

An Event · *Frances Webb*

THE AMTRAK INFORMATION DESK CLERK had told me to take the southern route because the scenery was better. I have done what he suggested, even though scenery is not important to me.

The porter's jacket is hanging on him like a garment bag. He is looking at my typewriter which is wobbling on my thighs.

"I will get you a table."

He brings the table and I lift the typewriter into the air. He unfolds the legs. "It's small," he says. "Not a grand piano."

"It's fine. Thank you." I set the typewriter down on the table and put my fingers on the keys and type: "The typewriter is not a grand piano. It is, in fact, a rather small instrument—but with the appropriate number of and appropriately numbered and lettered keys. And symbolized. Each letter and number precise . . ." I smell nail polish. I look out my door. The door to the compartment across from mine is open. I can see legs and a hand that is painting tiny strokes onto a fingernail of the other hand. The finger I can see has two rings on it, both large. The porter is leaning against the door. "You know how to call for me, now," he says to the woman in the compartment. I don't hear her answer.

He turns and looks in my door. "You let me know when you want your berth down, you hear?"

I nod. "Thank you."

"When it comes down it lays over the sink. So do those teeth and your washing first. Or you'll be wondering what that porter did with your sink."

"Thanks."

"You thanking me a lot. This is my job, you know."

I smile. He has a handsome face. Probably older than he looks.

He leaves, and I hear him as he goes down the aisle: "You all set now, Ma'am? Can you get up there, or do you want a foot? Here go. Put your foot in my hand."

I'm not climbing up so I won't have to do that—put my foot in his hand. I type: "Put your foot in my hand. Tuck it into my palm. Keep it there. Heel to palm . . ."

"Tuck yourself in good, sir. And don't worry about the morning. You got time. Who's next here?"

He wants to go off duty. I shall wash.

I close my door. The water is cold but for the parts of my body that I am washing it does not matter. I brush my teeth and wash my face and put on a robe. I open the door and look out.

"You ready in there?"

I nod.

"You step out. And let me tend." He lifts the typewriter and its table and sets them in the aisle. "You put your machine away and I'll fold up the table." He goes back into the compartment. "Uh oh. This one here goes the wrong way."

"What do you mean? Is it broken?" I am going to have to sleep on the floor.

"No. It's all right. It's just that you is going to roll the opposite way the train rolls, and that ain't so good. But you hold tight and it'll be all right. If you keep your rhythm right. Keep it with the train. Like horse riding. Post it. Get in tune. Roll with it."

"Thank you."

"And as I say, when I do something for you, then you thank me."

The train is sitting at the station in Toledo. On the track next to our train is a train with a sign on the bottom ridge of it that says, "Do Not Hump." I type: "Do not hump. Humping causes a disturbance of the integral parts plus malfunction . . ." I need a soda.

I open the door. The door to the compartment across from mine is open. The porter is on his knees. The woman is standing and looking down. Her hands are flat in the air with her fingers spread apart from each other and the nails are red and pointing. "It's gold. Whatever am I going to do?"

"I'll find it, lady. Never fret. I is used to bein' on my knees and seein' all there is to see." He is rubbing his hand over the floor. "You didn't know, Ma'am, that I spent long years in the coal rock bottom of the earth, the pit. I'm a miner. And a miner don't miss a spot a somethin' bright." He sweeps his arm low all around him. "But I is fat now, and I don't bend that good. I was thin then. So thin you could hang your cap on my hipbone."

He is still thin.

"I wish you would just look and not talk so much." The woman is behind him now. She looks like she is going to pounce.

"Talkin' and lookin' go together. Talkin' and lookin' make it that there ain't no strangers."

"I don't know how it can disappear like that."

"Lordy, I knows. Gold does that. Sometimes before you ever even get it."

"Don't be funny. I know I had this. It was in my hand. I'll look for it myself." She moves in front of him.

"Now just you be patient. What's that?"

"What?"

"That piece a sun behind your heel?"

"That's it. That's it. You're a gem."

"No, that there's the gem." He pushes his hands back toward his knees.

"How can I thank you?"

He pushes himself up. "When you depart from the train, Ma'am. That's time enough." He straightens his back. He rubs his knees. "I's surely forgot the pit. These knees is no good now."

"I could kiss you."

"No, you don't need to do that."

I type: "There's a piece of sun behind your heel. A calloused heel. White lines that run in the fingerprints of Sodom and Gomorrah" I'm thirsty. I need that soda.

I get up and walk into the aisle.

"Are you fixin' to go somewhere? We'll be here in Toledo for a piece. You can get off if that's your fancy."

"That's a good idea. I will." But I know I won't. I'm not that adventurous.

"I'm not tryin' to spoil your head. I knowed you wouldn't get off."

He has read my mind.

"Better tell how it is."

I nod and start down the aisle. Behind me he sings: "You ain't doin' nothin' smart, brother man, when you don' play your part, brother man"

I walk through two cars and enter the club car. A woman and her grown son, who appears to be about my age, are the only other people in the car. The woman is fitting sodas and Fritos into the compartments of the Amtrak paper carton. "It's not exactly the Waldorf, is it?" she says.

I shake my head.

"We're visiting Aunt Selma. Aunt Selma doesn't know how much we've grown," she says, looking at her son.

He looks at his mother and says that it is cold in Chattanooga this time of year, as he remembers.

I buy my soda and return to my car.

The porter is talking to a man next to my compartment. "What? You say you're a writer of that President's speeches? Well, that done plumb shut my mouth. I get all kinds of people under my care but I do believe it be the first time I got this close to the government. I think I can give you an idea for a speech . . . let me see . . ."

I notice his large dark hands again, descending from that white jacket, leaving wrists showing that look like stick extensions of the hands . . .

" . . . ain't got no ideas right now, but I will. Well, *you* may be the Man's speech writer. I guess what *I* am is a hillbilly by trade. Guess that's the size of it."

He is taking up a good portion of the aisle. Even though he is small. He is stretched out. One elbow is on one side of the aisle, and the other on the other side.

"I played poker with a young feller the other day. That *used* to be my trade, I guess you could say. Like the old days. Days of the cards and days of the drinkin'. At any rate, he near done me in. But I beat him and my head swelled to a melon."

I've got to get by him.

I walk up and turn. Sideways, I shimmy by. I don't touch him. I don't brush him. I straighten myself out and walk on.

"See that one? No, you can't. But that little lady there is typin' up a storm. She's a writin' words for some big boss."

"I know. I hear her," the man says.

They must assume that I don't hear what they are saying.

We are still in Toledo. We have been here for a long time now. Lamps hang from the passenger shelter roof. It does not look like a pretty city.

A passenger has gotten off and is walking the platform. It is, I see, the mother of the grown-up son. This is not her destination or she would have her bags with her, her coat, *and* her son. Anyway, he said something about Chattanooga. Come to think of it, Chattanooga isn't on our route. I am confused. I shall look at her again, and see if I can tell something. Her arms are crossed and she has undaunted faith in the train engineer to know that he will not leave without her. She has undaunted faith in herself to know that she will know the moment to get back on the train.

She will, I hope, know how to recognize the moment that is the moment before the lurch. That is the most crucial moment.

I knock on the window. She looks up. I wave. She waves. I am sorry that I have done that. I want no attachments.

I put a new piece of paper in the typewriter.

And look out the window again. She recrosses her arms and walks. I decide I have done nothing to form an attachment and want like anything for her to get back on so I can stop worrying about whether she is going to make it back on in time.

I roll the paper to the correct margin.

There is another sign. On the underpinnings of the car on the next track. It says, "Exceed Plate C." I don't type it. The language of the railroad, I decide, is not my language.

Beyond three more tracks is a bank. Debris is sliding down the bank and birds are picking at it. Beyond this bank are small houses. Close. Clustered. Cars sit by them. One car is upside down. It looks like a gigantic bug that got that way because of an overly-ambitious and enthusiastic leap.

I put my fingers on the keys. They look like twigs.

The porter is behind me in my door. I feel his presence. "See that lady out there? She knows to take a good walk when the train is standin' still. She knows to take the moment and use it."

I feel my fingers press onto the keys. I want the porter to SHUT UP.

"The heat's not too good. You need some gloves. Before you freeze your fingers on those keys. I ought to tear up my shirt and make you some."

"You do that."

"I'm gonna pack my bags and get on down . . . See you later, little lady." He leaves, still singing.

The train is moving. I don't see the woman. She must have gotten on. Thank God.

I hear the porter again.

"You say you gonna retire if Nixon doesn't run? Maybe you should retire if he DOES. Are you tellin' me you only write speeches for Nixon? No other president will do for you? Retirement's the new heaven, you know. Look at me. I did it thirty years ago. From black lung."

He tells complete strangers everything.

"Then Amtrak took me on. Here I is. I'm from the hill country—

Kentucky. People don't know what hard times is unless they knowed back in the beginning in the coalfield."

I close my door. Change my mind and type: "Exceed Plate C." It will come in handy as a metaphor sometime.

We begin Arizona.

I want to see Arizona.

I move my table and I get up.

I open my door.

"I knowed you couldn't stay in there 'til the flood."

"I have to see Arizona."

"Course you do. Your eyes gotta be sharp for everywhere. Like playing poker. Your eyes gotta be sharp. That learns you to play. In the early thirties I lost a lot a money. You sit down back then and somebody take twenty bucks you can't afford. So you learn. So you get concrete."

"Concrete?"

"Yes. Concrete."

I step back into my room and sit down and put my fingers on the keys.

"Thought you was gonna go see Arizona? You gonna miss it if you don't go today. We goes through it in only one day."

"I will see it, but there's something I have to write."

"Something I say? You gonna write what I say?"

"I'm not going to write what you say."

"You better get yourself to that observation car." He closes my door and I hear him sing but I can't make out the words.

I type: "So you get concrete." And that's all. Nothing follows.

The observation car is almost empty among all that red Arizona clay out there beyond the dome.

Gradually people come in. Sit.

A man sits next to me and opens *Newsweek*.

"Are you the one with the typewriter?" he says without looking up from *Newsweek*.

I nod.

"I write myself. One of Nixon's speech writers."

Of course. The voice. I recognize it. "That's interesting."

"Yes. I was planning and had begun a novel. Then got this offer that of course I couldn't resist, so"

"I guess to write the speeches for a president, you sort of have to agree with his politics . . . his philosophy, right?"

"It helps."

The red Arizona clay earth is forming itself into grotesque monstrous animal-like shapes. Then it smooths out.

There's a pueblo. I've never seen real, Honest to God American Indians.

There's a thin donkey.

There's a thin boy.

"This isn't the best part of this state. That's further south. Amtrak doesn't care about scenery," the speech writer says.

"Except the track was built long before there was any scenery, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I guess that's true."

"The train should stop and sit here like it did in Toledo. For the scenery."

"No reason here. No freight to unload. No place to unload it to, or at. By the way, your berth is next to mine."

"Why didn't you fly?"

"I get airsick."

"But not carsick?"

"No. Shall we meet for dinner?"

"That sounds lovely, thank you." But I know I won't.

"Trinidad, Colorado has an altitude of 6,075 feet." The Amtrak Information Desk Clerk did not tell me that Amtrak supplied tour guides.

"Trinidad, Colorado has good schools, good churches, good dairying, and back there, ladies and gentlemen, beyond the Texaco sign, is a Rocky Mountain three-peaked wonder. See it?"

"Want this? I'm through." The man hands me *Newsweek*.

"Thank you."

"If you decide to join me for dinner, I'm going at eight."

I smile. I turn *Newsweek's* pages. Look up and out of the blown out, bulbed roof at the sky that has given itself over now to preening. Eventually it stops doing that, though, and closets itself behind some sort of dark brown, and the travel guide says, "Thank you and have a pleasant trip."

I see the woman and her grown son. I want to say: "You made it back in." And then she will say, "Back in where?" "Inside. You were outside back in Toledo," I will say. "Oh. Right. Yes. I had forgotten," she will say. "I needed some air. Some breathing space. This can be claustro-

phobic, don't you think?" "I was afraid . . ." "Of what, dear?" DEAR? No, she must not call me that. Of what? Of what? "That you would not get a seat. It began to fill up in here as soon as we hit Arizona. The red clay, you know. There's something about red clay . . ."

The son is sitting on his hands. I have an urge to tell him to pull his hands out from under him.

"You ain't typing."

"I'm thinking."

"Where you from?"

"New York."

"Last time I was in New York I walk 76 blocks. I got off the subway wrong. Ever do that?"

"No. I usually know where I'm going."

"But I thought hell, it's only 76 blocks. The city ain't like the country. Blocks are short in the country—at least in the company town, they was, and they was the blocks I knowed. It was a good walk. I seen a lot. Next day, though, I say, 'don't wake me for a flood.' " He leaves my door and goes down the aisle, singing: "I make money, man, money don't make me . . ." He comes back. "And I sing a song different each time. You know that song? 'Money don't make me?' It's famous. Come from my group. Singing with a group you hear the others and that makes your singing more a song."

"I didn't know you were a real singer. I thought you just sang for fun."

"I didn't knowed there was a difference. Had to stop singing though. Got black lung."

"What's black lung?"

"You got some learning to do, don't you? What's the last words you done write on that paper?"

I look at my paper. My last words are "so you get concrete." I can't tell him that. I have to lie. I have to make something up. ". . . red Arizona clay earth . . ." I say. I look at him. He doesn't believe me, I can tell.

"You know how I knowed you is lying? Because that's not the rhythm I done hear last. That's not the beat o' your last words. But maybe you is smart. Maybe you is playing poker with my words. I used to skin a lot. You lose and lose and then you learn to play. Any time you pick a card you pair it up and you lose so in the end you learn to

make certain to pair up on little bets . . . and each game is a new thing . . . I went to jail once because I got caught with cheating. Then I got out. Next thing I knowed, I'm saying to a man, 'you lost man. You fell three times. Give me my money back.' And he wouldn't. So I hit him with a cue stick. Laid him out there. Sent him from here to there. They chased me for that. Took me six months to keep from going to the penitentiary. That's past history, though. Days of the gun. Days of the dollar bill. I remember riding all over the state of Virginia shootin' pool. Every place you go you take a couple of drinks. What it does to me is steady my nerves. Scotch and pool go together like a man and his woman. If you don't use it as a treat, that is. Because if you is gonna deal with gambling then you gotta deal with drinking. And if you is gonna deal with women you gotta deal with . . . well, you gotta deal with THEM. That was when I was in the coalfield, and a man need a treat. Now I is with Amtrak."

"And you don't need a treat?"

"I never say that, Little Lady. You gonna put something real down on that paper? Or is you gonna cover it with wishbones. And you better do it before Arizona gets you, or whatever your disease turns out to be The way the black lung got me and cut my singing in two. I is walking around with coal dust for a lung. If you got your hand in there and went like this" He touches his chest and squeezes. He is moving toward me. "If you got your hand there" His arm is reaching out . . . a long white arm . . . that has a hand on . . . my God . . . on my breast "If you got your hand there, my lung would be a bowl of black ash in it."

I don't move.

He takes his hand away. "Anyways, you is writing cause you knows how to write. I's singing cause I knows singing. What *you* knows, you knows. What *I* knows, I know. See that skin? You is black and I'm white is what YOU say. Am I right? That's what you is thinking. Well, you put blinders on you for that. Like horses. So they don't see 'cept what's happening. So they don't see 'cept what's ahead. So they don't see 'cept what's the path they gotta take."

My breast is pulsing.

"And you ask me how I'm doing? Didn't you ask me that when you open your door before? Way before? I remember you ask me that."

"I don't remember. Yes, I guess I did. No, I didn't. Yes, I guess I did ask you." I DID give him an invitation.

“And I don’t think I say, did I?”

“Yes, you did. I mean, no you didn’t. I don’t know” My typewriter looks small. And it looks very black. The letters on the keys look like I spilled white-out on them.

“So I tell you now”

Maybe I did. The white-out bottle is on its side.

“You still want to know more how I am?”

I shake my head no. I want him to leave. He is going to touch my breast again and make it jump like a jack rabbit

“You is shaking your head, but you don’t mean that. I’m flappin’ but not flyin’. You got that? Is that something for you to type?”

The keys look like small round black suns.

“We both begin alike, you and me, from our mothers in the womb. You can’t get away from that fact. But I tell you. I don’t get my songs from whites. Don’t you go getting your words from blacks.”

“Okay.”

“Unless I tell you what them words are.”

“Okay.”

“Here go. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then put your fingers on your keys.”

“I am.” I wish he would stop standing there talking and talking. Why doesn’t he go on about his business and stop giving me lectures on God knows what If he doesn’t go away I shall scream. I shall write to Amtrak about the porter who

“PORTER PORTER.”

“. . . and see that lady that was looking for her gold? She knows what she’s needin’. May not be what somebody else is needin’, but it’s what she’s needin’ and she KNOWS”

“PORTER”

“And right now it’s me. You keep typin’ them words I’m giving you”

“Okay.”

He closes my door and I hear him say, “You just get over there out of my way now, and I’ll find it,” and she says, “Whatever is the matter with me today that I”

I take out the paper. I put in new paper. I type: “Dear Amtrak: An event occurred”