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Strangers on a train

A fantasy fulfilled on Amtrak

Tom Hollander 6 October 2012

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ARTS LIFE PODCAST



THE WEEK

If I subtracted from my life all the time spent either thinking about sex, or engaging in behaviour calculated to achieve it (by which I mean most of my social life and career choices); or dealing with the consequences of having achieved it (by which I mean all of my romantic life), well, I don't know how much of my life I'd actually have left. Childhood. The useful bit.

Fifteen years ago, in August, I boarded a train in New Orleans bound for New York. The journey time was 29 hours. What to do? Write postcards? Read a book? Try to have sex with someone?

It was a sultry afternoon: Spanish moss dangled in a sensuous manner, the edges of things were blurry in the heat. And we passengers would be packed together for a really long time going in and out of tunnels. I didn't actually set out to do it. It was more of a daydream. It would be a wonderful thing. To meet someone lovely and to pass through every stage of an affair, within the same journey. First meeting, seduction, consummation, farewell. Like station names.

I drifted into the smoking carriage. The place where everyone has at least one vice in common. So a good starting point if you were actually going to try and seduce someone, which I wasn't, but since we had 29 hours I could at least flirt with the idea. Before I read my book.

The most attractive woman in the carriage was small, dark-haired, bright-eyed and talking animatedly to a big black soldier. But I wasn't trying so it didn't matter. And

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because it didn't matter, somehow he drifted away, and I found myself talking to her, and we got on, and in a way that I really can't remember there was a seamlessness with which we made our way, over a few hours, from smoking carriage to bar, and from bar to restaurant car, and over dinner we told each other our life stories, and in the narrow section of corridor on our way back to our seats we were forced close together and I turned and kissed her. Or did she kiss me?

Her name was Pamela Reed and she was travelling back to Atlanta, Georgia, to meet her parents. She had been forcibly estranged from her crack-dealing boyfriend who was now in jail. Her father was a colonel in the army and her mother was a schoolteacher. She was the apple of their eye and the source of all their pain. To me she was compelling. Obviously. And Atlanta was about two hours away. I remember her hand reaching behind her and holding mine and then we were in a bathroom. Quite a big American one. And in there we reached the consummation stagepost of our journey. And it was so wonderful that I was only slightly irritated at the noise of the guard hammering on the door yelling 'Excuse me! Excuse me!' You can go to the devil, I thought, because we are utterly alive and free and you are just a wage slave with a bunch of keys and a little whistle.

I said, 'Your nipples are surprisingly dark.' she said, 'I'm a quarter cherokee.' I said 'Wow.' And I felt love for her, because it was all so simple. She wanted me and I wanted her and I was the guy. I was the Marlboro man.

As we sidled past the guard back to our seats I was only half-listening when he said: 'Young lady, I've told you about this before...'

We sat in silence with our hearts racing. It was late at night now. A kid threw a piece of screwed-up paper at us. And the train hooted as it slipped into Atlanta.

And then we said goodbye and lovely to meet you and there was no exchange of addresses or telephone numbers. No guilt. No expectation. No blame. Farewell.

What a girl.



'Zombies! The worst kind....'

I felt a pang of something as she stepped down on to the platform. I stood slightly back from the window and as the train moved away I watched her meet her parents. Before she kissed them she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

I spent the next 18 hours reading, sleeping, looking out of the window and thanking God for his munificence. For once, my uncomplicated, all-pervading desire for womankind had been met by its opposite. Everything had come together, so to speak. I leaned back in rare contentment and the bounteous American landscape drifted past in Amtrak Panavision. There was only a nagging disquiet about that comment of the guard's.

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Surely he didn't mean that. Surely it was a general moan: 'I (mr boring jobsworth) have told "you" (plural, you lot, all you customers) about "this" (generally being in the bathroom too long and other petty infringements) "before" (on a daily basis, as part of my boring job, and this complaint is like a daily mantra).'

Surely he couldn't have meant: 'I, the long-suffering guard on this train, have been watching for months now as you, Pamela Reed, complusive sex addict and notorious Amtrak bicycle, have taken a succession of strangers into the bathroom and screwed them without protection just before greeting your traumatised parents.'

If that was true, then I was not a total stud, Pamela Reed was mentally ill, and our romance on the train was simply the meeting of two deranged people.

I resolved to put such thoughts out of my head. This was classic Groucho Marx... if it had happened to me, then there must be something wrong with it. No, the whole thing was magnificent. No point thinking anything else. I looked forward to telling my friends.

Over the years, my attitude has matured. I'm more accepting of the notion that all experience is flawed. So what if she was a sex-crazed psychopath? If your desire is to meet a complete stranger on a train and couple with her almost immediately, then what do you expect? Look at that horrid Sylvia in *Parade's End*. I reckon I got off lightly.

No, it was still beautiful. I still love her, wherever she is. Even if she's on her knees in a bathroom stall. I love her for the dream of it.

And I hope she's OK.

Pamela Reed's name has been changed.

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