

A train whistle blew in the distance and Nicholas jerked. "There aren't supposed to be any trains until after supper!" Oh, if only I had remembered the afternoon train he thought, but it only comes through every few weeks.

"Well then what was that?" asked Thomas.

Thomas was the only one that outright agreed to go for the ride and Nicholas figured he'd be having second thoughts now.

"We need to get back to the station," said Nick.

Claudia stood up beside him. "It's coming toward us."

Nicholas knew the children were in danger. He had to get them home. Nicholas stopped pumping, jumped from the slow moving peid, and stepped in front to brace it to a full stop. "If we ever have to get this pumping pattern right, this is the time guys. Push the front side down first this time Fletcher instead of up." Nicholas jumped back on and grabbed his side of the handle.

"You're going to be in big trouble when I tell Mom and Dad," said Fletcher. "You never checked the train schedule, did you?"

"Look, I'm sorry but we're in trouble," said Nicholas. He forced every bit of his strength into the steel handle. Without thinking Nicholas said, "We've got to get the peid to the station before we get killed."

Sarah started to cry.

"It's OK, Sarah. Nicholas is strong. He'll get us back, won't you?" Claudia glared at him.

The message he read in her eyes was, you get us back or I'll kill you myself. Usually when he saw that look, it ended up with him used as a punching bag. He couldn't hit her back because he was a head taller than her and his big arms and hands made him look like an orangutan compared to her small figure.

Fletcher and Thomas worked one side, and Nicholas matched their alternating up and down motion.

"Harder guys! We'll get back. Don't you worry," said Nicholas, trying to comfort everyone.

Nicholas knew if they panicked, they might break the rhythm and it could take them even longer.

His mind raced. They could jump from the trolley ahead of time but, if one of them didn't jump far enough from the track, they might be killed. Or, if the train smashed into the peid, it might derail. Dad told us not to put anything on the track that could cause an accident. Nicholas knew the trains sometimes carried tankers of chlorine for the paper mill. If the train jumps the tracks, it could cause a chemical spill. Why did I leave the siding?

"Push harder or we'll never get up this knoll," shouted Nicholas. They were half way up the steep grade. It would be a hard climb until they reached flat ground just before the switch plates.

A second whistle blew. The five children looked at each other. From his side of the trolley handle Nicholas could see the orange and black engine in the distance, but gaining on them. Fletcher and Thomas stood with their backs towards the train.

"Nicholas, what do we do?" yelled Claudia. Her face turned red with fear and anger.

"We race the train," shouted Nicholas. "You hear me? We've gotta race it. Fletcher, Thomas you pump as hard as your frigging arms can move. Don't listen for any more whistles. Don't look down the track. Just pump and I'll let you know if we need to jump."

"Nicholas!" shouted Thomas. "You're scaring us."

"We're already scared! Just pump and shut up!" shouted Nicholas. He could hear the hum of the approaching train, and the click-clack, click-clack, click-clack of racing peid wheels.

"We're just about to the switch plates," shouted Fletcher. A long whistle blast warned the children to get off the tracks. Brakes screeched as the train wheels grabbed against the steel rails.

Nicholas saw the huge cowcatcher on front of the train as both peid and train headed towards the station. The train squealed as the engineer tried desperately to stop. Finally, the trolley wheels caught the switch plate. Nicholas jerked sideways and thrust the long switch handle sending the train forward on the main line towards the station. The children dropped onto the peid floor as it coasted to a stop. A series of sharp whistles reminded Nicholas they had been very lucky. He also knew the engineer had to report this incident to the station agent – his father.

Nicholas lifted the bottom of his t-shirt and wiped the sweat from his forehead. The cloth reeked of diesel fumes from the train. He rarely saw his father angry, but this was certainly going to be one of those times. Nicholas felt sick to his stomach thinking what could have happened.

Fletcher and Thomas sprawled across the peid exhausted.

Sarah sat on the edge of the trolley and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I can't get my legs to stop shaking." She looked at Nicholas and shouted. "You could have killed us all!"

Claudia stared at Nicholas, but said nothing.

"Well, I didn't," snapped Nicholas as he stepped onto the gravel along the tracks. He knew how stupid he'd been. He walked around the corner of the station and threw-up.