

Rainbow Dreams

On the outskirts of a bedraggled West Virginia town, a skinny girl crouched beside the railroad tracks in the pre-dawn fog. She stared into the mist as if awaiting a lover's arrival. Her dog stood and began to whine long before she heard the train glide to a stop, its end about a block away near the water tower. She hoisted a heavy pack onto her back and began to move. As the husky matched the girl's quickening pace, his red neckerchief flashed. At the end of the coal cars sat the back engine, which she hoped would be empty as usual. She grabbed the railing of the steps, pulled onto the platform, and watched anxiously as the dog sailed like an acrobat to land beside her. Reaching down, she gave his head a quick pat. Moments later, the train began to lumber down the tracks with its new passengers in the cold, empty cab.

She slung the backpack to the floor with a quick shrug. The dog followed her every move, as if checking to be sure they were settling in before he sat beside it. She rubbed her neck, raw beneath the rough flannel shirt and buckskin vest. Under the matching buckskin skirt, her thick, woolen leggings bunched at the knees. They were ugly, but necessary. The morning air still frosted her toes. The red bandana covering her hair didn't exactly match the dog's, but it was close. From her right Robin Hood-like boot, protruded a knife handle that implied a formidable blade below. First, she peeled a tarp, then a tattered Army surplus blanket from around the backpack, and spread them in sandwich-like layers on the cold, metal floor. Withdrawing a second smaller blanket, she rolled it into a pillow, and fashioned a makeshift bed. After eating a piece of jerky from

her shirt pocket, and feeding one to the dog, she crawled between the layers. He licked his muzzle, then moved closer to sit sentinel-style at her side.

As the train rocked through the morning, she recalled the feel of her mother's arms around her, warm and comforting. "We'll be there, by and by, sweet-pea, by and by," she sang, cradling the thin three-year-old. She could hear her mother saying, "Read the sign, sweet-pea. S-T-A-T-I-O-N. Station. That's where the train stops, but we're staying on it. Just a few more stops, then we'll be in Louisville." Her mother's voice faded like an echo as a deep growling one took its place. A frown clouded the girl's face. "Get in the cellar, you little bitch. When I tell you to do sumthin, you do it! I'm yer pa now. Stop yer sniveling. If you run again, I'm gittin the switch." His voice suddenly softened and his large, lined hands were on her. "Now, ain't that better? I jest want to kiss you, pat you, love on you a little." She jerked upright, a look of panic on her face, and stared through the dusty half-light as if the voice might take shape and find her again. Immediately, the dog stood, barking sharply. "It's okay, Trash. I just had a bad dream." She lay back on the blanket-pillow, but sleep wouldn't return; the image of the man and the smell of the musty, dark cellar were too vivid.

She rose, squatted beside the backpack, and withdrew a dog-eared, cardboard-bound composition book, and a stubby pencil. On a clean page she began, "Dear Virgil, It's early morning and I'm headed to Louisville, then on out west for a while. Maybe if I get to the coast, I can come visit you. I want to see Mom's grave before I go. I know she ain't there, but it makes me feel better to talk to her. Last night I met some musicians who talked me into singing one of my songs at a concert they was giving. 'Course I cleaned it

up a bit. I was embarrassed and happy at the same time. I never done that before, but you'd been real proud because the audience applauded a lot. It's one I wrote a couple of weeks ago but never sent you.

“Well, hey there railroad copper, I see you in your truck.

You don't want me on your freight train, well, but I don't give a fuck.

You don't want me in your boxcar. You don't want me in your yard,

Or lying by the railroad tracks smoking my cigar.

You don't want me in your coal bucket or in your forty-eight.

You woke me in that gondola and said get off my freight.

Well, hey there railroad copper, I see you in your truck.

You don't want me on your freight train, well, but I don't give a fuck.

You don't want me riding power, cranking up the heat

Or lying 'neath the brakeman's seat kickin' up my feet.

Don't want me on your pig train, blowing in the breeze.

Arrested me for trespassing on railroad property.

Well, hey there railroad copper, I see you in your truck.

You don't know I'm on this hopper car and I don't give a fuck.

“I’d just outrun the railroad bulls in Clifton Forge, when I wrote it. If they catch me again, I’ll be in real trouble because they’ve got my picture. But, don’t worry; I ain’t going back there. Virgil, I can’t wait till you get out. We’ll go set up in the mountains like we planned when we was kids in Quinwood. I’ll get off the rails, we’ll get some land, and you’ll never get locked up again. When you can’t sleep, remember sleeping outdoors with the stars bright above and waking in the morning dew to find deer all curled up in the grass across the clearing. That’s what I do. It don’t get better than that, does it? Well, I’ll close now and write again after Louisville. Love, Sister”

The Norfolk and Southern crept slowly into New Orleans as if it were hauling elephants, yet only the thin girl and her dog disembarked a few blocks shy of the station. The train soon went on and the pair headed toward town. Later that night, as Pizza Hut was closing, they waited in the alley until a pimply-faced boy wearing a Saints’ ball cap and a sauce-smearred apron tossed several boxes in the alley dumpster. As he disappeared, the girl scrambled up its side and retrieved two of the boxes. Still warm, they smelled of pepperoni and oregano. She stuffed them into the backpack and motioned for the dog. Several blocks away on a park bench, she ate greedily.

The next day, a panhandler caught her eye, and the hair on the back of her neck prickled. Although she hadn’t seen him since, she was sure he who he was. The abuser who had dragged her across the country for four years, and who mercilessly raped and beat her each time she tried to escape. The man whose van she finally jumped out of when he threatened to kill her and dump her in Maurepas Swamp. The hunch of his

shoulders, the shoulder-length, greasy hair, and the way he sidled up to his marks, were the same. “Holy shit,” she muttered, almost race-walking in the opposite direction. “I thought he was up north.” Ducking around the corner, she didn’t run until she was several blocks away, then she and the dog gathered speed, jogging as fast as the heavy burden on her back would allow. She would have hitched a ride, but too often men wanted “payment” for a ride and she wasn’t about to give them what they wanted. She had stopped taking that chance long ago. They were both out of breath when they reached the tracks outside of town.

The westbound sat silent and still in the gathering dusk, just as she expected. Quietly, she hoisted the dog into an open boxcar, and climbed in behind him. Exhausted, she lay down to wait.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?” The railroad cop was on her before she awoke. He grabbed her by the arm to pull her to a standing position. She resisted, curling into a ball. He kicked at her shins, striking her hands, and her legs. Trash began to growl and lunge at the man who was tough, wiry, and sneering under his billed cap. He turned, without releasing her, and kicked the dog in the ribs with his steel-toed boot, sending him yelping and flying across the boxcar. Then he kicked the girl again, grabbed her arm, and twisted it behind her, pulling her upright. As she fought to get loose, he punched her. Her nose began to bleed. The dog lunged again, and the man pulled a pistol. “Don’t,” the girl yelled. “I’ll come with you.”

He put away the pistol, but slapped her again. “That’s more like it,” he snarled.

It took every cent she'd saved from odd jobs to bond herself out and get Trash out of the pound the following day, but it was worth it. Jails scared her. Jailers scared her even more. This wasn't her first, and the memories still stung. She prayed it would be her last. "Well, Trash, strike New Orleans off our list. We won't be back here again." Suddenly, she stopped, reached down, and scratched the dog behind the ears. "Poor boy, I'm sorry he hurt you." The girl turned her face to the clear sky for a long moment, then lowered it and said, "One of these days, we'll have a place in the woods. Just you, me, and Virg."

In early spring, when life reemerged in the scrub sand around Texas, the cactus once again looked fat and succulent, their blossoms showing yellow, pink, or red. Even the giant saguaros bloomed, their flowers dwarfed by the arms that hosted them. They would fade in the blistering summer, but for now, they were beautiful. Prairie dogs and armadillos sunned themselves on flat rocks and the border patrols began to search more diligently for illegals.

When Sergeant Ray Williams, opened the door to the second engine of the idle Burlington Northern freight near El Paso, Trash began to bark. The girl, sitting under the brakeman's chair, tried to jump past him, but he grabbed her. A look of shock crossed the sergeant's face. "Dammit, didn't I tell you last year to keep your butt off this train? I knew I shouldn't have let you go with a warning. This time, you're going to jail."

She stammered, "Come on, Sergeant. If you let me go, I really, really promise not to come back. I'm going back home to West Virginia. I wouldn't-a hopped this time, but I've been sick. I couldn't work to earn the fare."

“Bullshit,” he thundered. “You’ve never paid a fare in your life. How many warrants do you suppose there are for you? Enough to keep you locked up for a long, long time, little girl.” He jerked her arms behind her and clamped on the cuffs, pinching her skin.

She yelled, “I can’t go to jail. Don’t do this, please! What about my dog?”

“Fuck your dog,” he said. As he grabbed her pack, the composition book slid to the ground. He walked roughshod over it as he manhandled her toward his pick-up. Trash followed, growling and nipping at the man as they moved. Shoving the girl in first, he kicked the dog away, and circled the truck to enter the driver’s side.

As she heard Trash yelp, she screamed, “I want my dog. Don’t leave him. He’s all I’ve got.”

The cop gunned the engine and drove away without a word. Twisting in her seat and crying, she watched Trash run after them until he was lost in the distance.

In a darkened cell, the girl sat on her bed hunched into a ball, her head on her knees, her eyes swollen and red. The smell of all the cell’s former occupants assaulted her nose—sweat, urine, and tobacco—reminding her of another crowded jail in a midwestern town whose name she couldn’t remember. What she did remember was how desperate she was to get out. How the claustrophobic cell, especially in the darkness, reminded her of that childhood cellar. How she’d found the white powder in a hole behind the toilet. How she’d thought it was a bag of drugs left behind by some other jailed soul. How she’d eaten it and nearly gagged from the bitter taste, but didn’t care, wanting to forget where

she was. How she'd awakened in the clean, white hospital after they'd flushed the rat poison from her system.

Cold sweat dampened her bandana and she paced. Twenty steps across and twenty back. She counted them repeatedly. She pressed her whole body against the barred door and breathed deeply, hoping for fresh air, but none came—only the acrid scent of distant cigarettes.

She yelled at guards she couldn't see, but knew were there, "Where's my dog? Why did he leave him behind? He had no right. Please go find my dog."

From down the corridor came a guttural voice. "Shut up in there!" Returning to the bed, she curled up again and rocked.

Late in the evening, she asked for some paper and a pen. Afraid her tears would smear the ink, she wiped her eyes with her sleeve as she wrote. "Dear Virgil, I'm headed home and just wanted to say hey and sorry I didn't make it up to see you. It's warm here in Texas. Things are beginning to bloom, but sure I miss spring in the mountains. It's so flat here I think the wind will sweep me away. I want to be where trees protect me. I miss May apples and the sweet green of the trees. When I came into town, I saw a double rainbow and made a wish: that we'd be together in the woods soon. I don't know if rainbow wishes work, but it was worth a try. Take care of yourself. See you soon. Love, Sister."

She lay down, staring out the tiny mesh-covered window. A full moon shone in the center, as if for her only. *Forgive me for the little white lies, Virgil.* A television

flickered silently on the shelf above her head. Crying, she turned to the wall and tried to sleep.

A doe and her fawns walked in a circle, mashing the grass, then they knelt and slept. In the massive oak, an owl hooted. Stars dotted the sky like die from a croupier's cup. Virgil and Trash emerged from the tent to look at the moon, and she rose to greet them.

“Good God, we got us a hanged girl,” yelled a guard from deep in the jail. “Tate! Come help me.” The television screen was black, but the moon illuminated the cell like a Klieg light. She swung slowly from a beam, the red bandana around her neck.