

Cross Country

by Ron Earl Phillips

The train seemed unusually empty this morning. Not that I minded, the night before the train had picked up three travelers which brought the car's capacity to about half. Two men and a woman. Luckily, I wasn't burdened with any as a seating companion. Making polite conversation with strangers is almost unbearable. I can manage, but it makes me uncomfortable, especially the chatty ones. You can only listen to so many stories about cats, work or the family. Normally putting in my headphones and throwing up my hoodie is enough to derail unwanted conversations. Inevitably there is always someone who can't take a hint.

I am single, no family, no pets. I lived in a small, sparsely furnished studio apartment. I don't have a regular job, not a typical nine-to-five. Despite my spartan ways, I could never acclimate myself to a routine, a schedule. I watch very little TV and despite being well compensated for the job I do, refuse to pay ticket prices at a theater. So that leaves out most of the trivial conversations.

I do like to read. Travel by train is my preferred method, especially when a job doesn't need expedited, it leaves a lot of down time. Books and magazines fill that void. As long as I don't have any chatty Cathys, I'm fine.

Waking to a nearly empty compartment, doesn't throw me at all. It makes me feel at ease. There is a guy towards the front of the car asleep, blissfully unaware the car is so vacant and free. Everyone else is probably in the dining car, or possibly got off during one of the early morning stops.

I get up from my semi-reclinable seat to stretch. I see the guy up there is really knocked out, probably how I looked fifteen minutes early. Then I spy something in the corner of my eye as I twist my back around, stretching. A man standing in the rear doorway connecting the adjoining car. He's on the other side of the glass, watching me and talking to no one.

Casually I sit back down, turning forward. I notice in the shadow of the facing door another man. Watching.

I pull out my laptop. It had been tucked into one of two bags I carried on in LA. The other I had stowed away a couple cars back.

I watched the mystery man at the front with quick glances while I used the camera on the laptop to see behind me, watching his doppelganger. Neither moved, but continued talking to no one.

The train rolled across the Illinois landscape towards the East Coast, destination NYC. Ten minutes had passed since I woke and aside from my sleeping companion, my stalwart watchers, none of the previous nights passengers returned. I felt uncomfortably alone. Oddly, I wanted to chat.

"Hey, buddy." I hollered ahead.

He shifted, but ignored me. At least he wasn't dead.

I'd give him a few more minutes, maybe he'd rouse and be more talkative. The bookends didn't appear to be any immediate threat. I flipped closed the laptop, set it aside and dug out a dog-eared copy of THE BLONDE from my bag.

A couple pages down and the sleeping stranger lifted himself up from his seat. He looked at me and then lost balance, catching himself on the cushioned seat. He shook his head, gave me a wilted grin.

He saw I was watching him, eyes no longer focused on the book. He shuffled forward. He looked sick.

Three steps short of me he collapsed. I jumped out of my seat.

"You OK? Buddy?"

He didn't answer immediately. Looking up, the mystery man at the forward of the car was gone.

"I've been poisoned," the man at my feet said in a low groan.

I bent down, grabbing his arm, turning him. He was about my age, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Similar build, a white guy. Probably from the West Coast, too. He extended his hand and I took it, and as I lifted him up he coughed right in my face. I dropped him.

"What the fuck. Dude!"

"You've got it now. You have to help me."

I grabbed him by his collar with both hands, bringing him inches from my face.

"Or you die." He gurgled.

I slammed him back against the floor. He went "ummf" and started laughing. Hysterically.

I drew my arm back, hand clenched in a fist.

He threw his hands up, laughter gone. "The book. The book."

I withdrew, stood up and thought, *What book?*

Sitting up on the floor he pointed to my chair. I didn't look away, instead took a step back. Spacing myself.

"I saw you were reading Swierczynski. I must have read THE BLONDE three times. Kind of a crazy plot. Nanotech. Proximity. Clandestine organizations. All kinds of crazy. Have you read SEVERANCE PACKAGE?"

He lifted up, looked me eye-to-eye and extended a hand. I took it.

"Conrad Tuttle." He said it matter-of-fact. Then reached to his side with his free hand, pulling up a Glock. "Agent Conrad Tuttle."

He smirked. His grip on my hand tightened. The gun pressed against my collar bone.

"Mr. Brand we've got a situation." Tuttle must have seen a glint of surprise, "It is Michael Brand? Please, tell me a lie and say you're not."

"No, you got me agent. You are an agent, right? You've got a badge?"

I halfheartedly tugged my clutched hand, it got him to hardened the grip even more. He pushed more with the gun, biting into the fragile bone.

"This is all the badge you need to see, Brand."

"That's not good enough." I grabbed his extended arm with my free hand and fell backwards.

Agent Conrad Tuttle propelled forward, releasing his grip. Tucking as I rolled back, I managed to flip him under me. Momentum and weight buried my knee deep into his groin. He curled and I jolted up, pushing off him. I glanced at both doorways.

The book ends were paired up again and inside the car now, guns drawn. Both cautiously approaching, one slow step at a time.

I grabbed my laptop and sprinted towards the back exit. The moment slowed and I heard twin triggers. I dropped into a slide, hitting the closest goon at the knees. His neck ripped open as the twin's bullet hit. Blood erupted and I pressed him out of the way, avoiding most of the spray. At the door, I look back and see the other goon met a likewise fate.

I pulled open the door just as the rhythmic sound of the track changed, the muffling earth converging into flowing air and rippling of a distant river below. How's that for timing.

"Stop!" Agent Tuttle had managed to lift himself on wobbly legs. His gun again extended.

I flung my computer at him. He dropped to catch it. I pushed my way through the next two cars, retrieved my other bag from a compartment and strapped it to my back.

I look up and there's Tuttle again. I stood between cars, shaking my head in disbelief.

"Dude, you got the computer. What more do you want?"

I jump out into the open air, water rushed closer. Tuttle watches as I fall.

"You guys are really way too serious about music downloads," I yelled through the rushing air, "Aren't you?"

I pulled the cord on my pack, deploying the chute. I flipped him the bird as I glided away and the train railed on.

