at the end of the train, they tended to "rock" a lot more than other cars, since there was nothing to anchor them. When the train moved off or came to a stop, they jerked, the same way the tip of a whip jerks when it's unfurled rapidly and snapped. They had stoves that burned kerosene or coal, and they had bunks padded with thin plastic-covered mattresses. They were dirty and hot in the summer and cold in the winter and poorly lighted all the time. Often they leaked when it rained. A man in our town bought one and put it in his backyard, where he made a kind of workshop and outside-the-house getaway. My father thought he was nuts. "What kind of dumbass wants a monkey house in his backyard?" he asked whenever we drove by it.

Locomotive engines weren't much more comfortable. The seats were metal and had little or no padding, and at every turn there was some hunk of iron or steel ready to gouge or poke. Locomotives were also smoky and oily and hot, no matter what the weather. Diesels weren't much better. The smoke was gone, but they were greasy and hard. Still, riding in the engine was better than the caboose because they were up front in the wind.

The railroad kept my father away from home a lot. He missed Christmases, Thanksgivings, Fourth of Julys and Labor Days, birthdays, anniversaries, all kinds of parties and picnics, other events where other fathers were always present. When he was "out," he would be gone for three days at a time. "Three-on, Three-off" was his schedule. It didn't vary. Rain or shine, sleet or snow, heat or flood, ill or well. Although he suffered from debilitating "hay fever" that was worse than any cold you could imagine and crippling headaches, he never took a sick day. So holidays and special occasions often came and went without him.

He loved Christmas, though I never knew exactly why. We had a radio in our Ford and, of course, in the house, but he never listened to it except at Christmas. His favorite Christmas songs weren't hymns. He particularly liked "Silver Bells," although we lived nowhere near any city. He couldn't really sing, but he would whistle the tune whenever it came on, and it made him soft and sentimental. Another holiday tune that moved him was, "I'll Be Home for Christmas." One holiday season, he passed through the living room where I was watching a program called *Twentieth Century,* hosted by Walter Cronkite. That week's episode concerned the Battle of the Bulge, in which my father fought, although I didn't know that at the time. The picture on the set was of American GIs, surrounded by the enemy and trudging through deep snow, with explosions going on all around them. Under the film's added-in sound effects of booms and machine-guns, the soundtrack played that song. He stopped and stared at the set for a moment then lit a cigarette. After a few moments, I looked at him, as he hadn't moved or said anything, and I saw tears running down his face. It was one of few times that I ever saw him cry. It only lasted for beat or two, and he moved on. But I never hear that song or see any footage of that battle without thinking of him. I cannot imagine his pain.

But that sadness didn't really infect his love of Christmas. It may have been because of me and my brother. Our mother had no love of the Christmas holiday. Her father, already widowed, had died on Christmas Eve, 1938, leaving her and her six siblings in the charge of an elderly great-great-aunt in the depths of the Dustbowl and Great Depression. It ruined the holiday for her forever, even into her dotage. But my father loved the whole season: the food, the atmosphere, and especially the gifts. I remember many Christmas mornings, sitting and looking longingly and anxiously at wrapped presents under the tree, eager to dive in, but our mother always made us wait if he was due back that morning, so he could watch us open our gifts and play with them. Sometimes, he didn't show up till afternoon, and the delay was agonizing.

One Christmas, I awoke to find an elaborate Lionel Model Railroad set, all assembled and ready to run. He got his call to go to work about midnight, but he worked furiously for two solid hours and managed somehow to get the whole thing unpacked and set up in a huge circle that dominated our living room. It featured an old steamer that made "smoke" and had lights and whistles, with seven cars and a caboose, and there was a model depot and warehouse, crossing gates that went up and down and a water tower to go with it. It took up all of the living room that wasn't occupied by the Christmas tree.

He was "on" that Christmas Day, so I didn't have to wait to start. I ran that railroad all day long and had to be dragged away to my grandmother's to eat Christmas Dinner. By the time he came in two days later, the "new had worn off it," though; I think it disappointed him that I had grown bored and abandoned it for other toys. He played with it himself for a day or two, then ordered it dismantled so our mother could clean—Christmas at our house ended quickly, a concession, I now understand, to our mother's seasonal sadness. I don't think I ever set up that model train set again. Years later, he got it out of the storeroom and gave it away.

The rail line he worked for was a small subsidiary of a larger railroad. Once the line had had great ambitions, but a combination of economic downturns and steel shortages and finally the Depression limited it to being a connector line, joining two major railroads and the coastal regions of the country in a web of freight and people movement. The town we lived in was a major junction, though, and he would have to work to switch cars to make up new trains to make the run to another junction some 114 miles away. He especially hated switch work in the yard. It was tedious and dangerous and, he thought, beneath him. Switch brakemen or "fielders" weren't as well respected, but an agreement between the union and management meant that everyone had to work the switch yards each time before a run.

During his annual two-weeks' vacation, we went to California to visit his brother or to New Mexico or Alabama or Mississippi to visit our mother's brothers and sisters. We could have gone on the train for free, as he had a pass to ride any passenger line in the country, good for the whole family. We never did that. We always drove in the family car. He said it was no vacation for him to ride the railroad.

Trains ran on strict schedules, and all railroad men had to carry a railroad-approved watch. For years these were always Hamilton pocket watches, but in the mid-1960s, two wristwatches were approved, the Hamilton 505 and the Bulova Accutron. Both had to have "railroad faces," and both boasted superbly accurate timing. My father insisted on trading in his pocket watch for the Bulova. It had been developed by NASA and was, supposedly, the watch astronauts would wear into space. Accurate down to less than 1/6000th of a second, or so the claim went, it had a tuning fork inside it, never needed winding, hummed rather than ticked, was totally waterproof and durable enough to take the kind of abuse working on the railroad would dish out. I don't think my father was more proud of anything he ever owned than he was of that watch. He always removed his old pocket watch, chain and fob, and left them on his dresser when he wasn't going to work, but he wore that Bulova everywhere. And he showed it to everyone. Over and over again. After a while, even I noticed that people teased him about it. "Hey, Wrex, let's see your watch," some friend or relative would say out of the blue. I don't think he ever caught on to the fact that he was being joshed. He'd immediately roll back his cuff and show it off, launching off into his patented litany of the watch's virtues. He wore it until the day he died, and after that, I took it and wore it for years until the tuning fork finally played out.

Sticklers for on-time schedules or not, though, no one ever knew when a train would be coming in and the new crew would get their orders. Party lines were the norm when I was young, but we had one of the first private telephone lines in our community. Railroad men had to have a phone so the "dick scratcher," as the dispatcher was called, could call the crews and summon them to the depot. It could be at any time of the day or night, and they rarely had more than a couple of hours' notice. Often, my father had to stay at home waiting by the phone for the call when he would rather have been at some family function or out doing something with his friends.

We also had one of the first "refrigerated" air conditioners in our town—it was installed in my parents' bedroom. A lot of people don't know that these early electrified, Freon-cooled window-unit air conditioners were originally built to keep perishables cold on railroad cars. They were adapted for home installation in the sixties, and railroad men were among the first to buy them. The unit not only kept him comfortable when he slept during the day after he came in from his "Three-On," it also shuttered outside noise. He kept it chilly in there, down to sixty degrees or so when it was well over a hundred outside. My brother and I regarded it as a treat to be able to go in and lie down on our parents' bed in the super-cooled air during the hottest days of August.

When he came home from "Three-On," often having slept a few hours here and there in a caboose, he would be dirty and greasy. He smelled of metal and leather, oil and smoke, stale coffee and tobacco. He always wore overalls, always washed and ironed by our mother and starched so stiff they would almost stand up, over a soft-collar shirt and a necktie, with a flat striped hat, a red kerchief, and high lace-up, steel-toed work boots, scarred from stepping on the "stirrups" and "flipping" himself up to the "grab-iron" on cars and engines after throwing a switch. He frequently suffered from sprained ankles and torn ligaments, but he just laced the boots tighter and toughed it out. "Toughing it out," was, in many ways, his attitude toward everything. He didn't believe in excuses. In winter, he wore a denim "jumper" and a cap with earflaps. He carried switch keys and a glim, or a special three-bulbed battery-powered lantern, which I still have, and heavy leather gloves that were stained black with oil and grime. He was not a big man—only five-six—but he seemed like a giant when he came through the door. He would be so tired sometimes, all he could do was bathe, eat, and go to bed. Much of my childhood was spent tiptoeing around and whispering so he could sleep. To make too much noise and awaken him was to risk his terrible wrath, particularly when he had a headache. We hoped, though, that there would be a payoff for our care, that when he awoke, we would "do something." And we usually did.

My father always proclaimed that he "hated the goddamn railroad." But as I grew older, I noticed that we never passed a train that didn't capture his attention, never walked past a rail museum he didn't want to go into. I know he had a photographs over the workbench in our storeroom. Two were of the first locomotives he ever worked on, twelve-wheelers both, and one was of the first-ever train made up entirely of automobile carriers. He also kept a framed photograph of his line's logo there, out of sight, in a way, but where he could always see it. I think it reminded him of who he was. He would talk about how much he admired the diesel locomotives, reveled in explaining how a Westinghouse (air brake) or coupler or "Lincoln pin" or "Johnson bar" worked, and swore that he was so glad to see those old steam locomotives go away. But I also noticed that when an old steamer would chug through our town before they become utterly obsolete, he would stop and listen for the whistle, and if it was in sight, he'd stand still and watch it pass, a faraway look on his face as the smoke from the stack faded in the distance.

I also remember going with him to the depot to pick up his check. I recall the sound of the telegraph tick-ticking in the dispatcher's office, seeing the long wooden benches where passengers waited for trains, watching the postman sorting mail into bags to be deposited on hooks strategically placed trackside near rural post offices where the trains didn't stop so they could be snatched by a rail mailman using a "hoop." I remember the oddly shaped, chest-high desks where clerks with green eyeshades and sleeve-protectors stood and filled out paperwork, using steel-nibbed pens and inkwells, and the echoes of voices in the high-ceilinged waiting area. There was an odor in the waiting room, a kind of metallic smell, laced with linseed oil and disinfectant of some kind. I recall looking into the baggage room and seeing the redcaps smoking, playing cards or dice, waiting for the next arrival. I remember him talking of his work with other railroad men. I learned railroad terms early and found out about idlers and hot-boxes and frozen buckles and fusees, about green-eyes and clear-eyes, and wig-wags, knew what a clogged cut and riprap and a lay-by were. I learned how switches and humps worked. I heard about the fear they all had of derailments and icy tracks. And I sensed his pain when he would come in after some poor soul fatally wandered out on the tracks in front of a screaming locomotive that would take miles to stop.

I also heard of men who died working for the railroad, of those who lost fingers and hands, feet and legs, who "missed a flip" or fell in between the cars as they raced along the toepaths and "joined the birds," or jumped from one car to the other while the train hurtled along at sixty miles per hour. I also heard about hobos and bums, about jammed brakes and hoptoads. I understood the difference between grades and gates, cuts and passes. I heard him talking about "mile-longs," a train that would extend that far, cow-catcher to caboose coupling, about double-headers and bad orders. A railroad was a world of its own, and all the miseries and dangers and glories and pleasures of life lay along its steel rails.

From before I was born, we were a railroad family. One of the first rhymes I ever leaned was this: "Railroad Crossing/Look out for the Cars/Can You Spell That/Without Any Rs?" One of my proudest possessions was a nickel, laid on a track and squashed flat by a passing train. I still carry a red bandana instead of a handkerchief. I am, after all, the son of a railroad man.

Our mother, of course, was a railroad man's wife. Because he would finish his "three-on" at any time of the day or night, she was attuned to the sound of trains arriving. No matter what the hour, when she heard that whistle—and later, the horn of the engines—she would rise from her chair or her bed, come in from chatting with a neighbor or break off watching a TV show or reading a book, and she'd make him a supper. It was the only thing in the world that could induce her to leave a church service before the Benediction. Three in the morning or three in the afternoon. It didn't matter. It was never a small meal. It would usually have fried steak or chicken and gravy, potatoes, vegetables, fresh-made biscuits or cornbread, and pie or cake for dessert, often with ice cream. My father loved nothing more than ice cream. Summers would find him out on our back porch, hand-cranking one of his favorites—peach-pecan—with me commissioned to chip chunks of ice off of a block he had toted home from the town's icehouse and feeding it into the sides of the maker, dousing it then with rock salt to ensure a proper melt and temperature. Ice cream and peanut butter, which he would eat right out of the jar, I think, were his two favorite foods in the world. He would come in, exhausted but clearly happy and relieved to be home, bathe, dress for bed—even if it was the middle off the afternoon—eat his meal, smoke a Lucky Strike, then sleep for several hours.

Sometimes, our mother said that the when she heard that whistle, it was like he was calling her. The six blasts—long-short, long-short, long-short—always signaled that the train was approaching the yard. She said it was like hearing, "Come-on, Paul-ine. Come-on!" It was her call to duty, in a way. It became a kind of family joke. Many times when we were all going out together, he'd be standing in the driveway, next to one of our successive Fords, exasperated by her taking so long to get ready and out the door. We'd hear him call, finally, "Come-on, Paul-ine. Come-on!"

To say our father loved our mother would not be sufficient. He revered her. He idolized her. He never thought he was good enough for her, although she had grown up very poor, and his family had weathered the Depression in severely diminished circumstances but with comparative comfort. As a railroad family, we were never rich or even prosperous, but she had whatever she wanted that he could provide. She had to be careful what she asked for, sometimes. Once, they were walking past a gift shop window and she spied a particularly large and ugly ceramic swan in full wing and in the motion of landing in a bowl fashioned to look like splashing water. She said something admiring about it, but she was being sarcastic. He missed the irony, and on his next payday, he bought it for her. I don't know how much it cost—probably too much—and I know she hated it. But for the rest of her life it was the centerpiece of our dining table. Eventually, she became proud of it, I think, as she was always especially careful not to break it when she moved it. I think it came to represent how hard he worked and how much he loved her, and that made it beautiful.

My father didn't intend to be a railroad man for life. His father had been a horseman, a wrangler for the local mill, although he also carried the mail and often would go out to the track that ran only a few dozen yards behind their home and hang the postal bag on the hoop for the passing train to grab when it raced by their rural community. My father loved horses, though, and he always wanted to raise them or, in the proper parlance, "run" them. Once, when he and my mother were repainting a room in their home, they ran out of paint, and he left to go buy more at the hardware store downtown. She waited and waited. Hours went by and he didn't return. Finally, she looked out the window and saw him coming up the alley behind our house, leading a small welsh mare someone had sold him. She was furious. She thought the horse was a waste of time and money. He said it was a gift for my younger brother, but we all knew better. It was for him, although I never saw him ride her. We kept the mare in a rented corral and stable for several years, until he finally sold her. Being a railroad man didn't leave him much time for horses.

Another time, though, he was approached by two friends who wanted him to go in with them to buy a section of land—a section is one square mile. Their notion was that they would all pitch in and farm it, and he would have pasture set aside to run some horses. He wanted to do it, but our mother said no. She remembered what it was like to be poor and to be victimized by foolish schemes and bad investments, something that her father had indulged in too often. The men found another partner, and years later, oil was discovered on the land, and they became wealthy. She told me that my father never mentioned it to her, not even when he could no longer work for the railroad and had to take odd jobs, one of which was plowing fields for one of those same men on that same land. She said that it was the single thing in their marriage that she always regretted, not letting him have a place to run horses.

But he probably was no more a horseman than he was a field hand. He was a railroad man.

When I was young and before we had air conditioning in the rest of the house, I would lie awake at night and listen to the trains coming through our town. We were, as I said, a junction, and there were three major lines that intersected there and passenger lines, as well. We thought our town was special because we had two separate depots, and one of the lines had the same name as our town. There was also a large switching yard and a roundhouse and a wye. We could hear the trains working all day and all night, arriving and leaving, and we could hear the switchyards working, cars banging and crashing together as they were "dropped over the hump" and slammed into each other, all punctuated by whistles and bells. Train noise was part of my town's culture, part of my childhood experience. But I never could hear my father's train, distinguish it from the others. My mother always could. When I asked her about it later in my life, she said, "Only his says, 'Come-on, Paul-ine. Come-on!'"

My father had a reputation for being a practical joker in the town. People liked that about him, I think. He had a mischievous streak that sometimes manifest itself in wise ways, though. When I was fourteen, I got my driving license—you could do that in Texas in those days. Anyone could. I had the use of his "work car," a 1953 Chevy. I took it out one night with some friends, and, as usual, he gave me a curfew, eleven o'clock. We went to a basketball game and then got in someone else's car and "rode around" for a while, well past eleven. When they dropped me off at the car around midnight, it wouldn't start. I had no idea why or what to do. I tried and tried, but it just wouldn't start. I walked home, three miles in the dark. When I awoke the next morning, I found a spark plug wire on my bed. He came into my room, grinned at me and said, "Walk back and put it in." That was all he ever said. I never missed curfew again.

My father's health did not sustain him for as long as it should have. I'm sure that those cholesterol-laden, butter-slathered meals and sugary desserts didn't help. He smoked but he didn't drink alcohol—it wasn't a moral or religious thing with him; he said he just got enough of that when he was young. When he was in his fifties, he developed diabetes. It ran in his family, so it wasn't entirely unexpected. It eventually diminished his eyesight. Railroad men, head-men in particular, had to be able to see 20/20 with spectacles. Glaucoma impaired his vision, and the railroad forced him to retire long before he was ready to.

That was the worst thing that ever happened to my father. It wasn't so much that he didn't work—couldn't work, not and collect his medical pension, which was wholly inadequate—or that my mother had to take a job outside the home and earn most of our living, or that he wasn't glad to be free of "the goddamn railroad." It was that he lost his identity. He had been a railroad man all of his life. More than being a husband, a father, a decorated veteran, a thirty-two-degree Mason, a respected and well-liked member of the community, a solid citizen, he saw himself as a railroad man. But he was no longer. I think it broke his spirit.

After that, he took whatever work he could find: farm hand, motel manager, hardware-store clerk. He always said that an able-bodied man who didn't work wasn't "worth a damn." "There's always a job out there," he told me a hundred—maybe a thousand times. He insisted that my brother and I work at something. He tolerated play, admired study, but he expected work, hard labor if nothing else was available. One summer when I was older, I couldn't find anything suitable. He arranged for me to have a job with a construction company building a new factory. The foreman had no need for me, I could tell, and only took me on as a favor to my father. He gave me "make-work" chores, such as moving a huge pile of sand from one side of the construction site to another with a shovel and wheelbarrow. It would, he told me, take all day. When I chose instead to make use of a caterpillar front loader I discovered sitting idly nearby and completed the job in an hour, he told me I was too smart-alecky and let me go. My father was furious with me. It was one of many bitter fights we had when I was a teenager.

Like many men of small stature I have known, my father had a very short temper, but unfathomable depths of remorse after losing it. He could blow up in a wink, and it would take him a long time to get over an outburst that sometimes would cause him to say things he would regret. Ultimately, this divided us. Like most men of his generation, he believed in corporal punishment. My brother and grew up in dread of a "whipping," usually administered with his belt. None was ever severe or really even painful; it was more about the embarrassment. They stopped when we were about ten or eleven, except for one time. When I was seventeen, and foolishly rebellious, as most kids that age are, we had a towering argument about something he thought I had done, something I had, in fact, not done. We were in our living room, arguing bitterly and loudly, and he finally said I was "going to get a whipping" and started taking off his belt. I am and was a big man, taller than he by six inches, and much heavier. I told him I wouldn't stand for it, and I held him by the shoulders and forced him down into a chair. Then I left.

That caused a rift between us that never really healed. He was always wary of me after that, distant and guarded. We had many good times together in the next fifteen years, wonderful moments of intimacy and candor and love. But there was always that incident between us. No matter how long I live, I will never cease regretting that one impulsive action. I have wished so often that I had subdued my anger, swallowed my pride, and taken my "whipping." It never would have hurt that much, lasted that long. I never could figure out how to repair that rift, although I would have given anything to do so.

Like hundreds of other railroad towns across America, my hometown eventually lost the railroad, and that broke its spirit, too. Trains still came through, but they dismantled the terminals, closed the depots. Diesels didn't need water or coal, so they didn't stop. They swished through. The last passenger line, the Texas Zephyr, stopped service two years after my father retired. After that, it was all freight. The short-line he worked for was bought out, shut down; the routes were changed, the tracks taken up, the roundhouse, wye, and switching yard closed, allowed to fall into ruin, eventually demolished and sold for scrap. The old cuts that were so meticulously maintained filled with tumbleweeds and dirt. Men who still worked for the railroad were relocated to large cities from where they could be more efficiently dispatched. Crews were summoned by beepers, then cellphones from centralized locations, sometimes a whole continent away. Switching was done by computers with only minimum crews needed. Trains no longer required an engineer, a fireman, a conductor, multiple brakemen. They got on fine with two-man crews. Electronics did the routing, controlled the switches, gates, signals, gave the orders. Western Union offices that were part of the depot's heartbeat were closed and moved to Walmarts and supermarkets. The depots were either razed or turned into kitsch restaurants or gift shops for tourists. The old locomotives and some of the early diesels were put on side tracks and turned into museums.

The age of the railroad passed. Trains still run, but it isn't the same. When they stopped using cabooses it was the close of a chapter.

My father didn't live to see most of that. I think that was a good thing. It would have broken his heart. He was a railroad man. I don't think he would have wanted to be in a world without railroads.

I think about my father's being a railroad man a lot. I think of the long frigid nights and blistering hot days he worked for my family. I think about how much of life he missed working for the railroad, about how much he hated it, how much he loved it, how it made him who he was. On the day of his funeral, the procession moved out of the First Baptist Church and slowly made its way to the cemetery across the tracks toward the outskirts of town. As the procession passed through the downtown district of our small town, the signals at the Main Street grade crossing lights came on, and everything stopped as a freight train highballed through. My mother, seated in the funeral-home limo with our family, chuckled and sighed. "He spent all of his life waiting for a train," she said.

When I turned sixty, I did something I never thought I would do. I got a tattoo. It is the logo of my father's railroad line. I don't know if he would have approved or not; I'm certain my mother would not have. But I wanted to do it, felt, somehow, that I was obliged to do it. I think of it as a reminder of him, of how much he loved us and how hard he worked for us, and of how proud I am to be the son of a railroad man. It's my personal memorial. I will have it forever.

My mother died a few years ago. She outlived my father by more than thirty years, but she always saw herself as the wife of a railroad man. She never saw a train, even an Amtrak or a coal train or some other freighter highballing across the landscape that she didn't notice and comment on it, never heard an engine's horn without perking up, even when her mind was almost gone. At her graveside service at the town's cemetery, the minister finished his remarks and we sat for a moment in the searing heat of a late September afternoon and contemplated her pristine white coffin and the flowers covering it, waiting to be lowered into the grave next to his. In the distance, a freight train was blowing through our small town. It wouldn't stop, but as was the custom and the law, when it approached the old main junction, the engineer sounded the horn. My wife and brother, seated next to me on either side, both gripped my hands suddenly. None of us is the sort to believe much in signs, spiritual signals, and such like, but we all heard it, as clearly as a resonance from a lifetime of listening. The train's horn echoed across the prairie from the grade crossing, like the voice of a railroad man: "Come-on, Paul-line" it said, "Come-On!"