

No Glory in Leaving on a Greyhound

by Sarena Ulibarri

I leave before sunrise. Pile my bags on the sidewalk and go back in the house to write a note.

Sorry, Dad. I love you.

Then I crumple it, throw it in the kitchen trash. I start to leave, then re-write it and prop it against the half-brown bananas. I think about adding some maxim he taught me, or quoting an ironic Bible verse, but I can recall neither. The taxi comes, and I force myself not to look back as we drive away.

Downtown Denver is a ghost town this early in the morning. We turn a corner and I see the only signs of life: a couple whose Friday night has left them marooned in Saturday morning. The woman shivers in high heels and her boyfriend's suit jacket. They try to flag down my cab. I watch them embrace in the rear view mirror.

I don't yet know as we approach Union Station that two weeks after I arrive in Albuquerque, my boyfriend will be arrested for breaking into cars in a nightclub parking lot. I don't know that his mother and I will have to empty his apartment, or that I'll spend the rest of the summer at my mother's place in El Paso, wondering why I haven't gotten my period this month. Right now, I still think I'm doing the right thing.

At Union Station the taxi driver unloads my bags and drives away. I stand there for a moment, looking at the orange sign arching overhead. Behind me is Coors Field, where my dad took me to baseball games when I was young enough that the bases held no innuendo, when his summer project was to teach me not to throw like a girl.

I have too many bags to carry by myself. I try to stack them on top of each other, use the biggest rolling suitcase as a dolly for the others, but they topple mid-way across the station.

A white-bearded old man sits on a bench with a younger man. The younger man stands to help me. I'm exasperated, sure that the spilling of my bags is the worst thing possible. It's worse even than the last fight with my dad, when he told me if I left I was murdering my soul.

The younger man helps me gather the bags and I sit on the bench with them piled by my feet.

He asks me where I'm going.

"Albuquerque," I say. "I go to school there."

He asks what I'm studying.

"Writing," I say.

He points to the older man.

"He's got some stories for you," he says.

"Oh?" I say, feigning interest.

I'm nineteen. I have little attention for other people's stories.

The bus comes. The younger man helps me carry my too-many bags to the curb. The old man sits in the front. I sit in the back. The younger man waves goodbye from the curb and the bus pulls away into the sunrise.

Back at home, maybe my dad is just waking up. Maybe he's realizing his threats didn't work. His newfound religious zealotry failed to subdue me. He'll see by my empty room that I value love over money. He'll see that his promise to stop paying for college isn't a good enough reason to stay for the infinite length of a summer when the boy I love is 500 miles away.

I try to read, but I can't focus. It's the slogging of the morning through my brain, it's the bumps of the bus tires on the Colorado highway, it's the echo of my dad's words in my ears.

I lean my head against the bus window, let the vibrations of the road fill my head. I wonder if my soul will be murdered all at once, a quick strike when I lie down that first night in my boyfriend's bed, or if it will be killed slowly, a poison already working, starting the moment I walked out the door. I wonder if it will hurt.

The bus stops in Raton and we deboard and wait at the adobe station. I sit by the entrance so I don't have to pull my bags too far. The old man asks me if he can borrow a quarter. I find one in my purse and he calls his daughter on a payphone. I think about calling my dad, but there's no energy behind the thought. I'll wait until my soul is dead to call him. Until I'm sure it's dead.

When I do call him, a month from now, I'll learn that he's spent the whole month sick from anxiety, and he'll repeat with a clenched voice, "I need to talk to my daughter. I need to talk to my daughter." But we won't talk. Not really. Not yet.

The old man speaks on the phone for a few minutes and then he sits on a bench and stares at the floor until the train comes. He has a paunch belly, like my dad, but he wears cowboy boots and suspenders, not like my dad. His white beard starts thick at his face and thins out to wisps on his chest. I think about my dad's gray mustache, and how I always wished he'd shave it.

The train comes. When I bought the ticket, I imagined a train the whole way, the whistle blowing at Union Station, waving out the window to all the people on the platform, pretending one of them was waving to me. There's no glory in leaving home on a Greyhound, but a train is iconic. The tracks are bounded, the journey focused. A bus can turn around, but a train, it's

dedicated to its journey. A one-way Amtrak ticket feels much more permanent than a one-way Greyhound ticket.

I see the old man settle into his place on the lower floor before I climb the narrow staircase to my second level seat. It's an assigned seat, but there's no one else in my car. Most of my baggage is checked now, but I set my carry-on in the seat beside me.

The train winds through the mountains of northern New Mexico. Tall conifers are replaced by mesquite and juniper. The bare peaks of the Rockies give way to the rolling slopes of the Jemez. The train is slow, but I still can't read. The book lies closed on my lap.

I wonder if people at my dad's church will pray for my soul. I don't know them well. We went rarely when I was younger, before my parents divorced and moved to opposite sides of the Southwest. Just the occasional Easter or funeral. I don't remember any sermons about soul-murdering. I must have missed those.

I think about the old man in the cabin below me.

"He's got some stories for you," the younger man had said.

I decide to go talk to him. I'm sick of my own story for the moment.

He's surprised to see me. He moves a newspaper from the seat beside him and invites me to sit down. I sit sideways in the seat so I can see his profile against the moving landscape.

He tells me he's going home to Moriarty, a mountain town outside of Albuquerque. His daughter lives at the family ranch where he'd worked when he still could.

"Your son said you had some stories."

I assume the younger man was his son. He doesn't correct me.

"Well, I should have died half a dozen times by now," he says.

"Oh?" I say.

I'm not feigning interest anymore.

He tells me about a blizzard where his horse froze to death and he thought he would too. Though the New Mexico sun warms my legs through the train windows, I feel the ice in my toes as he describes losing his to frostbite.

The train stops at a small town near Santa Fe. Through the window I see a train car just off the tracks. It's been transformed into a home. People wave at us from the converted living room. A few passengers get off and inspect the picket fence surrounding the car, the foundation that holds the wheels in place.

The old man tells me about a dangerous cut on his hand, the gushing blood, the infection and grueling fever. He shows me the scar, a thick welt almost consumed by wrinkles.

The train crawls away from the derailed car. I hear people comparing the pictures they took of it.

He tells me about being gored by a bull on his family ranch, the horn piercing beneath his ribs, his body thrown and trampled, rescued by a brother who roped the bull and dragged it away.

"They didn't think I'd pull through," he says. "Gave me last rites and everything."

He doesn't ask for my stories. I don't offer them.

I go back to my seat before we arrive in Albuquerque. When we pull into the station I see my boyfriend through the window. His hair has grown bushy and unkempt. His acne has gotten worse. I don't know that the last time I'll see him, two weeks from now, will also be through a window, our fingers reaching for each other on opposite sides of the glass while the guard turns down the phone volume to signal visitation time is done.

He sits on the railing, smoking a cigarette. I don't consider going back. It's a one-way ticket, and it's going to stay that way. But I do, for a moment, consider staying on the train, to

see if it will take me somewhere else. Deeper into the Southwest. Into the Southwest of the old man's stories. I don't think about rock-filled yards or the scorch of a Southwest summer. I think about a sunset over the painted desert. I think about roadrunners with snakes in their mouths. I think about the smell of horses. The echo of a laugh on canyon walls. Cactus taller than me. Taller than my dad.

I'll have to take another southbound Greyhound in a few weeks. There will be nothing magical about the landscape I see out the bus window. We'll be driving through the Jornada del Muerto. But for now, continuing on is an adventurous fantasy. That Southwest of my imagination exists, somewhere. I know it does.

The train rolls to a stop. I pick up my bag from the seat beside me.

In the parking lot I see the old man. His daughter helps him into the cab of a pickup truck. I throw the last of my too-many bags in my boyfriend's car and run over to say goodbye.

"If you ever decide you want to write about me, I'll tell you more stories," he says.

"I just might," I say. "But how can I find you?"

He hands me a paper with his name and phone number.

In a few weeks, my boyfriend's mom and I will be dragging boxes through dry grass, loading a storage shed and returning rented furniture. I'll have to take my too-many bags further south to stay with my mom, and I'll realize when I unpack that the paper is lost. I'll try to remember his name and think about looking him up, but there will be no energy behind the thought. I'll remember his stories, how he should have died, but didn't. I'll call my dad instead.