

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 1

The little bumps and starts were not so bothersome. The experience, if it could be honestly called that without them—if under other circumstances the ride would have been anything but the most denigrating sort of travel, then at the moment it felt adequately authentic—was an acceptable illusion that if one listened very carefully to, one should feel nothing but security in the competence of the experience's providers. For the experience was a train ride to Bastings, and the service very excellent indeed, especially if one listened to every wheeze, puff, groan, and tuberculous cough from the engines, each one startling the inexperienced passengers in the booth to his left from their books and from their lazy slumbers with irritation, and sometimes with sickness.

"Sickness," quoted College from his elbow, and mumbled something about the faint of heart. Perhaps she was sleeping too, though it seemed a strange sort of thing to murmur in one's sleep. There was a fantastic view in the window across the aisle over the drooping heads of the other passengers that he would want her to see, but he was too afraid to turn to her, startling her, he imagined, from his shoulder, where the intimate weight of her head was resting together with the comfortable weight of his years (if they could be thus quantified), startling her with his old eyes from their reveries that they each imagined were the most perfect ways of being.

"Reverie," she murmured. She must be asleep. He tucked his old coat up to her chin, imagining that the fabric that was merely rough wool to his fingers, and cheaply made at that, had invaded her dream by brushing her neck and chin as a white satin scarf on her wedding day, a talisman into which had been embroidered a sixpence for luck, and that was now wrapping around her in the breeze under a willow that must be full of dew. Then as carefully as it had come, the scarf tenderly alights from her shoulders to become the jib on a mast behind

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 2

her and the grassy ground its deck. And barefoot, and resplendent in white, she sails to the lectern, full of purpose. At the head of the stairs, she meets her groom, his arm out, needing to lift on his shoulders her weight he denies, and so he struggles without expression to put her there, hold her by the ankles; his strength is so much greater than hers, his shoulders exactly as they should be. So she wraps her arms around him—and daddy carries her down the stairs again, giving a little shrug to bounce her into a better place on his back, talking nonsense, and smiling so that the sides of his head keep creasing in tempo with the little laughs she gives him, a charity for the old man he says, because he knows she doesn't know what he means by ambivalence, and wouldn't she like to have lunch now that the wedding's over? and he'll take her away from this fantasy, because it's too simple, because it's too allegorical, it's got potential but it's got flat characters with no dimension. Of course he's right. They count to eighty two together and daddy's no longer so strong. His fingers turn white around her ankles; his back hurts. His shoulders sag under her weight; his eyes well up; he wants to go back; can't we go back? He stumbles more heavily this time; he feels the weight above him unbalance him. If only he could shed that pesky heaviness above, he might save himself from landing face first in the dirt, he might stand upright for a few minutes longer before his knees gave out, or his back broke, split instantly at the spinal fracture from his youth, but the ground interrupts him, and he lurches forward, flinging his years from his shoulders (who knew that mere time could vocalize its departure so piteously?) before bouncing uncomfortably against the rocks, breaking, he is sure, the bones in one leg, an irritable last memory to be left with before being lifted from this reality by an unexpected earthquake.

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 3

The gentleman in the aisle across from him had been shaken awake by one of the more violent hiccups in the train engine. The method of his arousal was unremarkable and ugly as the recently conscious are likely to be, he thought, but for only the command and the power that he brought to facility from his dream, which by his murmuring just moments before, and all in a bout of swinging his head, and his eyes under their lids, with the urgent lethargy of the unconscious, all which made it the more surprising to see him so calm when he came to. Perhaps he was aware of his being watched. He would not put it past the man that he was aware of many more things than were immediately evident; he had been staring disconcertingly in this direction, under the presumption of looking out the window at the scenery, perhaps, but he felt drawn by the gaze even as it passed over his head, and found it a terrible time keeping his eyes and his mind attending the book in his hands, a *Brachten's Engineering* that he did his best to make conspicuous, as if his intellectual integrity was being challenged without even a vocal inquisition from the face of this impostor into his habits, his experience, his schooling. His eyes, imperious, saw all. What did this man see in him when his gaze slid the degree from the window onto him and his book, as it did so often? Like a ram it crushed away his gaze as the stares of those you most respect do so easily, the dominant animals, which must to maintain order, and oh how he was drawn to the incredible order, the quantity of this man. It was a radiation beyond the eccentricity of his features, which were strong, but not strong enough themselves to charm Pandora safely from that too-poorly clasped lid; it reached and curled like an aroma that quite exceeded as if in parody his scentlessness, a courtesy that none of the others had achieved having sat so nervous in their seats, and having no where particularly to go, and having just had lunch after the wedding in the long car, and having bad

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 4

manners. Several of them seemed to be quite enjoying their misery.

But not so for this Mr. Angles (he dubbed him), a man now unperturbed by the shaking of the train, each episode of which seemed to be dulled as if he were obscured behind a thick but totally invisible cotton drape that muffled the distractions and disturbances of his world, and the world of the companion at his shoulder. He stared straight forward with a determination that was quite overwhelming to the trivial business of his environment, and quite superior to it, he blinked once under a strong jolt from below that woke his neighbors—damn them for getting in his way. Excuse me, but I am looking at the view, he said to one, who seemed to think he meant outside the window, beyond which there was nothing, and looked baffled, but out of courtesy, the invention of which was quite an inexplicable thing he thought for today's youth to refute, slid back against his leather seat, and said nothing. Damn this insensitive passenger!

He had missed Mr. Angles spring to action, for now the man was on his feet, and his companion woken from a more peaceful slumber of her own, rubbing her eyes and seeming suddenly without the immediate proximity of her guardian sick under the antagonism of the train engine, which, he noticed, had in only this last interval become a ragged and angry wheezing that shook the entire cabin like the inside carapace of a cat reproducing with fur some ancient confectionary.

Mr. Angles's demeanor was a cruel one, now, an expression of outrage and retribution amplified twenty times by the magnificence of his posture. What horrible vengeance would he wreak for the upsetting of his companion? For the disturbing of his unquiet slumber? Even, perhaps, for the offense of a blink in his eye from a distended motor? This capable thing loomed in the passageway with a dark gravity that seemed to pull in at the walls and at

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 5

him, bending the chrome pipes in the ceiling and the overhead compartments and the narrow carpeted walkway too jaggedly and at such strange angles that he could not imagine this a force for good. Where before his gaze had been drawn implacably to the stream of Mr. Angles's attention out the window, where it diffused (even a strength as great as his it diffused), now it was contained in this corridor, and as fearless and with as capable a mind as he attributed to this handsome stranger, he did not believe any human being could control the charisma of this singular point, made up of the particle of the man and the particle of his brilliance, which for just a moment were wholly separable forces, before he was off down the corridor like the head of a comet. He was unsure in his awe why exactly he felt such annoyance—some vestige of the passenger's late intrusion into his universe, perhaps, but perhaps also because he felt like someone had just very obviously cheated in front of his eyes at an important game of cards, and that he was, due to some clandestine malarkey with his drink earlier in the evening, quite excited that he might see the behavior again. In his haste to do so, tripping over the shoes of his inconvenient neighbor, he bumped into Mr. Angles's companion—a pretty brown eyed girl with long lashes, now that he could see her up close, with skin a shade of train sick green—with hardly an apology from her, and as he trailed her down the corridor towards the back of the train, another atom of vapor in the wake of that mighty creature, he only just had time to think to himself how in such poor repute courtesy and its virtues were these days, before the worst belch from the engine yet shook the corridor and pushed his suddenly bruised leg and face into the carpet. Underneath him, machinery squealed.

III

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 6

The furnace was a character itself. Roaring and snapping, a great animal, a brute but a great animal, for it shied away from the buckets of liquid that the man in the overalls kept drinking to it—he poured the weakly colored medicine down its throat with a desperate deliberation—it put off the most offensive odor. Mr. Briscoe had a shovel in his big hands, which looked like rags to be wiped on, now that they had been close to the monstrous furnace, vomiting ever so unpleasantly black soot and charcoal for no good reason but distemper at its unrighteous treatment. It screamed. A great tremor ran through the shabby place and rippled, almost perceptibly, out into the quarters behind her; would you hold my waistcoat please, College?

It seemed a little flippant of him to ask, like he was ignoring the hurt (and please do not mention the threat, College) of this angry beast, the back of which they all rode like ticks tangled in the hair of a charging stallion.

IV

The explosion was not expected. Though in the mind of old Grinn, who tended the furnace now after things had settled down and that damned crowd had come packing in, there was a suspicion, an exciting vertigo that he tested himself with as a boy over deep gullies; there was little doubt in Grinn's mind, sure as he was that it was not the best one on this train, as he had been recently reminded by the abaptiston, that prick Briscoe; someone somewhere had expected it, as unexpected as it was. The steam control, an oblong thing with a wooden grasp at the end, a Portugal sticker mashed half off from rubbing hands on one metal side, looked tense at the accusation.

He was to make an announcement to the effect in an hours' time, with all haste Captain

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 7

said, that the train was operating normally, as anyone with half an eye could see now out their window, or hadn't gotten drunk on Scotch already like that depressing party of '49ers in the lounge, except not like that. The explosion was not a dangerous explosion, but a not dangerous explosion, that was all that needed saying, but perhaps you might provide some entertainment to make them feel better. A reenactment of the event glorifying that other fellow would be authentic, and maybe he could juggle, since he was the only one of the staff who could you know, good with his hands and all, used to the confusion, yes? "With haste, I said!" He was gone with that, as if that last advice was really a platitude that he, like all good men, found great wisdom in. For his part, there was likely little else to it than his wage.

The intake valves checked out fine on the meter, even after being tapped irritably, as did the exhaust pipes. It was unlikely that anyone had crawled into the furnace, and doubly so since it was on, as it had been for the last day and a half, though an extra bit of fuel the size and composition of a human body would be just the sort of thing to unbalance its chemistry (it was a nice personal mischief to be morbid once in a while, especially in a position such as his where he was responsible for so much life). The idea was distasteful to the facts, however, which put him, against the most scrupulous inquisition, in this very spot for the vast majority of the voyage, including and precluding the recent most memorable past.

Captain Franck did not know much really about how mechanics were run; it wasn't in his life briefing to be keen on a transistor. Grinn could easily baffle him and the rest of the crew, as he was expected to, with the slightest lie, but Franck had little else to offer them than a bluff look, stealing from one trusting sardine (packed in leather) to another; the trust and confidence that is lent to those that are obviously bred from honest stock; the nervous hope for safety; sometimes old-fashioned money when one of them buys duty-free. He passed an old

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 8

couple that had just gone back to honest conversation with his smile; they passed him barely a look when he went by, just a glance, it stole from him a little; how his responsibility kept him from the most liberating things—he sank to his knees and shuffled uncomfortably back to the couple; he kissed her hand and licked his boots and panting until his mouth was dry, and rolled over their feet in the space they had left in their disdain for underseat baggage, and warmed their legs by laying across them, and combed with as much care as he could manage the old man's unkempt hair with all the affection and deference he could muster—and there he was again, giving his squarish grin to a man in garish tweed pants (he put away a cigarette he had been looking sadly at) and the illusion was broken, the old couple was passed unserved. A teenage girl darted a flattering grin at him, a sweet little baby had stopped crying as he approached and asked the family if she needed anything; of course not, they said kindly. It was cruel of them, their smiles. Is there anything we can do to help, Captain?

His plea ran down the ranks, but it was ignored by everyone except that first old couple. A stewardess skirted by him when they both tried to fit through the front cabin door at the same time, swishing swish swish with a smell like petrol, and down to steal from the guests. He tried to forget her name because it was the name of a friend of his who in childhood had trailed along in their games, and who years later he had saved from almost drowning in a pool and never talked to again, and doing a fair job, came up instead with his father's with a more pleasant memory under a garden hose; he wasn't to leave the water on after playing games outside, he must listen and pay attention to what he said, because he was father. "Yes, sir," he could do that for him.

"Yes, sir," his first officer nodded and looked concerned, "I'm paying attention."

Captain Franck felt just about as terrified as he ever had, but it didn't show. He

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 9

chuckled. "This train is going to explode ahead of schedule, and I can't do anything about it."

V

"Dear ladies, I am in most capacities an unknowledgeable and most undiplomatic person, but an answer is expected to the question of those rumblings and hisses that lifted to us all from the floor nigh an hour ago, and that culminated in a most foreboding bang, and as I am the only man of a capacity inclined to assure you, with authority appropriate to my status, of the quality of your situation and mine, I must be for a moment or two both a diplomat and your most trusted friend, though in most capacities, I am unsuited to both tasks. Dear gentlemen, I do not pretend to be an expert in any science but my own, thus must have gratitude to one of you, one Mr. Briscoe, for assessing the situation of the disturbance on this train as not my responsibility according to his expertise, the study of which I must keep confidential and must admit no understanding of.

"If I were of less skill with my instruments, perhaps of the more esteemed capability of a doctor, one of which I know we have aboard—though I assure you that I did not mention a doctor to suggest that there are injuries, or that there will be injuries, no—I would maybe be wondering if the malcontent of dear Nancy here, that's what I call her, with her hiccups and all, was because of some engine deficiency, or some irresponsibility of the operators, which I have already said that by the exceeding expertise of Mr. Briscoe has been disproven, or maybe something else, to which I must say, being for my part now a diplomat, no. No, there is no deficiency with Nancy; no, I have been in the engine room these last few hours with as keen an eye as belongs to an engineer these days; no, you are in the best of hands. The Captain has

by: Drew Castalia

asked me to assure you with these assurances.

"But as I am not political, and have none of the virtues of a politician, of which I know there are three aboard, I know nothing about selecting very carefully what I say, or the manner it is said, or campaigning. But I do know about justice. I know it was just of Mr. Briscoe to burst secretly onto the scene just in time as he did, and conveniently just in time as such to become the hero of this hour, and truly it was so, even if it was in his own best interest as well, to help this poor engineer, who knew nothing about the nature of the problem and still does not, but that it was not a mechanical error with this fine train, Nancy, who has been serviced as carefully as trains are serviced these days by other engineers, close friends, at Newport two days past. Thus, when I say that it was not a mechanical error, I am being just, by telling the truth of my suspicions, to inform you that injustice of the most terrifying kind has been done to us all, but one, who expected it, though it would not be just to name him from my suspicions alone, that we have been sabotaged, and this pretty trip to Bastings, by way of the Horsehead Nebula and Orion Major, is doomed to an untimely end."

VI

They are all taking it rather well, Briscoe thought, and fingered his pocket watch in a moody way that left oily stains on its body; he had not washed his hands thoroughly enough after his performance in the engine room. He had not washed his hands thoroughly enough of the passengers, who now knew better enough of his bad temper to come to him with half-hearted praise. Still, they were taking it rather well. The predominant emotion in the air right now was only of a mild irritation (though Briscoe felt mildly irritated it was affecting him). He

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 11

put it out of his mind long enough to move over for College, who climbed to her seat on the other side of him and offered him a grape.

VII

Be careful, if you can help it, though you are not careful, you are being careful, which under the circumstances worries me. In College's mind, Briscoe scoffed, though her eyes took him for thumbing his watch, pretending to be absent-minded. Have some fruit. He hesitated. He obliged.

VIII

It was an opera. It made him nervous to see it, this opera. This opera was too petty, too sure, too contrived a situation to bear much scrutiny beyond the silent satisfaction of the cynic, too much a moral tale that raged so effortful to convince that this was the truth; the truth, the truth. Passengers watched each other with the accusation not of those whose lives had been betrayed, isolated and lonely, but of children who had been cheated in a petty game, conned, bamboozled by a card trick and denied recompense by some unknown quantity. Where was this quantity, the truth? It mooned for satisfaction in every dissatisfied glare from each passenger. They were playing the game poorly, this game of truth. Only Mr. Briscoe, that great man, and his companion (who was sheltered from the airborne agent from which they all suffered—an irritation is the best way to describe it succinctly—by his great radiance) were immune, and they bent under the weight of their immunity on their shoulders. Who had

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 12

ruined the game? Who had crashed the party? Who had made this trip, so innocent a hope across Orion Major to Bastings, for pleasure and luxury, so dandy an affair, for the luxury of escape on a train, a real train! called Nancy! so lavish the decor, for the most authentic experience, so carefully chosen the passengers, for the ultimate ambivalence, so entrepreneurial the venue, for safety (hah!) and adventure, so expert were the crew at operating and devising these scenarios that they had become truly seasoned to their routine, and were the most pliable for little concessions, for they were bored with the institution of adventure already, and were so seemingly in it with the rest of them, for they worried, though perhaps for them it was an exhilarated agony, for they seemed very much riled by the incident indeed, so much so that the shouts from the main cabin seemed to penetrate from the front of the train through the great din of the shaking, but on the whole much better behaved engine stacks, grinding their choleric discomfort away to an invisible timer near the back. Mr. Briscoe, that great man, was the answer. His secrets must be kept his secrets for them all to be safe.

Only a man that grand and with so numerous and distinguished of features would have the audacity, smoking his pipe just so in the smoking room, he saw it plainly, his incredible and justified pride, to play the game by his rules and his highly developed sense of irony and self-satire. There he was fingering his watch, making it dirty with a reason that was obscure to his admirer as the reason he had sabotaged the engines and then fixed the rumbling they had caused. What joke was he having? If only he would say, and they could laugh about it together, please Mr. Angles, tell me the punch line and I will laugh and laugh and laugh. I will follow you everywhere, just tell me something, speak to me! He had gotten up to introduce himself, thinking it time to defect from the side of the boring and quotidian, under the shade under the magnificent wingspan of this man, which, his arms held out, would shelter a city, a

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 13

very cosmopolitan one, by the excellent cut of his jacket, to the sun of his respect, for surely there was something he needed, some conspirator to sacrifice his life boldly for his cause, he was about to introduce himself to his good graces when his young companion cut him off, insensitive to his admirer's embarkation of mind and to Mr. Angles's (Mr. Briscoe's) authority, climbing over his legs awkwardly with a chuckle to his side, and tempting him with a fruit that he forbade her to pick from its stem, and then having been picked, his authority scuppered, his admirer shrank back to his treated leather passenger chair to stare with spurned eyes at his hero, who now chatting lamely with his companion (why did he let himself be ensorcelled by such triviality?), hesitated then ate the grape from her hand like a normal person, foolish and reprieved from his majesty. He hated her for her inability to understand him, and him; that great man, sucking at a grape so, who would cause her death, that stupid girl; he will shed you of him and seize his majesty from your temptation as blithely as he has conned us with his treachery, and as deftly, 'lo.

IX

The train hovered a meter above and below the place where one might think it should be comfortable when at rest. Like a bumblebee, it hovered inaccurately in this way between the two largish magnetic dams and attracted little particles to its sides, automatic repair machines that made tiny incisions into Nancy's hull, filling this one with this metal and another with yet more. The station proper was a beehive that dwarfed the bee in size and importance and energy; it was swarming with other bees, coming and going, going and coming, all on schedule and in harmony. This one was empty; inside it no one had yet arrived to fill the place with

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 14

complimentary drinks and traditional freeze-dried consumables, with laughter about how nice it would be to go on vacation and whether they would like to eat their clam chowder then or wait until later, and footfalls that, leaving the feet of their owners, would travel down through the thin carpet and the metal hull into the baggage compartment. Long-term checked baggage rested there in piles that could only have been arranged by the most delicate or the most careless valets, so precarious was their architecture. Among them, even though the ship had been swept and thoroughly investigated by trained crew and infallible machines, would scurry an ant, wingless and stupid, and find in its mindless efficiency the jelly sandwich that had not been properly sealed in its bag, and die emulsed in a wall of sticky food that could have kept it alive forever, as forever is to an ant.

Perhaps if the ant had lived it would have in its incoherence escaped the molecular cleansers that scoured away the infrequent grain of dust, the airtight automatic hatch door, the endless and hot hydraulic pipe system, and the tamper-sensitive pneumatic explosives set carefully to explode on a timer, to emerge onto the passenger deck, where it would have made poor progress along the rough carpet to the dull light at the end, the soft glow of the furnace that exceeded three hundred degrees even on maintenance (a helpful scrap of paper convincingly nailed to the wall—though it was done so in exactly the same way in every engine room in every iteration of this model train on the market—detailed exactly how many degrees that would be in fahrenheit, and on the back, celsius). There, it would either in ecstasy, all-consuming pain, or a rather boring indifference, no one could tell, be transformed instantly into gaseous form and sucked out into space.

The passenger cabins, the dining car, the lounge, the viewing car, all would be none the wiser, each bisected by the same long strip of carpet and draped all over, haphazard as if under

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 15

neglected laundry, by the shadows cast sundry by the furniture: a leather chair with its twin in martial repose, twinned again by the ranks before and behind them, and again to their side across the aisle, and once more, very subtly, by their doppelgangers leering strangely from the polished window, waiting for doppelganger passengers with doppelganger lives, storage compartments that bulged above them, wanting to be milked, emergency lighting that lined the edges of things, looking very tacky in the deep shadows and auburn rays from flood lights on the station, each ray muted by the tinting on the windows, but still so totally unmolested by the expanse of nothingness dividing them that their light seemed to penetrate with a clarity that made the distinction between inky black and old wrinkled orange so sharp—alarming fissures that split the frame of the train and then blended seamlessly into black space.

X

It is the delight of no one, but no one, to see College clearly. She has a clerical name, and a distinguished voice which carries very clearly according to her teachers, a watch that ticks faithfully, and a very comfortable seat made of leather. It has come of age for her to wish for better trappings than she has, arranged so delicately as she was on the flight plan, to sit so close to her good friend, and very sweetly talked to by an uninteresting fellow down the aisle, and still having beef minced for her a la carte. Having a hazard like this blended the smells, the faces grinning obscenely like idiots, the cocoon-like luggage that in every awkward way was being removed, replaced, opened, stuffed, organized, and replaced again, all the tricky problems that she would under better circumstances keep totally isolated in separate places on her plate—little College poked at a quorum of broccoli here, a little smear of ketchup that had

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 16

specks, a galaxy of macaroni smeared with cheese that seemed to attract green, occasionally leafy satellites all around, sometimes she would reorient the plate so that the picture was different, but the the elements were the same, and always recognizably exclusive. It was all such a mishmash on the train, where she was among the broccoli, and the lamentably limp spinach, and an obese carrot with a toddler and a soda pop, all now socializing, all now in ambush of order, burst from their compartments where in rows they patiently expected their delivery to her plate, and where she would analyze them, point out their soft spots, rotten spots, ticklish places, and penalize poor Briscoe here for their imperfection.

Briscoe was the only healthy one. She loved his mustache; it was so bushy. His hair was balding, a deficiency she thought he must loathe like any other man, but it was an addendum to many other human frailties under which hid the real strength of Briscoe, alien and charming and well-shaped, and succulent like a leaf. She supposed he wished she would marry him, it would only fit a man of his proportion, a man who liked to be described. To escape that, College turned inward, to a plantain orchard she found in her bosom, an escape from the mess of the angry ant farm around her where the trees had all been planted in straight rows and of the same species by Germans who would soon discover that their genetically engineered paradise was ecologically impractical. College would not warn them any more than the owner of an ant farm might warn the ants inside that they were trapped. She predicted their trajectory and their speed and deepest desires and was right. The orchard withered away, and she sat in the proceeding desert in a white fold-out chair with a glass of lemonade, watching sadly as the smoke on the horizon became yellow beetles became noisy bulldozers that tore away her world in a fury, revealing underneath a silver train named Nancy helmed by an engineer heartbroken by the death of his closest friend. She felt better, looking at all of them

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 17

from out here in space, because she could see clearly their destiny.

A "bang!" got College's attention in the cabin, but it was just a passenger who had found and spitefully crushed an ant with his shoe. As infuriating as the others were, she felt she owed him something for finishing her thought for her.

Her ambulant little diversions curled her hair, she thought, and smoothed it in the face of disaster. Stare briefly, face, and reflect on your place at the end of everyone's world, waiting there with mouth open to swallow our souls bit by bit or whole like an alligator.

XI

An enigmatic timpani of wisdom has kept me abreast of the late proceedings with a veracity that I had not thought possible at all by an act of inspiration, the springs of which well up accidentally here and forcefully—with thrust—there like sharks under the ocean, riding invisible subaquatic waves that ripple even where there is no great evidence of it. The act of sublimity, I had thought, was no more than the transference of solid matter into gas without an intermediate stage as the result of an intense input of energy, though now some intense energy, probably the frenetics of the late proceedings, has given to me the nectar of those romantics that knew the true laws of momentum, and rode them masterfully though there was no great evidence for it. It smarts, this revelation, where it is written in my book, this journal, being inscribed unto now these words—is null. It shames, written in this scrawling hand, a desiccant that leaches I see from the page its thirsty due—is a betrayer. It is so weepy a feeling, this intolerable non-science, but only appropriately so, for my manner seeks out and in only a short time intimates blueprints for the measurement of this endless vista by arcane

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 18

trigonometry, which having been uttered from my muddled brain becomes magic, and then transforms this page once again to calmness, though there is no great evidence of it. Here, my journal entry is written, is finished, has an end and a beginning. College will like that; I will show it to her when she is finished with her own. I do tread so dangerously close to shame in those conquerable moments of indecision that I may have given only my vices to that young lady who shares my room. I am glad it is gone, now.

It is not so much penitence now that I yearn for, as a more diligent scientist would in his scripture after such a critical breach of faith. I look around at the monkeys, and see them screaming, and bleating, and my desecration of this material world is suddenly and absolutely forgiven.

XII

One must never attempt to write while tired, thought College, drooping at her page with her pen such that the ends of her sentences made waterfalls of ink into the margins, and never after strenuous exercise of the body, which focuses the vapors of being in places less conducive to spontaneity and a blithe imagination than strenuous exercise of the mind, under the directive of which a good book can become a thorough and compelling agent. Thus, almost thus, had her mind been engaged so unabatedly for the last eight hours that her lucid moments, coming and going in patches like hills obscured strangely by the overhead cumulus, were now moments of irritably awakened reason, the sleep of which bred monsters that sprouted from her journal like ice crystals from a berry, bursting and making rotten patches; carefully reconstructed as they might be, they would never equal the sum of their latter day

by: Drew Castalia

algebra.

It did not please College to invite the apparition of fate this way, or to write about oneself before one was forty, so she closed her journal, and hoped Briscoe, who had finished writing in his little pocket book already, would have something more interesting to read about; something less reflective, pray!

It did seem very comical of the Captain to be passing down the aisle this way, offering drinks himself. Here he stopped at her and Briscoe's row and offered a complimentary carbonated beverage and a pair of eye glasses to the man across the way, who seemed to be staring very hard this way, perhaps struggling to read the safety information on the side of Briscoe's seat. He was a sane man to do so, but refused the Captain's offer, flushing like he was embarrassed of his poor eye sight, poor man—confronting such trivial deficiency in the face of the larger problem they were facing now much sooner than expected, that comfortable end. This made the Captain depressed (he shuffled uncomfortably and offered the passenger a chance to change his mind), and being refused again he turned his great heavy-lidded eyes, set on his face like a mated pair of massive carpenter bees, toward College and Briscoe. "How can I serve you? Would you like a carrot juice, sir, madam, perhaps you would care for some lemonade? Let me serve you," they seemed to say.

XIII

The worry, his incredible worry; it aged him, Captain Franck, and his hair already of cinders. There he was, at the beginning, offering it up to them all in the guise of Carnelion carbonated soda pop, or root beer, or the occasional juice, stealing from them all through the

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 20

crease in his forehead, his worry, which gradually deepened with unsatisfied hunger, eating their waste, as the night shifted—from the garlic, filling the air of the later evening with an easy scent that lifted the bones of them all and made them light, and their tongues light, and their heads, too, such that they replaced their miniature wine glasses on his tray (he had relieved all of the stewards for the night) and said, 'I am drowsy,' but also declined of his pillows, for they had brought their own—it shifted from all that to the later evening, where those inclined smoked airily in the appropriate compartments, and slouched uneasily by the edges of the Billiards, waiting for their turn, some letting their minds wander into drowsiness and abandoning their vigil, scented out their leather passenger chairs, then lasted the evening watching the rest of the game play out hauntingly on the back side of their eyelids like a repeating vid, and some getting their chance and regretting the inconsequence of a failed bet, a lost game, a frustration that itched out of the skin where it was born as self-criticism; some just played the game. The early morning, as he trundled by to collect garbage (they could not refuse him that service—he stole it from them before he realized it was so, and felt so guilty about it that he had not slept for want of a balm for his accidental sins), was for those few still awake like skating on the skin of a custard, sweet and slightly burned, gliding with the levity of someone whose muscles threaded more easily the surface than stop. Stopping was stiff and unfamiliar, so they gambled those moments not spent at the tables, instead following the trundling wheels of the Captain's push trolley up and down the aisle with their eyes, burnt out by artificial sweetener, and their fingers, twitching and flaky. "Do you need help, sir?" In the dark, beyond the silhouette of the shaking head, were the fragments of some unformed planet, pieces of which passed by the windows without any meaningful absolute trajectory, existing only as he saw them, now with eyes that were dry and stretched like cured meat, now with his

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 21

memory, where he had seen a million like it, great rocks through which he had threaded like a worm a thousand times.

When it bubbled up, it bubbled up. It was like a fish. Captain Franck caught it, and its taste was unpalatable. A passenger in one row peered at him strangely as he spit the taste out of his mouth, but she seemed to understand. Her state, at this four hours in the morning, was an understanding one. He waltzed on with the trundle buggy, up and down, up and down the aisle. Then it was morning.

The lights faded in very slowly just beyond the threshold at which any but the most attentive human being could detect its progress from one immediate moment to another, and an Earth dawn was reproduced with all but the most superficial inaccuracy aboard the Nancy, where it would remain until evening, a light routine for which was oddly omitted from the train's programming. It was spotless, this train, under the scrutiny of the molecular cleansers, and as the tubes of white light stretched away the shadows of the cabins, a somnolent radiance seemed to creep out of its cleanness where brief dust bunnies of yellow or blue light had been scooped up from the rays of some distant star and laid about the cabin in dirty clouds during the night. The authentic iron strongbox in the back, the vintage wood panels, the stain down the center of the center of the carpet from what would surely have been an endlessly variable stream of passengers, all perfect and maintained. This was the real thing, thought Captain Franck, and slipped down a glass of whiskey from the train's suite bar. This is what it was like to be human, and shuddered as the stuff hit his empty stomach.

XIV

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 22

I feel compelled even now to mention my thoughts as they appear, thought College, suddenly in a stream of unmitigated consciousness, carefully in little balls of hair (of the sort accumulated from bits of the carpet and the cat), nervously, then they do not move at all. The water is dammed by an overwhelming viscosity that owes an instantly suffusing self-awareness to a childhood of rigor and expectations. There, the water is thawed. Damn the dammers, with their logs, enormous pencils as yet unsharpened that link seamlessly as in a phalanx to restrict liberty where it exists at all and has not been curbed and shaped and made into a meticulous and thoroughly impenetrable network of reservoirs by the cobwebs of an anxious youth. I played their hand for a while, and stare at my ace right now, just one fragile card that tears very easily against the pressure of an expectation. I do not expect much longer that it will be whole. And it is torn.

If you must know, it comforts me a little, these ripped pieces of paper. Despite myself I arrange them on the wooden kitchen table in an exquisite reproduction of their original position, the seams are the blunt lines of a childhood scribble, and seeming unauthentic, are dismissed by even me who ripped them. Then, retrieving the card, whole again by the supremacy of my disbelief, I rejoin the game to the delight of the other players, all of whom had begun already to feel lonely. There is Briscoe, across the table, with a great stack of money. There is Lima, a University friend whom I lost contact with years ago, she is losing. The Captain of the train is here, giving out loans as fast as they materialize in his pockets, sometimes not fast enough, where they begin to fade into place in his amazed mouth, his eye sockets, which have always been empty, and in place of the graying hair that had already a sense of capital about it from the beginning. A candle in the center gutters with the anxiety of the drowning Captain, who pushes the table rudely in his fits of thrashing, here the flame

by: Drew Castalia

points towards me, the candle wax pools together and rolls unhardening in my direction. The dirty man from the engine room appears and lifts the table a little to give the wax incentive, and it runs into my lap, scalding but were this not a dream.

There is one other at the table, who is so nondescript that I do not notice him for any other reason than I have taken a deliberate count of the participants. It is his turn to bet.

XV

You do not recognize me, abaptiston, thought Grinn, where he pored through Briscoe's belongings and left his framed picture on the bed. He took a moment to stare down at the majesty with which the saboteur's photograph was adorned, a gilt frame molded in many marvelous patterns, but that was scratched away by age and travel and the friction of his other belongings; tainted. He was careful not to scratch it more as he replaced the article in the bag, afraid that by accidentally damaging the simulacrum all its sheen might break away into fragments and with them the remains of Briscoe's soul. Intimate histories surfaced like dead fish in a freshwater pool, severed from their secrets, under the scrutiny of his trespassing.

Briscoe had a strong allergy to most kinds of fruit, revealed a small container of anti-hystemic medication. He approved of fishing, even in off-seasons, as an activity for building concentration, said his wilderness brochures, some of which had been highlighted where a particularly desirable location was advertised or a bargain was to be had for fishing equipment. Here was an extra box of tissues, just in case, a towel, presumably for the same reason, a bundle of note cards bound with a rubber band on which had been written his various thoughts about the cooking he had encountered in his travels in the Polaris system (in

particular the moon of one of the outer planets), indeed all of Ursa Minor, and a predictably blank entry on one labeled "Bastings" at the top in felt marker with an ambiguous exclamation point next to it; on the side of a cheaply made pen was advertised a conference for amateurs interested in astrodynamic engineering; a tiny petroleum welding torch of the sort used by hobbyists. This was his public private self; Grinn was looking for something else, something more fundamental, a little crack that under the seat might expand into a flaky mess, a rift through which would pour soft yellow foam that was rough to the touch, and dirty.

It seemed dangerous and Copernican to think of Briscoe as anything other than the hero who had struggled as hard as any hero would in the engine room beside him yesterday, but also strangely seductive, as if the image of Briscoe with a sneer on his face, a chipped tooth, a bandaged eye, and a swarthy sort of accent was, like the controversial shape of the human world, one of those incontrovertible truths that one should instantly recognize as the truth once heard. He had not seen that the other passengers had felt quite so strongly about discovering scientific reality, as the extent of their malice was a rude word at the man who had spoiled their vacation. It was just a game that had been cheated at for most of them, a bit of bad karma that might somehow come back to him in the short duration of his and their remaining lives (assuming he had not a scheme to escape from the train, but again it would be one that would fool them, and they would not know that he was chuckling at their rainy weekend from the safe distance of some escape pod or teleportation suit while they were combusted by Nancy's engine violently shaking to pieces, or surviving that—the vacuum of space.

Grinn more than anyone else had been cheated of fulfilling his task on this interstellar trip. The frustration of it made his search through Briscoe's possessions more furious, and his careful perusal of the man's habitat became a ransack. Irrationally and in fits of temper he

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 25

ripped the covers on the man's mattress bunk to pieces looking for what he must be hiding, pocketing fistfuls of trivial garbage hoping that their absence might cause the man grief, and paused for long moments despite the risk of being discovered to cry into his arms, to rock on the desk chair that he had broken, tense and with his face bunched up into wrinkles, and then stand again and, hunched, resume his work. It was not a large room, but there were many nooks, many locked boxes, for Briscoe was a secretive man.

Under it all, Grinn finally found it, the solution to his problem, in a locked redwood container that had to be smashed loudly on the floor three or four times to open. He pulled the rubbish out of the box, and stared at his prize through the broken glass. He had not known exactly what he was looking for when he was driven here, but now he knew, and his insanity, his toxic, liquidy hate took shape and settled on his vision as the sun's reflection off a bright window sometimes does, and hardened into the surest sort of purpose, an icy groan that, when elevated as one does to the noise of gurgling water in one's throat becomes a hymn, a crystalline hymn that with a slippery surface like an ice cube sweats surety in globules, here all at once one falls, and there is action; then there is nothing as the others grow on its sides like grapes. Grinn fingered the allergy medication in his hands. This water pooling at his feet was meant for baptism.

XVI

Where has Grinn disappeared to? thought Captain Franck, and pushed his way through a knot of people, each whispering quietly about the heat and what they thought the tremors might be about, and whether this was how their journey would end. None of them even

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 26

stopped the Captain for a question; they knew by now that he couldn't do anything about it, that he was incompetent and scared. It depressed him that they didn't want anything of him, wouldn't inconvenience him, ask him to perform miracles, no one did that any more. Where has Grinn disappeared to? Probably the drink, he thought. That was why the Captain had visited the engine room in the first place, though Franck was sure that the engineers would not demand anything of him, or inconvenience him, or ask him tenderly for the miracle of some fetched liquor.

Grinn was not there, but his spirit, who wafted offensive and heavy and smoldering (like a furnace) in the room, made him sweat, and pushed the little thermometers far past the danger zone. If there was any saboteur on this train, it was negligence, there in that room, where its odor mingled with wet rust and the smell of overflowing hydraulics, a treatise that was by virtue of its malevolence totally alive. Tenderly it took him in, sheltered him in a few moments from seed to slender stalk, which, flowering, bore black fruit, and the abscission of that fruit was his pushing back through the corridor, past the whispering people, suddenly full of dreadful purpose.

XVII

Briscoe's admirer only barely survived embarrassment when he found himself momentarily more distracted by the Captain, dashing past them down the aisle, than by Briscoe himself, who had almost caught his gaze a moment before. He dared not look again so soon, and chose instead to cradle the image of him in his mind, where now he sat with such self-control, looking like he might very suddenly burst from his own human shape and reveal

by: Drew Castalia

himself against all custom, his normalcy shed from his body and rippling unnoticed by all the oblivious and the mundane on the train with them, who could not appreciate real revelation. They were sharing a bed with cockroaches who scoop food and twitch and only approach cognizance at specific hours of the day. An emptiness was all he had to distinguish himself from their gluttonous, insectoid lives, full of disease. This emptiness, a clinical hum that gave his limbs life and animated them with formidable vigor, thirsted in Briscoe's presence, though he clothed himself adequately in slime.

XVIII

It was a veritable undone, this thing which had been sent to him, a magical bullet that had pierced his brain and under the auspices of peace, truce, compatibility, and a sureness about all of these things, changed his personality such that Grinn the Engineer was no longer Grinn the Engineer, but Grinn the Vengeful, the animation of his lesser ambivalence into a substance more potent than the majority of his decency—wherein he had until now been a coward, squawking at the edge of his cage at the traitor with the bit of dangled food. Now he was free. Gorged on the origin of the experience, the bordered picture of College that had been half smashed in his hands, he did what one would expect of someone who had led a very calm and satisfying life, mostly in the countryside, had many children, and had just discovered that due to some administrative anomaly would not be required to pay a tax on his formidable income, none of which Grinn had ever experienced; he chuckled a bit.

Then he chuckled a bit more. What was funny was not that he had found what he had been looking for, or that what he had been looking for had turned out to be very funny (the

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 28

picture of College was a fairly bland one, of her sitting prim on the horizontal bough of some sinuous tree with her legs crossed, and looking rather cross about something); what was funny was that it was only after becoming so violent and self-destructive, and tearing open the otherwise worthless contents of this most secure box that he found what he was looking for, but portals to his more efficient discovery already littered the room about him. In fact, the discovery was the tremendous number of portraits, photographs, lithographs, sketches, paintings, doodles, and lightpanels of College in various containers, itself. Here in Briscoe's room, amidst the soft glow of the stars (he had left the light off despite his search, anxious about being found, but he had found the object of his search before they had; them, who would be looking for him now), amidst his obsession and his secret love, scattered around him like shattered glass among the pieces of his own devastation—some bent and broken tools, a drinking glass he had stepped on and pulverized, the torn sheets, splintered pieces of wooden drawers that had been hauled from their slots and battered to planks against the bed frame, a first-aid kit that was missing its bandages, caramel candies that had been smashed, crunched, squished, mashed into the carpet, and a two-part ornamental figure of a man with his daughter on his shoulders, snapped apart.

A corner of all this was left in his hands, clutched, the remainder floating like a condensing mist somewhere between the claw of a madman and the mouth of a saint, a volatile substance that in the light of day would ripple as if being blown by a breeze where there was none, but there being no proper daylight, and in the corridor only the mutilated whisper of air as it was sliced and fed gruesomely through the steel vent, it filled the room, the rest of it, where, chuckling to himself, Grinn surveyed his new kingdom, the domain of his control, and seized at the rest of it with his outstretched hand hooked like a claw.

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 29

Nancy would take her own life, splitting herself open like those drawers in imitation of his rage, but for now it was peaceful. The saints came marching in, breathing through their mouths, and there they sat with the madmen, drinking tea and playing chinese checkers. At the board was Briscoe, who would have managed to cheat somehow, even though he seemed too distracted with College's mistakes, scooping up and replacing all the wrong marbles, he said; and there was the Captain, giving her hints that she wouldn't listen to, and, having shouted them, turned in apology to someone else, someone nondescript, and having done that, feeds scraps from his meal to Grinn's whining boyhood terrier Nancy, who then, bizarrely, climbs aboard the table to make a controversial move.

XIX

As far as Briscoe could tell, a vast uncertainty was all that remained after the tremors began. No other real debris from the vibrating apart of the luggage compartments below and their contents having been ejected into space remained but this, an emptiness and a vague sense of disappointment that the real experience of their voyage was perhaps far more historical than they would ever have imagined. They reacted to the sudden tremors, unsettlingly, with the very human reaction of uncertainty and shock. In retrospect, had there been any human survivors to the event that had destroyed them in the end—though precisely what that was had been forgotten, even if the details as to the peculiar arrangement of their transportation remained—had even one remained, and if they had been particularly well versed in their own history, they might have remarked that the experience on this train, named Nancy perhaps by some overzealous interpretation of the latter habits of human custom, was

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 30

no doubt miles closer to the proper "human experience" than the brochure for the voyage originally suggested. Perhaps, thought Briscoe, that human might even think that the unexpected and explosive end to the "historically accurate, personally enriching, and luxurious" trip to Bastings was equally as arbitrary as the catastrophe with which he, being not only an expert on his own history but a participant, was morbidly familiar. But Briscoe was uncertain, never having met one.

His uncertainty was effusive; it led a contained and, Briscoe thought, humble life under his radar, where during familial events or particularly demanding University dinners it occasionally let itself out and, on a leash, barked in a way that was very distracting. Under normal circumstances, the extent of this flaw, which he had thought might one day be meditated away with special therapy, meant that he might pluck unwittingly at his fingers or if he was at a University dinner, at that, but now it was tumultuous and growling, the sound of a worm digging through the ground heard by a tiny ear. At this rate, the train would not explode in a sudden but expected moment of violence, but be shaken to pieces; here an antenna; here a loose control panel; here the docking clamps; the cabins one by one. This made him uncertain; it was not how he expected to end this trip.

College had taken to sleeping on his shoulder for the last few days, and he doubted that it was part of the ruse, as they had signed on together as teacher and student, a relationship much closer (if it could be quantified) to their natural relationship outside the bounds of this vacation. She did not want to move at first when the vibrations had begun, a turbulence that in her dreams took the form of the wind rushing very powerfully through the tines of a wind chime, but she shrunk, and in the dream she came to be standing against one great bar of the wind chime, which resonated so deeply, so obtusely, that her ears rang their own response a

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 31

cappella in her brain and her body was tossed up and down on the convulsing metal. She pushed herself away from him a few minutes after it had started: a full murmur from a musing hum sung contentedly in a shower (that to everyone on board seemed right around the corner) from the drip of water from a sweating ice cube. The sound it made was almost aquatic, and it roused College immediately to the purpose of using the toilet, towards which she skirted about Briscoe and navigated down the aisle, staring at the stripe down its middle so she might not be looked at with uncertainty, and perhaps also to keep her balance after a very disoriented awakening. She wanted it to be over, she thought, waiting for the "occupied" light over the toilet to fizzle out and for the balding man inside to emerge, look at her uncertainly (she had not escaped!), and pull up his trousers enough to push past her to his watching wife; she wanted this to be the end of it, this vibration. She powdered her nose, and her reflection leaped about; she sat on the toilet, and she watched the bar of soap roll to and fro on the sink shelf, tracing some mathematically complex route to the shampoo and back again; she washed her hands with it, and she remained with them on the fixtures there, amoebal like the suds that were stuck to the walls of the sink—sea foam burning away under a fluorescent sun.

XX

Captain Franck saw the best in people; it was not his fault. There, under a heath, was a very pretty bird, nesting, and there, on top of a stack of bricks, was an insect that very carefully crawled, losing, perhaps forever, the one object that would have made it the most happy of its kind. This was the best of them, that old lady under the ragged coverlet; she would have brought that from home, a family treasure subscribed some sentimentality by an accident, a

by: Drew Castalia

spilling of wine and a moment later a spilling over of lust as the secret predecessor to her future husband made a great shadow across the coverlet (she remembered it in her dreams on long train voyages)—but not now, it was a coverlet that had wrapped her first child and that still smelled of his little body long after his departure and his tragic death; that old man, he knew, carefully shifting his weight on his leather cushion. That man wished it were harder, he did; he did not know he could press a button to make the seat harder and him, just for a moment, the most happy human alive, so he just dealt with it like he had dealt with his own son, in short sentences, and like he had dealt with his affairs when they sold the house, also (Franck desperately wanted to tell him, but he pushed on down the aisle, filled with his terrible purpose).

A cork popped in the lounge behind him as the celebrators cheered their own end like humans are disposed to do. It would likely have been trailed by a feeble stream of their excellently chilled champagne onto the carpeted floor (staining it for the last time) if Franck's normally solicitous gaze had not escaped that vision with a quick look ahead of him to the increasingly crowded aisle (he turned to the next cabin, twisted the doorknob, stepped through). Cold kept him at it, this stepping through of things, a chilliness that was perhaps the premonition of outer space, a void that would drown out his capabilities, freeze his strong hands (they were meant for throwing, said his father under the hose) until they were collected by a larger object and broken into mere pieces of their once human form, pieces that would not be less fragmented, less immobilized, less drowned than they were in this cabin. The chill became a cool breeze, an hallucination of oasis in this cabin, sweltering with human presumption and human smells.

The heat was excruciating. In her sleep, the old woman would have shed the bit of

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 33

history she was wrapped in to the floor, where it would be stained by the champagne. The old man would be dancing, reveling with the rest, unaware that his perfect moment had just slipped him by, and he would wonder, as the air was sucked out suddenly from the cabin, and the windows slipped with a scratch like little mouse nails on a doorknob and scratched with a slip like little mouse feet, what he had failed to accomplish in his life. It would never occur to him that button, that a trivial moment of real comfort might have changed the meaning of his life. It was human life at its best.

The bodies that crammed the narrow aisle, dancing out of sync like agitated animals for an unexpected audience, gave off a heat of their own that was almost as suffocating as that from Nancy, who thrashed to a steady vibration of her own. Nancy, who's father would outlive her if he was not dead already. But somewhere, a single maddening voice sung the tune to which all these "people," whom he clawed away before him now that they were beyond his generosity, throbbed—a song like blood that beat through an organ and lifted it from inactivity to an arcane tempo. The hymn made a trail that he followed with his fingers, a radius of disease from some imprecise and dysfunctional explosion that had accelerated the purpose of this trip, the terrible purpose, into the space of a few minutes, allowing it, perhaps, to be at last complete before its new finale. Its lyrics left themselves trails on his brain and carved troughs between its artificial divisions. Vision blurred, but not by itself; vision blurred into his balance, into his sense of geometry, into a convalescent soup in which floated two cubes of insoluble ice. They circled in the sweet mixture, seemingly significant, but if one stared hard enough and with enough intensity at this image, between them materialized the truth of it (here Franck stepped through the door to the passenger quarters to a brief chill). The moment of most perfect meaning for all these passengers was there, the meaning for their

by: Drew Castalia

humanity, encrypted.

Grinn took an especially long moment in the mirror. The darkness was made heavier now by the heat, the cumbersome shroud that hung on everything as if a whole flock of theatre-goers had simultaneously disposed of their clothing on the hatstand, the broken drawers, the torn-open bed, the sink edge, the shower head (its running hiss was just around the corner), and him, but it left bare the ice cube in its glass, duplicated by the mirror, circling, and circling, and circling, but slowly.

Here the door slid open and all those garments of darkness were flattened into shadows against the back of the room, though without them he was just as blind. The whiteness obscured the hatstand, the broken drawers, the torn-open bed, the sink edge, the running shower head, and him, but there in a pool of soft edges rested the ice cubes, seen only by the man in the door, now only abstract, for a silhouette has no specific features.

XXI

Briscoe thought it not unusual that his room was so dark, as he had left it that way, and being only there for his allergy pills (the grape had been enough, and the heat, to get his head spinning), he did not bother to turn on the lights or endeavor even for a flashlight as what little of the room he could see, made messy by the tremors and very probably poor housekeeping, he supposed, was obscured once more behind the closing door. The carpet was perfect for shuffling, so he shuffled in case he might run into things, which he did frequently, towards the bed, under which he reached about for a certain bag. It was void. He was never the best at remembering where he put these sorts of things, in the drawers? no, it wouldn't be there, it

was too big, perhaps he had simply left it on the bed or it had been misplaced by housekeeping. No matter how authentic, this assumption of the most inconvenient human flaws felt put upon now as he wished for more elegant and abstract ways of finding his belongings than the eyeball and the brittle finger, which even now stubbed itself against something hard. He felt it most in his head where the allergy was.

He eventually found the bag upturned on the floor by his shuffling perhaps, or maybe one of the tremors now that they had become more violent, and was relieved that he had not left it below in the cargo hold (which the train had left behind in its disintegrating sclerosis). Normally he would be in control, but his headache seemed to resonate to a song, a hymn of the train's destruction that was echoed by hysteria in the hallways outside and by one crooning voice, the soprano with a voice like ice, never melting. It was a strange sort of dissatisfaction then, when he could not find his pills, that entered into his sympathetic reverie for their imminent destruction, like an itch into a crevasse of the body that because of one's posture was now unreachable but by help. College could not scratch it for him. Where was she again? Oh yes.

He thought at first it was his allergies, but in an instant light flooded his eyeballs with pain and receded also, and with a faint click there was his room, exposed by the dirty yellow overhead lights, and there was College, staring at him from hundreds of his picture frames, all broken, all stolen from their hiding spots and broken, oh yes. His first muddled thought was that the tremors had hit this part of the train harder than the rest; his second was a jolt of surprise as a voice said behind him, like ice, like the crystal tones of some prehistoric chant, "I know your secrets, Frederick Briscoe."

Grinn tried to be abstemious in his gloating. In many ways this felt like a confession for him, and listing all of the reasons why he thought so in his mind, where a very peculiar melody turned it into a sort of musical poem that was whipped into stiff peaks and hardened to mantra, broke away his anxiety about never knowing how he might have finished this trip. He asked Briscoe whether he felt this anxiety, though he supposed not because Briscoe had sabotaged the train. Free consciences, he went on about, and spent some time talking in a slow voice punctuated by sobs about Nancy, his old dog. Briscoe had not played by the rules, explained Grinn, he had tried to escape the responsibility that each and every of the pedestrian passengers on this voyage had accepted for personal enlightenment, luxury, and experience, for the game, and Grinn had intervened on behalf of the rules. But Briscoe had not escaped, had he? No, he had revealed the man's secret ambivalence and surrounded the room in it: so many picture frames that were now arranged such that they seemed to stir, the cross expression shifting nervously to the sad one, to the mouth full of white teeth and the long lashes, and back to sullen. They were all hard looks, he was sure, in Briscoe's mind now. "You are as human as the rest of us."

What, Grinn said, did compel you? Why ruin this? And here his finger was aimed at the pretty table lamp, inlaid with a wistful scene of cowboys hunting Indians in India. We have all the details right.

Insects tapped at the windows, scratching against them at incredible velocities their carapaces which, scratched and scratched again, revealed themselves to be bits of the train that had already vibrated off and had been caught by the thing's gravity in transit. In ten minutes

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 37

the little feelers that were really free floating wires and the proboscis that was the straw in a child-proof cup and some sheaves of paper like wings were replaced by a different insect with some other scavenged body, and then others arrived to beat mercilessly against the glass with a sound like a hail storm or, more appropriately, a swarm of locusts.

"I know you sabotaged my train," Grinn shouted over the din, "I know, despite your silence and your red face, that you were using my train for some personal goal, and that you broke the rules to do it. And now I have thwarted you. I have sabotaged the saboteur. I know his secrets, that he is as human as the rest of us, and that I can torture him for it. Whatever carefully timed scheme you had for the destruction of this train is useless now. You will not destroy Nancy because I will destroy her before you!"

XXIII

See, it cannot be kept, but by writing it to a journal with a pencil, like Briscoe and College do, this act of reading, which is done when I look at the panic and the resolution and the brown beards of the passersby. There is a tremendous bouncing that occurs as we swell together, and I am read. A transitive energy that cannot be captured; it is a jewel that being carved away from the stone becomes dull against the skin, an inner light flutters, and it fades like a recipe that was made well once. Instructions for this sort of thing exist, but they are made, and are made well once. There are masters, who teach you well, but just once and the knowledge is realized, usually tenderly, as someone else's jewel, and it fades, made well once. It is a conscious threat to unconsciousness, this eddy, which convinces that life is lived at all, that the ice cube melts, but renewed, there is again a structure, spontaneous and crystalline, a

by: Drew Castalia

majesty made without title or rank or authority that springs and dances like some manic clot of clay harvested accidentally from the rock; it has little limbs that flail of their own accord until their bizarreness becomes unbearable and we stop them with the flat of our hand. We see it crushed and measure its remains with a stethoscope, and, imagining some pulse (of which there is none truly), we hum it to ourselves hoping to seduce another clay being with spindly limbs out from the mountain. But none come. We bulldoze it down and inspect every pebble. There is no being with spindly legs. It was only made well once, says Captain Franck to himself, and sinks back into slumber, only to be visited again.

Remembering this, he flinched at the summons of the great rumbling from within the ship, the swarmlike buzz on the hull, the heat, which oppressing glazed the corridor with a smell like sap, and as a drop of its oil he separated the sea of passengers coming in and out of their cabins. Where had Grinn gone to?

A door up along the hall slid open and Grinn was delivered to him, dirtier than usual, and hauling a red-faced passenger with slack features that was only just recognizable as Briscoe. In between coughs that without much cooperation from his face hooted gruesomely from Briscoe's throat, the pair clamored towards him, stumbled towards him, then clamored again with a graceless autonomy against the flow of wild passengers.

"Grinn," shouted the Captain, and anything further was cut away by the noisy sound of Briscoe's vomiting. "Grinn," he repeated, "is this what you call glorification?"

When that crab had shuffled up to him, Grinn put his free arm on Franck's shoulder and said into his ear that there was something very important that he needed him to do (for he knew the Captain's secrets, too).

The Captain had little to offer him but a bluff look with heavy eyes that so totally defeated the confidence of his face (with their exigency) that he appeared on his knees praying, or begging, even when he was doing neither. He knew so very little about mechanics or about the workings of anything with gears that gnashed their teeth but how to point them in the right direction. He might pray—or beg—that they functioned as they were supposed to, though, which is why this direction from Grinn confused him. But this appeal, "there is something very important I need you to do" resonated in the little cavity of his heart; spoken from Grinn's mouth, it joined the harmony, omnipresent now, very near its source, and seduced him with a very beautiful music, a beated thing to which he began to dance, and as he danced he shifted into phase with the other passengers and their manic purpose like the top of a very sweetly played chord. Drop, drop, drop, went the beat, from an ice cube.

Yet still he was ambivalent. A key had been turned in his breast yet his hand still felt filthy when he seized Briscoe's collar and hauled him behind. But someone had needed him. For the first time! Someone needed his services, his strong hands, he had said. His capabilities had purpose, now; dreadful purpose, and they seemed to streak away down the aisle through which he now shouldered powerfully, or rather his purpose, while he remained near the doors to the passenger cabins, and wept in front of the engineer, saying he could not do it, he was not capable, and lied.

Instead, he had kissed Grinn's hand, licked his boots, panted in front of him at his request with a thirst for more, his heart had been turned, he had climbed on Grinn's back and combed his hair, blown his full lungs up to his face to keep him cool from the heat sweating

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 40

them all into desiccated plums; he had done all this, but had not returned to reality like he had before, not woken to the ambivalence of shriveled passengers that were missing through their own arrogance and their replacing of wine glasses and their refusing of pillows and their slouching at Billiards to ask him, to pray to him and beg him, the things that they would, if they knew, find most important. He had found the source of the hymn and its radial disease, and had been turned by it, danced to it, now syncopated against the rhythm with a thought that he believed his own, now resumed to the plodding crescendo behind which, with weak shouts and little wrangled screams that flit across the spectrum like a diva, Briscoe played in tune.

Franck stepped through the front cabin door and was briefly chilly. A stewardess whose name he had tried to forget because of how closely it resembled someone he knew crouched in the compartment to his side; she whispered at him to close the door; it was cold outside. He had been able to do something for her, he remembered, had saved her from a swimming pool. He thought that was wonderful and mentioned it to Briscoe, but forgot to listen for an answer.

XXV

Brachten's Engineering had been a hobby read. It had not sufficiently held his interest during the latter days of the trip with Briscoe for competition and as such had spent most of its time in the compartment above his seat—thankfully, actually, for it had a minute ago fallen on one of the crazed passengers who had tried to tear him from his seat and into the fray. The vibration of the train had edged the manual off onto his head, and had perhaps saved his life once, but the rhythmical sputtering it had begun to make suggested to him (if his

by: Drew Castalia

comprehension of *Brachten's* had been anything beyond superficial) that it might also soon be the cause of his death, and Briscoe's death.

It was not so much effort to close his eyes for a moment and fantasize about that man, even in the chaos. There he was in those shoes, and with that pocket watch, thumbing it mysteriously so that it became dirty. Around him was a tangible (his imagination exaggerated) swell of presence that was immediately noticed and noted, subconsciously by some, who turned to their little books to avoid his gaze, or pretended to sleep and dream of a place where he did not exist, and by existing dominate, and consciously by others, who approached him and asked him if they needed anything, and if his companion might want her drink refilled. "No," he would say, for he still felt resentment for her. She would die without water. Even the Captain, who, sprinting now, arrives at the crook of his elbow to confess his sincerest gratitude and pray that he might do something for him, being so much in debt, and beg. "No," he would say, for that was not his duty. And then he imagined the tremors, worse now, and this man in these shoes and with this pocket watch rubbed so, and he was there, his companion behind him (was his companion now a young girl with long lashes or an amorous man who watched people sleep?) like the head of a comet, he spiraled into the heart of space with his tail spread out wide behind him, and the particle of his brilliance glowed strong—there was no other particle now.

And there he was in front of the furnace with his hands dirty, saying very sensible things. He pointed at the list with the measurements translated on them—one side for fahrenheit, and then to the bucket in the corner. A lever was pulled. A knob twisted until it was so tight even his fingers became white without blood. The situation was described and he asked his admirer behind him to hold his waistcoat for a while.

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 42

Then Briscoe's doppelganger—with its doppelganger life—was just a reflection in the window that opened its eyes, and stared in at its admirer without his waistcoat (though now it rested on a large lever) in the engine room, the furnace making a noise like an angry stallion, and him like a great horseman. The red light from its great mouth evaporated the sweat on his face before it could even materialize on his brow. It burnt away all the passengers, he imagined, when the heavy door had been swung open and then closed again, and he was alone. It had cast his shadow for a moment down the aisle so distinctly that it touched the end and fidgeted about the groove around the front cabin door and made primeval motions, evolving gradually into a bearded man in uniform.

He directed the first officer towards the bucket, he tapped the metric calendar, he got his hands dirty, his radiance swelled and pushed away the heavy spirit that had sat on this room, singing some dirge—it evaporated into space forever with all the effort of an ant, as forever is to an ant; he looked up "meta-transistor" in *Brachten's*. He was filled with a terrible purpose.

The train's tantrum died away and was replaced with a sound like a cup of champagne left on center stage for a noisy audience. The tremors left early, and the sputtering before them, and all that was left were the most sensitive, the most delicate of the audience, the most cultured. They listened to that cup of champagne fizz until an attendant (in this case, the first officer) with white cotton gloves and a maitre's suit replaced it with a pop and a burble from a fresh bottle. So the audience watched, and listened, and each of their reveries was committed just for a moment to what each of them were sure was the perfect sound, and through that, what each other thought was the perfect way of being.

But the bottle was shattered, the glass covered, the engine room door was pushed open and there, stumbling like some crab, was the Captain supporting a very sick looking man.

by: Drew Castalia

With visible effort, the man looked up and focused deeply on his one-time admirer with eyes that, though already flat and wide like they had been smashed into two-dimensional discs, widened further in horror at this visage of his simulacrum. You are incapable truly of understanding, he seemed to say, and made a somewhat vilifying account of this by vomiting onto the floor.

Briscoe's doppelganger in the window faded away with a roll of its eyes, leaving the four of them to stare—not necessarily at each other, but to stare at immutable things in the way of those who are afraid of what will happen next.

XXVI

It is nothing to say that Briscoe's admirer—Briscoe's impostor, Briscoe thought—and the Captain hit each other with their fists and those things that they could get their hands on such that to Briscoe they became still more monkeys with primitive tools, though that tool was a spanner and that a valve meter with a plug on one end that was serving the Captain very well as a spike. It is not enough to say that, thought Briscoe. It must be said that they fought in the way that human men might fight when they were very angry—an important observation for Briscoe who had been thinking about this for some time, though he found it very hard under the sleepiness and the pain in his head (now a dagger, twisting quickly, then a saw with its edge so rough, there nails that a hammer bangs roughly against his brain) to maintain a steady thought on any academic tangent, for it looped back to the bottle of pills, inconsequential pills that had not been in his bag where he expected them. Without them he would suffer this death of personality until dawn at the earliest, and by even his watch—dirty with fingerprints

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 44

as it was—that meant that his personality was already dead. It was not terribly redeeming to him that his impostor, fighting now with the Captain in the manner of an ape, had saved the train for a few more hours (after that, the explosives would detonate). He might not be awake enough to get from it the answers he expected; human nature would elude him and his work, this painstaking—he meant no pun—endeavor would have been futile. And now, he turned into himself for that answer quite suddenly, and tried to ignore what he saw. Grinn had diseased him, lied to him the worst human sorts of lies. The pain blotted away his vision for a moment such that there was nothing but inside, where a deeper pain kept house. Oh yes.

Yes! The Captain had hit his impostor in the stomach with his primal weapon; he shrunk and in bending over a moment left blood on his shirt. It made him look weak—omega. Yes! The impostor struck back and the Captain gargled with teeth. Let them destroy each other. They were both loathsome animals; their human rituals made them loathsome. This was ambivalence too, but on a grander, more palatable scale that one need not focus one's eyes on too hard. This ambivalence, it was humanity.

The first officer watched the Captain and the man who had saved his life, and kept away from them on the perimeter of the engine room (it was quite small, so occasionally as the two gladiators circled he would have to scramble to avoid the fray), but never in his scrambling did he come close to Briscoe, whose eyes and face were perhaps so intense that they were felt to be dangerous—alpha. The Captain's strong hands did him justice and with a snap the impostor was limping.

What had brought them into such a stereotype? He still fought, this man who radiated authority and to whom everything seemed to gravitate towards, to bend in to touch, though he would lose to the stronger, the calmer, the bland and the mundane. He kept nodding to

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 45

Briscoe, as if encouraging him to go somewhere, do something, escape! But Briscoe did not want to escape. Grinn would come back here; he was not finished with his plans for torture, so he would come back here. Why did this not make sense to him, as he became bloodied and shouted his name, as if in undying love? He would write on this human peculiarity in his journal when he had finished and the train had exploded. As, perhaps, would this other man who fought with such passion, once he had cast off the burdens of humanity like discarded clothing from a recent theatre-goer. It was only the prescience of his mission that kept him exempt from this mania, all these assumed personalities. He was a centrifuge off of which all these experimental atoms fled. He was the mechanism, not the product, was he not?

Was he not? Grinn had simply been consumed by his own humanity, having succumbed to rules of this game. He was outraged to discover it, and had searched Briscoe's room for each of his possessions to prove himself right only to find—what? He turned from this introspection again to the battle, such an authentic example of humanity, this klein bottle.

XXVII

After much inquisition (the passengers were not very helpful, each one of them totally engaged in the indulgence of their humanity), a balding man in tweed who was sobbing hysterically—something about fidelity—recognized the broken picture and pointed Grinn along. Of course, the door was locked, she was a sensible girl, but the little welding torch was thin enough to slip between the door and the enclosure of the toilet room. It was not easy, as he was jostled to the side by people running, crawling, and dancing their way down the aisle, but though he was no expert at medicine, and no politician either, he had steady hands and

by: Drew Castalia

knew that with a little effort he could melt away the simple bolt (though it took more than a little to keep the authentic period woodwork from catching fire in the process, he had to keep blowing it out). What made the process considerably easier was that the vibration had stopped, and though it was a blessing for his sabotage that he might be uninterrupted so fundamentally, so also did it worry him that his plan was in danger. No one else on this train knew how Nancy's engine worked but Briscoe, the first crisis had demonstrated that, which meant that the Captain had failed and Briscoe had escaped. It was a shame that the Captain might not fully satisfy his own humanity, and hoped that whatever Briscoe had done to him had been sparing. He was not optimistic: Briscoe's designs for the whole crew had been cruel, fundamentally. He had tried to cheat, but had discovered that as he broke the rules he broke himself. The lock broke.

He had to kick at the door and push at the frame since furniture had been piled on the other side of it—a chair, the medicine cabinet, the towel rack and coat stand. He got in eventually and grabbed at College's hair as she shoved herself back from the barrier; he slipped on the floor (it had been covered in soap) and almost lost his footing, but finally cornered her in the shower and hauled her over his shoulder, out into the corridor, and down the aisle. No one seemed to care much as they pushed through the crowd, though one old couple did briefly pause for an eerie, kleptic glance.

XXVIII

College bounced up and down on the shoulders of her father, her husband, her captor; she was weight for their years, their troubles, their devices; if they could be quantified they

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 47

could be quantified by her. His collective boots marched in her vision along a red stripe like some line to a destination on a map, though it was the line down the aisle she knew. She was asleep, she was dreaming, she was sleep talking and sleep crying, a figurine that having been snapped apart was pressed back together in regret. She had been trapped; someone else had found better trappings but not her; she was a rabbit, poached. Now she was hauled like some culinary item, let us say a sack of potatoes since that is the fashion, down the plate to the broccoli to be mashed together with the other ingredients and made indiscrete, a complex pile of tastes to be ingested by another, perhaps her father, perhaps her husband (be careful, Briscoe!), perhaps her captor, this engineer who was no doctor. When would it end? she asked as she bounced on his back.

People ran around them in the periphery of her vision, each on some subliminal vector towards which they were bent to fulfill some story of their own, each brimming with articles of personality: that man read a lot, and he furiously narrated his book to all who would listen (a young woman who gave him a flattering glance), that other man felt contained, and now and then he relaxed, as he was doing now with a friend of his (their debate was a lively and intellectual one), though it worried him that his nerves would return. It was not so much chaos as coordinated activity, and the voice to which it was conducted resonated now so richly within the narrows of the train that its source had been lost and enveloped, and all was enveloped, mixed, combined in ways that were undesirable to College, inharmonic sometimes, a muddled palette; that woman made nothing but run-on sentences.

She was set down and held by the hair while Grinn opened the door to the engine room, and stepping through that threshold found herself at the end of the card game from her dreams, though the circumstances had changed. Briscoe was there, he folded time and time

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 48

again; the motionless figure of the nondescript player slumped in the periphery; the Captain took advice from the engineer, who, walking in, bet heavily; Lima, her University friend with whom she had long ago lost contact looked nervous. It was almost over. They had been sitting there, apparently, waiting for Grinn and her to arrive and finish the game.

"We've been waiting for you, like you said," the Captain said to Grinn. Briscoe was slumped against a railing, barely breathing; no, he was sitting next to the Captain, his eyes on Grinn.

There were two images of Briscoe. One did not look the same (the other's features, besides being cracked in some places and very bruised, were unremarkable), but they had the same aura of despair, the residue from a glycerine bubble that makes wrinkles on the face where it has popped, their eyes were angry and wasteful and dangerous, and she could only after some effort tell them apart.

"Look, Briscoe, at this hair in my fist." Briscoe obeyed. "This is human hair that I tug and wrench, and this is the human it belongs to that cries underneath."

"It won't be for long," Briscoe growled. Let's go back, can't we go back? His eyes were wild..

"Yes, you will save her from that, like you'll save yourself."

"You don't understand." Briscoe looked frantic.

"You think you are exempt, that by cheating you have made yourself no longer subject to the rules? I know your secrets, Frederick Briscoe," Grinn said. And I have captured the answer to your deepest one here; College was thrown painfully to the ground. I can claim your humanity with the image, and prove it here with the real thing, your pupil, your partner, your subject (you make bold experiments), your arcane trigonometry pierced by the light of nihilistic

by: Drew Castalia

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 49

art, your concession is mirrored here, look at her! There was nothing for her to do but cry as she was shoved out at the end of his fist again. You are ambivalent, Frederick Briscoe. Be careful, Frederick Briscoe. You have one more jump to make, Frederick Briscoe. I love you, Frederick Briscoe. You are responsible, Frederick Briscoe. Understand me, Frederick Briscoe. You are seized in the claw of a madman and held out at arm's length to the hymn of the saints, we are lost in the reverie to which we both imagine is the most perfect way of being; Frederick Briscoe, the end has finally come.

"It is time."

The Captain rose from his place on the bench.

"I need your help, Captain, one last time."

He seized Briscoe with his strong hands and picked him up bodily. He began squealing and thrashing like a ragdoll, moaning and coughing unintelligible grunts and screams that were as wild as any animal, and he was lifted to the end of the room, where he spat at the ground and at Grinn and at her and at his impostor and relieved himself in his trousers and bit his tongue until blood gushed out and hooted and beat himself in the face and finally cried out in a long keening wail of anguish as he was thrown into the mouth of Nancy's furnace and instantly incinerated.

There was a violent explosion that scoured the interior of the engine room black, and a second that followed from within the train itself. The tremoring began once more, more violently than before, the sputtering, the pops and fizzes in tandem. The great garbled mumble from the passengers that had survived that first explosion rose to totally fill all the remaining air with stories that were rushed to their conclusion by whispering mouths, the sputtering resumed, the bumps and starts became vicious.

by: Drew Castalia

"Finally, the end," whispered College.

"At last, justice," whispered Grinn.

"I was just once of great service," whispered the Captain.

"There is balance," whispered the nondescript man.

Then there was no noise, just a great raging light. And then there was no light.

XXIX

The view was remarkable. The great vastness that one perceives when emerging from underground into the largest cavern one has ever seen; or the awe at beholding a sunset that one knows is stretching in a great crescent across the earth like the skin of an orange, peeling away; even the philosophical enormity of someone else's eyes which in obedient deference to the quantity inside, one does not look into; these cannot compare to the perception of millions of colors streaking to the human eye across the vacuum. That purple is more purple than any purple one has ever seen. It is like those brief moments of solid presence that if one tries very hard and focuses very specifically on some thing one may briefly live—like returning to childhood when everything was present and real, and not by lazy default recalled from memory with suspicion.

Otherwise, it was just little particles, though someone far off somewhere would be wondering if they could ever be quantified, or if they would ever end, or if there was something they could do to make them better, and they would be human. It was a somewhat cactile formation of galaxies now that painted the debris, just particles now, with awesome oranges that in the ridges were stretched out to red like a desert sunset—no, like the deep rock

THE BEST WAY TO TRAVEL IS BY TRAIN

Page 51

in a cave exposed to light for the first time—no, like some clastic artifact that through different uses throughout the generations had acquired a color that was the perfect color anyone might imagine for that particular thing—no.

For most though, who passed by this place the next day and many years from then, the visible spectrum granted still more solemn colors than an august red, and more jupiterial and entrancing ones than purple at which also were marveled, but always there was a curiosity about what the other races thought for a long time was a misconception about it all in the human brain, an experience they would keep trying to emulate with as much authenticity and commitment to whatever the successor to science was as they could bear. Many of them would have no idea that the secrets that they sought there had already been discovered on the way to Bastings by way of the Horsehead Nebula and Orion Major. Still, there were those that did, and they walked away from it with satisfaction, some with disappointment, some wondering what the big deal was about, but all of them felt inclined towards at least some reflection, and they were always the wiser for it in the end.

The End

by: Drew Castalia