

Peace Work

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The train left Los Angeles at dusk and had crossed California and Arizona by noon of the next day. In the desert the line of cars was a flicker.

It was August, and the air conditioning in the train did not work. Roy opened his windows. When he dozed, dust collected on the shoulders of his sports jacket. He slumped across the aisle from a man who put a pill in his mouth every two hours.

The train came to a halt in New Mexico. No matter. Roy whipped out his laptop. He was a project manager, and he had Excel sheets with the names of clients and delivery dates and evaluations of performances. The work made the time go by, although it tried his patience.

The battery on the laptop expired. He waited for the train to start, or an explanation, but neither happened. The only person in the car with him and the man across the aisle was a woman reading in a seat behind them.

After an hour, Roy asked the man what he thought of the situation, and the man shrugged. The woman spoke up and surprised him when she said it was bullshit.

Eventually he got up and walked up the train towards the engine. Passengers were sparse. He could find no staff. He went back to his seat. The man across from him had put on a blanket, even in the heat, and he seemed to be asleep.

By late in the day, passengers were standing outside of the train. Roy stripped down to his undershirt and joined them. He had his cell phone with him but he couldn't get bars. There was a bump in the landscape. He'd seen passengers walk to it and talk on their phones, so he decided to do the same. He reached his wife Stephanie on her cell. A real estate agent, she showing a house, but she could make time. The reception came and went. He asked about their daughter and the pool guy. She said she wished he'd flown, but she understood.

The train started up again that evening. Roy bought beer from the beer cart. The staff member manning the cart didn't have any answers about the delay. A passenger passing through the car mentioned that the train had run over a person, but that seemed like a fantasy to Roy. Were they not in the middle of nowhere?

When the beer cart came back, Roy bought hot dogs and potato chips and cole slaw and sugar cookies, and he until his stomach felt as if it would bust a stitch. He got up and went to the bathroom and vomited and then, slimed in sweat, returned to the seat.

He tried to sleep, but alcohol had a way of energizing him before it tired him. Finally he got up and went back to the woman. In the dim light of the back of the car, she was reading a paperback with a flash-light. Roy said he wanted to talk to make the time pass, and the woman said fine. She tucked the book under her leg.

The woman told him a story about taking a train in Brazil, back in the Sixties. The train ride through the jungle had taken a week. Hippie was the word she used to describe herself in those days. She had given birth during the ride--to a boy she had conceived with a tribesperson from the Amazon rain forest. They had met doing what she termed "Peace Work." Not Peace Corps? No, Peace Work, she insisted. Was it religious, Roy said. The woman shot him a look. Anyway the Native had taken the boy, and that was the last she saw of either of them. Now it pained her to consider the boy because she never conceived again. It was probably the thing to do, however. She'd only been seventeen.

Roy wanted to believe her. When the conversation faltered, he got up and sat back in his seat. He fell into oblivion. The sunlight and the landscape shocked him when he woke up. Swamps, waterways, Spanish moss. They were crossing into Louisiana. He had the feeling of drowning in vegetation after all the openness of the deserts.

There was a layover in New Orleans, six hours. He took a pair of running shoes out of his duffle and put them on and went walking in the city. Crazy! He'd never been there in his life, and he wondered, after a few hours of wandering, if he should have taken a map. But that might not have helped. Many streets were blocked-off. Buildings were boarded-up or leveled. Hurricane Katrina had changed everything.

There were no white people for blocks. An old man asked him if he was lost, and he walked off. He felt frantic, going in circles, until he recognized a street name. When he made it into the oasis of the station, he tried Stephanie on the cell. Voice mail. I love you, he said. For a few moments, getting back on the train, he didn't know where the train was supposed to take him.

A beer helped. He found his seat as the train lurched out of the station. Other passengers had come into the car. The man across the aisle took another pill. His little adventure faded into boredom. Roy flipped through his calendar and made notes. The day waned.

He ended up sitting with the woman again. She began to speak to him in a way that made him wonder if he had ever known her. You have made mistake after mistake in your life, the woman said. A man should do what he wants to do, not what he must do. Nothing gives you pleasure any more. The desire to do something to help others or to confront your self cannot compete with the desire to play it safe. You have forgotten how to love. You may be getting a sickness from which you won't recover, and then you will regret how you have wasted your days. There is something missing from your mind that you pretend you have. You must confess, although it will change nothing.

Then, like that, it was done. Roy sat in shock. She was a stone. He said good night and went back to his seat. He rocked in time with the train. He looked at his hand, and it was shaking. When loneliness struck him, the only thing he knew to do was think of his daughter's sleeping face.

He grew cold. He put on his dress shirt and sports jacket. The man across the aisle began to talk. He offered to buy Roy a beer, but Roy refused. What about one of these? It was a pill. No thanks. Suit yourself, the man said. I will, Roy said, and he hunched against the window. He hoped the man would leave him be.

His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he was looking at outside the train. Blackness became woods, gray lines rivers. They rolled into a town with a station that could have been easily been mistaken for roadwork: a gravel lot and a bench made from a two-by-four and milk crates.

A passenger stood by the tracks and waited, suitcase in hand, until the train jolted to a stop and sighed. Roy could hear the man say a few words. What the hell was he saying? He handed the suitcase to an outstretched hand, and then, without warning, he vanished, and the train trundled back to life.

