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On My Way to DC

My Ride Along the Rails All the Way Back East in Autumn
By Diane Walsh

Roomette awaits.

As I look out my Amtrak window, sitting cosily in my guest blue-coloured roomette, there is an embankment I see. Ah—majestic, all-knowing beauties beginning to appear in a dance of sequential wonderment before a tired self.

I realize it's trees; these trees, swaying past my vision in all their glory, who are going to be my companions on this unusual journey before me. Trees, trees, and more trees, as if going on forever. "Shall comfort me," they say.

I perk up, doubting I'd been spoken to, and suddenly a mill appears, spilling its ground-up sandy wood pulp into the train's side, its sawdust mist hanging in the air. I feel disheartened at this sight as it breaks my peaceful thoughts, but the train continues—commandingly—to the first station. Everett, Washington is in sight. We're well on our way now.

Time moves. I'm unsure how long has passed.

At Shelby, Montana, we stop. It's snowing. Cold—very cold. Some Albertans disembark to yell and smoke. A lovely man named Gul appears in front of me and tells me he's assigned to my car. He is a most wonderful maître d'.

Taking him in softly, it strikes me that he might be the child of parents from Partition-era India. He has a very delicate manner, as if he carries a subtle recognition in his eyes of the immense spiritual experience and history of train travel. Interested in people; so very astute he is—to the point of knowing precisely when to have a glass of champagne poured for me. Just so.

Pure poetry he achieves as he places the glass on a linen-white napkin beneath my rectangular window, under the expanse of the rose sky. A sky—golden—becomes yet another one of my journey's friends. Its moving, exquisite colour reveals itself to me at the train's juncture. I am delighted.

Misty dusk approaches, getting on toward five in the evening. A soft sound of the train horn breaks the emotion-contained silence as we pull east.

"Supper time," Gul commands again.

"Oh yes," I say.

He insists. "Food for the core is to be had in the dining car."

The meal is eaten happily. I return to my roomette, cleverly slipping into the rinse station while others are still chomping and drinking. Under the soothing blue light that never turns off above my head, I peer outside again. My peripheral vision catches the romance of another train passing in the opposite direction.

Then—white light. Maybe stations. Maybe features along the rail line lending a helping hand. The strong steel animal makes time smoothly east.

America is beautiful. Don't let anyone tell you it's not.

As my train crackles along the deep-worn tracks, stealthily and courageously into the night, tears well in my eyes. Music plays in the background and I think about whatever residue of faith I may still have. I sense a kind of Spirit engulf me, then I catch myself. "Ah, just being silly again. Trees don't talk, right? Trees don't hug you."

Alas—they did. Me, that day.

We stop again. Folks get out to smoke; others stretch their legs. Grain silos stand politely in the distance. Chilly passengers recollect themselves after a short while. Satisfied now. And we press on.

It's the old side of towns we see from trains—indescribably raw. The U.S.A. is poor in appearance in parts, especially through North Dakota—sights one might read about in a novel. But here, from my rectangular window, more vivid—ever so more vivid—I gaze into the soul of the night to see what it has to teach me.

Damp from the corridor, I return to my window. Safe again.

Pitch dark outside now, barely able to see even the silhouette of branches.

Blood-red sky.

North Dakota. Home of American Indians.

Images pass through my mind of them fighting to protect themselves. Their land. A land so plentiful with oil—oil so voraciously wanted and desired, with angry vengeance, by all those who surround it. But with "The Indian" in the way.

"God bless the Indian," I murmur, somewhere between Stanley and Williston.

On the east side of Williston, I fumble for my camera, attempting to photograph North Dakota's oil rigs and their flame fires—only visible with a squint. Oil, oil, and more oil. I witness tens and tens of freight trains. "Liquefied Petroleum Gas," I read plastered on jet-black or rust-orange cars clambering by in the opposite direction.

How many times we waited for freight trains. They get first dibs on the old tracks. Business before people—that is the way on Amtrak these days. Not owning the tracks ourselves, the public that is, we must beckon to higher authority.

It's Burlington Northern Santa Fe—BNSF—that runs things in these parts, with their cargoes and boxes of chemicals. Cleaning products. Fertilizers. Black cylinders containing this and that. I noticed those black cylinder cars as early as Spokane, Washington. I confirm to myself how they grew more numerous through Montana and onward.

Then suddenly—eerily—a shocking sight appears. Thousands of horses crammed into a pen.

"For what?" I wonder.

It hits me like a freight train. They're for food. Horses destined to be food.

I scream silently in my mind. A dreadful thought—one from which, like the horses, I cannot escape. But I know I am right. Why else would so many horses be crammed together to that degree?

Feedlots. Their place before execution.

I remember reading that the ban on killing horses for food had been lifted in certain states. Poor, struggling states, no doubt.

St. Cloud, Minnesota. Bleak. “A kind of hell,” I think. Factories run down, no longer functioning. Crushed cars stacked everywhere. CP freight cars—Canadian Pacific—with “Government of Canada” printed across their sides, abandoned and parked surreptitiously along the railway.

I choose to nap.

I wake. The train is dormant.

“We’re ten minutes out of St. Paul, Minnesota,” comes the announcement.

“Did you know the Mississippi River can be seen for over an hour out of St. Paul?” I pretend to tell someone listening. Should I care? Yes. No.

Back to the dining car I go, rather luckily, where I meet Elsie Dodge—a children’s book author from Denver, Colorado. She’s a special-needs teacher. She carries a teddy bear permanently. That’s how she does it. Gets through this life. She’s the one with the smile.

Closer to the East now, nature begins to change. Seasonal traits I recognize from childhood in Montreal. Maple trees appear, rust-coloured leaves glowing through my rectangular window. Tributaries of the Mississippi stretch endlessly. More maples in Portage, Wisconsin—breathtaking.

Before my destination, we pass through what I know to be old Civil War stomping grounds from the 1850s. I look for colonial fixtures still standing. There are some.

We move out of the country as sneakily and clandestinely as we moved into it. Urban life begins to appear outside my window. I know my stop is near. I pack up and prepare to step onto a pavement I left days ago.

We arrive.

I float to solid ground, my soul incubated with images that will grace my memory now and forever.

I love that train, now behind me.

Hear me now. Take a long, long train ride. Never be the same.

Thank you, Maple.

Thank you, Sky.

Thank you, Pine.

Thank you, Indians of North Dakota.

Thank you, Gul.

Until next time.
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