

From Chapter Five: Train Tracks

Author's note: In its earliest stages, The West End Tree House Mystery was equal parts memoir and mystery. The following section, which originally appeared in Chapter Five: Return of the Tree House, recounts some of what Jerry and I did during the long summers, describes the train tracks near Pennsylvania Avenue, and retells other "small moments" from our lives.

Western Pennsylvania can be a dreary place, with unending weeks of grey clouds. But sometimes this place surprises you with a day that's really exceptional. Today was one of those days. The air held a hint of coolness, but the sun was hot on my back. Far above the fluttering green of the newly opened maple leaves, puffy white clouds were skimming across the sky like fast moving sailboats. Directly overhead the sky was pale blue, like a blue bird's back. The best part was that there was no humidity or haze in the air – the day was as clear as glass. If I had wanted to, I could have lay on the ground and stared up through the blueness into infinity. I've done that before, and sometime, if I stare long enough, I get this cool, crazy feeling, like I'm a NASA astronaut floating on a tether outside a space capsule.

But today there was no lying about and staring into space. Today it was get the boards up the hill to the tree house site. This was not a problem. The cool air and the breezes energized me, and I felt like I could run a marathon or bench press 500 pounds. Maybe I was feeling so good because we had outwitted Brian and Scotty. Maybe it had to do with the beauty of the day. But now, thinking back on it, I know there was something else. I think that my

“great to be alive” feeling had something to do with my friendship with Kerry.

Kerry and I were best buds. Sure, sometimes we got sick of each other. But most of the time we liked being together, goofing around, riding our bikes, exploring the neighborhood, cleaning Kerry’s fish tanks, working with my mom and dad in our garden, helping Kerry’s brother Steve wash his Mustang, or just hanging out. We spent a lot of time sitting on the concrete wall along the by the alley corner, talking about dogs, cars, deer, fishing, camping, how to make money, whether or not aliens existed, and how you could die from an exploding stomach if you ate Pop Rocks and then chugged a can of Coke, which is exactly how Little Mikey died.

We were always dreaming up projects and then figuring out ways to do them. For instance, last summer we put together a yard fair to raise money for muscular dystrophy. We had a ring toss game, a baseball throwing game, and a Chuck-a-Luck wheel. There was Bingo and bobbing for apples, and lots of homemade baked goods for sale, including my mom’s gobs and Mrs. Johns’ chocolate chip cookies, both of which were legendary in our neighborhood. After the fair, we spent a week building a fort out of refrigerator boxes we got from the appliance store up the block. But our biggest project was gathering up and selling stuff that fell off the hopper cars of the trains that ran along Pennsylvania Avenue.

We had a routine for this gathering and selling, and it went like this. First, we’d round up our supplies – a shovel, a pocketknife (just in case), a canteen of water, brown paper grocery bags, and work gloves – and put all of it into the old red metal wagon that my mom used to pull me in when I was a

little kid. Then we'd head out. If we needed more bags, we'd stop at the Acme along the way and ask for some. The baggers and cashiers there were pretty nice and usually we'd they'd give us at least a dozen big paper bags.

The railroad tracks ran parallel to the wire mills, along the north end of our neighborhood, over a black steel bridge that crossed Fairfield Avenue, and then atop an embankment that ran beside Pennsylvania Avenue. At the point where the tracks crossed from the bridge to the embankment, they must have been out of alignment because when the trains rattled over this particular place, their wheels squealed loudly and their hoppers and boxcars wobbled wildly back and forth. The wobbling was cool, and a little scary. Sometimes it seemed like a hopper would surely tip over, roll down the embankment, and crush us under a thousand tons of soybeans and steel. But we'd never heard of a derailment so we figured we were safe.

When the hopper cars swayed, stuff fell out. Once we found mounds of dried corn all over the tracks. We shoveled pounds of it into our paper bags and hauled it all home. Mr. Johns bought the corn off of us for fifty cents a bag. He said in the winter he would spread it in the fields for the deer and turkeys. In one week, we made five bucks from corn sales. This gave us a lot of incentive to go back and gather more stuff to sell.

Another time, we scooped up taconite pellets. Because they were solid iron, the pellets were super heavy. We used two bags, one inside another, to make a strong container. Then we filled it with pellets, almost to the top. This was a mistake. Of course, the bag was too heavy to lift, even when we tried lifting it together. We dumped some out and tried again. This time the bag

ripped. So, we tried a triple bag and only filled it about half full. With both of us lifting, we managed to get this bag down the embankment, but just as we started to set it into the wagon, Kerry lost his grip. The bag hit the wagon's rim and busted wide open. Taconite pellets went flying everywhere, rolling all over Pennsylvania Avenue and trickling down the sidewalk in front of Rob Choby's house. Rob's mother, who saw us trying to sweep up the little iron marbles with our hands, came out and gave us a broom. She never said anything (I don't think she spoke English very well), but she did smirk and shake her head, as if to say, "It is sad, but also amusing, to see how stupid you boys are."

We swept up all the pellets we could find and put them in the cardboard box that Mrs. Choby had also given us. Then we hauled the box home. Man, that was hard work! Those pellets must have weighed at least a 100-pounds. The bummer was that nobody was interested in buying a super heavy box filled with little crusty iron marbles. We didn't want Drew to get his hands on any of them because we knew he would weaponize them, so we ended up giving them to Mr. Niebold, the science teacher at the junior high. He said he might be able to use them during his second semester unit on magnetism. Plus, he thought they were cool.

We made the most money selling bags of coal to Mrs. Pavloski. Like a lot of people in the neighborhood, Mrs. Pavloski had a coal furnace in her basement. She'd pay us 20 cents a bag for our coal, which wasn't much considering all the work we had to do, gathering it up and hauling it away, but the money added up over time. With hundreds of train cars hauling thousands of tons of coal to the coke ovens everyday, there were always piles of coal lying

along the tracks. So every week we rolled our wagon down to Pennsylvania Avenue, watched as the coal hoppers wobbled and swayed, and gathered up bags of coal after the train had passed.

All in all, we probably made twenty-five bucks last summer, which to us was a lot of money. We went together to buy a few things, like candy and pretzels and donuts, but we split most of the money and then used it to buy stuff that each of us needed. Kerry bought a dozen Neons, a Bristlenose catfish, a box of fish food, two big bags of angel hair, and a can of red spray paint for a bike he was fixing up. I bought a Duncan yo-yo, a bunch of comic books, some football trading cards (I was trying to get a Jack Lambert), and new brake pads for my Schwinn Sting Ray 5-speed.

Kerry and I kept hoping that a train with a car carrier would sway enough to throw off a car. Kerry was hoping for a Mustang, but I would have settled for anything, even a cheesy Japanese Datsun. We never did find a car along the tracks. But my mom says, “never say never” and this is one of the reasons why we found ourselves at the tracks again this year, hoping we might find a Mach 1 or a Camaro, which Kerry said he would claim even though it was a Chevy. No such luck.

Last week, however, we did find a bunch of boards. They were spread everywhere. It looked like a pallet of them had tumbled off a flatbed car and exploded in a dozen different directions as it rolled down the embankment. To you, boards might not sound all that exciting, but to Kerry and I it felt like we’d hit the jackpot. The lumber was just what we needed to start another tree house.

Many of the boards were so splintered and cracked that they were unusable, but some were in good shape. They were oak, sturdy and roughhewn, maybe an inch and a half thick, six inches wide, and six feet long. We weren't sure what they were going to be used for – maybe flooring in a mineshaft or something – but it didn't matter. They were perfect for our tree house project. We stored them in my parent's garage, making two trips with the wagon because they were so solid and heavy. Now it was just a matter of hauling them to the Third Level, which brings me back to the story.