

Idle Chatter

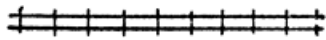
By Eric D. Goodman

Franklin still wore his Amtrak uniform, although he was officially off duty. He always wore it when he was on the train. He was never *really* off duty, because even when he was on break, he remained in view, on call, ready to assist the passengers, ready to make small talk. To everyone he met on the train, from the first punch of the ticket to the last farewell at the end of the line, he was *the conductor*. A mighty responsibility, but he'd been filling the shoes for decades. He knew how to make people comfortable with idle chatter. Being the conductor was more than just a job—it was who he was. That's the way it had been most of his life, and that's the way he liked it.

Now, after a long day of short talks, he sat in the lounge car—still available to anyone who wanted him—and looked into the darkness of the Indiana night as he drank from his canteen of water. It was black out, and he could barely see the shadowy trees waving in the distant wind. It had become quiet in the lounge car, but there were still people here: the young man who'd asked for a leaf of Amtrak stationery earlier in the day wrote hurriedly in a spiral notebook now; the guy with silver hair who looked like a preacher studied the notes to a speech; the gruff troublemaker toyed with his unlit

cigarette and drank bourbon now instead of coffee. They all had stories. Everyone had a story to tell. Someday he'd write a book about it.

Franklin looked away from the people and back into the darkness. He took a gulp of water. The sun would rise soon, and then they'd all be pulling into Chicago.



He'd encountered the poet earlier in the day, back around Ashland, Kentucky. The guy had entered the lounge car in a fury, had stepped right up to the conductor. "Excuse me," he'd said excitedly.

"What can I do for you?" Franklin had asked with his usual customer service smile.

"Do you have a piece of paper I could borrow? Or have?"

Franklin looked at the guy's spiral notebook, opened to a page of chicken scratchings in dull pencil that looked like they were ready to rub right off the page. "Did you run out?"

"No, I need to write a letter. Something nicer than a page ripped out of this old thing. Maybe a blank piece of copy paper, or stationery."

Franklin reached a finger up beneath his cap and scratched the side of

his head. "I think I can get you some Amtrak letterhead. Will a few sheets do?"

"That'd be great."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Colin."

"I'll be back in a jiffy, Colin." He returned with a dozen pieces of Amtrak stationery and handed them to the young man. "What's this really for, son?"

Colin smiled sheepishly. "It's a poem for someone."

The conductor grinned. "Love poem, is it?"

"Not exactly." Colin tried to disguise the obvious. "Well, sort of."

"Don't you worry none. Writing poetry ain't nothing to be ashamed of. Might not be tough-guy talk, but a good poem's a fine thing. Ain't no shame in it."

"Well, no, there's not." Colin showed him his notebook. "I'm a poet by profession. Colin White."

Franklin whistled. "You don't say. That's something to be proud of. You get your poems published sometimes?"

"Some times more than others."

"Tell you what," Franklin confided, "I've written a love poem or two in my time. Especially when I was younger, when I was about your age. The

women dig it.”

“Well, sure. But that’s not exactly the kind of poetry I write.”

“What are you into, philosophy? Poems that ask questions or give answers?”

The poet shrugged. “I guess I just write what comes to me.”

Franklin nodded. He could see that the wordsmith was in a hurry to spill out some words on the Amtrak letterhead he’d handed over, but the conductor had more to say. “Tell you what I learned a long time ago. Conversation is like poetry. You invite a person in with your words, hold them with a story or feeling or bit of information, and leave them with something they didn’t have before. You can touch a person with small talk.”

“Talk is poetry,” the poet said, and he wrote the phrase in his notebook.

“Touch with talk.”

“You gonna write this nice love poem of yours with that poor excuse for a pencil?”

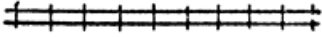
“Well, I guess I don’t have much choice.”

“Sure you do.” Franklin grinned. “You can ask your conductor if he has a pen.”

Colin tucked the pencil behind his ear. “Do you?”

“I’m one step ahead of you, boy.” He pulled an Amtrak stick pen from his inside blazer pocket. “For you to keep. Write something about my train.”

“I certainly will,” the poet said. “You have my word.”



Franklin had written a love poem or two in his time, but it had been a chore. He could talk, but talk was alive and in the air around him. Writing was different. With writing, he was confronted by the words on the page, challenged to make them more meaningful. Small talk, clichés, idle chatter—it was all meaningful when part of a living conversation, part of something bigger than himself. Without the interplay of others, his words fell flat.

He'd written a couple love poems for Latoya, ages ago. They'd really turned her on, but it was probably more the idea of having poetry written for her than the quality of the words on paper.

“You're a regular romantic,” she'd teased.

“Only because you gave me a reason.”

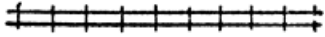
“I'm sure you've written a dozen poems for a dozen women.”

“Nope. I've never had a reason to until you came along.”

That had done the trick. She'd nuzzled into his chest and let out a warm sigh. “You sure know how to talk.”

It was his talk, he imagined, that had attracted her to him. He was a decent looking fellow, nice trim physique, well-groomed. But so were a

hundred other guys at the jazz clubs and blues joints. It was his turn of phrase, his knack for conversation that had brought them together. That's also what had driven them apart.



On the night train, Franklin left the lounge car to take a walk through general seating, just to check things out, make sure everyone was comfortable. He spotted the empty seat next to the poet. Colin was still there, snoring, his open notebook and a few pieces of the Amtrak stationery draped over the empty seat where the woman with the dragonfly pin had been. He remembered the pretty young thing with the broken heart. This cutie must have been the poet's muse, the reason he'd been in such a frantic hurry to get his poetry down. Franklin wondered whether it was her sadness or her good looks that had inspired him to write proclamations of love to her. Franklin once knew a girl with a broken heart. He still couldn't figure out what had broken it: his talking too much or not enough.

He remembered one night when they were driving home from a cocktail party sponsored by her work. Latoya was a secretary, but most of the people at the social came from a whole different society.

“From the other side of the tracks, you might say,” he’d said to her boss with a sly wink. Franklin had filled the night with small talk about trains, people he’d met, trivia about Baltimore and America. He thought the party had gone well, that he’d made a good impression. Latoya didn’t.

“Why you gotta be such an embarrassment?” They were driving to her place to spend the rest of the night alone, but she was applying another coat of lip gloss.

“What are you talking about? I think I did pretty good.”

“Good at making a fool of yourself.”

“Fool?” He gripped the steering wheel with both hands. “I’d say I held my own with those well-heeled big wheels. I was never at a loss for words.”

“You got that right. You jabbered all night, but you didn’t say a damn thing. Just a bunch of meaningless words.”

“I said things. Everyone seemed interested in what I had to say.”

“They acted interested because they’re well-bred. No one gives a shit about your trains or the riff-raff that rides on them.”

“People love trains. They like to hear about them. They tell me so.”

“They tell you so because they’re nice. I don’t know nobody wants to hear about trains all night. How’d you like it if I started talking about my make-up for hours on end.”

“I don’t just talk about trains. Only when they seem interested. I talked about a lot of other things. I’ve got culture.”

Latoya laughed.

In the car, Franklin had thought it odd that Latoya reapplied lip gloss and eye shadow, but at her place, he was glad she had. She looked sexy with the candlelight sparkling off her plump, red lips, a metallic sheen around her eyes. They sat quietly together on the loveseat, just looking at each other. Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald filled the living room with love songs. Latoya sipped blush wine and he drank a light beer. He sighed contentedly.

“You know the interesting thing about Armstrong and Fitzgerald?” he began in a whisper.

She huffed. “Would you drop it already?”

“Drop what?”

“Your auto-talk box!”

He looked at her, confused. “What’s eating at you, baby?”

“Know what your problem is? You talk too much, but you don’t got nothing to say.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I mean, you chitter-chatter away with all this stuff, but you don’t got no point. No one cares about “the thing” with dead jazz musicians, any more than they care about the state bird of Maryland, or that the state sport is jousting, or

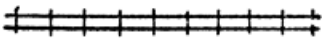
that the Ravens used to be the Colts, or the Browns, or whatever shit it is you're always blabbing about. You say so much stuff but you don't say nothing."

Franklin remained silent for a moment, watching the candle flicker in her wet eyes. "People do care, baby. I talk to people every day, and they like what I have to say. It's just small talk."

"I used to like your small talk too. But after a while, you need more than idle chatter. It's all superficial. What about you, your feelings, us? Who are you, anyway? You ain't got nothing inside. You got no soul."

Franklin felt tears welling in his eyes. "I...I don't know what to say, baby."

"That's my point. You gonna keep talking, you've gotta have something to say."



When Franklin got back to the lounge car, he found it nearly empty. The horizon was growing a light shade of pink in the east. For night owls, it was time to go to sleep. For early risers, it was time to start thinking about getting up. The army guy must have still been in military mode, because he was back in the car for a cup of coffee. The old woman, Helen, was still here, but she'd

nodded off in her chair. He walked over to her and covered her with a blanket. She seemed to be doing all right now. She'd been scared out of her wits earlier, scared to death of trains. He'd spent some time talking with her to take her mind off it. Just idle chatter, the sort of thing strangers on a train could appreciate.

"I won't lie to you," he'd said to her late in the evening when she'd come back to the lounge car for another screwdriver to calm her, "I do like small talk. If you'd like to chat, I'm right here."

"I would like that," Helen had said.

"I could tell you a lot about trains and the sort of people who ride them. But I reckon you'd rather talk about something else."

"An easier subject, perhaps." She put a finger to her lips, then said, "Death, maybe?"

It startled Franklin, but then she laughed and he realized she was making light of her own fear of trains. "Won't be long now," he said, putting a hand on her arm. "We'll be in Chicago soon. Bet you have a nice family waiting for you at home."

"I was kidding. You *do* want to talk about death?" She gave him a smile to let him know it was more humor—a way to cope. "I've buried my husband, and we never had kids. I have people waiting for me. Neighbors, friends—

they're my family.”

“That’s mighty fine, to have loved ones waiting for you, missing you.”

“Yes, it is. What do we have in this life if we don’t have other people?
Who do you have waiting for you?”

“Oh, I’ve got a woman waiting for me in Baltimore.”

“Married how long?”

Franklin scoffed. “No, not married. Each got our own place. I stay with her and she stays with me. But she has grown kids, you know. She spends her holidays with them and their families. I usually go to my nephew’s place for Christmas and Easter and spend it with his family, his kids. So I’ve got family and a girl. Buddies. And the train. I meet so many good people on the train. Can’t ask for much more than that.”

“No, you can’t.” Helen smiled. “You love this woman, or she’s just a girl?”

Franklin considered. “I love her. No need for us to dig deep and figure out why. She knows and I know. We’re happy.”

Helen nodded. “No one waiting in Chicago?”

Franklin frowned. “Oh, no, nothing like that. I’m true to my woman. I have friends in Chicago, but none I plan to call on. I’ll be in town a day, then back on the train.”

“You love the train as much as I hate it, don’t you?”

Franklin nodded. “There’s nothing quite like a train. Moments like this. Sometimes I feel like this is my home and my place is somewhere I visit. I plan to be working on the train until the day I die.”

Helen smiled. “You must get tired of train food. Where do you like to eat when you’re in Chicago?”

Franklin thought about it. “Tell you what I like best: a nice cut of steak at the Chop House. Or a Chicago-style deep-dish pizza. Or some hearty German sausage. Sometimes I like to hit the blues and jazz clubs at night for some drinks and conversation.”

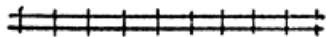
“Have you ever tasted homemade perogies? With potato vodka?”

“No, can’t say that I’ve had either one.”

“You should try them. Share a cab with me when we get to Chicago and I’ll make perogies for lunch.”

“Well, now, I don’t want to impose.”

“Who’s imposing? I like talking with you. You’re a good man with a day to kill. What would we have in this world without small talk?”



Franklin sat back down in the lounge car, not far from Helen, and looked out the window. The sky was still dark, the shadowy trees backlit by the increasingly pink horizon. The sun was about to begin another round. The train was about to end one.

Truth be told, there wasn't a woman he loved waiting for him in Baltimore. A woman, yes. They hooked up when he was in town, spent nights and days together. But they were lovers without the love. He had his nephew's family to spend the holidays with. But day in and day out, the only family he had was the transient one on the train.

He took a hearty gulp of water. The trains were the same, but they changed with each set of passengers. Every crowd brought the train alive with a new soul.

"Uncle Franklin, tell us train stories," his great nieces and nephews would beg at Thanksgiving. He contemplated what sort of tales he'd picked up from this trip. He looked over at the military man, drinking coffee in the corner. Couldn't tell whether he was happy or apprehensive about his destination. But Franklin imagined he'd be in a war zone soon, and there was little to be happy about there.

Franklin chuckled at his memory of the young poet, who seemed youthfully enthusiastic about scribbling love poems on Amtrak stationery. His smile faded as he considered the brokenhearted woman who'd gotten off in

Cincinnati. He pictured Latoya in the candlelight.

There were older couples who looked like the same person, young couples interlocking, families with parents and children, uncles and nephews. So many people. So many stories.

“Why, I ought to write a book about it,” he said to his reflection in the dark window.

Franklin knew better. He didn’t like to write, he liked to talk. His words were meaningless if not living in the air around him, connecting with the words of other people. He looked over at Helen, who slept peacefully as the train’s vibration rattled her. He considered their conversation to come. Helen was asleep, but he spoke to her anyway. “Where in the world would we be without idle chatter?”

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Baltimore author Eric D. Goodman reading “Idle Chatter” from *Tracks: A Novel in Stories*. *Tracks* takes place on a train traveling from Baltimore to Chicago; each chapter is the intertwining story of a passenger on the train. Eric is a featured author at this year’s Gaithersburg Book Festival on Saturday, May 19. Learn more about Eric, *Tracks*, and upcoming literary events at www.TracksNovel.com.