

TRAINS

I hear a train in the distance. The blaring horn of the locomotive lures me. In my dreams I'm on that train, traveling to anywhere. I don't really need a particular destination, I just want to ride. I love the feel of the wheels rumbling. The clackety-clack of the cars at their joining points excites me. I enjoy watching the scenery as we ride from one place to another. Even in the dead of night, I'm still having fun. My imagination runs free as the rhythm of the ride lulls me into a state of total relaxation. I'm in another world altogether. There, the inexorable passing of time fades into the recesses of changing venues.

I'm in North Carolina, riding the tourist train that travels between Charlotte and Raleigh. We pass through old, moss covered woodland whose roots are bathed by a hidden stream. Sunlight cuts through, brilliantly illuminating a tableau no artist could recreate. We ride through small towns divided by train tracks. Who lives in these ramshackle houses so close to the railroad? Who are these people, going about their daily business, oblivious to this noisy agglomeration of colored steel and safety glass? I feel carefree and detached from them. I'm on this ride for the fun of it.

I love to watch trains go by, especially passenger trains. I always wish I was on board. Where, I wonder, is this train headed? *"Please stop and let me come aboard. I want to ride, too,"* I plead silently. *"I want to watch the world fly by from the safety and comfort of my reclining chair. I want to get lost in the changing scenes. I just want to ride..."*

I once worked in a building near some railroad tracks. Trains passed by throughout the day, offering me a respite. I would eagerly watch out my window to see what was coming: a passenger or a freight train? I could forget about the chaos that engulfed our workplace while I watched the train...For a few minutes I could drift off with it, and imagine myself in another place. Those passing trains were always a welcome diversion, my momentary salvation.

Freight trains are a turn off. They remind me of difficult days, long hours, blemishes and incompleteness. They can be such an inconvenience, and they're ugly, too. Sometimes they seem to go on forever. The only fun parts of freight trains are the engine and caboose. Sometimes the engineer will wave; he seems so friendly in his bib overalls with a bright red kerchief tied around his neck. *"What's your name?"* I wonder. *"Where are you going? Are freight trains more fun than passenger trains?"* Freight trains: they're like storm clouds gathering on the horizon, blocking the sun, and chilling the earth. They represent unrelieved boredom, snaking slowly around the bend, endlessly tying up traffic.

I'm on the Coast Starlight now. It's a sleek, modern train that runs from Seattle, Washington to Los Angeles, California, the fabled city of angels. I board at 6:00am in Sacramento. This is so exciting. I haven't ridden a train here at home in a long, long time. This train is so different from the ones I've traveled on in the south, the East Coast, England and Europe. As we ride through the open countryside of central and northern California, memories of my cherished childhood and a previous life fill my head. We roll

through towns with familiar names, Antioch, Pittsburg, Vallejo, Martinez, Emeryville, Oakland...Wow! This is so great. Sometimes I can see freeways. There's the bay. We chug along through the East Bay Area, south to San Jose, Salinas, Paso Robles...It all looks good to me. I'm home and feelin' the vibe. Spirit beckons, whispering in my ear, "*You belong here. Come back; we're waiting.*" I'm on the train, kickin' back, chillin', feelin' fine. I'm home and the ride is righteous. I love it!!!! I know where I am and it feels so good to be here. I sit in the observation car and look out over a landscape that is very familiar, I think, dream, read a bit and nod off occasionally. This is so great. I feel giddy with anticipation. I don't want it to end.

At breakfast I'm seated with people I've never met before. Four of us share a table. We're all enjoying our collective train ride. There are no barriers. Communication is free and easy. We're all traveling to different destinations and we each *chose* to go by train. At lunch I meet more new people. We engage in casual conversation, chatting and eating. The food is pretty good, luckily, since it's so expensive. But what the heck? The scenery changes with each bite. Can you really beat that?

I'm back at work now...my vacation is over. The train ride has ended. The beauty and magic of my roundtrip train trip is but a fond memory now— however, in the distance I hear another one; another train. The blaring horn of the locomotive lures me. I could easily get up from here and leave this place. I want to climb on board that train and ride...anywhere...it really doesn't matter. I just want to ride. *I hear a train in the distance and I just want to ride...*