

THE DISTANT SOUND OF ENGINES

Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

"Len? Lenny?" The unearthly man in the next bed was trying to wake me up.

I lay in the dark, my hands behind my head, listening to the traffic going by the hospital. Even late at night--and it was late whenever the man in the next bed dared to talk to me--the traffic outside was fairly heavy because the highway ran straight through town. That had been a lucky thing for me, because the ambulance attendant never had been able to stop the flow of blood out of my legs. Another half mile, another two minutes, and I would have been as dry as a castoff snakeskin.

But I was all right, now, except that the jackknifing truck had taken my legs off under the dashboard. I was alive, and I could hear the trucks going by all night. The long, long rigs; semi-trailers, tandems, reefers...coming up the seaboard from Charleston and Norfolk, going on to New York...coming down from Boston, from Providence...Men I knew, driving them. Jack Biggs. Sam Lasovic. Tiny Morris, with the ring finger of his right hand missing at the first joint. I was one up on Tiny, for sure.

Job in the dispatcher's office waiting for you, Lenny, I said to myself. No sweat. No more bad coffee, cold nights, sandpaper eyes. Getting a little old for the road, anyhow. Thirty-eight. Sure.

"Lenny..."

The best the man in the next bed would do was whisper. I wondered if he wasn't just afraid. He was afraid to talk at all in the daytime, because the nurses simply stuck a new needle in him every time he made a sound. Stuck it through a thin place in the bandages, they did, and walked away in a hurry. Sometimes they missed, and sometimes only some of the drug got under his skin, so that only his arm went numb. The man in the next bed bragged about the times that happened. He tried to make them miss, moving his arms a little. Sometimes they noticed, but more often they didn't.

He didn't want the needle, the man in the next bed didn't. The needle took away the pain, and without the pain, with bandaging all over his face, he didn't have any proof he was alive. He was a stubborn, smart man, fighting back that way, because he'd developed a craving for the stuff, even not being like you and me. I mean, from some different place.

"Lenny..."

"Hunh?" I said, fogging my voice. I always made him wait. I didn't want him to know I stayed awake all night.

"Awake?"

"Now."

"I'm sorry, Len."

"Okay," I said quickly. I didn't want him feeling obligated to me. "It's all right. I get plenty of sleep daytimes."

"Len. The formula for exceeding the velocity of light is..." And he began giving me the figures and letters.

Last night it had been the exact proportions of the metals in a high-temperature resistant alloy; the melting and pouring techniques for it; the hardening process. The night before, hull specifications. I listened until he was through.

"Have you got that, Lenny?"

"Sure."

"Read it back to me."

I worked in a diner three years, once. I could remember anything anybody told me--I didn't care how complicated--and rattle it off right back to him. It's a trick; you wipe your mind clean, open your ears, and in it comes: "Two grilled cheese to go; bacon and tomato, white toast, no mayonnaise. Three coffees; one black, no sugar; one light and sweet; one regular." You open your mouth, turn toward the sandwich man, and out it comes: "G.A.C. on two, seaboard. B.T. down, hold the mayo." You turn toward the coffee cups and put out your hands. Your fingers grab the cups, and you move to the spigot on the urn. You tap the milk jug handle three times over one cup, twice over the other. The third cup slides by automatically. The important part of your mind is a million miles away. You put the coffees down, and your mind wipes out that part of the order. The sandwich man hands you two wrapped squares and a plate with the B.T. on it. You give them to the customers, and your mind wipes out the rest of it. It's gone, used up, and all the time the important part of your mind is a million miles away.

I listened to the rigs going up a hill in compound. Pittsburgh, Scranton, Philadelphia...Washington, Baltimore, Camden, Newark...A diesel went by--a flatbed, with I beams for a load--while I was reading back the last part of what he'd told me.

"That's right, Lenny. That's *right!*"

I suppose it was. In a diner, you eat the orders you foul up.

"Any more tonight?" I asked him.

"No. No, that's enough. I'm going to get some rest, now. Go back to sleep now. Thanks."

"Sure."

"No, don't be so casual. You're doing a big thing for me. It's important to me to pass these things on to you people. I'm not going to last much longer."

"Sure, you are."

"No, Lennie."

"Come on."

"No. I was burning as I fell. Remember the alternate radical in the equation I gave you the first night? The field was distorted by the Sun, and the generator restructured the..." He went on, but I don't remember it. I would have had to remember the original equation for it to make any sense to me, and even if I remembered it I would have had to understand it. This business of reading his equations back to him, see...that was a trick. Who wants to remember how many grilled cheese sandwiches to go did you sell during the day? I had a wise guy order in double talk, once. I read it back to him like a man running a strip of tape through a recorder, and I wasn't even listening.

"...So, you see, Lenny, I'm not going to live. A man in my condition wouldn't survive even in my time and place."

"You're wrong, Buddy. They'll pull you through. They know their business in this place."

"Do you really think so, Lenny?" He whispered it with a sad laugh, if you know what I mean.

"Sure," I said. I was listening to a tanker going by from the north. I could hear the clink of the static chain.

They had brought the man in the next bed in from what they figured was a real bad private plane fire. They said some farmer had seen him falling free, as if he'd jumped without a parachute. They hadn't been able to identify him yet, or find his plane, and he wouldn't give a name. The first two nights he hadn't said a word, until suddenly he said: "Is anybody listening? Is there someone there?"

I had spoken up, and he had asked me about myself--what my name was, what my trouble was. He wanted to know the name of the town, and the nation, and the date--day, month, and year. I told him. I'd seen him in his bandages, during the day, and a man in shape like that, you don't argue about his questions. You answer them. You're glad for the chance to do him a kindness.

He was a smart man, too. He spoke a mess of languages besides English. He tried me in Hungarian for a while, but he knew it a lot better than I did. It's been a long time since I left the folks in Chicago.

I told the nurse, the next day, that he'd been talking to me. The doctors tried to find out who he was and where from, but he didn't talk to them. He convinced them, I think, that he was back in a coma again; they hadn't much believed me when I said he'd talked sensibly at all. After that, I knew better than to tell anybody anything. If he wanted it his way, he was entitled. Except he found out, like I've said, that if he made a sound during the day, they'd give him another needle. You couldn't blame them. It was their way of doing him a kindness.

I lay back, and watched the ceiling begin getting light from the first touch of day outside the windows. Traffic was picking up outside, now. The rigs went by one after another. Farm produce, most likely, catching the market. Lettuce and potatoes, oranges and onions--I could hear the crates shifting on top of each other on the big stake bodies, and the creak of the tie ropes.

"Lenny!"

I answered right away.

"Lenny, the equation for coordinating spacetime is..." He was in a hurry.

"Yeah." I let it soak into the trick sponge in my mind, and when he asked me to read it back, I squeezed it dry again.

"Thank you, Lenny," he said. I could barely hear him--I began thumbing the night-call bell on the cord draped over the head of my bed.

The next day, there was a new man in the next bed. He was a hunter--a young fellow, from New York--and he'd put a load of birdshot all through his right thigh. It was a couple of days before he wanted to talk, and I didn't get to know him, much.

I guess it was the second or third afternoon after the new man had come in, when my doctor straightened up and pulled the sheet back over my stumps. He looked at me in a peculiar way, and said, offhandedly: "Tell you what, Lenny--suppose we send you down to surgery and take a little bit more off each of those, hmm?"

"Nuts, Doc, I can smell it, too. Why bother?"

We didn't have much more to say to each other. I lay thinking about Peoria, Illinois, which used to be more fun than it has been lately--for truckers, I mean--and St. Louis, and Corpus Christi. I wasn't satisfied with just the Eastern Seaboard anymore. Sacramento, Seattle, Fairbanks and that miserable long run over the Alcan Highway...

In the middle of the night, I was still remembering. I could hear the rigs out on the street, but I was really listening to the sound a Cummins makes going into one of those long switchback grades over the Rockies, and suddenly I turned my head and whispered: "Fellow! Hey, fellow--you awake?" to the new man in the next bed.

I heard him grunt. "What?" He sounded annoyed. But he was listening.

"You ever do any driving? I mean, you ever go down through New Jersey in your car? Well, look, if you ever need a break on tires or a battery, you stop by Jeffrey's Friendly Gas and Oil, on Route 22 in Darlington, and tell 'em Lenny Kovacs sent you. Only watch out--there's a speed trap right outside town, in the summer.... And if you want a good meal, try the Strand Restaurant, down the street there. Or if you're going the other way, up into New England, you take the Boston Post Road and stop by...Fellow? You listening?"

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