

The Christmas Rocket

MARK MALMKAR



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THE CHRISTMAS TRAIN

Ellen finally pushed her way to the ticket window. “I’d like a ticket to Denver, please.” She reached into her handbag. The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad Station was a mass of humanity on Christmas Eve, 1943: male humanity, to be precise, uniformed, military, male humanity. It seemed to Ellen that every soldier not at the front was in Chicago trying to catch a train home for Christmas.

“Military or civilian?” the clerk asked routinely. Before the war they always asked, “First class or coach?”

“Dependant,” she replied quickly, trying to give her voice an air of importance. “My husband’s in the navy.” Unconsciously she turned over her hand so the agent could see her new wedding band.

“Almost every space is taken, Ma’am,” he went on blandly. He consulted a sheaf of papers. “Train #21 still has a few seats. Departs 6:45.”

“I’ll take it.” She pushed her money forward.

Coupler knuckles slammed into one another the full length of the train as the switch engine poked its nose into the last coach. Steam hissed from around the black, grimy locomotive, sending a gray fog towards the conductor standing on the platform alongside the track. A brakeman jumped forward, jerked on the lever that uncoupled the coaches, then scampered up the steps into the vestibule.

The conductor penciled something into his notebook. “Car #605, bad order, faulty brakes, not replaced.” He pocketed the notebook and trudged down the asphalt platform towards the depot. The bad order car might not have serious defects but he couldn’t take a chance with it in the train.

The switch engine chugged, its valve gear clanking into motion, drive rods straining back against the crankpins on the wheels. Effortlessly the two rear coaches rolled and pitched through the track switches behind them where the defective car would be returned to the nearly empty coach yard for repairs. The other coach, #676, an old, obsolete wooden one, would again be tacked onto the rear of the train.

The conductor trudged alongside the dull green steel coaches that made up the bulk of train #21. Actually it was the second section of train #21, and it would follow the first section by a few minutes. In peacetime it was known as the Pacific Limited, but now the string of seven overworked, heavyweight coaches did not deserve such a pretentious name.

"The train's two hours late anyway," the conductor grumbled to himself. Almost every coach in the coach yard was leaving Chicago on a train today; meaning every crew had been called up. Trainmen who had hopes of spending the holiday with their family could forget it. Coaches were in short supply today. Too bad it was his train that got stuck with that old wooden coach the war department pulled off some siding somewhere.

Ellen dozed on the hard benches in the waiting room out of boredom. Her train had already been delayed over two hours. The public address system periodically made its monotone announcements, droning on about the cities the trains connected. After a short time the speakers blared again.

"Train #21. Train #21 is now boarding military personnel only. Pullman fares board on track 8: coach class board on track 13, for Clinton, Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, Council Bluffs, Omaha, Denver, Cheyenne, Ogden and points west."

Finally! She picked up her handbag and solitary suitcase and walked toward the gate area. She chose to carry her luggage, not trusting the baggage car to arrive in Denver the same day, or at all.

Lines formed quickly at the gates, then turned into mobs of sailors and soldiers, but then the mobs soon stood still. What was that Robert said about the military, "Hurry up and wait?"

The trainmen were announcing over and over again, "Pullman passengers will board on track 8, coach passengers, track 13." Then there was a commotion at the gate and people were straining to see what was happening.

“But I am a military wife,” a young lady raised her voice from up ahead, “my Ernie is a soldier!”

“Is he with you Ma’am?” the trainman asked.

“No. He’s in Europe.”

“I’m sorry Ma’am. The train is full. The space on this train is reserved for military personnel only. And their wives who are *with* them.”

Ellen’s fist shot up to her mouth. Oh, no! She bit into a knuckle. She too, was not *with* her husband.

“But I’ve got a ticket!” the lady whined.

“There will be another train tomorrow,” the trainman replied, “or you may cash your ticket in.”

“Why did they sell me a ticket then?” the young lady asked icily.

“Unforeseen circumstances, Ma’am,” the conductor politely broke in. “We’re short of coaches and a lot of people want to get home. But the troops have priority, you know.”

“Now how am I going to get home?” The young lady stomped off towards the waiting room, not waiting for the conductor to answer.

Ellen felt sick as she looked around her. What should she do? Robert was already out to sea. How long would she be stranded in Chicago? She’d already spent three days on various trains since leaving Robert in Florida. She found herself staring at a young sailor in a blue winter uniform and a heavy black coat. His little white hat almost mirrored his big grin.

She blushed. She felt she had to say something, after all. She didn’t know how long she’d been staring at him. “I don’t know what to do,” she said sheepishly. “I am a Navy wife, but my husband is at sea.”

“Many people want to ride. This is a bad time of year,” he answered with a smile.

“But I’ve already bought my ticket,” said Ellen, looking down at the colored piece of paper in her hand.

“Where are you going?”

“Denver.”

“I’m going to Denver, too,” he replied. “Actually, Steamboat Springs, but I have to catch another train in Denver.”

The line began moving through the gate again. Another woman strode angrily back to the waiting room. The conductor was being firm. Ellen looked at the sailor, then at the conductor, then back to the sailor.

She didn't know what to do. She was getting tense, and was unconsciously squeezing her ticket into a crumpled ball.

"Today you can be my wife," the sailor smiled. "Just for today. Just to get on the train. I'm Jim Shaw." He reached up and tipped his white hat. Ellen stared at him. How forward of him! He was just a boy. But he did have a nice smile. It would be dishonest. Would it be unfaithful of her? She wanted to get home so badly. She missed Robert and she missed her family.

She held out her arm for him to take and they stepped forward in line together. "I'm Ellen Dunigan, I mean, Ellen Hollis. I've only been married a week," she explained her nervous slip of the tongue. The sailor reached down and took her suitcase.

"I've only been married for two seconds," he joked.

They chit-chatted only briefly before the line moved and the conductor and trainman stood before them. Her heart thumped wildly. Did she look too old to be this boy's wife? Silently she chided herself; she was only twenty-one and did not look old.

She handed the trainman her ticket, slightly crumpled. The trainman looked at her, then handed back her ticket. "You keep this until you're on the train, Ma'am. I'll collect it there." He looked over at the sailor, "Is she with you?"

"She's my wife," the sailor named Jim Something-or-other answered.

"Track 13," the trainman said, and waved them on. Ellen flooded with relief.

Arm in arm they walked past the gate, down the concourse, and out through the passage to track #13. "Thank you," she said, releasing her arm from his grasp. It was then that she noticed he was carrying his belongings in a cardboard box wrapped with tape and string. It had turned dark out, which mildly surprised Ellen, who had arrived in Chicago on a B&O train that morning. The only light in the train shed above was random bulbs scattered around the posts and beams. They walked up the line of green coaches, breathing out clouds of frosty air.

"Which car are you assigned?" he asked.

She studied her ticket. "Car nine."

"I'm in car eight."

They looked up and down the train. "The locomotive is over there, so, it must be back that way," he said.

They followed the line of people moving down the platform towards the end of the train. As they neared the end of the train, Jim asked a trainman standing beside the portable steps at the end of a car, "Which car is this?"

"Number seven, sir."

Ellen looked toward the end of the train. There was only one car left. "But my ticket says car nine," she remarked, fear growing inside her.

"You'll have to find a seat in car eight, Ma'am," the trainman told her. "I'm sure you'll find a seat."

Jim assisted her as she climbed the steps and turned into the vestibule. Ahead of her was a wooden door with the faded numerals #676 in the center. She pushed on it and stepped into a crowded, dimly lit coach. Although the lighting was by gas and not very good, she could see that the red mohair seats were faded and worn, but had clean head linens. It was at least warm inside.

Ellen and Jim carefully stepped down the crowded aisle towards the end of the car, searching for two empty seats together, but stopped about two seats from the end. They looked around them, then at each other, seeing only a couple of singles.

"You all wanna sit here, Ma'am," a sailor stood up and motioned to the seat. His accent told her he was from the south. She looked down, weakly smiled at the other sailor in the window seat, then quickly seated herself.

She looked back at Jim. He handed her the suitcase, awkwardly placing it at her knees. "I'll find a seat forward," he said.

"Thank you, again," Ellen said, then warmly returned a smile. "It was noble of you."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Jim shifted his box under the other arm and walked away down the aisle.

"Miss, would you like the window seat?" the other sailor asked. "You could watch some of the sights."

"Would you mind?" She also knew she could lean against the window and sleep more comfortably.

“No, Miss, I don’t mind,” he said, standing up.

“It’s Mrs.” she informed him, “my husband is on a destroyer. The Garson.” She stood up, stepped around him and picked up the suitcase. Looking above her head, she found no luggage rack, just holes in the wood where one was previously attached.

“Phillip Elliot, Miss, from Columbus, Ohio. I’m on my way to Frisco.” He talked as he changed places with her and helped her wedge the suitcase between the seats at her feet. “I just finished basic training and I’ve been home on leave. I’ll be going to sea in a couple of days.”

He continued talking as Ellen settled down. She removed her coat and draped it over her skirt to keep warm. She was not in the mood for conversation so she did not make many comments. The train started moving slowly out of the station, gently rocking as it picked up speed. Outside there were few lights showing and no moon, so she couldn’t see much at nine o’clock at night. Soon the sailor took her cue that she’d rather not talk.

As the train picked up speed she felt a breeze wisping in from around the window. As the city slipped behind and the blackout darkness flashed past her window she felt the country winds hit the side of the car. She pulled her coat up over her cream colored sweater and tried to curl her legs up under her. That darned suitcase was going to be in the way. Maybe she should have checked it into the baggage car.

The rocking motion began to lullaby her, the seat cushions had warmed, and she was beginning to get comfortable. Suddenly, the rush of air from a passing train blasted the coach. The wood creaked, cold air hit her in the face, and black flecks of soot spun lazily through the air and coated her clothes. She buried her nose into her coat collar and squeezed her eyes shut. It was going to be a long night. She was slightly hungry, but glad that she’d had a sandwich at the station, because she had a hunch there was no dining car on this third-class clodhopper.

Jim knew for certain there was no dining car. He’d walked the full length of all eight cars searching for an empty seat. It was standing room only in each of the cars. Sailors and soldiers were standing in every nook and cranny they could find. No one dared to visit the head because he’d lose his seat. Jim stood for a while, leaned against the smoking room

SHORT STORIES

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The Christmas Rocket

is a collection of six short stories about passenger train travel. The stories are a mix of fiction and real-life recollections.

The settings range from a 1943 train during the Second World War through the Midwest during the 1960s to riding the amtrak in 2015.

The Lulu logo is a stylized, cursive script in a dark color, positioned in the bottom left corner of the cover.

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