

Cavanaugh

He was horsing around on the railroad track. Packie, one of the guys who'd been playing basketball with him, said he was showing off.

He said that later, Packie did. Right at the time, he didn't say anything. I don't think he did. I didn't hear about his saying anything.

Packie was already across the tracks. They were going to the corner store down the block for ice cream or something. It was a hot day. New Jersey summer hot. Cavanaugh must have shouted at him. Why else would Packie have turned around to look?

"He knew the train was coming," Packie said. "He had to know. So, he was standing with his back to the train, standing between the rails, and what happened was, he looked over his shoulder, I guess, and there was the train. It was, you know, much closer than he thought it would be. Must have been like that. And he couldn't move, it looked like."

This was later, of course.

"He froze," somebody said.

Packie nodded. "I guess that was it," he said.

What else could it have been?

It was bad for everybody. Couldn't have been otherwise. I mean, what somebody said later, the train cut him in half. Packie must have told him that, whoever it was said it. What Packie didn't tell anybody until later was this: he saw Cavanaugh's mother running up the road so she could catch the train. She didn't know, of course. And Packie, he pulled his t-shirt up over his face so she wouldn't see who he was and he wouldn't have to tell her.

I knew him, Cavanaugh. He and I and another guy played guitar together and sang. The other guy could play. Not just guitar. Mandolin, too, and banjo. Probably piano, I guess. He was the guy that figured out what we could play together. We had a little act for the talent show at

school. Junior high, it was, so folk songs. That's what it was then. Early '60's. "If I Had A Hammer." Like that. We sang "Oh, Donna," too. Easy tune. Three chords, I think. First time we sang it, I had the lead. Next time McDermott had it. Girl named Donna in the class said she liked it. Fair enough. That talent show was maybe a little short on talent. We got a big hand.

A month or so later, one of the school dances, they needed somebody to entertain when the band took a break. They hired us. Six dollars each, I think it was. Cash. So then we were pros.

But we were kids. Somebody told me what he used to do, Cavanaugh that is, some nights he'd call some girl and play records while they were on the phone and say, "I'm dedicating this one to you." That wasn't all that long before the thing with the train.

I'd gone away to school when it happened. I didn't come home for the service. I heard it was weird. A girl named Kathy couldn't stop crying, screaming that she'd loved him and he was her boyfriend. Nobody knew about that. That's what I heard. Some of them said later she was full of it. But I wasn't there. I don't think she was the one he called up with the records. I never heard that she was. Maybe.

There were tennis courts in the park beside those tracks, too. Cavanaugh and I played tennis there one afternoon. Just the one time. It was his idea, I think. He was more serious about it. I could wear guys out, the way I played. But Cavanaugh, I heard him one day talking to another guy about what kind of tennis clothes he was going to get that year, cream or white. Shit.

Why he asked me to play, I think he wanted to say he'd beaten me. He didn't, so he was disappointed. Worse, He was almost crying at one point. Whining. I wasn't that good. I just kept hitting the ball back at him.

"Unforced errors" is what they call 'em, what he did.

Everybody left from those days is old now, of course, the ones who aren't dead. Sometimes somebody turns up on facebook or something. One guy, Jack McCafrey, I clicked on him. I

remembered him as a good guy. We hung around a little. Junior high, again. He had an older sister who was beautiful. Long, dark hair and a great smile. But older, so.

I think Cavanaugh had an older sister, too.

I remember it sometimes, and what I wonder is whether Packie still thinks about it. I mean, he saw it. Not his eyes. Cavanaugh's. Packie wouldn't have seen his eyes. Cavanaugh was turned away, right? Toward the train. So, no. But Packie said he was cut in half. Laughing and kidding around one minute, and then a train slams into him and then all the gore and that's it for him while he's still a kid. Me and Packie and the others, we're all nearly 80 now, finished, most of us, with whatever it was we did after we were kids, even those of us who aren't dead by other means. I mean nobody else got hit by a train. Not as far as I know.

And Packie can't have forgotten it, right? I mean, he was there.