

# The Ghost Train



by Philip Bransky

*The old station and tracks had been idle for years...  
or had they?*

Jerry loved to sit on the huge crate. He didn't care about the dust, nor the slivers or even its loose boards. It had been empty and standing on the train station since the last train went through town many years ago. Any lettering on the crate was so faded no one could read it.

As he was growing up, Jerry became obsessed with trains. His parents bought him an electric train set for his tenth birthday. The locomotive would travel around the tracks stopping at the model railway station whenever Jerry switched off the transformer. Jerry would sit for hours never tiring of watching as the train makes its rounds, stopping at the station.

Every day, Jerry begged and pleaded to see a real train station or even better, a real train. When he was twelve years old, Jerry's parents took him to see the old, abandoned train station at the far end of town. His parents hoped that seeing the old station would satisfy his craving. They tried to make him understand that trains did not come to town anymore. Perhaps seeing the abandoned station would make the point clear to him. But, as with most other things, getting Jerry to understand was extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Their visit to the old, dilapidated station, with faded red and green signal arms dangling from the old bent signal tower, and a walk along the rusted tracks, long overgrown with weeds failed to make the impact on Jerry that his parents so hoped it would. In fact, just the opposite occurred. Jerry was enthralled with the station. He jumped up on the old crate and just sat there waiting for the next train to come through town. After a great deal of coaxing and a vague promise that they would bring him back, Jerry reluctantly went back home.

That visit to the station followed by the promise to return started it all. There was only one thing Jerry wanted to do every day, and that was to sit on the crate and wait for the train to come to town. He ignored his train set and constantly asked to be taken back to the train station. Normally well-behaved and calm, his character was changing to a stubborn, uncooperative child who would only talk about one thing, the train station. His insatiable desire was disrupting their family life.

Jerry's parents thought they had a solution. One morning, they told Jerry he was going to the station and could stay there all day. With a packed lunch and something to drink, they would leave him at the station in the morning and pick him up later in the day. His parents hoped that the long day of doing nothing but sitting on the old crate would cure Jerry of his obsession.

In the late afternoon, when they came to get Jerry, he was still sitting on the old crate. Jerry was very excited as he told them about his day. In the early afternoon, he was certain he heard a train whistle somewhere far off. Some town people who often walked past the station as part of their exercise routine stopped to chat with him. He would ask if they knew when the next train was coming through town. Most would just smile and tell him that no trains would ever come to town again. Jerry was sure that a train would come and he didn't want to

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miss seeing it. He insisted that he be brought to the station every day. Hoping that a few more days sitting at the station would tire him out, Jerry's parents began bringing him each day, with his lunch and juice.

That was twenty-two years ago. Every day during all those years Jerry's parents brought him to the train station. They came to realize that Jerry's whole life revolved around being at the old station. It was the only place where he was content. Sometimes he would take along a folded blanket to put on top of the sturdy old crate to make sitting more comfortable. Jerry was the subject of much gossip in town but most people knew him or about him and treated him kindly. Weather conditions never bothered him. If it turned cold, some folks would bring Jerry hot chocolate or coffee, even though he dressed in very warm clothing. If it was a hot day, they would bring iced tea or just cool water. Some would offer him food, but he always insisted that his lunch was all he needed.

Jerry heard the whistle more often, now. When he told people about the train whistle, they would just humor him or tease him with assurances that the train would come soon. Sometimes he talked about hearing the old telegraph key inside the station making its clicking sounds. There were no wires to the station and the old key was very rusty. But he insisted that he heard it tapping out a message.

On a warm afternoon in August, Jerry was at his usual place atop the old crate leaning against the station wall. It was one of those warm, quiet summer days when the humidity was low and soft breezes wafted through town. Even the birds stopped chattering to each other. People opened windows to catch the cooling breezes that carried sweet scents from the fields in the countryside. The peaceful quiet seemed to be interrupted by a sound, somewhat like a far off echoing, "Woowooo" carried in on the breeze. Some people took notice of the sound but most just ignored it, figuring it was wind going through overhead power and telephone lines.

Jerry probably heard the sound before anyone else in town. It was the same sound he had told people about many times. He sat upright on the old crate peering out towards the horizon. "Woowoooooo", there it was again. The sound seemed to be getting closer. Behind him, he could hear that old telegraph key clicking away, "Dit, dit, dat, dit dot", over and over again. Jerry jumped down from the crate and began pacing back and forth along the station platform.

In town, more and more people stopped whatever they were doing and came to the windows and doors of their homes, stores and offices. They strained to hear the sound that was becoming louder and closer to town. "Woowoooooo!" Neighbors looked with disbelief at each other and asked if they were hearing the same sound. "Was that a train whistle?" They knew it was impossible; but could all their ears be deceiving them?

Jerry's pacing was becoming more agitated. He was certain the sound was not far away. "Woowoooooo!" Where the tracks met the horizon, he saw puffs of smoke billowing into the air. "Woowooo!" Jerry could hear the clickety-clack sound of steel wheels rolling over the tracks and felt the platform begin to vibrate; he saw the old crate rattling on the platform. Glancing at the old signal tower, he saw that the faded red arm that hung limply for so many years was now jutting straight out to signal the train to stop. Jerry's excitement made him oblivious to anything around him except the moment when he would actually see a real train stopping at his station.

More and more people, including Jerry's parents, were walking through town towards the station. They stepped up their pace as they heard the sounds getting louder and nearer. "Woowoooo!" It was impossible that a train could be coming to town. The tracks were too dilapidated and twisted to hold a train. But, the sound was unmistakable, "Woowoooo"; it was the sound of a train. A few people shouted to the others to look out

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just beyond town, "Was that smoke from a locomotive out there?" A loud screeching noise was heard from the direction of the station followed by the clanging of a bell. Now they were all frantically running towards the old station.

Within a few minutes, the first townspeople reached the station. As more and more of them arrived, they were met with an eerie, disturbing silence. They stood as though riveted in place, staring in amazement at the station. There was no train, no bell clanging, no smoke and most disturbing of all, no Jerry. His blanket, lunch box and juice bottle were on top of the old crate, but Jerry could not be found. The signal arms on the old tower were hanging just as they had for decades. The only change they noticed was the weeds between the tracks; they were all bent over in the same direction just as though a very strong wind or, could it be possible, a train had passed over them on the tracks.

Later that night, in the old station, the rusty telegraph key began tapping out a message, "I am on the train. Stop. Don't worry. Stop. Jerry".

