

# A Train and the Water

I hear something in the distance. But I am not sure what it is.

“Something is coming,” I say to my brother.

“Huh?” my brother stops and turns toward me. He is walking just in front of me.

“Hush! Shut up!” I put a finger to my lips. I listen.

“You shut up!” my brother tells me.

“No, just please shut up,” I plead with him.

“No, you shut up!” he yells back.

“For God’s sake, you idiot...” Again, I hear something.

The sound is pitched so low that it seems to move the air, rather than move through the air. I bend and touch the rails, and I feel something – or is it my imagination? Whatever it is, the sound seems to grow louder. It is not imagination. Now I am certain I feel it in the rails. My brother shouts and points. I stand and follow his gaze down the tracks.

The train emerges from around a bend and speeds toward us. The engineer sees us on the tracks. I see his head in the front window of the engine. I see a face behind dark glasses. His mouth opens. I know he is looking at us. Suddenly I am hit, as if with a hammer, by a wall of sound. The engineer has blasted the train’s air horn at my brother and me. He blasts us a second time. The sound is long and menacing, an unrelenting bone-cracking scream. It is so loud that it paralyzes. I have heard countless train whistles, but never from directly in front of an oncoming locomotive. I feel that my forehead is being tattooed by the sound of the horn. I can’t think. I can’t move. Now the rails rattle and hum, and I think the world is shaking to pieces. The engine is 75 yards away. My brother and I have not moved. Our eyes are wide and our mouths are open, but we have not moved.

Then we do move and run into one another. My brother is knocked down, and I trip over him. I reach for him, missing his flailing hand. The engine is 50 yards away. I scramble to my feet. I begin to panic. Another blast from the air horn, even louder, slams into us. I grab my brother’s shirt and pull him. He has caught his shoe beneath a railroad tie. He kicks and screams. There is a sound that I imagine is like the ripping of the universe. The train’s wheels lock tight and hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of tons of steel slide and grind down the rails toward my brother and me.

We know that we must never go onto the bridge. But like other forbidden things, it has an allure that pulls us, in spite of its dangers and the threat of losing our hides to our father’s belt. We are wary, but we are drawn.

“Let’s go across,” my brother says. But he is not completely sure. It will be up to me. We stand at one end of the bridge and look across; then we look down. There is water far below.

“Only a little ways,” I say after a moment, though I am reluctant. Because he has suggested it, I can’t say no. This makes me angry with my brother. I give him a stern look that tells him not to push too far his luck of being younger. We both know that if we are caught it will be me that suffers most.

We step onto the bridge, careful to place our feet directly on the ties. Looking between my legs, I see the water below, a distant ribbon, foaming and brown. We find loose spikes in the ties and carefully stuff them in our pockets to take home. My pants grow heavy with their weight. My hands are dark from the iron and the rust. Soon I realize we have gone too far. And that is when I hear something, when I tell my brother to shut up, when I bend to feel the rails.

The locomotive's massive wheels grind the rails toward us, and then my brother's foot comes suddenly free, and we are falling. My heart leaps into my mouth, and then it stops. I do not breathe; I do not blink; I make no sound. I am twisting in the air. I think of the time I fell from the garage roof and knocked the air from my lungs, and how I thought I would die in the seconds before I could breathe again.

As through the lens of a camera, I see the bridge, the train, the smoky exhaust, parts of my brother. I look toward the ground, and then my face is hit very hard, and I feel a thousand needles in my skin. And then I feel nothing. I sense that I am still falling, but that I am falling so very slowly. My eyes come open. It is dark, but a light shimmers above me. I move my arms, and they seem not to want to move. They are heavy, and very cold. Without thinking, I breathe in, and the thick air burns. It, like my arms, is heavy and cold. Something shrieks in my head, and I know it is not air I have tried to breathe. I am under water.

I panic and thrash about. I feel something bumping beneath me, the ground, I think. All around and above me the water goes brown-black. The weight of the railroad spikes in my pockets pins me down. I see flashes of my hands, my arms, my shirt. I paw frantically at the pockets of my pants. I struggle to not breathe. I must not breathe, yet I have to breathe.

My greatest fear has always been of drowning. I am afraid of water. I don't tell anyone, because I am ashamed of being afraid. It isn't a matter of disliking water, like when a person dislikes peas. It is a morbid and desperate instinctive dread. It is a fear embedded deep inside me, and I don't know why it is there.

I have fallen from the bridge, where I was forbidden to go, and the water has me now. But I will not drown here. I will not die here. I will find my brother and make sure he doesn't die here. He will tell our mother what we have done, because he is young, and our mother will tell our father. Our father will be relieved that we are alive, and he will take a few moments to think of what might have been. He will shake his head and wonder how he could possibly bear the loss of his children. He might want to hug us, but he won't. After a while, he will emerge from his thoughts. He will loom large above us, his mouth agape with incredulity, that we could have been so stupid. And has he told us to stay off that bridge, by God he has. And by God he ought to beat the hell out of us, and by God he thinks he by God will.

Anger will build inside him until he shakes. It will twist his face into a rictus of futility and rage, and then it will claw its way out, uncontrollable and screaming like the locomotive, covering me like the water, and I will not be able to breathe. Later my father will be sorry to have punished us so, but he will not say he is sorry. He loves us and wants us to be safe, and so he feels he must do what he must. I know that the rage is not him, but that it is in him, even so. He is powerless against it.

I feel myself slowly rising, weightless. The blackness brightens to gray. I think I see the source of the light above me. I feel something hitting my chest.

"Wake up, wake up, Momma says to wake up," I hear. I see a pajama-clad brother sitting on my chest, knocking on my ribs with his chubby fist. I am lying in my bed. Through my mouth, I inhale great gulps of morning air, light and warm with the taste of sunshine. My dream dissolves into oddly angled contorted images, disconnected from meaning and context. The images fade somewhere behind my eyes. I grasp at them, but they have become like air, and one by one they elude me.