

## NIGHT TRAIN

Reeves took the train out of Richmond to Baltimore to avoid the hectic drive. Although he'd taken the train occasionally for business, this trip seemed somehow different. It took him back to those years when, as a child, he'd gone across the country with his parents—all the way to Oregon—on trains. He remembered the Union Pacific, the Great Northern, the C & O, each with its own distinctive colors and individual marketing: the sleeping kitten for the C & O, the bighorn sheep for the Great Northern, and for Union Pacific?—he couldn't remember but there must have been something. Trains were special then, with dining cars and waiters in starched white jackets, sleeping cars, and dome cars from which you could look down on the passing world. Now passenger rail was all Amtrak, all the time. There was no more, “Last call for breakfast” The last breakfast had long ago been served.

He looked out the window next to his seat and saw figures moving about on the platform beneath the lights in the deepening dusk. There had been a thin mist of rain coming down when he'd boarded but it was impossible to know from inside the car if it was still falling. A couple was coming up the concrete walkway beside the train, a large man wearing a bulky overcoat and a thin woman walking behind him, her head down and her step tentative. He was carrying a large battered suitcase. She was rolling a small bag behind her. Her bag looked like it could have been easily carried; his like it would have been much more manageable if it could have been rolled. She looked much younger than

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him. Still, her relative youth wasn't as noticeable as it might have been as she walked slumped and folded into herself and he strode confidently before her. As Reeves watched them, the train jolted and rolled slightly, stopped, then did it again, as if it were coming to life, or dying.

He wondered how different Lara would be after all these years. He'd met her in college, years after he'd ridden the train cross country to Oregon. Still it seemed the same era, an era of youth that seemed somehow linear and unproblematic in a way he rationally knew it was not and could not have been. This nostalgia about youth and trains was probably animated by the fact that he was going to see Lara after so long. The mind was a strange place indeed, throwing together giant railway engines driving straight ahead across the space of time, and memories of a sidelong young woman trying to find herself who had proceeded by indirection, playing on his emotions like a novice violinist, and producing similar painful notes. But despite that, there had been a closeness between them that had evolved toward an unspoken assumption that, when she returned from graduate school, they would marry. But neither of them had reckoned with Bob. Nor would he have ever thought that after Lara there would be no one else. But work had increasingly consumed him and there had not been.

He watched the couple from the platform select their seats. He was mildly irritated that they had chosen this car. It had been empty except for him and he'd been looking forward to keeping it that way, at least as far as Washington. The man had steel-gray hair that he wore long and rigorously combed back, and long sideburns that slightly curled beside his ear. His hair looked dirty and stiff. The woman was thin, almost gaunt, with large haunted eyes. She had long, straight red hair and her face was so white that it

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looked painted like that of a figure in Kabuki theater. She wore tight, faded jeans and a Navy pea coat which her pale hands held tightly clasped around her thin figure more securely than the buttons apparently could manage.

Reeves watched the man push his large suitcase into an overhead compartment, then collapse the handle into her wheeled zip bag and do the same with it. After he'd finished handling the luggage, he seized the woman's hand and directed her into the seat next to the window. He didn't let her seat herself. Rather, he physically pushed her down into her seat. He didn't do it harshly, but rather with a quiet authority that seemed almost subconscious. She settled into the seat beneath his touch with the docility of a well-trained dog. After she was seated, he removed his tweed overcoat, which now that he was close revealed itself to be a coarse herringbone of long-past fashion, then after pulling a newspaper from its pocket, balled it up and thrust it into the overhead compartment with the luggage. He sat down and began to read the newspaper. He said nothing to the woman, nor did she to him as she looked out the window.

Reeves took out a book and opened it, but before he began to read it he removed an envelope between the last page and the back cover. He took a piece of folded paper from the envelope, opened it, and read its contents yet again:

Dear Brian:

You may not get this before I see you, but I simply had to write my thoughts down. I am so glad that you will be at the funeral. It will be good to see you again, even in these unhappy circumstances. Bob was in a lot of pain at the end, and I am so relieved that it is finally over. I know it's an old, old question, but one wonders anew at why there has to be so much pain and suffering in the world when the whole issue asserts itself in such a vivid, horrible way in a loved one. The whole thing made me doubt my faith. It was weak of me, I know, but I simply couldn't believe in a

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God that allows such things. Perhaps I could only believe as long as my life was sheltered and secure. I suppose many people are like that. Then, when you called, after all the years that have passed, and it was on the very night of Bob's death—I felt anew that there are things beyond us that we just cannot understand.

It is still difficult to believe that you just happened to call that night, that you just happened to be coming to Baltimore and called, finally, after all the time that has passed. Richmond isn't that far from Baltimore. You said that you knew that we lived here. You must have been here many times. Why did you call just then? I have my thoughts, and I'm sure you have yours. Remember those late-night discussions we used to have in college? Oh, that seems so long ago now . . .

I hope you have been well and happy. I see your name in the paper occasionally when you handle a big case. I am looking forward to seeing you again.

With much love,  
Lara

He looked at the small, exact handwriting, nearly forgotten and now fondly remembered, then folded the letter, slipped it back into its envelope, and placed the envelope back in his book as the train finally began to move. She'd had a hard time of it. First Holly, her only child, had run off from home, what, two years or so ago now? She'd disappeared and nothing had been heard from her since. Then Bob's cancer had been diagnosed a year or so ago. How much harder must that have been when you couldn't even let your daughter know that her father was terminally ill?

*“Do you think,” Lara asked, raising her steaming coffee mug toward her mouth, “that it is possible to truly know happiness without having suffered tragedy or misfortune?”*

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*It was one of those late-night coffee shop conversations where they feasted on life's great questions with a naïve assurance that can only be fully assumed by nineteen-year-olds. Her light brown hair was pulled back in that no-nonsense way she had. Her wide blue eyes fairly sparkled with the seriousness of the debate. When he didn't immediately answer, she went on, elaborating on her question and then answering it herself.*

*"I don't think that you can truly know happiness without having experienced its polar opposite for comparison. You may think you are truly happy, but how would you know?"*

*"But if you think you are truly happy, you really are, aren't you?"*

*"No. You may be self-deluded."*

*"But what if you are fortunate enough never to experience that great tragedy or misfortune? Wouldn't that make you more happy, rather than less?"*

*"In your own mind, maybe. But on an absolute continuum, your happiness could never measure up to what it could be if you knew its polar opposite."*

*"Isn't it all in your mind anyway?"*

*She put her hands around her coffee mug, warming them.*

*"You don't think everything is just in our minds, do you?"*

Well now, he thought, she should be poised for that heightened happiness she sought. He hoped she would find it. He heard sobbing from across the aisle. He got up and walked toward the couple to investigate. The man was asleep, his head bobbing slightly to the rhythm of the train as it clicked along the rails. The young woman looked around from the window toward him. She lightly flicked at the corner of her eye with her

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fingers, looked away quickly, then looked back. Her pale complexion was mottled, the rims of her eyes reddened. She looked embarrassed. Or was it fear that he saw on her face? Before he could decide she looked away again, out the window into the darkness, as if there were something to see out there.

“Is anything wrong?”

She looked back at him. Now he recognized the look. It was a look of resignation, not embarrassment or fear. He’d seen this look before, seen it in the homeless people he’d worked with as a volunteer and in the poor women working three jobs to support drunken husbands he’d represented in *pro bono* divorces.

She shook her head strongly in an exaggerated motion.

“Just mind your own business,” she said.

He didn’t know what made him say what he said next. Particularly since he didn’t really think it was true.

“I’m a good listener.”

“Just go away and leave me alone, okay.”

She was speaking in undertones as if she were afraid she would awaken the sleeping man beside her. There was something about her, perhaps the enormous vulnerability that her trying to talk tough and be brazen couldn’t wholly conceal, that held him there. Maybe that was what made him hold his hand and gesture for her to approach him. She looked at him for what seemed an eternity, her eyes seeming to drain all vitality from him, all the while pressing her thin lips together, before she muttered, “Jesus,” and shook her head as if she’d just seen some kind of an original. Then, quietly, tentatively, she rose from her seat and began to ease over and around her sleeping

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companion. He slept so soundly, and she was so thin, that she managed to slip into the aisle without waking him. Freed from her window seat, she exhaled a long, luxuriant breath.

“We need to go to another car,” she said.

Nodding, he took her rough, cool hand and drew her behind into the next car where a group of ebullient salesmen were loudly discussing the pigeons they’d plucked, then into the next where it was as silent as a tomb except for the snoring of one of the three sleeping passengers. He found facing seats and released her hand, careful not to draw her toward a seat or push her into one.

“Look,” she said when they were seated, “we need to get off this train.”

“I can’t do that. I’m going to visit a friend.”

“I thought you wanted to help me.”

“I do. Why does that mean we have to get off the train?”

She stared at him for a moment as if she were just realizing something.

“I don’t know why I’m talking to you. There’s nothing you can do, nothing anybody can do.”

“Give me a try. Sometimes I surprise myself.”

She didn’t smile. Did she ever smile? Her look was so skeptical that he almost felt he was some sort of charlatan or imposter. He often felt that he was, just not now. Now was different.

“You’re not happy with the man you’re with, are you?”

Her laugh was one of the most mirthless he’d heard, and he’d heard a few that had made his hair stand up.

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“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Are you married? I might be able to help with that. I’m a lawyer.”

“Married! God, no. That would be simpler really.”

“Then why don’t you just leave him?”

“Okay, listen, here’s the whole fucking story. My father was a drunk and had sex with me. When my mother tried to do anything about it he beat the shit out of her. So I finally got enough of that and ran off. I figured it had to be better on the street. But the street is just the same. Everything’s just the same. Everything sucks. That’s just the way it is. It takes some people a long time to figure this out. Some never do. So I’m a pretty fucking smart girl, don’t you think?”

“So you took up with the man you’re with?”

“Yeah. Sure. I took up with him.”

“How long ago?”

“A month. Six weeks. Who knows?”

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen. Listen, I have to go back. If he wakes up and I’m gone, he’ll go ape shit. I don’t know what I’m thinking talking to you. I thought maybe . . . well, never mind.”

“You know what I think? I think you haven’t given up hope or you wouldn’t have decided to talk to me to begin with.”

“Yeah, well, you think whatever you want to think. I’m going back.”

“Don’t go.”



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“What am I going to do when he comes looking for me? Hide under the seat? I tried to leave him once. I left in the middle of the night while he was sleeping off a shitload of beer and he still caught me. He made me get this.” She unbuttoned her blouse and pulled the fabric back to reveal a scrawny white shoulder on which had been tattooed the letters “AP.” “Al Powers,” she said. “He doesn’t want me to forget him. Or anybody else to. For the rest of my life.”

*“What about evil?” Lara continued. “How do you evaluate evil in your scheme of things? Is it just subjective? Like happiness? That can’t be right, can it? Isn’t there something that transcends our individual perceptions of what is evil? If not, isn’t the world a pretty dangerous place?”*

*“Yes,” he said, “isn’t it?”*

*“Be serious. Really.”*

*“I am being serious.”*

“Did you go to the police?”

“The police! Shit! What are they going to do? Send me back to my father?”

“You can’t stay with him.”

She ran her thin fingers through her hair and sighed.

“I was wrong about you, wrong about everything. We can’t stay here. I’d just be putting you in the middle. I saw him beat up a guy once for just saying he sure liked redheads.”

She got up and stepped into the aisle.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

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She looked back and smiled. For a moment he had a sense of what she must have looked like on that first bright morning of emerging womanhood before the cycle of abuse and despair began.

“Jeanne. Jeanne Crumb. Ain’t it just perfect?”

“Where are you going, Jeanne Crumb?”

“Straight to hell I’d say. If you mean on this train, Baltimore.”

“So,” *Lara said, “do you think there is such a place as Hell?”*

“*Such an actual place? Of course not.*”

“*So Dante and Milton could create their visions entirely from their imaginations? There didn’t have to be some actual, transcendent reality that they were drawing on?*”

“*That’s what I think, yes. Besides, who needs an imagination? Man has always provided plenty of war and pestilence and intolerance and atrocity to give us examples of things hellish.*”

“*So is there anything outside the mind? Would everything just go away if we weren’t here?*”

“*I didn’t say that.*”

“*Didn’t you?*”

He watched her move up the long aisle and disappear through the door. He sat quietly for a moment, listening to the sonorous snoring of the sleeping passenger, and the metronomic sound of the train over the rails, before he got up to follow her. She was right. There was nothing he could do, nothing anyone could do. He wasn’t sure what had gotten into him for those moments where he’d thought differently. She was just one

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of the casualties in the brutal war of life, a war fought without generals, and without any strategic rules of engagement, a war of random encounters in dark alleys.

“Sir, I think you dropped this.” He turned around to see a porter, a black man who seemed to be all grinning white teeth in the dim light. Before he could say anything the porter handed him a wallet. “You dropped it on the floor there. Under your seat. Wouldn’t want to lose your wallet, would you now, sir?”

He started to say that it wasn’t his wallet, but then something kept him from it. Back in his seat he examined the wallet. It appeared to be brand new, barely used. The leather was supple and the color of fine brandy. He’d never seen such fine leather, or a wallet so fresh and pristine, even new ones in the leather goods shops. It was like no wallet he’d ever seen. He opened it but could find no identification. There was nothing in it at all, in fact. Nothing except for five crisp new one-hundred-dollar bills.

*“Do you believe in serendipity?” Lara asked.*

*“Huh?”*

*“You know: a happy, fortuitous finding. Totally unanticipated.”*

*“Such things happen, I suppose.”*

*“And when they do, do you think it’s just chance? Or is there some reason, some force behind it?”*

*“I found a McDonald’s ketchup packet once on the table. Saved me a trip back to the counter.”*

*“You’re making fun of me.”*

*“Never.”*

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He put the bills back into the wallet and put it into the pocket of his sport coat. Across the aisle he could hear Al Powers rousing.

“Jesus, you little bitch, give me some room. I said move over, God damn it! There’s no fucking room in this seat and you’re all over me.”

He got up and walked very deliberately up the aisle. He came to Powers’ seat and stopped. The light was too bad to make out Jeanne’s eyes as she looked at him. Powers’ head turned slowly about on his thick neck. Up close his face was coarse and badly shaven, with a thick nose that looked as if it had been broken and healed without any medical intervention. He looked at Reeves warily, dark eyes narrowed.

“Lose something, buddy?”

“Yes, I believe I have.” He swallowed slowly and drew in a deep breath. “This young woman is my daughter.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath from Jeanne but she said nothing.

“What the hell you talking about?” Powers demanded.

“She ran away from home and I’ve been following her for some time now. I finally found her. She needs to come home with me.”

“Yeah, well, you’re full of shit. She’s with me.”

“Let’s talk. I know this must be a shock to you.”

“I don’t have time to fuck with you, you fucking jerkoff.”

Reeves felt his heart thumping in his chest like a trapped rabbit.

“Look, I appreciate all you must have done for her. I know you must have been looking out for her, taking care of her. These teenagers can’t take care of themselves, you know.”

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Powers looked like a beaten dog that had unexpectedly been petted.

“I still think you’re shitting me, but I’ll hear you out.”

“My daughter needs to come with me. She’s a minor and any court in the land would agree. But, as I said, I know things need to be made right with you.” He reached into the pocket of his sport coat and took out the wallet. Powers’ eyes watched hungrily as he opened it and took out the hundred dollar bills, then deliberately counted out one after the other until he held all five fanned out in his hand like a spread of cards. “I know it’s not enough. But it’s the best I can do. The law wouldn’t give you anything. But you know how the law is. The law would screw you over and leave you behind.”

Powers rubbed the stubble on his chin and stared at the bills.

“You got that right about the law,” he said. He reached out and took the bills.

“So fuck the law.”

“So we okay?” Reeves asked.

Powers nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, “we’re okay.”

Reeves smiled at Jeanne and nodded. Powers sat there as she scrambled over him and followed Reeves back to his seat. Once they were seated, she looked at him earnestly and asked, “Okay, you’ve bought me. What kind of kinky sex do you like?”

He had no idea how his shock at her comment had transformed his face, but it must have been impressive because almost immediately the snide rigidity of her expression crumbled and she began to cry.

“Oh, my God,” she said, “you mean you really wanted to help me?” After a moment she laid her head on his shoulder. “I don’t even know your name.”

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“Does it matter?”

“A girl should know her father’s name, don’t you think?”

“Brian Reeves.”

She snuggled up against him.

“And here I thought it was Lancelot.”

He put his arm around her. Soon she was in the midst of a quiet and restful sleep. Where, he thought, had that money come from? Who would have five hundred dollars, and nothing else, in a wallet? Had it come from some type of criminal transaction and been carelessly dropped? Then, having found the wallet—or, more accurately, after having had it called to his attention and presented to him from beneath the very seat where he’d been sitting—what had suddenly inspired him to use it as he had?

*“Some things,” Lara said, “just can’t be explained. You have to admit that.”*

*“I never denied it. But that doesn’t mean there’s some grand, objective scheme of things. It just means we’re idiots.”*

Maybe, just maybe, we weren’t idiots. Now, he thought, out of all of the randomness, this. The daughter he’d never had, someone to care about, save, reclaim. And Lara now alone—without husband or daughter. It was crazy to think this way, of course, but he couldn’t help it. There was a sense to things, a pattern. He just hadn’t been able to see it. The train rolled into Washington. The lights of the station illuminated Jeanne where she continued to sleep, unfazed. His arm and shoulder were numb from holding her, but he wouldn’t stop. Not now, not ever. Gradually, as the train eased out of the station, he faded off into sleep too.

When he awoke slightly outside Baltimore, she was still asleep.

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The train slowly came to a stop. He woke her up.

“We’re here. You’ll come with me. To my friend’s house. Everything will be all right now. You’ll see.”

She smiled. He waited until Powers had left, then got her luggage. They descended from the car into the damp, foggy night. He looked about for a cab, then saw one far down the platform and started toward it. As he approached it he saw a figure emerging from the mist and, after a moment, recognized Lara.

“You shouldn’t have come,” he said. “It’s so late.”

“It’s not that late. And do you think you could keep me from coming to meet you after all this time? It’s so good to see you, Brian.”

As they hugged he said, “Lara, I’d like you to meet someone.”

He turned to introduce Jeanne. But she wasn’t there. For as far as he could see there was nothing but fog drifting through the dim illumination from the lamps. There was nothing else. Nothing at all.