

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Strangers on the Desert Train

Surreal Lewis · Wednesday, October 5th, 2016

(*"Tomorrow's Voices Today"* is a new series curated by poet and educator Mike Sonksen.)

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I woke up in the lounge car with a pain in my neck and my face buried in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Sunrise. The Mojave Desert zoomed by the train windows and orange lit up the sky. A few rows ahead, on the left, the artist who talked to us at the station in Gallup was still painting rocks and talking to strangers. He was talking to a hipster-looking "screenwriter" when I fell asleep and to Amtrak security guards when I woke up. Does he even sleep?

I went down to the cafe car to get some breakfast. \$6 for a frozen microwaveable Jimmy Dean breakfast sandwich. Fuck that. I bought a \$2 coffee and sat down with Howlin' Wolf in my earbuds. Moments later, a smiling Amish couple and their tiny Amish baby were sitting across from me. At least I assumed they were Amish. It wasn't until their scent drifted over to my side of the table that I realized the Amish don't believe in wearing deodorant. We sparked a conversation and the man tells me they're from Missouri, heading to San Diego to visit his grandmother getting back surgery in Tijuana. Odd, but I didn't ask any questions. Soon after, more Amish relatives arrived, happily taking the next booth over. A wave of body odor rushed in from their armpits and crashed against my nostrils, but their wide and yellow smiles overpowered the smell. All the men had the same bowl cuts and Honest Abe beards, with identical blue shirts and suspended black slacks. The women wore dresses covering every inch from head to toe, topped with white caps.

The previous night, stopping in a town in Arizona, two men who looked similar boarded the train, only they smelled like leather rather than armpit, and resembled mountain men or miners. They too wore identical clothing with heavy leather boots and had the same Lincoln beards and Beatles cuts. One was a thinner, taller version of his husky partner, sort of like an Amish version of the Blues Brothers.

"Where you guys from?" the artist asked.

They paused and stared for a moment, until the taller one frantically blurted out, "Toronto!"

"Toronto... Cool, man," the artist replied. "What're you doing all the way in Arizona?"

Another pause, followed by glances at each other. "Work," the tall one said.

Why were they so short and frantic in conversation? I thought maybe they weren't used to social interactions with people so different from them. Maybe they'd never been on a train before and the shaking and narrow aisles were overwhelming. Perhaps they were brainwashed Russian spies, who had failed their mission and had their minds wiped by the neuralizer like in *Men in Black III*, and the only pieces left in their memory were "Toronto" and "work". Maybe these thoughts were a sign I should've been asleep by then. The men had no blankets or pillows, they just dropped to the floor

and within minutes – loud snoring.

While walking up and down the aisles that night, I found more and more men who looked exactly like this sleeping in rows of seats together. One of them was older and larger, with a white Santa beard and black top hat. I mentally nicknamed him “Papa Amish”.

Each car of the train was odd and diverse. To start, the cars all smelled faintly like old person, cigarettes, and air conditioning. Too much air conditioning. Coach was too cold and shaky to sleep in at night, and its aisles were filled with the strangest of strangers. The seats were occupied by snoring old men, robed women on some sort of religious pilgrimage, shoeless transients in deep sleep, men in cowboy outfits, and a tall woman with large breasts, long hair, and tight clothes. She spent the night back and forth between the bathroom area with various men. She looked like Barbie after a rough night of drugs and partying.

But now it was the morning, and despite the neck pain, the lounge car was a much better spot than my seat would’ve been in the cold, strange smelling aisles of coach. I stayed in my booth, sipping coffee, hearing Amish conversations drift between English and German.

In the aisle, the perfect looking American couple – middle-aged, clean cut, and in conservative cowboy attire – was finishing up a conversation with the artist. He had been painting and talking all night long. Simply by being in his proximity, I had learned that he was on his way to LA for an art show. I walked over and asked to take a look at his art. “Sure, man, check it out.”

He painted Native American art and symbols onto pieces of rock directly from the Navajo Nation in Arizona. I was sleeping on Navajo dirt just days before. The reservation is a magical and impoverished place, covered in red sand that occasionally drops into green desert canyons or finds its way into outdated and rundown buildings.

We began talking and he told me his name is Chris Pinto, Navajo and Chicano. Passing Victorville, I saw a house with a stained Confederate flag hanging from the old truck in the backyard. The red, white, and blue of either flag reminds me of racism. I told him about my friend Phelan’s dad, half-black and half-Native American. His grandma on the reservation made him sleep outside in the cold because he was a too black and “corrupted”, but when he moved to Philly with his dad, the black kids bullied him for not being black enough. Chris shook his head. “I don’t pay attention to color man, besides these colors...” he said, pointing at the work-in-progress on his rock with his paint covered and scarred fingers. “My grandpa told me we all bleed the same color. Red. And that’s all that matters... unless it’s green blood or something. Then you should be worried! Ha ha ha!”

Chris looked like Danny Trejo, only with a beer belly and a bigger smile, along with a mustache and slicked black ponytail. We talked for about an hour. He told me stories of what it was like growing up Mexican and Navajo, the history of his land, and the meaning behind his art. “A dot of paint can go a long way, mix it with a little bit of history and it can go even longer,” he said.

“I don’t just do Navajo art though, I’ll do Spiderman or Batman or whatever man. As long as I have a paintbrush in my hand I’ll paint anything.”

That morning, banning gay marriage was declared unconstitutional nationwide by the Supreme Court. Chris said, “Gay marriage legal? Cool, man. I’ve never minded gay people. I mean, I’ve never slept with any women in my own tribe – mainly cause she’d probably be my cousin or sister or something – but I wouldn’t stop someone else from doing it you know? Just do what you want, man. There’re more important things to stress about.”

When the train reached Fullerton he got off, patting me on the shoulder as he left. Never before had I hung out with a family of bad smelling Amish people and a Navajo artist in a speeding metal container, but I have two painted and signed rocks on my desk to help me remember it.

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