

Clickety Clack

Written by Jack Sparacino
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Trains can make you smile. I love their churning power, the graceful sweep of the tracks over the horizon, even the simple act of buying a ticket from that dutiful soul at the station.

But most of all I love the sounds – the hypnotic trek over the rails, squeaky seats, the soothing clickety clack that says, 'we're on our way, lean back and relax, read a book, check your e-mail, have some coffee, close your eyes. Yes, close them, you're getting sleepy now'... (fade to Oz's Wicked Witch of the West): "poppies... poppies will put them to sleep." That clickety clack is nearly a metaphor for life, the assuring sense that you're moving forward, that better things lie ahead. That life is indeed good.

Okay, now let's put down the Kool-Aid. If life is a rhythmic, peaceful train ride, there are enough bumps and commotion to shake us all up regularly. Stuff happens. At worst horrific, but much more often frustrating or just plain mystifying. Puzzling usually, and sometimes silly. Some recent examples woke me on the train.

Strutting my stuff. It's fun to own an older car. My near-vintage Audi Quattro has been in the family since it was new. On one memorable trip, my son and his friend Greg and I headed from Stella's Pizza in Stratford, CT toward St. Helena Island on the day I retired. The car was crammed nearly out the tailpipe with our things—poor Greg jammed in the back seat trying to study his Chinese lessons.

Over the ensuing years, this grand old dame of a car slowly failed, system by system but none critical. The event that finally got me off my duff was the trunk struts wearing out. I nearly lost a finger one day and then got slammed in the back of the neck when the trunk—heavier than it looks—guillotined down on me. Okay, okay, let's take care of all this, but where? Everyone I asked recommended the same facility that specialized in German cars—Import Service of the Lowcountry. They were great. All is fixed now but what took me so long to get on the ball?

Falling asleep to life's clickety clack? Carbon monoxide poisoning?

Cheerful as a bivalve. Ever read a good magazine ad for soup? Here's one for landlubbers—"One taste, and you'll be happy as a you-know-what. Introducing Campbell's Homestyle New England Clam Chowder. Made with tender clams caught fresh off the Atlantic coast." Now I've dug/harvested thousands of clams in my life—most of them locally. And I've caught too many fish and crabs to count. But I've never "caught" a clam. If they tried to get away, I suppose you could catch them. But they're stick in the muds, literally. It would be like proudly announcing that you "caught" a stone. C'mon, soupsters, see if you can find someone on staff who has actually gone clamming. Or just call me!

Funny ladies. Television has had its share of gifted comediennes. Lucy and Carol from the old days top many lists. But today? Seems to me that acting skills have been added to comedic talent. Is there any way that the funniest women on TV don't include Deborah Messing and Megan Mullally from "Will and Grace"? Amy Poehler is one of the contemporary greats. But dare we overlook the hilarious Judge Judy, whose sense of fairness and comedic timing are challenged with nearly every case? "He stole my hamster." "I only borrowed it and it wasn't yours anyway." "I mean my gerbil—Hammy. And you took his little cage, too." "That was my cage and besides..." Judy to the rescue: "Bup bup bup... Look at these eyes. They don't keep me up here because I'm gorgeous, they keep me up here because I'm smart. Now Hammy, I mean Mr. Hamilton, what did you pay for that gerbil? I mean hamster, ah guinea pig, whatever—and do you have a receipt, sir? Perfect."

Hitting a screwball. How did Sports Illustrated dance around the issue of PED's in its "Baseball's Greatest" (2013) book? Clever they were in comparing players from the 1800's through the present. The word "allegations" went a long way. And the incredible photos were a great distraction. Nice job, fellas (maybe).

Now you tell me. I spent six tough years at The University of Chicago in the 1970's. Only recently I learned that legendary oil and railroad tycoon John D. Rockefeller, Sr. funded the school's launch. He was widely admired and vilified nearly his entire life, but always seen as a business genius. Among his quotes: "The ability to deal with people is as purchasable a commodity as sugar or coffee and I will pay more for that ability than for any other under the sun." Evidently success wasn't a straight shot for him, and those railroads didn't all lead automatically to Fort Knox.

Where did they go? Not so very long ago, many people had colorful nicknames (e.g., Joe "The Yankee Clipper" Dimaggio, Red Sox pitcher Dennis "Oilcan" Boyd, Tiger great Ty "The Georgia Peach" Cobb, Phillies pitcher Roy "Doc" Halladay). The terrific big band collection, "The Sound of the Fabulous Forties," includes a who's who: Tommy, Artie, Duke, Bunny and Benny among others.

So where did all those colorful names go, to some anonymous graveyard in the sky or did they all get transferred to race horses (hello Seabiscuit, Whirlaway, and Native Dancer)? Kids today seem largely content with their given names, or have all the really good monikers been taken? Please pull forward. Evidently I lack practice at negotiating the drive-through lane at fast food restaurants. It was 12:15 p.m.

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(Me) "Hi, I'd like a fish sandwich, a cheeseburger, small fries and two small chocolate shakes. And do you have chocolate chip cookies?"

(McEmployee) "We don't have cookies at lunch time."

"What? That can't be right. I just want some cookies like it says on the menu."

"You can't get biscuits after breakfast."

"Biscuits? I don't want biscuits, I want chocolate chip cookies. COOKIES."

"We have oatmeal and chocolate chip."

"Yes, chocolate chip."

"Do you want the 3 for a dollar kind?"

"I guess so, is there any other choice?"

"No, that's it. OK, chocolate chip cookies. That'll be \$11.25. Please pull forward."

"Thank you, but I'm losing my mind here."

"Yes sir, have a nice day."

Reptiles anyone? Millions of us take great pleasure in owning a dog (oh ok, or cat). But it seems that some of us—you know who you are—are more interested in lizards. While waiting for an appointment recently, I saw little general interest reading material in the racks. Thank heavens they had a recent copy of "Reptiles" magazine. What fun learning about new products such as Rep-Cal's cricket shaker with "bug catching pipe" which "coats insects with vitamins." And it's just not the same without that pipe.

As the great journalist Edward R. Murrow once said, "Anyone who isn't confused really doesn't understand the situation." I feel like he was reading my mind.

Now, anyone for clam chowder? On a long train ride? While musing about reptiles (many of whom could use a nickname)? Clickety clack...