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A short story
3400 words

The standard distance between rails for all U.S. railroads is four-feet, eight-and-one-half inches. That is the gauge upon which the pre-railroad tramways were built by English expatriates. The tramways were constructed using the same jigs and tools as wagon-builders, and that is how wide the wagon wheels were spaced. The old roads in England had ruts in them that those wheels were made to accommodate. Those ruts were worn by the chariots of Imperial Rome.

4 feet 8 1/2 inches

The hulking engine squats impatiently on the silver road, pausing on its march through the Pennsylvania night, hissing its angry voice into the frigid air, hungry to be on its way. Stretching back more than a mile, eighty-five dark acolytes sit motionless in its wake, slaves to the powerful pull of the black giant.

Danny Evers trudges out of the silent woods, a charcoal figure detaching itself from the gloom, white paper roll in hand reflecting moonlight like some

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ghostly lantern. Scuffed brown boots crunch crumbling gravel. Grimy fingers wipe sleep and coal dust from weary eyes as he swings up into the murky cab and settles back into the cracked leather of the engineer's chair. Listless pulls on rusted levers coax the resting beast to life. Clanking and creaking it strains forward, gathering momentum. Danny yawns, spits the stale taste of bad coffee onto the grated floor beneath his feet.

Lurching around banked curves past sleeping villages over ancient trestles, the train hurtles through the empty night. Alone at the controls, Danny's head nods forward on his chest, and he drifts into light slumber. Dozing engineers at the throttles of speeding freights are a regular occurrence in the world of short haul railroads. Crushing monotony and brutal hours conspire to create a safety hazard that management tries to minimize, in vain.

In the rocking, pitching cab, the cold touch of his father's hand jerks Danny awake. Flashes of light and the clamor of clanging alarm bells fill the stale air. Danny shakes his head, clears his brain, and slaps the red button once.

"No problem. All good here, boss."

He pulls the collar of his oil-stained jacket higher around his neck, tugs the weathered pinstriped cap lower on his damp forehead and settles back into the groaning confines of the swaying locomotive cab.

The night Danny's father died was a night like this. Alone in the yard working over the damaged coupling assembly, hands stiff with cold and twisted by hard labor, Carmine Evers never saw the renegade car careening down the

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track on its mindless mission to crush the life from his body. On that night his young son lay sleeping, dreaming of green football fields and soft, supple girls in window-fogged back seats. Imagining a future he would never see.

Danny cringes now with every touch of his dead father's hand waking him to the terrible quaking of the engine. He despises his father. Hates the man for dying that night in the yard, leaving his son trapped between the iron rails.

Midnight. The ebony monster trailing its ribbon of bound followers lumbers into the yard, groaning through creaking switches past hulking shapes, coming to a wheezing, croaking stop. Danny steps down from the cab, logbook tucked under one arm, and drags himself toward the low-slung diner crouching beside the tracks. Inside, green fluorescent light illuminates the grizzled cook in his pit-yellowed T-shirt and filthy apron behind the greasy counter. Danny eases onto a red-topped stool. He shakes a mangled cigarette from its pack, tenderly cupping raw sooty hands around silver lighter, igniting the Camel's slender tip and inhaling deeply.

The cook slides a steaming cup of black coffee and cracked plate of milky yellow eggs bleeding onto soggy sausage in front of his silent customer. From a tiny speaker in a distant corner The Byrds wail their retro biblical chorus:

*...and a time
to every purpose
under heaven...*

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Danny's father once sat on this stool and ate the same tasteless meals. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, interchangeable breaks in the tedium of endless days and nights. Danny's grandfather had crossed this path as well, supplying his own link in the chain of railroad men stretching as far back as a line of coal cars on a Scranton run.

Working conditions in the old days were far different, of course. Memories of journeys as a young boy in the company of his grandfather to what seemed to be far off magical places still warm a small corner of Danny's heart. Riding high in the big cab, reaching way up to pull the chord that sounded the plaintive whistle heard across the countryside, waving from the back of the caboose like some imperial potentate at smiling civilians in small towns along the way.

Long gone is the era of the caboose. With crews whittled down to one engineer left alone to carry the load, that comfort is a luxury no longer permitted. Tough times have hit the small railroads hard. Profits must be made. Downsizing and cost cutting are facts of life. Amenities the likes of toilets aboard today's short

line freight haulers are fixtures of the past. And the life of the railroad man is far from what it once was.

All that was of little concern to young Danny Evers. It became clear that his destiny lay beyond the blind heritage of his predecessors. He grew tall, quick and strong. An All-American with real talent and a future that promised escape from the prison of the rails.

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Then, The Accident. And in one terrible night a net was flung around Danny from which he could not hope to escape. He became a captive of the rails, conscripted into forced labor to provide for himself and his widowed mother as his father had.

Danny pays for his meal with the inadequate per diem allotted his shift and shuffles out into the iron night. Across the road a taxi sits, ready to transport him to the no-star motel where he will sleep before resuming his journey in the morning. The once yellow cab that in another lifetime prowled the canyons of Manhattan glistens darkly in the glow of the streetlamp, wearing its coat of coal dust like a shimmering shroud. The fine black powder layers everything in the yard. Trees, streets, buildings and livelihoods all share the same blanket of grime, casting the scene in a bleak noir.

Danny sleeps a dreamless sleep. There is no space for dreaming in his narrow gauge world. The rails bracket any hope of a life he might have had. The confining, defining rails insist that dreaming is not allowed.

In the morning he will retrace the same route back home. Back to the tiny wood frame house with the screen door that slams and the fence that leans into the wind. Back to a life lived in the absence of dreams.

Two nights later, five hours into his twelve hour shift, Danny is aboard another ponderous vessel traveling another predestined path in a never ending loop from no place to nowhere. He eases the small bottle from his coat pocket, twists off the cap and lets the fierce liquid burn its way into his consciousness. He knows this is against company policy. But he needs the drink to relieve the pressure, to loosen the vise squeezing his brain until he can't think, can't breathe. Two more pulls and he feels his body floating out past the insect-blurred windows, beyond the grimy cab, flying free.

Once more Danny's dead father's touch yanks the engineer back inside the lurching cockpit. He rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands, trying to refocus, angry at the intrusion. Suddenly alert, he sits up, brain buzzing, internal warning

signals flashing. Up ahead, glimmering in the moonlight, a lone figure stands on the tracks, staring into the blinding white light of the oncoming train. A shoeless boy in flannel pajamas, blonde hair tossed by the night breeze, cobalt eyes fixed on the engine charging down upon his fragile body.

Brakes scream. Sparks fly. Danny howls a silent “No!” as the speeding engine screeches to a grinding stop in the awful night. Leaping from the cab he searches under the great wheels, terrified to discover the horror he might find there. Up and down the tracks he races, fearing, hoping.

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This has happened twice before on nights like this. The boy in the tracks, gaze fastened upon the onrushing train, ice blue eyes pouring into Danny’s soul. Twice vanished like steam in the darkness.

Danny nurses a beer in a distant corner of the bar, doing his best to appear invisible. He has nothing to say, nothing to offer in the way of small talk. Acquaintances he might stumble into here are unwelcomed guests.

A commotion at the front door does little to disturb his self-imposed isolation. Thankfully, the rowdy gang keeps its distance. Danny makes himself smaller, pulling his stocking cap down to eyebrow level.

Out of the corner of his hooded eye he notices one of the noisy crowd looking his way. The man separates himself from his mates and heads straight for the lone drinker in the corner.

“Danny Evers? Is that you?”

Danny scowls at the 30-something in pressed khakis and blue blazer.

“I can’t believe this,” the intruder crows. “Hey, don’tcha recognize me?”

Wrapping his victim in an alcoholic hug the man grins stupidly, shaking his head in wonder. “What the hell are you doin’ here? Never thought I’d run into you in this

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shit town. They just shipped me in for the night, back to Philly in the morning.

What’s up with you, Danny boy? Let me buy you a beer. We got lotsa catching up to do.”

Trapping Danny in a one-sided conversation focused on himself, his wife, two kids, and race up the corporate ladder, the old high school classmate prattles on and on. Danny lowers his head into the onslaught, ducking and dodging like a prizefighter, fabricating small lies when cornered.

“So you work for C&S Railroad, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m doin’ contract negotiations for you guys right now.”

“Really.”

“Hope I don’t screw up your big bonus, ‘ol buddy.”

“No problem.”

“God, you could throw the ball. Figured you’d turn pro.”

“Nah.”

“Jesus, this place is a pit, isn’t it?”

Forty-five painful minutes later the man enfolds his prey a final time, eliciting promises to visit his condo at the club next time Danny comes to the big city. The young Philadelphians take their raucous leave of the seedy watering hole, blasting out into the night. Danny sighs, orders a beer with whiskey back, deciding its time for some serious drinking.

The talk of ancient football victories and recent career triumphs have turned his stomach sour. He absently scratches another label from another bottle with a dirty fingernail and tries not to feel anything.

The next morning, nursing a massive hangover, Danny slogs into the railroad office, stretching painful joints, massaging his pounding head. He collapses into a chair, swings his feet up on the old desk, and stares vacantly into space.

The small, harshly illuminated room feels empty, even when occupied at odd hours of the day and night. Yellowing knotty pine-paneled walls stand barren except for one lop-sided framed photograph of a steam engine chugging its way through a mountain pass. The office is furnished with a wooden desk displaying an alphabet of initials chiseled over decades into its scarred surface. Two gray metal folding chairs, one telephone, a fax machine, a refrigerator and a bulletin board plastered with safety slogans complete the sparse décor.

“Do you believe this shit?” Josiah Dorn slams the refrigerator door rattling the contents inside. Waving an empty Tupperware bowl stained with the orange residue of some carefully hoarded meal, the overweight engineer continues to rant as Danny sits, paying no attention.

“Goddamn name pasted right here, plain as day,” Dorn hollers. “And some stupid asshole thinks it belongs to him. Thinks I put this stuff here for any old

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dick brain to help himself. Son of a bitch.” He heaves the empty container against the wall and storms out, slamming the door behind him.

“Shut the fuck up,” Danny growls to the empty room.

He shakes a Camel from its pack, lights up, takes a drag and shoots a smoke ring toward the ceiling. His tired gaze wanders the familiar surroundings, coming to rest on the bulletin board where a yellow note tugs his attention back to something approaching alertness.

Danny Evers, call 763-4200.

He frowns, unfamiliar with the number. Blowing a layer of coal dust off the phone, glancing up again at the note on the board, he dials the local call. After five rings a voice answers.

“St. Mary’s, how may I direct your call?”

Danny sits up, feet hitting the floor.

“This is Danny Evers. I was told to call this number.”

“Your name again, sir?”

“Evers. Danny Evers.”

“One moment, please.”

Danny fidgets, drumming his fingers on the desktop. He stands. Sits. Stands again. Cursing under his breath, he just about decides to hang up when a male voice comes on the line. Compassionate but brief, the doctor delivers the bad news.

“When?” Danny stammers. “What hap... Yes, yes I’m OK. Thanks, doctor.”

Danny sinks heavily back into the chair, phone receiver clutched absently in one hand. The clock ticks away empty seconds in the stillness as he absorbs the wash

of emotions breaking over him like waves on a rocky shore. His mother had been bedridden for some time. But dying? How was that possible? He never even got the chance to say goodbye.

Painful memories mixed with practical anticipations of arrangements to be made chase each other around Danny's shocked and saddened brain. The young man had been his mother's sole caregiver since the day his father died. Now she is gone.

After accepting muttered condolences from the few friends and distant relatives gathered at the gravesite and thanking the neighbor ladies for their kind contributions of cookies, cakes and casseroles, Danny is finally alone behind the wheel of his battered but beloved '57 Chevy, driving a dirt road with no particular destination in mind. This is therapy. On rare days free from the shackles of the rails he delights in turning down unexplored country lanes for the pure pleasure of making the independent choice to execute a turn. Turn left, turn right, Danny doesn't care. As long as he is turning, moving away from the unbending road, choosing a direction of his own free will.

As he drives, somewhere just below the surface of a pool of sadness, a foreign thought begins to bubble uncomfortably. This strange reaction to the sudden loss of his mother is wrong. Out of place. Unwelcome.

What Danny feels is the possibility of escape. A small chance for a new kind of freedom he never dared to think possible. He is furious with himself, embarrassed and ashamed to be experiencing these inappropriate reveries. But they will not go away.

Danny Evers doesn't know whether to cheer or cry. A small tear snakes a track down his cheek, settling the question. For now.

The "Old Pennsy" route is a combination of treacherous battles with the Alleghenies and smooth sprints along the Juniata River to the east. Just west of Altoona is the famed "Horseshoe Curve," where spectators gather on sun dappled afternoons to watch up to 70 trains in a single day challenge the mountain grade. Tracks like these were laid 130 years ago to connect towns and cities across a growing America. Today, the locals carry coal. And engineers fight boredom and bulging discs in mind-numbing passages through the colorless night.

On this night, Engineer Danny Evers pilots the General Electric 4500 horsepower locomotive on the Old Pennsy run, unaware that this shift will be his last.

Just over a rise, rounding a bend, he spots the apparition that has repeatedly come to haunt his nocturnal journeys. The shoeless boy in flannel pajamas stands again in the path of the oncoming train. But unlike past confrontations, the boy is positioned far enough away that Danny has time to easily rein-in the charging leviathan.

The locomotive wheezes to a halt. Danny jumps down from the cab, dashing past the nose of the engine, his body backlit by the blazing headlight, his breath a cloud of white before his eyes. The boy stands motionless, blue eyes fixed on Danny's azure gaze. This kind of close encounter has never happened before. With just six feet of track separating man and boy, Danny stares, transfixed. For tonight he witnesses an astonishing modification to the surreal scene on the iron rails. To the boy's left, a woman in a simple print dress, gray hair tied in a neat bun atop her head, is holding the child's hand.

The weeping wind joins a chorus of clicking, hissing engine noise, punctuated by the thudding of Danny's racing heart. He stands rooted in place, afraid to move, fearful of disturbing the delicate balance.

A small, sad smile creases the face of Danny's mother. She nods her head, almost imperceptibly. A quiet gesture of gratitude. Of farewell. Of release. Danny longs to close the space between them, wrap his arms around her and say all the things left unsaid. But the boy holds his attention. Rivets him in place. The child too is smiling now, beaming ear-to-ear, sheer delight dancing on his innocent face.

Danny takes a hesitant step forward, returning the contagious grin. He starts to raise his hand in a silly wave, thinks better of it, lowers it back to his side.

The woman and boy exchange glances. Together their eyes drift upward into the glaring light cast by the looming engine. Danny turns to follow their gaze. When he looks back, they are gone. He stares down the empty track for a very long time. Then walks back to the cab.

Inside he is not surprised to see his father in familiar dungarees and engineer's cap. Danny's grandfather stands beside him, memories of the grand old days trailing behind him like coal cars on the North Bergen line. Both men smile at Danny. He is unable to move. His father's gaze is filled with encouragement to dream. His grandfather's nod, permission to break the chain.

A world of hope, forgiveness, and understanding passes between the three men in silence. The years of irrational anger at his father for the crime of dying and condemning his young son to a bitter life begin to melt away. Sweet memories of boyhood journeys with his grandfather waft over him in warm reminiscences of a cherished time.

Finally, holding his gaze evenly on the two railroad men, Danny backs down the ladder to the track bed. He stands beside the rail for a long moment, brushing tears tinged with coal dust from his eyes, looking up at the mammoth idling engine. The connected line of freight cars snakes back out of sight, far into the distant past.

Ahead in the night sky, stars shine rich with possibilities, beaming down their promise of dreams to be explored. Danny removes his cap, staring at it in his hand,

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turning it over and over like some ancient artifact that calls for studious examination. Then he flings it up into the cab, turns, and walks away into the night.

On the silver road the black giant waits, impatient to be on its way.

