

The Train

By Rebecca Sobel

My mother knew my train was scheduled to leave 30th Street Station in Philadelphia at 8:20 PM. I had told her at least two weeks beforehand, and then again every day for a week leading up to my departure, so that she would be sufficiently prepared to drive me to the train station. So, when at 7:45 PM my mother was nowhere to be found, I became frantic.

I called her on her cell phone numerous times. I called my father, but he had no idea where she was. I was about to call a taxi, when at 8:05 my mother busted through the door, hooked with shopping bags and groceries.

"What do you want for dinner, honey?" she yelled to me.

I grabbed her arm, took her back outside, and through my huffs and ranting she came to understand her tardiness and my frustration.

"We'll be fine. We have 15 minutes," she said knowing well that the train station is a 20 minute drive from our house.

My superpowers were failing me and my attempts to Jedi-stare the cars in front of us off the road were useless. I had to get to Boston. I was checking out Boston University, staying with my friend who goes there. I'm hoping to attend next year. At 8:15 PM I pummeled through the glass doors to the train station and raced to the ticket counter, only to be informed I was too late. But my mom had sped off by then and the overweight old lady with the beaded rimmed glasses told me I could take the 9:20 PM train to Boston and offered me first-class seating as compensation.

There's always that second when you're about to board a train, and the passenger cars aren't marked with the exact train number, destination, and all its stops, along the side of the car, and you freak out a little cause you don't know if you're in the right place. You look around trying to see if the other people in the passenger train look like they would be the same type of people going to wherever it is you're going. I probably should have asked someone, but I didn't. Instead, I eyeballed my neighbors, most clicking on their laptops, and figured these business types were surely on the road to Urban Ville.

When two hours had passed, and New York City was nowhere to be found, I picked myself up from staring at the back of the seat in front of me while listening to conversations happenings all around, and realized that nothing looked familiar. I had taken this train thousands of times before, and I certainly knew what the route from Philadelphia to New York City looked like. And this wasn't it.

I waited till the ticket-taker-conductor-whatever-they-are person wandered down the aisle checking tickets, which - I had checked - mine said Boston, and asked him where this train was heading.

"Geneva" he said, and sifted through the aisles before I could react.

Jesus Christ where the fuck is Geneva? I called Lauren on my cell phone and asked her where I was. She didn't have a clue, so I told her I would most likely be late. I should have gone to look for the conductor type, to make sure I was on the right train. But I sat in my chair and did nothing more.

At the next stop a girl who graduated from my high school got on board, firmly stationed herself right across the aisle from me and, without being at all stunned or surprised to have run into me so far away from our homes, she started talking my ear off about the most mundane, boring, monotonous crap that I've ever heard. I learned to tune her out almost immediately and soon she looked only like a television set on mute. I was only concerned with where I was going, or not going for that matter. A few stops later, the girl got off, and I remembered that I had first class seating privileges that I wasn't using. I figured if my trip was going to take longer than I expected, I might as well be in first class.

I picked up my backpack and shuffled out of my seat. Walking up the aisles to the first passenger car, through the mechanical passageways, through the dining cart, I finally came across another conductor-ticket-taking-man. I asked him when this train would reach Boston, Massachusetts.

"'Bout Fourteen Days."

Yay. Sarcasm.

I kept walking down the aisles until I finally saw first class seating: four rows of chairs on one side of the car in pleather coverings with reclinable adjustment. I put my bag down on the seat next to me, reclined my chair, and looked across the aisle into the breathtaking face of a boy I once loved.

Luke and I had worked together in a coffee shop for about a year. I had the most tremendous crush on him, which I was never able to be too subtle about, but nothing had ever happened between us. We would hang out together after work, writing song lyrics, singing, smoking pot, making crafts, and talking about ourselves outside ourselves like we had the control to make a difference. I loved him. And while I made my sentiments known, I never would have pushed him. He was too important to me to lose. But after the summer ended, and we both moved on to different jobs, our time together shrank until we eventually lost touch with each other. Things like that just happen. It had been about another year since I had seen him last.

I looked across the aisle, wide-eyed. Luke was lying across the laps of his sister and brother, with his back propped against the window of the train and his feet dangling into the aisle. His hair was messy and it looked like he had just woken up.

He saw me and flew forward across his siblings, his torso draped into the aisle and arms outstretched to me. We hugged hard, holding each other tightly, until I was sure I would have the smell of his hair, like coconut, imprinted in my nostrils for as long as I lived. He climbed into the seat next to me and we attempted to catch up. I was so happy to see him; I think I was beaming. It wasn't long, though, before everything stopped feeling so soft. When I asked Luke where he was going, and why he had caught this mysterious Amtrak Donner party, he told me he was headed to Colorado.

"I'm going into the army." He said it like you hear it on those WWI and II specials where they show the heartbreak of separation between couples when the men get sent off to war. It was almost like he was wearing a military outfit on a base in the middle of nowhere, flipping his camouflage hat to the horizon in one last farewell.

"It's all I can do. I need to go to the army to get money for college. I can't dick around anymore. I'm going to Colorado to visit my parents before I leave."

I had no idea what to say to him. I latched my arms around his back, squeezed him like I was trying to saturate my skin with his, but I knew there was nothing I could really say. People do what they have to do. And you shouldn't interfere, with your selfish emotions. I stared into his eyes until mine began to seep.

About when the green on the trees turned a lighter shade of lime, Luke asked me if I wanted to go with him to Colorado. I didn't have to think much about the question. Boston was days away, my trip there already shot, and here I was with Luke, finally spending time, though about to leave him again. Of course I would go with him. I would go anywhere with him.

Luke told me that none of them had paid for their train tickets. They feared if they got off the train at the station, the ticket checker would check their tickets, and if they didn't have one, they would be sent to transportation security. He told me we had to jump. This didn't make much sense to me, but I didn't say anything. The thought of my hand in his, jumping off a train, was all so dramatic and clichéd - I couldn't wait. I put on my backpack, Luke's sister secured her bag, and we went down the aisles toward the first mechanical door. Luke lifted the red emergency handle, which, surprisingly, didn't make the sound it threatened, and before I even had a chance to see what was below me, Luke grabbed my waist, and hurled me with him through the air, whizzing into the Colorado River.

I woke up and called Luke. I was out of breath, anxious. I hadn't spoken to him in so long; I couldn't remember the last time I'd called him. I told him he wouldn't believe what had just happened. I told him all about the train ride to Boston, I told him how I saw him in the middle of America, how we jumped out of a moving train into a river together. When I was finally all out of breath, Luke was all quiet.

"It's funny how you always call me whenever I need you the most. Whenever I need you more than anything, there you are." His voice floated softly over me. "That's crazy," he said, but

not very excitedly. "I am going into the army to pay for college. Tomorrow." His voice was like a drum beat resounding through a public high school's cheap outdated intercom system.

I was stunned. I reached under my bed and found photographs I had taken, artwork I had made, poems I had written, all for Luke. I held them in my lap, defeated.

"Hey, why don't you come here, to my parents house, tonight? They live just outside the city, and I don't leave until tomorrow. We can at least spend some time together."

We sat in a room on the floor talking. After Luke and I had gone through all of the necessary catching up, and filling in on each other's lives, we just wanted to sit and soak in one another for a while. We sat next to each other, propped against the wall of the room. I laid my head on his shoulder and he put his hand on my head, and I could feel the heat passing through his body into mine. I knew he felt it too. And, since he was leaving tomorrow after all, and since it just felt so good, I figured I could ask him about us, as in, why not ever us?

Luke told me he knew. He just said he knew. He looked at my face, at my eyes, and then my lips, held my cheeks in his hands, and told me he loved me too much to fuck me and leave me. I asked him why nothing had ever happened between us before.

"I kissed you once," he said.

I can't believe I had forgotten that he kissed me.

"And then Jake called you and nothing ever happened."

I dated Jake off and on for a while. I have no idea where he is now, nor do I care. Luke gave me the softest, petaled press of moisture with his lips against mine; he breathed into my mouth, kissed the end of my pout, and told me that I would always be special to him. He had beside him everything I had ever made for him, in a box he had fashioned, whose cover was worn away.

Luke's sister came into the room and, without saying hello, pushed the two twin beds together, and put a king-sized sheet on top of them.

"That'll be better for you two, eh?" and she gave me a little wink.

I woke up and called Luke. This was crazy. His mother answered the phone. When Luke got on the line, I told him all about the train, the plunging, the crying, the passion, and his sister. I was so excited to tell him I wouldn't let him say a word until I had gotten the entire thing out of my system once and for all.

"It's funny how you appear whenever I think about you hard enough," he told me. "I am going to the army. And I'm going to college. I'm going to Boston University. I love you."

My chest couldn't find air to pump and my heart was pounding against the wall of my ribs.

"But there's something else I have to tell you."

There was no other sound in the world but his voice.

"I have AIDS."

I woke up and called Luke. An automated woman told me his number had been disconnected and directed me to a cell phone number. The man at the other end of the cell phone told me Luke had moved out of their house. He told me he had moved back with his parents who had moved out of town and hadn't told him where. I asked if he had his new number. He said he had no way of knowing. No way of knowing.