

'TIL
NIAGARA
FALLS

Katerie Morin

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1 THE ROBBERY - ANNIE

When the other passengers have drifted off in that half-sleep that comes to those sitting upright, I take my place in the aisle. I stand facing the direction of the engine and let the sensation of the train's speed take me.

At first, all I feel is the rumble beneath my feet and the sway of the car on the rails. I close my eyes and wait, lifting my hand from the back of the bench so that I stand with arms raised like a diver. Then I feel it, the pull forward, as if I were a fish at the end of a line being flung towards the shore.

I came overland by stagecoach, which felt like being carried in a giant's boot as he staggered west. Going back, our speed is breathtaking. I wonder how fast we're going—twenty, maybe even thirty miles an hour?

The car's windows are closed tight against the billowing ash of the engine, and the air is stale and humid from the sleepers, but standing alone in the train's aisle I am a comet streaking through the sky.

"Are you all right, Ma'am?"

I open my eyes to find myself face to face with a porter. In the half dark his round spectacles are like pennies over his eyelids. I shiver at the image and stumble sideways towards my seat.

"Thank you, a touch of rheumatism, that is all," I say as I maneuver back into my place on the hard bench. The grey that has begun to streak my hair allows me certain eccentricities and after a moment, he keeps going down the aisle.

Third class is the first passenger car behind the express, closest to the engine and its choking clouds of ash. I'm sure the porter is heading towards first class, at the far rear of the train, where the walls are lined with gleaming walnut and the individual sleeping compartments are separated by heavy crimson drapes. I'm sure in first class the windows are open to the night and the passengers dream of flying.

Across from me a little boy lies asleep with his head in his mother's lap. His face is slack with trust, the sandy fringe of his hair falling across his cheek. I frown at the pretty picture the two of them make. I will not let myself remember what that feels like, that warm weight of peace. I turn my face towards the dark mirror of the window and press my forehead against the cool glass. At least the woman's husband is still asleep.

The three of them boarded at one of the whistle stop towns that exist to supply the train with water and wood, a tiny dot on the map, just west of the Utah line. I remember a rickety depot, a tank house and a wood shed. Nothing else that even hinted that people lived anywhere amidst the scrub brush that unfolded in four directions.

"Why does the train say that?" the boy had asked his mother when the train whistle blasted.

"It's just a whistle," she said "It doesn't mean anything."

"It's the sound the steam makes when the train engineer opens the exhaust valve," I told him. "The engineer has to keep the steam's pressure high enough to make the train go, but not so high that the boiler explodes." I couldn't stop myself, years in front of the classroom had made it impossible for me to ignore the little boy's question.

"Steam's just water gone crazy from the heat," the mother told the boy in a tone that meant—"Don't listen to her, she's as crazy as the steam." It was then she noticed her husband noticing me and narrowed her eyes in my direction. I guess my hair isn't grey enough for her, she saw me as a threat. I think she misunderstood his interest. The look he gave me, it was the one he might give a horse that can count.

I wonder how long it will take before I stop answering the questions of children. For years I've seen the world as a collection of natural laws to be explained and understood, when will that fade? How long till I can resist the urge to save empty tin cans in the hopes of making Bunsen burners from them? My eyes have been on the ground, looking for the glint of nails or copper wire scraps. I need to raise my head, not everything needs to be saved till it finds a purpose.

The train whistle wakes me. Outside the window the landscape is a flat expanse of brown with sage that's only barely green. I hear a pop, then a series of rapid pops, like water dancing on a well-oiled skillet. The train bucks beneath me and I fall into the aisle.

The world seems to collapse on top of me in an avalanche of boxes and bags. We shudder to a stop. Around me I hear groans. My legs are buried under luggage fallen from the upper rack. I kick my feet, and while the bags slide, I'm still stuck. When I lift my head a porter is running down the aisle towards me. I raise my hand for help but he steps over the pile that pins me down and keeps going.

"One moment, my dear!" someone says and I feel the bags on my legs slide down and over my heels. I pick up my head and an older gentleman in pin stripes holds out his hand, wheezing slightly. I take it and struggle to standing. Now I can see why the porter left me in the aisle.

Outside there is a man on horseback, his face concealed by a black bandana, his rifle leveled at the windows of the passenger car. There are so many passengers looking through the glass at him that I briefly wonder whether the car will tip over from all that weight on one side. The popping noises must have been gun shots aimed at the train's engineer. We are being robbed.

“Do you think we’ve been stopped by the James gang?” the mother asks her husband, her hands covering the boy’s ears. “I heard that with each hold up they leave a letter stating how they want the robbery to appear in the paper, how they want their names printed, how they pulled it off. They just leave blanks for the amount of cash taken.”

“Saves reporters some work,” her husband says.

“The James Gang doesn’t operate outside Wyoming, we’re three hundred miles from the border,” my savior points out, wiping his face with a white handkerchief. “Now, there should be six of them, I’m sure of it,” he went on, “2-2-2 that’s the pattern. Two for the engineer, two for the express car, and two to watch over us, to make sure we don’t do anything daring.”

“I didn’t read none of that 2-2-2 nonsense in the paper,” the husband says. “And I keep up on all the railway news.”

“I’m afraid that’s not from the paper. Last spring I saw the ‘The Collis Train Robbery’ at the National Theater in San Francisco. I was lucky enough to see Chris Evans’s own wife and daughter play themselves in the production.” From the way he said it, you’d think he’d seen Charles Dickens perform *A Christmas Carol*, instead of the kin of a convicted railway bandit in the story of his prison escape.

“Evans was driven to it by the railroad’s stealing his land,” calls someone closer to the door, “They got what they deserved!”

“Like hell!” comes another opinion.

“Some claimed the play was lurid, but I found it very informative,” the older gentleman continues. “Whoever these men are, they’re clearly gentlemen.”

“Why do you say that?” I ask. “They seem the farthest thing from gentlemen to me.”

“He only means we’re not dead, they didn’t wreck the tracks to stop us,” a man at my elbow says.

Destroying the rails to cause a train to crash had been the pattern for train robberies five years ago. Back then bandits would first loot the express car, then rifle through the bodies of the deceased for whatever they had in their pockets.

“Look, they’ve got the safe!” someone calls.

A mule comes into view, dragging a green Wells Fargo safe by a length of rope. I curse myself for a fool, we must be carrying silver from the Magdalena mines. New Mexico is riddled with dark holes of the stuff, not enough to cause a silver rush, but enough to draw some families clear across the continent. There was enough to draw me.

Finally, they have the safe on the ground. They dump the Pinkerton guard next to it. Then one of the robbers starts going horse to horse, throwing open every saddlebag. There’s shouting, cursing. The man on horseback outside our window turns towards the confusion.

“Nate forgot the goddamn dynamite!”

One of the bandits is shoved forward. No dynamite means no way to open the safe. They’ve stopped the train for nothing. How long will it take the engineer to get the engines working again? The bandit, Nate, points to the passenger cars. I shrink back from the window.

“Get ‘em out here!” one of the bandits yells.

“What can they mean?” the mother asks her husband.

“They’re going to rob us,” the older gentleman says and in seconds there’s a scramble away from the windows. People start emptying their pockets, fumbling with bags and underneath cushions—they’re hiding their money.

I hear a click and turn. There’s a bandit in the doorway of the car, his pistol leveled. Everyone freezes and the bandit gestures for us to exit the car. Slowly, we file out, the armed man behind us.

We stand in the shadow of the train. My heels crunch in the gravel that lines the tracks. The shadow is barely a foot deep. If the train had been robbed an hour earlier there would be no shade, we’d be standing in full desert sun.

I can see six bandits, so perhaps the play was right with its 2-2-2. The horseman keeps his rifle leveled at us while Nate walks down the line, a gunnysack held open in front of each passenger. They empty their pockets, but he isn’t satisfied, he takes watches and necklaces. I watch as everything the passengers couldn’t hide falls into the bag. I clasp my hands together, put them over my heart, press down on the outline of my wedding ring where it lies sewn to the strap of my bodice. Nate stands in front of me and I can’t move.

He grabs my reticule and dumps it over his bag. My papers, my photographs, an advertisement for a typewriter from E. Remington and Sons, they all flutter to the ground. He shakes it again, my salve falls and rolls into the dust.

“Where’s your money?” he asks me. His eyes are wild. He forgot the dynamite. The mistake may have cost him his life, I won’t let it cost me mine.

“I don’t have any,” I tell him, but I’m too loud. I try to hold his gaze and slowly lower my hands to my sides, let them hang loose just over the roll of bills sewn into my petticoat.

“For heaven’s sake,” the woman next to me says, “Just give it to him.” She reaches past me to drop her wedding ring into the bag. I noticed she removed it when Nate was still several passengers away, she was too quick, too happy, to do so.

“I don’t have any,” I repeat when the truth is I have everything I own sewn to my underskirt. Each bill took a year of scrimping to put something by, a year of scraping against blackboards from St. Louis to San Antonio and finally, New Mexico. Each bill earned in a place hotter and drier and more desperate than the last.

The bandit picks up my ticket, I watch his lips move as he reads my destination.

“No one travels from New Mexico to Michigan without a dime,” he says finally.

“They do if they teach school,” I say.

There’s a barking laugh and although his face is masked, the horseman’s eyes and voice tell me he’s leering at me.

“School m’arms and spinsters always hide their money in their petticoats,” he says.

The bandit in front of me grabs my left hand and holds it up. There’s no ring.

“Lift your skirt and give me your money,” Nate says.

“I will not lift my skirt,” I’m loud again. I can’t help it. I give him “The Look.” It has stopped boys with spitballs but it doesn’t stop him. He draws his gun.

“Lift your skirt,” he repeats.

I can’t move. He presses the barrel of his gun to the side of my head. The metal is cool, the leather of the holster has kept it insulated from the heat of the day. If I wait, the metal will warm from the contact with my skin. It will conduct back up the barrel to his hand.

But no, that must be what the ivory handle is for, to save his hand from the heat of the bullet firing, each one, a small explosion making the metal hot enough to scorch.

“Well?” The question is a growl in my ear. It is the sound of a dog getting ready to pounce.

He is going to kill me. I try to push the thought away, to think of a way out. But it persists, he is going to kill me. And once I am dead, will he roll me over? Lift my skirt over my head? Rifle through my petticoats in front of the boy and his mother?

I want to scream “No! No! No!” It’s the thinking of a child—the knife is shiny but it’s sharp, the fire is bright but it burns. I want it to be different. It will be different.

“No.” The word escapes before I can swallow it.

“Goddamn it! Lift your skirt or I’ll blow your brains out!” he snarls. But take my money and you take my life, it’s the same thing.

“I’d rather be without brains than honor,” I reply. Let them think it is shame that keeps me from obeying. I close my eyes and in a second my lashes are wet. I hear a soft crunch of gravel as a couple of passengers shift their weight. Please, let my words give a kick to their backbones. Please, let someone rescue me. Please, let him falter. Let him put the gun away.

I hear Nate drop the bag. He takes the gun from my head. It will be different. He is putting the gun away.

I open my eyes to a blur of silver, a knife angling towards my skirt. I feel the sting of metal on my thigh and scream. Nate slashes at the calico of my dress. There are shouts from the passengers, but no one moves, no one helps. I slap at him, try to push him back, but in seconds, the front of my dress is cut away.

Another slash and he takes the pocket of fabric I had sewn to my petticoat. He hands it up to the guard who opens it and fans out the bills. I fall to my knees.

“A roll of bills like this is worth killing for,” the horseman tells me and then holds them up for the other bandits to see. “Count yourself lucky that I’m in a good mood.”

“Please,” I say. I’m begging on my knees, my hands clasped together. “I’d rather be without brains than money. Please.” He drops the money in the sack and calls them all to mount.

“Please,” I say to the dust cloud that rolls towards us from their horses’ hooves.

“Please,” I say as I pull together the torn edges of my skirt.

The porter offers me his handkerchief. I press it to my leg and watch as a thin line of red soaks through the cotton.

“You’re lucky, it isn’t deep,” he says to me. He lifts me up and carries me back towards the passenger car. Over his shoulder I can see the conductor has assembled the rest of the porters to drag the safe back towards the express car, six of them standing in for the bandits’ pack mule.

As they watch that slow parade, the passengers chatter like hens clucking in a yard, happy with relief. They have all escaped with their lives, all except for me.

The porter lowers me into the first seat of the car, then takes off his coat and arranges it over the front of my dress like an apron. The aisle is still cluttered with baggage and he pries loose a suitcase and places it beneath my feet as a footstool.

While he works, I put my left hand behind my back and slide it down into the cushions. I feel around for any money that could have been hidden in the rush before the bandits forced us outside.

My hand closes on a folded piece of paper. I don't look at it, just slide it into my shirt cuff and pray that it's a bill. As the passengers file past me to their seats, I lean forward, wincing and placing both hands over the cut on my leg. The porter asks me if I'd like a cup of water and I shake my head.

"Could you please fetch my bag, I'd like to change into my other dress," I say to him. He puts his fingers to his cap before he leaves because I am a lady. Or at least, I was a lady. Now I am a thief. And I'm as good as dead.