

# The Boy Who Loved Trains

By ReadWorks

Travis grasped his mother's hand as they headed toward the yellow bus. He felt relieved she was accompanying him on a field trip to the history museum that day, since it was a new place that he had never been to.

While his classmates sat in the back of the bus, discussing their plans to check out the cowboy hats or covered wagons in the Wild West exhibit, Travis sat in the front with his mother, daydreaming about where he would go, with or without them: to the railroad exhibit.

To say that Travis loved trains would be an understatement. Travis *lived* for trains. Ever since he was little, he had been curious about them: how they worked, why they made the sounds they made, where they came from, and where they were going. He would coo with joy as a baby when his mother wheeled him into the subway train, falling asleep to the swaying movements it made. By tracing the outlines of the subway tracks on maps, he learned many numbers and letters (the "N," "R," "1," and "2"). By sounding out his favorite word (T-R-A-I-N), so like his own name (T-R-A-V-I-S), he learned to spell. And by figuring out the intervals between trains (ten minutes between the rickety "R" trains, but less than a minute sometimes between the trains on the express lines), he taught himself the basics of math.

By second grade, he'd become a big help to his parents and brother, not to mention visiting houseguests, because he could tell them which trains to take without ever looking at the schedule. He had all the train times memorized. His family referred to it as Travis's "superpower," which made him feel very proud. This is why he agreed to the museum trip. He couldn't wait to learn more about trains even if he had to take a bus to the museum—what he considered an inferior mode of transportation—and even if some other parts of the trip frightened him a bit. He didn't like being around a lot of people, especially ones he didn't know already. Crowds in large spaces made him especially anxious.

Travis knew his love for trains could be hard for other people to accept, though he didn't always know why. Sometimes his dad wanted to talk about work or school at dinner, and sighed with exasperation when Travis just wanted to ask him questions about trains instead. Sometimes his brother wanted to watch movies or read books with him about jungles or space. Travis wasn't usually interested, because there were no trains in the jungle stories or the space tales. And sometimes his teachers and classmates asked him to help out with a group project, or do a play, or make a poster about ladybugs, or something like that. Travis just said no. "Ladybugs," he would point out, "were not at all useful. They couldn't take you anywhere, or come to you just when they were supposed to, or make all kinds of exciting sounds that made you want to know just what they looked like inside."

Travis imagined that only his mom would be by his side while he bombarded the guide with questions about all the old engines, wheels, and rails he had seen in the museum brochure. Everyone else would be in the Wild West section of the museum. That would be fine. As he thought about his questions, he got a little scared again and squeezed his mom's hand. Ordinarily he was very shy with strangers, even when tourists who were lost asked his

parents for subway directions. He knew his superpower could help the tourists, but he didn't know them, so he stayed quiet. His mom had helped to think of good questions for the guide, and his brother had written them down on a piece of paper he carried in his pocket. His father had practiced reciting the questions with him, pretending to be the museum's train expert while Travis read them out loud.

His mom felt Travis gripping her hand with his small, sweaty hand and grinned down at him.

"You excited?" she said.

He nodded and then gulped in his seat on the bus.

The vehicle cruised alongside the park, and for a while, Travis tried not to think about how much he hated it: the noisy stops and starts, the rancid, rubbery smell, and the fact that he had to be trapped inside its terrible yellow exoskeleton with so many screaming children. Then, suddenly, at a red light, as the driver shifted it into drive, it lurched forward, emitted a sound like "gurrngle-shriek!" and would go no further.

Cars behind the bus began to honk. Drivers began to yell. Travis held his hands to his ears. His mom held him close. She knew that unless he was inside a train, with its comforting hum and its predictable stops and beeps, loud sounds gave him an awful feeling in his stomach. The sound of yelling, even distant yelling, could send him into a panic.

After fifteen minutes of bus-bound torture, the teacher told the students to file out of the bus, line up on the sidewalk, and take their lunches over to the park, where they would wait to see if a mechanic could come in time to save the day. Travis was relieved to find that he knew this corner well: it was near one of his favorite sidewalk maps, which showed all the subway lines in the neighborhood connecting like blood vessels underneath the streets. He munched placidly on his peanut butter and jelly sandwich, tracing their colored lines under the avenues and blocks with his finger, oblivious now to the complaints of his classmates, who were worried the bus's engine was unfixable.

In fact, he must have lost track of time altogether, because when his teacher finally called the kids and parent helpers together under an elm tree, it was to tell them it had grown too late to join the tour at the museum, and they would miss the guide's much-anticipated presentation on the cowboy hats and covered wagons. They would have to reschedule for another day, and for now, they would be taking the subway back to school.

Everyone in the class let out a giant groan.

"Noooo!"

"Back to school?"

"Are we going to have to take a test now?"

"Can't we just go home?"

Everyone, that is, except Travis. He had just checked his watch: it was 1:12 p.m. In other words, it was almost time for his favorite express train to arrive. He descended the subway stairs gracefully, happily holding his mother's hand, leading her down as if he were on his way to greet his oldest, dearest friend.