

## THE HAUNTING, SHRILL, TRAIN WHISTLE

By John F. Hall

So the story begins with a melody in my head and memories of things that happen so long ago. Faces and conversations fade too fast, and time passes too quickly. Two weeks ago, around 2:15 pm, I stopped at the Whistle Stop donut shop in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. It opens early and closes at 3:00 pm. Just making a guess, I would estimate that the railroad tracks are not more than 25 feet from the tiny donut shop. My wife, Paula loves their jelly donuts. They are fluffy and not greasy. I drove up to their drive- thru window. A lady opened the window. I told her that I needed two jelly and two glaze donuts. She got a concerned look on her face and she said: "I believe that we have just one jelly donut left. But I'll look and see if I can find another jelly donut." She closed the window.



Then, I heard the warning bells of the railroad gates coming down at the Highway 68 railroad crossing, behind my Ford Escape SUV. I looked up and saw the bright front light of the southbound oncoming train. I knew, that in a matter of seconds, the train engineer would make the required number and the required sequence of shrill whistle blasts, before it reached that railroad crossing. I could feel the ground vibrating even inside my SUV. The train had four locomotives that indicated that it was pulling extra rail cars. I started counting the number of box cars, chemical cars and flat cars that the train was pulling. I observed a few dead head (empty) flat cars. So I guess that the, railroad company was making money on this run. I had reached counting 130 rail cars when the lady opened the drive-thru window. She said: "I found a second jelly donut." She told me the cost of the four donuts. There is a small glass "tip jar" at the base of the window. I paid for the donuts and gave her a dollar tip plus change.

The Whistle Stop donut shop is sandwiched between the railroad right-of-way on the east side and, perhaps, 18 feet on the west side by another building. There is barely enough room for a car to drive around the shop to get back onto the highway. In comparison, I have a concrete block well house next to my house that is nearly the size of this donut shop. My Christian Fraternity Brother, Frank Raber lives in Hopkinsville. The locals call it "Hoptown." Frank is a self-employed and super smart auto mechanic. He told me that the majority of the Whistle Stop donuts are made in a larger nearby building. Frank said they make 30,000 donuts a day that are delivered to retail stores and gas stations in Kentucky and Tennessee. I've seen one of their small vans deliver donuts to Hancocks Neighborhood Market in Cadiz, Kentucky where I buy groceries.

Listening to the train's haunting, shrill, whistle blasts, as it sped by the donut shop, brought back fond memories. My dad, Charles J. Hall lived in a small house in Edgewater, Florida. It was located about 600 feet from the Florida East Coast railroad tracks. I remember when my wife, Paula, and my son, John, and I would visit him. Like clock work, one train would come down the tracks, late at night. The haunting, shrill train

whistle blasts shattered the silence of the night and woke me up. I never got use to those whistle blasts at dad's house.

Even today, when I ever I hear a train whistle, I think of my dad. I miss those long talks that we had in his living room, late into the night, when Paula and my son were sound asleep in another room. I should have asked my dad more questions. I should have spent more time with him. When he died, unexpectedly, I was employed full time in law enforcement; commanding 169 National Guard soldiers, and taking Army correspondence courses. I was speeding towards burn-out. Al Stewart and Peter White wrote the song, "Time Passages." These are their lyrics: "It was late in December, the sky turned to snow, all around the day was going down slow. Night like a river, beginning to flow, I felt the beat of my mind go. Drifting into time passages, buy me a ticket to the last train home tonight. Well I'm not the kind to live in the past, the years run too short and the days too fast. The things you lean on are the things that don't last. Well it is just now and then my line gets cast into these time passages. There's something back here that you left behind. Oh time passages, buy me a ticket on the last train home tonight. Hear the echoes and feel yourself starting to turn. Don't know why you should feel that there's something to learn, it's just a game that you play. Well the picture is changing, now you're part of the crowd. They're laughing at something and the music is loud. A girl comes towards you, you once use to know. You reach out your hand but you're all alone, in these time passages. I know you're in there, you're just out of sight. Time passages, buy me a ticket on the last train home to night."

I find that writers who write about things, that they have never experienced, are not being honest with those that read their fictional stories. I lived on a train for over a week when I was a teenage soldier. I was in a red caboos with six other soldiers. We were escorting classified weapons to San Francisco, California, from an ammunition facility in Milan, Tennessee. I liked to sit up in the cupola and look out at the fields and small towns that the train passed through. There is a clickety-clack sound that occurs as a result of gaps in the rail that allow for rail expansion. On most railways, the gaps are opposite each other. In the United States, the rail joints are staggered, and not opposite each other.

Cabooses were used on every freight train in the United States until the 1980s, when safety laws requiring the presence of cabooses and full railroad crews was repealed. The caboos served many purposes. It served as an office for the conductor who kept a "waybill" for each freight car from its origin to its designation. Brakemen, switchmen, and flagmen rode in the caboos. It served as a bunkhouse, cook shake, and rolling infirmary if first aid was needed. It also served as the restroom for the crew. The toilet is located behind a door at the front end of the caboos.

The caboos was fitted with red lights called markers to enable the rear of the train to be seen at night. Advances in communication equipment took the crew out of the caboos and put them in the locomotive. In my opinion, it's a disservice to the railroad crews because there is no restroom in the locomotive. They have to wait, sometimes as long as six hours, before they can use a restroom at a switching stop. The Senate and the House

passed railroad legislation to prevent a National strike. It was signed by the President the first week in December 2022.

During the railroad escort mission, every time the train stopped, I would climb down out of the cupola and grab 3 “Thompson” submachine gun and a 38 caliber revolver and holster. Most soldiers who had Thompson submachine guns were very slow to give them up in favor of the less well-liked grease gun. It was used during the Korean War and later during the Vietnam War. The Thompson submachine gun was retired in 1971 after 33 years of service. Once I was armed with a Thompson, I would leave the caboose and guard one of the boxcars containing the classified freight. I think it scared the people in the little towns when we stopped. They did not have a clue about our security mission. General John T. Thompson wrote in a 1918 memo, to the designers, these words: “I want a little machine gun you can hold in your hands, fire from the hip and reload in the dark. You must use ammunition now available and I want it right away.” The Thompson uses .45 caliber ammo.

Baker Knight wrote the hymn, “Glory Train.” These are some of his lyrics: “I want to ride that glory train, I want to ride, ride, ride that glory train. Yes, all I want to do when my life on earth is through, is to get on board and ride that glory train. Ah, there’s a railroad train that’s a leavin’ just rolling down the tracks. And the passengers aboard it boy they’re never coming back. It’s a glory train that’s leaving. It’s the train I long to ride to that home way up in heaven where God’s children all abide... Hear the thunder of the engine, get aboard her if you can. For the final destination is that far off promised land, where the Master will be waiting. In His home way up above, just to fill our hearts with gladness, and His great eternal love... When you get down to the station, and the train’s about to leave, you be sure to have a ticket. If you really do believe, that the Master’s is waiting for you, in His home way up above, just to fill our hearts with gladness, and His great eternal love...”.

The caboose is now an obsolete relic of the past. Yet, for more than a week, it was home to this old soldier, when I was young. I cooked meals in the caboose, and I had my share of being thrown to the floor, when the train unexpectedly coupled another rail car. The electronic “hotbox” and dragging equipment detectors, now check moving trains more efficiently and reliably than trainmen in the caboose. These electronics are installed along the main rail lines. Computers eliminated the conductor's need to store and track paperwork in the caboose. And the caboose faded away into the sunset.

The rolling black out, one day before Christmas, made me think of Jimmy Webb's song, “Wichita Lineman.” These are a few of his lyrics: “I am a lineman for the county, and I drive the main roads, searchin' in the sun for another overload. I hear you singing in the wire. I can hear you through the whine... I know I need a small vacation, but it don't look like rain. And if it snows that stretch down south won't ever stand the strain. And I need you more than want you, and I need you all the time. And the Wichita Lineman is still on the line...”. And the haunting, shrill whistle of a distant train, keeps my dad's memory, gentle on my mind.

John F. Hall

\*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

<http://www.ajlambert.com>