

Introduction to Travel

When I was in high school, my dad gave me a weekly allowance of twenty dollars. Where a teenager was supposed to spend money in a town where the Wal-Mart Supercenter was a point of civic pride, I was never sure. So instead, I started stashing it, making a withdrawal every once in a while to see a movie or eat at Taco Bell. But mostly, the bills collected in the back of my armoire.

My savings gained a purpose when my high school marching band went to Phoenix to march in the Fiesta Bowl Parade. It was my first time outside the Southeast, and my first time on an airplane. I was terrified of flying, but as we walked through Hartsfield International Airport to board our last plane after the initial twenty-minute flight from Birmingham to Atlanta, I was exhilarated. For the rest of the trip, the thing I most enjoyed was breezing through the airports, rolling my luggage behind me and listening to the different destinations announced over the intercom. I felt like I had everything with me I would ever need.

When I got back home, I suddenly knew what all my hidden money was for. By my senior year, I had a thousand dollars saved, and I knew what I wanted to do.

"I want to take a trip after I graduate," I announced to my mother during my junior year of high school. We stood on either side of the sink in our small kitchen. It was a Saturday morning, and we were both still in T-shirts and shorts with unbrushed hair. I stood musing over the toaster, watching the coils blaze orange. Mom was scraping fake butter onto a bagel.

"With who?"

"With you, if you wanna come."

She assumed I'd meant a trip with my friends, but going with my friends had never crossed my mind. My sparse handful of friends liked to go to the beach, get a tan, go shopping at a mall. I hated heat, got sunburned easily, and found shopping mind-numbingly boring.

Mom took a bite of bagel at the counter and stirred some fake butter into her bowl of

instant oatmeal. She assumed her sentimental mother voice. "Sweetheart. You know I'd love to give you a senior trip. You know I would. But we just don't have the money."

My toast sprung out of the toaster. I flinched. "I have some money saved up."

"Like how much money?" Mom laughed.

"I dunno. The last time I counted it was almost a thousand dollars."

"Where did you get a thousand dollars?"

"I've been saving my allowance the past few years."

Mom faced me now, her elbow propped on the counter. "You mean you've just been letting all that allowance sit there?"

I laughed. "Yeah. So?"

"That's not why we were giving that to you! We were giving that to you to spend!"

"Well, now I am spending it!"

She turned back toward her oatmeal with a snort. "I guess you are."

She stood over me that afternoon while I sat on the floor by my armoire, my wad of cash dissected into stacks of fifties, twenties, tens, fives, singles.

"Nine hundred eighteen dollars," I said.

"Where were you thinking of going?"

"I dunno yet. I've wanted to go back out West ever since Phoenix."

I stacked all the bills together and folded them twice, stuffing them back into the shoe box in the bottom of my armoire. I could sense Mom mulling it over. I remembered a photo album my grandparents kept at their house, of the summer their family spent in Colorado for my grandfather's job when Mom was in high school.

"I've always wanted to go back out West," she said. "You know who else would like this?" she added.

I nodded. "Meemaw."

Meemaw was my name for my grandmother. My grandfather was Pappaw. Their real names were Pauline and Charlie McGraw, and they had always lived ten minutes away from me my whole life. Their house was a 1940s ranch on a hill next to a fenced garden. The front yard was full of huge trees with moss and soft, thin grass growing between them. The inside of the house had been added onto many times before they bought it, but the original rooms had dark, glossy wood paneling, and hardwood floors ran throughout. It was full of things my grandmother had made and was making--sewing, painting, sketching, gluing together, shalacking over, dismantling.

We sat at the dining room table the day we told her, the room around us littered with remnants of art projects. Everyone had eaten, and Pappaw had taken leave to go watch a Western in the living room, the volume cranked up so loud we knew he couldn't hear us.

"Now, Charlotte," she said. "She should be puttin' that money toward college." I was used to the way Meemaw often talked about me in my presence.

Using the money for college would be a recurring theme over the next two years, especially since I'd have an existential crisis the following spring, turning down a financial aid offer from a private school in Birmingham, opting instead to spend a year at a community college and then transfer out of state. But I held fast to our trip.

"Where d'you wanna go?" Meemaw asked.

"I dunno. Just somewhere. Maybe back out West."

"Well, lemme ask Charlie about it," she said without fanfare. "I was gonna use my half of the tax refund to paint the carport, but I guess I could use it to pitch in."

Travel Lesson #1

map (n) - a navigational tool that shows all the roads that exist, or (more commonly) have existed at some point, in a given place on the day the map was printed. Map reading, a related term, refers to a complex form of divination, similar to the reading of tea leaves, by which a gifted seer determines what all the lines on the map actually mean (the seer must also be trained in the sacred and delicate art of map folding).

There are two kinds of people: those who can read maps, and those who, upon looking at a map, see only a mass of squiggly lines. I'm more of a MapQuest girl, myself.

My grandmother falls into the former category. Even now, when she and my mother visit the city I've lived in for two years, we hardly make it from the grocery store to my apartment before we hear the ominous crinkle of the map unfolding in the back seat.

"Now, on the map, it says you could also turn right up here," she says, helpfully shoving the map under my chin. Mom steals a sidelong glance at the map.

"But this way is faster," I argue. "I do it every day."

"Well, I'm just saying, this is another option. Maybe you should take a right up here, Charlotte."

"You're pointing left, Meemaw."

By now, Mom is in silent agony, trying to snatch at the map and keep a hand on the wheel.

"Keep going the way I said, Mom."

"Are you sure?"

"She could also take a left onto Washington and then a right onto Hillside and then a left-

_"

"So should I take Washington or not?!"

"No!" I say. "Meemaw, just put the map up!"

"Alright!" she says, refolding the map with the assurance that her conscience will be clean when we drive off a cliff.

Car trips were the only trips my family had ever known: you pack a couple of ice chests, load the back seat with enough non-perishables, blankets, and pillows to survive the blizzard that's always coming when you travel, and go. Each item must be wrapped in its own Wal-Mart bag, sealed by an infuriatingly effective knot, and left unlabeled so that even just finding your toothbrush becomes an adventure. And if you're going too far for that, what the hell are you thinking anyway?

So nothing could have prepared us for our trip to Montana--and that's how maps invaded. My grandmother must have ruined a dozen atlases planning it. Immediately following every meal we ate at Meemaw and Papaw's that spring, Mom and I watched mutely as she cleared the remnants of our meal from the table, along with any of her current projects (piles of half-sewn fabrics, old paintbrushes, magazines with pretty pictures she wanted to sketch, the bucket of green beans she'd been hulling), to make way for the atlas. We watched blankly as Meemaw sat her pen in the northeast corner of Alabama and made a slow, shaky line along a tangled web of highways and interstates until she reached some indeterminate point in Montana--Missoula, Kalispell, sometimes a nameless spot in the green boundary marked Glacier National Park. The wood-paneled walls, worn glossy with age, the buffet, the hutch, and the bureau, stuffed with placemats and good silverware, not to mention the walls lined with easels and potted plants and the occasional sewing machine, seemed to close in on us as the light dimmed outside.

"See," she said, announcing each road as though she knew it intimately, "we'll take Highway 23, then merge onto 1-35 around Brownsville. . ."

Within two minutes, this route would reveal a tragic flaw; my grandmother harbored a deep dread of the chaotic congestion of major cities, while my mother swore she couldn't bear riding through Kansas--it was so boring. Detours were devised, then highlighted as the ones we preferred, only to be replaced by even better ones, highlighted in another color. But no matter how many back roads she gleaned, bent intently over the map with a giant magnifying glass, my grandmother displayed a mounting sense of panic when she couldn't avoid every major city. We wondered if she could be an outlaw wanted in the Midwest.

"Ohhh, we don't want to go anywhere near Oklahoma City," she would say, grabbing the highlighter, "let's get off I-29 right here and take Highway 41 around it instead. . . there. . . Now, we're going to have to be real careful of bears once we get out there. . ."

We defaced beyond recognition the full map of the U.S. in every atlas in the house, then waited for my grandfather to buy a new one. Other than performing that service periodically, Pappaw kept a safe distance from our meetings. Whereas Meemaw could focus on one project at a time all day, from a five-course meal to an oil painting of a lighthouse, often not bothering to change out of her pajama pants and a paint-splattered purple T-shirt she'd had since I was a toddler, Pappaw preferred to float, tending his vegetable garden in the humid morning, fixing a drain after lunch, rotating in the evening between a loud football game or black-and-white Western in his den and simply walking laps around the house "to burn off all that good supper I ate!" With round green eyes, a cheerfully mischievous spring in his step, and some trace of curl still visible in his dark, short-cropped hair, Pappaw could easily pass for a lovable leprechaun-handyman.

We invited him to come on the trip, but he declined.

"Oh, y'all know Charlie," Meemaw said. "He hates to travel. He might catch germs."

Papaw was, overall, a well-pressed man. He always wore freshly ironed jeans (which

Meemaw hemmed for him because of his leprechaun's height) with a tucked-in, button-down shirt or, for an extremely gritty project, a spotless white T-shirt with a front pocket. The smallest mosquito bite or cut merited a dousing of rubbing alcohol. He hated to travel and stay in hotel rooms after a civil service career spent doing just that--not to mention the challenge of staying so well-pressed on the road. His exclusion from our meetings caused him a quiet glee.

"Y'all want some peanuts?" he asked occasionally while passing through the dining room to the kitchen.

"Charlie, we're tryin' to think!" my grandmother responded.

"Alright, then." He retreated through the living room into the den with his hand full of peanuts.

Dad was also invited, and also declined.

Perhaps the men's reluctance to travel with us was a warning sign. On the other hand, it's hard to accept that your loved ones view you as harbingers of disaster.

Meanwhile, Mom and I tried to avoid Meemaw's trip-planning sessions, but to no avail. We answered our home phone in the evenings only to be greeted with, "I finally found the perfect route! You take I-50 through Arkansas and then meet up with I-85 in Missouri. . ."

Even when we'd exhausted every possibly combination of highways, interstates, and twisty backroads in the atlas, Meemaw contacted every tiny town we thought we might stop in for the night. Her mailbox saw a steady surge of informational packages from eager little Midwestern towns all vying for our business at their local Holiday Inn. When we gathered in her living room to watch TV after dinner, she read aloud to us from these thick little epistles before passing them around. However, just when we began to imagine ourselves spending a night among the cornfields of Iowa or the rolling hills of the Badlands, the route inevitably changed again.

Early in the spring of 2005, we reserved a lakeside room in the Many Glacier Hotel; we booked three seats on one of the park's bus tours; yet we still had no clear route plotted to Montana.

I awoke one Saturday afternoon the following spring to the sound of Mom pounding excitedly up the stairs toward my bedroom. Iris, our dog, lumbered along at her side, nearly tripping over herself at the prospect of waking me up.

"Haley! Turn on the Travel Channel!" Mom exclaimed, grabbing the remote from my nightstand and hurriedly doing just that. "It's about Glacier National Park!"

Iris leapt onto my single bed, simultaneously crushing my vital organs and trying to lick my face. The little television screen in the opposite corner of my bedroom slowly came to life with a sweeping shot of the Rockies, while a narrator said something about mountain goats. Mom, who had been awake at six o'clock jogging with Iris, changing hummingbird feeders, and watering plants, hopped up and down in a T-shirt and a pair of workout shorts in the throes of excitement.

"That's where we're going!" she laughed. The phrase became a chanted mantra as she went back downstairs, where the same program was playing on the living room TV. "We're going, we're go-ing. . ."

In the process of donning a pair of sweatpants, I kept listening to the narrator talk about the Continental Divide and the park's famous Red Bus Tours. Looking out my purple-draped bedroom windows into the spindly gray woods that comprised our yard, I tried to imagine setting

foot in a place so fundamentally different--a parallel universe where the trees, the rocks, even the sky was different.

"That's the bus tour we're taking!" Mom yelled up the stairs.

And then the announcer segued into a brief discourse about the Empire Builder, a train that had run from Chicago to Seattle since the turn of the century, stopping in Glacier National Park along the way. Black-and-white photographs showed corseted women sipping tea at an ornate table in the dining car, or men in suits and bow-ties playing an amiable game of cards, followed by footage of today's passengers laughing and talking jovially, seated next to big, bright windows or disembarking in the park against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains, their luggage rolling chipperly behind them. But that faded photo of the high-ceilinged dining room was my downfall. I would give anything to set foot inside that train.

I thundered downstairs into the living room and stood in front of the TV with Mom, watching the last montage of the Empire Builder jetting easily through a misty pine forest, around the side of a mountain, and out of sight.

"We should do that," I said.

"Oh, that train's probably so expensive. Sit down and watch Amazing Vacation Homes with me."

But I had bigger things on my mind now--my crush on the Empire Builder consumed my thoughts from that moment forward. I knew when Mom blew off a subject that way instead of arguing down to the bitter end, it was a sure sign she was at least mulling it over.

By that night, I was already calculating simulated train routes and projected passenger fares.

"Hey, come look at this," I entreated when she walked past my bedroom. She approached my desk only to discover that, just as her mother had plagued her with atlases, her daughter would now harass her with the Amtrak website.

"We can leave from Anniston with connectors in Charlottesville and Chicago--"

"Haley. There is just no way we are going to be able to take that train, okay?" She laughed and shook her head. I felt more reassured than if she'd picked up the phone, called Amtrak, and ordered our tickets on the spot.

The next time Meemaw whipped out a fresh atlas and commenced the search for the U.S. map, Mom broached the topic.

"You know, Haley and I were watching the Travel Channel the other day, and there was this program on about Glacier National Park."

"Is that right?" Meemaw interjected absently, having found the U.S. map and smoothed it across the dark surface of the table.

"Yes, and they showed this train, the ah--ah--"

"Empire Builder," I said.

"The Empire Builder," Mom continued, "and it takes you all the way across the country to the park."

Meemaw leaned back from the map, smiling broadly and nodding her head, rhythmically saying, "Ah-hah, ah-hah," a sure sign she wasn't actually listening.

"We were thinking that might be fun."

She bent back over the map and resumed outlining her latest route.

"The Em-pire Buil-der, huh?" Pappaw picked up the thread as he passed behind us on his way to the kitchen. He pronounced the name slowly, something he did when he liked a word or

phrase. "That sounds like the train I took when I was in the army, on my way out to Washington. And from there we went to Ko-rea." We later confirmed that it was, indeed, the very same train.

Pappaw continued to the kitchen. We watched Meemaw run her finger along the line of a highway, intimating her scheme as she went.

"Em-pire Buil-der," I heard Pappaw repeat contentedly under his breath as he passed behind us again, disappearing into the den with a bag of pork rinds.

Later that spring, shortly before school was out, Pappaw withdrew a considerable chunk of cash from the bank and bought us three round-trip tickets on the Empire Builder.

When they arrived in the mail, Mom and I assembled with uncharacteristic solemnity around the little metal table in their kitchen. Meemaw stood by the counter where she'd been canning tomatoes all morning. Mom and I balked at the sheer number of them--whole tomatoes just in from the garden were piled by the back door; bowls of peeled tomatoes lined the counter waiting to be canned; finished cans had accumulated in the floor and were eking their way onto the table.

"We're gonna need these damn things this winter, now!" Meemaw scolded our skeptical glances as she scrubbed her tomato-stained hands in the sink. Pappaw, who grew the tomatoes, gestured toward her back while laughing silently and rolling his eyes.

"Now all y'all gotta do is just board the train, and wait at the station durin' your layovers," he said as he doled out the tickets. "And if you have any questions, just ask the conductor, and he'll be glad to help you."

Each ticket came in its own folder, with an informational brochure and a map of the route we'd on a total of three trains: The Crescent from Aniston, Alabama to Charlottesville, Virginia; The Cardinal from Charlottesville to Chicago; and at last, the Empire Builder from Chicago to Montana. This cheered Meemaw, whose atlases were conspicuously absent. She traced her finger along the glossy surface of her map.

"Well, see here! We're gonna be passin' through Illinois, and then Wisconsin, and then Minnesota. . ."

At least this wasn't the kind of map she could write on--though she would spend the next months researching each town the train stopped in along the way.

I flipped through my own brochure, taking it all in--from the photos of content model passengers to the misspelled name on my ticket: Hayley instead of Haley. Papaw was clearly relieved to have all this settled; Meemaw was pacified by the unalterable, pre-planned route; Mom seemed on the verge of bursting into another chant of excitement, possibly "We got our tickets! We got our tickets!"

And we had finally managed to find a mode of transportation that rendered maps completely useless.

Travel Lesson #2

packing (v) - a sadistic game played by travelers prior to departure, in which they challenge themselves to fit either as much or as little as possible into the luggage that will accompany them. The game continues throughout their trip as they come either to regret or incessantly gloat upon their chosen strategy.

In the weeks leading up to the trip, whenever Mom and I went to Wal-Mart she'd pause in one of the grocery aisles, staring into the rows of Rice-a-Roni and instant taco filling.

"If I made this for dinner Wednesday night, would you eat it?" she asked once, holding up a vacuum-sealed vegetable stir-fry.

Visualizing the shriveled vegetables entombed in the package, I shook my head. In my family, the refusal to ingest anything even remotely edible was a sign of pickiness, a dreaded disorder, and my pickiness was a constant source of anxiety for Mom and Meemaw as the trip loomed closer.

"What are you going to eat in Montana?" Mom groaned in the grocery aisle, as though we'd be forced to eat nothing but dehydrated vegetables the entire time.

"Sandwiches," I replied drily.

Wal-Mart, our nearest grocery store, was in Fort Payne, a twenty-minute drive from our house on Lookout Mountain, one of two long, broad plateaus that bordered Fort Payne, making it a narrow town. On our way home, we passed the Alabama Fan Club, erected in honor of the band, Alabama, a 1980s country music sensation whose members hailed from Fort Payne. Life-sized statues of them were commissioned for the public park, where they smiled benevolently upon passersby. My grandparents had been to see the Fan Club, but I never went.

"We should stop by Mom and Dad's," Mom would usually say as we wound our way up the side of Lookout Mountain. Their house was at the top of the hill; ours was out past the bridge that crossed Little River Canyon, a picturesque place where at least one eager sightseer drowned every summer.

At my grandparents' house, we found Meemaw rustling around in the plastic Wal-Mart

bags that had been spreading across her dining room floor for the past few weeks, creating an eerie sea of identical smiley faces. They were full of travel-sized wonders she found at Wal-Mart, like thumb-sized hairbrushes, and collapsible plastic cups that took up slightly less space than a regular cup. Meemaw was one of those pack-as-much-as-possible travelers.

"Look what I found at the store!" she said today, pulling out a money belt made of bulky polyester. It fastened around her waist with a clunky pouch for concealing her cash, which Meemaw positioned under the elastic waistband of her pants, making her stomach look oddly pooched.

"How neat!" Mom exclaimed while I watched in petrified silence.

"Yeah! I was thinkin' you could wear it on the trip," Meemaw continued, unfastening the belt and handing it to Mom. I bit my lower lip to stifle a smirk.

"Um. . . oh." Mom gingerly pushed the belt back toward Meemaw. "You know, I don't think I'll really need it. You'll get more use out of it than I will."

"Well okay," Meemaw shrugged, tucking the belt back into a bag. "I'll wear that thing, by-golly."

While they talked, I surveyed the bags. I knew their contents would be sprawled throughout our carry-on bags, purses, and pockets, so at any given moment I could be offered such luxuries as bottled water poured by my grandmother into a collapsible plastic cup, or a five dollar bill to visit the snack car, produced from a pouch in her trousers.

Despite their preparations, however, Mom and Meemaw lapsed into fight-or-flight mode during the last days before our departure. Our house got several calls a day from Meemaw, announcing she'd bought a travel-sized toothbrush or asking if she should stash a box of Wheat Thins in her bag, just in case. Mom set herself in a perpetual state of motion, power-walking nonstop around our two-story house for three days. If interrupted, she launched into a recitation of every minute task she still had to accomplish before we left, and why.

One day I heard her rummaging around in the closet under the staircase. I came halfway down the stairs and leaned over at the spot where the living room ceiling met the staircase banister.

"Are my striped flip-flops in there?" I called. I heard whatever she'd been rifling through smack to the ground.

"Haley," she said in a low, breathless voice, emerging barefoot from the closet in a pair of old shorts and a baggy T-shirt, "we have two days until we leave, and I still have to finish packing my suitcase, cook dinner tonight, go get groceries tomorrow so your daddy'll have something to eat while we're gone--"

"Okay, okay! Never mind!" I yelled, retreating back upstairs. But she followed me to my bedroom, her footfalls heavy and frustrated, detailing how many extra bowls of cat food she should leave out.

Her worries were related to the fact that Dad would be alone with our three indoor cats and our dog, Iris, for two weeks. Dad spent most of this ordeal downstairs in the daylight basement playing an aviator computer game, but whenever he had to come upstairs for food, Mom would rush up to him, a sprightly 5'2" against his big, clumsy frame, to prevent some potential disaster.

"James, you better not leave that deck door open and let those cats out while we're gone! You hear?"

"I hear ya, I hear ya," he responded, bobbing his head absently.

"An' you better not invite all your friends up here! You'll scare the cats to death!"

Yet we all knew Dad would inevitably allow at least one of those catastrophes to come to pass. I could already see him lumbering upstairs to walk Iris and pausing listlessly in the open doorway, fumbling with her leash, while a cat scampered across his size-twelve feet toward freedom.

Nevertheless, Mom made a bold effort to secure her home by identifying high-risk areas for misbehavior and fortifying them with Post-It notes.

"DO NOT let the cats outside!" read a note on the back door.

"Keep porch light turned off during the day!" urged another above the panel of light switches.

Mom exhumed my luggage, a black wheeled suitcase, from the guest closet assuming I'd immediately start packing. Her own suitcase, recently purchased from K-Mart, was brimming with toiletry bags and clothes for all possible weather. It was larger than mine and covered in a metallic, silver space-age material.

"It's like a pimp suitcase," I laughed when she showed me.

"It is not!" she pouted.

I left my open suitcase in my floor, untouched. The cats curled up inside, getting hair all over the lining. Three days later, it was closed and pushed aside, still empty.

I had been on enough trips with high school groups to know the drill.

"So, where are you from?" other travelers would ask, innocently.

At which point you'd say, "Alabama."

And they'd respond with, "Ohhhh."

On our marching band's trip to Phoenix two years ago, our group was paired briefly with another marching band from some Midwestern state like Iowa or Illinois. The Midwestern kids, as a condescending joke, asked one of our color guard girls to recite the alphabet. She did, until she got to the letter "E," and she stopped.

"Well, that's all I know!" she announced flippantly and walked away.

Perhaps such experiences influenced my decision to spend the better part of the afternoon before our trip in my bathroom dying my hair bright red.

I did it because I sincerely felt bright red was the color for me, and because I had just graduated from a high school with a strict dress code. Mom had bought the dye, but I didn't tell her I was doing it that day. A ratty towel pinned around my shoulders, I massaged the gooey red into my hair, careful not to smudge any on my ears, neck, or forehead. My hair was long, wavy and blonde, almost to my elbows, and I worked an entire can of dye down to the ends. The plastic gloves from the kit crinkled coolly against my scalp. They were heavy with smeared red mousse when I peeled them off and plunked them in the trash. For twenty excited minutes I watched television in my bedroom floor, hair piled atop my head. I was dimly aware of a storm gathering far away behind this anticipation; it was more a sense of relief that because of this, I wouldn't be lumped in with my so-quintessentially-Alabamian family on this trip. I rinsed my hair under the surge of the bathtub faucet, the ends swirling around the drain in a pinkish pool that finally turned clear. Towel-dried and brushed, I could already see the new color when I glanced in the mirror, satisfied. I liked things other typical American teenagers liked--such as unnatural hair colors.

While my hair dried, I threw some clothes in my suitcase, adopting the pack-as-little-as-possible strategy.

"Did you shower this early?" Mom asked when she brought a stack of clean underwear to my room.

"I just dyed my hair," I grinned.

"Lemme see."

I ducked under the lamp by my bed. She leaned over, examining my hair in the light, and she smiled in an amused way.

"Cute," she said with what might have been a chuckle.

"Thanks."

That night, I stayed up until two o'clock writing an eight-page paper on Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* for the American Literature class I was taking over the summer at the community college. I woke up the next day at noon, twisted my bright red hair into two braids, and finished packing.

A mountain of luggage was already poised on our dining room table when I brought my bags downstairs. Dad was in the kitchen frying eggs; a bowl of instant grits rotated in the microwave. I know that when the eggs are done, he'll slide them on top of the grits and mash it all together with a fork, occasionally adding ketchup.

"What happened to your hair?" he asked with feigned shock.

"I dyed it," I replied, swinging my bags onto the table with the others.

He nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Looks good, looks good."

The sound of a car crunching down our gravel driveway announced my grandparents' arrival.

"They're here!" Mom called from somewhere upstairs.

We began loading their trunk with luggage, an arduous task that required a touch of pure magic and much the same skill set as a good game of tetris. Cramming luggage into tight spaces was an art in my family. Watching my father grunt as he heaved Mom's fifty-pound pimp luggage into the trunk with Spartan strength, or Pappaw as he gingerly lowered the trunk lid after each addition to be sure it would still close, was akin to witnessing a tribal dance in an exotic land. Items were lifted, dropped, lifted again, and dropped at slightly different angles. The entire rear of the car bounced alarmingly under the stress. Mom oversaw the entire process, contributing the occasional panicked ejaculation: "Daddy, no, that's got our snack food in it! Be careful, James, you'll crush it all an' it'll just be crumbs!" Inevitably, a couple of our carryon bags wound up in the back floorboard, tucked under our feet, or in front of the back windshield, creating questionably safe driving conditions for Pappaw.

Mom and I gently crawled into the back seat with Meemaw, unsure where to sit amid all the helpful travel-sized items she'd collected.

"What have you done to your hair?" Meemaw exclaimed in sincere horror as soon as I lowered my head into the car. "All our pictures from out there are gonna be ruined!"

"No they won't," I said comfortingly.

"They will! You're gonna look back at those pictures one day an' all you'll be able to think is, 'Oh, God.'"

Dad plopped down in the front passenger seat, make the already-dropping car sag a bit more. And thus we began the hour-long drive to the Anniston train station.

Travel Lesson #3

brochure (n) – a piece of promotional literature in which a team of marketing specialists creates a fantasy land where the subject (in this case, a train) is not what it is in reality, but what the team of marketing specialists always dreamed it to be.

When we arrived at the Amtrak station, we noticed some discrepancies between our universe and the alternate universe of our brochures.

The station was charmingly derelict, with weathered paint and quaint iron bars on the windows. We unloaded our luggage from the car, similar to taking the thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle you just completed and smashing it against a wall. Our suitcases dropped with a thud on the pavement while Dad and Papaw debated whether they should leave us here. Across the street were tall, narrow houses that were likely contemporaneous with the station. A car crawled by with its windows open, blaring techno music.

Weighted down with duffel bags, backpacks, and purses, we wheeled our luggage around the corner. Seated along a cement curb by the tracks, luggage sprawled in piles along the sidewalk, were our fellow passengers, sheltered from the July sun by a rusty metal breezeway. Some of them cast appraising glances our way.

“You know what, Daddy,” Mom said, “I think we’ll be alright. There are other people here.”

“Well, alright, then,” he replied.

“Y’all be careful,” he and Dad echoed as they hugged us. I wanted to say something, perhaps thank them for driving us here, for the help they’d given us with this unexpectedly expensive trip, but somehow just standing there was unbearable, and I was overcome with an inexplicable stiffness through which I could barely return their hugs. Instead of watching them walk back to the car and drive away, I walk toward the curb with Mom and Meemaw without speaking. Now I wished I could say something adult and witty at this pivotal moment in our introduction to the other passengers, so that we’d make our entrance laughing and talking with the easygoing grace of the model passengers in the brochures. But instead, my grandmother was

first to speak.

“Haley, don’t let your little jacket get dirty when you sit down, now.”

“I know,” I answered in defeat.

While planning the trip, I had subconscious notions of what it would be like. Over the next few days, I would become conscious of them as they steadily failed to manifest. As I stared into the vacant, wooded lot across the tracks, surrounded by middle-aged travelers and one little girl who might have been ten, I realized one of my subconscious notions involved bonding with other people my age.

Meanwhile, Meemaw befriended everyone.

“That’s my granddaughter,” she said to a gray-haired couple she’d been talking to, gesturing toward me. I leaned back and waved. “She just graduated from high school, see, and this is her senior trip.”

The woman bent toward me and asked my least favorite question: “What are you majoring in?” This was an adult’s way of saying, “I really can’t relate to young people at all, so this conversation is going to be excruciating for both of us.”

“English,” I replied with a sweet smile, nodding the whole time. It was a nervous tic provoked by the question itself and the conversation that always followed. This woman opted for the most painful follow-up question of all.

“Ohhh! What grade are you going to teach?”

“Oh, I’m not going to teach,” I responded, my smile sweeter and my head-bob more uncontrollable.

The couple was shocked. “What are you going to do, then?”

I didn’t know the answer to that, but I had found one that satisfied everybody. “Oh, I want to go into publications. I like editing.”

“Ah! So, like, newspapers?”

“Probably books.”

My nod tapered off in the ensuing silence. Assured they couldn’t think of any more ways to relate to me, I returned to staring at the trees.

“She’s startin’ in the fall at the community college,” I heard Meemaw say to break the silence.

“Ahhh,” the couple replied in unison.

The train was late. The sun sank below the tree branches and the breezeway pillars cast slanted shadows on the pavement. People consulted their watches to keep track of just how late the train was now as opposed to five minutes ago. Down the sidewalk, three people got out of their car, nonplussed by the train’s absence—these were seasoned train travelers. One of them, a heavysset woman, wore a bright purple T-shirt over a flowy skirt, a striped sombrero hanging at her back over a profusion of long, black hair.

“Well get a load o’ her,” Meemaw muttered to Mom, who glanced at the newcomers but didn’t say anything.

The other two people looked like the woman’s parents. The three of them stood apart, cackling with each other. The sun had almost vanished when the father wandered over to the rest of us, pointing to a traffic light mounted near the tracks.

“See how the light’s green? When it turns red, the train’s about to be here,” he explained. It was the most interesting thing anyone had said all day. “A red light tells any other

trains passing through here that another train's about to be using this track.”

"Didja hear that?" Mom asked me.

"Yeah."

Now everyone watched the traffic light. The sky was streaked with dusky pinks when it turned yellow, and a few people cheered.

"It's almost here," Mom bubbled, her upper body bouncing. "Are you excited?"

"Mm hm." My stomach was churning, my heart fluttering, my mind racing to recall the exact location of all my possessions. Camera in the backpack. Books in the duffel bag. Water bottle in my purse. "Maybe we should get up now," I added, hoisting myself to my feet.

Everyone was standing by the time the light flashed red, gathering luggage that had been sprawled behind them all afternoon. Weighted down again with backpacks and shoulder bags, we huddled together when we heard the rush of the train approaching.

The train came out of nowhere, roaring by in a streak of silver, the roar of the horn tearing through the breezeway and shrinking into the distance. A hot gust blasted across my face and sent my bright red hair, frizzed out of its braids by now, floating pleasantly away from my neck and forehead. The train was endless. The middle of the train slid to a halt in front of us, changing from a gleaming blur to a series of banged-up cars with big, hazy windows and a blue stripe along the side.

I stood close to the sombrero woman, who frantically hugged her parents and turned toward me, grinning.

"Can I take your picture?" I asked on an impulse.

"Sure!" She pulled on the sombrero, flung her arms wide, and threw her head back dramatically.

"I'm Mandy," she said after the flash.

"I'm Haley."

"Where are you headed?"

"Charlottesville. Then Glacier National Park."

"We'll be in the same car, then! I'm going to Lynchburg."

Narrow metal doors flipped open in front of us. A tired attendant stood by each, calling out the name of a different stop, divvying us up by destination. Mom, Meemaw, Mandy, and I headed toward a man yelling, "Lynchburg, Charlottesville!"

The door was high off the ground. Meemaw shoved her luggage doggedly up the steep steps into the car; Mom, weighing in at 112 pounds, was determined that she, too, could hoist her 50-pound luggage up the stairs. In the end, the attendant had to help her. I managed to pull mine up behind me, though my duffel bag, hanging horizontally across my back, knocked roughly against the door.

The attendants tossed our suitcases into a pile at the back of the compartment, then hurried us up a narrow aisle to a cluster of empty seats upholstered with coarse carpet. An attendant scribbled Charlottesville on slips of paper that she stuck in the luggage racks above us. Mom and Meemaw took two seats across the aisle from me, struggling to arrange all their bags as people bumped past them.

I waved to Mandy when I saw her step into the compartment and look around, beaming. She plopped into the seat next to me, patting her thighs.

"It's so nice to be on a train again!" she said.

"This is my first time."

"Oh! You're going to love it!"

I heard the click of the doors closing. A stagnant bustle filled the car as attendants rushed through the doors at either end and passengers haggled over seats or rearranged their bags.

"This is it," Mandy pronounced knowingly when a faint hiss issued from somewhere outside, turning into a familiar chug-chug-chug-chug. Out the window, the trees were moving away from us. In the dim purple-gray dusk, we had started to move.

Travel Lesson #4

train (n) – a mode of transportation consisting of dozens of metal boxes, linked together at the ends, which move along a set of metal rails and, for the most part, never fall off.

Our train rocked steadily through northwest Georgia into South Carolina. Knees against my chest, I leaned against the scratchy carpet on the wall as kudzu-covered trees and strings of powerlines glided past. Mom and Meemaw spoke in low voices in the seat across the aisle. Behind us, twenty people in blue T-shirts occupied the last block of seats. Most of them were teenagers close to my age, with a few adult women who might have been their mothers. For the most part, the women chatted while the teenage girls swapped seats, flirting with their male counterparts. As the overhead lights switched on for the night, however, someone started singing a gospel song. Within a few minutes, all the people in the group had huddled together, sitting sideways and backward in their seats to form a circle. The first song segued into another song, and that into yet another, all of them seemingly about Jesus and heaven and glory and how happy they were about all those things. I finally noticed their T-shirts had crosses on them. Mandy gasped with excitement.

“Awww, look at that! I feel like singing now.” She disappeared into the circle of blue T-shirts, the border encompassing the seats directly behind ours. Before long a woman in a blue T-shirt tapped my shoulder.

“Would you like to join us?” she asked kindly, craning uncomfortably to talk to me. She was sitting with her knees in the seat, elbows propped on the headrest.

“Oh! No, that’s okay,” I laughed nervously. Without another word, she put her back to me again. I donned my headphones to prevent further conversation.

At nine o’clock the lights went out for the night and Mandy returned for an elaborate bedtime ritual that involved a Breathe-Rite strip and a pointy white nightcap. I exhumed a tiny pillow and an afghan that had been stuffed in my duffel bag, raised my footrest after a brief struggle, and turned toward the window.

“You don’t think she’ll get too cold over there with just that blanket, do you?” my

grandmother whispered audibly to my mother.

“She’s fine, Mother,” was Mom's equally audible response.

I closed my eyes as a mere formality, entertaining little hope of actually falling asleep in an upright position. Theoretically speaking, the coach seats on a train will recline, but only when the passenger behind you has no knees.

Sleep proved a minor concern, however, because the church group had only been warming up. Even at ten o’clock, they made it clear no one would be falling asleep on Jesus’s watch. The loudest in the flock were two women behind Mom and Meemaw. I had begun a prayer of my own for one of the attendants to tell them to shut up when, to my horror, a familiar voice took up the task.

“Be quiet!” Mom’s drowsy, slurred reprimand rang throughout the car. “People’re tryin’da sleep!” I turned toward the action, as did everyone who was still awake—which was basically everyone. Mom was twisted groggily in her seat, staring down the two women, who gazed at her blankly.

Seeming satisfied, Mom slumped onto her travel pillow, destined not to remember her heroic outburst the next morning.

I yanked the afghan over my head. Mandy continued to snore softly.

The church group was obligated by honor to continue singing for at least another half hour, though in admittedly more hushed tones. At ten thirty, however, the party modestly disbursed, and all was quiet--except, of course, for the gut-wrenching sound of metal creaking against metal when the train crossed a rough patch of track. Mandy contorted into a variety of poses throughout the night—curled into the fetal position, or lying in the floor with her torso draped desperately over the seat. The first faint hint of light was a welcome excuse to abandon the tiring charade of sleep and get some real rest by staring vacantly out the window.

Travel Lesson #5

socializing (v) – the act of befriending one’s fellow travelers. This coping strategy tends to fail horribly among people who don’t happen to share the same social, religious, and political values, and is highly impractical in most real-life situations.

Generally, on a train or other enclosed space, it’s wise to avoid socializing to prevent your fellow passengers from reverting to a tribal state and engaging in outright warfare. Warning signs of impending disaster may include odd, clannish behavior and the forming of sudden alliances.

The musical church group’s antics were nearly forgotten by the time Mandy awoke at seven o’clock the next morning with an abrupt “Where am I?” She disappeared into the bathroom to remove her nightcap and Breathe-Rite strip. Mom’s eyes were puffy when she offered me a granola bar, which I nibbled slowly.

Meanwhile, the church group was already returning from breakfast in the dining car, and they were amassing followers.

“I’d like y’all to meet Brother Jones!” their leader announced exuberantly as he entered the car, followed by a rather bug-eyed man who nodded to the group before taking a seat among them.

We were nearing Lynchburg, Virginia, Mandy’s destination, which also meant we were getting closer to Charlottesville, where we would have a layover.

When we hissed to a stop at the Lynchburg station, Mandy scrawled her e-mail address on the back of a blank luggage tag in loopy handwriting before disembarking. We watched the station recede into the distance, wishing we’d been the ones to set foot on solid ground.

“Don’t you know her parents were glad to get rid of her,” Meemaw muttered loudly as the station disappeared.

A man with a shiny, clean-shaven head took Mandy’s place. An attendant scribbled his destination, Philadelphia, onto a slip of paper and stuck it in our overhead compartment. Too tired to make conversation with him, I heaved a thick paperback anthology from my duffel bag and busied myself with American Literature homework.

I was in the middle of a short story about a man who tries to swim across every backyard swimming pool in his county when Brother Jones, the holy mercenary from the dining car, offered to lead the church group in prayer.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them form a circle in the middle of the compartment and link hands; a pair of joined hands hovered awkwardly above my head. Brother Jones lead some standard prayers while everyone closed their eyes or lowered their gaze. Meanwhile, my protagonist was undergoing a dramatic revelation about the meaninglessness of his life, so I didn't notice any subtle changes in the subject, syntax, or diction of the prayer. But I looked up abruptly when it finally registered that Brother Jones had started shouting, "The devil is on this train! The de-vil is awn this tuh-rain!"

The circle was convulsing with emotion, its members getting a thrill from the news. The only person to really comprehend the gravity of the situation was a little boy, who burst into horrified sobs.

"You stop that, now!" his mother, who was in the prayer circle, reprimanded him under her breath. Brother Jones took no notice, but continued trumpeting the news about the devil.

While I gazed in bewilderment at the revival that had sprung to life around me, I came to the slow, painful realization that the row of seats containing Mom, Meemaw, myself, and the poor, unsuspecting man from Philadelphia was conveniently positioned at the very heart of the prayer circle. Mom realized this too. Sitting stiffly straight in her seat, she fixed Brother Jones with a cold, unblinking stare. Meemaw, who had grown up in the Ozarks of Missouri and had childhood memories of snake handlers, sat askance in her aisle seat, arms folded and head cocked to one side, as though she were in danger of bursting into laughter.

"The devil is on this train, I say!" Brother Jones announced for the sixth or seventh time.

"An' the devil's about to bite your head off," Mom said under her breath to Meemaw. The women holding hands near them averted their eyes. The bald man cast a sidelong glance at me, and I noticed he had a single diamond earring in one ear. A brief, conspiratorial smile flashed between us.

Meanwhile, something had broken the power of the circle--maybe Mom's sarcasm, maybe sheer boredom. Who knows. Some of the people were trying to discreetly duck out and gather their luggage, since we were approaching our stop. When the train jolted to a halt, Brother Jones was lost in a stampede of passengers eager to escape.

Mom cast venomous glances toward everyone wearing a blue T-shirt as we approached the exit. But when we started down the steps, several men from the group rushed toward us.

"Let us help you with those," they said, hoisting our luggage onto their shoulders and setting it neatly on the pavement before we could protest.

"Thank you," we replied rigidly. Whether they acted out of remorse or a bloated sense of selflessness, I never determined. As we pulled our bags across the pavement toward the Charlottesville station, they were still milling around by the tracks, waiting to load their church van.

"Well. Wasn't that something," my grandmother said.

A blast of cold air gushed across us when we swung open the glass doors to the Charlottesville station. The walls were bright white, with polished gray tiles across the floor. I threw my bags down and entered the restroom in a trance, where Mom and I spent ten minutes scrubbing our armpits with wet washrags, re-applying deodorant, and changing our underwear. I re-braided my

hair while she brushed her teeth with the travel-sized toothbrush.

Our layover was scheduled to last all afternoon, so we checked our bags at the front counter with a clerk, who passed them over a metal scale. Mine weighed in at twenty-eight pounds. Meemaw's scraped by the weight limit at forty-eight pounds. When Mom's hit the scale, the clerk paused. The digital meter flashed 51.

"It's really not that heavy!" Mom pleaded as the clerk stared at her.

Finally, he took the luggage with a sigh. "As long as you can carry it, ma'am."

Outside the station, I felt warmth radiating from the paved streets, but a steady, cool breeze blew as well.

"Wow, I love Virginia!" Mom pronounced after walking half a block.

Charlottesville housed the University of Virginia campus, and we walked over a huge V inlaid in the brick sidewalk. The streets teemed with athletic-looking students. Charlottesville was serious about catering to this demographic: we passed a Mellow Mushroom, an ice cream parlor, and a sub shop, all charming to Mom and Meemaw. We chose the sub shop.

The worst thing about traveling from a state like Alabama, associated with things like racism and trailer parks, is that you know someone in your family really does embody at least one of those stereotypes you've tried so hard to shirk off.

A cluster of kids about my age, presumably all students at the UV campus, were milling around behind the counter of the sub shop when we walked in, the only customers. We ordered and chose a booth in an adjoining room.

No sooner had we sat down than my worst fears were realized.

"Did you see all the black people workin' here?" Meemaw exclaimed in awe, casting a glance toward the counter.

Mom elbowed her under the table. "Mother!"

"What? I'm just makin' a remark."

"I don't see why it matters," I put in.

"Oh, well, you know what I mean," she answered with a wave of her hand.

"No, I don't."

"Well. Anyway." She folded her arms and fixed an obstinate gaze on the wall. A girl from the front counter brought our food, and Mom filled the rest of the meal with stiff small talk. Just as afternoon waned into evening, we returned to the station with an unexpected sense of relief.

Travel Lesson #6

schedule (n) – an abstract concept in which some travelers and transportation services believe, and some don't. Typically, the term refers to the notion that if someone says something is going to happen at a certain time, it will.

We returned to the Charlottesville station thinking we'd be just in time to gather our luggage and board the train. However, this train, like The Crescent, was late. We sat in the station, now crowded with other passengers, bags, and voices, until after dark. The Cardinal, which would take us to Chicago, Illinois, roared to a halt on the tracks sometime well after nine o'clock. When we finally get on board, we immediately pulled out our pillows and blankets, exhausted. A woman behind Mom and I talked on her cell phone with her husband until the wee hours of the morning. "Well, we're passing through another town now," she said every few minutes. But even she paled in comparison to the church group.

I woke up in the gray half-light of morning in a rural part of Indiana. Mom had moved to the seat by Meemaw, leaving the one next to me empty. I stretched across it and slept lying down for the first time in two days.

When I sat up in my seat again, we had passed from Indiana into Illinois. A silo gleamed silver against the sky every few miles. White houses were set far back in the fields, clustered around a church steeple or. I imagined the people in the neighborhoods, living in the bungalows with deep porches and muddy lawns, driving past fields of green corn to go to the grocery store. We passed a field with four men at its center, working, visible only from the waist up. They waved at the train, and I waved back, not sure if they could see me.

At noon, Mom sat down next to me with sandwiches from the snack car. Meemaw had offered to sit alone across the aisle, and as we ate our sandwiches, we began to suspect she had ulterior motives in such generosity. She spent more time talking to strangers on the train than to either of us. She had hardly said a word to me at all since we got on The Crescent.

"Well, I figure I'll just embarrass ya," she said when I pointed out this piece of vacation trivia.

Instead, she preferred to have the same conversation with everyone who sat within earshot of her.

“Do you know the band Alabama?” was the opening question

“No,” was always the response.

“Well, we’re from Fort Payne, Alabama, and that’s where all those band members grew up, see. And most of ‘em still live there,” Meemaw would blaze ahead proudly.

Mom tried to counteract the conversation by leaning over and saying, “Actually, we live in Mentone, Alabama.”

But her intervention only prolonged the conversation, since my grandmother then felt obligated to explain that while Mom and I lived in Mentone, a little town just outside Fort Payne, and by the way this was her granddaughter who just graduated high school and this was her senior trip, she and her husband did live in Fort Payne. I was certain Meemaw didn’t understand our lack of eagerness—underfed and sleep-deprived for about forty-eight hours now—to make small talk with all the new people who boarded at each stop.

We came down at slant into Chicago on what looked like the worst side of the city, inching along on some rusty tracks suspended high above rows of squat houses with peeled paint and sunken roofs. A few graffiti-covered boxcars had been abandoned along unused tracks. The scenery changed near the station, rundown houses becoming businesses and finally even polished high-rise buildings. We dipped underneath the station, stopping in a basement loading zone. I caught a glimpse of an arched brick bridge, a few taxis, a guy on a bike speeding through an intersection; my only look at Chicago.

Paved sidewalks ran alongside endless sets of train tracks underneath the station, lit by yellowish industrial lights. We disembarked and immediately inhaled pure fumes. Meemaw walked so fast that the wheels of her luggage kept catching in the uneven pavement. Everything about Chicago made her nervous. Our only objective was to get inside, have our bags weighed, find our terminal, permanently fix ourselves to some seats there, and wait for our last train.

The Empire Builder was the first of our trains to be ready in the general ballpark of the time printed on our tickets. The Chicago train station was like an airport, with winding hallways and overhead signs denoting each boarding zone. We ate fast food in the tiled food court, where Mom and Meemaw mispronounced “panini,” and slumped into three unsupportive chairs in the terminal for our train, afraid we’d get lost just by standing up. A cacophony of voices echoed around us; there weren’t enough seats for all the passengers, and some of them sat on the floor or stood looming over the rest of us, having loud conversations. After an hour, the first passengers were called over an intercom to board the train according to their destinations.

The terminal was sparsely populated by the time Glacier National Park, Montana rang across the white tile. We rolled our luggage to the end of a long line of passengers milling around a set of double doors. A lanky kid in black, the first person my age I’d seen since we left, dawdled behind us. He glanced up from examining his shoes, and I looked away. Beside the doors, a stout security guard ripped a perforated edge off our tickets, and we crossed the threshold into the orange-lit loading zone.

I inhaled a lungful of fumes as I paused in front of the Empire Builder for the first time. A double-decker train with an untarnished green-and-silver exterior, it stretched down the sidewalk and out of sight, looming toward the high concrete ceiling: the train my grandfather rode to Washington over fifty years ago.

The lanky boy in black caught up to us. I could feel him standing behind me, waiting to be told where to board.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

“Glacier,” I replied, surprised to talk to someone my age.

He raised his eyebrows. “Nice.”

“So where are you going?”

“Seattle, man.”

“Cool,” I nodded.

“Yeah.” He grinned. We stood there until an attendant yelled, “Seattle, Washington!” down the sidewalk.

“Well, uh, maybe I’ll run into you again,” he said, and he walked to the front of the train, stooping under his shoulder bag. Yet I didn’t intend to track him down, and I wondered if he intended to track me down, even as he said that.

“Glacier, Montana!” an attendant yelled from a car next to us. I was relieved to hear someone announce our final destination, to hear “Montana” and walk toward the narrow door, waiting as Mom and Meemaw hobbled up and swung their bags over the threshold before climbing in. But the image of that lanky kid, riding alone to Seattle, was still with me. I thought about a book I’d read the year before, about the original settlers of Puget Sound, about towering, silent trees and placid water. My grandfather had told me about Washington, too—how he looked out the window early one morning, on this very train, and saw a mountain lion poised on a rock at the edge of the misty Washington woods, calm, watching. Our trip dwarfed before me, becoming only the first of many places I would go, I would have to go, before I could be satisfied.

On the bottom floor, we stacked our luggage across a set of metal shelves before climbing a narrow, purple-carpeted staircase to the top, our duffel bags knocking against our backs.

The passenger car’s interior was similar to the others we’d ridden in, except cleaner, empty, and silent—Chicago was the beginning of the Empire Builder’s route, so we were the first to board. Compared to those overcrowded trains, the Empire Builder was still almost empty when the engines hissed to life. Mom and I shared a seat while Meemaw sat with a new stranger she could plumb for conversation.

Chicago became a blur, as did the remainder of Illinois. Mom fell asleep, her chin wrinkled against the collar of her shirt, but I fastened my gaze to the window. We skirted across lower Wisconsin, a landscape of farmland and wide ponds, fenced pastures and old plank houses with the occasional kiddie pool in the front yard. In Minnesota the sun set over wide lakes and tree-covered peninsulas, casting streaks of orange across the water underneath a pink sky.

That night, I slept until two in the morning, when I was jostled awake to see the lights of Minneapolis and St. Paul looming ahead. Without moving, I watched the edge of Minneapolis approach and then recede into the distance. After the Twin Cities the terrain became prairie, endless flat miles without curves, tunnels, or towns to stop in. We raced across the country in the dark, the engine chugging harder and harder.

“We’re making up for lost time,” conjectured Mom. I hadn’t noticed she was awake.

“We must be getting close to North Dakota,” I said. We both knew North Dakota was the last state before Montana. It would take a day to cross, but then we’d be there.

We sped out of Minnesota onto the Great Plains, and I fell asleep again.