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Boy on the Tracks

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He awoke to the cry of a younger child echoing from the urine-smelling smaller bedroom next door. He gazed at the clock—almost time to get up anyway. His bare feet slid onto the cold worn linoleum; he pulled on his jeans and tee shirt and padded into the other room.

The small naked brown body of his three year old sister sat squat in the middle of the floor and it was her, in her distress, who was making all the noise. As she saw him she stopped and the merest indication of a smile came to her face, for this was Jonathan, her protector, lover, and giver of all things wonderful, coming to her aid.

With the firm but tender grasp that only a twelve year old brother could exert upon a little sister, Jonathan swept her up, patted her gently on the posterior and bounced her solidly, but with the utmost care, plonk, in the middle of the bed. This in turn disturbed the bed's other occupant, a five year old boy who had apparently slept through all the bedlam that had preceded this interruption of his slumber.

Jim, the younger boy, growled something very nasal, rolled over and lay staring at the peeling ceiling while Jonathan, working with the skill that could only be developed from a six day a week job, slipped a tiny cotton print frock over her sister's shoulders.

A voice from the doorway did not take his attention from the job in hand for he knew it was Betsy Mae and she didn't really bear much looking at. Five years his junior, she was darker than he, more African in appearance and very skinny. He often thought it strange that she and Jim were so dark in comparison to Jenny and himself.

He carried Jenny into the kitchen where Betsy Mae had set breakfast, a simple affair of grits and salt pork, then carried her upon his broad shoulders to a neighbor's house before he and Betsy Mae set out across the tracks to school.
It was a warm day and he could hardly keep his mind on what the teacher was saying. Not that Mrs. Robinson ever had much to say, but just stretched out whatever she did have trying to make out that she knew everything. What was she saying about Hannibal from Africa? That's where his people came from. The day is warm. There is a fly walking on his desk. From his desk he can see the playgrounds where a few kids are running about. Hannibal is crossing the Alps on elephants. He wonders if his great-great grandfather ever rode on an elephant? It is muggy. Clouds are forming in the distance—big black clouds.

If he looks right he can see Sally but he should not look and so turns back to the playgrounds. Hannibal has stopped to rest his army in northern Italy. Sally's brother beat him up last week just for walking with her—says Negroes are no good. The breeze rustles the trees. Marcus kills Hannibal's brother. Hannibal is defeated and Mrs. Robinson rambles on. Maybe Negroes aren't any good? Oh to get out of here and run free—to play. The day is far too warm to think. Sally, so fair, so pretty. Ring the bell, for God sake ring the bell.

They were just picking up sides for a ball game when he rushed over to join them. Then he was sorry he had been so hasty. A coolness fell over the group on his approach and although he was by far the best hitter he was the last selected. He felt the disapproval of the other boys and he did not bear their coolness lightly.

He played first base and did a swell job. His two base hit with the bases loaded was received with great delight by his own team and not an unusual amount of scorn by the opposition. His real triumph came, however, in the final innings when he starred in a wonderful double play that won the game.

Everybody slapped him on the back, "Good old Jono," but when the dust cleared and the boys broke up into groups of fours and fives, to head for home or to the drugstore, he was the only one still standing on the deserted field.

Nobody had even bothered to ask if he wanted to come, not that he could afford to go to the drugstore anyway, but they could have at least asked. He folded his limp old glove, shrugged his tired shoulders and sauntered across the field to the main street, then padded his way toward the shopping area.

The pool hall was almost empty. It was far too humid for pool, nobody wanted a shine and he had hardly had to bother to pick up a cue all evening. He longed to get home, not that there was anything he wanted there, but he was sick of sitting about. The barber annoyed him with stupid comments and twice this week Chuck had hit him on the tail with a cue. By God if Chuck does it again he'll beat the living daylights out of him even if it means losing his job.
The life which was once pleasant was now becoming more complex. Once nobody called him nigger or turned him away. Growing up had caused him some problems and the burden of his race was now falling directly upon his shoulders for there was nobody to share it with.

Two hours and three pairs of shoes later he was free to leave—a dollar sixty better off, or was he? He packed away the cloths and turned out the lights in the pool hall, then walked out into the ill lit street. A cool breeze had sprung up and a fleck of dust scratched at his face. In the distance thunder rolled like the roar from some distant battlefield. He walked toward the tracks. A whistle wailed in the distance.

He paused at the rail fence along side the tracks as a long freight was rolling slowly by. He straddled the fence and sat with hunched shoulders gazing at the box cars.

NEW YORK CENTRAL, C & O. One might think it strange that one of his tender age should have the wander lust. ROCK ISLAND LINE, MILWAUKEE. After all what did he owe this town—nothing. BALTIMORE & OHIO, UNION PACIFIC. For that matter what did he owe any town. GRAND TRUNK, SANTA FE. Seldom sees mom, except on weekends, and never sees dad. PENNSYLVANIA, GREAT WESTERN. History test tomorrow—Hannibal was a no good nigger too. BURLINGTON, SPOKANE, PORTLAND & SEATTLE. What to do—what can he do? UNION PACIFIC, NEW YORK CENTRAL.

The rain begins to sprinkle down as he swings his young agile body over the rail and walks toward the tracks. Standing a few feet away from the cars, he can brush their steel sides with his hand—freight cars from all over the country.

The rain falls faster. The rolling stock picks up speed. As a vertical steel handrail of a refrigerator car goes by, he quickly closes his hands around it. With a jerk his feet break contact with the ground, his hands slide down the wet rail, his fingers strain, then give way, and Jonathan slips between two cars.