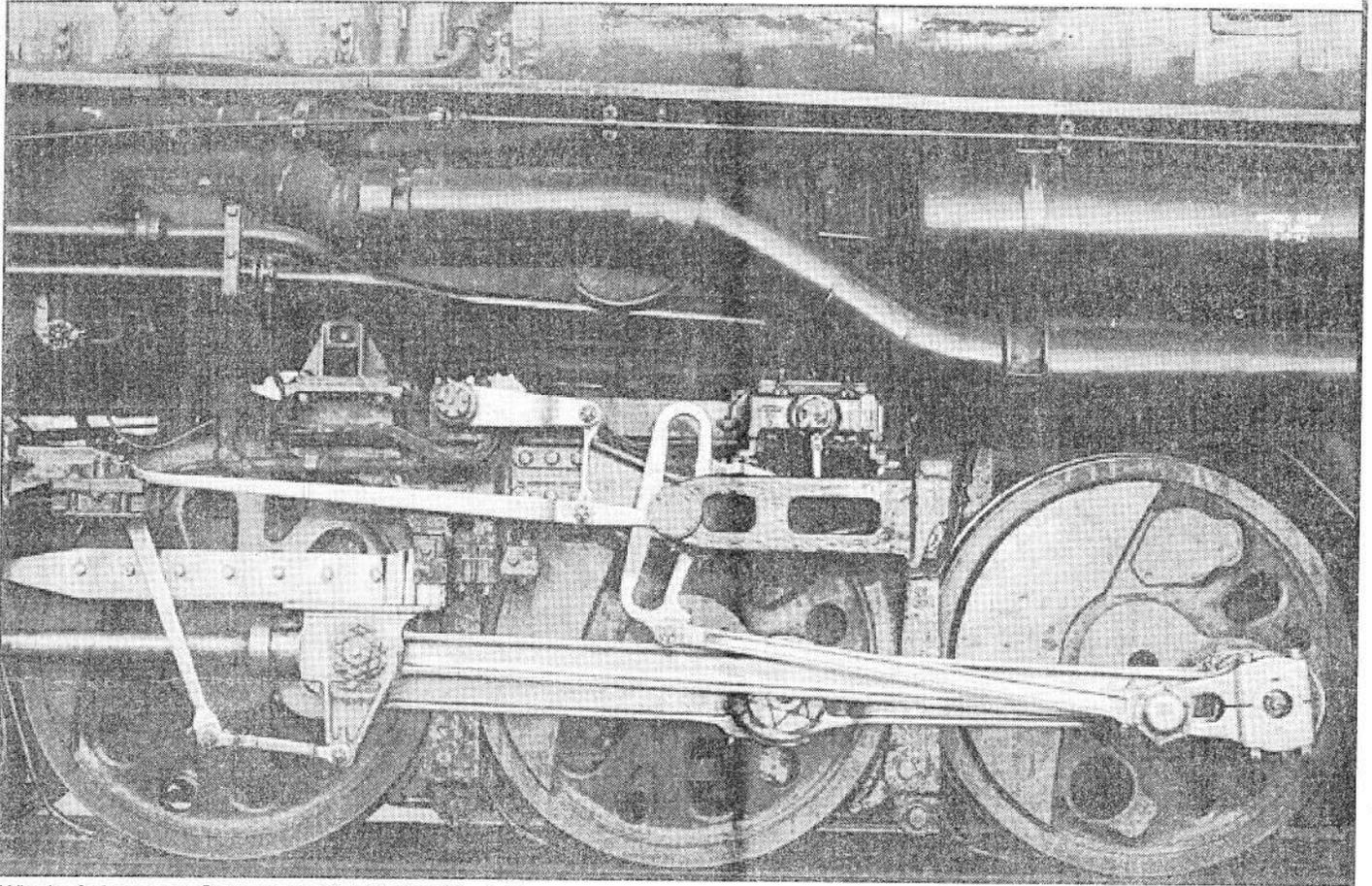
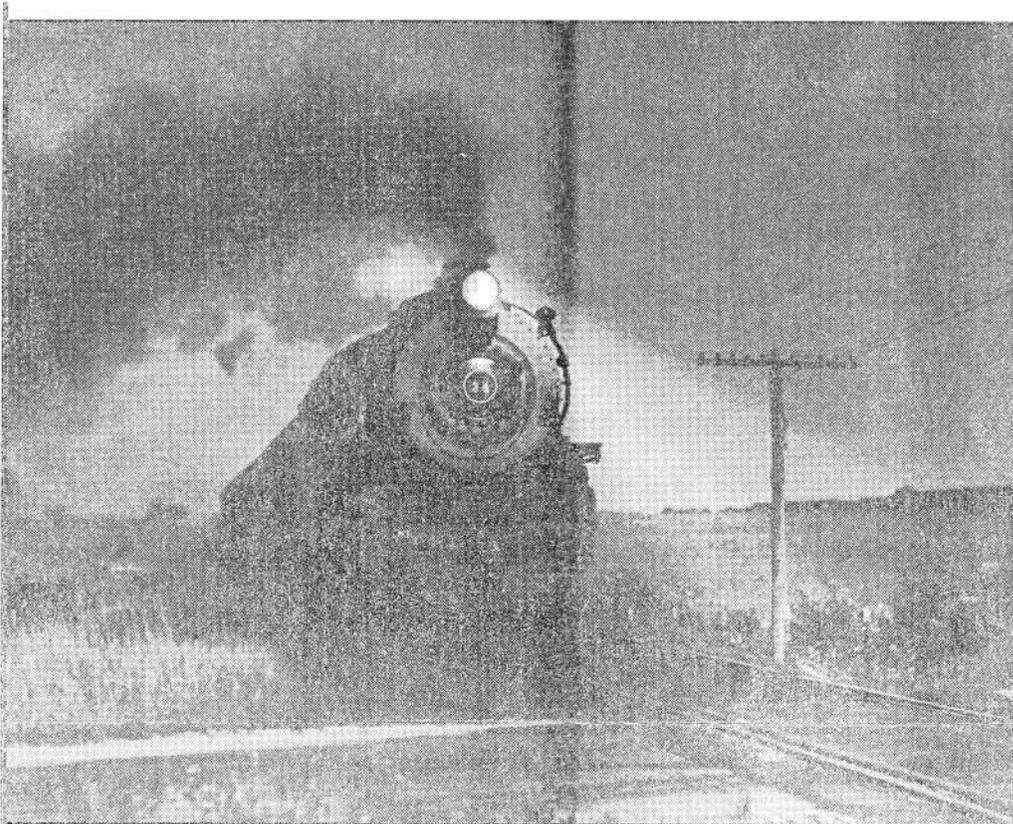


NIGHT EXPRESS

As I left work that hot, sunny afternoon, I did an unusual thing. I stopped and turned to look at the railroad headquarters building where I worked and I gazed beyond that, toward the locomotive repair shops where the newly-refurbished engines were being fired up in readiness for service. The smoke from their stacks rose straight up into the windless, cloudless sky. Thus reminded of the oppressive heat, I resumed my walk home along the well-oiled, single-track mainline as I always did, ever since I received my transfer to my desk job at headquarters. In fact, I even stayed at the same rooming house which had been recommended to me by a fellow railroad employee when I came to town. The landlady who cooked the meals and the other roomers and boarders had become a sort of family to me, since I had none of my own. Sometimes I blamed the war for that, but the truth was, I just never got close to anyone after ^{the war,} perhaps out of fear of losing them all over again. I suppose it was one of life's compromises which most people make to keep life livable. My life was livable. There were no longer any emotional ups and downs as there had been during the war which had been years largely of tedium relieved only by moments of stark terror and years of boredom superimposed with hours of anguish over lost comrades and loved ones. I had been a soldier, and although the newspapers said we had won, my own experience was only of defeat. The world we had supposedly fought to protect was no more than a delusion. Only the losses were real: the years of wasted effort, the superhuman courage, the sacrifice, the work and the lives. Even though most



Wheels of a locomotive © Randy Faris/CORBIS (COLOR print)



Midnight Express on Long Island, circa 1930s (c) Bettman/CORBIS

of us had escaped physical injury from the shells, bullets, bombs and mines, we were nevertheless wounded. The quality of life itself seemed wounded, perhaps because so many brave, conscientious and gifted people had been killed in so many generations of war. Those of us who survived hardly mentioned the fact that we had fought on one side or the other. We sought to lead what we thought were normal lives, civilian lives. We attempted to live as if wars had never been part of our lives and we participated in this pretense with the others, even as we knew that we were only playing at being civilians. It is odd to think that I played soldier as a child and that I now play civilian as an adult. Even in this world of glaring sunlight, there were dark shadows, but these shadows provided no protection from the glare, nor relief from the heat.

As I walked along the well-used mainline in the hot afternoon sun, I shivered. The shrill whistle of the five o'clock passenger train brought me back into the world of the here and now. Soon, it would come speeding along the mainline and I would have to leave the oil-specked gravel roadbed to avoid being struck down or pulled under the wheels by the turbulence of the train's passage.

It was right on time, as usual. I could watch its progress from the station as its plume of coal smoke marked its starting point and then quickly faded as the firebox drew in more oxygen and the engineer worked the cutoff lever/^{WHEN} the locomotive reached optimum speed. I could work the controls in my sleep once I learned to listen to the locomotive's breathing, and/^{TO} know what it meant. After circling the freight yards, the train came onto the straight mainline and the engineer opened her up. I watched the railroad cut under the roadbridge and the locomotive suddenly appeared, wreathed for an instant in smoke and steam as it roared out of the underpass and rushed by me. I waved at the engineer, but he was

gazing as he should have been, calmly and alertly, at the track ahead. The passenger coaches clicked smoothly by and just as abruptly, the train was lost to view among the brush-covered hills on the outskirts of town. I continued my walk along the dirt road which paralleled the mainline, since I knew that a freight train would be along shortly in the opposite direction, once the passenger train ^{cleared} the siding on which it stood waiting. The mainline was for some inscrutable reason a single track, and the heavy traffic in both directions required intricate scheduling, in order to move trains both safely and efficiently. What a difference double-tracking would have made! I once joked that all one had to do was to connect all the sidings which paralleled the mainline, thereby doubling the track. But employees in Central Traffic Control did not see much humor in this solution, because it might **mean** their transfer elsewhere.

This is what caused me to stop in surprise, for what I now noticed for the first time was a double-tracked line. These rails crossed the mainline and they were rusty with disuse. In some places, dirt had almost covered them, so that ^{have been} may / the reason for my overlooking them on so many occasions. Still, I could not understand how I could have been so unobservant. I took an interest in my work on the railroad, and I liked to think that I knew my branch of the system thoroughly. How had I missed this crossing? The double tracks ran at right angles to the mainline and no switches existed to connect them so that a train could transfer from one to the other. Aside from the crossing, the two lines seemed oblivious to one another.

I was curious, for double tracking meant heavy traffic and important destinations. What were these destinations and why had traffic ceased? I looked at first in the direction of the setting sun, but could see nothing of importance in that hazy, glaring

distance. In the opposite direction, I observed that the double tracks seemed to run parallel with the highway which also crossed the mainline at right angles. My curiosity was aroused, and I decided to explore these mysterious, disused railroad tracks to see where they led. Perhaps they had served a factory or a mine. Certainly there had to be something big to justify double-tracking.

Because of the motor traffic on the highway, I did not want to follow the railroad line by that means. As for walking upon the tracks themselves, the sun was still hot enough to make that exercise unpleasant. An alternate route appeared in the form of a narrow dirt road, reasonably shaded by trees, which seemed to parallel the railroad tracks. After glancing at my pocket watch to make sure of the time, I set out upon this road, resolved to be back home by dinner time.

The trees grew thicker and taller as I walked further and the shade was pleasant in contrast to the hot glare of the sun, even that late in the afternoon. Gradually, the ^{dirt} road narrowed into a footpath, then it became a deer track and finally it ended in a steep-sided gully. There was no way forward, so I decided to climb out of the gully by grasping tree roots which protruded from the rain-eroded slope. It was difficult going, for the roots sometimes broke and the dirt footing often gave way. I was breathing heavily from the exertion as I came to a retaining wall built of old railroad ties. This made climbing much easier and soon I reached the top of the embankment.

I was shocked to see how dark it had become. Obviously, I had lost track of the time and had missed dinner, but that was not the only surprise. Having climbed out of the gully, I saw that I was now standing upon the platform of a disused railroad station. The light of the full moon illuminated the gaping windows, through which I could see the remains of the collapsed shingle roof. I was most surprised by the two men who stood next to me on the platform,

although they did not seem to be ^{perturbed in the least} by my sudden, sweaty appearance. They behaved as if they saw people climbing out of gullies all the time, like ordinary commuters.

"You're late," said the fellow wearing a white shirt and black tie which matched his black cap upon which the title, "Station Master", was embossed in brass letters. In one hand he held a signal lantern and under his arm he carried a furled red signal flag. The other man wore khaki overalls and carried a clipboard which he ^{propped} against an upright, two-wheeled cargo dolly as he filled out papers which seemed to be shipping forms. It all seemed perfectly routine and that is what baffled me. What were these men doing on the moonlit platform of an abandoned railroad station on a disused railroad line? I had no time to consider this question, however, for the "Station Master" asked me, "Where's your ticket?"

I'm a fairly cautious man and it has been my experience that one often learns more about what is going on by pretending that one knows what is going on, instead of asking people directly, "What is going on?" The direct question often causes them to clam up, because you have thus identified yourself as an outsider, a rube, or worse, which might get you shot in some places.

"I don't have a ticket," I answered quite honestly, for I was becoming a little apprehensive about this evening's experience. Perhaps it would be just as well for me if I did not ^{take part in} this little charade. But naturally, I was curious and it no longer mattered how late I got home.

"That's all right," said the Station Master, "You can buy it from the conductor. Excuse me, please." He brushed past me and stood at the edge of the platform.

So, the ball was back in my court, I thought. Do I play along or do I tell him that I had no intention whatsoever of taking any ^{the reason for} train that night and that he was totally mistaken about my presence on the platform. And then I thought, "What conductor?" For there to

be a conductor, there had to be a train and there was certainly no sign of one anywhere on this starry, moonlit night. If it had not been for the reassuring chirp of a cricket, I felt right then as if I were standing on a tiny asteroid in the middle of the universe.

The Station Master gazed into the distance and suddenly raised and lowered the signal lantern. I squinted into the darkness in the direction he was facing and gradually, I made out a tiny red light, perhaps a traffic signal, except for the fact that it was becoming larger and it was approaching us. Then I realized that it was the rear warning light on the passenger coach of an approaching train which was backing onto the siding of the abandoned station. Soon I could hear the steady, powerful hissing of the locomotive. From the column of smoke, I could see that there was only one coach on this train. The brakes screeched and couplings clanked as the train halted beside the platform. There was a loud roar as the safety valve popped open. Clearly, the locomotive was all fired up and impatient to get going.

But no passengers and no conductor appeared. There seemed to be no one aboard. Obviously, there had to be an engineer and a fireman, for the locomotive could hardly operate itself, otherwise it would have been eerie. As it was, I merely thought the whole business was very strange and my curiosity was finally getting the better of my apprehension.

"Well, are you getting on or not?" asked the Station Master.

"The express runs on schedule, you know."

I nodded and approached the rear platform of the passenger coach, my mind filled with doubt and misgivings.

"All aboard!" called the Station Master.

"Just a moment," I said.

The Station Master paused as he was about to swing his signal lantern.

"Why have I never seen rail traffic on this line during the day?" I asked.

"Because the express only runs at night," he answered, matter of factly. ⁴ in khaki overalls The man stopped writing on his clipboard and grinned at me. I felt pretty stupid. Clearly, I was not thinking fast enough. I had to ask appropriate questions if I were to obtain the answers I needed to solve this mystery, one way or the other, before I decided either to board this peculiar train or beg off and go home.

"Why is there only one coach?" I asked in desperation, hoping to buy sufficient time to ask something more relevant upon which to base my decision.

"That's all it needs," said the Station Master, giving me a critical glance.

The man with the clipboard looked up at the stars and shook his head. Now I stood with one foot on the platform and one foot on the rear bottom step of the passenger coach. The locomotive's air compressor panted rapidly, keeping pace with my own excited heartbeats. At last I thought of the obvious anomaly in these

proceedings: only the train conductor had the authority to direct the train to move. No one else could do that. The station masters only advised the conductors if the tracks were clear within their blocks.

"Where's the conductor?" I asked. "Why isn't he signalling the train to move?"

"The conductor is aboard," said the Station Master. "All blocks are clear from here to the final destination. This is standard operating procedure for the Night Express. If you continue to delay this train's departure, however, you will meet the conductor very soon and he will be upset with you and me. Please get aboard."

My feet remained where they were, one on the coach step and one on the station platform, my right hand grasping the handrail on the side of the coach. My mind was racing, but I needed more time to consider my decision. There was no time, however, and it seemed like a 'now or never' choice: remain or go. What was I risking, after all? It was merely a train trip. The most I would lose was some time and money out of my otherwise routine and uneventful life. But what if this were no ordinary train? What was its "final destination"? I half opened my mouth to voice this question, but the Station Master just shook his head and motioned me aboard.

I experienced for the first time in my life a real 'agony of decision'. If I boarded this mysterious train, would I be making the worst mistake of my life, and if I turned and fled home, would I be missing the best opportunity of my life? No 97.

I needed more information, but there was no time for that. I could have gone home and made inquiries about this train and the line on which ^{it ran,} but I had the strange feeling that such inquiries would lead nowhere and that this might be the last train available for me or anyone else. In any event, what did I really have to lose? Had I become so old and set in my ways that I feared adventure, even if it were only an unplanned train trip? What was the point of repeating the same routine, day after day, like some dumb machine? Was this to be my life? Or, was this level of existence even worthwhile living? I had often told myself and others that I hoped to learn something new everyday, and quite a few days had gone by without my having learned anything new, as I recalled. For an instant I hesitated on this no man's land of platform and step. What if there were no way back? Back to what? My mind asked.

As I swung aboard, the Station Master raised his lantern in an arc and a cloud of steam hissed from ^{THE} locomotive's cylinders. The train jerked and we were off. As I entered the darkened and apparently deserted passenger coach, I quite looked forward to meeting the conductor.

THE END OR THE BEGINNING?