THE RAIL YARD JOB

By Denny Riley

I saw the rail yard job in the want ads, so I called the number.

Tom Donohue answered. He told me he was yardmaster at the Goodman Street rail yard, and he was looking for a yard clerk.

“Almost four o’clock,” he said. “And you’re the first one to call about the job. You ever worked swings and graves?”

“Yeah.”

“You have? Good. What a yard clerk does is keep track of all the waybills and what tracks the cars are on. It’s swings and graves. Can you come in now?”

“Sure,” I said.

He told me to wear jeans and work shoes.

It was Monday afternoon, the 7th of April. I caught the East Main Street bus. On the phone Tom Donohue made it sound as though I had the job. I couldn’t see where there’d been an interview. His explanation of yard clerk meant nothing to me. He said I’d find him on the third floor. At Goodman Street I got off and walked south.

Brick buildings with grimy windows lined the street. Goodman ended at a big rail yard. I’d lived in Rochester all but four years of my life yet never knew the rail yard was there. A four-story steel blue tower stood beside the tracks. It resembled a stubby airport tower that didn’t care about its appearance. The top floor had large windows and a balcony that looked out over the rail yard.

The ground floor door was open. Tools I didn’t recognize were leaning against the walls. I climbed to the third floor where Tom Donohue was standing behind a tidy desk. He was wearing

a green plaid shirt. “Denny Riley? Call me Tom.” He shook my hand and looked me up and down. “Have a seat,” he said as he sat. Before I was in the chair he asked, “What about Selective Service?”

“I was in the Air Force.”

His eyes widened but as quickly he looked down at his desk and mumbled about serving one’s country and that he regretted not having the opportunity, due to his railroad deferment, but we all serve in our own way. He stopped talking and looked at me as though it was my turn to sound like a patriot. I held up four fingers and said, “Four years.”

He nodded and said, “Can you start now?”

“Sure.”

“Well, you got the job. You’ll have to get a haircut, though.”

“I was planning to.” My first lie on the new job.

“Good. Work a few swing shifts with George and you’ll be all set. You’ll work graves a while then get a definite schedule. Let’s go upstairs. I’ll introduce you to the dayshift guys. They leave at five. George is up there too.”

Six guys were on the third floor. All but one stood at the large windows watching a freight train go by and talking loud and fast and pointing at the cars. The other guy sat in a chair by one of the old wood desks that faced the walls. He had a phone to his ear and jotted on a pad with a pencil while repeating “Mm-hm.”

“Fellas,” Tom called. “If I can have your attention. This is Denny Riley. He’s our new yard clerk.”

Someone said, “number grabber.” It was the man at the desk. He looked over the top of his glasses at Tom.

Tom chuckled and said, “Okay,” and went on. “George will be training him.” He nodded to a stocky guy over by the door to the balcony. George looked at me and bobbed his head.

Tom told the guys, “Don’t let Denny’s looks fool ya. He was in Vietnam.”

That caught me off guard. I looked at the dayshift guys bug-eyed. They sort of smiled. Tom pointed at each of them and pronounced a name and a job. The jobs were railroad jargon and went right over my head. I managed to catch the names, though. Maxie, Tone, Nunzy, Arty, Petroski, and George. They dressed like Tom, chinos and sports shirts, except George who wore a blue work shirt, jeans, tough looking shoes, and a railroad cap cocked toward one ear. When Tom was done talking, he smiled, and everyone smiled back. Tom wished me luck and trotted down the stairs. When the door below squeaked shut they made their way to their desks and talk resumed.

One said his heart was broken by a horse in the fifth the night before at the track.

Another said, “I didn’t bet that race. It gave me a bad feeling.”

The first guy said, “You’re full of it, Tone. You never don’t bet. You’re afraid to tell us how much you lost, is all.”

Before this line of discourse could develop a guy across the room seated with his chair facing away from his desk called to me.

“Hey Denny. Are you Tom’s new boyfriend?”

“Huh?” I said.

The guy said, “What with your long hair and everything, I figured.”

“Leave him alone, Maxie,” one of the men said without looking up from papers on his desk. “Didn’t ya hear Tom say he was in the Army? Weren’t ya, Denny?”

“United States Air Force.”

“There ya go.”

“You got 417 to worry about, Maxie,” another man said.

“Here’s your 417, Nunzy,” Maxie said grabbing his crotch. “Ain’t that right, George? Donohue’s a fairy?”

George said, “You might know more about that than I do, Maxie.”

All the men laughed, even Maxie, but he had a point to make.

“No,” Maxie said. “Donohue’s a fairy. He ain’t gonna hire this longhaired kid if he weren’t.”

With that I decided to never again get a haircut.

“So,” I said to Maxie, hoping to not sound peeved. “If a guy has long hair it means he’s queer?”

“I never heard this about Donohue,” Nunzy said to Maxie. “Until you didn’t get the yard master job and he did. You ever heard it before that, Arty?”

“Never heard nuthin,” Arty said. “You heard that Tone?”

“Nope, never did,” Tone said.

Petroski said, “By your way of thinking, Maxie, Donohue got the yardmaster job because the section boss is a fairy too, and now Donohue’s only gonna hire fairies.”

The phone on Arty’s desk was ringing but he didn’t make a move to answer it.

“Come on out here,” George told me.

We went out to the balcony. The overlook, they called it. George looked out at the yard. “Don’t try to make sense of those guys. They spend too much time together.”

He pulled a pack of Camels from his pocket and offered me one and we lit up. He took a long drag. While he exhaled, he pointed with the two fingers holding his cigarette.

“The yard’s three quarters of a mile from end to end. It’s 36 tracks wide.”

He went on to tell me what goes on in the yard. I almost wrote “he went on in great detail to tell me...” but I don’t know if he did. My total railroad experience up to then was hopping in and out of boxcars with my boyhood pals on a siding at the end our street. George lost me with his first sentence. I stood beside him staring over the yard but thinking about the railroad police chasing away my pals and me. I was alert enough, though, to hear George wrap up his dissertation. “It’s a double ended yard but we switch from the west end. Got it?’

“Yeah.”

He laughed at me. “You shoulda saw your face. Anyway, every car on the road has a number stenciled on its upper left corner. And every car has a waybill with the same number on the upper left corner. Everything about the car and its load is on its waybill. There’re only three places a waybill can be. With a conductor, with a number grabber, or in the correct cubby hole above the number grabber’s desk. When cars are brought into the yard the conductor brings the waybills up to the tower. You make a list of the car numbers on your pad and go out in the yard to check they’re here and on the right track. After a local is switched together you go out and do the same thing. That’s all ya gotta know. Let’s go out to the yard. This tower can drive ya nuts, with all its bullshit. Let me show ya the waybills. We’ll make a list of car numbers then go out.”

I worked two swing shifts with George then worked a string of graveyard shifts. On graves there were only two men in the tower, a freight master and a number grabber. My first graves I worked with a freight master named Agostino. Agostino had his own way of working graves. Whenever he and I worked together we did it Agostino’s way. It was based on his observation that nothing happened from 11:28 PM when the last local train left the yard, until 5:44 AM when the first main liner of the day came by with such a racket it would wake anyone.

“Yard engines stop work when the last local leaves,” Agostino told me. “After that every car in the yard is right where it’s gonna be. All you gotta do is make sure the cars on a track match the waybills, and the waybills are ready when the conductors come in. C’mon.”

We ran down the stairs and out of the tower with pads, pencils, lanterns, and lists of numbers. The yard was lit like a ballpark by bright lights high on poles. It smelled of tar-soaked railroad ties. We walked between tracks 8 and 9, a dark cavern where the yard lights didn’t shine. Tall boxcars on both sides gave off the warmth they’d gathered all day in the yard. We shined our lanterns up to the numbers on the cars and checked them off on our pads. As we walked, the smell of tar was overpowered by the smell of mustard. Mustard seeds trickled from hoppers waiting to unload at a mustard factory in one of the old brick buildings that surrounded the yard. The seeds that trickled grew and blossomed in the grit between the tracks. “French’s Mustard,” Agostino said although I hadn’t asked. We walked back between tracks 10 and 11.

When we were in the yard light again Agostino said, “I’ve been working in this yard twelve years and never found a car on a track where it wasn’t supposed to be, or a car not on a track where it was supposed to be.” He hesitated, then said, “Both.”

We laughed.

“You have a pretty good record.”

“I’m good at this.”

He led me out of the yard to a pizzeria on East Main where he bought a large pepperoni with extra oregano. We took it next door to a bar, empty except for the bartender who knew Agostino. We shared the pizza with him, drank two pitchers of beer, and played the bowling machine. When the bar closed we made our way back to the yard and to the siding where cabooses were. We climbed into one and boosted ourselves up on bunks and went to sleep until the main line

train barreled through at 5:44. We went into the tower then, finished the paperwork, and left when the first day guy came in.

On my second grave shift, when the freight master was Jimmy O'Connor, I learned that Agostino did more work than he had to. The freight master on graves had nothing to do but be there in case something came up that had to be done. Jimmy O'Conner worked only graves because he had seniority and chose to. He spent the night reminiscing to whoever the number grabber was about how the railroad used to be before all these young pups with their college educations but not a lick of horse sense came in with all their automated gadgetry.

Jimmy always arrived early, set his lunch pail and thermos on his desk, turned his chair so he could watch the yard and see the number grabber's desk at the same time. When I came up the stairs, before I got to my desk, Jimmy began one of his stories of the railroad the way it used to be. He had a dozen stories he told over and over in no predictable order. George told me Jimmy told him the same story two graves in a row. His voice was like an old-time radio announcer with the drawback of no plug to pull. His delivery gave the impression he shouldn't be interrupted, though he was never ruffled when it happened. He appeared to enjoy the interruption, as if it was a reminder he was not alone. I found I could go out to the yard and come back any time and Jimmy would pick up right where he'd left off. I didn't risk going to the beer joint or sleeping in a caboose. I walked every track where there were cars, stopped back in the tower for coffee and a bit of Jimmy's tale, and went back out to read by lantern light in a caboose. I was at my desk droopy eyed when the day shift came up the stairs at eight.

Then on a summer night three months after I began my railroad career something happened. Jimmy greeted me with, "Well there he is!" the way he always did, and I said, "Hey, Jimmy," like I was tickled to see him. I went to the number grabber's desk and began looking at waybills as though I was all about railroad. He began his story about a steam locomotive going off the

tracks in South Byron in 1942. I cocked an ear his way while I jotted down car numbers, as though I didn't want to miss a word of a story I'd heard before, and before that. When my list was ready I said, "I'm going out."

Jimmy nodded, opened his lunch pail, and said he'd see me when I got back.

I walked out to track 5 and stood between the rails. A warm breeze swept through the yard. The stars were out. I lit a cigarette. I recognized some of the stars as constellations but didn't know their names. I was in no hurry to get on with the grabbing of numbers although I knew I shouldn't walk through a rail yard staring at the stars.

The yard was as quiet as a rail yard in the middle of a city can be. All through the day the yard engines shunt cars back and forth, massive cars pulled one way and thrown the other, rolling, screeching, and wobbling on shiny rails, a hundred and fifty tons of car and cargo, propelled by an engine's shove then traveling under its own weight until suddenly it collided with a car of similar girth. They'd couple on impact with a deep, solid whoomph that repeated itself but with diminishing volume as it rippled down the line of coupled cars already on the track. None of that happened on graves. After a day in the sun, hundreds of cars rested on the tracks. Box cars, hoppers, flat cars, gondolas, reefers, tanks, and cabooses. They cooled in the night air. As they cooled, they groaned and bellowed like a wounded mammoth sinking in a tarpit, like a giant redwood bending to a storm, like a lonely whale calling from the deep; they boomed and banged.

Beyond the rail yard the spire of Kodak Office stood out with red lights blinking at its top to ward off small airplanes.

I lit another cigarette off the one still burning. I remembered 6th grade boys talking at 42 School about Rochester being an important city because of Kodak, and that the Russians might drop a hydrogen bomb on Kodak and what would happen if they did. One of the boys, a kid

called Pokey knew everything about warfare and weapons. At least for a 6th grader he did. A Russian bomber would fly over the North Pole and Canada and Lake Ontario and drop a bomb right on Kodak, and that one bomb would wipe out the whole city. I was startled by the magnitude of the possibility. My dad worked at Kodak but that made no difference. Everyone would be killed.

After high school I joined the Air Force and spent four years working in target rooms. The first was at one of the Strategic Air Command's seventy airbases where long range bombers were on alert every moment of every day, loaded with hydrogen bombs. In the target room we assembled the information needed to get the nukes from our airbase on the Great Plains to the sky above a target in the Soviet Union. What we assembled was classified as Top Secret Extremely Sensitive Information. TSESI. I turned 19 when I was in my first target room.

When our country began the bombardment of North Viet Nam I was sent over to where dropping bombs actually happened. Every day we bombed Laos and North Viet Nam. My work in the target room led to the destruction of bridges, roads, ferries, barracks, rail yards, dikes, rice paddies, and anybody or anything nearby.

I lit another cigarette before I entered the cavern of tracks 14 and 15.

This rail yard is a Soviet target, I thought, and I laughed. I laughed at the 6th grade boys back at 42 who thought the Russians aimed a nuke at Rochester because Kodak made Rochester an important place. I laughed because while I was in Strategic Air Command I learned that everything in the Soviet Union was a target of ours, and I knew the Soviets had a similar plan for North America. To be a targeted city had no glory. Everything was a target. Five nukes aimed at one city was not unusual. Even if Kodak wasn't in Rochester, the rail yard itself made Rochester a target. I knew as I stood there that I was standing on Designated Ground Zero for a Soviet hydrogen bomb.

Something was different. I felt the night held me on the path to grasping the ethereal elusive, the wisdom just beyond reach, the truths that lurks in the corners of our thoughts, the ones that disappear when you turn your attention too quickly upon them.

My thoughts disappeared. I was in a rail yard after midnight at work on another lousy job.

The kids at 42 were way ahead of me. They'd finished college, had jobs they wanted, maybe were married, maybe already owned homes, while I'd wasted four years in the Air Force and now couldn't get it going in the world I'd returned to. Yet I felt I knew stuff the 42 School kids might never know. But what did I know? Well, I knew about targets. I knew about targets, and bar girls, and lies we stamped Top Secret.

I began to walk between tracks 14 and 15 when something I stepped on rolled my ankle, a pain for just a second but enough to make me point my lantern down.

The ground was cluttered with chunks of oily black coal. I looked at the chunks and blamed one for twisting my ankle, a chunk as big as a baseball. I picked it up and tossed it a few times in my hand, the way a relief pitcher does when he's handed the ball. Then I reared back and threw it over the cars on track 15 and waited for a sound. The longer I waited the better I felt about the throw. Then it came, a boom like an out of tune timpani in an empty concert hall. Or like a big chunk of coal hitting an empty boxcar.

I stood still. What a weird trip, thinking I'm cool because I threw a chunk of coal. All over the world kids play in rail yards strewn with coal. That thought lasted less time than it took to think it because I knew of rail yards where there were no chunks of coal. The rail yard at Yen Bai for one. A chunk of coal that fell from a coal hopper in Yen Bai was grabbed right away and put in a burlap bag by a coal merchant who walked the streets of Yen Bai selling coal by the chunk. The chunk would be set in a nest of paper and twigs, lit by a flaming twig from another

fire, and blown upon until the chunk began to glow. One chunk of coal and a bunch of twigs could cook the daily meals for a family or roast the split chickens for a street vendor.

The rail yard at Yen Bai often came to mind when I first got out because of the fishing village we took out when we bombed the yard. When I wanted to make a point with someone about the randomness of air attacks I'd bring up the fishing village, but this was the first I'd thought about Yen Bai in a year. The yard was on a line along the Red River northwest of Hanoi. To us target planners it wasn't a rail yard. It was an interdiction point. Yen Bai Rail Interdiction Point. My F-105 wing had struck it six months before I was over there, when the yard had seven tracks. Five were restored and forty cars were on them, and our wing received orders to bomb them.

While I stood in the Goodman Street yard, I remembered the night in the target room when we planned the raid. I remembered looking at large black and white aerial photos. My memory looked down once again at Yen Bai. As a number grabber, I understood the photos so much better than I had. I knew a number grabber was working at Yen Bai the night I only thought of it as a target. He was probably a guy like me, a guy who needed a job and found one in a rail yard, only his was a rail yard where F-105s dove down and dispensed 750 pound bombs.

The boxcars in the Goodman Street yard banged and yawned. I knew it was the boxcars, but I also heard dive-bombers bearing down on me. I heard exploding ordnance marching across the rail yard toward me. I turned toward the noise and saw boxcars down the tracks tear apart and explode in flame. I saw twisted chunks of steel fly into the air. I hit the ground and crawled under a car and was under the car when the bombs came down around me. I felt the jolting impact, the blinding explosion, the ear-splitting noise, saw the searing shrapnel, and heard screaming.

THE END