

SCARING THE TRAIN

Terry Dowling

Because for us, something might appear in the heart of the day that void not be the day, something in an atmosphere of lice and limpidity that would represent the shiver of fear cu of which the day came?"

- Maurice Blanchot

The Infinite Conversation

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PORTOBELLO 1962

Every summer during our childhood holidays at Portobello, Maximillian and I would spend an hour every third day scaring the train. Every third day meant twenty-one days before we'd duplicate a day, which seemed clever at the time, neither of us realizing that it made its own pattern.

It never took more ha a few exhilarating moments, of course, the scaring itself, but the hour gave preparation time, let us prepare our chosen section of track, he particular sheltered stretch or cutting, never using the same one twice in a week unless that became part of the strategy.

It gave us time to avoid the local constabulary (and, naturally, the frightened drivers, firemen and concerned locals did get the police onto us, though never with any luck). When Constables Pike and I larlow came on their bicycles, or now and then with Sergeant Jeffers in the district's single squad car, we were crouching behind the long grass, peering through greenery, never seen, or were miles away with relatives and friends, secure in our alibis.

The scaring itself? It was anything from running to a spot on the track moments before the locomotive reached it, to doing an oh-shock-horror!, freeze-frame, hands up, wide-eyed terror reaction or a classy matador flourish before leaping aside. Twice Max did his damsel-in-distress routine, lying across the line; we even did up a chicken wire and papier mache boulder, though by then the engineers knew to call our bluff. With a scream of the steam whistle, the great engine plunged upon it, making us wish the boulder had been real.

We countered with the old dressed-up store dummy, its arm severed and painted with 'blood'. The engineers barely flinched. They had our measure right enough, had made their private decisions and adjustments. They would have driven through a massacre on that stretch of track after what we'd given them over four golden summers.

The whole thing entered a new phase when Sergeant Jeffers, rather belatedly, put two and two together and realized - at probably the same time we did - that since these 'reckless and dangerous pranks' (as he had the Portobello Weekly Mail put it in one front-page write-up) happened only in the summer, it might well be the kids of families visiting from out of town.

Max and I weren't to be outdone. We made sure of our alibis, both with adults and the kids we hung out with, and took to using disguises more and more often - jumpers and caps, even wigs bought in home-town thrift shops and theatrical supply stores, taking pains to throw suspicion on local kids we didn't especially like.

Planning and timing became perfect; each scaring was a precisely calculated masterpiece and more exciting than ever. Of necessity, we had grown to be masters of those rare things in thirteen-year-old boys, restraint and patience. One evening, while I was conspicuously at a local party with my folks, Max put the first empty four-gallon drum on the left side of the Hank's Creek cutting. It took him twenty-six minutes, there and back, riding without a light. Two nights later added the one on the right and linked them with multiple strands of heavy-gauge fishing-line souvenired from fifteen-year-old ace-bully Rusty Cramer's fishing basket - an exploit in itself!

Max and I didn't need to be there for the outcome but snatched thirty minutes from a Sunday family picnic to pedal furiously to Manton's Hill, there used

our borrowed binoculars (birdwatching, right?) to observe the 10:58 from Madrigal plunging over the Hank's Creek bridge, the drums crashing down, bouncing off to the side – kaboom! kaboom! – clear as the bells of doom in the morning quiet (so we imagined; the train's own sound swallowed it all, perhaps even for the engineers, though they would have seen the drums plunging down; possibly did hear them pounding against the sides of the cab).

Max turned to me when it was over, eyes flashing. "We could've derailed that train if we'd wanted to, y'know, Paul."

"Reckon. Or blown up the bridge. Stolen dynamite."

"I'm serious."

He was, but on that hot quiet morning the talk went no further, for Max had his binoculars turned on the cutting.

"Hey, look!"

I raised Dad's glasses, swept my gaze in two big coins of dislocation suddenly made one across trees, fences and sunny fields till I found the place, saw the solitary figure standing by the tracks at this end of the cutting. Almost a mile away, no clear features, but someone in a thoughtful stance it seemed; not Jeffers or Pike or Harlow, no one I knew, just some stranger drawn by Maximillian Sefti and Paul Danner's double booms of fate. He seemed to be looking down at the tracks, perhaps at the crumpled, dented drums and their trailing, incriminating lengths of line.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"No idea," Max said. But then, though it was a mile or inure, though there were trees and fields out of sight in the tree-shadow, our bikes back in the long grass so nothing glinted, nothing, the man looked directly out at us, directly at us. We couldn't see the smile or the nod, though we imagined them well enough, but we both gasped when he raised an arm and waved, acknowledging us, someone, anyone who might be watching across all that bright sunny air. We lowered our binoculars long enough, instinctively enough, to give each other a reassuring glance – we were both there, both seeing it – then looked back.

He was gone, of course, which completed the fright perfectly, had us scanning the intervening fields, noticing the pockets of shade like our own, patches of tree-shadow, the gloom in wind-dancing, sun-dappled copses, sockets of darkness where other watchers might now be watching us.

"Jeffers, I betcha!" Max cried as we scrambled down to our bikes, though we both knew it wasn't. "He's set us up."

But there was no one else about and no interception as we pedalled back to the picnic grounds. All I could think of – and Max, too, I knew – was all that vast sunny space, the airy distances, the man waving, the sudden holes of black you just never noticed till you looked for them, then saw so suddenly, so nakedly.

Curiosity got the better of fear, of course. By the time we were cycling home at the end of the day, following the billowing dust of our parents' cars, we were no longer spooked. The mysterious stranger was no Bogeyman, just someone who had heard the racket and come down to investigate, who then seemed to be looking out at us, had seen a companion, an acquaintance, someone he knew, and simply waved in greeting. Nothing to do with Jeffers, nothing to do with vigilant local farmers setting a trap.

But enough of the fear remained, the mood of that morning hour, to power our curiosity. We were determined to stage another scaring on the Tuesday, breaking our third day ruling but needing to do something, needing to be sure. By the time we reached Hayvenhurst Avenue we had our plan. The four rolls of three-inch grey masking tape from Bidder's barn were perfect and, as we weren't the only kids to take regular shortcuts across the Bidders property to get from Hayvenhurst to the creek, we judged the risk well worth it.

In thick woodland three miles out of town, close to the Manton cutting, we laid out seventeen by seventeen eight-foot strips of tape in a grid, carefully backed so we finally had a steel-grey portcullis, what looked like an iron grate to be fixed over the track on more of Rusty Cramer's fishing line.

We threaded line at the corners and sides, rolled up our grid, then did a few partial run-throughs, got the thing to the edge of the cutting and unrolled in less than four minutes. The hard part, scrambling down to get the end of the line hiked up and tethered to a tree on the other side, then weighting down the bottom hues with stones to get the tension needed, we figured would take another four to six, allowing for fumbles. We tossed a coin for the privilege and Max won.

We stored the grid in some bushes, rode back to town by a leisurely roundabout route, even stopped at the library to borrow a book on local bird-life, establishing our alibis there and justifying borrowing our folks' binoculars again.

On the Tuesday we were out at the Manton cutting twenty-four minutes ahead of the 12:10 freight. It was hot and very still in the cutting. Cicadas droned in the trees; only the slightest breeze stirred the dry grass stalks along the tracks. The rails gleamed like streaks of chrome in the noon heat.

In moments we had the grid unrolled, tethered and tossed down. Max scrambled after it, soon appeared on the other side, hauled the grid taut and fastened it, then weighted the trailing tethers with rocks. That done, he scrambled back and lay panting beside me, admiring our handiwork.

It was as if it had always been that way – a gated track, the lines like poured quicksilver coming and going, running off into the day, nothing else but insect song, dried grass stirring in the thermals off the rails, the barest flutter of breeze in the treetops.

"Let's go!" Max said, and we were up and on our way, cycling out to Byle's Lookout, using the long sweep of Salter's Hill to put us up the other side in a record six minutes. We were on our stomachs, panting, binoculars up and focused before our front wheels had finished turning.

We were a lot closer than at Hank's Creek and could make out the whole scene: the cutting exposed from this angle just before the tracks curved away towards Madrigal, everything as we'd left it, the scene deserted but for the grasses stirring and the improbable iron gate athwart the track. We could already hear the train approaching, a low sliding roar, building and building.

It was over in moments. The 12:10 was suddenly there, plunging at the grid like a demon. There was a scream of the steam whistle, oddly attenuated, it seemed, as if dampened by the cutting or the trees, then – thwap! (imagined not heard) – the grid was hit, carried away, and the eighteen bogies were clack-clacking their way off towards Madrigal.

But neither Max nor I jumped up to leave. Without having agreed on it, even mentioned it, we stayed where we lay, watching the tracks through our glasses. And the man was there, just stepped into view from behind the embankment, seemed to be studying the rails where our gate had been.

Prickles of fear rail down my spine.

"Christ!" Max said. "Who is that guy?"

"Let's go, Max!" I spoke in a harsh whisper, not wanting to see him look out and wave, not again. I remembered all the dark places in the trees, saw them again right there.

"Wait, will ya!" Max said, feeling a need to wait, and I probably couldn't have left anyway. I needed it too somehow, this part of what we'd started.

And sure enough, the figure looked up, much closer than before, much closer, a man in his early fifties or thereabouts, in dark work shirt and drab workman's pants, wisps of grey hair stirring on his mostly bald head, deepset eyes peering out. And he smiled as if understanding, possibly a grim smile, and nodded, yes, yes, I know, and not waving this time, just turned and stepped out of sight behind the embankment.

"Who is that guy?" Max asked again, but more to himself than to me. Death, for my money, I wanted to shout. Pavor diurnus. Day terror. The Bogeyman.

"Has to be planted," Max continued. "They've been watching for us is what. Keeping an eye out. Listen, Paul." He turned on his side to face me. "That may not be the guy from the other day. They've got help. Guys from the railway

maybe. Planted them at likely places. Maybe they're onto us, maybe not. So they wind us up by acting like they've seen us. He didn't see us just now, just knew we'd be watchin'. They're goosin' us, Paul. Rattlin' us."

It made sense. Blessed good sense.

"What do we do?" My voice was still broken by fear, embarrassingly querulous.

"We've got a week left. We can plan good stuff for next year. Real good stuff!"

"Lay low now, you reckon?"

"Not on your life. We get 'em a good one. One last scare." "They could be watchin'. What do we do?"

"A night scare, Paul."

"They're not as good."

"No, so we do it where we never have before. Where they'd never expect."

"Like where?" "In town."

"Town!"

"At night. Late at night. We rig up something at the end of the platform."

"But at night, Max. They just don't see enough."

"Yeah, so we rig something that uses that. We use the engine's head-lamp. Okay?"

"You got a plan?"

"Believe it, my man."

For the last scare of the last week of what was to be our final summer at Portobello, though we didn't know it then, we picked the Thursday, the 11:40 freight out of Madrigal, non-stop through Portobello at 12:16.

A monograph from the library – Nightbirds by George Lowry – furnished us with our alibi, while a coin toss gave me the privilege of the scare itself. Not something I actually wanted, but I wouldn't let Max know that for the world. We sneaked out at 11:45, pedalled into town, hid our bikes and slid down to the station. It was deserted on this late-summer night, the air already cooling towards autumn, with crickets sounding and an occasional fragment of a nightbird's song to justify our visit if anyone found us.

The lights from Main Street and Hayvenhurst barely reached the platform; only the lights in the waiting room and the twin lamp-posts at either end showed where Portobello Station existed in the night.

We had minimal equipment just in case: a twenty-foot length of sturdy rope. Max's plan was simple. The rope would be tied round my waist and fixed to the lamp-post at the southern end. I would lean out at a bizarre forty-five degrees from the platform's edge, giving the engineers enough time to see me before Max hauled me back.

It would be a dreadful sight for the engineers, a frantically waving figure leaning out – an impossible image to take with them as they plunged on through the darkness. So simple. So effective. Our bravura piece before we went our separate ways for another year, so we thought.

We rigged it up, did a few rehearsals so I could be sure of my footing and Max could get used to my weight. We agreed I would pull back myself if I wanted to – all we needed was for me to be glimpsed for a few seconds after all, and the approach was long enough. But leaving it to the last moment would make it the piece de resistance scarings.

At 12:05 we checked the knots, and Max took his place behind the post. I leaned out over the track, satisfied myself that there was ample visibility, and waited the few minutes, counting bits of the darkness like the worry beads Max's Mum used at mass, noticing it all: the dint lines made by fences, trees, cast-iron fittings, the soft lights of Main Street reaching out, striking into my eyes – look here! look here! – the red and green signal lights, the double tracks themselves, made into sliding sweeps of silver by a Moon we couldn't see. There were just the crickets, the warble of a bird sounding far off, a few barks from a dog even further away.

"Get ready," Max said, needlessly.

I hung there, leaning out, sharp with anticipation and too much darkness; noticing it all, listening, straining for the slow sliding roar that would

grow, edge up, come as both a wave of sound and a shiver underfoot; watching for the single eye, the shouts of steam. I strained for that unmistakable train rhythm –

locomotive locomotive locomotive

There it was! Yes!

And there were words on that rush of sound as well.

"What do you two think you're doing?"

We froze in disbelief, Max gripping the rope, me leaning out.

And there was Rusty Cramer, fifteen, burly (fat), vindictive (blamed, implicated by the fishing line) and angry (dangerous).

"I said, what do you two think you're doing?" He came towards us like a big block of night, something dislodged from the ordinary world and sent careening, spinning out wildly into all this calm.

"Wait and see!" Max cried, not wanting to lose our chance, not now.

"Yeah, well I knew I'd catch up with you arseholes sooner or later."

He was close and threatenmg, still improbable, but Max tried tokeep him talking. "It's a joke we're pulling, see. Watch what happens now."

"You're both for it, you dumb shits! I'm gonna bust ya!"

"Watch the train first, okay? Here! Wow, look at that!"

"What?" Rusty Cramer said, and turned, saw the freight thundering on its run through the town, looked back, tried to figure exactly what it was we meant to do, turned again just as the light hit me and the whistle screamed in warning, terrifying me and keeping Rusty distracted. "What the hell!"

I remembered to wave my arms frantically, judged my own jump-back only to have Max haul me back first.

Actually I fell back, and the locomotive was there, past, gone, leaving the steady thunder of bogies howling after it. And Max ran at Rusty, pushed hint hard, sent him slamming into the iron sides of a bogey, where he sprang away again, slammed into the lamp-post, thud after sickening thud.

I was on my feet in seconds, staring, horrified, dangerously close to the track myself, saw Rusty Cramer pinball from bogey to post to the gravel, saw him flat, torn and dead. Saw Max wide-eyed, determined to have his alibi, his scapegoat, never for a moment saw the guard's van rushing, up, dim and forgotten, or the bar or strap or trailing line, whatever it was that struck my skull and sent me flying, falling, and thinking as I fell: "I'm dead too!" I didn't die. I spent three months in hospital with a fractured skull and got used to having a metal plate over the weak spot as a constant reminder of how lucky I was. Mum didn't say much about what happened, mostly: "There, there, Pauly, you just rest." But Dad gave me most of it.

"That damn fool Cramer kid!" he said on my second day out of a seventy-day coma. "What do you remember, son?"

I played dumb, frowned a lot, asked him to tell me more. "Rusty Cramer's dead, you know, Paul?"

"What about Max?"

"Max. He phoned it in. Said you were after night birds, stumbled on the Cramer kid doing one of those pranks on the station."

"Right. That sounds right. Don't remember too much though."

"Course you don't. You startled him and he got hit, then something brained you good. You're very lucky, Paul."

"Seem to remember that. Where's Max?"

"Where do you think, son? School's been back nearly ten weeks. He said he'd write or call, keep in touch."

"Right. So Rusty Cramer did all those things."

"That's what the cops said. Blaming it on outatowners. Thug of a kid. I guess it's just as well he blew it."

"Why's that, Dad?"

"You remember he had a rope fixed to a post and was leaning out – how Max said you found him? Well, he scared the train drivers good this time. One had a heart attack from it, they reckon; died right there at the throttle. The other guy says Rusty must've scared him to death hanging out waving like that. You

probably stopped other deaths happening, son. I'd try and look at it that way."

"I will, Dad. I will. I guess it's the only way."

Max and I did get to speak about it after a fashion, but on the phone, long-distance, three weeks later. I didn't ask him the most important question: how he could have done it, how, actually avoided it, convincing myself that it had been spur of the moment (though it hadn't been, of course, definitely hadn't been), just something implicit in all our earlier games of death and mayhem, one more unreality, cartoon-like almost, not to be dwelt upon too much.

And while we made our peace, alluded to his quick-thinking, run-to-the-phone-for-an-ambulance call, spoke of Rusty's death (murder!) guardedly, and that of the engineer (manslaughter), even mentioned the newspaper clipping from the Mail Dad had kept about how the autopsies on Rusty Cramer and the driver were botched, we had to postpone the full weight of our discussion and debriefing, the reality of it, till our next meeting: other important things like the mysterious man at the cuttings, the botched autopsies, all the stuff that mattered all of a sudden.

"I'll write to you," Max said, far off across the country. "And we can talk about it in the summer."

Which didn't happen, of course. After the accident, Max's parents didn't choose Portobello that year and, with my sister dating, we didn't get there either. Two years after that, Dad's job took us down to Australia; I finished high school in Sydney, and in 1967 went on to do an Arts degree at Sydney University, and Max Sefti's and my scaring the train became one more unresolved part of that ineffably dear, long, slow, blink-and-it's-gone, quickly stolen thing called childhood.

2

SYDNEY UNIVERSITY 1967

Imagine what it was like then towards the end of first term, sitting with nine other first-year students in our English tutorial, when the door opened and in came a student forced by part-time employment commitments to change tutorial groups, who turned out to be none other than Max Sefti – here in Australia, in Sydney, at this university, walking into this room.

It shattered the smooth consensual reality in a moment, was wonderful and utterly bizarre, even vaguely alarming. We had shared lectures in Wallace and Carslaw but hadn't spotted one another. There were no words to capture it, absolutely none. The tutor's remarks, the Innocence and Experience poetry of William Blake, stood no chance except as vivid counterpoint, but afterwards, over coffee in the Refectory, I found out about those missing parts of my life.

It wasn't an optimum spiel because Janice and Becky, two girls from our tutorial group, tagged along with a friend of theirs, an intense-looking, dark-haired young guy named Lucian. Consequently, what might have been an incredible yet surprisingly natural bridging of days became the kind of narrative back-tracking I'm giving here. It was certainly interesting in itself since I was able to hear Max tell his version of it at last, filled with his forthright young adult confidence and my own self-conscious, artless lapses into cliché, an understandable refrain oh "My God, but you here!" The facts came out all the same, though as part of some incredible freak accident, certainly not as premeditated (however briefly) murder: Rusty, lying dead, the unseen guard's van, my being struck hard enough to fracture my skull, send me into coma and require a long convalescence. That helped win back Janice and Becky's attention; they asked about the plate in my skull, exactly where it was, could they touch it, things like that. Dark-haired Lucian frowned and seemed clearly fascinated.

I heard how Max had given the police – the very ones we'd caused such trouble

- an account of finding Rusty on the station, startling him in mid-scare, causing him to stumble and fall so he was hit and flung back into the lamp-post. He told how an unfastened strap or buckle flailing about had struck MC on the side of the head, and how ready the authorities were to believe, actually believe, because Rusty had been such a swine of a kid all his young life and we did have our birdwatching book and all.

I learned, too, how Max had had the presence of mind to re-tie the rope from my waist around Rusty's, had got that done minutes before the police and the ambulance arrived so everyone believed, so no one even for a moment thought to suggest we might have been in collusion with him, a local kid working with two outatowners.

That was the version he gave anyway: Rusty catching us at it, tripping during a scuffle, being hit; things arranged so lie was implicated, but all an accident. Just a terrible accident.

Max added a detail then that sent a chill through me in that sunny corner of the Refectory.

"Paul, something happened while I was re-tying the rope round Rusty's waist ..."

"You saw the guy!" I blurted it out. The bits of fear had all connected up. The far-off reality was real again, finally, not pushed aside, not hidden away.

"No. No, I didn't." His tone gave me the 'but' before he said it. "But I looked for him, you know? I'd knelt on something sharp and just looked up. Expected to see the guy - like in that Charles Dickens story?"

"But nothing?"

"Nothing. Just a feeling, you know. It was a really bad moment. I was fumbling with the rope, trying to get it under Rusty's body and tied before the cops arrived. I was breathless from running from the phone, my knee was hurting from whatever I'd knelt on, you were lying there covered in blood. I had Rusty's blood all over me. It was pretty awful."

I made myself ask it. "So what about the autopsy reports, Max? They were messed up, you said."

"I did? Oh yes. Right. On the phone that night. The Mail had a bit on it. The train driver died of a heart attack, but the autopsy for cause of death said the blood had changed."

"Changed? What do you mean, changed?"

"Just that. Changed. Altered somehow. It didn't say. But the Cramer kid had the same thing. His blood had gone funny." "But what does that mean?"

People at other tables were giving us looks.

"Paul, it didn't say. Just that the lab people had stuffed up." I calmed myself. "But you sensed the guy?"

"Something. I went back to the station the next day. You were over in Madrigal, still on the critical list, still in a coma. They had already operated to relieve pressure on your brain, to get out the bone fragments too smashed up to leave there, they told us."

It was frustrating. He was talking for the others.

"See anything?"

"Just where it all happened. The post was actually bent where Rusty hit it. They hadn't sanded over the blood stains properly yet. I saw the nail I'd knelt on before getting the feeling. It was just - eerie, you know?"

"But no sign of the guy?"

"Uh But it was like he was there, you know? I kept looking up expecting to see him."

Lucian spoke then, the first words I'd heard him say that morning but for monosyllables.

"It's convergent energy. How you think of a thing makes a thing. How you name a thing defines a thing."

Thanks, Lucian, if that's your real name. I'd only known him by sight before that morning but it was the kind of patter you expected,

looking at him - all Plato and Socrates, Sufis and Sophistry, Castaneda and

Sgt Pepper's.

Max looked from him to me and back. "Say again."

"You probably haunted yourself," Lucian said. "We all do it.

Set up expectations. Rope the unconscious into it – all that energy."

"Uh uh," Max said. "I meant the other bit."

"Power of names. Naming gives shape. Summons. Bestows

power. All part of primitive people's singing up the land, re-naming things, re-making things. The Navajo –"

"Yeah, right." Max had heard enough.

But Lucian continued, and just as well. "It's like these scarings. At what point did they become rituals?"

"Rituals?" I showed my annoyance now. But Max was intrigued. "Did become?"

"All right. Do become, though I suspect they already have. And, yeah, rituals because we always do more than we know. Simple acts become metaphor, symbolic, representational, as well as just themselves. We're left to find what they really mean."

Who's your friend? Max said in a look, but was interested in spite of himself. Lucian probably read that look. "You have to admit it, Max. You were both pretty fixated. The blood and death and all. That man you saw. Lots of fertile stuff there. Of course there are going to be ramifications. All that emotion and psychic force; both of you looking for answers."

"Maybe." Max was yielding, plainly needed something of the reassurance dark, assured Lucian seemed to be providing. "What do you suggest?"

"Suggest?" Lucian managed to look both surprised and confident all at once.

"Why, re-stage the event – with us along as unbiased controls." He already had that good scientific word. "See what you get."

"A scaring? Here?"

Becky liked the idea. "Why not? It'd be fun."

"We've got trains," Janice said. "Lots of stations."

Now I was the one with the doubts. "Too crowded. Doesn't feel right."

"Okay," Lucian said. "I should be able to borrow a holiday house at Glenbrook. That's in the Blue Mountains if you don't know, about two hours away. Term vacation's, what, in two weeks? We could go up for a few days. Lots of little stations. Springwood. Blackheath. Medlow Bath. Hazelbrook. Wentworth Falls. Just pick one."

Max turned to me. "Paul? What do you think?"

"Yes," I said, connecting up the years, feeling relieved, reprieved somehow, giving all that had occurred its due place in my life, its correct perspective and proportion, getting another chance at – just something important. "Yes, I want to."

My certainty surprised me.

"What do you say?" Lucian asked Max, diplomatically.

Max, so suddenly here, so dramatically in my life again just by being here, frowned, murmured "Hmm," then said: "Yeah. Okay. Why not?"

I believe he thought he was doing it for me – allowing a psychotherapy, completing an equation – but deep down I knew he needed something out of this too, perhaps as elusive as redemption, expiation for harm done, control lost, perhaps as simple as nostalgia for what had been.

Our only days.

3

GLENBROOK 1967

Late Monday afternoon was it. The five of us set out from the small wooden house in Glenbrook and drove through the Blue Mountains towns in Lucian's Holden. We had a rather tense and silent afternoon tea at the Paragon in Katoomba, then continued out to Mount Victoria, only to re-trace our route, stopping and looking, stopping and looking, till we finally found a suitable station sufficiently hidden away from the road.

All things considered, we should have known better than to go ahead with it that particular evening; everything about the last hour of the day felt wrong. Rain was due and there was that low mean sideways light coming at us below an overcast, and a cool breeze hugged the land, moving the trees and grasses but leaving low clouds locked in place, wrinkled and bellying down.

Strange weather, the light sliding in from the edge of the world like that, giving us a disturbing overlit quality so we glowed like tricked-up idealizations of ourselves, figures in some garish Symbolist painting.

Even as we went down the steps into the shadow of the platform, something of that quality remained – a silvering, gilding, flaring in the sunset edges of the trees and waving grasses, each leaf and blade picked out, detailed, each whorl and valance of the locked and threatening sky.

"This is weird," Janice said, perfect bathos, typical Janice, and the rest of us laughed; it was so beyond words.

"Elemental, dear Janice," said Lucian, which she didn't get, but it was probably the right word: we were elemental on that lowering, fading, fateful evening, in one of those moments of incidental framing reality where every commonplace surprises you.

I know, I'm overdoing this, but that's how it was for me, and the others too, I felt. Some days, some evenings, night just happens as a background to other things, but here it was, being made, perceptibly forming out of cracks and corners, the blackness of the short tunnel pushing out, flowing up, as if prying itself loose, all of it heightened by the dramatic closing light we had just now left behind, shed from ourselves in return for discrete shadows, the self-same drab as the clouds overhead.

There were people, just a few, waiting for the next commuter train up from Sydney to take them on to nearby Mountains stops and beyond, or the express to take them down to Emu Plains and out to the coast.

We stayed just long enough to work out the details, which side to use (left-hand facing west – the train would plunge straight into the quick darkness of the tunnel – blink, blink – did we imagine that?), how to make an easy getaway through the shallow tunnel. itself We stayed until the 5:50 from Sydney had dropped off its passengers and moved on, waited till they had vanished into the night and the lone ticket collector had gone back in out of the wind, then made our way to the car, headed back to Katoomba.

"I'm not sure about this," Max said as we were driving along.

Lucian must have expected it; he was clearly our motivating force now and still the perfect diplomat. "I know what you mean, Max. It's been a weird afternoon. What about you, Paul?"

Again I surprised myself. "Might as well go ahead with it now." Something about the quality of the light back at the station had fascinated me, given me a sense of imminence, something. But I didn't speak it, and must have even sounded a bit indifferent.

Lucian pulled over, turned to face us in the back seat. "Listen, you two," lie said, but carefully, caringly. "Five years ago you got close to something really important for you. It affected you in all sorts of ways, I can tell. We don't have to do this. We can call it off. But it needs a bit of enthusiasm, okay? If we go ahead."

Janice grinned at him. "I'm enthusiastic."

"Right," Max said, to Janice or Lucian, you couldn't tell. "It was just so ..." – dramatic? frightening? vivid? I wondered what he'd say – "incomplete." "So we're doing this now. Completing it." Lucian spoke as if he understood it all, and maybe lie did. "Next question. If we do it, your call, who leans out?"

I spoke first. "Me!"

"I will!" Max said.

"Toss for it!"

"My turn!"

Lucian, captain of the car, the whole night, decided. "Maybe it should be Paul, Max. He needs to do this. Okay?"

Max nodded. "You up to it, Paul?"

"I'm fine."

So we drove on, took in a movie in Katoomba, got back to our chosen spot at 11:02, in plenty of time for the freight. Since we figured the train would probably sound its whistle when the scaring took place, we left the car half a mile from the station and walked there, not wanting disturbed locals to see us driving away afterwards. Our plan was to walk along the tracks and cut up to the highway.

The night had closed in, chill and windy, and though the overcast stole the starlight, the rain had held off. As we moved down to the platform, the wind soughed in the power lines, whistled round the stanchions, gusted in the trees. Grass bent low on the embankments. The dark hole of the tunnel seemed thicker, deeper, seemed to pull at us, pull then push in distinct night rhythms. I wasn't the only one to imagine it; the others made comments too, seemed to find it eerie, but then we were all oversensitive to such things. The platform itself was deserted as we expected, with just a few lights showing in either direction, the four double lamp-posts, the two sets of signal lights showing their comforting red and green. The waiting room was lit too and cosily, warm. A fire had been left in the generous hearth, with wood to one side. The honour system prevailed and, despite our mission, we fed it for anyone who might arrive during the long night that would follow.

It took moments to fasten the rope, first to the westernmost lamp-post just before the tunnel, then to my waist, less than a minute or two to let me reprise my long-ago act of leaning out over the left-hand line, feet on the lip, Lucian and Max hauling me back a few times on Max's call. All straightforward, an anticlimax if anything after the build-up of our boyhood scarings, something almost pointless and foolish, stripped of context. But Lucian was clearly excited and Max was becoming so. We were all on edge; any lingering sense of anticlimax was kept at bay by the night itself, so vivid and powerful, by the constant, unsettling keening of the wind, the shuddering grasses above the cutting, the tossing trees – so many inexplicable, sudden sounds. The darkness of the tunnel seemed even deeper – pushed, pulled, waiting.

This wasn't Portobello in the warm summer night of 1962. This was a small Australian mountain station racked by a chill, late-autumn sou'easter. This was a consummation somehow, a fitting resolve. Some kind of redemption.

Max knew it; dark-eyed Lucian did. Becky no doubt. Janice said she was cold and became in a moment persona non grata forevermore in all our minds.

The time drew near. The girls hid; I leant out; Lucian and Max took their places, gripped the lifeline double-handed.

No one came. No hint of the stranger. No Rusty Cramer this time (though, paradox, I did wish it could be so, generous in my need). The wind blew and blew; the rails shone by any light they could steal – found firelight, lamplight, stole light from our eyes to keep the silver there in that heaving autumn dark.

Train came impressed on that fragile darkness, a roar below, behind, above the wind, suddenly there in smouldering running lights, in the headlight beating out, a great diesel bearing down.

I stretched out my arms, waved, waved frantically, pinned in the hideous, devouring glare. The whistle screamed, screamed where it never had before, at an hour when it never should.

I waved in the terror-rushing-darkness. How many heart attacks this time? How many? All fall down! Everyone!

Was hauled back, ricocheted as the raw and angry train ran by and was swallowed by the frame of the tunnel, swallowed whole, gulped in carriage by ratcheting, sliding, angrily snapping bogey, vertebra by vertebra as its dark spine was sucked in, gone.

Max and Lucian had both caught me. There was a moment of exhilaration, of sheer delight at what we'd done, all our earlier fear turned into that. Becky was smiling, Janice too, though she still looked scared. Would we be caught?

Would we?

But we didn't wait for some curious local to call in a complaint, or for a lone patrol car wandering through these towns to investigate why a through freight would shatter sleep around midnight this way.

Max untied the rope and coiled it ready for throwing aside later, then we helped one another down onto the tracks and began our retreat, following the double lines to the shallow tunnel.

Max couldn't restrain his delight. "It worked, Paul! It worked!"

"Smooth as clockwork," Lucian said, sounding pleased too, then added: "We need to listen though. For vibrations in the rails." "Could a train come?" Janice asked, first time of four or five. Perversely I said, "Sure could." Scaring the Janice. Hating her insensitivity to this, her finding only the Bogeyman when it was so much more.

The tunnel was only twenty or so paces long, and a train wind pushed at our backs all the way, though it was just the sou'easter finding a way through. But when we came out the other side we noticed the changes at once. The trees still blew above us on the embankments, the grasses still leaned in waves; the wind was sounding, hitting at us, but it was as if stillness had been imposed on all that - those things drawn off, suspended somehow, changed.

And more. It was as if one of those heavily shadowed, cliff-locked, deep-tunnelled coastal stations south of Sydney - Otford, Stanwell Tops, Helensburg, I wasn't sure of the names - had been superimposed on this one. The tunnel had been too deep; now the sides of the cutting seemed way too high. Details were wrong, out of plaee. Perhaps it was adrenaline rush, nerves firing with the excitement, all that noise and light replaced by the compressed dark of the tunnel and the windy silence, but we all noticed it, showed it by the looks we gave, though nothing was said, not even when we saw that there was fog in the cutting ahead.

Fog on a windy, overcast night! It snatched the streetlight too, gave some to the tracks so they ran as quicksilver glint, drawn off and lost in the silvery pall.

But fog.

The next surprise: the line branched ahead. Branched! We were not even fifty metres from the tunnel and the left-hand, westbound track we were following had a line running silver and fogbound into a cutting, steep-sided and not on any of the maps Lucian said he had studied.

This wasn't the stranger of summers gone, not Rusty Cramer bouncing pinball ricochet off the midnight freight to Madrigal. This was the world gone wrong.

"We go back now," Lucian said, and echoed that key word.

"This is wrong."

"Something's there!" Janice cried.

locomotive!

We all heard it. A shuffle, snuffle, muttered, stolen back. "Run!" Max said, and we did, not up the sides, it was too steep, not ahead to cross that branch-line, but back.

locomotive! locomotive!

Unmistakable. Something waited in the old, new, different cutting. Something. We ran on and on, entered the tunnel again, found it long, long, far longer, deeper than it had been moments ago, ran on, panting, breathing hard, Janice giving off a wail that never quite made it to a scream.

locomotive! locomotive! locomotive!

Pursued by the night, we fled, felt the train wind at our backs, were pinned in headlight, light made from darkness, rail silver, stolen streetlamps, window-shine and eye glitter, dazzling, numbing, chilling light.

"Against the wall!" someone cried, Max, Lucian, I couldn't tell. "On the other side! On the other side!" And I ran with the others, trusting that someone had indeed calculated which track would carry the – locomotive! locomotive! – presently at the tunnel's mouth. Train. As if that covered it. And we rushed, clattered and stumbled to the tunnel wall, that wrong, south-coast tunnel wall, flattened ourselves against the slick, damp bricks, cold, so cold, too cold, tried to push into the hard wet surface, air coursing over us, smelling of train friction, metal on metal, ozone, dried blood, night-bitter, blood-bitter, locomotive! locomotive! It ran past, whatever it was, going the wrong way on the wrong line at the wrong hour, in a tunnel that was wrong, wrong, with all of night and hell and angry disregard in its rush. And we pulled back, peeled away, only when there was no sound (and no fog and no cutting, I was certain), no train wind or hint of its returning, no sign at all of that ultimate Night Train. Janice was dead when we found her. All that carefully packed life bludgeoned – no – drawn out thin and gone, cut free, snatched away. No wound that we could tell in the meagre light, just wiped of life and light and fear, all in a moment, there in that space, a mere twenty or so paces deep. Normal again, hall! Never normal. Never again. And when the police finally came and took us back to Katoomba and asked their hours of questions, it was left as heart attack and stupid uni students walking the tracks (apparently the engineers had not bothered to report the scaring). Sure, Lucian phoned around and word got back to us later that there was a glitch in the autopsy forensics: all the iron had been leached from her blood. So that couldn't be the end of it for us. We went back, three of us did, some months after the court hearing. Becky and Lucian were living together by this stage, but she decided not to go along. So Lucian, Max and I drove up one Saturdaynight, arriving late with our torches and memorial bunch of flowers (our excuse if anyone found us at it), and after entering the tunnel from the western end to make sure there was no extra line, no branch cutting beyond, we finally agreed on the spot where Janice had died. There were no blood stains, of course, nothing on the hard round stones before that slick wall but moss, old cigarette packets, a candy bar wrapping, leaves and dried grass stalks, two bottle tops and a rusty nail. Not quite knowing why I did so, I took the nail, put it in my pocket; it was something that was real, after all, part of it, part of the place and the time and the death. Of poor, brief, stupid Janice. We left the flowers and drove away.

4

TOWN HALL STATION 1972-1994

There were four openings for this account I'm doing here, one for each version I've tried putting down, depending on which starting point I chose. One line you already have: 'Every summer during our childhood holidays at Portobello, Maximillian and I would spend an hour every third day scaring the train.' But I could just as easily have started in media res, as in an earlier attempt, with: 'The train winds are the best in Sceptre City' – a good line: short, gripping, promising mysterious things – then worked back through it as Dr Day suggested I do. Stealing a bit, really, because Sydney didn't get its third real skyline landmark – Bridge, Opera House, finally the Sydney Tower: God's Microphone, the Sceptre – until 1981, but as you discover as you get older in the eternal Now, you reach a point when it never seems otherwise, and you have to concentrate to remember how it really was then. The line is as true for 1967 as today – tonight – and writing this down again, I do remember that name as part of that time.

Glancing back over what I've written, it seems that Lucian promised to be some sinister reincarnation of that stranger Max and saw years ago. Sinister he was with his dark good looks and strange notions, but while Max and I remained in one another's lives after we graduated in 1970, we lost touch with Lucian and Becky who, last we heard, got married and mortgaged and snatched aside from the flow of life (or into it, depending on your view of such things).

Max got married too, to a young high-school teacher named Pauline. Me, why I'm Mr Popular, with relationships pretty well constantly, but have stayed single, communicating something unresolved in myself (I was told by one girlfriend who went away, vanished from my life, never answered the phone again), something tense and gripped too tightly. And I screamed during nightmares I never remembered. So, sure, I had ladies, partners, companions, in one-night, six-week, two-month lots, but never futures.

Max stayed in touch and stayed interested (there was too much unresolved between us as well) and he was the one who phoned in May 1972 and asked me to meet him at Giovanni's Pizzeria at Town Hall Station to discuss train winds. What he said. Train winds.

We'd tried Sydney's train winds before, back in '68 and '69, standing on Town Hall, Wynyard, St James and Museum, feeling the plunging piston push of air before trains arrived, the unmistakable slipstream, warm, redolent of oil, ozone, raw metal and dark places. It could delight you, thrill you or scare you silly, and we kept at it because we almost understood something every time, recognized or remembered something, though never quite what.

So began a decades-long series of infrequent, almost ritualistic meetings that usually started with a meal and ended with us going down onto the platforms and just experiencing the elusive telling-us-something quality of the train winds.

All routine until a week ago.

Tins time his voice on the phone had been troubled, urgent.

Would I meet him? Yes. The usual place (now Alexander's Cafe). Sure.

I found him drinking coffee right there before the breathing stairwells of the Town Hall underground. He didn't say much, not then, but we bought City Circle tickets and went to the final level where there was the weight of the city and the lives, and the familiar twin tracks laid taut, silver and humming between their double gulps of darkness. Tunnels are like seashells: you hear impossible seas when you listen close.

We stood, toes to edge, peering off into one of those snatching gaps and then, then we could talk, eyes on the dark in darkness, then we could.

"You know what Janice said that night, Paul?"

Janice? Janice? Years, moments, lives rammed together in an instant.

That Janice.

"What? When?"

"Before she died. Before we went up to Glenbrook that weekend."

"No. I. didn't. No, I don't, Max. What did she say?"

Toes to the edge, we peered off into gloom, minds attuned to the faintest breath, listening, listening for the tiniest ghost-rush and whisper.

"She'd had dreams, she said. The same dream. Ever since we decided to do the scaring. She dreamt she'd die there."

I resisted the hard knot of guilt, fought shame and denial, the emotion locking my gut. Bloody Janice! Bloody, changed-blood Janice!

"So?" Calm. Hard. Keeping it hard.

"Something sharp would take her. Something sharp."

Thanks a lot, Max. Bringing me this. "A train?"

There, I had named it, said it, peering into gloom. The Night Train. locomotive!

And listened, watched the veins in the earth, those warm taut lines, worm lines, snail-slide of silver; watched the blocked black, ocean-shell darkness. For train. Train.

"Something sharp. I asked that too - a train? - before we set out that day."

"And? Come on, Max! And?"

"She asked if trains were sharp."

Ohmigod! Poor dizzy Janice. So brave, so driven. So changed. "You never told me."

"Told no one, mate. You didn't want to hear. You wouldn't have then, would you? Another death?"

"No." Small word. No. Remembering Janice. Years. Summers. "I kept it from everyone."

"Lucian?"

"No way. He'd have gone off on one of his theories. We put it aside. Just like with Rusty Cramer."

"So why tell me now?" Though I knew what he'd say.

"I've had the dreams too, mate. Four of them. Something sharp. About trains." We felt the faintest kiss of air, a hint, a flutter. It was. Oceans filling on midnight shores.

"So we don't do this anymore. We put it aside again, Max.

It's just memory serving up old stuff. We've carried it with us too long."

We step back right now, Max, I wanted to say. We step back. No more scaring either way.

Feathers of air stroked our faces.

"I just had to tell you. Had to let you know."

"Down here?" What I didn't say was: Did the dreams scare Pauline away?

"Needed that too. Just did, you know? It's been too long."

The rush, the unmistakable smell of the pushing air, the smell.

Metal on metal. Ozone. Electric fire in the underworld. Sharp fire deep down.

"It has," Step back now, Max. I took his arm: he let me draw him back with me, one step, two, another. "We should include Lucian. Let him know too. Talk it out."

"Already have."

"What? When?"

"He suggested this. Said I needed this."

The train was there, shattering, battering, squealing down to just a silver, ribbed 10:08 to Hornsby, modern and safe, harmless again.

We waited as people came and went, waited till the doors slid shut and it had pulled off into the undernight. I imagined it drawing the air from our lungs after it, pulling it into sighs, drawing it thin. Earth, fire, water and air. Max did sigh. "I'm scared, Paul. Really scared, you know?" "So we keep away from places like this."

"Does no good. I see lines."

"You what?"

"I see train lines everywhere. Just look down a street or an alley. There they are, clear and bright as anything?"

Like the dark holes under trees. Black spaces in sunshine. "You mean it?"

"Look again and they're gone. But it's not corner of the eye stuff, Paul.

They're right there. I hear a noise at night, look out the window and see them going down the street. See them in the drive, going across backyards, running right through fences. I go out to the fridge. There are lines in the living room, Paul, just right there, you know."

I still had his arm, was gripping it hard. I made him listen to me, told him about my own visits to Dr Day, got him to quiz me on why I'd do such a thing. No, I wasn't having dreams or seeing lines. But I had anxieties, I said, problems relating, connecting. I had to write it out, I told him, which did seem to help. I said he hadn't done that was all, hadn't sorted the coincidence of the deaths, hadn't worked through it. Been debriefed. Talked down. That's all.

We agreed: no more scarings. We'd meet with Lucian, patch up the ragged bits, talk it through, the three of us. Stay in touch this time.

He was easier as we left the station; I was easier, having focused my own fear and edges through Max's own. He gave me Lucian's address, then we phoned, arranged to meet on the Friday night. Then I put Max in a cab and never saw him again.

7:13 PM

Last night I found Lucian's nail. Third opening of the four. This is the one I had before I decided to do it via Internet, get it out as far and as fast as I could. It can't be everywhere at once. It can't look everywhere. There have to be gaps, ways through, yes, openings. But time for this line anyway, bringing it nearly to the moment. One to go. Last night I found Lucian's nail. Two inches long, flat round head, round body, the sort of short, dark, rusty nail you find by the dozens, hundreds, in the re-cycle bins of older hardware stores and in old paling fences. But his. His.

Found it on the night of the very day Lucian's package arrived with its ninety-minute TDK audio tape and the little cardboard box and the note – the package brought in by Tilly and used to weigh down her own goodbye note on the afternoon she too had had enough of remoteness, screams in the night, failure to commit, whatever she decoded it as.

Her note didn't surprise me. She'd tried; I'd tried, believed I had, believed I believed I had. I tried to wish her well.

But Lucian's note chilled me where I stood in the hall, the words scrawled in pencil, more disturbing somehow than if they had been in blood or purple ink. Max's nail. Hide it. Tell no one.

Look for mine. Hide them both. Stop it here.

I resented the melodrama, the emotional grab on top of losing Tilly (with all the cumulative guilt of losing Louise and Jill; it just went on and on, back, back), but I was deeply and singly terrified too.

Max's nail. I opened the tiny box and saw it – just like Janice's, like Lucian's too I bet! – and knew Max was dead. Knew somehow, somewhere, he would be found with his blood changed, the iron gone to make this.

Nail.

I started to understand it then, you see. Standing in the hall, holding the small white box, with Tilly gone and the tape to play and the stupid note.

But not Lucian. Not Lucian dead too!

Two thoughts. Three. You've left me alone with this. Betrayed e. And: the Train was getting nearer.

Then the phone rang.

Standing there in front of it, compressed with loss, terror and disbelief, with too much unravelling of the ordinary world, I cried out and swore and would've shouted down the line except I thought Tilly. Please, God, yes.

"Paul? It's Becky. Sorry to bother you but have you seen Lucian?" "No. No, I haven't, Beck. What's happened?"

It went from there. Could I come over? Of course I would, left the tape waiting, unplayed, went to her place, heard how Lucian had gone with no word, no explanation. She'd waited the drunk-binge, affair-guilt, drug-down twenty-four hours (apparently he'd been hitting it hard in every sense of the word, goosed by ideas that wouldn't go away), made the appropriate calls to friends (well, closer friends), hospitals, the police, answered their questions – no, no sign of foul play – had finally, finally, two days on, phoned me on the off-chance.

Off-chance! On, more like it: the very day his package arrived.

The last time she'd seen him was as she'd left for work, sitting at the kitchen table, the morning after being out with Max till all hours. With Max. I asked about that-, heard they'd been seeing a lot of one another (without including me? So much for our meeting up again), allowed that the tape would tell me all about that.

I looked in the kitchen as surreptitiously as possible, looked there again while brewing Becky and me coffee, found it just sitting there on the bench top as if pushed to one side, that exact size and shape, would never have

noticed it without looking for it.

His. It was.

"What's this?" I actually asked her when she came in to help. She shrugged.

"Don't know. Found it on the floor."

No real curiosity about such an ordinary thing. It's true when they say there is nothing more sinister than what we never suspect: teapots, cracks in sidewalks, the flutter of a curtain, the bang of a screen door, lawn sprinklers.

Where's the body then? I wondered. Thinking of Janice, the nail in the tunnel where she had died, the sharp thing Max had knelt on tying the rope around dead, changed Rusty. (I was putting it all together, you see.)

We ended up sitting at the kitchen table and I pocketed the nail when I went to pour us refills; then spent the next hour considering anything and everything, me trying to be calm and caring but frantic with the need to find Lucian's body, wanting more than anything to get out of there so I could play the tape. No police, no telling anyone till I'd played that.

But Becky's question brought me up short. Not the expected theories: the prospect of a clean break, running away with someone, not the improbabilities of an amnesia-inducing accident or even a thrill-kill, but words about our first days.

"It's all to do with Portobello, isn't it? That convergent energy thing." How you think of a thing makes a thing. How you name a thing defines thing, I might have said no, gone on about how wrong it was to make Lucian's ideas the only, handle on this. But Becky had had twenty-seven more years of such talk. No doubt it did follow on, did connect up. She kept at it.

"That's when it all started, didn't it?"

I might have told her then, mentioned the nail – the nails – the tape, the scrawled note, but needed perspective, desperately needed detachment if I could get it.

"Let me think this over, Beck. Let me go through my, old diaries, just think it through, you know, see what I come up with. I'll call you tomorrow. Fortunately I'd been there long enough, sitting through the silences with her, that it didn't seem like I was abandoning her. We'd exhausted possibilities, gone from plausible to improbable, from rational to irrational. At last I could leave.

"There's nothing else, Paul. There's just nothing else," she said as we went to the front door.

I hated her certainty, feared it. "I'll call, I promise. The moment I have anything."

Then I drove home thinking, wondering, bringing it all back.

I could have started the account like that, you see, with finding the nail, then gone back to Portobello and 1962. But I needed to pace through it for myself, just to get it out, and I'm nearly done.

I went home and put Lucian's nail in the box with Max's, then slipped the tape into my sound system, pressed Play.

There was nothing. Nothing. Just the running noise of the capstans turning, a no-sound, like the vacuum of space against an open mike, a constant waiting changelessness.

Now that I've had words fade on the page in front of me, I know what to expect, but even then I wasn't the least surprised. Once you granted the nails, the changed blood, of course you allowed for tapes that erased. Allowed them all as parts of a system – something just being recognized.

I drank more scotch than I should have and slept, thank God, slept right through.

Not because I was brave, more that I missed Tilly and was lonely, I went out walking that cold windy Saturday morning (this morning), just went across to the park, loving the autumn chill, how the leaves blew in waves, scurried and rustled on the paths.

I had the nails in my pocket and had half a mind to drive up into the Blue Mountains, go to the tunnel where Janice had died, or easier, closer, go down

onto Town Hall's lowest level and just sit there, wait out the day – in case Lucian might come to me from some impossible cutting or out of some narrow squeezed-back folded-in part the undernight. I was halfway across the deserted park when the hallucinations began – the hint and glint of rails among the scattering leaves, the sense of a train wind: ozone, steel on steel, feather-flutter in the midst of the cold south-westerly, like a warm breath into chilled hands. I kept waiting for the attendant sounds, imagined –locomotive! –yes, its the bending, shuddering trees.

And I knew. Just knew.

How Max had died. Rusty's death. Janice's.

Leaning out. Tethered. Lucian hauling, misjudging, some error. Max dead, a nail left from his changed blood, wrested out. Every adult human carried at least a two-inch nail's worth of iron in the blood. Carrying oxygen to the brain or something. What a death! Train pummelling through, laved in train wind, a kiss, a stroke, out goes the iron. The mind, the body, knowing what it lacked, stultified with the knowledge of the clean sweep. Something sharp. Bitter iron taste like blood in the mouth.

I kicked at the leaves, hands in pockets, walking, walking, –catching hints of silver lines in the windy day, coining at me from under the trees, glinting in bushes, raw quicksilver, paled chrome, drawing off and off and away, treacherous as razors.

The lines. All the hues.

Somewhere, somewhere, I knew, as I turned out into Buckingham Street, passed sealed, windlocked houses, leaves scattering, blowing out of beleaguered trees, Max's body lay changed and dead, perhaps in a forgotten tunnel, overlooked in a culvert, someplace where Lucian had done – or not done – his deed.

But Lucian, where?

I turned from Buckingham into Wentworth, circled the park, crossed it again, expecting Lucian at any moment, sitting on a bench, standing under a tree, dead eyes looking straight out, face white, leached, starved. But no, nothing, and the hints of lines faded in the bleak afternoon, vanished altogether. Yet had told me something. Accelerating affect. The lines leading out.

I phoned Becky from a payphone on the corner, meaning to be brutally direct ("Where did you leave the body, Beck?"), but there was no answer.

I caught a cab to her house, entered by the unlocked back door, and found her dead on the kitchen floor, plundered, changed, eyes wide, her own nail by her right hand, held but dropped in death.

I added it to the others in my pocket, wiped the door handle and left, went back into the windy afternoon and took a bus into the city, went down onto the lowest level of Town Hall Station. No tether for me, just a quick moment of agony, a small tragic ritual in this dead afternoon hour, only a few people about.

If you've got this far, get to see this much at all, then you know didn't do it, of course.

As I waited, peering into darkness, I saw someone looking back at me. Standing on the track, barest hint of shadow in shadow, of eyeshine and pale, pale skin: someone.

Lucian, was my first thought, first certainty. Lucian, you bastard, my second. Not your nail in the kitchen. Some other poor bugger's to mislead us.

No one else was watching. No one else saw me jump down onto the line, stride into the warm, pulsing throat of the tunnel. No one called after me. I went up to the figure standing in the middle of the track, was about to grab him by the front of his jacket, demand What have you done? What have you done, bastard? Had the words right there, but stopped short.

It was Lucian all right. I saw that in the glow of platform light over my

shoulder, in the white of skin and the glitter of sightless, staring eyes. He was staring into light.

It's hard to say now what he looked like, what the loss of iron had done. What skin I could see was like marble, tight and cold. He just stood, dead, changed, scarecrow upright, arms dangling, but worse, worst of all, his mouth hung open, and through it, from it, came a wind, that wind, and the whisper – locomotive! – of barest noise-in-a-seashell words.

"Not yet, Paul." Named. Naming me. h did. The Night Train did. This Bogeyman. Bogie-man. "Not yet, little Paul."

I fled then, turned and ran out of the tunnel, clambered up onto the platform even as the sliding thunder came and – an unforgettable, meat-slammed-on-a-table sound – dead Lucian was impaled, carried, dumped and rolled by the silver severed thread of a train – my sweet, unknowing, latest, alibi train.

I took out the box, opened it, saw that the nails were gone. And knew.

6

7:38 PM

So, you've guessed. Well, I took longer than you, but I worked it out then, refined it tonight, writing this.

The plate in my skull: not plastic or stainless steel, no, not for me. If you looked, you'd find dead black iron. Intimate iron. I'm sure of it. A mirror curved onto thought, raw but never doing harm. Not to me.

How many lives, I wonder, for that piece of metal, just so this demon, this devil, can have its psychopomp, one who goes before? One of many, who knows? Successors, perhaps, to our man at Portobello so long ago.

How many of us, driven to silence? Needing to speak, drawn to tell, what do I do? Go on seeing the glint of rails across parks, rainy avenues, flashing in the moonlight when there is no Moon, twin lines of there-not there quicksilver, feeling the train wind in the tiniest

breath and pulse, in the play of dust devils in an empty street?

Go on drawing others to me, those whose blood will be changed in the sharpened dark?

I don't expect you to believe any of this, if ever it does get out there. Just don't be surprised. That Becky died. That Dr Day didn't answer his phone tonight, will probably never answer it again. That I'm still alive.

We all like trains. We do. But how many of us did it take to build this train and its endless thundering bogies? (Bogies, oh yes!) And tracks that go on and on and spill into the ordinary world worn thin? How many nails? How many?

My final opening, - line? Easy now. Perfect ending.

Let me write it. Let me write it before the words fade again. You would have liked it.

Now I know what Death is.

There.

And here. The knock at the door. Someone – Sue or Carmen, maybe Tilly back again. Or maybe that new guy from the office. Gerry. He said he might drop by. Any old iron.

Even as I close this off, press send one more time, there are rails, hints of lines off down the hall, running into night, but not for me.

Not for the Bogie-man.

There's the far-off sound, a warm familiar pressure in my skull, and the wind is already blowing.