# The Courage to Face a Lifetime

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For two years, I worked as a railway conductor hauling freight through the Canadian Rockies. The snows in mid-winter often forced daily life to slow, then grind to a halt when the highway shut down. While the roads lay buried under snowdrifts, the rails peeled away and climbed over mountain passes, through tunnels and down into the valleys of white-powdered evergreens. In the silent, yawning wilderness the locomotive remained the only living force, roaring forward against nature's demand for hibernation, like a bull elk shouldering up the only open line through the snow. When the railway froze, it didn't hibernate. It backed up, a steel herd of trains stacking behind the lead.

That winter, I wasn't far behind the season. The phone rang and dragged me out of my torpor. My noon callout arrived after dark, an ad hoc graveyard shift, droning through the receiver without ceremony. I hung up with the dull resignation of pulling another all-nighter for a day's pay. Freight didn't sleep. Neither did the crews. Not on this night.

Nothing about the trip promised drama. Pulling maximum tonnage up the steepest grades in the Rockies' most hostile stretch, the train nearly stalled. The wheels slipped on snow-dusted rail, then the movement caught and lurched forward. It was a brutal, stuttering climb, like shoving dead weight uphill that answered every foot with violence.

The cars rear-ended the cab when the wheels broke loose. Then traction returned and the whole train snapped tight. The slack—ten thousand feet of steel clasped in rusted knuckles—compressed and stretched like a prizefighter's arm loading, then snapping out a straight punch. The seat drove into my back, the headrest catching my whiplash. The vibration shook loose the handles, the windows and my vision.

Beneath the rumble ran a sharper sound, icy in its pitch: steel grinding on steel as the track curved along the mountain's face. The engine's violence was honest, raw power doing what it was built to do. Yet the grind was something else—friction wailing in the dark, the sound of force applied where it shouldn't go. I could forget it if I let my mind drift far enough into numbness, until the roar swallowed thought. But later, after my shift ended, my ears still rang, as if my body kept the receipts my mind buried.

The night wore on. The only proof of forward movement was the next signal far down the track, a faint green star shifting behind treetops. When we reached it, we'd call clear, then wait for the next one. Each green light sat out there like a promise we didn't trust. Between them was nothing but rumble.

In that noise and vibration, sleep still found me, not as comfort but as assault. It struck as weight. Gravity dragged my eyes down and darkness stitched my lashes shut.

"Clear."

I heard my own voice as if the radio spoke for me. I glanced at my engineer. He was in the same trance, eyes forward, face blank, hands resting on the controls, conserving enough energy to lift a finger on command. "Clear."

A minute later we both sank lower. My eyes snapped open. Green burst out of the black—too close, too sudden, too bright—like an emergency flare under my eyelids. I caught it, read it, called it. Then I was gone again, half-conscious, unsure if I'd seen right or even spoken. Sometimes when my engineer repeated my call, I couldn't tell if he'd seen it or echoed me by reflex. He looked awake. He was driving the damn train. But when our eyes met, he stared through me, his face on autopilot. We were two orange pylons in hi-vis, ballooned in winter

layers, warming seats for the next crew. We ran on instinct and shrank the future to the next signal's flare.

We measured time differently out there, not by the clock, but by the pitch of the engine as it changed with the grade, the way the metal rattled, and our brains with it. By the superstitions we didn't admit to in daylight: that the radio stayed silent; that the signals didn't drop; that if the trip started too well we didn't name it, hoping luck held through the homestretch; and that we hadn't dreamt the track had quietly betrayed us into a siding.

It wasn't only fatigue. The job trained us to live one light at a time, and after enough trips like that we started doing it off the tracks too, measuring life in shifts and miles on paper, in the hours until our phones rang, day or night.

Only two numbers mattered. Hours on duty and hours off. Eventually we'd reach the bunkhouse and trade off, passing our attrition down the line as horror stories for the next crew. We called it rest. The body didn't.

Even before we arrived, I knew what rest would mean. A pitch-black room and the red pin of the smoke detector on the ceiling, staring back like a watchful eye. The trip would end on paper, but my nervous system kept the receipts. The vibration would linger as a phantom rattle in the bones. I'd lie there exhausted but wired, as if some part of me refused permission to sleep.

When I finally went offline, the dream would hit. In it, I was barreling toward a red-board on the mainline. A stop signal. Catastrophe. I'd snap upright in the dark, hand snatching for the emergency brake. Then I'd collapse, too exhausted to brace for impact, while the red pin on the ceiling watched.

But for now, we were still hours from any bunkhouse, starting the final climb where the highway met us overhead, the make-or-break. We'd find out soon if we owed interest on the smooth start of clear signals: whether we'd drive straight in or get parked on a sidetrack miles from the terminal, watching endless traffic steal the mainline. At the top of that hill was the bargain I'd made when I hired on. Money first, meaning later—life reduced to whether we'd be allowed to finish the job and whether the night paid full price.

Until then, the world was only what the headlights gave me, a beam drilling a narrow corridor into the dark, and two pale rails like a bridge into empty space. Flurries crowded the light. Wet snow clumped on the windshield and vanished under the wipers, the beam hovering and flickering behind melting ghosts. Then a clean brilliance dropped through the windshield, illuminating what the headlights could never touch. It stirred me upright and hauled me out of my daze.

The cab trained my vision on the rails. I stepped down into the stairwell in the nose and looked up.

The sky was smothered in winter cloud, and nothing natural could shine through. It wasn't the moon. It was a floodlight on Highway 1, something deliberate, man-made. The bridge overhead sprang from the rock, cleared the ravine, and struck the far ridge; one straight edge slashed across sky, stone, and snow. From below, it reduced to one image: a flagstaff rising cleanly out of the dark, no cloth stirring—only a pennant of white brilliance.

I looked over at my engineer. He slumped in his seat, glassy-eyed, tapping the alerter before it bellowed awake. I stayed on my feet.

"Clear," I said, cleanly this time.

And I didn't lose focus again.

I had no words for what happened until I reread Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* years later. After building the summer resort at Monadnock Valley, Roark accepts the simple thanks of a boy who has witnessed what man can achieve. Rand writes, "He did not know that he had given someone the courage to face a lifetime." The gift is wordless. It's the sight of a man who has chosen his life so purposefully that it permits another person to dream of what's possible. Looking back now, the floodlight on Highway 1 did the same for me.

On the railway, I ended up with another job, not a career, living in a state of drift—the abdication of conscious direction. Drift showed up as a series of compromises, as pragmatic bargains that justified my decisions. Money first, meaning later, as if dollars could replace purpose. The bargain felt temporary, but renewed itself paycheck by paycheck: one more call, one more season, one more job. Then the days began stacking in the wrong direction, and the future shrank to a single stretch of track between the signals, until I reached the next terminal, looked up, and realized I'd coasted farther from the ends I once saw possible in myself. And in the back of my skull was the grinding protest—not against work or hardship, but against effort spent without purpose. Motion without a chosen end.

I didn't solve my life in that stairwell. I simply felt the contrast. Intention made visible, cut cleanly into the indifferent mass of the Rockies. I took it as permission to chase the best within me, the way the boy met Roark atop the hills of Monadnock. Under that man-made moonlight, a flag planted in hostile winter, I felt it as a wordless, emotional sum—the courage to face a lifetime.

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