

April 1955 - Train to California #1

we pack our brown cardboard suitcases
my plaid shorts, violet velveteen dress,
and tennis shoes with bottoms worn
to the dirty white canvas

dad, mom, i, and three sisters
board the western pacific train
red, yellow, and black steel
scents of grease and coal produced smoke

a porter dressed in a red gabardine
coat with tarnished gold buttons
points his white gloved hand
down a narrow hallway carpeted in worn red roses

our family walks in a line to a room
with a set of bunk beds and a stuffed faded red chair
a coat closet for a bathroom with a toilet and sink
that permeates odors of stale cigarette smoke

the porter gently pulls dad into the hallway
closes door with mom, me, and my sisters
in the cracker box sized room
two sisters sit on each bunk

mom sits in the shabby red chair
her dark brown hair curls in moist air
eyes closed, long black lashes
flutter over pink cheeks

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dad returns holding a brass key
given him by the porter for a sitting room
behind a dark oak door in middle
of the room now smelling of sweet sweat

i and my sisters take turns
wiping our perspiring red faces
with a rose smelling linen cloth
mom in the chair, dad sitting on bottom bunk

from the hallway a tired raspy voice whines
"dinner to be served in dining car at 5 PM"
we all yawn, our stomachs gurgle
as a line of passengers pass our door

the dining room is under a
windowed dome that frames the yellow
parched prairie fields of corn and soybeans
black cows and pink hogs lounge amongst the crops

we eat a meal of pork, potatoes, carrots, and peas
on thin china plates bordered in red roses
the sky above the domed windows turns shades
of hot pink and the purple of grapes

i do not want to return to our room
where the air is thick and hot
i will have to share a bed with my sister and maybe dad
and the bathroom smells like stale smoke and pee

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April 1955 - Train Ride to California #3

dad's eyes were red from too much brandy
or a lack of sleep in the bottom bunk
with my gurgling sister and me
he left the small twin bunk in the pink dawn

dad patted my three sisters on their butts
it was time to get up, to go to the dining car
he mumbled through gritted teeth
something about a strong cup of black coffee

we dressed in our bright plaid shorts
each of them the same but a different color
mom smoothed her pale yellow cotton dress
put a lilac shawl over her boney shoulders

the dining room was crowded with voices
of all pitches and rhythms to make certain
each rider could be heard over the bumps,
squeals, and grinding of steel wheels against steel tracks

the scents of baked coffee on the bottom of the pot, ripe almost sour
orange juice,
burnt hard toast, and eggs cooked in lard seer
my nose and make me gag without notice
my family waits for an empty booth as we brace to keep our balance

i focus on the dome windows where the periwinkle sky
is bright with sun and snow covered mountains poke a lost cloud
i daydream i've floated to the window to soak the sun into my body
in an angry voice dad pulls me back, a booth is ready

two sisters and dad sit on cracked faded red faux leather seats
mom, a sister, and me are on a seat sticky with food from the last
passengers
my sisters and i are served small boxes of rice krispies, corn
flakes, and cheerios
the boxes are split on the perforated "H" and clean white milk poured in

i rest my head on the red brocade back of the booth
my spoon drips milk and cheerios in my plaid lap
mom takes her cloth napkin and wipes the milk and cereal
from my lap as dad demands, "sit your skinny body up"

mom rubs my bouncing leg, smiles at dad, and swallows nervously

the porter delivers a clear circular glass ashtray to the table
dad has to smoke when finished with his over easy slimy eggs
the dining car a blue haze from other's cigarettes and cigars

one sister moves quickly under the table to sit on the floor
she likes darkness similar to a cave along river walls
mom and dad leave her there to tickle our legs and spit on our shoes
she is a brat, wears soda bottle thick lens glasses, dad's favorite
"little girl"

i kick the sister under the formica table top
i hope she turns black and blue like the bruise on my thin arm
where she pinched me using her sharp little fingernails
with a grin spread across her plump face under crossed eyes

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California 1955

grandma fyrne stands in her pale blue flowered
cotton dress over soft saggy breasts
gray brown hair crimped around
her tender face of wrinkled waves

next to her is grandpa ole
he is thin, erect, mouth puckered
eyes brown and penetrating
glasses cover the intense gaze

reaching for the bottom grated step of the train
dust swirls over the tracks
obstructs my nose and becomes
a swarm of gnats in my eyes

i trip and fall to sharp gravel
it digs into my naked knees
my brown cardboard suitcase opens
the violet velveteen dress curtsies before me

welcome to sacramento
dirty, dusty, and ugly to my vision
grandma and grandpa amble to
our family now standing on the faded wood platform

no hugs, no kisses, a smile from grandma
grandpa takes dad aside and speaks
out of reach of our ears
mom frozen as hard as rock

grandpa ole and dad walk around the clapboard station
mom and grandma talk about pressure cookers
canning tomatoes, visiting aunt helen,
and uncle guy at the turkey farm

i am sweating in my yellow

sleeveless cotton shirt
the drips rolling down my back
into orange plaid seersucker shorts

blood and dirt clog the cuts on my knees
black flies buzz around like they are pieces of meat
my mouth is dry as rough towels
that have waved from a worn rope clothesline

my three sisters begin to chase each other
around the wrought iron bench
no mind to the couple holding hands
as though handcuffed to each other

a pale green plymouth rounds the corner of train station
through the windshield under the visor i see
dad with his right hand on the steering wheel
his left hand out the window dangling a cigarette

a black chrysler turns the corner next
grandpa ole drives to the platform
his body erect and mouth pursed
ready to pick up grandma fryne

my sisters and i climb into the back seat
of the green box-like car
mom sits silent in the front seat
ready to find a small pink house with peeling paint

we drive down dust blown streets with
kids playing in their yards under orange trees
dogs bark at the striped chippies
the scent of roses everywhere

- Judy L. Brekke