

ALL ABOA-R-RD!

Dorothy Livesay

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHILDHOOD and adulthood is so simple that we forget to think about it. It lies in the fact that a child does not have to make decisions. His world is not one of action, but of sensations. It is as if he were being hush-a-byed in a cradle "on the treetop." And if the cradle were whisked away from beneath him he'd still believe he could be cushioned on air, for "When the wind blows the cradle will rock!" Or, there is the possibility, if he is less than three years old, that he would be put aboard a train with his parents but without any idea as to whether this is a stationary new home or an automobile on rails. He has no responsibility except to be there, rejoicing in the cries of "All aboa-r-rd!"; in the feeling of being shunted backward, then forward; the jolt, the chug of wheels; and "Mommy, we're moving!" Now his breath is released as the city's bones are cast behind and through the racing window his eyes devour the grassy plain.

Or so it was in my day. Is that why, as adults, we so love trains? Suddenly, we are safe. That sense of security is bliss. As a child at home in the west end of Winnipeg, I remember my early "train thoughts": waking to the deep sound of an engine's moose call; lying in the half light, the green blind being drawn. Passers-by on the wooden sidewalk cast strange shadows on the ceiling above my head and I imagine fairy princesses, carriages, men on horseback, gnomes. Then outside again there's the *clop clop* of the milkman's horse, the clatter of the huge silvery can of milk from which he will measure pints and quarts and pour them into our jugs on the kitchen table. He may leave butter also, in striped pats, all to go into the ice box beside the block of ice hewed from the river, smelling of sawdust. In hot summer we dream of ice and snow. The trains shunt, the black engine lets forth its call. Soon it will be autumn, dark evening, when the train's necklace of lights winks its messages across the prairie.

We took the train every summer to go to a cottage in Keewatin (northern Ontario). That was a dull, boring, daytime journey, no air conditioning, the sun sticky yellow on the green plush seats. The real excitement would be to travel overnight on the CPR, west to Regina for camping at Fort Qu'Appelle. The conductor would be out on a wooden platform, the neat grey-clad Negro porters grinning under their red caps, chaffing the children. How tense we felt when the

steam began puffing furiously under the wheels, the conductor waved a signal to the engineer leaning out of his black window, and the magic words echoed from car to car: "ALL ABOARD!" You had to kiss your grannie quickly and be lifted by the porter in a flying movement up the iron steps past the corridor of "staterooms" into the sleeping car.

Dinner in the dining car was a deeply satisfying adventure: just getting there, pushing doors through car after car. The head steward kept you waiting a moment until he led you to a table for four, a snowy tablecloth with white table napkins folded like wigwams presiding over the population — those knives, forks, three kinds of spoons, the jug of ice water, silver sugar-and-cream bowls, balls of butter on ice, and that most fascinating basket containing crisp round rolls and soda biscuits. You did not have to feel hungry. You knew there would be good things coming. Five courses! The waiter would shake out the napkin by your plate and tie it round your neck with a flourish. There! Tuck. To begin with: celery sticks and olives. Soup was served from a silver tureen. Then the Winnipeg goldeye, mashed potatoes, carrots, cabbage, turnips, or beets. For dessert you might have to choose between blueberry pie and orange water-ice sherbet (not the strange starch pudding called sherbet today) or, perhaps, strawberry ice cream and pound cake. Father always asked for seed cake, but rarely got it — for which I was thankful. How could anyone like eating that? Perhaps the divine moment of delight was when the waiter had left the bill for a parent to sign. For each person he brought round silver bowls of warm water. "Do we drink it?" "Oh dear no! In these you dip your fingers, delicately, and dry them on your napkin." Delicious ritual, and perhaps the train slowed down at that point. The evening sun shone over the golden prairie fields.

There followed childhood sleep — "rocked on the cradle" of the wheels! And sometimes with all the shunting and grunting one could be thrown out of the berth. Then back into the warm womb, utter silence as the train waited in some country siding — waited and waited for the oncoming monster burdened with freight cars. Finally the shunting began again, until we took flight along the rails. In that dark behind the green curtain the child feels completely protected, with no will, no needs, ready to be rocked to sleep by the *thumpety thump* over the rails and the ever-so-often tilting from side to side. That foetal feeling! In adults, it becomes sexual arousal. From my far off ten-year-old childhood I remember listening on the stairs when our latest maid was telling my mother about her experience in an upper berth. "Never travel that way!" It seems as she lay there in the dark, a man's hand crept up from below and began "feeling" her leg. Quick as a flash she seized her straw hat from the net hammock where such things were put at night. From the hat she pulled out her hat pin and stabbed the offending hand. It worked! And though at that age I was completely inno-

cent, the incident must have plunged deeper into my unconscious, imprinting a sense of mystery and fear into sleeping on a train.

Years later, travelling at night with my young family to Penticton, we encountered the rockiest roadbed in Canada — the Kettle Valley line (vanished now). A married friend of mine was aboard in the next double berth. In the morning, hanging on in the swaying washroom, I asked her if she had been able to sleep “with all that shunting?” “Shunting!” she retorted. “*He* shunted down from his upper to my lower. What a time to make love! But that’s the way men are — unpredictable.”

So nowadays fun on the train is no longer to be looked forward to. The mysteries of train travel for child or adult have vanished. And forgotten also is the lifestyle of those men who carried us across the continent. What of the engineers faced with an avalanche of snow? The conductors, trainmen, and porters called in to shovel in emergencies? The cooks running out of supplies on some ice-bound siding? The passengers playing cards endlessly to while away the interminable waits, digging for a bottle hidden in their carpet bags (those one-handed bulging cloth or leather bags that men carried). Nowadays there are a lot of retired conductors and engineers on the CP and CN who travel free and for pleasure, whose stories are juicy enough to make a novel. But no one has written it. The feuds that went on between the private CPR enterprise railwaymen (and all their cousins, families, friends) and the public CN personnel represented the real Canadian game in those days. Not hockey held your obsessed attention, but the latest Canadian National derailment. My mother’s family, ardent Conservatives and upholders of the status quo, had a further stake in the CPR because my Uncle Phil was a baggage clerk at the Winnipeg station. Whatever disaster hit the CN, they cheered. The CPR disasters went unsung.

So today, if you listen to those old railwaymen in the lounge car or at the table, you’ll note how drastically times have changed. “I think it’s time now for unification,” I heard the other day. “All the logistics point to amalgamation of the CN and CP, but the government does nothing.” “Oh *them* fellows?” exclaims an eighty-five-year-old ex-conductor. “Them politicians take off in orbit and then they can’t see where they’ve gone.” So, although they were stimulated by the game, the uncertainties, the night shifts, the absences from home often as not, in their middle age they have a sense of having been cheated by that travelling life. They lost touch with their children. “You can live or die alone. The offspring don’t care.” Or: “The wife and the kids all ganged up against me — then they left me.” “Were you so poor a husband?” “I don’t think so. I was boss on the job but she was boss at home . . . but I was away a lot. Many’s the time I had to work nights. I didn’t see too much of the kids.” He was sitting opposite me, a worn-out deeply lined face, a gesture of defeat. “Who wants me

now?" Railroading had been his life but it had also destroyed him. So he travelled continuously, compulsively: seeking, seeking. For today "the times is different."

That old fellow reminds me of a children's story that fascinated me when young. It was called "All Change Here." Instead of obeying the command to get off the train, the children grew bigger and bigger while their mother and nanny grew smaller and smaller. Changed indeed! And now the aging conductor and my aging self are shrinking down. It seems to be the children who are making decisions, managing our affairs, running the computers — and those computerized, sleek, and silent trains.

