

## Iron and Clay

It was in Gary we picked her up, Monday morning around eleven. The sulfur smell of the steel mills had been filtering into the train for some time, through cracks in the plastic window casings, through the flashing spaces between the sheet-aluminum segments of the telescoping tunnels that connected the cars. I had had to make my way through those shifting passages three painful times during my all-night journey, to get to the toilet, and that was the first thing I thought of when I saw her – how would she get to the toilet?

“Ninety-one year old Cubs fan,” the conductor said loudly with a wink as he lowered her by her bony elbow into the aisle seat beside me and placed her bulging plastic purse tenderly in her lap like it was a fat baby. I had been hugging the window, trying to be alone with my thoughts, trying to ignore the conversation of the two ladies seated behind me in the handicapped car, the old lady car. The “physically challenged,” obese-and-like-it-that-way car, the day-late, dollar-short, rug-pulled-out-from-under, flat-on-my-face and tripped over car. The dust-biter car.

She was wearing a Cubs cap – dirty white mesh fabric on the back and faded blue on the front, and the brim was a little limp. Her face was hard, as if it had been carved out of limestone, and about the same color. A few grizzled tufts of slate-colored hair stuck out from under the cap. She wedged her rubber-tipped cane into the crack between our seats.

“Goin’ to the game tonight,” she said, and the spaces between her yellow teeth looked as if they’d been puttied in with a dull, soft metal, pewter or lead. “Always try to make it to the game.”

I tucked my pillow against my shoulder and feigned sleep.

“Been goin’ to the games since I was a girl,” she said to no one.

The train began to glide, and soon worked up to its familiar claketta claketta. Through half-open eyelids, I watched the towering blast-furnaces and foundries and two-hundred acre shrapnel-littered yards of U.S. Steel zoom past. On the highest tower was painted the blotchy, once green insignia: USS. A few scraggly weeds had dared to root in among piles of rusting I-beams in the smoky shadows of the hulking iron-sided buildings. A few blinks later, the time-mangled clapboard slum district shamelessly displayed its backside. Three filthy children played atop a pile of crushed plastic bottles and tin cans. Back home in Pittsburgh, all the steel mills had long ago been converted into slick cybertech company offices and high-end shopping malls. The toxic fallout of the industrial boom had been swept up along with its human victims and the whole mess hauled out of eyeshot. For some reason, Gary lagged behind, the conscience-wringer of the Midwest, obstinate, crippled, out of synch.

The two ladies in the rear resumed their earlier conversation, nasal, whining, like a couple of moose. They had kept the other passengers up half the night with their complaining and loud demands. And they seemed not to care that everyone in the car now knew their intimate lives and those of their friends, neighbors, and relatives.

“He was nothin’ but a drunk, drinkin’ geeein, drinkin’ wahhhn, drinkin’ beeer, drinkin’ whatever he got his hands on. Beat de keeds. She say, I ain’t havin’ no mo’ keeds, you wan’ ‘em, you have ‘em. He neveh was no good.”

“Mmm-hmm. Dat f’ sho.”

“Looka dat white woaman. She can steel walk bah herseff. What she think she doin’ here, mighty as can be.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

The “white woman,” a pale redhead of about thirty, must have heard them as she shuffled back to her seat toward the front of the car, clutching the back of each seat as she went. Earlier in the toilet, I had overheard her tell the obese woman that she had a rare form of cancer and was traveling to see a specialist in Chicago. I had seen her weeping fairly regularly into a Kleenex. She bent to pull one from her bag, and I turned my head.

Seeing me move, the Cubs fan perked up.

“The days are gone,” she said. “But I still believe they can come back. I still believe.”

Stringy arms poked from her t-shirt sleeves and her hands were taut and etched, probably from a lifetime of chopping carrots for casseroles and wringing dishrags, from the daily push and pull of sponge-mops on peeling linoleum, the yank and tug of cotton and polyester in and out of bleachy-smelling laundromat washers, from long seasons of wiping vomit from children’s beds and faces. Women’s work. Her gray fingertips were permanently dented and soiled, no doubt from decades of snatching up pennies from asphalt and applying carefully calibrated pressure to grocery store fruit and working needles through grimy, holey jeans. Probably they smelled of the ammonia of diapers and of the black mold and brown mush that hides under the peels of spoiling onions.

“My daddy moved the family here in 1906, when Mr. Gary founded the city. He built the mill, and had to have a place for the workers to live, so he built Gary. The Cubs were something back then. Won the World Series in ’07 and ’08. Daddy used to tell us about stars like Frank Chance and Mordecai ‘Three-Finger’ Brown. The Cubs were winning pennants and playing in the Series all the time when I was a kid.”

She might have been a pretty kid. What color would her hair have been?

“But the war years were the best. The mill was pouring steel like pancakes. Everybody had a job. None of this drugs and gangs and shootings, like Gary is now. Then it was time for the Boys to come home, and the Cubs were there to welcome them. The Cubs were America. The Cubs were tough like iron, like steel, and so were their faaans!”

She reigned in her rising volume, and when the trembling in her body had subsided, she took a deep breath and sighed with a hiss and a wheeze, like air escaping from an old tire. “It was the best of times, back in ’45 when the Cubs played in the World Series, right here at Wrigley Field. They would have won it too, if it hadn’t been for the curse. Ever hear of the Billy Goat Curse?”

I shook my head. I gave up all hope of faking sleep. She inched herself up a bit taller in her seat. Her breath smelled like sour milk.

“Well, there was a fella, a Greek immigrant, who owned a tavern. One day a goat fell off a truck and wandered into his tavern all bleeding, and he cared for it and nursed it back to health. After that he started to have good luck in his business, and the goat became his mascot. He figured the goat would bring the Cubs luck too, so he got two tickets to the fourth game of the series, one for him and one for the goat. But when he got to Wrigley Field, he was turned away. People said his goat stunk too bad. He showed them the goat’s ticket, but it didn’t matter, they kicked him out of the stadium. Right then and there, he cursed the Cubs to never win another pennant or play in another World Series. That day, they lost to the Detroit Tigers, and ever since they’ve been in a sorry state. They tried to break the curse in 1984 by parading a goat around the field, but the Greek fella’s nephew told them it wouldn’t work, because they were just doing it for publicity. They really hadn’t opened their heart to goats.”

“I see,” I said.

She pulled a game schedule from her purse and perused it. The purse was pink and smudged, like a piglet.

“So, where are you headed?” she asked.

“To a pilgrimage site outside of Chicago.”

“Been travelin’ long?”

“Yes.”

“Got leg problems?” She looked down at my legs, their shriveled contours unmistakable beneath the stretch velveteen of my pants, spindly and spiraled like licorice twists and propped at odd angles against the footrest.

“Burned,” I said.

The gray-green smoke from the Gary blast furnaces was thick and sticky now against the window panes. It was noon but there was no sun in sight. The train swayed from side to side and jerked cruelly with a clap every time the wheels struck a defect in the track.

“Burned,” she said, and pressed her wafery lips together. “Accident at work?”

Alright, she wanted it, she was gonna get it. Let her have a heart attack.

“My husband poured gasoline on me and lit it. While I was lying in bed recuperating from a stillbirth.”

Her face was turned slightly away, hard and yellow in the dusky light like a bronze statue. Her eyes were focused sharply on a point ahead that I could not see. The train thwacked and swayed, and our arms bumped together.

“Baby born too soon?”

“Too late. Postmaturity, they call it. If they don’t come out when they’re supposed to, their systems start breaking down, and they can’t endure labor.”

“Didn’t the doctors know?”

“Nobody knew. The dates were wrong. It was fourteen years ago. Fourteen years ago today.”

“The list” began its litany: the time I was offered an entry-level position with IBM but gave it up at the insistence of my fiancé, only to have the relationship end and find that the job had been filled; the time I found out, after saving my virginity for the honeymoon, that my handsome new husband was a childhood sexual abuse victim and was not willing or able to perform sexually; the time I sat in a fertility doctor’s office alone sobbing into a plastic chair while the first attempt at artificial insemination bled out between my legs; the time I took a year of maternity leave from a Russian Studies program only to find upon my return that the Soviet Union no longer existed, much of my training was obsolete, and a cadre of younger, healthier, and less depressed students had moved in to replace me; the time I arranged for childcare, scraped together enough money for gas, and sorted through eighty Salvation Army and Goodwill dresses in order to find a decent one, only to arrive at the Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to find that they were closed for their annual cleaning; the time I was carried pale and numb from the courtroom after my husband was sentenced to only six months of work-release; the time I met and fell in love with Sam, a fellow burn unit patient, only to have him go home to his fiancée, even though she had refused to visit him there for seven months because of the smell; the time I was told by Dr. Johnston that the grinding pain in my arms and legs was due to permanent nerve damage and would never go away. Why the hell was I going on a pilgrimage? What kind of God would force this much suffering on mere human beings? He – It – was savage, bestial, teasing and torturing his own offspring, blasting them like pig iron, pounding and splitting them like rails.

I turned toward the window. Through the smoke I thought I could see an open smelter, the roaring, spluttering orange mass of oxygenated ore, the coke ash frothing and spewing from the cauldron, flaming rivulets of slag hurling hellward, crackling sparks dancing all directions into a windless void.

The moose women started up their drawly whine again.

“This yer conductor don’t tell us nnothin’. The other conductor, he tell us all kinds o’ thangs, lak all ‘bout the mountains we seein’ – this yer conductor don’t tell us nnothin’.”

“Don’t tell us *nnothin’*.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a service attendant bringing them lunch on a tray.

“Here’s your sandwich, here’s your mayonnaise, here’s your coffee – I had them brew it strong just like you wanted – and here’s – “

“Get me some ice watch too. And I want some french frahs.”

I heard the clatter of the wheels grow louder as the rear door of the car opened to let the attendant out, and then grow softer again as it closed behind her. The smell of sulfur inside the car began to mix with ham and cheese and coffee. I reached into my bag and felt around for the last of the granola bars. There were two inside the foil wrapper. I offered one to Madam Cubbie. She took it and we slowly munched together in silence.

Soon we would reach the Chicago station. I began to worry that I would not get any help transferring my bags from the train to the bus. When I’d purchased my tickets online, I’d noted that I would need assistance. I had phoned the 800 number too, and the operator had assured me there would be a porter and a wheelchair waiting for me at the door when I boarded in Pittsburgh Sunday evening, but there was not. I had had to push through a tense knot of people to the ticket window. The whole scene replayed in my mind.

“I’d like to check this bag, and I’m handicapped – I can’t lift it into the chute.”

The ticket clerk ignored me. I repeated myself as I stood braced against the counter.

“Let me see your ticket,” she snipped. I fumbled in the side pocket of my carry-on and handed it to her. “This is not a handicapped ticket. You did not request assistance and lower level seating.”

“Yes, I did request it, both online and over the phone. They assured me that – “

“This train is sold out for lower level seating. You’ll have to be seated upstairs.”

“But I can’t climb stairs.” About forty feet away, I noticed the baggage handler, tall and scowling, face set like cement, loading tagged luggage from the chute onto a cart. “And I need to check this bag,” I said to the clerk as politely as I could. “I can’t lift it. Can someone help me?”

“This train is sold out. I can’t sell you another ticket.”

“Well I – I suppose I will have to sit on the floor,” I said quietly to myself.

A middle-aged man stepped up and looked me in the eye and said, “Ma’am, do you need some help?”

“Yes, sir, thank you and God bless you.”

He wheeled the bag over to the chute and lifted it in. I watched nervously. My frayed duffle was the last to be loaded.

A few dozen people, laden with bright-colored luggage, scurried to board the train. I looked down at my carry-on bag. I looked around for the middle-aged man, but he was gone. I saw a young man of about twenty wearing a backpack and hiking shoes.

“Sir, could you please help me carry this bag?”

He appeared not to hear me. The hum of the train engine increased in pitch. I saw another young man.



“Please could you help me carry this?”

He threw up his arms, huffed, then said, “Sure.” He took the bag and started for the train. I lurched and gasped my way forward, pain twisting and shooting up what was left of my thighs. Finally I reached the door of the first passenger car, which was guarded by an attendant.

“Sir, I have a problem. I’m handicapped and I can’t climb stairs, but the lady inside told me that I have the wrong ticket for the lower level.”

“I can’t seat you. Go to the next car.”

I prayed and hobbled. Everyone else had boarded by now except the uniformed car attendants, who stood outside their doors, holding the handles. The man with my carry-on bag had disappeared. My hot face felt as if it had cracked in half, and tears sprayed out. I approached the next car.

“Ma’am, I’m handicapped and I thought I had the right ticket – I called the 800 number – I can’t climb stairs – please, can I trade seats with somebody? Please, I don’t know what to do!” I was wiping my face with the sleeve of my sweater, accidentally exposing the red and purple scarring at my wrist and nearly toppling over with each sob.

She grabbed me under the arm and hoisted me into the car’s lower level. “You!” she screamed, pointing at a thirty-ish couple in the first two seats, “Upstairs!” The couple sheepishly obeyed. She led me further down the aisle to where a woman lay sprawled, taking up two seats. She kicked her in the thigh, which was protruding into the aisle. The train began to pull out of the station. The woman roused herself from sleep and let me slide into the window seat, where I continued to mumble and sob for another twenty minutes or so, “My carry-on bag, some man has my bag, my bag, some man has my bag.” It contained all of my food for the next two days, and

all my medicines. I had no money, having exhausted my disability check on the tickets and shrine reservations.

About half an hour later, a porter brought me the bag. Everything was still in it.

The memory made my stomach ache as we approached Union Station.

The train slowed to a stop, and several minutes later an assistant conductor helped us all out onto the platform of the cavernous underground station – the two moose women first, then Cubbie, then me, then the white woman, then the obese woman, whose gray complexion and panicked eyes and gargantuan, pitted ankles marked her as a heart patient. The air was cool and damp. We huddled on clammy metal footstools, our backs against an icy concrete pier, while the able-bodied passengers detrained and stepped briskly around us toward the terminal. Family members found one another, counted their bags together, conferred about who would carry what, and went on to their vacations and weddings and wine-and-brie reunions.

Maybe if the suffering of the present would let up long enough, I could finally make peace with the past. How many pilgrimages would I have to take before God saw that I was serious? I needed It to show me how to accept useless suffering, an in-valid life. How to lose well.

Cubbie leaned toward me and tried to shout something. The several-story high concrete walls seemed to soak up her stiletto voice. The subterranean damp mixed with decades of diesel exhaust created dripping, sooty stains that streaked down the smooth walls from sixty feet up. A silver metro commuter train was revving up on the next track, about ten yards away. It sang louder and stronger until it was roaring like Niagara Falls and setting up a ticklish sympathetic vibration inside my guts and ribcage. My wasted muscles and brains and bones felt forced into

life. My liver stirred and my sodden heart buzzed despite itself. I could feel the outlines of my lungs inside my chest.

I smiled. It was exhilarating to finally be out of that sweltering womb of a train car. I breathed the frigid air deeply and took in the entire scene with a mechanical indifference. The diesel fumes even smelled good after the meat-stench of Gary. A thought congealed: Men had designed and built everything within sight and sound of me, unilaterally, without the input of the weak, the small, the female. Man had created this world, not God. To accept my time and place, all the man-made horrors and beauties of it, to accept that there is no court of justice except within me, that the entire kingdom of God is within – maybe this was all it took. Maybe. Twenty minutes after everyone else had cleared the area, an electric cart came to pick up the human detritus of the loser car, along with our luggage, to transport us to our busses.

“Sortin’ and gatherin’!” Cubbie yelled toward me as the driver lifted her onto the cart. “He makes others a test for us, just like we’re a test for them.”

“What?” I yelled back.

She brandished her cane like it was a rapier. “And it’s not over till you’re dead!”

Forty minutes later, the bus dropped me off at the medical supply store. It turns out the electric scooter I had reserved for my tour of the National Shrine of St. Therese was not available. Someone had rented the last one just before I got there. There was no sense getting angry about it. I turned around and made my way slowly out to the littered street and hailed a cab. I spent Monday afternoon and night at a hotel in Darien, a few blocks from the Shrine on the south side. I wasted the time playing on a computer in the hotel lobby. I googled diesel locomotives, and e-mailed my sister. Then it stormed all night, lightening flashing at the edges of the drapes. I dreamed of Jesus at the feet of Mother Mary, black sheep and bleeding goats

cradled in his arms, pretty people rushing past with their colorful luggage. I awakened refreshed, maybe because the acidic soot had been cleared from the city air by the rain. As I sat on the edge of the bed at six a.m., staring down at the flesh and bones of my legs, it occurred to me that it had not been a fruitless journey. I knew what I was made of.

Now it was after nine. Number Thirty back home to Pittsburgh was running an hour behind. I was relaxing on a bench in Union Station's eastbound waiting area, my chest humming again with the heartbeat of the diesels. My bag had been checked, a wheelchair stood ready. A porter had already taken my carry-on to the platform. I watched the throngs, black and wan, bent, haughty, steeled, oblivious, who passed their lives God knows how in a city of yesterday's promises. I thought of Cubbie and wondered how the game had gone. I hoped she'd had the satisfaction of seeing her team win, after all the trouble she'd taken to make it there at ninety-one, gripping her cane in one trembling hand and her twelve-pound purse in the other. I was enjoying the music of the locomotives, the endless gnashing and clanging and clattering of metal against metal, the whirring of connecting rods and the ratcheting of valves and the scraping of pistons inside cast-iron engine blocks, their 4000-horsepower harmony timed as tightly as a Mozart symphony, when a TV in a nearby lounge caught my ear. A newscaster was saying, "Powerful winds and thunderstorms downed trees and power lines throughout northern Illinois last night. Thousands of fans attending the Chicago Cubs and Houston Astros baseball game were evacuated from Wrigley field at the end of the first inning as weather sirens blared..."

Cetti Cherniak