

LET ME REMIND YOU
THAT THIS IS MEMOIR
NO FICTION.

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Gary Gladstone ©2007

(Dutchess+SLC+HVWC, AOTL Event 11/16) (9¹⁰ mins, 1422 words) (7/6/16
AoTL, replace finished story with this ver.)

11/10/16 3:36 PM Latest Finished Edit (READING copy) s

Rose On The Denver Bus

It's 1951 and in three days I will be sixteen. Today is my third day in a sweltering window seat on this old silver and cream Trailways bus. My parents can't afford the airplane so I'm a cross-country bus passenger for four days on my way from New York to Denver to visit my grandfather. The countryside whizzes past my slide-open window. The Midwest crop and dirt fields flow by like fast river currents. Fence posts stutter past. I try to count them but they fly along too rapidly. The distant hills follow more leisurely.

In ten years someone will invent automotive air conditioning. Now, the steamy-hot thick July air billows into the open windows. It smells of young green corn, hot tar and exhaust fumes. I'm trying to sleep in my clothes but my belt, shoelaces, elastic rimmed under-shorts and stiff blue jeans cinch and tug at my body. My fellow passengers are all suffering on the clammy bus seats made of burlap-textured plastic. Everyone is sweating. The craggy-faced self-proclaimed out-of-work movie extra, who sang western songs to us straight throughout the last two nights, is snoring under a crunched up flat-topped cowboy hat. All the passengers who were singing last night like family are now disconnected and in their own private worlds. Two sailors in white uniforms have been practicing rolling cigarettes for hours.

Across the aisle a large woman and her teenage daughter wearing matching pale green floral print dresses are leaning against each other. They smell of an aggressive perfume. I think it may be Evening In Paris or more probably a dime store version, Evening In Nebraska. It makes my eyes tear, but at least seeing how long I can hold my breath is something to do. I think the daughter might be pretty but she's blocked from my staring by her ample mom.

This trip, which started out as my first solo long-distance adventure, has mellowed into a boring endless series of rest stops, short naps and passenger pickups. Sometimes the passenger stops are at nothing more than a lonely bench at a crossroad between cornfields.

I am constantly on guard when we stop to pick up new people. I'm afraid of strangers who might steal my prized metal slide-top cigarette case while I'm sleeping.

It's past midnight. The hissing of the bus's brakes wakes me from a d deep sleep. It's pitch black and raining. My window is fogged from body steam. We've stopped for a passenger exchange. Dark hulking shadows of boarding passengers are stamping their feet and shaking umbrellas as they tramp up the aisle. I move over to the aisle seat in my row in an effort to hide the vacant seat next to me because I want privacy. Everyone finds seats. Mercifully, the empty seat next to me remains unoccupied. Just as the bus driver reaches for the long lever to close the door, a young girl leaps aboard. She walks up the aisle wearing a blue gingham pinafore.

She has no umbrella and no luggage and she's dripping wet. She's perhaps fifteen, slim and jaunty. Her crisp and purposeful movement reminds me of the experienced commuters back home on the train I ride occasionally into Manhattan. She's astonishingly beautiful. Her long, shoulder length sandy blonde hair is tied in pigtails with wide pastel yellow ribbons. Raindrops trickle down her forehead and across the pink-flushed centers of her pale cheeks. She marches with authority directly to my row of seats and, with a politely shy grin, points to the empty seat next to me by the window. Her eyebrows rise above her sapphire blue eyes in a questioning gesture that asks about the seat's availability. I'm too shy to speak and nod affirmatively. My heart literally skips a beat. I'm thrilled and think, "My god, she's going to sit next to *me!*"

She slides in front of my knees and plops abruptly into the seat and I feel a puff of her wet, rain-moist warmth on my right arm. She wriggles to uncrumple her dress and smooths out the wrinkles in her lap with outward stroking motions. The faint aroma of rose-scented bath soap floats across my face. She raises her chin, rolls her head off towards the window resting it against the headrest and closes her eyes. She falls asleep. There is a very slight upturn to the corner of her mouth, the hint of a smile. "That was nice," I think to myself. "I won't get to talk with her but I'm glad she sat next to me."

As the bus rumbles along, the windows are closed for quiet and the air inside is thick and muggy. I steal a glance at her. She's farm-girl pretty with no make-up and smells like moist-sweet roses. It's hot in the bus. I fall back to sleep.

An hour later, I wake from the weight of her head on my shoulder. She's asleep and her head rocks gently back and forth from the bus's motion. The rain has stopped and a half moon casts the only light in the dark interior of the bus. I don't know what to do. I don't want to wake her. I am enjoying this accidental attention. I see the tightly pulled strands of hair on her head as it starts to roll off my shoulder and against my stomach. She's fast asleep and tilted across my lap almost 90 degrees. I am electrified. I want to put my arm around this lovely girl but I don't know her. How can I do that? I shift slightly so she is not firmly against my shirt pocket where the cigarette case would press into her forehead. She wakes, lifting her head to briefly look at me before closing her eyes again and, with that same partial smile, rises a little and places her cheek against mine. I am the luckiest guy on earth. I move my face inches away to offer her a recovery from a possibly inadvertent overture. She presses closer. What do I do? The only time I was ever this close to a pretty teenage girl was during a game of spin-the-bottle when I went into the hall closet to claim my kiss from Barbara Ferguson. I cashed in my reward by accidentally, in the dark, smooching her entire nose. This was very different. The sleeping farm girl raises her chin and softly kisses me on my cheek. I put my arm around her shoulder and she snuggles closer and kisses me gently on the mouth.

The night tilts and swirls us into a dizzying indigo ecstasy as we kiss and hug and stroke each other. I am barely conscious. I smell the sweetness of her hair and the rose soap mixed with the damp sweat on her neck. She takes my hand and orchestrates a half hour of passionate twisting and touching.

We are both stroking and moaning and giggling. And then, it's over, I open the window and we rumble along in the darkness. We're silent as the night air evaporates the sweat from our grinning faces.

My heartbeat slows and my breathing returns to normal. The bus slows down and pulls off the road onto the moonlit gravel shoulder. We are next to a farm field and off in the distance there's a farmhouse with one light on. My pretty girl in the blue gingham dress pops up from the seat, twists and smooths to straighten the pinafore dress, squeezes my hand and silently bolts for the front of the bus. The door opens and I see her jump down into the dark blue night. On the ground I can see her shadowy figure skip towards a tall old man wearing bib overalls. As they hug each other, I hear the word "Dad" in her muffled greeting and the two start walking towards the farmhouse.

The bus lurches back onto the local road tearing me away from the farm girl with sapphire blue eyes wearing a wet gingham dress, I don't know her name. We never spoke a word to each other. After all these years, I can still see the strands of hair on the nape of her neck, and smell the sublime bouquet of her rose-scented soap.

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