

The Train

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After my father dies, fewer photographs are taken of me. The ones that remain are blurry. My dresses are too small and I start to wear flowered shorts with striped tops. My hair no longer falls in ringlets. It's longer and shaped funny. My mother uses a soft bristled brush to smooth the outside, but the tangled mess underneath begins to grow larger and larger around my neck. The smooth layer floats over the matted bulge, angling out past my shoulders then frizzing into pompoms at the ends.

Something happens to my mother too. Her lipstick is crooked. One side is much higher than the other, like someone elbowed her when she was putting it on and she didn't take the time to fix it. Her eye shadow is a bright blue thumbprint when she blinks. She wears cheap wigs that look like plastic broom bristles formed into a bouffant. Her real hair sneaks out the sides and back and she holds her hand on top of her head when it's windy. She starts to smell funny too, and the dark circles under her eyes make her look sick all the time.

We are taking a train to New York to visit relatives I have never met and I'm supposed to be excited about this, but I'm not. I tell her that I'm feeling sick, like I might throw up. She tells me I'm fine. We are sitting in the dining car but I'm not hungry. I tug at her sleeve to tell her that it's really hot in here - really, really hot. My eyelids droop and it takes the strength of my entire body to lift them back up. When I do, I see two men sitting across from us. They're smiling and laughing with my mother. She puts her arm around me and gives me a squeeze, but she doesn't look at me. She looks at those two

men and says something to them. They laugh, but they don't look at me either. Maybe if I put my head in her lap, then I can close my eyes for a little while.

It's a different world under the table. It's dark and cool at first, but my face is like a furnace so it warms up quick. My mother's stomach makes bubbly noises in my ear. She takes a drink and I can hear the liquid move from her stomach through all the plastic tubes I imagine are inside her. My head is loose on my neck. It bounces up and down on her belly as the train moves along. I hear a whooshing noise as my head launches up, then gurgling as my ear hits her belly, then whooshing, then gurgling, then whooshing. I'm really gonna throw up.

I sit up quickly and tug on her sleeve again. "I'm gonna throw up," I whisper in her ear so the men won't hear.

"What? No, you're fine, honey," she whispers back, "Just put your head down." She cups her hand over my ear and tries to push my head back down on her belly, which makes me feel dizzy and sicker, so I resist. I can feel the liquid in my own belly now as it flows up the tubes and reaches the back of my throat. I force it back down.

"No, mommy, I'm sick," I say loudly this time so everyone can hear, because someone really needs to do something, quick. There are three men now. Another one pulled up a chair while I was under the table.

"I'm gonna throw up," I say to the third man with the most serious face I can muster. He's the only one looking at me so maybe he'll actually listen. But just saying the words is too dangerous. I can't hold the liquid back with my throat open like that. I close my eyes and put my hand over my mouth. I try to make them all disappear so I can focus my energy into squeezing my throat closed. I think she's asking me a question, but she can't seriously expect me to answer her right now. This is wrong, all wrong. I must keep the liquid in, must keep the liquid in.

Then the train makes a turn. We all lean to the right and the liquid pounds on the back of my throat like a giant bile fist. We sway back to the left and it punches so hard this time that it breaks through and out. It sprays between my fingers in small streams, arching up, then onto the dining table and screw them, I might as well just let it all go so I move my hand away. Once, twice, three times.

Everyone has jumped back, knocking over chairs and screaming words over my head. I'm sitting alone now, my own horrible stench rising from the table like a mushroom cloud. I cry when I realize what I've done.

In the midst of the chaos I hear a deep gentle voice say, "She's just sick, ma'am, well get it all cleaned up. Here, you can move to this table."

Through my tears I see a blurry figure of yet another man. This one's wearing a pinstriped vest with a bow tie and a brimmed cap. His face and his hands are black. Blacker than anything I've ever seen before. It makes him separate from everyone else. He smiles at me with big straight teeth and pats my back.

"You're not feeling very well are you?" He touches his hand to my forehead. "Oh my, you're burnin' up aren't you now?"

I can't stop crying to answer him, but he squeezes my shoulders to let me know that it's okay if I don't. My mother is frantic, screaming and yelling, "Oh my God! Look what you did!"

I hear him tell my mother something about taking me back to my room and soon I am swaying back and forth in the dark tiny cabin with the black man behind me holding my shoulders. He is coaxing me to lie down on the bottom bunk, but I'm not supposed to sleep on that one. I'm supposed to get the top bunk because I've never slept up top before. I was excited about it when we first got on the train. He tells me, No, no. I can't sleep up top. I'm too little and sick and I might fall down. Come to think of it, I'm not excited about it anymore anyway.

He's nice to me. He gets a wet rag to wipe off my face and my hair and I pretend that he is my new daddy. He sits with me in a chair next to the bottom bunk and gives me sips of water from a cone shaped paper cup. He pats my shoulder every once in a while just to let me know he's there.

The next morning the black man is gone and a different man is climbing down the ladder from the top bunk. That's where I was supposed to sleep. Everything is all wrong now.

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