



The Prince of Pompadoodle* Takes the Train 1999

I was told it was only going to be a journey of a few leagues.

As my league work wasn't up to snuff I figured it would take a while longer. I loaded myself up with the stuff of the classic poseur. A handbag a duffel bag, new shoes, an over-the-shoulder bag and a shopping bag flaunting that it's Heavenly.

A ragamuffin dog was following something that seemed to be stuck on the bottom of one of my new shoes. She stared at my shoes constantly. It made my departure nervous, I began to sweat, is this hound a foretelling of the future, am I departing on the Holiday from Hell. This is me in the dark glasses holding up a paper coffee cup, my mouth is open, perhaps a toast to whomever is taking the picture, the hell hound is still there. A toast is in order, a toast is ever present, and soon I become toast, the foretelling of a red dog by the railroad track.

I have a newspaper under my arm. When I am seated in the train I will open this paper and see a small article, "hi there from the road to Hell." The article will say "All the service staff on the train system is on strike. The people that you will be dealing with on your train ride part of the holiday from hell, these are management staff and these personages are being forced to wait on you as they are the most dependent. Therefore the most blackmailable. Have a nice trip. Oh by the way, if the staff seems testy or out of sorts, your ticket allows you to kick them with the flat of your boot, anywhere below the ankle. Their attention will become much more focused.

I leaned back in my parlor car, it was the Prince of Pompadoodle class for me on the holiday from hell, I had a compartment, two beds, a shower, and a leather sofa chair. I was unworried about a strike, after all I was the prince, and pompadoodle was straight ahead.

We departed from a rather square building, that had a red dog in the parking lot. As I got out of the taxi I must have stepped into something that got the dog's attention because the beast is following me around. Just before I had my picture taken, but while I was still loaded as you see me here, a Hindu gentlemen came by offering to sell me some sandalwood incense. I assured him they smelled terrific, but really, at this moment, I was a bit preoccupied to be buying incense, besides I was sure you wouldn't be able to fire them up on the train, and in the scenario for the holiday from hell I wasn't about to become the Warrior Soul who ends up being kicked off the train in East Anglia Utah, for conduct unbecoming the short-term renter, even if the prince class gave you a room and a half to roam around in. Prince class also had a shower, people became my great friend over that. By the third day people were asking where's the guy going to hell, I hear he has a shower.

Let me say first off that I've stopped smoking many years ago. On the big long train ride to hell the only place one could smoke was downstairs in the bar car, a crabby little space of three booth type deals, seats about twelve comfortably. At any given moment there would be at least forty people crammed in, all leaning over into the smoking space, so the smoke wound its way up into the main traffic, and was assisted to the exit in the lungs of many others. But even the prince can get lonely. I mean what's the point of princehood anyway unless it has a social valve. Ask any princess the answer is the same, lucky for you to be in my company. So I squashed myself into the smoker's crampedness and played gin rummy with a cocktail waitress who got on in Reno and two army guys heading back to Chicago. And nobody left. If you left your seat in the smokers area, you were doomed and had to wait for the next station stop, Omaha two hours and twenty minutes, if we're on time which we are not. Did I not mention that we started late ran late and finished

with a flourish, eleven hours late into Chicago, people missed their connections, their loved ones people went ballistic at the station when we got in. The complaint line formed around the pillars and snaked out into the station central. People were hot. One woman was going to miss her father's funeral. She flung herself onto the marble. She screamed, my father is dead and I must get home. She was inflamed. Her passion and heat should have warned me. The holiday from hell has started we are already well into it, you just haven't noticed yet. You have a hotel room, already booked, you have a duffle bag and a shoulder bag and a shopping bag that declares heavenly and the curse of a red dog.

Had I thought for a moment about the presence of the red dog, or its interest in my shoes or any of that, but no, being distracted as I was, loaded as I seem to be, and busy offering a toast of old coffee, I'm in mid-sentence, probably about to declare, I'm on my holidays, here's to me. All this seems to be tied to a different story, a boring tale of one man's journey to visit the folks.

I've always found it interesting to see how people decide to punish themselves. Upon close examination of this picture I see a man who has made one bad decision after another and he hasn't even gotten on the train yet. I mistook the dog right off the bat as being some carved wood statue idea, some perhaps local custom, a dog statue to greet arrivals at the train yard. I was going to set my newspaper on it when the thing became animated and started staring at my shoes.

I hated my shoes the most I guess. Of all the stupid costumery I had assembled for this holiday the leaving out fit was the worst. And the shoes, somber black, stiff fitting oxfords, this was the gear I hoped to get airborne on, so to speak. My jacket weighed nine pounds alone, I'd shaved off my goatee so I didn't recognize myself whenever I passed a window, I'd peer hopefully, but always disappointed to find some complete buffoon has taken me over, dressed me up, if you will, and is taking me for a train ride where the staff is all on strike, and the waiter hated us, but he changed at Denver and we got another waiter who also hated us. Us being the diners in the dining car. Those of us who wanted to pony up ten to twelve bucks a pop to sit at a decent table, with a cloth and silver and eat in the company of three others, all strangers. Nonetheless, the other alternative was the snack bar, which was also where the smokers gathered. It was downstairs and the waiter in the snack bar was really toast. By day two the smokers had drunk all the beer and the waiter/snack bar guy was taking longer breaks, sometimes disappearing for a whole hour, the snack bar/smoking colony declared war on the snack bar guy, everybody's drinking and puffing heavy. No place to eat a sedate meal.

After all we're talking Pompadoodle, so every four hours the prince would rise up through the smoke of the gin rummy game I've lost fourteen in a row, excuse himself

with a coughing fit, mutter I've got to have air, save me a seat and zoom off to the dining car where the waiter was mad at us.

There we are four of us. All of us mature people, not ready to fight, each of us enjoying the old way we travelled, slow across America, Denver at night, Brushback and Too Little in the flat land haze, four people riding in the sunset, in the dining car, each of us smiling to our neighbor in contentment. The waiter appears, a large black man, he has a gold tooth, a crisp uniform and a handful of cards, which he doles out, one for each of us. It looks like a report card. He hands us each a stubby yellow pencil and says, with a bit of an edge, don't lose the pencil and he cruises off to bend over another table of happy faces and hands them all cards. The woman across from me asks what we're supposed to do. I said, far as I could tell we were supposed to fill in the squares, this was the menu, and we were to check off what it was we wanted. The gentleman who came is not really a waiter in the real sense, he is a man who gives out and picks up cards, the food is delivered and the dishes picked up by yet another man. Our man is back. All done he orders, no it seems there were some questions, the couple across from me, the Illorons from Carmel, elderly couple, he made it in iron ore stock before the crash that took out my grandfather, they ask about something. The man grabs their card and really scrutinizes it, he hands it back and says, sign the back. The lady beside me is having an anxiety attack. First of all I'm not sure that in her whole lifetime any black man has ever been anything but real polite and she is frightened of him. She sits there, her hands folded and she says to her shirtfront, I'll have Earl Grey. A pall has fallen on our group. I look around every group is quiet, everybody is hoping for a good grade from the waiter. It was like back at school, they gave the report cards out in the order of finish. If that Rampart idiot got called before your name you were doomed. It was like this in the dining car. We ate because we must, we huddle in groups of four, we worked out jaws and glanced hastily at our report card. An F, talking with your mouth full. I hear you now, you say, oh shut up prince and get on with the doodle part, you know where you are the master of the shower the private bathroom the extra chair and sleeping arrangement. You heighed-three-hence from the cottage main and now the coachman's mad at you. I realized early on but especially after we changed rail

crews in Denver, that I wasn't to take all this ordering us about personally. They were operating under the letter of the law and the rest of us were on our holiday. We were traveling east, some like myself, to visit the family, some to marry and some to bury and all of us heading towards Chicago where we would debark our long land cruise and go our different ways. But out here still we were united, smokers, non-smokers, still Christian beggars and old patriots, all us united against the staff. And they were a very determined force. They controlled the flow of beer for example. At first the beer guy said that people must behave, meaning smokers, cause they also became the drinkers, and to lose your seat was to be sent up above, with the non-smokers, who were not listening to uproarious stories being told, crude money jokes, but funny, and gin rummy games, all this happened in a relatively small area. The beer guy says, if you don't straighten up I'm not going to put any more beer on board, when you drink up this bundle, you're finished. Forty-five people inhaled their ciggy until the red tip on the end glowed brightly. I thought, oh oh, although I'm down six bits after four days maybe my time in the snack bar must come to an end. Too late, there is a rush for the counter. The beer guy just manages to close his steel shutters, metal like Stalingrad, and he is sniggering in there behind, you can hear him. A sailor guy wants to climb outside the car and swing in through the hole where they pass out the empties during short stops. A committee is formed, someone says, let's strap our belts together and go on the roof and swing in, "Liberate the beer," becomes the cry as I disappeared up the stairs. Hey, I'm a geezer guy now, I don't need to be swinging from a moving train because the beer guy has said he's had enough. I leave that for more reasonable minds, sailors, I've always thought they showed real clear-headedness.

It was not as if you could save a biscuit for yourself, who would want to, it was all for one and one for all on the train ride during the holiday, and although it might seem rather selfish to you that I would take up a precious seat in the smoking section, nonetheless, I saw it as my writerly duty to sit in there with all the smoke and drunken hilarity. At my cubicle there were two G.I. not traveling together but had migrated to the same section on the cross-continental express, one sat beside me, near the window sometimes and near the aisle on others. Across from me sat the

blonde girl from Reno and next to her sat the other G.I. Whoever I was partnered with, we took a bath, I couldn't do it right. But the beer flowed and after the third day a dull thing permeated the whole downstairs. It was now common knowledge that we were going to be late into Chicago, not three in the afternoon, more like midnight, maybe later. The people who had made connections to other passage were looking either more stunned or the opposite, more and more with the foam-flecked lips and the high screaming call of the hunting hawk in trouble. A kind of stretch out eeeeeekkkkk eeeeeekkkkkk. The beer guy had won as we all knew he would, after all he represented Authority and try as they will to ignore it, solid working class structures like the type on this train, they had respect for authority, bottom line, you could see it, at night perhaps, the train is mostly asleep, the lights are dimmed in most compartments, the bar car is closed the train has settled in for the night, the odd light, someone is reading perhaps, you glance down as you pass, the sway has adjusted to your feet and like the sailor you pass down the bridge of the train, its spine, backbone, if you will, the roar, as you pass between cars step into the next one up, it's soft and dark the light is pale yellow, my face is leaning against the window, the eyes open staring out into the dark outer night, you see the face's reflection, it is inward this journey, the face believes what it knows to be true, far away is an island called home, I will take the ferry and they will meet me at the dock.

* The Prince of Pompadoodle is from A. A. Milnes's children's book of poems, *When I Was Six*.