2,879 words

On the Hi-Line

A middle-aged lady rises from her seat on the eastbound Empire Builder several rows in front of me. She tumbles to the floor, writhes in the aisle. Her husband (apparently) tells everyone, "She's having one of her seizures—it'll be over in a moment." Instead of gawking, as most observers do in an emergency, I want to help, to offer more than visual sympathy. When I make my way down the aisle, the husband is kneeling close to his wife. "It'll be okay. Just give her room," he orders, the back of his head to me. There's no way past him, really no way to help. Reluctantly, just another passive female, I return to my window seat and rest my cheek against the smudgy glass as the train approaches Whitefish.

One July afternoon when I was seven, I was headed outside when I saw a mud-brown station wagon hit a red squirrel. In the middle of Walnut Street—it having been recently resurfaced with periwinkle-colored rock—lay the squirrel, its tail hopping in various directions, its body rolling back and forth in a jerky, uneven way. Frozen to the sidewalk, I watched that barely alive squirrel until I was crying. I hope this woman doesn't have a similar fate. I hope her husband is right about the severity of her seizure.

"She's all right, everyone," the husband says. I stretch my neck and peer over the headrest. The husband helps her into her seat. Some people clap over the screeching of the train's brakes, and I feel a sense of relief like when the dental hygienist is cleaning your teeth—that near-choking sensation as water sprays in your gaping mouth—and she finally says she's done, and your heart is speeding with the joy of not having drowned.

I’ve been riding since 1:30 in the morning; my sister Kara and my brother-in-law Bryan dropped me off in the Spokane station. The coach car is half filled, yet it’s more full than the last time I took the train two years ago (during my freshman year) when my parents, my brother Kade, and I went skiing at Whitefish. The train’s coffee this morning was scalding and strong, but it hasn’t cut through my grogginess. I still have a full day until Fargo.

The train sways into the Whitefish station, and salt pellets dot the cobblestone platform. A horde of people wait, a mass with dark hair. Native Americans. I’m not sure what tribe. High-schoolers. Boys *and* girls. There must be at least sixty of them, each with a duffle bag or backpack, or both. While I examine the crowd, the words that my great aunt Sheila growled at Thanksgiving revisit me: “The only good Indian is a dead one.”

I excused myself from the kitchen table and, suppressing myself in the entryway, my legs wobbled as I muttered every curse word and insult I could; I spoke none of them when I returned to the table. Outwardly composed, inwardly seething. See, my first college boyfriend, Richie Dog Eagle, was Native American. Lakota, to be precise. From a reservation in South Dakota. Our relationship, unfortunately, lasted only seven weeks. Unknown to me, he was cutting so many classes that he was failing all but one. I only knew that he was struggling with some classes. Then, without warning, he simply up and left. I stopped by his dorm room one November afternoon, and his roommate told me he moved out earlier that morning. Richie. The nicest guy and the best kisser I’d ever dated (before or since). I’ve never told any of my family members, not even Kade (more out of fear that he’ll slip up and tell Mom or Dad), about Richie.

Over the crackling intercom, the conductor announces Whitefish will be a fifteen-minute stop. I’m so ready for fresh air—the six hours of recycled and heated train air have dried my

sinuses and throat. Plus, the December air will wake me up for my long day. Over 450 miles remain across Montana. Then all of North Dakota.

Outside I encounter the yelling, laughing, and jostling as the group of young Native Americans begins boarding the train. I can sense their excitement, and I wonder where they're from, where they're headed.

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The train rattles into Cut Bank, the ache in my head reminiscent of the late nights of a finals week not long ago. The car is, fortunately, fairly quiet. My grogginess, a kind of fuzziness, feels worse than before. A trip to the snack car for more scalding coffee is necessary if I'm going to make it through the day.

Across the aisle, a young Native American couple is asleep—his head against the headrest, mouth open; her head against the shoulder of his black parka, her arms clutching his arm as though she were a little girl clutching a favorite stuffed animal to her chest. I make my way to the narrow stairs at the center of the car, wishing I could just take a shower, more to cut through the grogginess than anything else.

When I open the restroom door, there's a wild mass of bare skin—a boy and girl, a loose pile of clothes on the small floor, lots of exaggerated breathing, bodies pasted together. I slam the door shut. Trying another restroom, I find it empty of people but reeking of cigarette smoke. Beer cans, as well as the top of a glass bottle, stick out of the garbage can. I check the bottle—empty. Not that I would drink any. I do have only two rules for drinking: one) not before noon & two) not from anyone else's container or glass.

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The laughing and the exaggerated footfalls are what first catch my ear. Then the *hey* and the *watch out.* Two Native American boys stumble down the aisle, clearly plastered. I turn up the volume on my iPod, allowing the mellow music to distract me.

Suddenly, one of the boys plops down in the vacant seat beside me. Grinning stupidly, he tries running his hands up my arms. I shove him away. "Cut it out," I say, my words louder because of the music's volume. Beer, stale body odor, and bad breath are overwhelming. "Get out of here." When I shove him again, his friend pulls his arm.

"Sorry," the friend says, though from his slurring of the word, I know that he, too, is just as drunk.

The car door opens and they exit, the fast clacking of the wheels on the tracks abruptly louder and then quieter. *What just happened?* I glance at the young couple. They're unfazed by all of this. The girl holds the boy's hand, and he's skimming one of those used car shoppers that convenience stores always have in the metal racks beside the registers. It lies across the gray plastic tray.

"Are you guys a part of some school group?" I ask, pulling my earphones from my ears.

The boy flips a page and looks up, but not at me. "We're all going to a Job Corps training site."

"Where at?" I wrap the earphone cord around my iPod and tuck it into my side coat pocket.

"Wolf Point. It's the middle of nowhere."

I kind of know what that means. After all, I grew up in Ellis, Minnesota, but I also know that the Hi-line towns are the definition of *nowhere.*

"For part of our Christmas break we get off the rez," says the girl, her words crisp and efficient. "Thank *God.*"

That's something I haven't seen before: a reservation. In my time together with Richie, I wanted to go home with him some weekend, to see if the stories I had always heard were true: abandoned cars, dogs loose everywhere, every house the same design. Plus, I really liked him; I wanted to meet his mother, grandmother, and three younger sisters. That had never happened, although I'd certainly listened to his complaints about life there. He told me there wasn't much to see on the rez, that the drive from Aberdeen down to the southwest part of the state was boring and I wouldn't like it. I guess I can't understand why we never went. In the two years since then, I've wondered if his family would have reacted negatively to his dating a white girl who fulfilled the stereotypes: fair skin, medium-length blond hair, blue eyes, *mostly* slender.

"So how about you? Why are you going through this nothingness?" the girl asks.

"To Fargo. I was visiting my sister and brother-in-law in Spokane."

"That's a long trip," she says before turning toward the window, which I take as a signal that our conversation is over.

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I promised myself that I would wait until after Shelby to order some warm food from the snack car. Sure, I have granola bars, pretzels, a bag of M&Ms, bottles of water, and two Mike's Hard Lemonades, but warm food is always a plus, especially in winter traveling across this cold, desolate land. Having ridden before on the train, I know how you crave food and snacks, even if you've eaten something an hour earlier and you're preoccupied with a book, music, or a conversation.

The door separating my car from the next one slides back, and I enter that space where the cars join. I cross the threshold, hunger pressing me forward. What I observe is shocking even to me, a college junior. It is somewhat like the platform all over again except some are playing cards, one couple is rolling around (mostly clothed) on the floor, some are throwing a football back and forth. Garbage everywhere. Crushed chips, wrappers, bags, cans, bottles. They've trashed the place. I breeze through to the stairs that lead to the snack counter.

When I finally return to my seat, carrying a paper plate with a microwaved cheeseburger as well as a bag of plain potato chips, I notice an unpleasant pungent odor.

"What *is* that smell?" asks the woman in front of me.

A man's voice. "The toilets. I heard those Indians plugged them up with cigarettes and other stuff."

I think of the observation car, as well as the restrooms. I can't rule out the possibility.

"It's awful. I wish we could open a window somehow," the woman says before coughing.

"The train'll stop in Havre, but that's a good hour at least."

I try to let the smell of the warm cheeseburger overpower the scent wafting up from the center of the car. I also decide that after I finished my lunch, I'll wash my hands in the restroom of another car. Maybe they haven't trashed all of the restrooms.

The intercom crackles, and the conductor asks for everyone's attention. "This train is non-smoking," he says, the words carrying frustration and barely restrained anger. "If you are caught smoking anywhere on the train, including the restroom, you will be dropped off at the next station stop. Also, the legal drinking age does apply on all Amtrak trains. If you are caught drinking anywhere on the train and you are underage, you will be dropped off at the next station

stop. Lastly, any passengers not obeying crew member instructions will be dropped off at the next station stop. Thank you."

Apparently things are worse on the train than what I've experienced.

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I wind my way down the narrow stairwell, one of my coat buttons making a high-pitched squeak against the metal walls. My feet almost sound hollow on the short, contoured steps. At the bottom of the stairs, the luggage racks are jammed with every size and color of bag. In the middle of the car, where there is an entryway for the side doors, sits a young Native girl. Knees to her chest, forehead on her knees, she's petite in her jeans and tan coat. Through the silver door's small rectangular window, the snow-covered fields are the stark scenery.

"Are you okay?" I ask her, bending over.

The girl peers up at me with one eye and shakes her head. Her black hair swings back, partially covering her face. She must be fifteen or sixteen, at the most.

"What's wrong?" I crouch like a catcher. Little beads of sweat cling to part of her cheek. At this level, the scent of alcohol is all too obvious.

"I'm gonna be sick."

This isn't what I signed up for by buying my ticket. "Here, let's get you up," I say, taking hold of her arm.

"I'm too tired," she says, her voice faint. Then she groans.

And bracing my feet, with one arm now around her back, I pull up with all my might and she hardly has any legs to stand on. All her weight, no more than ninety or a hundred pounds, is against me, and I nearly topple backwards.

"C'mon," I say, half dragging her to the first door, hoping the restroom is empty. It is. She manages to lift the toilet lid, and I hold her with one arm, rubbing her back as she wretches. It's a sound I can barely stand.

"I'm done," she mumbles, so I reach around her to press the flush button and to close the lid.

I tell her to sit. She falls onto the lid, somehow remaining upright. I take some paper towels—thank God there are still some—and dampen them with water. "Here." I pat her sweaty forehead with the cold paper towels, brush her hair from her cheeks so I can wipe them.

"I drank too much." She says it as though it is a discovery, a revelation. Maybe it is.

"I guess you did." There's no point in lecturing her. "You feel any better?"

"Kinda, yeah." She adds an *I'm sorry.*

"You should eat a little something," I say, pretending I haven't heard her apology. "I've got some pretzels up in my seat. They're tame."

She simply nods. I pull her up, and we struggle out of the restroom and climb the stairs.

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Alicia, the girl I helped, is asleep beside me; the old blue blanket I've brought covers her. She managed to eat some pretzels and drink some water before saying she wanted to rest, wondering if she could stay in the seat next to me because the car isn't noisy. She reclined, and after I gave her the blanket, she fell asleep. The couple watched the whole exchange—I could tell—but they said nothing.

When the train pulls into the Havre station about a half hour later, the smell of the car much worse, I see the border patrol in their black jackets, and two sheriff's deputies in their two-

shades-of-brown uniforms. Four men wait on the platform, one of the deputies talking into the receiver clipped to his shirt pocket. The couple across from me points at them.

I rise, resting one knee on the seat for a better view. As the train crawls to a stop, I brace my arms against my seatback.

"They're getting on the train," the boy says.

The girl replies, "They're going to find 'em. They always do."

"Probably so," the boy says.

From the corner of my left eye I detect movement. The deputies. The dark brown hats. Standing in the middle of the car. One walks away from me, the other toward me. The deputy has the standard deputy look: mustache, wide shoulders, sharply ironed tan shirt. He pauses a couple rows ahead of me, loudly delivering his question. "Any disturbances in this car at all, folks?"

"Just two drunk Indian kids stumbling through. I heard some were fighting in another car." The seizure woman's husband. I glance at Alicia—she's asleep.

The deputy reaches me. "Has anyone bothered you, miss?"

I turn briefly toward the couple, and then I see the deputy scrutinizing the couple and Alicia. I hear my great aunt's stupid words, and I bet this deputy thinks the same thing. I remember how Alicia said she was sorry and how I wiped her face with the damp towels. I think of the first time Richie kissed my neck, my body straddling his. His cheek smooth, his lips moist. Late at night in the study lounge on the fourth floor of my dorm, the lights off, the windows open, the wind bringing in the fine rain. Where is Richie now? Back on the reservation? Drinking? Doing meth? Dying? Dead? Two years later and I still have no idea.

"Miss, has anyone bothered you? Have you seen anything suspicious?"

All three people are watching me—they’re waiting. The deputy’s brown eyes seem too small for his hulking body, and then his eyes change to a dull gray, the color of my great aunt’s eyes.

“Nope,” I say confidently. “Nothing at all.”

The sheriff walks past, and I gaze back at the couple, meeting the girl’s eyes. I can feel them searching me, seeing inside me. And in that moment—as the faint crease of a smile begins on her face—some tacit understanding passes between us. I’m positive that she knows why I lied, even if I can’t quite articulate it myself.