

February 1972

The unbearable pain was splitting my head open in a haze of agony as red as a pomegranate. The headache had awakened me at three in the morning. I pulled myself up out of bed, walking through the dark house to the bathroom. Switching on the bathroom light was a mistake, as all it yielded was a blinding effect that exacted an even worse toll on my head, which already felt as though a diesel engine were running full blast in each temple.

My grab for the bottle of aspirin knocked over just about everything else in the medicine cabinet. I wrestled four aspirin out of the container and downed them with a glass of water, then retreated back to the bedroom, the mere touch of the pillow against my head igniting another explosion of cranial pain.

I cradled my head in my hands, hoping the immobility would somehow ease the attack on my nervous system, but no such luck. My next maneuver was an emulation of old European royalty, who used to sleep in an upright position. Why is anyone's guess, but I hoped a change of position might somehow fake out my system and bring even a modicum of relief.

The moon was visible through the parted curtains, the small amount of moonlight able to enter giving the room a ghostly quality from which were borne unearthly creatures made of floating dust. They seemed to call to me but severe pain is a jealous thing that dislikes its victims focusing on anything else.

Within half an hour, the pain gave hints of having diminished ever so slightly, though my head felt as though it had expanded to the size of a watermelon, something like the Elephant Man. The pulsations within my pate were still of maddening intensity. Tears filled my eyes with no accompanying emotion and I knew what was coming.

The contours of the bedroom began to sway and shift and take on new forms. I laid my head in my hands, hoping without praying for someone, anyone, to extend to me a hand of comfort and healing.

The clock read 3:30 AM. It had already been a long night and the morning augured no signs of deliverance from the torment.

As I say there in the midst of my private grief, I heard the faint sound of a distant train whistle, that hauntingly lonely sound that has stirred so many imaginations over the generations. I was distracted from the pain by memories of the endless train whistles I heard in my childhood, blown by engineers commanding the freight trains that ran through Inglewood throughout the night. I doubt if there has ever been a child who was not captivated by train whistles in the night, dreaming of the exotic places kids always think the trains are headed for, much more exciting than stockyards and steel mills and other uninteresting places adults care so much about.

Perhaps in those instances were born my more intriguing fantasies of mystical trains running on ethereal rails, coming to take me away to lands unknown to and undreamed of by others. What brand of magic is there that is not in some way not associated with trains and the seemingly infinite freedom they represent? What kid who ever witnessed a sunset from a train hasn't had their heart impregnated with that memory forever? Then when they grow up and are able to avail themselves of trains, they prefer the faster, absolutely impersonal airplane.

When I was a child, I had a special place in my heart for the insignia of the Great Northern Railroad, a white goat. While the cars sped by on the screen of my imagination, I would inevitably wonder from where the steel leviathans had departed and what their destinations might be.

By day I would walk the lengths of the tracks, lithely leaping from tie to tie, collecting spikes, squashed animals, and other entrancing debris. To my mother's chagrin, I placed these things, including track kill, in what I called my magic box.

One afternoon while visiting the family ranch in the San Fernando Valley, I was walking along the local railroad tracks when a cold chill ascended my spine, then turned tail and fled down my arms. Feeling dizzy, I fought to maintain composure, balance, and consciousness, as it would not do to pass out on a railroad track.

I made my way off the tracks and set course for a grove of trees clustered about an ancient, rusty water pipe. The faucet handle was broken and leaking, but there was enough pressure in the old boy to allow me to wash the dust from my face and cool down a little.

As I cleaned myself up as best as I could, I noticed that beside one of the sycamore trees flanking the tracks there appeared to be forming the figure of a man, one who was walking in my direction.

I was startled and afraid, having no idea who he was. Perhaps he was some sort of railroad policeman intent on arresting me for trespassing or some other heinous infraction of civilized law. A shake of my head cleared the remaining drops of water, my handkerchief taking care of the residual moisture as I kept one eye on the mysterious stranger.

Still dizzy, I began backing away from the unwanted intruder, turning around and making my way more quickly down the line until I felt it was safe to turn my back. I made it my business to stay as far away from the rails as possible, lest a seizure come over me and leave me sprawled across the ties.

After awhile, I nervously turned back around for a quick glimpse behind me. I was alone, and glad to be. I slowed the pace of my walk and breathed deeply of the invigorating aroma of sycamore, which lined the fences of the horse trails in that part of the Valley.

Feeling more secure, I began to whistle as I once again took to walking the tracks. Solomon was right again; pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall, for just as I got back on to the track, I found my body was not obeying the dictates of my will.

Lightning streaked across the stage of my inner vision, a fierce wind howled through my brain and all control over my nervous system was lost.

In some way I was unable to understand, I turned up at the bottom of a dry wash, several yards distant from the track itself. An indecipherable shape of dark green was hovering nearby, just out of arm's length. Everything was spinning. I was unable to gain a mental grasp of my environment to try and steady the images whirling before my eyes. My circumstances seemed well outside of my power to control or even comprehend.

As I attempted to stand, I caught a glimpse of the green figure, losing sight of it as I fell to the ground. My pants were damp and dirty from the wash. A pennyweight of strength seemed to flow into me, enough to permit me to stand without again keeling over. I could see the greenish blob still organizing itself into a definite form. I made this thing the focus of my concentration, bringing all my awareness to bear upon it. As I did, I was suddenly surrounded by what looked like thousand of yellow monarch butterflies, their small majestic wings beautifully and mesmerizingly translucent in the afternoon light.

They gathered themselves into a circle around the now humanlike figure of the green entity.

“Are you alright, young man?” came the question.

As the voice made its way through my objective consciousness into the deeper layers of my mind, I was able to gauge the appearance of my companion, a man dressed in blue overalls. His kindly face sported a three-day old patch of whiskers under his blue eyes. He appeared to be about fifty years of age. In point of fact, he looked like every child's idea of a railroad engineer, friendly, grizzled, magical.

“Are you alright?” he repeated.

“I think so,” I replied. Although the world had resumed a normal outer appearance I myself was still shaky. I reached up to grasp the hand he extended me and with one tug of his strong arm I was standing upright.

“What are you doing down here on the track, boy? You could get killed.”

I didn't answer his question, the habit I'd formed from unprofitable encounters with my parents. I merely shook his hand, said goodbye, and turned for home.

With the sound of the train whistle still being drawn through my thoughts, I returned to the present. The moonlight still pushed its way through the curtains and judging by the faintness of the glow from outside there had not passed very much time. A glance at the clock proved the truth of that; it was now four AM.

My headache was still very much in evidence. The breeze blowing the curtains was cool and brought a bit of refreshment into the room. I went over to my desk and packed my pipe with cherry blend tobacco, which recalled an incident in 1961, just prior to my graduation from high school.

It was late at night; I was seated at my desk smoking my pipe, which, on this occasion, was filled with something I had purchased within the law. I was idly thinking about my girlfriend of the moment when out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed someone who was there with me. I turned on the desk lamp and shined it around the room. I was alone. Perhaps there were residues of past smokes clinging to the pipe bowl that were having an interesting effect on me. I turned off the light and returned to my smoke and my thoughts.

The last few months had been bad. I had been dealing with the usual uncertainties about my future. High school was rapidly drawing to a close, my relationship with my girlfriend was not progressing in any meaningful way, the prospect of college was unsettling. In short, my life was in its usual shambles.

I blew a cloud of smoke out in front of me when, for some reason, I suddenly realized I had been without a seizure for months. Perhaps that part of the Dyal saga had finally closed itself out? Then came a mental will o' the wisp, a revelation, a dim memory, something that prompted me to look outside. I laid down my pipe and crossed over to the window, spying something hovering in the dark, moving through the shadowed street.

Overcome by the familiar dizziness, I fell to the area rug covering the floor in front of the window. My mind was filled with the not unpleasant sight of Bonnie's shapely legs. As my thoughts began the upward climb of her anatomy I sensed a presence joining me in the room.

I must have unknowingly righted myself because another wave of dizziness swept over me and again I fell, rolling over on the floor. My head cleared quickly and I was able to realize that dawn had arrived.

The sun had chased the moon over the date line and bright sunshine filled the room, its intensity blinding me and filling my head with throbbing pain. The taste of blood was in my mouth, my left arm felt broken. The worst had happened: another seizure. Fortunately I was able to move my arm and clear my mouth of the blood.

I sat on the bed, the room knocking out one spin after another. A new day began. Would it be filled with fear as I realized the seizures were back?

At that uncertain moment I had no way of knowing that I would not have another grand mal seizure for decades.