

TRAIN TIME (EDITED)

Sometime in the middle of the night, a girl boarded and sat in the empty seat next to mine. She was quiet and tried not to disturb me and so I was careful to keep like she hadn't, like when my parents used to come in and tell me I had to go to sleep, it was well past my bed time and I had to get up early for school in the morning. I'd lie still and keep my eyes closed, or maybe pried open just enough to see them through the blur of eyelashes, like I was doing now, just enough to see the slight curve of her body and a wave of long hair, like I'd fallen asleep watching TV and wasn't, in fact, still up watching some bad late-night game show or an edited-for-TV version of a movie I'd already seen a dozen times and, anyway, we owned on VHS so I could watch whenever I wanted. I could feel the warmth coming off the girl like a low energy, body-shaped space heater, and so inched closer toward her, mimicking her curl though leaving a slip of air between us. Her hair smelled like produce and flowers, like walking through the farmers market I used to go to in Seattle, and I stayed like that, almost-holding her, like a hovercraft hugging the ground.

I'd taken the train because I thought it might be fun, I thought I'd see some of the country and meet and talk to other travelers. I would try to get as much out of the travel as possible. But after I boarded and found a seat, I traced my finger over the route on the flier I'd grabbed at the station, and then spent the day watching the empty countryside repeat by outside. My window looked like a wet painting that I'd pulled my hand across, frustrated at its boring greens and browns. No one came and sat anywhere near me and I snacked out of my backpack, not once getting up from my seat for any reason. By sunset, a third of the country had passed me by while I imagined everything going on out there, everyone waking and working, eating and sleeping, loving, fucking, dying, giving birth, having birthday parties, going to school or the doctor or the bowling alley or a ballgame or even just to the grocery store, all while I never left my seat, and the thought of it all wore me out. Everything went dark, except a runway of lights illuminating the aisles and a handful of spotlights overhead, beaming down into laps, and I wasn't used to such a lack of light pollution outside, but I couldn't appreciate it because the black just streaked into more black, like the window had been painted over. I put on my headphones and tried to curl up as much as I could in the awkward train seat, and fell asleep.

When I woke in the morning, with the first hints of sunlight beginning to tease out of the horizon, the girl was already gone. I got up and walked to the viewing car, the only one yet awake, aside from a couple of train employees.

"Awake already?" one of them in the viewing car said, and I couldn't tell if it was a question or statement.

"I must have woken with the sun," I said. "Camping or fisherman time, I guess, you know? Train time."

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He looked at me like I was the first guy on a train to ever wake up at or before the sunrise, like everyone else could either afford a sleeping cabin or just had no trouble sleeping curled up or stretched out on the seats that didn't recline even as far as the passenger seat in my Ford Escort, which I'd slept in plenty of times, usually much better than I had the night before. I remembered how I hadn't been able to get warm all night. I'd tried to wrap my sweatshirt around me as tight as possible, had even tied the drawstrings tight, all to no avail. I'd lain there wondering why the heat wasn't working or the a.c. was overworking and now I thought about asking this guy why it had been so cold, but he didn't seem very receptive to questions. And then I remembered the girl again, her warmth, and how at one point she'd rolled over and almost into me and I could feel her breath on my face. It had felt good, this familiarity and comfort level between us, like we'd been sharing a bed for years. So I rolled over, slow and quiet, trying to sustain and not ruin the moment. With my back to her, I shuffled closer and rested my ass on her leg and felt a surge shoot through me, like grabbing an electric fence, and I tucked one arm down between my legs and squeezed into myself, trying to hold onto that warmth. My headphones were still on, quiet, and I fell asleep to the calm of Jeff Tweedy singing that "his goal in life was to be an echo."

The conductor was still looking at me funny, like wondering why I was still standing in front of him.

"We running late?" I asked.

"Yeah. Almost three hours, but we are hoping to get some of that back. We will make an announcement soon as everyone is awake."

He walked away before I could ask any more questions and I wondered what had happened to those hours, where they'd gone and how he thought we might be able to get them back. Had it happened slowly, in increments, or all at once in one big delay; had it been before the girl boarded, during her ride, or after she'd left? I wondered where she'd boarded and departed, supposing it didn't matter but still thinking that somehow it might.

Alone in the viewing cabin, I watched the sun crawl up out of the ground and tried to remember the last time I'd been awake for a sunrise. I thought of making milk carton viewfinders at school to watch an eclipse through, the teachers telling us the sun could blind us if we looked directly at it. I stared out the window and could see the sun moving up against the blue backdrop and then, when I couldn't keep my eyes open one second longer, I shut and held them tight. Fireworks exploded across the dark background of my eyelids and I felt blind, in that moment, like maybe it was true after all, and it felt comforting. Then the red and purple sparks became less frequent and intense, blinking and streaking across my eyelids enough to notice and watch each individually instead of everything all at once, and my closed eyes looked like a night sky sprinkled with fireflies. My mom had told me stories about catching them as a kid in Missouri, keeping them in mason jars and her and her brothers

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smearing them on their arms and chasing one another, glowing, all through the night. But I'd never seen a firefly, they didn't exist out west, and so I'd always thought of them as childhood fantasy. I never saw one until I moved to Chicago and then, when I did, I was sad I didn't know anyone in the city, sad I didn't have anyone to share the moment with, the magic made real. I opened my eyes and, outside, the entire landscape looked the best it had since I'd boarded, beautiful like an old movie from the '70s: a little washed out and grainy, streaked with light and lens flares, more perfect-looking than any clear and crisp picture.

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I kept watching the sun shooting into the sky and forgot about time—it felt both like I'd just boarded and like I'd been on the train forever, like it had been day all along, ever since I could remember. I thought of the White Nights of Russia or Alaska and what it might be like to ride a train through all that daylight. I looked around and the car was half full and I wondered when that had happened, if more time had been lost or found, and then the train stopped and the conductor announced that we had ten minutes to smoke or stretch or whatever we might want to do.

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I stepped off the train for the first time in over twenty-four hours and made my way past a couple dozen passengers already smoking on the station platform. I'd always kind of wanted to smoke but I had no real interest in being a chipper, smoking just one or two a night like the ex, and I'd never thought I had the time or money for the real thing. Like too much of a commitment. I found a payphone and called my best friend to let him know the train was running late but we might be able to get some time back, though I still wasn't clear if that was really possible, but he didn't answer. I listened and started counting rings – nine, ten, eleven – waiting for the machine that never picked up. Finally, the conductor called "Everyone aboard!" and I waited one more beat – sixteen, seventeen – then walked back toward the train, past the last couple of straggling smokers, waiting until their last possible moment.

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Back on the train, the viewing car was full of people, everyone looking like they'd been there all morning. I found my sweatshirt draped over a chair next to a guy in a seat that had just been empty. He looked at me suspiciously and rotated his notebook away to make sure I couldn't see what he might be writing.

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Near the front of the car, at the end opposite from me, a group of guys were playing cards and drinking beer. They sounded like they'd been there drinking all morning though I was sure I would have noticed them, or maybe they started early at their seats, and I wished I'd brought my flask, I couldn't afford the train's beers, at least not enough to have made them worth it. I thought of the ex again, how she'd asked why I never wanted just one glass of wine or a beer or two with dinner, her claim that drinking alone was a sign of being an alcoholic. I wasn't ever sure if one had something to do with the other but I'd wondered why she said it, like she was reprimanding me. At the time I'd only ever drank at parties or out socially anyways, never by myself and rarely even with just the two of us.

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I kept staring out the window, watching the arc of the sun like tracking its path was something I'd always meant to do and here, finally, was my chance. I put in my headphones and pretended not to notice anyone around me, not the guy secretively writing next to me, not the loud guys playing cards who I was trying to ignore, trying to pretend that I didn't care whether or not they invited me down to join in.

The rest of the day, I sat like that, listening to my music and pretending to be invisible all while hoping someone might come talk to me and prove I wasn't. At times, I would pause my music but not take off my headphones and listen to the card players get drunker, growing louder and braver, hassling the workers, telling loud jokes. I tried not to cringe at the loudest making jokes about all the fags out in California, where we were headed; tried not to look judgmental or like I wasn't tuning everyone out and could in fact hear them.

I invented an alternate day, something I did often, changing the course of history according to something I wished I'd done. In this version, the girl who'd slept next to me for some indeterminate length of the previous night had stayed on the train. In the morning, we talked about where we were headed over shared breakfast or lunch, or maybe both, in the meal cabin and discovered our final destinations were the same. After lunch, we went and played cards with the group of guys because she had no problem inviting herself or maybe one of the guys spoke up and invited us over because she was an attractive girl and that's what guys who weren't intimidated by attractive girls did. We played cards and got drunk and she scowled at the guy when he made his fag jokes and he apologized and I could tell she thought less of him but we stayed and kept having fun. Or, in another version, an alternate to the alternate, we didn't go play cards with the group of guys but instead sat together all day, spilling our lives to one another. I'd tell her my stories about fireflies and my ex-girlfriend who I'd gone to the Farmers Market with and who I'd always bought a single flower for and then we'd buy some fresh tomatoes and squash and berries and whatever else was in season, take it all home and make whatever meals we could throw together with what we'd bought and what we already had in the cupboards. I'd tell her how, after we broke up, I found a cheap apartment and moved out, got a job selling buy-one-get-one-free pizza coupons door to door with a bunch of guys who thought they were hot shit, quoting Wall Street and Glengarry Glen Ross and complimenting each other's "power ties" and new watches. So when my best friend called and said he'd moved to California and asked what I was doing and could I come out for a visit, I said of course and packed a duffel bag and took the bus to the train station. I didn't ask him why or for how long, and I didn't pack up or clean my apartment or tell my landlord I was leaving town. I'd tell this girl how I felt a little guilty admitting this, but a part of me hoped maybe Craig had moved down to California alone because of marriage troubles and now I could move in with him and we could be roommates like old times.

I was working all this out, trying to figure out in my head just the right way to tell this dreamed of girl all of this, a way to make myself sympathetic, hopefully, and not sound like an asshole, when we jerked to a stop and the train went dark for a second

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then all the lights flashed on at once. I looked out the window and it had gone pitch black while my mind was elsewhere and it was obvious we weren't at a designated stop. I asked around what happened and where we were and some guy said he didn't know but that we were almost to Colfax, which was the stop before mine. Then one of the card players walked down the length of the car, past all of us staring, led by someone in uniform.

"I thought I missed my stop," he kept saying, over and over. "I thought I missed my stop, I thought I missed my stop...."

The entire train was quiet and then the conductor announced that the emergency stop had been pulled and so they had to do a full safety check, per train regulations. It might be as long as an hour but they were hoping to be moving again in thirty minutes. Because we weren't at a station, we had to stay on board, couldn't exit for a smoke or anything else.

I could hear everyone around me murmuring, sharing what they thought happened, complaining about the delay. I looked out the window and thought I could see the lights of a station. Right there and then one more was my stop. I was so close. I wondered if Craig was already at the station waiting for me, how long he'd been there, how long he'd stay. Restless, I threw my backpack over my shoulders, followed where the card player and man in uniform had gone. They'd left the door open behind them, It was dark out and we were between stops, in the middle of nowhere, and I thought I could just jump off, walk the rest of the way. I was so close.

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