

One-Way Ticket

by Antonya Nelson

Margaret and I are going to Chicago. Everything we do this morning feels final, as if we are doing it for the last time, which is probably true. The man standing behind the ticket counter looks up expectantly when he hears Margaret's voice, and then down again when he sees her. She doesn't bother trying to look attractive today. She wears my oldest, biggest sweater, its elbows sag at her forearms. The ticket seller hands us our tickets, hers is a thin one-way, mine a thicker round-trip: Colorado--Illinois--Colorado.

It is early morning and neither of us has slept well. I haven't shaved, and Margaret has sleep in her eyes. The only other person in the depot is a young woman snoring on the bench. She's lying on her back, her body sprawled loosely, her head sideways. She looks as if she's been flung there, discarded in a hurry. Margaret turns away from the woman and I know she is thinking that she would never sleep on a train depot bench. Margaret watches people. Much of her behavior is determined by not doing things she sees other people do, learning from their mistakes.

"I'm hungry," Margaret says. Every morning she eats four oranges and then has several cups of coffee. Nothing in the depot is open yet, and we will have to eat on the train, which is posted on the board as half an hour late.

My mother had tried to get me to pack food. She and Margaret haven't spoken for a month, not since the monkey died. I'm sure Margaret blamed my mother, though it was an accident.

Margaret traces her finger along other routes on the Amtrak board. There are a million places she could go from here.

Our train arrives, a blinding light from the west. It looks as if it is on a mission and caught in mid-stride and has little time for us. It heaves impatiently. Margaret has gathered her duffel bag and pack and, though I offer, insists on carrying them herself. She is moving away. This is all she is taking.

She sits opposite the water fountain on the train, the only seats not across from other people. This isn't exactly intentional, it's more a habit with her. Even her job is isolating. She sits behind a two-way mirror at a psychological testing center observing and recording data on preschoolers. She is always alone. It surprised me that she allowed me to come with her to Chicago.

Margaret decides to sleep and adjusts my seat straight up to accommodate her head. I look out the window, leaning forward as if I might see some faces to wave good-bye to. Icicles have formed between the two panes of glass. The train has regained its speed, and our reflections race across the sky. Mine opens its mouth and swallows a cottonwood, a rusting Chrysler. The dry weeds and debris on the side of the track rush by, blurs in the half-light, but in the distance, the Colorado hills barely move. I think about our journey and wonder if twenty-four hours will be a long trip or a short one. Margaret, asleep, whistles softly as she breathes out.

I met Margaret because she lived next door to my mother and was watching Mother and Alf, Mother's monkey. I had come home from college on spring break two years ago, and caught her spying. Their houses were only ten feet apart and Margaret used to sit in an easy chair in front of her window, drinking coffee, and waiting for the monkey to appear.

Alf had his routine, racing through the rooms of the house, agile on the chair backs, a streak of auburn across the shelves. He was wiry grace, and he always landed, out of breath, against the window. He would cling to the sheer curtains, spread flat with his small-toothed grin aimed toward Margaret, ten feet south. When I appeared unexpectedly in the window one day, she raised her coffee cup to me.

"I thought I'd moved next to the only interesting person in Grand Junction," she told me, meaning my mother, when we met. I liked her bluntness, her imagination. She had invented a fantasy life for Mother and Alf.

"I decided they were waiting for a man," she said. "The kind of man who would go away and leave a monkey with a mistress."

Margaret gets a distant look in her eyes when being told things she doesn't want to hear. She didn't want to hear that Alf wasn't particularly bright, that he was mostly destructive, and that he wasn't rare.

"Purely a domestic," I said. "Thousands like him."

"But he's special, don't you think?" She wanted to believe him unusual.

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"Talk to me," Margaret says, waking but not opening her eyes. All our fights seem to begin with "Talk to me." I panic. A fight is the last thing I want today. So I say nothing. And Margaret sighs. "Tell me a story," she says.

As usual, I cannot think of anything clever enough, and begin, "There was this girl taking a train trip and she was already bored silly--" but Margaret raises her hand for me to stop. "Forget it!"

I've done it again: not funny enough, not spontaneous enough. In the beginning, when I wasn't trying very hard, it was easy. That's the irony.

Some man behind us is singing. Most of the lights above the seats are off. The few that are on shine cones of white on white heads. Margaret and I are the youngest people on the train. Only retired people and students take trains, I think. Dust particles float in the air in the aisle, and we pass a dark town. The singing gets louder. It is "Hesitation Blues."

"Well, what do you know," says Margaret, her eyes still closed. "It's your favorite song."

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Margaret saved Alf from the Humane Society. My mother was going to get rid of him, but Margaret taught him some tricks, and that redeemed him. He began mimicking her. She smiled, he made a

smile. She winked, he winked. They both frowned and shook their fists.

Sometimes, though, when we didn't expect it, he sank a nail or tooth into someone's arm. I allowed him his secret vengeance, but Margaret had no patience with Alf's bad behavior.

"He's testing you," she said. Alf had hit me with an apricot which he got from a bowl of fruit we kept for him on the table. Apricots were his favorites. It hurt, but not much, and I didn't understand Margaret's anger. "He pushes you, and you let him get away with it!" She smacked his paws. She told him there were limits to accepting bad behavior. "Sometimes you have to push back," she told me irritated.

I had told Margaret that I didn't know her anymore, that she had changed, but that wasn't true. The truth was she was bored with me. She knew I loved her, and that I would put up with anything she did. So she met a sculptor who was indifferent toward her and now she was going to Chicago to live with him. I came along because I knew our splitting was inevitable, and I wanted twenty-four hours alone with Margaret.

We have hardly spoken today. Our shoulders jostle, and sometimes our knees bump, I am more aware of the sensation of her body than I have been since I met her.

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"Grand Green's Gate, famous for thin-skinned pecans. Real tasty things." The voice over the intercom is slow and male and Midwestern. It wakes me up. "They got a Walt Disney park in Marceline. Walt Disney lived six years in Marceline, and if you look out the north side you will see Walt Disney Street. Looking to the south, you will see the largest goose monument in the world. It takes three hours to pluck a pound of down at Marceline's Silver Lake, goose capital of the world, and good fishing, too." He's enthusiastic about this bleak town.

"Margaret," I whisper into her ear. "You're missing Marceline." She pretends she is asleep, turns prettily, and moans. She doesn't fool me; I've seen her in a real sleep, and there is none of this curled and demure business. She thrashes. The only noise she makes is a harsh glottal snore. The man on the intercom comes back and says his name is Harry. He says the dining car is closing for breakfast. Several spurts of noise come after -- Harry tapping the microphone with his finger.

So Marceline, Missouri, comes and goes. Miles later a man with long sideburns is riding a bike. He waves to the train and the bike wobbles as he holds it with one hand. His smile is like Margaret's. A loose and silly smile, eyes squinted almost shut. She calls it an idiot grin. She hates some things about herself: her idiot grin, her sturdy body, her short fingers. I'm interested in imperfections. I like her. She is a square shape in my mind, blunt edges and solid center.

People move around now. An older woman across the aisle is returning home from a visit to California. She tried to read a book about Egypt that her son in California gave her, but the singing man won't shut up. They've been on the train together all night. He has a loud and whining voice, very insistent. He stops singing and says he was discharged from the Navy for being crazy. After he was discharged he got into the opera. I hear the woman make noncommittal, polite noises, but when the man pushes, asks what does she think about craziness, she bristles and says she doesn't know about such things, that she lives alone.

The man's hair is white with brown spots the color of shoe polish. White tufts of whiskers grow on his face. I feel unaccountably sorry for him and for the woman. He begins another story about people's shoddy treatment of him. This time it's about his wife who left him for another opera singer. "Yeah," he says, answering a question no one has asked. "I had a wife, but she left me. She left me for this famous guy, a real mean sonofabitch. I wanted her more, but he got her." This gives me a chill. He takes a breath, he's going to go on, and Margaret turns, unexpectedly, in her seat and hisses, "Shhh!" There is a stunned silence, but we are all a little relieved.

In Kansas, Harry tells us we are crossing the Arkansas River. "The Arkansas is full of black-mouth catfish, gumbo catfish, long-gill catfish and red-eye catfish." He pauses and we all look over the frozen patches. "These fish are all members of the catfish family," he adds.

Margaret and I went camping in Kansas once. It was tornado weather, and we drove six hours trying to get away from the clouds. She had a map, directing me while I drove. We kept going to different places, but each one was dismal, and we kept hoping that it would get better farther on.

When we got to the Arkansas River it was almost dark. We set up her tent. That Margaret owned a tent had surprised me. We were the only ones on the river, since it was spring and bad weather. She made avocado sandwiches, cutting the avocado with a nail file. We ate them, listening to the wind, feeling the tent sides press against us when it blew hard. She never said let's go or why are we here. We sat near each other in the darkening tent, eating our sandwiches and playing a game pushing the avocado pit around with our feet. That seems a long time ago. The Arkansas is black today.

"On the north side of the river there's good croppie fishing. Croppies are sunfish. They eat night crawlers and sometimes weigh two pounds." I wonder how Harry knows this part of the river is good for croppie fishing, and while I am wondering that, Margaret says, "How does he know?" I smile, but immediately a great wave of sadness and self-pity sifts through my chest and into my stomach. I want to tell her that we think alike. I want to hold her but I know she would resist, tell me I'm sentimental. I get up and wander back through the train.

The crazy, having exhausted our car, is starting on the one behind us. As I pass by, I hear him asking two women if they know any songs. "Of course," one of them says, looking away.

"Well, do you know this one?" he says, and he launches into a song I've never heard before. "Pussy ain't nothin' but meat on the bone, you can make it, you can take it, you can't leave it alone...."

This gets a chuckle from several men. It is enough to make him continue. I know I will be embarrassed for him, so I move on, swaying and grabbing seat backs.

In the club car the only empty seat is across from the woman with the book on Egypt. "I had to get away from that man," she says, shutting her book. "he's just too pathetically lonesome. Have some." She indicates a small wine bottle rocking on the table. "That your sister you're with?"

I guess Margaret and I don't seem very romantic. I tell the woman no, but then don't know how to explain. I should be able to say we are friends first, and lover second, but I suddenly don't think I believe that.

"Where are you headed?" the woman asks.

I haven't imagined doing anything except getting back on the train for home, so I say Colorado, which confuses both of us.

"Where'd you come from?" she asks. "I think you're on the wrong train." And then, maybe because she thinks I'm teasing her, she opens her book again and turns away from me.

When I come back to our seats, Margaret is crying. I feel myself soften. She says she is thinking about Alf.

Our relationship had been in a steady decline for a while, but it hit bottom when Alf died. My mother killed him.

Margaret had been over, making tea, putting rolls and cups on a tray for us. She likes ritual. It was a fine, wet, October day and we had had a good morning. Mother was in her rocker, moving steadily back and forth, and Alf sat on the windowsill, weighing fruit in his palms, watching the pigeons outside.

Suddenly, one of the birds flew straight at the window, straight at Alf, who leaped from the sill to behind Mother's chair. She rocked back. He screamed, a very human sound. The whole series of actions seemed like on continuous motion: the bird's wings, Alf's jump, my mother's feet tipping the rocker back, the scream that registered in my stomach. Margaret came into the doorway holding her tray, and we watched Alf die. He lay flat on his back, still under the rocker. His spine had been broken.

Margaret left Mother's house that day, and refused to come back. After that, she turned her armchair away from her window, and whenever I saw her, she always ended up crying.

I sit down next to her now, and she blows her nose. I never know what to do when she cries. We pass a farm where three dogs stand with their mouths open, howling silently at the train whistle. I think I know how they feel.

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The crazy man is back in our car now and threatens to get out and clean the windows with his undershirt if something doesn't happen soon. Everyone is silent. All I hear is wheel on rail. No one wants to start any conversation with him. He makes Margaret angry; I can feel her tense beside me, but having silenced the man once, she won't do it again.

On the north side of the train, Harry points out a pond good for "large-mouth bass, using Lucky Thirteen lures and patience." Harry must be some fisherman. Margaret laughs at his remark.

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We buried Alf outside town. The rain from the day before had turned to snow. We walked in a sort of procession. Margaret with the shovel and her pack, and I with the orange-crate casket. It took over an hour to dig the hole. The snow began sticking to the ground and Margaret pulled a silver flask of crème de menthe from her pack. She had wrapped Alf in one of her shirts; its cuff showed between the crate's slats. We finished the liqueur before we covered the grave, and then Margaret brought out a sack of apricots. She poured them over the mound. Snow fell on the fruit.

"He ever remind you of anyone?" Margaret asked me. She was looking at me very intently.

"No," I said, unsure of what she wanted. "He reminded me of a monkey. Who did he remind you of?"

She looked at me again. "Somebody you know," she said.

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The lunatic says he used to play a piano in an antique shop in Reno, Bunnie's Antiques, and Bunnie made him dye his hair. It is midafternoon, and he's been on this train since the night before last.

"Will she get another monkey?" Margaret asks.

"I don't think so," I say. Alf, however endearing, was troublesome and unpredictable. "I think Mother was relieved to have him gone." Margaret considers my answer and then turns and looks out the window. She leans her forehead against the glass and closes her eyes. Harry comes on and tells us we are passing the world's largest sausage factory.

Just before sunset the people in the car get angry with the crazy man. It has been a long day. One guy says, "You must be a hundred and sixty years old." And others join in. Everywhere. Asking about this story or that story, they shoot him down, vengefully. The woman with the book on Egypt tries to be kind, but she is a weak ally in the midst of all this artillery.

"Twenty years in the Navy..."

"And twenty years in the opera..."

"You must be two hundred!"

Margaret and I pretend not to hear. She stares out the window, and I stare at her profile.

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We eat a dinner of peanuts and bananas, Alf food. I start to fall asleep, wondering if Margaret will look at me and think about me. Or if she has ever thought about me in the way I think of her. I tell myself she must, but it is a feeble line I feed myself. I close my eyes and imagine her with the sculptor. She tells him I brought her to Chicago and they laugh at me. She holds onto him tightly, fearfully, because he would be able to leave her easily, without regret.

I fall asleep and wake up angry. Harry's voice is coming over the train's system, and my shoulder is cramped against the seat back. Margaret has disappeared somewhere and I am glad.

The crazy is still up, ostracized and singing to himself. I feel, suddenly, grateful that I am not him and this makes me generous, so I listen to him and quit thinking about Margaret.

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At midnight we cross the Mississippi. Fortunately, Harry has signed off for the night. Margaret and I sit closer. I can smell her hair and the coffee she has drunk, which seems to come from the pores of her skin. We haven't discussed getting to Chicago. Margaret says, "If I squint my eyes, those lights on the water blend in with the stars." She has a nice night voice, husky and a little Southern, and she likes to talk in the dark. I count the places we have spent the night together. Sometimes, when she was new to me, she would be quiet until we were in bed. Then she would talk, moving her hands in front of us and watching them as she talked. She likes the way her hands shape what she says. The motion of the train and Margaret's hands are everything tonight.

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The train pulls into Chicago at dawn. We roll under bridges and all is sky and cement, conflicting shades of gray. On the walls of the underpasses blue tile signs read Safety First. Margaret is wide awake. She has changed clothes and is wearing something new, a green shirt I've never seen before. She is lovely in it and I wish we had another train trip together. I could try to win her back, offering familiarity, telling her: safety first.

Our train has arrived early. That's why the sculptor isn't there to meet Margaret. Pretty soon, however, he is late. Margaret sits next to me on our wooden bench and we watch strange people pass by. A tanned-faced woman in a blue cowboy hat with rodeo pins stuck in it

sits on the other side of Margaret and blows cigarette smoke. Margaret fans the air. She looks miserable.

After a while we know her sculptor is not coming. My train back to Colorado leaves in thirty minutes and I will have to choose. Margaret won't ask me to stay, but she won't ask me to go, either. While I contemplate my future--with her, without her--the crazy guy appears. I shoot bullet looks at him, but Margaret does the strangest thing.

"Tell me the truth," she asks him. "Were you an opera singer?"

The man pauses, his mouth slack and confused. "Yes," he says, and starts walking in the other direction, his back stiff. "Yes, I certainly was. And better than she ever knew."

Margaret turns to me and for a moment I see the question in her eyes and I flush in an instant of hope. But she's already scanning the morning commuter crowd, lost in her own vain hope.

Exhaustion overwhelms me. I wish, suddenly, that our relationship could die as quickly and cleanly as Alf had. If I could, I would give Margaret a farewell hug--brief and tender--then I would run and catch my train.

Instead, our relationship will languish. I understand that now. "I think I see your sculptor," I lie.

"No." Margaret sighs, shakes her head. "He's not coming."

We sit that way, feeling alone yet connected. Unconsciously, I start to hum, and gradually realize it is "Hesitation Blues." After a while she picks up her bag of art books and I follow her out of the station. As we climb the stairs, she turns to me and hands me her heavy bag.

