

The Red Caboose

He'd never admit it to his friends but the only thing Jason liked about football was the time of year they played it. The air was newly cool and crisp, red and yellow leaves tumbled over the grass, smoke came out of your mouth when you exhaled. (Yes, he knew it wasn't really smoke.)

But that was it. As for the game itself, he didn't care for all the body slamming. Sometimes a pass would drift wide of its intended receiver, plonk far out of play, and yet some clod would ram into him full force anyway. Why? *Because it's football, dude!*

Another thing he didn't like about football: the game didn't allow for daydreaming. He wasn't a good baseball player either, but at least he could get away with daydreaming deep in right field where they always stuck him because no one ever hit the ball out there. On fine summer days lolling in the outfield he could watch clouds come and go, change shapes, see the sun squish flat and orange as it sank beyond the railroad tracks, or wonder what lay exactly 500 miles away in each direction—north, south, east, west.

He couldn't get away with that, playing football. This time, he was trying hard to concentrate, to memorize Randy's confusing signals and judge the arc of the ball (what a stupid shape for a ball!) while running downfield with Babcock panting hard on his heels. To everyone's surprise, including Jason himself, he managed to catch the ball. Holding on to it was another story. For a split second the ball wobbled in his hands, just long enough for Tony B to pluck it and sprint upfield to score a touchdown for the other team.

Amid booing, cackling and insults, Randy retrieved the ball, marched over to Jason and slammed it in his face.

"I thought the fuckin' idiot would at least *try* to block it!" That's what Randy claimed when Davis

berated him for his temper.

Jason had dropped like a puppet, was sitting on the grass holding his hands to his face, appalled at the gusher of blood streaming down his fingers, wrists and forearms.

It was no use. Davis and a few other kids tried to talk him into staying but Jason had a point to make. And leaving the others to their boneheaded game seemed the best way to make his point. So he climbed on his bike and pedaled away from the football field, past his own neighborhood, out beyond the suburbs and the golf course where he turned onto a service road and past a swamp, then farther out alongside the railroad freight yard. There he turned onto a gravel path that ran parallel to the tracks. How far did this path go? He wondered. Could he follow the tracks right out of town, all the way to the countryside? What if he just kept riding and never turned back? Where would he end up, New York City? At the ocean? In the desert?

After riding for what felt like a very long time, Jason began to feel tired and hungry. His face was sore. When he touched his nose it hurt, and though it hurt bad, it was hard to stop touching. At least the bleeding had stopped. When Randy had smashed the ball into his nose it seemed like the blood wouldn't stop gushing. Now his face felt swollen, his nose stuffed up, like he had a cold.

Riding along, pedaling slower and slower, he glanced up and saw a curious thing: a single train car, a caboose, sat all by itself in the middle of a field. It looked so out of place, a train car abandoned in the tall grass. He rode over to it. Up close he saw that the caboose was on railroad tracks, but the tracks were old, sunken in the dirt and clearly hadn't been used in years. They curved away from the main tracks, then just faded into the tall grass.

The caboose was old, its wooden sides weather-worn. Its paint was flaked and dull, a shade closer to tomato soup pink than fire engine red, the color it was probably first painted. On the side,

near the back, were letters and numbers: C V & P A 505707. These were so faded they were barely legible, though back when they were stenciled on, they were probably bright yellow.

Jason looked at the windows on the side of the caboose. One was cracked, two had curtains, all were dusty. What did it look like inside? He walked around to the back of the caboose, took hold of the railing and pulled himself up. The rusty, sun-baked iron felt warm on his hands. At the top of the steps a pocket-style door was pushed all the way open.

He'd never been inside a caboose before, though he'd always wanted to. Looking in, it was more like a regular room than he'd imagined: there was a table, a few chairs, a reading lamp, a cot, even a rug. On the far end, across from the door where he'd entered, was a small galley kitchen with a sink, and above it, narrow shelves. Next to the sink was a hot plate with two burners, one of which held a black iron teapot. To the right of the kitchenette, wedged in the corner, was an antique record player, what his grandfather called a *Victrola*.

Squared below the windows was a table, covered with a red and white checkered oilcloth, as if awaiting the arrival of a guest. A kerosene lantern sat atop the tablecloth. Next to the lantern was a coffee mug and a deck of Bicycle playing cards.

As compact as the red caboose was, it still had room for a small bookshelf along one wall. Even the books looked old; they were small, dark, cloth-bound volumes with flaked gilt letters on the spines, most of them worn so he couldn't read the titles. A few of the bigger books were bound in thick brown leather.

In the left corner, where Jason had stepped into the caboose, was a big overstuffed chair, covered in maroon velvet studded with rows of nickel-colored tacks. It was just like his grandmother's chair, except his grandmother's was dark blue, and she always kept lace doilies draped over the armrests.

Next to the chair was a stand with a round wooden shelf. Sitting neatly on the stand was a pipe

holder with two pipes, a tin of tobacco and a box of Three Stars wooden safety matches. Nailed to the wall between the chair and the window was a calendar from the year 1939. Jason guessed that the calendar remained on the wall for so long because of the picture: one of Maxfield Parrish's nearly-naked nymphs draped only in a gossamer veil, svelte, dreamily reaching up—*aspiring*—to a bright crescent moon in the deepening green-blue twilight.

In another corner there was an old roll-top desk, an unexpectedly elaborate piece of furniture for such a space. Curious, Jason lifted the the narrow slatted cover of the roll-top desk and saw a strange device. He guessed it was a telegraph machine, though he wasn't sure. Had he ever seen one before? Maybe in an old western movie, or the time his mother took him and his friend, Chris, to the Historical Society Museum in Centerville, where they must have had one on display.

Connected to the Bakelite and brass apparatus was a keyboard, similar to the old typewriter his grandmother had up in her attic, but this was smaller and didn't have all the letters in the alphabet. All the vowels were there but only a few consonants; also, the numbers 1 through 9 plus 0.

The mystery contraption had three rows of shapes and symbols he'd never seen before. He was familiar with Roman numerals of course, and he'd seen Greek letters on Orthodox churches, Hebrew letters on synagogues, the squiggly script written on mosques and Chinese ideograms all over Chinatown. From skimming his older brother's calculus textbooks he'd seen (though didn't understand) all kinds of weird symbols. But none of them were like the shapes on the gizmo's keyboard.

Puzzling over this he felt suddenly very tired. Was it due to losing so much blood earlier? Wasn't there something about feeling drowsy after getting hit in the head? He didn't have a concussion, did he? Randy had slammed the football into his face pretty hard, but hard enough to cause a concussion?

Maybe if he just laid down for a while and rested, then he'd feel better. His nose might stop

throbbing and then he'd get up and ride back home in time for supper. He hoped he didn't have a broken nose or black eye or anything he'd have to explain to his parents.

He stretched out on the cot and stared at the ceiling. A bare bulb hung over his head, its black cord old and frayed. Two rusted metal vents were in the ceiling too, probably to keep the caboose from turning into an oven on hot days.

He closed his eyes. It was unusually quiet. Other than a slight ringing in his ears, he could barely hear anything. It seemed odd not to hear the sound of other trains. After all, he wasn't that far from the main railroad tracks, shouldn't he hear other trains go by now and then? No sound of car traffic either. No wind or voices, birds or insects. The sound of a plane—far, far away—maybe. But so far that it could just as well be his imagination.

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He woke up blind. Couldn't see a thing. Panic! Wait—there was something—the faintest glimmer of something...gray...silver...a lantern on a table! And then he realized: he'd fallen asleep and now it was pitch dark! Was he ever in trouble now! Big time! How would he explain this to his parents?

He stood up slowly in the unfamiliar dark, and moved cautiously. Over near the windows there was a hint of light, the palest moonlight.

Who-who, who-who, who-who. The owl's call, so clear and so close, startled him. It sounded like it was inside the caboose. He stood still, waiting to hear it again but heard only crickets. He moved closer to the window and looked out. It was pitch dark out there, so dark that the stars shone with an unreal brightness. Only once before had he seen such bright stars, the time he had visited his uncle's farm in Manitoba.

If the stars looked this bright through the dusty window, how clear they must be outside! He crept toward the back of the caboose, trying not to bump into anything in the dark. Out on the rear steps the air felt cold. He went down the iron stairs and stood in the field. Looking up at the tremendous black sky with a billion blazing stars was more stunning than anything he'd ever seen at the planetarium.

"Oh—" He heard himself say, though there was no one to say it to, "—a shooting star!" A brilliant white-blue streak across the sky! He'd seen shooting stars before, but never one so bright and so long. And then another! And another!

His father had told him about the Perseids meteor shower, that it happens every August, and if you drive far out of the city, you can see lots of meteors (*meteors* being the term astronomers use for "shooting stars," his dad said). Gazing up at the amazing light show above him, Jason saw something he'd never seen before: while staring at one point in the sky, hoping a meteor would flash by, the star he was staring at flared up for a fraction of a second, then disappeared! Vanished! There one moment, gone the next.

With zillions of stars in the sky, how he could tell that the one he'd been staring at disappeared? He had no answer for that. The star was there and then it was gone. Something was going on up there and he didn't like the look of it. It just felt *wrong*.

And that made him think of home, how he planned to get back home in the dark. He couldn't just get on his bike and pedal away. It was so dark he'd never find his way. His father would be furious. His mother would be "worried sick." That's what she always said whenever he didn't show up as expected.

Shivering, he went back inside the caboose. Too bad there wasn't a phone in there. The caboose seemed to have everything else for comfortable living, why not a phone? Well, for one, he told himself,

it was abandoned in a field for years. Why would it have a phone? And even if it did have one, how would it work?

He remembered seeing a box of wooden matches, so he felt his way in the dark over to the stand in the corner next to the chair. Lighting a match, he guided himself back to the table to light the kerosene lantern. Success! Now he had light! Too bad he didn't know Morris code, or whatever they call it. Maybe he could get that old telegraph machine to work. Tap in dots and dashes to alert the sheriff or state police or whoever monitors emergency calls. Does anyone even use telegraphs anymore? S-O-S: that was the distress signal used in movies. How do you tap S-O-S on an ancient telegraph machine? Maybe there's a manual lying around, *The Idiot's Guide to Morris Code*.

Jason untangled a few cords and plugged their jacks into ports that seemed to fit. When he tapped the machine's keys it made clicking and whirring sounds that gave him hope. He had no idea what he was doing but the machine seemed to be responding somehow. He couldn't say it was working, but at least it was making noise as he typed.

The question was, *What to type?* He looked around for a manual, a guidebook, some handwritten notes that might give a clue how to operate the gizmo. From a dusty drawer in the desk he pulled out a dog-eared notebook with yellowed pages covered in illegible scrawl. Written in pencil, faint squiggles had faded over the years, and now looked more like invisible ink than pencil lead. The only marks he could read clearly were C V & P A 505707. *Why did they look familiar*, he wondered, then recalled they were the same letters and numbers stenciled on the outside of the caboose. *But so what? It wouldn't be unusual for an engineer to write the train's ID number in a notebook, would it?*

By this time however, Jason was in wish fulfillment mode. Since praying was something his parents never did, he didn't pray himself. But he had friends who prayed and he'd seen countless

scenes in movies where desperate characters broke down and prayed. He didn't know any prayers, but he wanted to escape his situation so badly he tried a desperate move: hunching over the strange keyboard he typed in C V & P A 505707.

Nothing happened. Maybe he'd made a typo. He tried again. Still nothing. He'd try once more. He knew now he was thinking superstitiously. But at this point, if magic was all he had, he'd apply the rules of Magic 101 and repeat the code three times.

And like magic the caboose shuddered. It felt like another train had rammed into it, like a coupling just happened and he was about to be dragged away. Then the walls and floor and ceiling started vibrating. Dust fell from the overhead vents, the Maxfield Parrish calendar swung on its hook, plates and glasses clattered in the cupboard above the galley sink. Then a deep thundering roar sounded from the floorboards and for a second Jason felt the dreadful fright that the whole caboose was going to explode with him inside it!

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It would be hard to say what the greatest offense was. Trespassing, while illegal, wasn't the charge, as it otherwise might have been. Destruction of property was invoked at first, but then someone pointed out that the building had not—*technically*—been destroyed, or even damaged. Ultimately, what was at stake was the preservation of reality itself, or at least “consensus reality,” as it is sometimes called.

The whole incident brought to light a philosophical question rarely asked: Which is worse, to flout a universal law—the taboo against infanticide, say—or, to violate the laws of physics? Outside the abstract realms of pure thought exercise, there is no practical instance for the question. But now, inexplicably, an old, faded red train caboose had suddenly appeared, embedded within the physical

structure of an existing building, namely, a 60-story mixed residential and commercial high-rise tower on the corner of Louisiana and Rusk Streets in downtown Houston, Texas. 782 Louisiana Street to be precise, an imposing steel-glass tower, its steel anodized a dark burnished brown, its glass tinted a pitiless black.

All rational thinking failed to explain the phenomenon. Some attempts, weak in reasoned analysis, were strong in fanciful imagination. One observer for example, a well meaning custodian, said he'd read once in *Reader's Digest*, that tornadoes were known to generate winds of such intensity they sometimes resulted in freakish phenomena, and cited the example of a single broom straw having been driven right through the trunk of a wooden telephone pole. Two of his co-workers agreed that his observation was very interesting but a spokesman from Emergency Services pointed out that in the case of the caboose, no tornadoes had been sighted or reported.

Shortly after the caboose appeared, Falcon security, the firm contracted by the building's owners, ordered a maintenance crew to drape a massive construction tarp over it. And even though the caboose had been visible for such a brief time, rumors strange and implausible spread quickly. There were, in fact, two eyewitnesses who happened to be approximately 75 yards away at the time of the manifestation, sitting on the ledge of a plaza fountain, smoking crack and drinking cough syrup, but Shecky and Ramona's statements, voluntarily submitted to the police, were discounted as "unreliable."

Still, rumors spread like a flu bug. Alex Hammer, local shortwave radio enthusiast and blog writer, concluded that the appearance of the red caboose could be explained by "a heretofore unprecedented slippage in spatial-temporal matrices."

Enthusiasts of parallel universe theories, proponents of multidimensional reality models and old-fashioned crank debunkers argued their clashing points of view. The debunkers, for example, insisted that the caboose was a mere prank. A band of highly organized and skilled tricksters had

pulled off a hoax of mind-boggling complexity: they had somehow cut a corner out of the tower's facade and implanted a thoroughly realistic replica of a 1940s-era railroad caboose car.

Troublingly, the caboose was set at a devilishly impossible angle, suspended 3-feet, 5-inches above the surrounding sidewalk on the southwest (left) corner of the building, and 11-feet, 7-inches above the southeast (right) corner. That the entire caboose was also rolled at an improbable angle of minus 16 degrees off geometric level was another challenging detail to explain.

Even those who pushed the “prankster-built” hypothesis were uneasy over the fact that the building's exterior security cameras revealed a normal facade at 04:13:06, and the same facade penetrated by a skewed antique rail caboose at 04:13:11. Critics of the hoax explanation pointed out that even the fastest working hoaxers would need a minimum of eight 24-hour days to pull off such a stunt. Five seconds was an unreasonable amount of time to complete the task.

Some claimed it was a miracle, others, sorcery. Not surprisingly, it was a fringe group that put forward (and clung to) the prankster hypothesis. These were, by and large, the same kind of people who denied the Holocaust and continued to insist that the World Trade Center twin towers were toppled by US Government missiles on 9/11, commercial airlines' flight manifests and voluminous eyewitness video footage to the contrary notwithstanding.

Falcon Security was the first to examine the building's video footage. As luck would have it—if it could be called luck—security cameras had recorded the red caboose materializing in downtown Houston at precisely 04:13:11 on the morning of October 10, 2015.

“Freeze it!” The operations manager ordered. At 4:14 a.m., stepping cautiously out of the caboose's rear door was a kid, male suspect, approximately 4-foot, 10-inches, one hundred pounds, blue baseball cap, white T-shirt, blue jeans, red high-top Converse sneakers. Suspect exited from rear

of train car, appeared confused, possibly under the influence of narcotics. Suspect climbed down from unauthorized vehicle and proceeded southeast on Rusk Street.

A few hours after the caboose appeared it was completely under wraps. Passers-by on the street saw only a bulky blue construction tarp draped over what was assumed to be scaffolding on the facade of a downtown building, a routine sight in Houston or any large city.

Falcon Security, in concert with the Houston Metropolitan Police, the Texas Ranger Division, the FBI, CIA, DIA, NSA and US Border Patrol, ordered all businesses in the downtown area to surrender their security camera footage. Within hours, “the kid,” as he quickly came to be called, popped up four more times, wandering the streets around Main Street Square Station, the Majestic Metro Theater, crossing the Buffalo Bayou bridge, heading toward the University of Houston.

Psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers under the employ of various police and municipal agencies were called upon to analyze the kid’s movements, actions, body language and—to the extent possible—facial expressions. “Delusional.” “Lost.” “Under the influence.” “Developmentally disabled.” “Schizophrenic.” These were the professionals’ initial assessments. One of the Border Patrol agents, squinting at a close-up pulled from a security camera said, “The baseball cap. He could be Mexican. Illegal immigrant.”

The Houston Metropolitan Police issued an APB on “the kid.” A dragnet was in place and tightening quickly. The authorities contacted the media, and within six hours, millions throughout the greater Houston area were on the lookout for “the kid.”

Before issuing its press release, NSA director Edwin Danby was careful to spin his narrative. Despite Falcon’s quick cover-up, rumors of a red caboose crashing into a downtown Houston building were already afoot. The authorities didn’t want to contend with the added sideshow of a kid in a baseball cap stepping out of a red caboose and wandering the streets like something out of *The X-Files*.

But people gossiped anyway: *Aliens have landed in downtown Houston! Their spaceship looks exactly like a red caboose! ET has disguised himself as a normal-looking kid in a baseball cap!*

Danby's story was much more prosaic: The "kid" got separated from his parents in the visitor's theme park at the Johnson Space Center. He has Attention Deficit Disorder and may be autistic. If you see him, immediately inform the authorities of his whereabouts. **DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ENGAGE WITH HIM!** Because of his condition he may have a negative reaction and pose a danger to himself or you.

At 11:27 a. m., Houston Metropolitan Police received a call from a school crossing guard: she'd spotted what looked like the kid near the Poppa Burger at North Main and Harrington Streets. Within six minutes two police officers from the mobile bicycle patrol approached Jason. Seeking to avoid a panic reaction they advanced casually. "Nice day, huh?" One of the cops asked. Jason stared at the cop, his mouth open but not saying a word.

Just then, a group of men in dark suits—first four, then two more, then three more?—appeared so quickly it was hard to count them all. Two of them grabbed Jason's arms. One flashed a card at the cops on bikes and another pulled Jason off the sidewalk and pushed him into the back seat of a black Ford Expedition. Jason got no further than "What—" in his question, *What's going on?* when one of the suits grunted, "Shut up! Anything you say can and will be used against you blah blah blah."

Jason knew this part from TV. He'd seen it so many times he knew exactly what was going on: he was being read his Miranda rights! On TV it rarely turned out well for people who were read their Miranda rights. The black SUV squealed away from the curbside. Looking back at the corner where he was seized, Jason saw the two cops on bikes disappearing from view. It was too quick to tell for sure, but Jason thought that even the two cops looked alarmed.

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“He doesn’t have any ID.”

“Nothing?”

“Nada.”

Baker stood outside the one-way mirror, eyeing the kid in the interrogation room. Chandler updated Baker. “We fingerprinted him, took a DNA sample, which the lab is working on now, but you know the drill: if he ain’t in the system we got diddly. And a kid like that—white, clean, looks younger than 12, obviously *not* a street kid—chances of him being in the Nat database are nil.”

“Shit. So what do we do?”

“I don’t know, waterboard him?”

All the cola he drank was making Jason fidget and go to the bathroom. Every time he went he was escorted by a guy dressed in black. The guy was huge: six-foot-four, three-hundred pounds. Making him look even bigger were the size 13 military-issue black combat boots and thick black Kevlar bulletproof vest adding inches to his girth bulging with gear—billy club, taser, 2-way radio and most provocatively—a holster swollen with the thick black butt of a Glock 9 mm hand gun.

The guard never said a word to Jason, just stood by, breathing audibly like he had asthma, while Jason positioned himself at the urinal. Even though all the pop he’d drunk was sending him to the bathroom it wasn’t easy letting go while the big guard towered right behind him, literally breathing down his neck.

“All right. Let’s start again,” the man with the white shirt and yellow tie said. “State your full name and address.”

Jason answered the man's questions again, repeating the only lie he told, which, he figured, wasn't really a lie but the right thing to do. He didn't trust these guys, the way they'd pulled him off the street, the interrogation room, the overkill with the armed guard: there must be something wrong with them. If he gave his true address, who knew what they might do to his family?

"What kind of accent is that?" The man asked.

Jason didn't think he had an accent. He thought the man asking the same questions over and over had an accent. He sounded like Hank, on *King of the Hill*. A southerner. Good ol' boy. A cowboy, a Texas cowboy, like George "Dubya" Bush, though he didn't look like Bush. He looked like John Goodman: big wide face all sweat and jowls. Friendly but unpredictable.

"So once again," the man whose name Jason couldn't remember said, "how did you get inside that train caboose?"

And once again, Jason answered. It was the same story, over and over. And having to repeat the same story over and over was getting to him. Were they trying to drive him crazy? That's what worried him most, the fear that he'd lost his mind. He'd heard about crazy people, of course. Near Dover Park there was a big state psychiatric hospital everyone called The Nut House. He'd seen patients wandering the grounds there, sometimes straying into the park, shuffling around in their hospital gowns, saggy asses hanging out as they pointed at cars and muttered incoherently.

When he'd woken up and stepped outside the caboose, out into the streets of a big unknown city he thought, *This is a dream. A weird, super-realistic dream I haven't woken up from yet.* But the dream kept dreaming. He couldn't wake up from it. He pinched himself. Unlike in a dream, it hurt. He asked a stranger where he was. The man looked at him like he was trouble and told him to fuck off. Next he asked a lady who looked like she wouldn't swear at him. She said he was on Congress Avenue, and asked if he was lost.

“No,” he’d said. For some reason he didn’t want to alarm this lady or trouble her with his problem. He’d figure it out. Maybe in a minute or two he’d come to his senses, wake up and be amazed at the weirdest dream he’d ever had. But he didn’t wake up. He kept walking, looking for clues, hoping to recognize someone or something.

He tried to reassemble the events of the last 24 hours. When he recalled the football game and Randy slamming the football into his face he realized that was it! He had a brain injury! He wasn’t crazy after all, he was brain-damaged! But wait—how is being brain-damaged better than being crazy? Because you can be fixed, that’s why! With the right treatment, a good doctor, special medicine, he could be normal again!

Then he thought, *Wait a minute—what if I died? What if I’m dead? What if that football hit me so hard it caused bleeding in the brain? When I laid down in the caboose it was because my head was filling up with blood! I fell asleep and died in my sleep! I’m actually dead now! I’m not wandering in some unknown city, I’m in hell! Or some weird place the living never knew existed, a place where dead people actually go instead of heaven or hell.*

Maybe I’m a ghost. But no, everyone I talked to saw me. They answered my questions (even though one guy told me to fuck off). People don’t tell ghosts to fuck off do they? Maybe if they’re crazy they do. Oh no, what if everyone’s crazy here? Maybe I went crazy and ended up in Crazyland where only crazy people exist. The guy sitting across the table asking the same questions over and over—he’s acting crazy, isn’t he? Isn’t that what crazy people do, just keep asking the same stupid questions over and over, no matter how many times you answer them?

They weren’t getting anywhere with Jason. As many times as they made him repeat his story, the kid wouldn’t change any details. Staff psychologists concluded that he wasn’t lying as such. He was

delusional. Possibly psychotic.

“We checked out the caboose,” Nuñez said. “Turns out there *is* some kind of apparatus in there, looks like a telegraph, unknown type of keyboard.”

Butcher scoffed. “What are you saying, the kid is telling the *truth*?”

“No. Just seems weird. Maybe we should have a look at it.”

“At what?”

“The machine, the telegraph, whatever.”

Butcher shook his head, “World’s gone crazy, Carlos. Next you’re gonna tell me the kid is Harry fucking Potter.”

It was Everett who proposed that they take Jason back to the caboose and have him reenact his story. Others thought this was a hare-brained idea but didn’t have the rank to say so. Security alone would be “a pain in the cojones,” Nuñez pointed out, but for lack of another plan they carried out Everett’s orders.

Flanked by a squad made up of representatives from the CIA, NSA, FBI and Falcon Security, Everett, Butcher and Nuñez marched Jason into another black SUV and drove him back to the tower where the caboose was lodged. Trying to preserve “the optics,” the security squad was ordered to don hard hats before stepping under the tarp on the caboose, as if they were businessmen visiting a construction site.

There wasn’t enough room inside the caboose to hold the entire security contingent. Those who couldn’t fit formed a perimeter outside, standing at attention, hands folded in rest position, betraying their true role as hired muscle, not visiting businessmen.

Everett asked Jason if he thought he could repeat exactly what he did the first time he used the machine. Jason went over to the roll-top desk and looked at the keyboard with its peculiar symbols.

Which keys had he pressed? It wasn't easy to say because he'd tried so many different combinations. For a long time nothing had happened. Then he'd hit some combination or sequence of letters and numbers and suddenly—there was a noise, a really loud roar like thunder—and there he was, climbing out of the caboose in a strange city that he later learned was Houston, Texas.

Everett told Jason to type in what he did the first time. His attempt was just like before: whatever he typed did nothing. He tried many combinations and nothing happened. Some security agents traded glances among themselves.

“Sir, we're spending a lot of man-hours here,” one of the agents said to Everett.

Jason stood up and stepped away from the desk. Four guards reached toward their holsters.

“Can I go outside for a second?” Jason asked.

“What for?” One of the guards asked.

“To try to remember something.”

Everett nodded at the guards. “Keep an eye on him.”

They surrounded him and walked him out the rear door. He lifted a corner of the tarp draped over the caboose and looked underneath. He let the tarp drop then climbed back up the steps and went inside again, up to the keyboard on the roll-top desk. This time he typed in C V & P A 505707. Three times. A shudder shook through the caboose, the security crew tensed. A number of them had drawn their sidearms, two had dropped down on one knee to stabilize their aim at Jason.

The floor of the caboose began to vibrate, a deep rumbling clatter that spread alarm among the security crew. The vibrations doubled, trebled, the entire caboose shook and rocked like it was in an earthquake.

“It's a fucking bomb!” One of the agents yelled and darted toward the back door. The panic he set off sent the rest of the agents bolting after him, desperate to clear the caboose before it blew up. Seeing

the caboose rocking under the tarp and the stream of agents leaping out the rear exit triggered panic in the cadre of agents posted outside the caboose. Everyone in the area ran as fast as they could to escape the explosion.

And then it was gone. Vanished. As if it had never been there. The blue construction tarp lay in a heap on the ground where one moment earlier it had been suspended from the roof of the caboose. The facade of the building looked untouched, as if nothing whatsoever had changed. The squad of agents that ran for cover turned around and stared, dumbfounded at the disappearance. Just as Jason had earlier, the whole lot of them suddenly doubted their sanity.

As for Jason, he was like the caboose: gone without a trace.

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A grass fire smells different from a paper fire which smells different from an electrical fire. Jason had noticed this before so the smell of burnt grass was the first thing that struck him. He got up and walked out the rear door. Outside of the caboose he saw that the grass closest to the wheels was singed black—that was what he smelled. A few yards away his bike lay exactly where he had dropped it.

The second thing he noticed was the sun, a squished orange, low on the horizon. Was it rising or setting? He picked up his bike and straddled it. Glanced at the sun again, which may have been just a tad lower, so he guessed it was setting. He'd better pedal as fast as he could if he was going to make it home before dark.

Once again he found himself questioning his sanity. How could he have had a dream that was so real, so detailed, so convincing? He was convinced that he'd been gone for a very long time, but looking around now it seemed that only a few hours had passed.

On the ride home he resolved not to tell anyone. They'd think he was crazy. His mother would take him to a psychiatrist. His father would order him to "straighten up and fly right." So best to keep it to himself. But that would be hard. He'd be tempted to tell his friend, Chris. But if he did, even his best friend would think he'd gone bonkers.

Nearly a week went by and he'd managed to keep his secret—so far. This might not have been possible if it weren't for the internet. Because online Jason could search for anything that might explain what he had experienced—or *thought* he had experienced. In the privacy of his room he Googled "head injuries and hallucinations" and "out-of-body-experiences."

Curious about any reference to a red caboose mysteriously appearing downtown he also searched www.chron.com, the web site of *The Houston Chronicle*. When he actually found a link he was relieved, then disturbed. He couldn't decide which was worse—the fact that he'd dreamed a dream so convincing he'd failed to distinguish reality from fantasy, or—that the caboose he'd climbed into had actually teleported him to Houston!

The links he found led to a string of articles that did mention rumors of a red caboose suddenly appearing in downtown Houston, but they were all presented as a classic example of the "urban legend." Some links pointed him to snopes.com, a site that specializes in debunking urban legends, hoaxes, and pranks. But the explanations given made no more sense to him than the craziness he remembered so vividly.

According to Edwin Danby, director of the NSA (National Security Agency), a joint investigation carried out by the NSA, CIA and FBI had determined that the bizarre rumors were, in the end, attributable to a man named Carston Burbidge, better known as "Voltax Extraordinaire," an amateur magician and self-described "illusionist."

Danby described Voltax as “a washed-up has-been, a poor man’s David Copperfield who attempted to launch a comeback from a failed career as an illusionist.” In a misguided attempt to outdo Copperfield’s famous *trompe l’oeil* of “making the Empire State Building disappear,” Voltax pulled off a stunt using an elaborate array of mirrors, 3-D projectors and lasers while taking advantage of the optical properties of the tower’s glass curtain facade to create the illusion of a 1940s-era red caboose appearing to have fused within the building’s edifice.

The articles went on to say that Voltax was charged with criminal mischief, disturbing the peace and defacing private property. Asked to explain the unusual lack of publicity surrounding the stunt, Danby said, “Media coverage was voluntarily suppressed in order to minimize the chances of so-called ‘copycat’ imitators.” He then added, “Some people may find such a stunt to be harmless, but in fact, it poses a great risk to the public at large. As guardians of the public safety, we simply cannot allow it.”

Jason shut down his computer and stared out the window.

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