

# Excerpt from *The Sleeping Car Porter* (a novel-in-progress)

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The last passenger aboard, Baxter clears his throat, his throat-clearing obliterated in the vast echo of the terminal and the locomotive's rumbles and hisses, the sleepy pigeon coos, the rats scavenging among the edges of the tracks, under the platforms. He ascends the vestibule steps, and directs passengers to their neatly folded beds like he is a policeman in traffic choreographing the bumbling, dangerous dance of motor vehicles, bicycles, humans, and horses. Baxter politely instructs an old couple that they did not book the Drawing Room, they are in Section 4 with the other pauperish well-to-do people who only paid for Sections, not the Drawing Room, nor the middling-well-to-do two Compartments. The couple straggles stolidly toward the opposite end of the car, flattening to the wall of the corridor as other passengers rush past them. They are poor well-to-do people. The poorest of the well-to-do people who ride this train. Her handbag alone is probably worth months of his wages and tips. Probably two hundred dollars. Like an unchivalrous bastard, the old man makes his old wife take the upper berth.

Charlie Choo Choo calls *All Aboard*, the *oooar* of *All Aboooard* drawn out until it sounds almost mournful. Baxter tucks away the step-box, and heaves the trap closed. The train jerks, then sighs. Baxter stands alone briefly in the steely bubble of the vestibule, swaying with the train as it rumbles out of the station.

He kicks the shiny metal wall. Hard.

He bends down to polish the toe of his shoe for a second with his thumb. Flourishes a rag out of his pocket to polish the scuff off the wall. He can feel a gag rising up into his throat, but he covers his mouth, closes his eyes until it passes.

He straightens his jacket, resets his cap on his head, then swings into the corridor. He changes from a blue uniform-coat into the white summer uniform-coat. He saunters past the ladies' washroom, past the cold, silent heater, and into the submarine tube of shelf after shelf of identical-tin-soldier passengers, while the train speeds and sparks over the rails in the dark.

The passengers continue to bustle themselves into the rows of smooth beds blooming from every wall and ceiling that he has prepared, muttering, exclaiming, the aisle of drapes shrouding the beds in the sections. They settle into their soft, mattressed shelves with their suitcases and boxes, their hats, their nightshirts and dressing gowns, their unsolicited opinions, and their bottomless pits of well-to-do and phony-well-to-do problems and needs. Their unpolished shoes begin washing up along the shores of the curtains, in the shoe-sized cupboards in the corridor. Passengers whisper and slide into sleep, rustling, already snoring and sleeptalking in their neat, curtained rows.

In eighty-eight hours and forty-five minutes they will land on the other side of the country. This run west as long as a Portuguese man-of-war tentacle.

He blends into the flocked wallpaper, he is just another draped blanket as he ambles down the hallway of drawn berth curtains gathering pairs of shoes, scrawling section numbers with a pencil on the soles which he isn't supposed to do, but. In the smoker he shines shoes. He isn't obliged to shine shoes, but he is expected to shine shoes. Shining shoes means bigger tips. Or just tips. Not shining shoes means being like Eugene. A free, free man with severely diminished prospects. He wrote Eugene a letter once, just to ask how he was managing after being fired. But Eugene never wrote him back.

He burrows into the mountain of still-warm shoes, rubbing, swiping and buffing, the repetition of shoe after shoe a sick, slick rhythm.

His bell rings. He springs up, wiping bootblack off his hands. Compartment 2. One of the middling well-to-do's wants another blanket.

– Why's it so cold? she asks.

*It ain't*, he wants to say, but instead he whispers that he'll turn on the heat. And then he just won't. It's August for the love of Pete!

He splats shoeshine paste on to the final pair of shoes. Brown creamy uppers, only slight wear in the right heel. Sometimes the wear on some shoe soles surprises him, the shoes of these opulent people and their varying soles. He swipes the shoeshine rag at his own feet, his toes glittering in the dim.

He knows he'll come close to cracking in half when he hits hour 48, probably around Moose Jaw when travelling west on this route. Between Regina and Winnipeg when travelling east, the gagging from lack of sleep will be harder to control, he'll be desperate to lie down but won't be able to lie down – otherwise he'll get demerits or fired for sleeping on the job. He's learned the trick of catching a tiny nap every time he blinks, his eyelids scratching. He knows he'll be blamed when passengers abscond with linens, towels, sheets, blankets. Even a pillow. He once saw a female passenger kidnap a matching pair of brown, maple-leafed china cups and saucers from the diner, tinkle them into her bag, but it was not his place to say. He whispered it to the conductor, who said to Baxter, – Tell me something new.

Baxter frowned. His feet were bursting the seams of his shoes.

– Don't bother, the conductor said. – Mrs. Merlin's the ambassador's wife. And supposedly she tail-tickled some king when she was young.

– But she's taken a towel too.

- Don't make it a problem. Here's a nickel.
- And a blanket. A marble ashtray.
- Jesus Christ, the conductor said, his blue eyes bulging. – Where's she got the room?

The conductor gazed out the window at the rockface speeding by, so close they could reach out and rip their hands along its jagged wall. – Doesn't matter, he said, and tugged his cap down further on his head. – What the hell matters anyway. Nothing.

The conductor scratched his jaw with the stub of his index finger. He was a man returned from the Great War.

Baxter wonders if the finger stub hurts.

The cost of the missing wool blanket will be deducted from Baxter's wage. Later, he swiftly stole back the blanket while Mrs. Merlin dined on tenderloin and baked tomato and her husband smoked Chesterfield cigarettes, thieving it out from where it peeped out of her bags under her berth.

His eyes learn not to function. What he sees and knows will not protect him.

What he doesn't see: Passengers, supposedly wealthier than Croesus like the ambassador's wife, pilfering like the youngest bastard sons of a family of chicken pluckers. He doesn't see married men slipping into the berths of women not their wives. He doesn't see unlucky flashes of women's knees and nipples, as they sail to the ladies' lavatory in front of him because he doesn't matter.

He *doesn't* matter.

He shifts and slides among the folds of the curtains, the shadows, just like a vampire or a beetle from Egypt. Yes.

He hasn't heard the whispered story of a rare railroad man – rare as a jellyfish with teeth – slipping into a lady's compartment. The only time one of the other porters gives Baxter the time of day is the darkest edge of a blue moon night when one might tell Baxter to watch his car while he gets up to high jinks, when that porter's in cahoots with a conductor. Baxter's stomach convulses for anyone caught with these lethal, bejeweled white women. He's heard sometimes these white women are undercover spotters.

*The rolling of the train makes women romantic*, Eugene once told him Men swinging by their broken necks from trees.

Back when all of them still spoke to him, joked with him like a little brother.

Baxter doesn't see sweat and semen stains on train linen, blood. When he's had to tend to a sick passenger, he doesn't see human manure smears or vomit. The destruction in and around the hopper that he has to clean up. He doesn't see drunkenness or decrepitude

or ineptitude although he mops it up, scrapes it, soaps it down. What happens on a train stays on a train.

He tips spittoons into the men's hopper until they are empty, and rinses out their remaining drool.

As he passes through the vestibule between his car and the next, he doesn't see the shiny pair of men's shoes flung like dead fish washed up on English Bay, sprawled on the top step. He steps around them so they won't taint him. No one will bother with or even notice those kinds of shoes. They belong to a porter who let the job squeeze his heart too hard.

He's picked up undergarments. Touching a passenger's forgotten unmentionables, discarded garters, stretched out musky stockings, once shocked him; now he only cares that the train is moving on time so he can drop his wedged in smile, collect some money crumbs, get off this train, and step back into a proper life. He hates having to describe the lost things in the lost article register. A forgotten boudoir cap. A pocketwatch – the time stopped at 12:17. More than once he's had to record a pair of frilled *bloomers*. Once he had to record a switch of human hair.

He blacks boots, soaps soles, polishes, he buffs, he polishes again.

He folds, he unfolds. He folds, he unfolds.

Once he rocked a shrieking baby, then let it suckle his knuckle, while its mother heaved her misfortune into a toilet, and the father in exasperation at the noise sequestered himself in the smoker behind curling wreaths of fiery tobacco. The baby was surprisingly heavy and dense even though it was no bigger than a plucked turkey, and it sucked and gummed at Baxter's knuckle, eyes drooping closed.

He's never heard a white woman swear so hard it gave him gooseflesh, never seen a man shove his wife down a passageway in the sleeper car because she wasn't moving fast enough. He didn't see her stumble onto a knee, did he? Or the blood from her nose clotting on the front of her dress because she banged her nose on a doorframe.

He doesn't see the particular curve of a male passenger's buttocks, a tempting Adam's Apple, shoulders protruding inside too-tight shirtsleeves. He does not look at crotches, no matter how tight the trousers. He's never wasted time daydreaming of Rudolph Valentino in the crumpled pages of the discarded copies of or he gathers up on every train, when he should have been thinking about stocking the upper berth in Section 3. Nor of that porter who took over the car once when on another run Baxter disembarked in Chicago, William Poindexter, reportedly mad enough to spit because of Baxter's fuzzy headedness. Poindexter plays the saxophone very well, and is a bid whist sore loser.

That one time last spring Baxter didn't see a ten dollar bill as the passenger in Compartment 4 – some kind of parliamentarian from Ottawa – casually extracted the bill from a pocket and handed it to him. Or the things Baxter did to earn it.

Passengers settled, in their berths, shoes polished and replaced, tips forward, heels back.

He sits at the end of the sleeping car, riding a hard wood stool, his face rigid as he wrenches himself backwards and forwards, trying not to succumb to sleep. The train rumbles over the tracks, shoots through the darkness. Sometimes moving so quickly he wonders if they manage to break the time barrier.

That would be mighty interesting. Yes it would.