

The Doppler Effect

by Geoff Woods

Cooper walked slowly to the grassy knoll overlooking the busy train junction. The sun had just set from an overcast sky and the fine mist of tiny water droplets created halos around the industrial lighting above the train lines. The grass was damp but Cooper sat down anyway. A little dampness was not going to change anything.

He had been coming here for more than thirty years – it was his contemplative place. As a child he was fascinated by the locomotives dragging huge coal trains at surprising speed. How could there be so many of them? Where did it all go? He wished he had seen the old steam locomotives but there were consigned to the museums. Still, the locomotives had changed over the years and now they were mostly triple headers – thousands of tonnes on a single train.

Weeeeeoooo. That distinctive sound of the engines was so penetrating and mournful. It was such an unusual sound. The Doppler Effect he recalled. It was stuck in his head from school days. Yes, Christian Doppler was the Austrian physicist who explained that extraordinary change in the pitch of the sound. Funny thing – there were no trains around in the mid 1840's. Ah, but it was the light waves colour shift he figured out first, from the stars. The application to sound waves was easy after that. He shook his head and wondered why he would know such irrelevant stuff. Irrelevant, that is the story of my life. He smiled ruefully.

He felt relaxed sitting here. He was comforted by the decision he had made. It was years in the making but at last, he had found the courage that so often escaped him. He had carefully tidied his bed sit this evening. He pondered if even that would be really relevant in the scheme of things. The mist became a little heavier. He decided to seek shelter under the viaduct at the bottom of the knoll. This is my time, he thought – I will not be rushed now.

As he entered the underpass, he heard a voice that caused him to jump reflexively. "Shit! Who's there?"

"Relax friend, I won't hurt you" said the voice. Squinting into the gloom, he could vaguely make out a reclining figure.

"What are you doing here?" asked Cooper still breathing heavily

"I could ask you the same question, friend" answered the voice. "I am Jimmy, Loco Jimmy me mates call me."

"Loco?"

"Settle down son. I'm not that sort of loco. Just call me Jimmy."

"Yeah right. Jimmy. Why are you here? Are you homeless?"

"No, I'm not homeless. I got a nice house. I used to be a train driver. I like the sounds here. Are you going somewhere or did you come here to be alone?"

"I I think I should go. I don't think I should be here."

"I can see your silhouette against the light, son. Hope you don't mind me saying but you look a bit sorry arsed to me. I reckon you should stay for a chat now you're here. It's still raining out there. Sit down a moment and tell me about yourself."

Cooper sat awkwardly in the dark.

"My name is Cooper. I started watching the trains from the ridge when I was a kid. This is a kind of special place for me. I was sitting up on the knoll and I came down to get out of the rain."

"Why would you come to your special place at 7 o'clock on a rainy night?"

"You ask a lot of questions for someone I don't know and who just frightened the life out of me" Cooper said indignantly.

"'Frightened the life out of you?' Was that a figure of speech or was it Freudian?" responded Jimmy, warming to the conversation.

"I don't think I like you, Jimmy."

"Don't take it badly, Cooper. I read people quickly and it often spooks 'em."

"Your turn, Jimmy. Why are you here on a rainy night?"

"Well, I am a recovering alcoholic Cooper. Haven't had a drink for ten years. Recently, I've been losing my way. I made a snap decision tonight to go somewhere and get drunk" confessed Jimmy.

"You're drunk?"

"No, not yet. I got a bottle of scotch here that I haven't opened. Want a drink?"

"No thanks. I seldom touch it" replied Cooper. "Why did you become an alcoholic, Jimmy?"

"Well, if we knew the answer to that one, there would be a lot fewer of us" Jimmy said looking down. "I think alcoholism is one of the mysteries of life. It's kind of like say, depression. Why would anyone get depressed for any length of time, particularly when they seem to have plenty in life? I think you know something about depression Cooper. Care to tell me about it?"

"Look, I do know something about it but I don't want to talk about it now, maybe later."

"OK Cooper. Take your time. I think I need to tell you though that I reckon I know why you came to this busy train centre tonight."

Cooper stared into the gloom in silence.

"You are a bit spooky, Jimmy."

Neither spoke for a moment.

“Do you suffer from depression, Jimmy?” Cooper asked to break the awkward moment.

“No, not when I’m sober. The only depression I get comes in bottles” said Jimmy smiling. His smile was felt more than seen.

“So why would you want to drink? I don’t get it.”

“Me neither. Me neither. It took me years to get sober and yet I still haven’t unravelled the complexities of the condition.”

“Was there something that caused it at the beginning, Jimmy?”

“About twelve years ago, I was driving a train near here and suddenly, I saw this bloke standing calmly in the middle of the track. God! I couldn’t sleep for weeks. In fact, I never went back to the job.”

Jimmy heard Cooper draw in a sudden breath.

“That’s what triggered it?” Cooper asked.

“I’d like to say it was a simple case of cause and effect but, to be honest, I now know that I was descending into alcoholism before that. Maybe it just sped things up a bit” Jimmy said with his voice trailing off.

“What makes you say that?”

“The signs were there. The blackouts. The alcohol centric life. The self-centered existence and everything that went wrong was somebody else’s fault. The pseudo-life of dishonesty and excuses. The broken promises. We think we are all special cases but the development of these illnesses pretty much follows the text books. Untreated they always get worse, never better.” Jimmy said seriously.

Cooper sat in silence, his mind whirring.

“What happened then?” asked Cooper as curiosity overtook him.

“The hardest part was breaking the denial. No way was I going to admit I had a problem. But, I got sick and tired of being sick and tired. I slunk into Alcoholics Anonymous and found something I thought had gone forever – hope.”

“And that’s it?”

Jimmy laughed. “Oh no. There was a lot of hard work from there. I had to uncover a new existence. I had to discover things about myself that I had never known. It took time and dedication but I found a life far better than I had had.”

“And you’re here tonight with a bottle of scotch because?”

"Because, I'm work in progress. If I don't stick to the formula, I slide into that terrifying place where hope does not live."

"I know that place, Jimmy. Not the one where the grog is but the place where there is no hope".

"I'm pleased to hear you say that but not surprised. Most people you tell about that place might offer a kind word but not really understand. They've never been there like you and I have."

Cooper and Jimmy sat in silence for several minutes.

"Jimmy, what happens to people like us who don't find hope?"

"Cooper, less than 10% of alcoholics arrest their disease. It's possibly worse for people with depression. Only 2% genuinely seek help. They are devastating statistics. Untreated sufferers spend a lot of time in that lonely place we were talking about. Many die prematurely. It doesn't have to be that way but"

Another train rumbled over the viaduct, shaking the ground. The train horn echoed through the wet darkness, changing pitch as it went.

"Jimmy, you know what they call that sound? The changing pitch?" Cooper enquired

"Yeah. It's the Doppler Effect."

"It is a mournful sound, Jimmy, don't you think?"

"Mournful? No. To me it's hopeful. It reminds me that all things pass."

"Jimmy when you were driving the train, the horn wouldn't change pitch would it?"

"No, you're right. It's only observers who are stationary or going the other way who hear the pitch change."

"So, if you're stuck on the train you can't hear the sound of hope?"

"You're getting the gist of this Cooper. You've gotta get off your life's train before you can hear the message."

"What about your scotch? Are you going to drink it now? It's an express train ticket for you isn't it?"

"You know what Cooper, old son, you've damned spoiled my thirst. I think I might leave it here for the homeless. Tell you what Cooper, I think I might have spoiled your plans this evening too. Let's go get a cup of coffee."

"Yeah, I'll be in that. What an evening. Plans all shot to hell."

Ends