

Inward Bound

By Jane Tesh

“You’re what?”

The young man shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, his expression regretful. “I have to, Dr. MacKensie. It’s just not what I want to do.”

Jonathan stared at his student, aghast. “Allen, you are one of the brightest young men I’ve ever taught. You have a great future in anthropology. Why, that study you did of the Taung Child was positively brilliant. You can’t drop out!”

The young man shrugged. “I’m sorry. I got this terrific offer to play drums with the Overdues. I can’t pass it up.”

“But think what you’re passing up here.” Jonathan couldn’t believe this was happening. Allen Pedigo, his best student, dropping everything to join a rock band! “You were going to head our next field trip. Your next paper is practically completed. You have only three more classes for your degree!”

“Yeah, I know,” said Allen apologetically. “It’s just not what I want to do with my life. I mean, it’s been fun, but I’m just not into it.”

Jonathan was at a loss for words. Frustration welled up, effectively choking him. This was impossible. What had gone wrong? Where had he failed?

“Look, I gotta go,” said Allen. “I’m sorry things didn’t work out. I enjoyed your classes, and you were a great advisor. This is just the chance of a lifetime, you know?”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” said Jonathan. I had such hopes for you. Apparently, they were all my hopes, not yours. “Isn’t there anything I can say or do to make you reconsider?”

Allen shook his head. “I really gotta go, Dr. MacKensie.” He held out his hand. “Good luck with old Ramapithecus.”

Jonathan numbly shook his student’s hand. Allen shouldered his knapsack and walked out of the office. Just like that. Over. Gone.

Jonathan sank into his chair. This series of unfortunate events had been going on for days, sending his spirits lower and lower, and Allen’s defection was the crowning blow. He couldn’t seem to shake the depression that was overtaking him, a dark, relentless mood that had started creeping up about a week ago, round about his father’s birthday.

He would have been eighty-five had he lived. He would have been in good health for a man of his age, spry, inquisitive, his mind active and alert. Who knows what sort of remarkable discoveries he would have made? How he would have enjoyed all the wild adventures his son had had with a certain lively journalist. In fact, he would have been of great help to me on some of the cases, an ally against Benedek’s more outlandish theories.

Jonathan shook his head, trying to clear the painful memories. There were more immediate problems. Allen couldn’t leave. There must be some way to prevent the young man from throwing his life away on some ludicrous rock group that would fizzle and die in the time it takes to sing a pop song! But his mind was blank. It seemed he was so tired lately, and sleep eluded him, the late evening hours filled with replays of the day’s events, the missed opportunities, the failures.

What’s the use? Why bother? Somehow, somewhere along the line, you failed Allen, failed to inspire him, encourage him. Who knows how many others you haven’t reached? Whatever made you think you could teach, anyway? Maybe it’s a god thing your father isn’t around. He’d be disappointed. He’d say, what’s the matter with you?

That's what I'd like to know.

Edgar Benedek strolled into the large brown and gold office, hands in his pockets, prepared for a bracing setdown by a woman he considered the world's champion, Dr. Juliana Moorhouse. Why else would she call him to her office like the principal summoning a truant? She never wanted to see him.

Benny thought back over the previous weeks, wondering which of his escapades had stuck in her craw. Let's see, there was the trip to Oz, which she discounted completely; the vampire – but he'd taken care of that himself, and Jon only got a little bullet wound in the arm, nothing serious. The ring business was probably the problem. No telling what her Majesty had seen when she tried the magic ring that granted your heart's desire. Probably me boiling in oil, he thought, grinning.

"Yo, Dr. M. Here I am: signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours."

Dr. Juliana Moorhouse looked at him coolly. Yes, ehre he was, in a shuddering combination of pink and orange and a tie shaped like a fish, with that ten-thousand volt grin and mischievous glint in his eyes. How he managed to always be so incredibly cheerful – well, in this case, cheer was what she needed.

"Sit down, Benedek."

"You look sensational today, Dr. M," he commented. "You planning to bowl over those mysterious regents later on, hit them for a few more bucks?"

"There is plenty of funding available for continued paranormal research," she said dryly, "but don't think that gives you permission to run up unnecessary expenses."

"Sounds like you got a job in mind," said Benny, intrigued.

"Yes," she said, selecting a solder from the top of a stack. "I have."

Benny read the first page and raised wondering eyes. "A phantom locomotive! Jonathan's going to flip!"

"I certainly hope so."

"This is great stuff," said Benny, reading further. "Has he seen this?"

"No," she said. "I want you to tell him. And I want you to make certain he gets involved in this assignment."

Benny fell back in the chair, a hand to his chest. "You want me to get him involved? Quick! Call Ripley's!"

"Oh, calm down," she snapped. "There's no need to be so dramatic. Just take this assignment and make sure Jonathan goes with you."

"Dr. M, I am just thrilled beyond words," said Benny. "If you knew how many nights I've been unable to sleep, wondering if you'd ever trust me."

"Get this straight," she said. "I am doing this only as a last resort. I've noticed you have a certain – talent for cheering Jonathan out of these unfortunate slumps. He's in another, and so far, nothing else has worked."

"The last time this happened, you warned me away," Benny reminded. "I've still got fallout from the evil eye."

"That was different," she said. "That was one isolated incident. This has been going on for weeks."

"So fill me in." Benny turned his chair around and sat with his arms folded on the chair back.

Dr. Moorhouse fingered her ever-present string of pearls in an uncharacteristically nervous fashion. "His lectures have lost a certain élan. He's taken to just sitting and staring into space. He's beginning to neglect his other duties. When I speak to him about this – and I have, believe me -- he's very vague and listless."

"Maybe he's got a cold," Benny suggested.

She shook her head. "I've known him longer than you have, Benedek. This is something much more serious than a cold."

"Is it the same old Why Can't I be As Smart As Dad song and dance?"

"I don't think so," she answered. "That may be a part of it, but, well, you'll see for yourself."

Benny got up, snapping his fingers. "Dr. Benedek is on the case, ma'am. Where will I find the patient?"

"I believe he should be finishing his first section of Anthropology 101 about now. The DeBries lecture hall."

Benny sauntered down to the appropriate classroom and found a seat. The last time he'd sat in on one of Jonathan's lectures, MacKensie had the kids practically on the edge of their seats as he unfolded some amazing discoveries scientists had learned from mere bits and pieces of ancient teeth. Today, though the students were listening politely, it was obvious the sparkle was gone and Jon was just going through the motions. He didn't even attempt a glare in Benny's direction, didn't acknowledge the man's presence until the students had been dismissed and the last one had left the classroom.

"Hello, Benedek," he said, stacking up his notes.

"Hi, yourself," said Benny. "Long day, huh?"

"It hasn't been too bad." He put on his glasses to read a piece of paper one of the students had left on his desk; then took them off and folded them in his pocket. "I have a graduate seminar in an hour, but if you'd care to go have a drink or something."

"Yeah," said Benny. "Sounds good, partner." No frown, no snarls, no, "Oh, my God, what now?" Dr. M was right. This was serious. He gave Jonathan a careful going over as his friend stuffed papers into a briefcase. Well, he looked the same. The graceful profile and long light brown hair that had all the females on the GI campus and elsewhere drooling en masse; the plain conservative clothes. But the dark eyes, now turned in his direction, seemed weary and dispirited. Before, Jon had just been moody. Today, he looked alarmingly apathetic. "I say we head for Tilda's Grill," he said, knowing this was one of Jonathan's least favorite places.

"All right," he said.

Benny whistled the "Twilight Zone" theme softly to himself. "O-kay," he said. Time for a major game plan here.

Over two beers and a bowl of Tilda's homemade fried pork rinds, he chatted in his usual style, noticing that Jonathan's attention kept drifting and returning as if his friend had to keep reminding himself to listen.

"And so this thing came out of the fireplace, about six feet long, green hair--" he stopped and rapped his knuckles in a sharp rhythm on the table. "Yo! Earth to MacKensie. You listenin' to me, Jack?"

"I'm sorry," said Jonathan, refocusing. "You were saying?"

"Where are you today?" Benny asked. "What's on your mind, buds?"

"Oh, nothing," he said, far too casually. "Not really. I'm just a bit. . .preoccupied."

"I'll say! What's up?"

"It's nothing," he repeated. He glanced at his watch. "I should be getting back." To Benny's further astonishment, he took out his wallet and calmly laid a five dollar bill on the table. "That should take care of the drinks. I'll talk to you later."

"Wait a second," said Benny. "I haven't even told you about our next case."

Jonathan was already leaving. "Come by the house," he said. "You can tell me then."

Benny watched him go, perplexed. No argument, no protest, not even a snide remark about paying the bill. It was as if he were sleepwalking—uh-oh. Had another wayward sorceress or spirit put a spell on him? Maybe some critter they'd offended in an earlier adventure was taking some subtle revenge. It had happened before.

He jogged after Jonathan, catching up with him easily at the edge of the campus. "Don't you wanna know what it is?" he asked. "You're gonna love this one, Jack. You remember that phantom locomotive I told you about, oh, maybe a month ago?"

"I also remember you made it up," said Jonathan.

"Not this one, Pal. This one's for real." He watched hopefully for any spark of interest. "Seems this ghostly train has been sighted near Silverhill, Wyoming. People get on board and disappear forever. It's a steam engine, one of those old fashioned jobs, you know, like that 747 or whatever in Santa Maria."

"282," Jonathan corrected.

Benny thought he saw a little more life in his eyes. "Yeah, okay, so this 282 is zippin' through the night, carrying people off to who knows where. I say we catch this train, buds, and see where it takes us."

"It hardly seems likely we can catch a phantom train," said Jonathan.

It was a weak argument, but it was a beginning. Benny took heart. "Well, come on and we'll see. Might be a terrific sight, this huge steaming locomotive charging out of the dark, bell clanging, whistle blowing, making the ground shake."

Yes, there was definitely a light on now. "I'll need to check with Dr. Moorhouse, get someone to cover my classes--"

"All taken care of, Jonny. We head out tomorrow morning." He was hoping to provoke some irritation, but Jonathan accepted this as a matter of course.

"All right."

Boy, I got my work cut out for me here, Benny thought. He knew how to handle Jonathan when his friend was surly or confused; this new development had him momentarily stumped. You won't get this one past me, J.J., he decided, watching Jonathan's retreating figure. I'll crack this, you'll see. First, I'm making a few phone calls.

On the way to Silverhill, Jonathan was quiet, but he was never at his best in airplanes. Several times, Benny thought about asking what was wrong; each time, he waited, thinking that eventually Jonathan would volunteer some information. Ruling out supernatural interference for the moment, he tried to think what might have brought on such a dark mood. He knew one of Jonathan's recent papers had been rejected by some anthropology journal, but thought that had blown over. They'd had some pretty harrowing adventures lately, but since Jonathan could usually find a logical explanation that suited him, Benny didn't think any of that was preying on his mind. In fact, Jonathan seemed to liven up on a case. He'd get involved with the people, shed that academic demeanor, and become enthusiastic and often intensely interested in seeing it through.

I'm counting on that to happen this time, too, he thought. Since it's a train, how can I miss? That crafty old Dr. M. She must've been saving this one for an emergency.

He glanced at Jonathan. His friend's expression was abstracted, brows slightly drawn, eyes far away. What could he be thinking of?

Jonathan was thinking of a song. Ever since Benny had brought up the subject of trains, it had been on his mind. It was an old song, one he'd heard as a child, and it had intrigued him because it was so radically different from the stiff formal hymns he heard in church.

The gospel train is coming,
I hear it close at hand.
When it stops, I'll get on board,
Take me to the Promised Land.

The sprightly rhythm and plaintive melody had stayed with him for years, weaving about the few but happy memories of his father bending over the model train layout, instructing his young son in the finer points of railroading, coupled with the bitter regret that, although he had promised, his father never found time to take him to ride a real steam engine.

Oh, he'd had the chance to ride trains at fairs and exhibitions when he was older. By then, his father was dead.

Had the train come for him?
The angels there will greet us,
Twill be a happy day.
All sorrow gone, and I'll be free
And ride the gospel train away.

Odd, he hadn't thought of that spiritual in a long time. Why did it surface now? He glanced at Benny, who was deep in conversation with the flight attendant, a pretty brunette. He envied the man's carefree attitude. Things just didn't seem to affect Benny, or if they did, it didn't show. In fact, there were a lot of things about Benedek to envy. The man was quite successful. True, it wasn't a success he would've wanted, but it was success. Benny was in demand for all the top rated talk shows. His books were on the best seller lists. Compared to this output, Jonathan's few papers and monographs looked pitifully small. Benny was not that much older, and look what he had achieved.

He sighed. Right now, he'd like to be chatting with a pretty stewardess, but it took an effort he did not possess. It was as if he were on the bottom of the sea, and each time someone spoke, he had to struggle free of the mud and weeds and swim all the way through the dark green depths to the surface to reply.

Just leave me alone. Let me think. Let me settle back in the mud.

"We've landed, Jonny. Up and at 'em."

He followed Benny off the plane, blinking as if awakened from a deep sleep. They picked up their luggage and took a taxi to the Silverhill Hotel.

"This place is a bit off the beaten track," Benny commented. "Track, get it? Oh, by the way," he calmly lobbed his bomb. "Wanda's gonna meet us there."

At this, Jonathan sat upright. "Wanda?"

"Yup."

"Wanda?" he repeated in disbelief. "Your friend, Whiplash Wanda, the lady wrestler?"

"In living color," Benny grinned, pleased to have finally caused a reaction.

"Oh, not again," Jonathan groaned, sinking back into the seat.

“Relaxovision, pal. You don’t have to go to any matches. She just happens to know Pauline Frasier.”

“Who?”

“Pauline Frasier, our contact.”

Jonathan’s glare was fast approaching its normal intensity. “I find it remarkably coincidental that your friends, more often than not, ‘just happen’ to be in on our little adventures.”

“Hey, it’s a strange and mysterious world we live in, J.J.,” said Benny. “She’s dyin’ to see you again.”

“I’m sure she is,” Jonathan said darkly. “I suppose Rosie is with her?”

“Nope. She’s gone solo.”

“Thank God for small favors.” He shot Benny a suspicious glance. “How did she know we were coming to a small town in Wyoming?”

“She lives here, Jack. It’s her home town.”

“You can’t expect me to believe that!”

“Well,” Benny amended, “she is from Wyoming.”

Jonathan sighed and turned away. This was a familiar exasperated gloom, however, not the listless silence of before. Benny kept his grin. His master plan was underway.

Whiplash Wanda, Jonathan recalled, was the larger of Benny’s two lady wrestler friends, a tall buxom redhead with an outgoing personality, somewhat along the lines of Benny’s, but not as relentless. When they’d met on a previous case, she’d been alarmingly friendly. She still was.

“Jon!” she cried, giving him a hug that made his ribs clack together. “Great to see you! Benny, you little pest!” She easily swung Benny around. “Hot on the trail again! What is it this time, shorty? Ghosts? UFOs? Bogeymen?”

“A phantom train,” Benny said, his eyes sparkling. “A spectral locomotive that carries people to the Great beyond!”

Wanda rolled her eyes. “Sure thing, honey. And how many sidecars did you have on the plane?”

“I’m serious, Wanda. This ectoplasmic engine rolls in here every time somebody’s due to take a dirt nap.”

“Benny,” she said patiently. “I think you’ve slipped a cog. How can a train be dead? Is this what I’ve come all this way to hear? Nobody’s actually seen this thing, have they?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell him,” said Jonathan, heartened by this unexpected ally.

“Shucks, Jack, you can’t tell this guy anything,” she replied. “He’ll go his own way if it kills him.”

“It nearly has,” said Jonathan. “Several times.”

“But I escaped unscathed,” said Benny cheerfully. “Not even a psychic scratch. What are we standing ehre for? Let’s make tracks. Get it? Make tracks?”

Wanda and Jonathan exchanged a long-suffering glance.

“Could we at least check in first?” Jonathan asked.

The hotel was a large white western-style building with a wide sunlit lobby lined with mirrors and decorated with hanging baskets. Benny was anxious to be on his way, but Jonathan wanted to rest.

"You and Wanda go ahead," he said, unlocking his door.

Benny had already tossed his suitcase into his room and was bouncing impatiently on the balls of his feet. "Come on, Jack. Lighten up! What's with the gloom and doom routine? Miss Frasier's waiting on us."

"You can tell me what she said."

Benny followed him into the room. "She's gonna be talkin' trains here, J.J. You're the expert this go round. All I know about trains is the chorus to 'City of New Orleans.' Come on."

Jonathan put his suitcase on one bed and sat down on the other. "Benedek, I'm tired. You know I hate to fly. Just go on and leave me alone. This was all your idea, anyway, dragging me along."

"Dragging is right, chum." He frowned, wondering on the best approach, then snapped his fingers. "Ohh, I see," he said in a superior tone. "It's Wanda, isn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

Benny made some clucking noises.

Jonathan's eyes narrowed. "Are you implying I'm afraid of that woman?"

"Me?" said Benny with elaborate innocence. "No way."

"Benedek." This was a low growl.

"Stay in here and brood, see if I care. I'll tell Wanda that greeting was too much for you. Burned you out completely. She'll be impressed." He turned to go. "See ya later, Jon. I gotta go make--"

"If you say tracks, I shall strangle you," said Jonathan, getting up to follow him. "No more train jokes!"

"Fair enough," said Benny.

Pauline Frasier was a small neatly dressed woman in her mid-fifties. She greeted them cheerfully, expressed pleasure at seeing Wanda again, and led the way into her living room.

"I'm so pleased that someone is finally taking a serious interest in the Nightwind," she said. "It was my great-grandfather's train." She had placed a large photo album on the table and turned to the center of the book. "Here are a few of the pictures I managed to save. My great-grandmother threw everything away after the accident."

"Accident?" said Jonathan. "What sort of accident?"

"The train was going too fast and derailed," she explained. "My great-grandfather was quite a daredevil. Seems he'd heard of another steam engine reaching eighty miles an hour and thought he'd try to beat its record."

"But fifty was a top speed for trains of that era," said Jonathan.

She shrugged. "As I said, great-grandfather would try anything."

"My kind of guy," Benny remarked. "Is this him?"

"Yes," she said. "Frederick Frasier."

The faded sepia picture showed a dark-haired man with an impressive moustache standing proudly beside a steam locomotive. To Benny, the train looked like the one James West owned in "The Wild Wild West," with a miner-type headlight, large cowcatcher, and bell, but Jonathan perked up.

"That's a Union Pacific 460," he said admiringly. "Express passenger locomotive."

Pauline Frasier nodded. "Most of them were on the Chicago to San Francisco line that ran near Sherman between Omaha and Cheyenne."

"It's a beautiful train," said Jonathan.

"How come the smoke stack is bigger at the top like that?" Benny asked, cheered by this partial return of Jonathan's spirits.

"That's a diamond-stack," he explained readily. "An earlier form of spark arrester. There was a curved screen over the top and a deflector. The coal in this part of the country was very light and crumbly."

Pauline chuckled. "Frederick used whatever he could get his hands on. My great-grandmother said he was crazy about that train. Practically lived on it. It's too bad he died on it, too, but he probably would've wanted it that way."

"So what's the story?" Benny asked.

"Well, about a year ago, people started hearing a train whistle, and then someone in town would die. Word got around it was the Nightwind coming for their souls."

"Couldn't the deaths at this time have just been coincidental?" Jonathan asked.

"Possibly," she granted.

"Why this particular train?" was Benny's next question. "Did it have a curse on it or something?"

Wanda gave a snort. "Don't mind him, Pauline. He's always like this."

"Depends on how you look at it," Pauline said to Benny. "Some people say Frederick endangered the lives of the passengers by trying to go too fast. Many of them were killed when the train derailed. It could be the train is cursed and has to appear when someone dies."

"Has anyone actually seen it?" asked Jonathan.

"Several people have claimed to have seen something," said Pauline, "but there's really no concrete proof." She smiled at them. "That's why I'm so glad a professional team is here for a real investigation."

"Miss Frasier," said Jonathan, hating to disappoint her, "we could be here for weeks and never see or hear anything."

"Yeah, how often does the train come by?" asked Benny.

"We heard the whistle last night," she said in all seriousness.

"Whoa! So somebody's gonna die?"

"Benny," said Wanda, exasperated.

"This is great! Maybe we'll see the dead soul climb on board for his final trip to – where does it take them?" he broke off abruptly. "Is this the earth to heaven line?"

"I really don't know, Mr. Benedek," said Pauline. "There are all sorts of legends. One says if you get on board, you have to ride forever. Another claims that my great-grandfather is atoning for his sins by shuttling people to their reward or punishment. And still another says it's a glory train, bound for heaven."

The gospel train is coming,

I hear it close at hand.

Jonathan was only vaguely aware of the conversation that followed. Benny asked where the train had been sighted, and Pauline said something about abandoned tracks outside of town, but his thoughts were elsewhere. A glory train, bound for heaven? He felt a chill. Could this possibly be what he was thinking?

Don't be so melodramatic, he told himself. You're not usually taken by such fanciful notions. You're depressed, and you thought of an old song that just happens to do with trains. Stop thinking about it.

When it stops, I'll get on board.

Take me to the Promised Land.

But. . .what if it's true? What if--?

"Yo, Jon. Time to clear out, chum. We got all the info."

Benny, Wanda, and Pauline were standing, shaking hands and saying thank you. Jonathan got up, bringing himself back to the present with effort. He said good-bye to Miss Frasier and thanked her for her time.

"I have high hopes you'll solve this mystery," she said. "I'd really like to know – that is, if you should actually see my great-grandfather--"

"Why don't you come with us?" Benny suggested.

"You mean, I can come along, too?" she said, surprised. "With you? On the case?"

"Heck, why not?" said Wanda with a curious glance at Jonathan. "We're short one person anyway."

"Besides, we need you to show us the exact tracks," said Benny, not missing Jonathan's fade out. "Come on! It'll be fun!"

Fun was not exactly what Jonathan would have called tramping along a section of rusty tracks overgrown with weeds. Nothing was left of the Silverhill station but a commemorative plaque, but further up the track were the remains of a smaller loading platform.

"They say the train slows down here for a minute," Pauline remarked. "As you can see, the tracks haven't been used in years."

"Does it always come at night?" Benny asked.

"Yes. Frederick loved to travel by night." She looked where the tracks disappeared into the darkness. "For a while, my great-grandmother never talked of him," she said quietly. "Then, a few years before she died, she talked of nothing else. I stayed with her quite a bit, to keep her company, and she told me all about him. She never understood his fascination with the train, never really cared to ride it, but she told me once, she said, 'Pauline, I wish I'd been with him. I'd ride that old train now. I'd ride it wherever he wanted me to go.'"

"Tell you what," said Benny, breaking the melancholy silence that followed Pauline's words. "Let's go back to the hotel and get something to eat and then camp out near the station marker. That way, we'll be in place to flag down the train when it comes."

"If it comes," Wanda put in.

"What, I got a stand-in skeptic here?" Benny said in mock disgust. "She's stealin' your act, Jonny. You'd better wake up."

Jonathan was looking down the track, imagining the train coming, puffing clouds of steam, the wheels turning smoothly, the shuddering vibrations underfoot, the people waving from the passenger cars, waving, beckoning.

I wish I'd been with him.

All sorrow gone, and I'll be free.

Wanda touched his shoulder. "Come on, Jon," she said, her eyes full of questions. "Let's get some chow."

Jonathan tried to keep his mind on the dinner conversation, but it was much easier to drift away to his own concerns.

A promising students walks out. Your work is rejected. Your research is lightyears away from any real breakthrough. If that train really comes. . .if you could just ride away and forget all this. . .

Part of him still struggled to be calm and rational. You've been down before. This is just a little depression. Shake it off! But his thoughts kept circling back. He was thirty-five years old and hadn't accomplished one damn thing. Was there any point in continuing? Was there anything keeping him here?

Benny had no trouble keeping the talk going, and as Miss Frasier didn't know Jonathan, she assumed he was naturally vague. Wanda, however, kept shooting anxious frowning glances at Benny. After a while, Pauline left to change clothes for the evening Train-a-thon, as Benny called it, and Jonathan went up to his room, leaving them alone at the table.

"Whew!" said Wanda. "So what's with Jon?"

Benny shook his head. "I'm tellin' you, Wanda, whatever it is, he's in real deep."

"I know just the thing to cheer him up," she said suggestively.

Benny chuckled. "You had your chance."

"Half a day on a boat with you and Rosie? Be real!" She folded her arms under her impressive chest and eyed him narrowly. "How'd you ever get him involved in all this? He just doesn't seem the type."

"Oh, Jon has hidden talents," said Benny, sprinkling sugar on his potato salad. "If there's anything paranormal in the neighborhood, it practically sits up and begs for him."

She kept her suspicious gaze. "Word is, his school or whatever lends credibility to your little rag of a newspaper."

"Share and share alike," Benny agreed.

"Well, shorty, I guess as long as it works." She raised an eyebrow as he added his banana pudding to the mixture.

"Like a charm. I've even got his dragon lady of a boss eatin' out of my hand. She's keen on the supernatural. We're two of a kind. Soul mates."

Wanda had known Benny long enough to ignore most of his chatter. "Was this your idea or hers?"

"Fate lent a hand," Benny said mysteriously. "The very day I was finishing an expose on some Lemurians for the Register, I get a call from Georgetown to come ride the rails."

"Mm-hmm," said Wanda. "So what's the deal with Jon?"

"Something's on his mind. That's why I called in the troops." He gave her a wink.

"Yeah, well, I appreciate that, Benny," she said, wincing as he took a mouthful of his concoction. "I've never really been attracted to these intellectual types, but in Jon's case, I'm willing to make an exception."

"I kinda figured that."

"After all those guys in tights and outrageous outfits, a man in a suit and tie's a real turn on."

"Jon never leaves home without one. Just stand by. I'm hoping this train will be the cure."

"If it comes."

He grimaced. "What do I need Jonathan for? You make a great wet blanket all on your own."

"You jerk," she smiled.

"You even sound like him," said Benny, scraping up the last of his dessert. "Let me go see what's keeping our little ray of sunshine."

Jonathan opened his door. "I'll only be a moment," he said.

Benny sauntered in. "No rush. We got a few hours till dark."

Jonathan was unpacking a few last items. "Is it absolutely necessary to sit out in the cold all night? I'm really tired."

"Hey, it's nice out. We could take turns if you like. Me and Pauline. You and Wanda."

Jonathan paused, decided it wasn't worth the effort, and snapped his suitcase shut. "I thought I might get to bed early."

"Oh, is that the problem?"

"There isn't any problem, Benedek," he replied, annoyed. "Nothing a little sleep won't cure. I've been working fairly steadily the last few months. I think I deserve some rest."

Benny leaned against the bureau, arms folded. "I know what you're thinkin', Jack. Can't hide anything from an ace reporter such as myself. Those eyes give you away every time." He sketched some quick headlines in the air. "'Bored Prof Takes Last Train to Clarksville.' 'I'm Giving Up, Says MacKensie.'"

"What are you talking about?" said Jonathan, feeling guilty color warm his face.

Benny pointed an accusing finger. "You're thinkin' of cuttin' out on me, pal, of riding the railroad in the sky, the glory train, the celestial express."

"That's absurd." But he couldn't meet Benny's eyes.

"You mope around for days and expect me to believe that?"

Jonathan tried to explain. "It's-it's not what you think, Benedek," he said with a sigh.

Benny crossed his arms again. "So tell me. Prove it."

"It's true I've been a bit--" he searched for the right word and settled on "—moody, but I assure you, I have no intention of getting on that train. You can't get on something that doesn't exist."

"Ah, but if it did."

Jonathan hesitated just long enough to confirm Benny's suspicions. "Of course not."

Benny grinned. Jonathan was the world's worst liar. No matter. He had a plan that would solve everything and quite possibly turn into the story of the century. "Okay, buds," he said. "Just checkin.' Let's go track down a train."

The night was clear, the stars bright clusters of light in the dark blue sky. Pauline had some lawn chairs and blankets in case it got too chilly. Wanda brought along a sixpack and a bag of pretzels.

"Just like the drive-in," she said, inching her chair a little closer to Jonathan's. "All we need is a movie."

Benny was whistling "I've Been Working on the Railroad" as he set up a chair for Pauline. She sat straight in the chair, looking ahead expectantly.

"This is so exciting," she said.

"Didn't you ever try to see it before?" Benny asked, setting his chair next to hers.

"I didn't really like the idea of sitting out here alone," she confessed, "and until you and Dr. MacKensie came, no one was serious enough to sit out here with me."

"We love it," Benny assured her.

"And if the train comes, and my great-grandfather's there--" she hesitated. "Well, I-I'm not sure what I'd say or do."

"Leave that to me," said Benny.

The hours passed. The only sounds were of crickets and other insects cheeping rhythmically in the grass and the occasional hiss of a beer can being opened and the rustle of the pretzel bag. Wanda yawned hugely and dozed in her chair. Benny amused Pauline with stories of his adventures. Jonathan fought the steady advance of depression.

Late night was not the time to be reasonable. He realized this. All his past failures resurfaced, and the longing for peace intensified.

Stop it! He told himself sharply, but the melancholy would not go away. Wait till morning to sort this out. Get some sleep, eat a big breakfast, then try to rearrange your life. Brooding over the past, over Allen, over your father. . .

When the whistle blew, he was the first to leap up, staring down the track with a mixture of disbelief and hope.

No.

It couldn't be possible.

"Yow!" said Benny. "I see it!"

Wanda said, "Well, I'll be damned."

Pauline clutched Benny's arm, unable to speak.

Out of the night came the unmistakable shape of a train, light gleaming, smoke pouring from the distinctive stack, little flags fluttering in front. The ground trembled. The whistle blew again, a piercing, dischordant shriek. The sound went through Jonathan like a trumpet call.

My God.

It was the most beautiful train he'd ever seen or imagined, solid black, with a shimmering ghostly outline, as if someone had traced it in phosphorus. Even the smoke had a silvery glow, and the spokes of the large wheels sparkled. It was slowing down! If he could reach the passenger car. . .

The train had slowed for only a moment and now picked up speed. The passengers were blurred faces behind pale glass windows. Hardly aware of what he was doing, Jonathan started forward. It might be possible to catch the railing on the last car. Yes, run! Catch it!

"Sorry, Jack," said Benny. "I'm takin' this ride." And he stuck out his foot.

Jonathan tripped and fell sprawling as Benny sprinted up to the train, grasped the railing, and hopped on board. Jonathan raised his head in time to see Benny wave a cheery good-by.

"Benedek!"

"I'll send you a postcard, Jonny!"

Jonathan scrambled to his feet as the train surged forward. "No! You can't do this!"

"Too late, buds! See ya!"

Running as fast as he could, Jonathan almost managed to grab the railing, but it slipped through his fingers, leaving him breathless and disheveled on the track.

"Benny. . ."

The train disappeared.

Dazed, Jonathan started off in the same direction only to find a strong hand on his arm. "Just hold on, Jonathan," said Wanda. "We'll find the little squirt."

"How?" he said, bewildered. "How can we possibly find him? You saw that train. He's gone." He stared at the empty track.

Wanda patted his arm encouragingly. "You know Benny. He doesn't stay gone for long. Hell, you can't kill him. Got more lives than a cat." She led him back to where Pauline was standing, her eyes enormous in her pale face. "Sit down a second. We'll think of something."

Jonathan sat, stunned. Benedek, you idiot. I can't believe you did that! Well, yes I can. I should have suspected. I should have known you'd do something like this, you and your all-important stories! If I hadn't been so self-absorbed, so stupid and moody. You can't be gone forever, you just can't.

He pushed himself out of the chair and went back to stare at the tracks, rusty tracks, overgrown with weeds. I saw it, but I don't believe it.

"What can we do, Pauline?" Wanda was asking the older woman. "Got any ideas?"

"I-I'm not sure," she said, shaken. "I never expected to see anything, much less--" Her voice quit.

"It was the Nightwind, wasn't it?" Jonathan asked, and she nodded. "Do you know all the legends? Is there any way we can get Benedek back? A spell, or a quest – anything?"

"I'll have to think," she said, brushing back her hair with an uncertain hand. "I'm sorry. This has been such a shock."

"We'll get you home right away," said Jonathan. "Wanda and I can start searching on our own."

"I think we could all stand some rest," Wanda said. "You look run over, Jon."

"I wish I had been," he said bitterly. "I can't possibly rest! We've got to start looking."

"It's almost dawn," she argued. "We're not going to find a trace of that train during the day, you know that."

"Do you see a trace of it now?" he replied, gesturing to the darkness around them.

"Sure, go ahead and give up before we even start," said Wanda, deliberately provoking. She had expected a reaction, but was startled by the flash of fire in his dark eyes, the sudden intensity in his face.

"I will not give up," he said, his voice low and controlled. "I'm going to find that damned train. You can help me or not; I don't care. But I'm not giving up."

Her sudden grin took him aback. "That's more like it. Come on, Pauline."

They took Miss Frasier, still distracted, back to her house and made sure she was safely settled. There was some coffee in the kitchen, and Wanda made a pot full.

"Sit down, Jonathan, and let's thrash this out," she suggested.

The hot liquid eased some of the tightness in his throat. "It's all my fault," he said wearily. "I've been brooding about my own troubles and not paying attention. I should have realized that was just the sort of thing he would do."

"Hey, me, too," said Wanda. "I shoulda grabbed him. But that train surprised the heck out of me! I just stood with my mouth open." She took a big gulp of coffee. "Okay, we know why Benny got on board. What's your excuse? What were you tryin' to do?"

He hesitated. "I'm not sure."

"Looked like you wanted to ride that thing."

He nodded, his expression blank.

Wanda put her cup down. "Jon, I don't know you at all, but I'd say you've got some major unloading to do, and now's the time. We can't concentrate on finding Benny until you get your act together."

He nodded again. "You're right," he said slowly. "It's just that train and--" He sighed. "One of my students dropped out this week. Not just one of my students, my very best student. I can't get over the feeling I failed him. I feel I've failed at everything."

"That's too bad," she sympathized. "But how many kids stayed in?"

"What?" he said, momentarily puzzled.

"So you lost one. How many you got left?"

"Well, I don't know." He did some rapid calculating. "Ninety, perhaps a hundred, a hundred and twenty."

Wanda shrugged. "I'd concentrate on who's left."

"But you don't understand," said Jonathan. "Allen was the very best, the smartest student I've ever taught. He just quit on me."

"So you're gonna quit on everything else."

The glance he gave her was first sharp and then remorseful. "I guess that's how it looks."

"Uh-huh." She poured herself another cup of coffee. "What you got here, doc, is a simple case of the blues. Happens to the best of us. How does the train fit into all this?"

"That's a long story," he said hesitantly.

"Okay," she said with a smile. "I've pryed enough." A noise made them turn. "Oh, hi, Pauline. Want some coffee?"

Miss Frasier was still pale, but had recovered her composure. "No, thank you." She looked into Jonathan's eyes. "I think I know how to get Benny back."

"Great!" said Wanda enthusiastically.

But something in Pauline's face made Jonathan's apprehensive. "What is it going to take?" he asked.

"More than you may be willing to give," she answered.

Jonathan stood by the Silverhill station marker, gazing at the empty tracks. This was the third night he'd waited for the Nightwind Express, and he despaired of ever seeing it again.

I'll wait every night. I don't care how long it takes. I'm going to get Benedek off that train. I just hope Pauline knows what she's talking about.

"It may be possible to make an exchange," she had said. "There was a story once about a mother giving up her life for her child. She got on and tossed the child off into its father's arms. It's just one of the legends, Jonathan. I have no idea if there's any truth to it."

Well, we'll just find out, won't we? he thought grimly.

The sound of the whistle jarred him from his thoughts. It's coming! At last! What if I miss? He knew his agility was questionable. What if Benny's not on board? If he isn't there, can I get off?

His worried questions were drowned by the mournful whistle and the rumbling of the ghostly train now steaming toward him like a huge prehistoric monster. Jonathan stood as close

as he dared to the shivering tracks. When the train slowed for a few minutes, he grabbed the nearest railing and awkwardly pulled himself on board.

The movement of the train was surprisingly light, an almost imperceptible swaying. Everything inside the passenger car was filled with a soft white glow. He could see the faces of the people, all softly blurred like old photographs. Most of them were dressed in the style of the late 1800s, but there were a few in forties dresses and World War I uniforms. He walked apprehensively down the aisle, but except for a few vague smiles, the passengers ignored him.

He continued to walk, fighting off the calm feeling that threatened to engulf him, a peaceful emotion that seemed to say: sit down, rest, your worries are over. Fear and the urgent need to find Benny overrode this creeping lethargy, propelling him on to the next car.

There he was, sitting by a young lady in a straw bonnet and shawl, as vague and blurry as the others. Jonathan shook him.

“Benedek!”

The eyes gazed up without recognition though he smiled pleasantly. “Hello.”

“Come on, I’m getting you out of here,” said Jonathan, pulling him to his feet. Benny offered no resistance as he hauled him along through the passenger car and out to the end of the train.

“What are you doing?” Benny asked, suddenly more alert. “Jonathan – hey, what’s going on?”

“You’re going off,” said Jonathan, pulling him to the edge.

“What is this? What are you doing here?” Benny asked. “What am I doing here? Whoa! We’re on the ghost train! Are we dead?”

“Not yet,” Jonathan answered.

“I remember now!” said Benny excitedly. “Wow! Some ride, huh?” he watched the dark fields and trees whip by. “What’s the next stop, Limbo City? I know how to limbo, no problem. Or are we takin’ a non-stop trip to Paradise?” He could not read Jonathan’s expression. “Yo, Jonny, what’s up? Is this a permanent arrangement, or do we change trains in the underworld?”

Jonathan was leaning over to look around the next curve. He could just see the bright circle of Wanda’s flashlight at the platform just ahead. If Pauline was right and the train slowed, there should be just enough time. . .

“Jon.” There was a hand on his arm. “What is all this?” Benny looked at him worriedly. “Hey, I know you’re miffed ‘cause I got to ride first, but we’re even now, buds.”

Jonathan turned, smiling slightly. “Yes, we’re even now, Benny,” he said, and with a quick movement, grabbed him and threw him off the train, right into the waiting arms of Whiplash Wanda.

“Welcome back, squirt,” she said.

Benny struggled free and ran for the train, but it was rapidly chugging out of sight. “Jonathan!”

Wanda caught him. “He wanted to do it,” she said in an oddly quiet voice. “Pauline told him an exchange was possible.”

“An exchange?” Benny exclaimed. “You gotta be kidding! Why didn’t he jump off?” he stared at the vanishing train. “Damn it, Jonathan! I’m sick and tired of all these heroics.”

“Come on,” said Wanda.

“Come on?” he echoed. “You tellin’ me we’re just gonna walk away and leave him?” He shook her off.

"Benny, I don't like this any more than you do," she said, "but it was his choice."

"This is crazy," said Benny. "There has to be some way to get him back."

"Sure," she said. "You get on and throw him off. I can see this going on for years." She sighed. "I don't know what we can do, Benny."

Benny was furious. "You let him do this? You knew what was going to happen, and you let him do it?"

"He can be awfully stubborn," she said apologetically.

Benny stared in dismay at the empty tracks. "Tell me about it!"

Jonathan stood forlornly at the railing of the last car. He had seen Benny land safely in Wanda's arms. Now he waited for the deadly calm to settle on him.

It won't be so bad, he tried to convince himself. I can use a little rest. Eternal rest I'm not so sure about. There's so much I want to do! I picked a fine time to realize this, didn't I? Well, MacKensie, you got what you wanted.

The calmness didn't come. The cool breeze gently blew his hair and flapped his tie. The steady rhythm of the train's wheels was the only sound in the moonlit night. Under other circumstances, it would have been absolutely perfect, the moonlight, the breeze, the quiet ride into the night.

"Well, son, that was quite a performance," said a friendly voice.

Jonathan saw a man standing beside him dressed in an engineer's overalls and cap. He had bright twinkling eyes behind little round glasses and a large snowy moustache.

"You mind telling me what that was all about?" he asked.

Jonathan faltered for words, wondering if the man was real. "M-my friend got on by mistake," he replied.

"And you didn't?"

"No, I-I was told I could go in his place," he said uneasily. "Miss Pauline Frasier told me."

"Oh, she did, did she?" he said, still in a friendly tone. "Well, suppose I don't want you?"

"Excuse me?" Jonathan said in surprise.

The man chuckled. "Well, I could flatter you by telling you what a noble thing you did for your friend, but the truth of the matter is, it's not your time. You'd be a mighty disturbing presence on board."

"B-but the others," Jonathan stammered. "They look like they're asleep. I thought--"

"They are asleep, most of 'em. They gave up a long time ago."

"Benedek didn't give up. He couldn't have."

The engineer chuckled again. "Naw, he just took a little rest. Good for him to sit down for a while."

Jonathan couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Then he wasn't in any real danger?"

"Well," the engineer admitted, "I'd forgotten about him, actually, till you showed up."

Jonathan felt a strange impulse to laugh. "I don't quite understand."

The man leaned on the railing, gazing at the peaceful dark countryside. "Oh, I would've remembered after a while. Isn't his time, either. You see, some people go right on to their final destination. Others have to wait, rest, sort things out. I make sure they have a comfortable ride."

"You're Frederick Frasier, aren't you?" said Jonathan. The man tipped his cap. Jonathan offered his hand. "I'm--"

"Jonathan MacKensie. Yes, I know." He shook hands. "You're a railroad man yourself, I hear. Had another MacKensie not long ago. Right fond of trains, too, he was."

Jonathan felt as if he couldn't get enough air. "M-my father?" he managed, his voice a whisper. "My father rode this train?"

Frederick looked thoughtful. "Well, either this one, or one of my other locomotives. I have a roundhouse full, you see, all kinds. Don't often get a chance to talk to a fellow enthusiast. That's how I remember."

Jonathan tried to speak through a throat clogged with emotion. "How is he?"

"Your father? Well, that I can't say. I just provide the transportation. But he looked mighty peaceful, tickled to be riding the rails. Said he used to spend a lot of time with you and some model layout."

"Yes," said Jonathan. "Yes, he did."

"Said he didn't have many regrets in life, but he did wish you'd gotten to ride a real train together." Frederick patted the railing. "One like old Nightwind here."

Jonathan felt a weight lift from his heart. We had our train ride after all, Father. Maybe not together, but if your spirit was here. . . I can't believe any of this is happening, but I feel so much lighter, knowing you had a safe journey. "And this is what you do?" he asked Frasier. "This is what you've done ever since--" he couldn't finish.

Frasier smiled indulgently. "Lord, yes, son. This is my reward."

"Your great-granddaughter said something about a wreck," he ventured.

"Oh, the original crash. That's true. I was goin' pretty fast. But it was an accident. I wouldn't have endangered my passengers." He grinned. "Got her up to seventy. Course nowadays, she goes as fast as I like."

"Shouldn't you be—um--" Jonathan motioned toward the front of the train.

"Oh, once every so often I can stop for a chat," said Frederick. He pulled out his pocket watch. At the same time, the whistle blew. "Yep. Time's up." He smiled at Jonathan. "You're a brave man, son. A little emotional, a little sensitive, but who's to say that's wrong? You get back to your friend, get back to work. Ghost trains can't hurt you, but despair certainly will." He began to fade. "Tell Pauline hello, and tell her her great-grandmother sends her regards. And maybe, much later on, I'll give you another ride." He waved and was gone.

The whistle blew once more. Jonathan felt the train give a jerk, and abruptly it melted out from under him. He fell heavily onto the gravel and old tracks. When he tried to get up, everything rotated and dimmed, fading quietly into night.

Benny kept running down the tracks, refusing to heed Wanda's calls or to believe Jonathan was gone forever.

It's not possible. I'll get everybody I know on this one. We'll get him back.

He ran until he was out of breath and stopped, head down, hands on his knees, gasping. Damn you, MacKensie. Who do you think you are, pulling a stunt like that? When I find you, I'm gonna beat you to a pulp. This ain't Tale of Two Cities, buds. Nobody's takin' the rap for me.

"Benny, wait up!" came Wanda's voice.

He straightened, preparing to take flight.

"Benny, wait! I'll come with you!"

He let her catch up, and she gave him a hearty cuff on the shoulder. "Why'd you run off like that, you jerk? I'll help you look."

"Okay," he said. "I just didn't want you hauling me back to town."

They walked on in silence, Benny becoming more and more frantic as the miles went by without any sign of the train. The faint gray light of dawn was just brightening into day when he saw the figure sitting on the tracks. He gave a whoop of joy and ran forward.

"Jonathan!"

Jonathan was attempting to sit up and was grateful for their assistance.

"You jump ship, Jack?" Benny asked, grinning delightedly.

Jonathan looked around, confused. "They threw me off."

"You okay?"

He nodded. "Lost my breath. Let me sit here a minute."

"As long as you like, pal," said Benny, making a fist. "Then I'm gonna knock your block off."

"What?" said Jonathan with a frown.

"I've warned you about that John Wayne stuff, J.J. It's getting' to be a real pain."

He glared. "Oh, I suppose you want to spend eternity sitting like a wax doll and smiling like an idiot?"

"No more than you do, chum."

"What do you mean by tripping me?" Jonathan demanded. "You and your damned stories!"

"So who's idea was it to jump on board in the first place?" Benny retorted. "You try anything like that again, and there won't be any need for a ghost train. I'll send you direct."

"Guys," said Wanda, exasperated. "Could you settle this later? Come on, Jonathan." She helped him stand. "Whoops, still a bit wobbly here. Help me out, Benny."

Benny got on the other side. "I usually have to do this myself," he commented, "and it's a real chore."

"I can walk," said Jonathan crossly.

"I don't mind at all," Wanda said with a smile. "In fact, you could run back and get my car, Benny. It's parked at the platform."

Benny's eyes twinkled appreciatively at the look on Jonathan's face. "Gee, that's a great idea, Wanda."

"Benedek," Jonathan began.

"I'll be back in a flash, Jack." He thought he had used up all his energy, but found himself jogging easily along the tracks. The sun was coming up, and he felt he could run forever.

He drove carefully back alongside the track to find Jonathan and Wanda in a close embrace. It didn't appear that MacKensie needed rescuing. When he gave a little toot toot on the horn, Wanda looked up, pleasantly dazed, whereas Jonathan scowled at the interruption.

"I can come back later," Benny said helpfully.

"Well, MacKensie, you seem to have brightened up a bit."

"Yes, I--" he paused. "Dr. Moorhouse, I really must apologize for my recent behavior. I

know I've been less than--"

"Nonsense," she said briskly, taking her seat behind her desk. "We all have our bad days. I assume you and Benedek took care of everything in Silverhill?"

"It's all in here," he said, handing her the folder.

"A phantom locomotive, wasn't it? You must have enjoyed that."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did," he said, smiling.

She nodded, satisfied. "And why didn't you tell me about Allen Pedigo?"

His smile faded. "I thought you knew."

"I found out, of course. What I didn't know was why he was leaving."

"To join a rock band," Jonathan said heavily.

Dr. Moorhouse did not seem surprised. "Had you discussed this with me, you might have saved yourself a little soul-searching," she said, "or perhaps you already knew that Allen's father had been a drummer in a rock and roll band."

"His father?" Jonathan said.

"One of those big groups of the mid-Sixties. Birds or Reptiles. Some sort of animal name. I understand that it has always been Allen's dream to follow in his father's footsteps." She smiled up at Jonathan pleasantly.

He suddenly felt very foolish. "I see."

"I thought you might. I believe you have some other students waiting?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I have. About a hundred and twenty altogether."

"Good. Run along. Oh, and MacKensie," she added. He paused at the door. "Keep up the good work."

"I will," he said, smiling. "Thank you."

He found himself whistling on his way to class. What was that tune? Oh, of course.

The gospel train is coming,

I hear it close at hand.

Well, it was a cheery tune. No harm in singing it. Maybe some day in the future – way in the future – he'd ride one of Frederick's trains to heaven. Why not? But for now, there were students to teach, discoveries to find, shadows to chase.

He entered the classroom where the students waited, put his notes on the lecture, and smiled at the young expectant faces.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm glad to see all of you today. Shall we get started?"