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The Train

It was August 1, 2020 and I remember it like it was yesterday. I was on a train from North Carolina to Philadelphia to go see my grandparents. I'd done this journey once before when I was young. It was a commitment and I declared, a test of sanity. This was different than when I was young though, I was twenty-three and the visit was less of a vacation and more of an escape. In my life, I had never imagined escaping from North Carolina, especially not to Philadelphia. And here I was, on this godforsaken train. How had I gotten here?

I remember how my leg stuck to the seat. It felt like every freckle had turned into a spout for water, enabling excessive liquid to seep through my skin. I felt deflated as my beautiful sunflower sun dress seemed to droop as if it hadn't been watered in months. Oh, the irony of, of my greatly watered flowers. I remember how my mouth felt dry, and this prevented me from falling asleep. What I don't remember was how I finally got myself to sleep, but I'll never forget how I woke up…

There was a jolt as the train pulled into the Raleigh, North Carolina's stop. I remember when I was a child I woke here because it was not long enough for me to be in a deep sleep and the same could be said for this time. When the car jolted, I remember letting out a quiet moan, opening my eyes only briefly to close them again. I remember feeling disgusted as I moved my leg, trying to get comfortable again but instead getting stuck on the seat. Then, the ceiling of the train came crashing down onto my right leg, then to the floor. I jumped up, utterly frightened and shook, only to realize that the ceiling was really just a suitcase. Now annoyed, I then looked at the holder of the suitcase. He looked at me with a mixture of disbelief, amusement and light discomfort. I remember it so well.

"Well, what the hell was that? You just throw shit at people you meet?" I was trying to play it cool, but my leg was throbbing and my jaw was fighting staying closed as I stared at the best looking young man I had ever met.

"You see, I have a little brother," He started.

"Dude, what?" I interrupted.

"And he's been giving me romantic advice, like, you don't understand this kid has four girlfriends right now. He's six! And he said, you won’t believe this, but he got two out of the three of these girls by throwing blocks at them!" I was staring at him, as he lifted the bag now laying right below my leg.

He placed the bag in the overhead and sat down in the seat in somehow one motion. He stuck out his hand, "Alex."

I reached forward to grab his, "Payton." I felt a chill rush through my body and instantly retracted it, slumping back into my seat to try to gesture that I did not want to talk.

"So where are you going?"

I remember thinking there was no way he was serious, this was not happening right now. I was not being hit on during this train ride, "Philly."

He slumped back into the seat, seeming to imitate me, "Looks like we are in for a long ride."

I watched him close his eyes, and took a breath of relief and did the same. Without sleeping for long, I am again jolted awake, smashing my head into his shoulder. I hadn't expected this train ride to be such a physically violent experience.

"Shit, ow," I proclaimed.

"If you wanted to talk, you could have just tapped my shoulder," He grumbled as he rubbed his eyes beginning to wake. I decided to look at him, really look at him, while he woke since I realized I had not before. Since he had sat down, he had taken off the jacket he once wore. Revealing a light blue t-shirt. I noticed his belly had a small stain of sweat, likely where his arms laid while sleeping. His dark brown hair greatly contrasted his bright blue eyes in a way that somehow made them light up even more. When he turned to look at me, I felt like his eyes pierced my soul. I almost felt naked. Self-conscious, I moved over in my seat and placed my arms across my stomach.

"So, now that you've got my attention. Why Philadelphia? What's there? A who maybe?"

"I'm actually leaving a ‘who', well two of them to be exact," I paused. "I don't know why I am telling you this."

"Well, because I asked," He smirked.

"But do you care?"

"I repeat, I asked."

I remember staring at him, wondering if he wanted to know. If I should disclose, part of me knew it wouldn't matter since I'd get off this train and likely never see him again. Instead of speaking, I sighed and slumped into the chair again.

"Two people, so parents? Roommates? A bad threesome?"

"You got me, it was a bad threesome." Yup, I remember deciding then and there I was not disclosing.

"I had one of those too. That's actually why I'm off to Philly too." I looked at his face but did not reply. His stupid eyes were beautiful, but I remember thinking that I was nearly certain I hated him. I could not wait to be off this train.

I remember how I started to close my eyes when he began to poke my shoulder. My eyes flipped open, "I'm bored," he said, "You can't sleep now. So, I'm moving to Philly. I'm not running from a threesome. I had a really bad break up last year since then I haven't really been able to break a funk. I quit my job, got a new one in Philadelphia and I'm starting fresh."

I remember surprising myself, "What do you do?"

"I'm a tech guy, I do computer security for companies. It's an easy job to come by, everyone needs one. Being a nerd actually pays off, go figure."

"Get dumped for being a nerd?" I remember flinching at myself, "Sorry that wasn't cool."

But he laughed, "I got dumped for being obsessed with my job. She would spend date nights telling me how I loved my job more than her. Honestly, I'm not sure she was wrong but it was crappy to hear. I mean, that's why I'm leaving North Carolina. The company was too big. It wasn't just a job, it was my life. My clients became my wife, kids, and parents. I knew I'd never have a life, and I had to get out of there."

"So, what are you going to do with this new found life?" I recall my inner introvert screaming at me. Why was I doing this? How was I doing it?

"We will have to see. So, what are you running from?"

It was funny because I remember thinking he had no idea how true that statement was. At that moment I flashed back to earlier that morning. I shoved all my dresses into a bag, I grabbed my one pantsuit and folded it neatly, before aggressively shoving it into the bag. I remember shaking as I wrote the note.

*Mom and Dad,*

*I'm going to live with Mimzi and G. I don't have space here anymore. I love you both, but the fighting has become too much. I'm twenty-three years old and I feel a mixture of a parent to you both and a toddler. I am somewhere between without control, and a product of your actions wants and wishes as a mediator. I am sick of being sick and worried every time I leave the house wondering if another fight has broken out. If there will be a new hole in the wall for me to repair upon returning home. I have patched my last hole and mediated my last battle. I ask that you both take time to determine what you want. Never in my life did I imagine I'd write a letter essentially asking my parents, MY PARENTS, to grow up. But here I am, grow up. Figure it out. Either divorce, rediscover your love or just be happy. Stop being so caught up in sadness and anger. Whether you find it or not, I cannot be here. Not for a while. Don't reach out. I will call you when and if I ever feel ready.*

*I love you both. I really do.*

*-P*

I looked at him and decided to summarize what I wrote. Leaving out the years of battles I had been through, I summarized to him that my family had a lot of issues and I could no longer be a part of it. That was why I left. "I'm a free-lance writer, I can go anywhere. And I couldn't be there, I don't know how long I'll be here either. I just needed to start somewhere."

He sat and looked at me for a second, and I noticed he again mimicked my slump in the seat. He started to look up at the roof of the train. I was worried I had said too much so I closed my eyes, this time hoping to disappear, not fall asleep this time. Then, he poked me again.

"I'm proud of you," I remember how he kept looking at me long after he said it. He clearly had nothing else to say, and honestly, he didn't need to say anything more. That was everything I needed to hear. I slumped deeper, I remember my dress catching on the seat and bunching up in the back. I didn't care, and I placed my face in my hands and began to sob. I remember how he placed his hand between the blades of my shoulders and I remember not caring or feeling embarrassed about the stickiness of remnants of sweat on my back. I needed his touch. This stranger, he wasn't strange to me. I realized that hatred I had thought I felt wasn't hate but a threat. I knew, at first sight, that this man could break right through me.

"I didn't mean to make you cry," he said. I looked up at him, his eyes looked a mixture of concerned and amused. I remember not knowing what to make of that. I didn't reply but continued to cry. I hadn't cried in a year and a half, and it felt damn good. Somehow I just didn't care that he was watching, I didn't care if anyone was watching. I was free on this train, and crying meant I was free.

The train ride glided by, and somehow that ten-hour ride ended too short. I remember, when the train pulled into 30th station in Philadelphia, we looked at each other and smiled. "I don't know about you, but traveling really tires me out. Want to grab a coffee?" He asked.

I nodded and we grabbed our bags. We found the first coffee shop we could and talked for hours. When the coffee shop prepared to close we decided we should switch to a more adult drink and found a nearby bar. I felt invincible with him, I couldn't shake the feeling that this might be love at first sight. I never wanted this night to end, and right around midnight, we decided to close the tab. I was staying in a hotel that evening because I had told my grandparents I did not want to get in too late. So he offered to ride a taxi with me to my hotel before he made his way to his own apartment. At his offer, I remember how I felt a chill down my body; The excitement shot through my body.

I remember I decided to run to the bathroom at the bar before we walked home. Looking in the mirror, I noticed how frizzy my hair had gotten from the ride. How crumpled my dress had become from my crying spell. I felt embarrassed. I was immensely attracted to this man, he was the most perfect thing I had ever seen. I remember looking in the mirror and feeling completely inadequate. I remember, I irrationally debated hiding in that bathroom for hours, hoping he'd leave or I’d just simply running away. Yet, knowing I was being silly I walked back out.

As we embarked to look for a cab, I'll never forget how he grabbed my hand. He looked at his watch, "Why don't we walk?"

"Alex, we are five miles away."

"Your point?" At the words, all the nerves I had in the bathroom had washed away. And we walked. Like our train ride, this walk passed too quickly. We talked without stalling and like longtime lovers. I had never felt this before. When we finally reached my hotel, he stopped and looked at me. "I'm proud of you," he said again.

This time, I didn't cry. Instead, I smiled at him, beaming with pride. I was damn proud of me too. I pulled him closer to me, and this surprised even me. I remember how he laughed, caught off guard by my new found courage and I still hope, pleased with my action. As he leaned in to kiss me I closed my eyes.

And then, I blinked. The room starts to come back to me, and I'm on the train again. In confusion, I look at the man sitting next to me. As my body returns to life, I feel my legs stick to the seat. I rub my hands down my sunflower dress, still damp. With half-closed eyes, I watch this man I loved, his pale blue eyes open and not paying the slightest attention to me. As the train slows to a stop, He lifts himself and grabs his bags. He nods and smiles at me acknowledging, "See ya." He grabs his bag and moves to the doors, never looking back. My eyes open wide, as I watch the man I loved escape me, without ever falling in love with me, and I remain stranger. I close my eyes, squeezing tight, in hopes of returning to sleep and finding him again. Instead, I just see black.

Maybe he wasn't going to be my happy ending, and this was not a love at first sight. But seeing this man on the train, and loving him in my dreams made me realize that leaving home was the right thing. My happy ending was out there, and maybe I'd stumble upon it on the train or in a coffee shop. Maybe my happy ending wouldn't be with some guy but falling in love with this city, or maybe something completely different altogether. With my eyes closed, I heard the conductor say, "Next stop, 30th street."

"Ah," I sighed out l loud. "I'm proud of you," I whispered to myself.

Rationale

Throughout the course of this class, a theme that constantly arose was the idea of using imagination and creativity as a form of coping. This concept is seen in Life, Animated and also Marwencol. Additionally, in Lydia Barry's Magic Lanterns we discuss the idea of using objects to make sense of the world. All of these forms of storytelling involve these objects that are used, manipulated or molded to help give a better grasp of life. What I wanted to do was instead work more with the idea of potential space. I wanted to write about "what's" that could happen in a story.

In working with the inspiration with Life, Animated and Marwencol I was able to develop ideas involving how to imagine a world. These are inspiring as it shows two men who are working to cope with their personal struggles by imagining a world of their own that is much safer and more pleasant. I am inspired by this concept because it shows how many people envision a different life for themselves than the one they live in. In Life, Animated there is a use of Disney to rationalize everyday life. From this, I am able to have my character take from her experiences in learning about love to allow for her to imagine the life she does in her dream. Likewise, like Marwencol she is able to place characters as best fit her imagined world. Although, hers is more subconscious.

Additionally, something I tried to build off was Thomas H. Ogden's On Potential Space, thinking of the scene in the bathtub with the child and the mother. The child had experienced some trauma regarding the water and was fearful about a new experience with it. The mother helped the child to transform the water into something new so that it was no longer threatening to the child. This inspired the work being done with dreams. In this story, it becomes apparent pretty early on that the woman narrating the story is trying to escape something. The dreams became almost a coping mechanism for the everyday life that the character was running away from.

Additionally, textural features of the story aside, I felt like this was a great example of creativity. This is the type of realistic fiction that people have a love/hate relationships with because there's no happy ending, and this is the stuff that happens all the time. I was inspired by an experience I had previously had. I sat on a train, bored out of my mind and locked eyes with a man I found attractive and imagined all the possible outcomes of how we would talk, what would our kids look like. I wrote it for all the times I had imagined that the Starbucks worker stared at me a second too long and that they loved me instantly. I wrote it because there is this space between our world and the worlds of those around us. These worlds very rarely collide and I would like to argue it is more powerful when they do not collide then when they do.

While that may seem like a profound statement, that worlds that do not overlap are more powerful than those that do, this is something I stand behind. I feel like this remaining open space, this area that allows people to imagine what could be is immensely full of power. It gives creativity to the world but holds no weight of reality. Everyday life stuff gets heavy, but there is beauty in the lightness of creativity. The concept that it can be a powerful idea, but when it is put on a page or told or even just thought, it is able to disappear from the mind. That is not to say that sometimes people do not fall in love with strangers and have it lag, but it is to say that there is a purity in this love that is only dented by the space of what could be. "What could be" is a much safer space than that of "what has happened."