

**Bob Kunzinger**

**Fields where Sunlight Streams**

The trans-Siberian railroad runs from the Baltic through Russia's western cities and villages, through the great dense and ancient forest, cuts across the steppe and the taiga, turns down along the Amur River, pushes its back up against China, and reaches out its falling fingers to find Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan. It spans the massive Russian empire, spans decades, czarist reigns, it spans the birth and death of the Soviet Union, lifetimes of laborers, the deaths of exiles; this stretch of rail cuts a path through politics, dynasties, families, through a multitude of ethnicities, through suffocating summers and bone-cold winters, Arctic winters, frozen winters so cold the mere mention of the trans-Siberian railway to westerners conjures up images of ice and barren fields of snow. This train moves aside whatever stands in the way; rock and soil, marble, a countless crisscross of fallen birches and pines. A myriad of engineering principles makes this train run across these iron rails through green landscapes. It rolls over pools of spent oil, of human waste, to carry passengers past the eastern edge of Russia's frayed European fabric into the silent mystique of Asia. These rails carried opportunity to the Siberian outposts, while transporting millions to gulags and prison camps. It brought soldiers to war and home again, bodies home again, Jews from their homes to eastern towns during the pogroms, tourists trying to reach Baikal, businessmen hoping to spend a few days away from the city; it brought the twentieth century into the twenty-first, the west to the east, and the hopes of millions into the vast indifference of the Russian frontier. These packed train cars have slid past vast apathetic fields for more than one hundred years, and they've carried the confessions of gulag guards, of Bolshevik evangelists, the wit and subversive criticism of dissident poets, the last hopes of a dying imperial family; these carriages have carted east those feared in Moscow, those freed in prison camps but forced to flee no further than the next station on a frozen frontier; these cars moved multitudes to the wasteland beyond the Urals hoping to populate the eastern perimeter of Russia, leaving them there to die from disease and deadly winters.

This train moves though our lives carrying stories of strangers, companions who help us blend in despite compromised communication skills, creates brothers who bond over chess and Baltika beer

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on some late night/early morning leg just above the Mongolian border.

This railcar carries this father and son into Siberia, the “frozen tundra,” where nothing grows, and exposure to the elements kills the strongest of men. This is the wasteland to which politicians in St. Petersburg and Moscow sent their enemies, fearful of their power but more fearful of making them martyrs. Every story set in Siberia portrays characters wearing parkas but still freezing their asses off. This is the image carried by Cold-War era kids like me.

It is a clear summer afternoon here in St. Petersburg, and the temperature today is in the seventies. My son, Michael, and I wear short sleeve shirts and carry our bags to the edge of the platform which the sign dictates is our ride to Yekaterinburg, the city which separates east from west, our first destination on this fabled train. Right now it is in the mid-eighties in that city, and we both hope the cabins onboard are air-conditioned. The porter takes our bags and the passengers are boarding — men mostly, and some boys. They all hold their tickets and scout the numbers on the sides of the train carriages. One man asks if we need assistance, and now, only now, it is finally clear to me that we are really doing this; after years of thinking about it, months of planning, thousands of dollars in air travel and train tickets, and countless hours of research about where to go and where not to go, my son and I are about to train across the widest wilderness on the planet.

We chose second class, which means purchasing tickets for beds in a cabin built for four, bunk beds to each side of the entrance. Each bunk is about the size of a twin mattress, has storage, a light, and is tucked away quite comfortably, though the space down the middle of the cabin, about the width of the heavy, locking door, is narrow enough that two passengers sitting on their bunks with their feet on the floor can't do so directly in front of each other or they will bang each other's knees. The cabins are generally full, so Michael and I always have two other passengers sharing the ride and sharing the table between the beds against the outside wall, which is made up mostly of a generously sized window. Travelers in second class are mostly businessmen heading to or from a job, families of four who already have the means to afford such luxury, and that rarest of specimens: the tourist. Us. For just a few rubles more, passengers can purchase meals, but few do. The brown bag provided has a bottle of water, a piece of chocolate, and a small container of rice

with meat — or as my son noted, wood chips. Besides, there is plenty of food to be found without succumbing to their grab-bag concoction.

If we had wanted to travel first class, I would have paid twice as much so as not to have cabinmates, but then, of course, what's the point? The foundation of travel is people, local people who have unique customs and dialects, who share advice and laughter and, sometimes, tea, a bottle of wine, or vodka. Traveling on the Siberian railroad with cabinmates means learning to share, learning to trust, spilling communication skills like hand signs and silly drawings onto the table between us and pushing detente to its limits.

Then there is third class, whose passengers ride in a separate car altogether, built more like a narrow barracks with a multitude of bunks pushed against each other in haphazard ways, and those passengers have little access to or money for the dining car, their bags and suitcases tucked under their heads for lack of storage as they head to their summer datchas. It is cheap, and it gets them where they need to go. In the beginning of this coast to coast concept, there were only the extremes — Imperial travel with red velvet walls and inlay tables covered with the finest cuisine from the best chefs; or the cars filled with workers, exiles, going as far into the bleak distance as their health allowed. But today this train carries every conceivable aspect of Russian society, a veritable cultural cutout from some ethnography museum. And we're all wrapped by some steel casing brushing time aside as we click along, some for hours, some for days, some until someone else says it is time to disembark and start over. For all of its potential claustrophobic sorrow, this train is all about starting over.

The trans-Siberian railroad moves with bullet-like precision ripping holes through customs and cultures across nearly half the planet, with a history that pulled the 19th century expanse of Czarist Russia into the 20th century and the dominance of Soviet Russia, and then helped escort the mystique of so-called democratic Russia into the 21st century, all the while in its wake creating jobs, bringing people out of their ancient ways and setting a new course for anyone who hears its timeless and imposing rumble along this iron scar across two continents. The distance from St. Petersburg to Vladivostok is roughly six thousand miles, a journey of which very few travelers need or wish to engage. Perspective: it's as if I boarded the Long Island Railroad at Montauk Point to head to downtown Manhattan and decided to continue on past Honolulu. We are an anomaly. The other travelers, nearly

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all men, are heading to or from work projects or visiting family just one or two stops away. Some people travel further, but not more than a station or two, and in third class a few families carry a month's worth of belongings. As for the passengers going the distance it seems to be just the two of us and a family of four from France, and I think we're all a little anxious; though if Michael is, he certainly doesn't show it.

I remember when I was young and rode trains with my father, and when we made it to mid-town Manhattan, I was nervous, surrounded by so many strangers. Fifty years later, I feel somehow safer here on the Siberian rail. Maybe it is experience, or perhaps it is being well-prepared which calms my nerves and welcomes what's next. Most likely, it is simple resignation: we are here, we will board, and the train will leave the station. No magic tricks.

We are far from the first father and son engaged by this railway. Czar Alexander the Third ordered his son Nicholai to start the project, and the young prince took it to heart, pouring his energy and ambitions into carving this legacy onto the Russian landscape. He hired a Scottish engineer and that man's son to figure it all out. The engineer brought in fellow countrymen and went to work under Nicholai's guidance, and the Scottish influence is still obvious all along the route. A few decades after his father's decree, that young prince became Czar Nicholas the Second, the so-called "Last Czar" of Russia, who in 1918 boarded the train with his son Alexi on this same route from St. Petersburg to Yekaterinburg for what would be the last ride of their lives. One hundred years ago that father and son, his mother Alexandra, and his four sisters rode to their new home in an old palace. I stare down these tracks aware that this is that same rail, and we're heading to that same city, and will soon look out and see the same landscape seen by the Czar and his son that last time before the entire family was shot to death in the basement of that palace.

We come here to follow that czar and his family, to follow Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, the Bolsheviks, communists, tourists, laborers, dissidents, exiles, businessmen, to follow them eleven time zones across one nation. To ride the railway from this first station to the last is to cross centuries, generations, and cultural differences so drastic some areas aren't recognizable as sharing a common history.

We have come here to diagram the long and compound sentence which is the trans-Siberian railroad. We have little idea of what to expect, no common-ground upon which to even make a guess from any other of our travels, and both of us completely lack the language skills to navigate even the dinner menu. We are, in a sense, self-exiled pilgrims relying upon our faith in strangers; strangers whom, for the majority of my life, I was taught not to trust and who hated Americans. Yet, standing here now looking down the tracks beyond the dozen or so train cars, my soul settles down, finally able to reach beyond that terror which comes with anticipation, ignorance, and misinformation. And just by virtue of resignation to the fact there is no turning back, I find comfort in the kinetic reality of now, the boarding, the finding of our cabin, and making our own way. Here, now, seeing as far as I can in the late afternoon of the White Nights, I can't help but think of my own father standing on the platform of that Long Island station, waiting for the express to Manhattan. He made that journey every day for decades. My dad, who is at the end of his rides, the end of this own journey, sat in the seats facing forward and read the paper, nodded to comrades continuing downtown with him, and in the afternoons on the way home he might break up the hour and a half trip with a drink in the bar car. That was his ride. And this is mine, my son's and mine. We will head east to the other side of the planet through the remote forests of Siberia, where I am told our closest traveling companions are the ghosts we bring along to talk to on the long hauls through endless nights. I don't mind; it will be good to spend time with them, understand again why we carry some with us and leave others behind as we move through our days. There's something about the absolute stillness of travel that makes time re-align itself and allows perspective to permeate those nights, allows us to excise our demons and watch them drift into our past as we move along.

You can't buy therapy like this in the states. There are too many towns, too much noise, and too much conversation. Everyone is always talking to someone. In America we already know how to get where we are going without a need to ask for help because we keep track; and even if we get lost, we can check our phones and get back on track. We keep track of where we've been, and if we are late we hustle up and make tracks. We demand of ourselves to stay on track. It is where we ride the rails to get home to our family, find comfort in some small tract of land.

These Siberian tracks run the rails from the Imperial capital to the naval town on the Sea of Japan, to the land of exiles, of Decembrists, of Solzhenitsyn. They run so far into the wild, dark distance it is difficult to try and keep track.

On previous trips to St. Petersburg, I walked by this station dozens of times in this cultural heart of Russia, Peter's City, but never gave it a glance. Now we're inside our own metaphor, boarding the train and seeing where it brings us, sometimes exploring, sometimes just enjoying the sound and the enchanting suggestion of forward motion. It is the way of things on this train across the earth, that at times we disembark to take a break, to explore another way; some companions will be with us longer than others, and some so briefly we will forget they were there to begin with; some of this ride will terrify us, some of it will excite us, and some of it will bore us to death, but still we ride. For some, a time will come when they wonder why they don't just step off for good, wish they never boarded to begin with, some continue on anyway but with resignation, some with determination, and some with no expectations at all but to see what's next.

We stand in the passage between cars and look at the landscape while Michael plays "This Land is Your Land" on the harmonica. Birch trees dominate the August distance, and for quite some time we pass little more than white tree trunks with green pastures and the occasional small shack alongside the tracks. Some shacks have guards who stand outside smoking cigarettes and watch us pass, but mostly the small guard houses remain empty, and all are painted royal blue, all of them; as if someone in Moscow one summer day handed paint to some poor worker and said, "Go brighten up the place."

The striking reality of this "place" is that the landscape outside remains as much a part of the journey as the hallways inside, as much a companion as our cabinmates, and as essential to the crossing as the dining car and the thousands of miles of tracks still ahead. For the most part, the train itself is the tourist attraction here; it is hotel, dining car, and late-night pub. In America, we train through somewhere else on our way to where we are going, but in Russia, the somewhere else is our traveling companion, the arc of our narrative, the string of dynamic moments in our character development. Tolstoy points out, "One of the first conditions of happiness is that the link between man and nature shall not be broken." Even on a train; especially so, since it is the "trans-Siberian" part of this journey that makes the ride unique.

Out here is not like passing through the Adirondacks, no matter how similar the surroundings may sometimes seem. This terrain remains, for all intents and purposes, mostly barren of towns and people, making the train a moving oasis, and it is exactly that contrast which provides balance and makes anyone on this ride aware of each nuance of the journey, and it is that vague “barrenness” which keeps us from forgetting exactly where we are. Certainly, closer to the city when we first left St. Petersburg, the surroundings seemed more suburban than either city or rural, but once we passed Lake Ladoga just a few hours later, any semblance of towns slipped into the shadows and we quickly discover this train remains the most essential element. In many stretches of this ride, the population onboard is indeed significantly larger than the residents in the surrounding territory.

“Slow Train by Dylan,” I say, and Michael smiles. He knows the tune, and he knows if he can’t retort within a minute, he buys the next round in the dining car. I throw it out there while he’s playing “This Land is Your Land,” figuring it difficult to call up a different tune so quickly. It’s one of our games, this one train songs. He continues to play for half a minute, then says, “Midnight Train to Georgia,” and returns to Guthrie without missing a beat. “The other Georgia,” he adds, and I laugh.

Within the carriages, the narrow hallways are often crowded with Russians looking out the corridor-long windows. None of it is overly confining or claustrophobic, but on a week-long journey across wilderness, sharing a cabin with businessmen whose dialect is hardly recognizable as Russian, we find respite here between cars where we can hear the rails beneath us and feel some coolness coming in the moving floor. These carriage connections are something akin to tectonic plates sliding back and forth so when we stand against the walls facing each other one of us might be moving in the opposite direction of the other, but not too much and it is all so much smoother than we had expected, and some passengers passing through to the dining car might pause for a moment, look out the windows and listen to Michael play American folk music. It is odd to feel at home in a land so far from our own, and the further east we move toward an absence of western Russian architecture or cars or really any sense of village life at all except guards near small royal-blue shacks, the easier it is to believe we are moving across the upper mid-west in America, or across Canada where such vast wilderness might still be possible. Still, as Ian Frazier points out, Siberia is so big it is more of an idea than a place.

The first stretch of this trip is not unlike the ride through Nassau County on the way from Manhattan to the emptier farmland of eastern Long Island. This eastern stretch out of the city of Peter the Great has the same sprawl of factories and endless roads of houses and swing sets on otherwise empty lots, elementary schools not improved in forty years, stores, rows of parked cars along narrow streets, scattered trees, tiny stores with small windows beneath Cyrillic words, random garages, industrial sites ad nauseum, and the royal-blue shacks. The train makes more frequent stops now than it will tomorrow and the stations here are more crowded with men in suits and women in heels and children carrying hard suitcases filled with clothes and toys to bring to the family dachas just outside the city.

Farther east, the city-sprawl eventually gives way to villages with their own center, disconnected from St Petersburg in the daily ways of life, with their own soul of sorts; a town square, an abandoned or repurposed estate, and some notable industry. These are the suburbs which mark time as we know it. In the city, changes can be so immediate and drastic, it is numbing. One day it is Leningrad; the next St. Petersburg; one day the markets use the traditional ways of shopping — pick out your goods from behind the counter, go to a different line to pay, return to the first line to turn over your receipt for the goods — the next day you're putting all your goods from the shelves into a cart then onto a conveyor belt where someone bags it all and you walk out like you just left a western superstore. No transition, no warning, no sense of what-was in the sudden world of what-is.

In the villages far from the city, changes can be as drastic yet paradoxically irrelevant. The owners of the local businesses and factories have changed so that the money makes it to the pockets of some oligarchs in Moscow instead of the government in Moscow — but what do local workers care? People still work at the same garage they always have, the same factory, the local store. Maybe more customers from the city show up, but otherwise life is the same since no one in these small hamlets had any knowledge of, or any need to know, where the profits went to begin with. They live their lives, and once in a while they ride this train east, to visit family or find work. Life in the city and in the rural spread of Russia is similar for that disconnected routine. But in the suburbs-as-we-think-of-them, people try to balance the changes with home improvements such as satellite dishes, new appliances, and foreign-made cars, all tempered by traditional garden plots



tended with archaic tools. Throughout the run along the rails from St. Petersburg nearly all the way to Yekaterinburg, small gardens back each another with tiny sheds for supplies. This is shared land, and everyone learned generations ago to respect each other's plots, their vegetables, their place in time. And the farther we travel the more distance exists between villages, and I am so overwhelmed by the seeming distance from what in the west might be defined as "civilization," I am reminded of Tolstoy's words, "I felt a wish that my present frame of mind might never change." In these regions, the railroad stations become the focus of the lives of locals. The train is their commerce, and we are their customers, their connection to the rest of the world, their topic of conversation and their method for keeping track of time. We all have our own reasons to travel through Siberia, and each of the stations of the crossing has its purpose beyond the simple ritual of passengers boarding and disembarking. It is mail depot, food court for old women selling homemade goods, gathering spot for children home from school, and they all bear it well, conduct their business well.

Closer to Yekaterinburg, the spaces between those stations, however, seem vast. Marshes sometimes appear, or fields of grass and hay, and wheat, and runs of grazing land with scattered cattle seemingly without guidance. A shack appears, and wires run along the rail. Every hour or so a few roads converge around a few houses, and a car rolls to a stop next to the tracks, and I wonder where it is going. It can't be east, certainly it can't be east I foolishly believe, since it seems to me that there isn't anything in the east except that mysterious and vast nothingness which awaits us through the great northern forest. But even still, the vastness I see outside the two feet wide by four feet high windows in these passages becomes even more barren as we move closer to the eastern edge of "European Russia," so that eventually the only visible life is our own reflection in the windows at dusk and the fading light on the tops of birch trees. At some point all landscapes require imagination to cover the darkening distances only barely visible during daylight, let alone when dusk fades. The west has long been curious about the outposts of Siberia, the villages in the east, the prisons, the isolation and cold. For now I turn my attention within again to a passing Russian man who nods with a smile as he moves toward the dining car. The sun has set, so studying the wilderness of this expansive nation will have to wait for another day as it is finally, and completely, dark.

The villages outside seem to be mirrored onboard in the hallways and sleeping quarters, each cabin a cottage, each passenger a resident, safe inside this vein running through Europe into Asia. The balance of inside and out, of engineering and wilderness, simply means we are as much a part of what we pass at fifty miles-an-hour as we are a part of conversations in the dining car, further highlighting the contrasts. It may be the twenty-first century in the cabins, but also something older, weathered, somehow waits in the lands stretching across the Urals and the Steppe, dioramas of decades in decline, a wilderness witness to slaughters, pogroms, transports, exiles, and dissidents, and this train has been an accomplice in this tragic history.

During the day the brilliant, warm sun on the landscape is inviting, primal, but as night falls, the shadows blend history and place, so that out among the faded trees it seems as if ghosts gather and wave to me as we ride past. *This land wasn't made for czars, I think, let alone presidents or general secretaries.* It is the most untamed place I've ever been, with its beautiful and ancient and timeless sameness about it, its horror and tragedy, its heroism and redemption, and standing on board now it is easier to believe that those historic and not so long-ago terrors along the rails were merely fleeting moments which never could take hold with any permanence.

Standing between cars is only slightly louder than inside any individual train car because despite being "sort of" outside, these spaces between — the gangway connections as they are called — are designed nothing like the locomotives in television westerns where cowboys leap after each other across iron joints and passing tracks. These are mostly enclosed passages, pleasantly cooler than the hot cabins but decidedly not exposed to the elements. Every alternating passage between cars is reserved for smokers, and since so many Russians smoke while traveling by train, those passages are normally filled. Michael and I stand by ourselves between the cars in the odd, non-smoking passages, and he plays Guthrie while I look out at the wilderness with dusk coming on, out at the same land Angela Carter describes in *Night at the Circus* as the caravan crosses into Asia: "Outside the window, there slides past that unimaginable and deserted vastness where night is coming on, the sun declining in ghastly blood-streaked splendor like a public execution across, it would seem, half a continent, where live only bears and shooting stars and the wolves who lap congealing ice from water that holds within it the entire sky."

Our train treks along thirty-miles-an hour faster than Carter's, and the timeless and borderless tone of the harmonica brings me back to the moment at hand, and it is a scene out of Guthrie's own life, a page of *Bound for Glory*, and I think how every young man should experience this freedom, this absolute sense of the moment. Here, Michael has his first taste of the wild possibilities before him in the middle of what was once one of the most restrictive empires and then one of the most invasive governments in the history of humanity. I watch him play while he watches the dark outline of trees rip by, and I take note of how good he has become. The disappearing sun lay flat behind me, illuminating Michael's face, catching a glint on his harp, and he looks older, like he belongs, like I am another Russian passing between cars, and he is simply here, and it makes sense. *When did he get so good?* I think, listening to him somehow keep Guthrie's repetitive melody from being boring. He nods toward a blue shack with a solitary guard and keeps playing, a talent he apparently managed to master while I was passing through his youth on my way to work. *We've been riding this metaphoric train for twenty years*, I think. And so far, it seems we've managed to stay on track. Michael dips his harmonica. "Take the 'A' Train' by Ellington," he says. He plays louder to make a reply more difficult to conceive, and he is right. Tonight's round is on me, even though I quickly recall a half-dozen compositions. Downtown Train, Crazy Train, Casey Jones, and that Springsteen one which escapes me at the moment. There's something about the train motif which all artists have borrowed and shared to satisfy our common metaphor. "Everyone loves the Sound of a Train in the Distance," Paul Simon," I say, but he shakes his head. It's too late. We laugh.

These times we spend together in this passage have become our small shared American space. When we enter our cabin or the dining car or stand in the hallway looking out the wall-size windows at the landscape, and conversation inevitably occurs with other passengers, we are separate, two American travelers who happen to be father and son barreling through a land so foreign it is difficult to find common ground. But in the passageway, quiet, we find something we can relate to. It is normal to need some place like this when traveling — a pub, a church, a coffeeshop — a place to find one's bearings and catch one's breath. It doesn't need to be for long, the length of a tune, perhaps.

Michael stops playing to take a photograph of mysterious fields of cattle with no apparent farmhouse or farmer, but the light is gone and he gives up. I wonder what happened in some man's ancestry or political bend during imperial or soviet days that finds him on a farm nearly in Siberia to tend cattle without neighbors, without news, without much interaction with other men. Then Michael plays again and the music brings me back inside where I watch him lean against the wall of the car, hands cupped around the edges of his harmonica, a thousand miles of track behind us, and I laugh out loud at the convergence of circumstances that finds me with my twenty-year-old son on a train rolling across the former Soviet Union toward the Pacific, hardly a lick of the Russian language between us, the vague destination of Vladivostok, just a dot on a map, closer to Hawaii than to where we are now, with no apparent purpose other than to get there, playing and singing American folk songs. It didn't take long for us to settle in to our own lives in our own cabin, feeling like this trip was made for him and me.

I look at Michael and smile. He turns to me and laughs. "What?" he says.

"Springsteen."

He stares back out the window trying to dial up a train song by one of his favorites. Nothing. *Of course not*, I think. This one's for the fathers:

I will provide for you  
And I'll stand by your side  
You'll need a good companion  
For this part of the ride  
Leave behind your sorrows  
Let this day be the last  
Tomorrow there'll be sunshine  
And all this darkness past  
Big wheels roll through fields  
Where sunlight streams  
Meet me in a land of hope and dreams