

# On the Empire Builder

*by* Sean Brown

With beat up Chucks we march onward. Not much sole support in the cardboard, but then again, they don't look right brand new anyway. Super glue holds the fray in place when it starts to cross the line from stylish to derelict. White laces turn gray, and those plastic tips crack and tear, a hopeless battle, their destiny long predetermined. A silver ring popped out, now the puddle water rushes in. Portland's wet in the rainy season.

Beautiful in the summer though, and that's a well kept secret. They don't like Cali kids much up here, though we're all Hollywood knock off characters, best supporting actors made in China or someplace like Birmingham. Or we will be, would be, could be, if we were cool. Crisp fall air has come to Whitefish, Montana earlier than most places, and a border patrol agent just asked me if I was a US citizen in back in Haver.

A large man reads the USA Today across the aisle from me, he has no idea that he's made it to print. That's how I deal with people, I turn them into cartoon characters, caricatures fit for human consumption. Sorry Fat Man, we've never spoken, and you're not really my type, but you've become literature all the same. Read world wide by the millions...err, 12 or so of my closest friends, and yet ignorant of your fame, your notoriety. Two hands on the steps, big man, if you fall now, you'll be stuck in that stairwell till Washington.

Things took a turn for the sarcastically vicious, but why? Twenty six hours on a train plays tricks on the mind, but at the same time, I'm feeling fine. Two thirds of the way home. Three Kerouac novels down. Four sandwiches, a thing of pasta with tomatoes, a granola bar, two sweet nut rolls, and a banana. I missed a phone call at 2 am last night, twenty three hours ago. I've been on roaming, unable to check the message ever since. It was from Her. The anticipation is bittersweet. And train food sucks, so I packed a lunch.

The view is beautiful from the observation car, at least once you hit the mountains. Naked American Apparel models romp with elk and antelope, and the Ghost of Richard Nixon directs traffic with the grace of a Wounded Hyena. Jesus. I've never really listened to the lyrics of "Iko Iko" off the Big Easy Soundtrack, pretty brutal stuff, but I like it, especially in the Observation Car. Especially with Nixon safely on the other side, The Wrong side, of the looking glass.

I'm still worth a million in prizes, though my bank account hovers around thirty seven bones. Good thing talk is cheap and the beer is on sale. And when I get to Portland, my building has free laundry, though perhaps also a meth habit. Win some, lose some. I need to get some sleep, only a couple more hours till Spokane, a place where things really get wild.

