

A SUMMER DAY IN THE LIFE OF JOHNNY CONNELL - Tuesday, August 9, 1966

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My eyes opened. I was laying on my side and I looked straight at the bunkbed that my brothers Kevin and Dennis slept in and both of them were already up. Naturally, their beds were not made. I turned and looked up at the ceiling and focused on all my senses. I could hear the sound of a distant lawnmower from one of the windows, but from the other I heard two women's voices chatting, I tried to focus on the lawnmower but their voices were too clear. I knew they were neighbors because the clarity of **one** voice was identical to the sound I heard when she called her son in for lunch. Apparently, they were hanging laundry and one woman was complaining how the neighbor next door changed his oil in her driveway and made a mess. Their voices faded and I could begin to smell the fresh cut grass. I also heard some friends playing out front. I had to get outside, but I still had a few things to do. I was waiting for my favorite sound of the day. If I would just wait a minute or two I would **hear** it. Soon, my wish came true. I could **hear** the sound of a passing train. The very distinct horn of the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR) GG-1 Electric locomotive with the sound of the pantograph running along the overhead electric wires that produced this beautiful humming sound. I could tell that this train was headed to Washington, DC. All that was left was to determine how many passenger cars this massive locomotive was pulling. Based on the clicking sounds of the track, I guessed around 8 or 9 cars. I then quickly jumped out of bed, put on my clothes that my mother had laid out the night before that were on a chair at the end of my bed. I ran to the bathroom, quickly brushed my teeth and washed my face. I then went back to my room, made my bed, and headed downstairs to the kitchen. As I passed the living room I noticed all the furniture was in the middle of the room. That meant my mom was going to clean windows today or she would rearrange the furniture in the living room; perhaps both. My father hated those days. He had to get use to a new location of his chair and had to determine whether or not his view of the television was better or worse. He always let my mother win if there was an issue. At the kitchen table were my two brothers and my little brother who slept in the other bedroom. **They were** already devouring the French toast that my mother was preparing. Michael, my little brother ate from what I would call a baby plate even though he was 4, and my mother cut his toast into small bits. He was a picky eater so she was watching him as she prepared more toast. My sister was missing, but I really didn't care, she did not play with us anyway. Probably taking her time getting dressed. The orange juice was so cold and refreshing and the French toast that my mother made was always perfect. I thought to myself that this woman can cook perfect French toast, but other food she burns to a crisp. I was just happy that she did not do that to my French toast.

As we ate very quickly, my mother told us that she would be cleaning windows today which meant that we could not play on the side of the house in the dirt bed. *(It was meant to be a flower bed with some azaleas but nothing lasted long because it did not get enough sun.)* Kevin and I complained a little because it was our intention to play with our matchbox cars alone the side of the house while it was shady. She gave in and said, one hour before you have to leave the area. We agreed. She also gave us the daily talk about coming in for lunch at noon and then our mandatory pool time in the afternoon. Yes mom, we understand, said Kevin and I. Not a peep from Dennis, and Michael was too busy playing with his food, besides both would probably stay inside and play in the basement.

Kevin and I quickly ran out the front door and started looking for our friends. Some were on bikes, some sitting on their front steps and others entertaining themselves playing with sticks. Before too long we all started to gather on a neighbor's front lawn. There were basically 3 groups of kids that played together. The older kids, those 13 and up who liked to move in gang like fashion through the neighborhood. They were harmless, but always gave us a look that we were not worthy to be in their group. Their hair was longer and they wore white t-shirts with the sleeve rolled and some smoked cigarettes and cussed a lot. One of the boys, Joey, always had a transistor radio playing music. As they walked past us and grunted at our group, I heard PAPERBACK WRITER by THE BEATLES on the radio. Our group on the other hand had girls and boys from age 7 thru 12. The boys all had burr **haircuts** and most of us still wore whatever our moms told us to wear. The final group was kids generally 6 and under. They had to stay on their front lawns under the watchful care of mothers that usually sat on the stoops smoking and talking.

Our group was too large, so we started to break into smaller groups to do the things we liked to do. A lot of girls went off to play hopscotch, some others continued to ride their bikes up and down our street and about 6 of us decided today was the day to get out our matchbox collection and play in the dirt alongside the house. We developed roads, towns and highways all to the dismay of my mother who shut the window over the dirt bed and raised her finger and pointed to her watch. I shook my head and continued playing. My mom never needed to fear because the maximum amount of time we played with our cars was about an hour. We were more interested in what was new in our collections and being jealous of what the others had. After an hour, we were done. We all got on our bikes and started to head through the streets of Sharon Hill. There was this unwritten rule with all of our parents that we were to stay on our side of the town, but with each passing day of the summer, the temptation was to go further and further. Our parents had to know this and I think they knew what we were doing, but because we were not alone, they were okay with us pushing the limits. Today we made it to the high school and used one wall of a building to flip cards. Our 'extra' baseball cards were used either on the rims of our bike tires or we flipped for them. Today we were flipping. I only lost a few cards, no biggie. On the way home, we flew past Curtis Park train station. I was wanting to stop, but trains were not on the minds of those in my group. No problem, I would be back later. For my 9th birthday in March, my grandparents gave me a watch. It was getting close to the noon hour, but not quite. We all stopped in one of our friend's driveway and talked for a bit. At this point in the summer it was about all my friends getting ready for vacation. The majority of the families took their family vacation to the shore in August. My family was different, we took our vacation in June. I was a little jealous, but I would have more time for trains, that made me smile while we were talking. There was only day each summer that I dreaded; both of my closest friends shared the same birthday, August 21st. Les and Debbie would spend that entire day together and I was so jealous, I would spend the whole day at the train station sulking in my sorrow. But that was not today.

Soon mothers throughout the neighborhood would start calling their kids in for lunch. I hopped on my bike and went to the house. As I entered the back door, I heard music playing through our stereo console. It was instrumental, easy listening music, but I saw how happy it made my mom as she hummed along, and I was okay with it. She told me before I washed my hands I would have to run to Kelly's, the neighborhood convenience store and get a quarter pound of ham, quarter pound of bologna, a quarter pound of white American cheese and a 'Jewish' (Kosher) pickle. She gave me a bunch of coins and off I went. The trip took me 2 minutes by bike. I loved this little store. The store certainly had an Irish name, it was a small space but jammed full of what any mother would need for her hungry

children. *(There was another store around the corner, however, the woman that owned that store was not as nice, besides she had hair growing on her face, but she had stocked toys such as kites, yo-yo's and wooden airplays that made any trip worth it.)*

I placed my order and it was quickly filled. I was tempted to get a few Mary Janes with the few pennies left over, but I resisted, mainly because I was not in the mood to share which I would have had to do.

For lunch I had a glass of milk with a ham sandwich and a few sweet pickles. I did not like Bologna nor Kosher pickles *(too sour)*. My mom told me that while she was pregnant with me all she ate was bologna sandwiches and Chocolate shakes. That explained my dislike for Bologna, but not my appetite for chocolate shakes.

After lunch we would have our required pool time. Most summer days in Philadelphia were exceedingly hot. I think all the cement and asphalt created a hot mess each summer. I was okay with the pool time. I went upstairs to get into my bathing suit, but my mother would not allow us to get into the pool right away. We had to wait for our food to digest. We had two choices: sit on the couch which was still sitting in the middle of the room or go to the basement to play. The choice was easy, the basement because in a house without air conditioning, the basement was the best place to play, besides, my dad's model trains were down there. Kevin and I were given instructions by my father not to touch the trains on the platform. Like devoted sons that we were, we never did. Dennis and Michael never had interest in trains, so they had no temptation. After almost an hour, our mother gave us the green light to get into the pool. Our time was uneventful. The five of us got along fairly well in the pool. Michael was still a bit too young to spend a lot of time in the pool without my mom so she came and took him inside. I got on a float and looked up at the clouds and noticed how blue the sky was. I watched commuter planes and larger jets fly overhead on this day. I also listened to the freight trains go by both on the PRR and B&O railroad. Early to mid afternoon was a time of day on the PRR that freight trains traveled since commuter rail service was light. After about an hour or so in the pool, we were allowed to get out and return to outside play until dinner. I quickly dried off and put on my clothes. I grabbed my train log notebook and pencil, jumped on my bike, and took off for Curtis Park station. I got there in 5 minutes. Most of my friends were doing pool time or were inside because of the excessive heat day, so I was not missing anything. As I approached the train station I parked my bike on the rack provided by the railroad, I heard music from the house closet to the tracks. I was jealous, they could see trains all day long. I heard a song that I had heard before, STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT by FRANK SINATRA. I believe that it was on my parents easy listening channel as well. They must have had the same radio station on. I quickly walked down the steps to track level and found a bench. As I was coming down the stairs, my left ankle started to have throbbing pains. When I sat down, I tried to massage it. It helped a little but I knew I had to do my step exercises, but was very lazy in doing them. *(I was born with a detached Achilles tendon on my left foot; I had major surgery a few years earlier which required 30 stitches up my leg, time in a cast, wheelchair and I had to learn to walk again. The doctors had warned my parents that as I grew I would develop pain in the ankle area and would have to do foot exercises.)*

I loved this time by myself at the train station. There were two inbound tracks to Philadelphia on the outer side and the two tracks outbound to Washington on the side I watched the trains. The PRR had three types of trains that would run on these 4 tracks from New York to Washington. First, the local commuter trains which would take workers to and from the city to the suburbs. Secondly, passenger trains that would run from Boston to DC and beyond and finally, freight trains.

I was there around 3:30PM which means that in 30 minutes the rush hour would begin and I would see lots of commuter trains. I would write down in my log the times, engine numbers, and how many cars each train had. On any given day I would see between 10 to 15 trains before dinner. Today was no different as each quarter hour went by the commuter trains coming out of the city got longer and longer. *(PRR had these old MP54 units that originally were passenger cars that were converted to electric units to run on their own power. Trains during rush hour could be as long as 14 cars.)* The passenger trains rolled by with GG-1's leading the way. I made a promise to myself that someday I would be on one of those trains going to a faraway place. *(At this time of day, many of them were long distance trains operated by other railroads but being pulled by PRR's GG-1's on the electrified line from DC to NY. Trains were going to and coming from the Carolinas, Florida, and New Orleans.)* Freight traffic was light at this time of day due to the heavy passenger service, but this day I would see **two** really fast local freight trains (less than 30 cars), one being pulled by a single GG-1 and one by an E-44 locomotive. I was happy. As 5:40PM approached, I quickly got on my bike to get home. My father would soon arrive home and dinner was served at 6:00PM sharp.

Dinner this night was meatloaf and mashed potatoes and green beans. It was one of my father's favorite dinners. During the summer months we were allowed to drink homemade ice tea that was sweetened with real sugar and lemon. I loved summer time! My mom and dad would talk about their day and the 5 of us would normally just egg each other on to get one of us corrected. There was always dessert. My dad's favorite was any type of cake. Once dinner was over my parents would clean up the kitchen and we would go outside. As we waited for all the neighborhood kids to finish dinner, I went to this older couples' steps and talked to them. They did not have any kids but always welcomed us to their steps. Mr. Stackhouse would sit and smoke his cigarettes. Mrs. Stackhouse was very thin. Her skin was wrinkled and dark and she smoked as well. I remember looking at her and saying to myself how did you get so many wrinkles. *(It was not until later did I understand that she lived in the sun everyday tanning herself in **her** backyard and at the shore.)* I really liked them, their conversations were funny the way they interacted with one another. Her voice was deep and raspy. From within their house, I **heard SUMMER IN THE CITY by the LOVIN' SPOONFUL playing on the radio. It reminded me that indeed it was summertime.**

When all the neighborhood kids finished dinner, everyone would gather together and determine what game we would play. Parents had chairs on their lawns so they were ready for a show. This day we would play dodgeball. I could never understand why the teams were formed like they were. I was not an athlete, could not play well especially with my ankle, but I just really just wanted to have fun. I usually did, whether I was on the winning team or not. Of course, I always got distracted by passing trains.

After the game I ran to our front lawn. I laid on the grass looking at the stars that were beginning to show themselves as the sun started to disappear from the horizon. I heard the familiar sound of the Rosati Water Ice Truck. I looked at my parents sitting on their chairs. *(In our neighborhood, ice cream trucks would come by 3 times a day. Jack and Jill would come around 4:00PM with ice cream on sticks. We never were allowed to get this ice cream because it was too close to dinner. Although I remember the music from the truck to this day. The next would be Philadelphia's own Rosati Water Ice. This truck would come by between 7PM and 8PM. This is not your shaved ice with flavoring. This is real Italian water ice with real fruit which is incredible. Finally, Mr. Softy soft serve ice cream truck would come by around 9PM).* Even though we really wanted to have a water ice, my parent's said no. If we got something it would be on a Friday or Saturday. Today was only Tuesday after all.

As darkness came, everyone moved inside. Our TV never came on until the last hour of programming (10:00PM – 11:00PM.) The local news started at 11:00PM. Tonight, it was some movie on NBC that I had no interest in, and neither did my parents. So, no TV for us this evening. We would start getting ready for bed in the opposite order of our birth. Michael was first. By the time it was my time for a bath it was about 9:30PM. As each of us came down to kiss our mother goodnight and get a hug from my father, I was in my bed by 10:00PM. My father would go to bed as soon as the local news was over. This was one of those nights that I would sneak downstairs to watch TV with my mom. I started this little tradition only in the summer because my mother would always offer me fresh fruit which meant grapes, plums or peaches. My mother always watched crazy old movies that I had no interest in, but in the quietness of a summer evening we would talk about my day and how she wanted to do things in the house and often asked for my opinion. *(I often tired quickly, my time with her lasted no longer than 30-45 minutes).* I gave my mom a kiss, thanked her for the fruit and went to bed.

Once in bed with the window open, the still night air felt hot on my body which made me sweat. I would begin listening to the trains passing by. It was night, so freight traffic was heavy. There was easily one freight every 10 minutes in either direction. But tonight, I was listening for a passing passenger train with the powerful GG-1. As I was dozing off, I imagined myself at 30th street station waiting for a train to take me to New York. I had bought a business class ticket. In the real world, I heard the passenger train roll by our suburban neighborhood, and in my head the train was arriving at the station. The attendant opened the door to the business class car and led me to my seat and offered me a glass of milk. The last thing I remember was the call from the conductor yelling, ***"Aaaaall aboaaaaard!"*** **Father John**