# Night Train

## A short story by David Daniel

Curran got aboard minutes before the train, with a snort of compressed air, lurched out of the station headed south with its nightly cargo of commuters. He had to pass through two cars before he found a vacant seat and sank down next to a man with a laptop open, some kind of spreadsheet on the screen. Across the aisle, a woman in a business suit and Nikes was on her phone, grilling some poor schmuck about an expense account. Curran stowed his briefcase and loosened his tie. In fifty minutes, give or take, he'd be home. He shut his eyes. And tried to erase the past three hours.

The meeting had seemed interminable, and when Smith, VP of the sales team, finally asked, simply as a matter of form, if anyone had any last business, people gathered their things, eager to bolt. That's when Pete Jostedt said, "*I* do." There were groans, but Smith gave the young guy the floor, and Jostedt went on. And on. He puffed about his stellar numbers, quoted client testimonials, bragged on how he was being featured in a coming issue of the *Boston Business Journal*. It was all stuff that could have been handled in sixty seconds; and Smith, who should have halted it, allowed Jostedt to continue. Curran was clenching his hands under the conference table, wanting to strangle them both. God knew they'd all endured Jostedt on previous occasions as he filled the room with hot air about how he was the future of Moller & Sons, Inc. But had Curran spoken up? He had not. Like the others, he'd been cowed. He had let the kid preen, and he had kept silent because to do otherwise might call scrutiny to his own fagging sales figures, and a recent customer eval that had pinged him for being late to an appointment.

Even so, afterward, Smith, who ordinarily would have paid scant attention to one lukewarm evaluation, was suddenly all over Curran with questions. He had stopped just short of expressing a loss of confidence in Curran's value to the organization, never mind his thirty years of exemplary service. All because Jostedt — who'd been aboard a year! — insisted on making a continuing show of how big his balls were. When Curran finally got to South Station, he'd missed his usual train and just managed to make this later one.

He had to calm down. The stress was lousy for his stomach.

Outside the window, twilight was already coming. As a boy, Curran always loved September: football games and cornfields and the changing leaves. Now the fading light made him somber. By the time he got home, it would be going on 7:50 and Nola would want to talk about her day, and then he'd have to take the dog for a walk. And he'd probably lash out at both of them and then apologize because it wasn't *their* fault, and he'd gulp down a cold dinner and put out the trash and recycling bins — tomorrow was Thursday — then maybe, finally, he could mix a drink, a martini, as dry as a late summer lawn (thinking of which, he had to call the landscaper to be sure he came and put down winterizer and cut back the hedges). He'd sit on the screened porch and watch a couple of innings of the ebbing Red Sox before he took a Prilosec[1] and got in bed, supper sitting heavy in his gut, and try to sleep in order to be fresh for tomorrow's sales calls — that is if the dog (or his own stressed bladder) didn't wake him at two A.M. to pee, and then good luck falling back to sleep.

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[1] Prilosec: medicine to treat heartburn.

The train was slow clearing the city, only just past the Dorchester gas tanks, but still, it was moving faster than those poor SOBs on the X-Way. All the way south it was a ruby necklace of brake lights, and above hung a lilac shimmer of fumes, like spirits of a lost world.

The guy in the next seat went on pecking keys, the cells of the spreadsheet metastasizing with numbers. The woman in Nikes was barking into her phone about who was going to set up the conference room and order coffee for a meeting in the morning.

It never stopped.

But the train did, waiting for a red signal to turn green. Curran was eye level with lighted billboards advertising luxury cars and tropical vacations. Maybe Moller & Sons could get into the action, put up Pete Jostedt's smug face and a tally of his peerless accomplishments. Now he remembered something else. In that last moment, when Jostedt had finally shut up, he had slipped Curran a thin smile, only for an instant, and it would have been easy for the others to miss, but it had registered. *I'm the better man*, it said. *I'm a winner*.

The train was progressing in sluggish peristalsis, from red signal to red signal. Past a work crew under arc lights repairing track. Past a long string of graffiti-spangled boxcars in a siding. Even so, the stop-go motion was lulling, and Curran closed his eyes, consciously quieting his mind, letting the afternoon's bad energy dissipate with each mile.

When he opened his eyes, the train was practically at the town where he'd grown up. He and his wife lived farther south now, in a leafier community. Not as swank as where Pete Jostedt lived (and complained about his flood insurance premiums as a way of emphasizing he was right on the water), but the Currans were near a tidal river. He had clawed his way there — and it had only taken twenty years.

Something brought to memory being fourteen and a question he and his friends used to ponder: *Who was the toughest guy in Weybridge?* The list invariably got down to either Red Goodwin or Bobby Gilberti, much older guys than Curran and his friends. Sometimes another name might get tossed in, as a kind of dark horse candidate — Mike DeLuca, maybe, or "Top Wrist" Donovan — but it was difficult to match the feats of Goodwin (who, legend went, had wrestled three town cops to a draw in a donut shop melee, no guns or nightsticks involved) or Gilberti (who, one night after a WHS basketball game, got jumped by a crew from Adams Point and had hung around afterward to call an ambulance for them).

Where were they now, Goodwin, Gilberti? Old men, if they were still alive.

Curran remembered late summer evenings, right around this time of year, with crickets shrilling in the tall grass, when Stevie Pinzari's big brother Jerry, his cigarette tip a firefly in the dusk, would entertain the younger kids with vivid tales of pranks and capers. The story that intrigued Curran most had to do with an initiation. In it, someone wanting to be part of a local gang, had to go to the train station in the Heights, where there was a washout under the railbed, like a foxhole. The initiate would worm in there so he was lying on his back on gravel, splintery creosoted ties pinning his shoulders, the underside of the steel rail inches above his face. Freights and passenger liners had regular and frequent runs in those days, but freights were what the ritual favored because they had no need to stop at the Heights station. With the locomotive's whistle announcing them (sending a candidate's adrenalin through the roof), they would come blasting through at speed. Guys had been known to panic and piss themselves, or scrabble out of the foxhole in terror at the last moment, goodbye to making the gang.

Although he never actually took part in the train ritual, or that of jumping off the towering ledges at abandoned, water-filled quarries over on the Bingham town line, Curran used to thrill to such stories. Years later, taking a junior college psych course, Curran came to understand that these were rites of passage into manhood; but at the time they were just spellbinding tales, embellished no doubt in Jerry Pinzari's telling.

A jolt pulled Curran out of his reverie as the train started up, a signal gone green again. He looked at his phone. 7:41. By the time he retrieved his car from the station lot and drove home... He revised his estimate upward by a half-hour, took the martini off the menu. Dutifully, he texted his wife to say he'd be late and would call when he got to the parking lot.

The woman across the aisle continued to conduct business, each one-sided phone conversation louder and more aggressively abrupt than the one before. Despite the distraction — or because of it — his mind soon circled back to Jostedt. They had history.

For years Curran had been Moller & Sons' most consistent sales performer, frequently winning the annual award. On occasions when a colleague took top spot, Curran was the first to offer congratulations. They were a team, after all. Friendly competition benefited everyone. Then Pete Jostedt came. With an Ivy League pedigree and experience on Wall Street (as legend had it — and legend it was; a Google search showed Jostedt's stint at Dartmouth had ended short of a degree, and the Wall Street experience was a one-year internship). But Curran didn't fault him for this; he himself didn't have a degree. His beef wasn't even Jostedt's pretense of being "self-made" and not the son of a wealthy family. That was just the birth lottery. No, Curran's issue was Jostedt's bombast and his disdain for the company culture. Sales wasn't a team sport, Jostedt scoffed. Collegiality weakened drive. Keep competition *mano a mano*. Make the annual award *monthly*. (The company compromised with *quarterly*.) In private he mocked the "sales*person*" — even the "saleswoman" — tag, only half-joking in saying women were by nature too nice to be effective at selling. "Unless it's Mary Kay."

Over several quarters he pressed Curran hard and then, this past time, he won the top spot. Curran congratulated him. They were still a single unit in his mind, after all; a team. At the awards ceremony, as Curran shook the young man's hand, Jostedt leaned close so only Curran heard. "Get used to it," he said. And Curran realized that he never would.

The conductor announced the approaching station in Curran's old hometown. The train would stop above the very spot where bare-chested kids once had lain under the rails. He found himself thinking of those days, a lifetime ago it seemed, when home was near, and proving oneself seemed an uncomplicated and significant act, and all the lights were green.

"Heights next," the conductor called rotely. "Weybridge Heights."

As the train slowed, a number of passengers rose, gathering their things, and moved to the exit. Nike Woman wasn't one of them. She was reading the riot act to someone, a husband from the sound of it. Curran was thankful it wasn't him, but he was thinking: Would Nola be crabby because he was late? Probably not. She knew the uncertainties of his workdays. Maybe she'd already have taken the dog for a walk, sparing him that chore. Still, the evening was effectively blown for any quality time together. "How was the meeting?" she would ask, and he realized he would lie. No mention of Jostedt or the talk with Smith. It would only rile him all over again, and make her worry about his job security, about theirs. But he couldn't lie to himself. Okay, he was only fifty-two, barely fifteen years older than Jostedt, but nothing was *sure* any more. His dank train of night-thoughts could worm down into his subconsciousness, gnaw furtively at his gut, bring him wide in the lonely hours before dawn.

A final time the conductor called the stop.

Unexpectedly, he found himself grabbing his briefcase.

The train moved off without him. The passengers who had disembarked ahead of him went to waiting rides or to their parked cars. In short order, he was alone on the platform. Dusk had fully come. He regarded the station sign, where moths spun around an overhead lamp. WEYBRIDGE HEIGHTS.

He lived two stops farther down the line. The next train wouldn't be along for some while. He'd have to call Nola. *Why?* she would ask. Why'd you get off *there*? And he had no good answer. The last thing she'd want was to drive here to get him, then have to take him to the station in their town so he could get his car. He'd stick to his plan and call her when he was there. He figured thirty, forty minutes till the next commuter rail came through.

He could see the faint glow of the tiny nearby Heights. In his adolescent days the Colonial Pharmacy was there, with a soda fountain and a magazine rack where he read comic books, thrilled by tales of heroes doing bold things. The pharmacy was long gone. There was a convenience store now, as he recalled. To kill time, he would walk over and get a decaf. At the end of the station platform, he stepped down onto the gravelly embankment at the edge of the railbed. A safety fence separated it from the tracks. He walked slowly along the edge of it, stones crunching under his soles.

*Jostedt*, he thought with renewed ire. That's what had done it. Totally spoiled the evening, twisted his mind. And now he was back where he'd started. Literally.

After high school, Curran had taken some classes at Adams Point JC, but college wasn't his thing. Surprisingly, the one class he'd enjoyed was a literature survey, taught by a professor named Ron Goodman. They'd read a play called *The Death of a Salesman*, and he remembered how the author described a salesman as somebody riding way out in the blue on a smile and a shoeshine. He'd dropped out the next semester and went to work at a string of crap jobs before he got into sales and discovered he was halfway good at it. Eventually, he landed at Moller & Sons and had been there ever since. He sometimes recalled the line from that play and felt its truth. When he was on his game, he *was* out there in the blue, riding on a smile, fully at one with the world. So, what was it about Jostedt that caused Curran to doubt himself, aside from his being a smug prick?

A prick who was probably at home right now — *four* stops down the line, sitting with his live-in girlfriend, mixing a Mojito, savoring his ocean view. He certainly wasn't thinking about Curran, here in the dark, walking along the railroad tracks in his old town. Jostedt had beaten him again.

He didn't know what he was looking for until he saw it.

In the bank of gravel by the fence there was a gap. Hesitantly, setting down his briefcase, he stooped, feeling his knees pop, and peered into the space. There was a kind of burrow under the embankment. Jesus. Could it be? Was it possible the foxhole was still here? He stood and looked carefully around. Assured he was alone, he took off his suit jacket and laid it and the briefcase in the high grass alongside the fence. Kneeling again (actually *hearing* his knees pop this time) he stared into the gap. Then he low-crawled under the fence. He rolled over onto his back and using his heels to propel him he scuffed in.

When he was under the tracks, in as far as he could go, snugged on both sides by gravel, he looked up. Inches over his chest were the wooden cross ties, the steel rails perpendicular atop them. Above was a rectangle of indigo sky, the first few stars starting to shine.

At fourteen he used to imagine what this might feel like. Claustrophobic for sure. Frightening. Even lying here now, his back on the rough ground, just trying it out, he tingled with a nervous urge to be quick about it. And yet, it was exciting, too.

He should get out. If he wanted that coffee, there was still time. But lying there in the darkness, hearing the singing of crickets in the surrounding night, he realized there was a peacefulness, too. His mind eased.

He could not say how long he lay there, or when the night sounds had changed. Ever so faintly at first, now more noticeably, the tracks had begun to vibrate and hum. Soon, from a distance, came the air horn of a train. The commuter rail. Still a way off. His heart beat faster. Time to shimmy out, get his things, get up on the platform. He couldn't miss this train. Nola would start to worry.

But not yet. He found himself thinking again of Pete Jostedt, the big closer, with his sales numbers and his ego. His attitude of superiority, his macho sneer of challenge: *Get used to it*. I'm *the man now*.

The train's horn sounded again. Louder, nearer. Okay, he thought. Been here, done this. Time to get out. The tracks were singing, sending small stones skidding down around him. His breathing quickened. How heavy was a railcar? Would the weight sag the rails, press the cross right down against a person’s chest and crush him? Would the hiss of air brakes deafen him? Would a squirt of scalding fluid blind him? Hypotheticals. OK, no more screwing around. Move it.

The train whistled again. Loud. Very near.

He remembered the play he'd read in Prof. Goodman's class again, the rest of the line, about how the salesman, when he was out there in the blue, when he got a stain on his hat and people stopped smiling back, he was done. Toast. Was that to be Curran's fate?

But he didn't ponder it, because it came to him now, with a dart of recognition, that the train was not slowing...because it had no *reason* to. It wasn't going to stop. I wasn't a commuter rail. It was a *freight* train. Maybe the one he'd seen earlier in the siding.

In his mind he could picture it. A long long succession of tank cars and flatbeds and hoppers and gondolas and graffiti-covered boxcars, pulled by enormous diesel locomotives.

The tracks were rattling, the noise growing thunderous.

Curran's gut twisted. A sour taste filled his mouth. He was starting to hyperventilate.

Then a great dazzling fan of white light swept over him, and the sky was blotted out. The tracks settled lower on the cross ties as the train racketed by, car after car after car. Stones pinged down on him. A hot iron-and-diesel stink sharp in his throat and lungs, he lay paralyzed, as if dead—but not dead. *Alive*. And he pictured Jostedt lying here in the foxhole too, wailing terror and tears, bawling like a baby, clutching at Curran, and Curran, his voice lost to the CLACK-CLACK-CLACK of huge iron wheels, but full of a wild elation, screamed — *"Who's the man now!"*