The Train

BY GALE RENÉE WALDEN

"Would you mind if I sit here?" the man asks, gesturing to the empty seat next to Beth. The man is slight, his tanned features tiny within his face. His eyes are a white blue study. He is wearing a tweed coat, a white shirt, and cowboy boots. A brown fedora dangles from his left hand. Beth knows that the fedora looks like a cowboy hat when it is on him because she'd seen him in the train station with the hat on. He was a man who didn't look right in the Boston train station with its marble and brass accompaniments. He was a man who looked as if he should always be in a building made out of wood.

Beth is disturbed that anyone has chosen to sit next to her at all; there are several unoccupied double seats on the train. She is making a twenty-four hour trip to Chicago and the second seat is imperative for the type of sleeping arrangement she negotiates with her body on these trips, but there are rules on the train and one of the rules is: you can't keep the seat next to you unoccupied if someone asks for it. There are all sorts of tricks to stop this asking in the first place—one is to stare straight off into space in a manner suggesting you aren't even aware you are on the train. Beth doesn't have the fortitude for this countenance—it requires a strict posture of melancholy and Beth is afraid if she practices the posture she might get stuck. Her mother's warning about what might happen if you cross your eyes has transported itself into many aspects of Beth's life. On the train, Beth is much better at the other trick, which is to acknowledge not only your own existence but also that of a presence next to you, an entity that Beth occasionally covers with a portion of the plaid blanket she has draped over herself. For some reason, none of this has served as a signal to the man in the hat as he stands in the aisle, very straight, holding his hat down toward his knees. Beth moves the corner of the blanket, and says, "Of course." The man sits down, as straight as standing, except now his knees are bent. "I

couldn't see myself coming or going from back there," he offers, gesturing to the back of the car in the opposite direction from where the conductor and his assistant are approaching. The conductor has a fat, sturdy face and, after taking a ticket from a passenger, he touches the rim of his cap and bows his head slightly on both sides of the aisle as if he were in his own parade. While the conductor is bowing, his assistant writes the name of a city on a slip of yellow paper and attaches it to the clip above the seat. The people two seats in front of Beth say their destination is Waterloo, Ohio, but as far as Beth can tell, judging from the CHI on the waving yellow slips, most of the people in the car are Chicago bound.

When the conductor gets to Beth, he calls her "young lady." The man holding the fedora tells the conductor that he had already collected his ticket. "Remember?" he says. "Back there." The conductor touches his hat, pushing it up a little and scratching underneath. Beth hopes the conductor is thinking the same thing she is: "How could the ticket have been collected back there when I'm just now moving back there to collect tickets?" Beth hopes that's the question behind the head scratching, and perhaps it was, but the conductor didn't scratch hard enough to produce the result Beth wanted. "All right, I guess," the conductor says; "Where did you say you were going?"

"Wyoming," the man says.

"That means Chicago for now," the conductor informs him. The man accepts this information politely, even though Beth thinks he must have known already.

"There was a train before this one, and there will be a train after the next one," the man says, as if professing faith in the Universe rather than acknowledging a timetable. "You only have the one train, don't you?" the man asks Beth, who nods, feeling oddly guilty about the implied simplicity of her life.

The train has its whole life conceiving now; families are unpacking themselves into the trip. To the side of her, Beth sees a woman passing around a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken to three curly-haired children. Beth thinks they are all seven years old. The woman has straight blond hair and the curly-haired children are dark, but they are calling her Mom with frequency. Toward the back of the car, a baby is crying. Two seats up, a man jumps up to help a woman lift a suitcase off the top shelf and a woman even further up seems to be starting a story hour. One of the curly-haired children stays with the blond woman, while the others nonchalantly inch their way to the story-hour woman.

Everyone's domesticity is disturbed when the dining-car attendant announces, over a microphone, his intention to serve Chicken à la Amtrak. The lounge-car attendant gets hold of the microphone next, and, in an open bid for customers, entices people: "We have ham," he says, "we have cheese, we have tiny blankets and playing cards. We have," the lounge-car attendant says, and pauses, "beer." This does it. People start to advance, syncopated, from the back of the car, forward: two teen girls with long hair and slightly pouching bare stomachs are followed by a small bent woman clutching a cane. A young man with a dusty pea coat and dusty brown hair and a small radio attached to him sways in time to invisible music, but when the young man passes Beth's seat, she hears a moment of music. Or rather she hears a moment of drum.

"Ah, the pilgrimage has started," the man next to Beth observes. "It's the amateurs who are headed up there now." Beth knows this is true. Anyone who has been on a long-distance train knows to bring a cooler full of food and drinks and not to make use of train food until the cooler has run out. "Just wait," says the man seated next to Beth, "as soon as they get them up there, they'll start with the rules." He's right. Just then the lounge-car attendant returns to the air. "Sorry, folks, no smoking in the lounge car, except for fifteen minutes every two hours—I'll tell you when that is."

Beth turns to the man sitting beside her. "Beth," she says, extending her hand. "You must be psychic."

The man looks at her hand a little too long before he takes it, stating, "Carl. I love cigarettes," and then, perhaps realizing that had nothing to do with anything (although Beth understood that the rule has significance to him), he confesses, "I'm only psychic over the phone," before he lets go of Beth's hand. The brown fedora is now in Carl's lap and he considers it with his hands as he speaks. "There are steps most people's minds can take which mine cannot. I don't go one, two, three. I go straight to three. It's really the only kind of work I can do," he assures her.

In the time since Carl has released Beth's hand, he has not turned toward her. He speaks to the seat in front of him. Beth glances over at him long enough to see a slight sheen like dew on his nose, but then feels rude, as if she has broken the etiquette of their arrangement. Also Beth is afraid that with her new knowledge about his career, she will start to ask him questions about her life. Once she called a phone psychic but hung up before he came to the phone. Beth got charged eighty-five

dollars anyway, miraculously, even though the call was to a toll-free number. Beth had to call the phone company and explain to the phone company representative that she hadn't even talked to a psychic, but that a computer had asked for her name and she had given her middle name—Mary. "I guess I knew something was wrong at that point, having to lie about my name and everything, " Beth confessed. "Even though it wasn't a complete lie," she reminded the phone company woman; "It was my middle name."

Beth told the phone company woman that as soon as she realized the wrongness of the psychic phone call, evidenced by her alias, she tried to hang up the phone but the phone wouldn't hang itself up and every time she picked up the receiver she would hear some music that chimed in a pattern. "I think there was maybe a flute in there, but there wasn't much melody," Beth informed the woman.

"What's your first name?" the phone company woman asked, sternly.

"Beth."

"Beth Mary?" The phone woman softened. "That doesn't really go together. It'd be better if those names were reversed."

The thwarted phone call to the psychic was two years ago. Beth doesn't even know what question she would have asked, but she's pretty sure it's never been answered. Beth decides that even though Carl has reminded her of something she didn't particularly want to remember, she can talk to him, as long as she keeps some distance by not looking at him in the same manner in which he is not looking at her. She stares straight ahead as she speaks. "So do people ever get mad at you when things don't work out the way they wanted them to?"

"Oh, sure. People will do anything to avoid hearing the good news."

"Good news?" Beth echoes. She would love to hear good news.

"The world is just filled with the good news and people just do not want to hear it."

"What kind of good news?" Beth doesn't even mind hearing someone else's.

"Like, say there's a street that you want to cross and there's no light, and trucks and cars just keep coming—lines of them, like they're going to a funeral or wedding you don't know about."

"Are their lights on?"

"It doesn't matter, but if it helps you, yes, their lights are on."

"So it's a funeral."

"It's not important where they're going, what's important is that

you can't get across the street and you want to. Every once in awhile one or two lanes in the street open up and you think you might get to cross, but then you see a car coming at you, quick, in the opposite direction."

"How many lanes are there?"

"Four. It's a four-lane highway."

"I thought it was a street."

"See," he says, "this is what I mean. This is the type of arguing people did all the time. This is why I finally had to quit being a phone psychic. Everybody got involved with the details, and didn't want to hear the good news."

"Which is?"

"That everyone always calls me just as the street is completely clear."

"Oh." Beth is already tired of Carl. Outside the window it is dusk. A few trees have red and yellow leaves left on them, but others are already bare. Beth thinks they are still in Massachusetts. She can't remember if she had this thought before or after the train's brakes squealed, before her head was thrown back to meet tartan canvas and forward to hit blue plastic. While her head was traveling from back to front she saw a piece of fried chicken up in the air. People who were walking in the aisle lurched (Beth liked that word but didn't usually find an appropriate context for it) until they fell onto someone else; Beth saw one child propelled out of his seat and a man's plaid shirt reach out to catch the child. Somehow the man ended up sitting in the aisle with the child in his lap. There were two odd things, looking back, that Beth remembers. One is that nobody screamed. How was that possible? The other was that Carl didn't seem to have moved at all. He was as straight as ever, staring ahead. He looked like a cowboy hood ornament.

Most people were hunched forward with their arms around their knees, as if they had suddenly remembered directions from airplane stewardesses, but when the braking stopped, the children started to cry and brought people back to their upright positions. Everyone began to talk all at once but not to each other, so that no one caught the words and they floated up like balloons and intermingled, and then floated down again, solitary. On their descent Beth hears: "please," "Frank," "child," "potato chips," "my son." The first complete sentence she hears issues from Carl's mouth. "We've hit something. And probably derailed."

"We've only been on the train for two hours," Beth observes, as if that had anything to do with anything.

"Statistically accidents most often happen near home," Carl says.

"I'm nowhere near home."

"Well, somebody on the train is," Carl says patiently. Beth thinks she would be mad at him too, if he were her phone psychic. She's mad at him anyway. "I bet you tell people that he'll be back, but you won't want him then," she says. "I bet you say that a lot."

"I've said that more than once," Carl admits.

"That's a cliché." Beth reminds herself that Carl has a mental impediment that makes it impossible for him to be anything but a phone psychic and even that was too much for him, but her sympathies remain indefinite.

The train is dim. Not dark, but dim in a way that makes you sad, like the way late Sunday afternoon in the fall is dim. The major overhead aisle lights are off now and the engines seem to rev themselves up and then shut down slowly. The noise is like a very big vacuum cleaner.

It hasn't ever occurred to Beth to be in a train accident and Beth finds it hard to believe that anything that hasn't occurred in her imagination could actually happen. She has been proven wrong on this again and again, but she is stubborn in her disbelief. It has occurred to Beth on numerous occasions to be in an airplane accident, which is why she's on the train in the first place. In Beth's imagination, when the plane is dropping (and, in her imagination, it's the drop rather than the crash that frightens her; in fact, Beth's imagination won't actually allow the plane to crash because that involves a type of violence that Beth doesn't really want to look at, or approve of) Beth is mostly afraid of dying with strangers. If this had happened on a plane (whatever happened), Beth is pretty sure she would have died with Carl. Who's to say what her obligation to him would be then?

The curly-haired children have gathered around their straight-haired mother again. "What happened, Mom?" the girl says. She puts her head on her mother's breast and the two boys rest their hands on the girl's head. "We killed something," one of the boys says. "Something's bloody near us." He sounds excited as he says this, but the other boy begins to cry.

Most of the men on the train stand up, preparing themselves to do something, but waiting for the orders the conductor will give. One of the men breaks rank, tries the sliding door into the other car and calls out: "Locked." When a voice finally does come on over the intercom, it is the lofty one of the dining-car attendant stating that the dining car will be closed. His voice is less confident than it was the first time they heard him. It strengthens as he says, "Everyone please stay in your seats."

Beth assumes he's happy to be able to state a rule. "We will be stopped for a while now, but it isn't safe to get off the train." Beth thinks she hears a sharp intake of breath, as if he is taking a bit of a drag. "But," he announces, "anyone who wants to smoke should come to the lounge car now."

Beth looks out the window and sees that there are no buildings around. Mostly there are thinning woods. It doesn't look like a place where there would be a crossing, so Beth assumes they haven't hit a school bus, which somehow seems to happen frequently. "I hope we didn't hit a deer," she remarks, still looking at the window, careful not to look at Carl.

"Bambi was traumatizing for many people," Carl acknowledges, "but I'd be grateful if it was only a deer we hit."

"What?" Beth demands. "What do you know?"

"That I'm going to have a cigarette." Carl doesn't stand up with a push—he more or less straightens up by unbending his knees and putting on his hat. He takes on importance to Beth by striding down the aisle and disappearing, but it's a fleeting importance that doesn't last much longer than his actual disappearance.

While Carl is gone, Beth takes some time to pretend that he isn't coming back. She takes off her shoes and puts them up on his seat and covers her legs with the small plaid blanket. She is so pleased with the arrangement that she reaches down beneath her, unzips the small canvas cooler and grabs one of the two beers that she has allotted for the trip. When Carl returns to the seat she is reading *Glamour* magazine and half-listening to the conversations around her, most of which involve arguments between couples about why they should have flown. "It's not like we're pioneers, or anything," she hears one woman confide to her husband.

"Did you find out anything?" Beth asks. Others in the car have turned slightly toward Carl also, as if he has come from a land where there is information.

"Those guys don't know what they hit. They think it's a cow. Someone found a hoof. The train will run but they have to wait for an Amtrak inspector because of the dead guy."

"A dead guy?" Beth asks. "From the accident?"

"Old age. His daughter-in-law says that he'd always wanted to take a trip cross-country in a train and so they decided they would do it now—fall—leaves. You know, before it was too late. But he's dead now."

Beth tries to think about the dead man on the train. "A man is dead on the train," she says to herself. The sentence has a nice ring to it. A ring of something important.

"Have you ever read Emily Dickinson?" Beth asks Carl.

"The dashes were too perplexing for me. They were a little too much like my skips."

"There are editions with standard punctuation," Beth informs him.

"I wouldn't be interested," Carl says.

The man in the seat behind them leans over and taps Carl on the shoulder. Carl flinches jumping-bean-like, but stays straight.

"Where's the dead guy?" the man questions. Beth turns slightly, enough to glimpse the facial hair of the man tapping Carl. It's white, soft and long. "I don't like dead people," the bearded man clarifies.

"He's in a sleeping car," Carl says without turning around.

This seems to satisfy the man. "I guess if you're dead on a train, that's the best place for you," he says before he sits down.

Carl actually turns toward Beth. "Maybe it was Death we hit, maybe the hoof was the hoof of death."

"Now your mind is skipping from one to zero," Beth remarks before she can stop herself.

"Nah," Carl says, with, to his credit, a slight smile. Also, he seems to have developed a drawl since his last sentence. "It wasn't even the thing we hit that caused the train to go so bad. It was kind of a combination of the thing we hit and the rail jumping up to hit the thing we hit, which made us derail. It'll be awhile before we get back on track. Plus we have to wait for them to pick up the dead guy."

"There's not a station here." Beth looks out. It's almost dark. The sky looks like one-two-three Jell-O, the lighter shades of blue at the bottom, the trees cardboard props against the blue.

"There's an Amtrak rule about not unloading bodies at a station in front of other passengers."

Beth thinks that everyone who smokes must get extra room for information just by ignoring the whole major fact that smoking kills you. She's bored. They could be here all night—maybe they'll send a bus to get them. She turns to Carl who is, of course, staring straight ahead. She wonders why she even bothers to check. "Hey," she says, touching Carl's sleeve with a fingertip, careful not to touch Carl's actual arm. The fabric of his jacket feels checkered. "Let's play a game."

"I'm not good at games. There are usually steps involved."

"This will be easy for you." Beth knows the rules of the game so thoroughly, she sees that she might have had this plan all along. "This is the phone psychic game. I'll make up a person and I'll be calling you. OK? That way it will be easy for both of us. Everything you'll be telling me will be about the fake person."

"We can start right out," Beth continues, "we won't have to pretend a phone's ringing or anything. Though we should probably say hello."

"Hello," Carl acquiesces.

"When was I born?"

"July 11, 1976."

"That's right. I was a Bicentennial Baby."

"To this day, people give you coins with a drummer on them."

"I have a large ceramic donkey bank from Mexico specifically for the purpose of holding those coins."

"So what is your first question? First questions are free, you know."

"No," Beth says, glancing over. Carl has moved his position only a crack, holding his arm a little crooked at the elbow. Beth thinks this must be how he holds the phone. "If I tell you that, you'll figure everything out using common sense."

"I have no common sense," Carl reminds her.

"This is supposed to be about me."

"Yes. Well, I sense a sadness in you."

"You could say that about anybody."

"I sense a specific sadness in you. Located in the solar plexus."

"Why don't you just say the stomach? Why does everybody always say solar plexus?"

"They're different things."

"Tell me something important," Beth demands. She feels a slight movement and out of the corner of her eye she sees that Carl has closed his. When he speaks, his voice sounds slightly higher.

"I would say to you that you occasionally get a glimpse of happiness and that you spend your whole life trying to get back to that glimpse. It seems to me it is in early morning at a time of the year when the trees are of the darkest green and they hang down shadowing everything. There is a promise you chase everywhere, through many states and countries. This promise smells like a perfume. Figures form around elusive flowers and musk and they are figures you love. He has dark hair and she, she is littler than you both. She takes on every smell

you've ever wanted to breathe. And in between the night and the morning you are almost to them. I don't know whether you're going to be able to negotiate the light and dark to get to them. Your glimpse of happiness may be in the in-between."

"I'm hanging up now," Beth says.

"See. The truth makes people angry." Carl's voice has changed back to normal, but his eyes have remained closed.

"I was in third grade in 1976," Beth says.

"I know that," Carl confirms. "I was just trying to be charming."

Beth curls up, sort of fetal-like. If she's pregnant, she wonders if it will hurt the baby for both of them to sleep positioned like that. Her sleep is deep and awake. Sometimes she hears things in and out of the train, snoring or something against the wind. As long as her eyes are closed, she is safe. As long as somebody is making decisions about when they will move, and when they will not move, Beth is cocooned. Once she feels the train jerk and opens her eyes. Most of the other passengers are asleep. Outside, it is completely night and nowhere. Beth hears, before she sees, a door opening out into the dark, and then watches a military choreography of flashlights, five on each side of the door, forming an aisle. From her window, Beth sees slightly illuminated Amtrak attendants holding the flashlights down toward the ground, out of respect, she thinks, for the covered body on the stretcher, which is carried by four civilians down the path between the small illuminated circles. One of the Amtrak guys salutes as the body makes its way down the aisle. Behind the body, Beth sees what she guesses is the dead man's family: a bundled woman, a man, and a teenage boy. She doesn't see an ambulance. Are they just going to leave them out there? Beth hears the engines rev up, sees the Amtrak attendants file back into the train, although she notes that one of the attendants and his flashlight remain with the family. They look hunched and little, as if someone has died and now they are off the train.

Beth looks around and wonders if anybody else has ever been thrown off the train. She can see it could take less than a family member dying—a drunken row and you could end up in the middle of nowhere. She thinks maybe this has happened to the man in the plaid shirt.

The train pulls away from the people it has dismissed. There is the sound that the train blares, preceding the train into its future. All night long, tiny cities will waver in through the windows and the passengers, sleeping or drinking or reading, will momentarily float onto them.

Somewhere in the future there will be a liberty bell, names will get called out into night air: Buffalo, Erie, Waterloo. Some of the people on the train will leave.

Beth hears a bit of a snore and suspects it has come from Carl. Next door, Carl's head has tilted just enough to make Beth think he's awake, but when he speaks he doesn't open his eyes. "He'll come back," Carl says softly, before he opens his eyes and turns directly to Beth, "but you won't want him anymore."