

Train Man

It's 4am when I join the bus in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I'm the only addition at this stop and I'm not welcome. Resentment burns in the deep brown eyes of the Mexicans who inhabit the first dozen seats. They are heading to El Paso to cross the border, many illegally. They don't want me to sit next to them. They repel me with expressionless stares or by feigning sleep. Bags are slipped onto vacant seats to make them appear occupied. "Is this seat free?" I repeat at each row. The occupants avert their eyes and guiltily shrug their shoulders, pretending not to understand. I wonder what will happen if no-one lets me sit next to them. Will I have to ask the bus driver for help? Or will I be sent back into the dingy bus station to wait for a more accepting ride?

I continue making my way down the aisle, imploring people through eyes made bleary by the hour. The answer is no. It is always no. I'm so tired I'm ready to cry and then a gruff voice growls from the depths: "You can sit here lady". An old man is standing, indicating the empty seat between him and the window. I give him a relieved smile as he shuffles awkwardly out of his seat to allow me past, his breath rasping in my ear. The yellow lights reflect off his bald head as he sits down with a painful grunt. There is clearly something wrong with him and I am effectively trapped.

His breath whistles in and out, punctuated by muttered groans. I am trying not to make eye contact, but his blue eyes burn into the side of my face, his desire to connect all too obvious. I sink further into the seat, preparing for sleep. "I've just been released from hospital after an accident," he says, his voice crackling like static on an old radio. "Thirty-five days," he adds with a rueful shake of his head. "Thirty-five days I was in hospital. Released for a month, but I couldn't travel 'til now."

Unprompted, he unbuttons the top four buttons of his plaid shirt, revealing a jagged, inflamed scar running from the upper right quadrant of his chest diagonally across his abdomen. All the while, his breath whistles and rattles, in and out, creaking and gurgling as it makes its way through his damaged crust.

"What happened?" I ask, my curiosity overcoming my reticence to engage. His eyes seek mine. "Run over by a train," he grunts. I nod slowly, not wanting the details. On an earlier journey, I'd been informed that the trains running through Flagstaff, Arizona blow their whistles to warn away alcoholics sleeping rough on the tracks. Perhaps this man didn't heed the warning.

He bends forward and stretches one hand towards his battered duffel bag. With trembling fingers he inches the side zipper open and rummages inside, pulling out a thick manila envelope. He presses his hand against the back of the seat to push his torso upright, wedging the envelope between the coarse blue cloth and his pasty white, pudgy fingers. Closing his eyes, he winces as he inhales shakily. I tense my calves and push myself into an erect position. I peer over the seat-backs, but I realise I'm too far back to catch the driver's eye should I need help. If this man stops breathing, I'm on my own.

He exhales with a long, shuddering sigh and pushes his weight back into the seat, his eyes flickering open and coming back into focus. "Here," he says, tossing the envelope onto my lap. "Was boarding the train," he whispers. "Door shut. Caught my foot." His brow furrows as he describes being flipped under the train, the heavy vehicle running over him at low speed. "Going home now to Mom," he sighs in his muffled Texan drawl. Mom must be ancient.

I turn over the envelope and drag my nail along the edge of the flap, pulling out a sheaf of papers and

two x-ray sheets. I hold one of the x-rays up to the yellow lights lining the aisle, which flicker as the bus engine rumbles to life. We back out of the parking bay and onto the highway as I examine the damage. It's a chest x-ray. "Collapsed lung," my crushed companion comments. I don't want to see a collapsed lung. I quickly slide the x-ray under the pile of papers, before my brain can comprehend what my eyes have seen.

At the top of a crinkled off-white page, the words medical report are typed in capital letters. The patient's name is Pat. The doctor's ink scrawls are challenging to decipher and I can't make out his surname. His occupation is listed as oil rig worker and his place of abode is Odessa, Texas. I'm shocked to discover he is only 52. He looks 70. It seems being crushed by a train is a fast track to old age.

Random words leap from the page as my eyes skim over the details. Concussion, brain fluid, broken ribs, collapsed lung, bruises, contusions and blood. A lot of blood. O Negative. The impersonal words burn a picture of horror into my brain. I flick through the pages, every sentence apportioning pain. Pat waits patiently for me to finish reading. I don't know what my reaction should be. "I'm alive," he shrugs and grunts, when I look at him with sympathetic eyes. He shifts into what I assume is a more bearable position and we both watch my hands as I slide the report back into the envelope, page by page. When I hand it to him, he grasps it between his thumb and his forefinger and drops it gently, sending it down to settle on top of his bag. The effort is too much for him and he closes his eyes. I wait for them to open, but instead his breathing slows, a low purr gurgling in the back of his throat as he dozes.

I watch his chest rise and fall as the minutes pass, the words I've read bursting into my thoughts in graphic imagery. It's 4am and I'm exhausted. I can't comprehend the agony this man has endured and

how alone he must be to be travelling by bus. As my own eyes droop closed, I curl into a ball, pulling the hood of my jacket over my ears to drown out his gentle snores. I dream of trains and carnage and disfigurement.

Hours later, the driver announces a twenty minute stop. It's not incentive enough for me to propel my eyelids open. Pat clears his throat and taps me on the arm. "Are you getting off here?" he asks. I open my eyes just enough for him to see and mumble that sleep is my priority right now.

Twenty minutes later, the commotion as passengers embark wakes me fully and I watch Pat shuffle laboriously back down the aisle. He lowers himself next to me with a wheeze. As he catches his breath, he hands me a raspberry and cream cheese pastry and a can of coke. "I thought you might like breakfast," he says and looks away. He refuses my offer of payment.

I squeeze the pastry packet gently to check that it's sealed. I've heard stories. The wrap is intact. This wounded, broken man, who probably has very little, has bought me breakfast. My horror at his injuries is replaced by admiration for this random act of kindness. I don't have the heart to tell him that pastries and coke are my least favourite breakfast. Today, I will like them. It's the least I can do.



The hand of fate?