

Going Native

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

"God, could you find a duller way to travel?" asks my leggy companion, the luscious Ruth. She has this weekend off, and she insisted on coming with me on my assignment. It'll be fun, she said, and then followed that up with, how can I know what you're doing unless I come along with you on occasion? I listened to the logic of that, and now I find myself trapped in a 5' by 6' moving room with a woman who finds train travel passe.

Me, I'm afraid that the Amtrak trip up the mountain will be the best part of this assignment. I work for eight online editors, and all of them called me last week to ask for an article on the annual TVS convention. Such a uniformity of requests has only happened once before in my career, and that was when a woman that I sat beside in grade school, tormented in middle school, and dated in high school was inaugurated as President of the United States. Suddenly my memoirs had value.

Somehow, I doubt that this essay has the same sort of import.

I also had my doubts about bringing Ruth to kooksville and now, when we're still two hours away from our destination, I know I've made the Wrong Decision. She is lying on the bottom berth, her bare feet against the dirty plastic wall, her skirt pooled around her waist, and she is not thinking of sex.

Neither am I.

"I mean, we've been on this train for hours. How did people travel like this?"

They made love, they ate, they read books. But I do not tell Ruth that. She would see it as a slap, an insult to her great intelligence. In real life, Ruth is a receptionist for a lawyer, but she prefers to call herself a paralegal. She uses legalese, mispronouncing most of it, and pretends that she knows as much as someone who has a law degree.

I've never told her about mine. But then, why should I? It would ruin the sleazy nature of the relationship, the fact that I'm dating her for her deliciously man-made breasts and she's dating me because I know the secrets of the universe.

She believes that's because I'm a journalist. The old fashioned print kind, even though what we print is done online. I'm paid by the download, which is why I'm on this train trip instead of say, investigating the latest bombing in downtown Seattle. No matter how idealistic you start, you soon learn that it's paranoia that sells.

Which is why we're on a train instead of teleporting. There are no teleportation stations in this part of the Cascades. Rumor has it that the first teleportation technician who ventured into this part of Oregon was shot. Whether he lived or died depends on which rumor you believe.

Ruth knew we were heading into no man's land when she decided to come with me, but the closer we get the less I believe she actually understood it. I think she thought we'd look at the crazy yokels and then go home.

I think I thought she could handle anything.

Check that. I think I knew, deep down, she was contemplating Marriage, and I wanted to convince her that breaking up was her idea. But that's hindsight. Going in, I was simply concerned about the lack of sex.

"Once," I say, gazing out the window at the snow beside the tracks, "this was the fastest way to travel in the whole world."

"Yeah." She flops an arm over her eyes, missing the deer that stand by a group of trees, staring at us. A 19th-century vision in the 21st. "Sad, isn't it?"

I'm not sure. I'm enough of a romantic to enjoy the view. I'm enough of a romantic to wish that she'd enjoy it with me.

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The assignment, if you look at it historically (which is one of the few things that I've retained from law school, a sense of historical perspective), is a perennial: Go look at the fringe and report back to the masses. Around the turn of the last century, that meant going to carnivals and fairs to examine the bearded women, the two-headed chickens, and the stillborn fetuses that looked like fish. In my grandfather's day, a reporter on this beat might go to see the mysterious Area 51, thought to be a repository for Unidentified Flying Objects (things so familiar they were known by their acronym UFO) and for the little green men who flew them. Me, I get assigned the annual meeting of the Teleportation Victims Society whose own acronym is TVS, but who is known in newsrooms nationwide as TVSo?. I should've known I was in trouble when I tried to explain this little joke to Ruth and she'd stared at me blankly, not even threatening to smile.

The TVSo?s meet every year in Harbor, Oregon, which used to be a 1990s survivalist camp between Bend and Klamath Falls. The area's only attraction, or so I could glean before I arrived, is that it has no teleportation station, and none is planned. If someone wants to travel in that part of the Cascade Range, they either have to go to Bend, fifty miles to the north, or Klamath Falls, over 60 miles to the south. Then they have to take whatever ground transportation is available, provided, of course, they can get it. Amtrak still serves this part of the country, partly because the sparse population can't justify the teleportation system, and partly because the tracks have existed for nearly two hundred years. It's the only form of public transportation between those two stations, and mostly it's used by the low-income folks who can't afford the cost of speedier travel.

I insisted on taking the train all the way from Seattle, over Ruth's protests, because I wanted my experience at the annual meeting to reflect the experience of all the other TVSo?s. I had secretly hoped I'd meet a few of them on this ride, but Ruth has kept me chained to the room, demanding room service, and not paying for it in the way that I had hoped.

Still I manage to sneak to the club car once, and there I see exactly what I expect, a group of tired, smelly people, most of whom are too drunk to look at the magnificent scenery whizzing past. I realize that, in my new khakis and bomber jacket, I am overdressed and as conspicuous as a rich man in Olympia. No one will talk to me. They barely manage to look at me.

And, for the first time, I worry about how I'll pull this assignment off.

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I should say at this stage of article research, I always worry about how I'll pull the assignment off. Even though what I write is dictated into my wrist-top, edited on a larger screen at home, and e-mailed directly to my editor, what I do is really not much different from the work, say, Mark Twain did almost two hundred years ago. He ventured out into places unknown and reported back.

Ernest Hemingway did that, so did Ernie Pyle, and Peter Arnett. The great journalists thrived in times of war. When there is no war -- or no war America is interested in -- we are stuck with perennials. And no

journalist ever became famous by risking his life at a TVSo? convention.

I simply want to go in, find a few things that are amusing, see if I can discover the secret behind the victimology, and return to home base with all parts intact. I know that, by Sunday evening, I will have a story. I'm just not sure if it's the kind of story Hemingway would have dispatched from Spain.

In fact, I know it's not the moment the train pulls into Harbor, Oregon.

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When Ruthie and I get off the train at the small white station nestled against a snow-covered ridge, we are greeted like visiting royalty. I made no secret of my job as a journalist, but it's really Ruthie they want to see. It seems, on the e-slip she sent with her fee, that she listed her employment as she always does.

A paralegal and a journalist. We are a dream couple for the TVSo?s.

I am not the only journalist in this place. Every major television reporter, radio commentator, vid producer, and holotechnician is here to record the loonies in action. I am one of the few print people, and the only one with enough awards to make me semi-famous. Every TVSo? wants to tell me his story, to introduce me to little Jonnie or Suzy or Uncle Billy, and to show me what makes them different.

When I get off the train, I realize I am not ready for this. The grasping hands, the slightly desperate gaze. I insist on going to the hotel before meeting people, and Ruth gives me her I-can't-believe-you're-doing-this look. That's when I realize she's not upset about the location or the people. She's upset that I want to leave them. She not only relishes the attention, she believes she can give these people advice. She doesn't realize how dangerous the situation can be. She's with the only people in the world who might take her seriously. I grip her arm and follow our host to the Compound, our hotel.

The Compound was the former survivalist's camp, and looks it. The outbuildings are made of wood hammered together by people who clearly didn't know what they were doing. The main building, where the restaurant and gift shop reside, was once a ranch style house, built in the mid-twentieth century, complete with front-facing garage. The building had been added onto, once during its survivalist camp days -- that was evident by the concrete bunker in the back -- and once by the hotel, the brass and wood facade that tried to make everything upscale.

Our room isn't really a room. It was cabin Number 8. A plaque on the door tells us that it had once been used by the house's original owners as a storage shed, and was remodeled into a cabin when the camp started in the early 1980s. The plaque tells us proudly that eight people lived in this space; I'm wondering how Ruth and I will manage for a weekend.

The room is square, with an area carved out for a bathroom with an ancient shower and plastic tub. The sink has motion detectors instead of computer controls, and the toilet actually has a handle for flushing. Ruth is charmed, but I wonder if that will last into the middle of the night, when one of us stumbles in there and initiates the gurgle and grunt of the ancient plumbing.

We unpack, and then Ruth wants to reenter the fray. I'm more interested in checking out the dining facilities. The reconstituted chicken I had on the train didn't last me long.

Outside, we see several blue and white signs, pointing to various cabins. Most signs are hand-lettered and made specifically for the conference: Registration is to our left; Legal advice is to our right; and Testimonials is straight ahead. Other signs show us the way to improve our Education, covering everything from Technological Secrets to the History of Transportation. Many of these, I know, are

on-going programs, and I will check them out through the weekend. It's the guest speakers I am most interested in, and those are going to be the hardest events to see.

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In the registration line I learn that the TVSo's aren't all low-income poorly educated folks like the research had led me to expect. The man in front of me is a doctor from Philadelphia who has documentation on "differences" and was willing to call it up on his wrist-top right there in the frigid Oregon mud. The slender, pretty woman behind me is a reasonably well known vid personality whose career went into a decline, she says, after she teleported 65 times in one month. I talk to both of them at some length. Ruth has left me alone in line while she went on to the lodge for drinks.

She has been gone a long time.

I draw the same sort of crowd I drew at the train station. I am uncomfortable, used to being the observer, not the observed. Everyone wants to tell me a story; everyone wants me to know how teleportation changes people, how it creates differences where there were none before.

Some of the stories are just silly, like the vid personality's. She claims she lost a little bit of charisma each time she teleported from one place to another. Some are strange, like the woman who has me examine holograms of her now-estranged husband, a man whose eye color changed in the space of one afternoon from green to brown.

The rest are merely sad. Many are from people who claim that their spouses are no longer the same people they married, and they blame use of public teleportation. Others show evidence of medical conditions they claim were caused by teleporting, and still some have tales of close loved ones who died soon after traveling in a teleportation device.

I have read the literature; I am familiar with all variations on these stories and more. I even know their origins.

I ask the eye color woman why she believes her husband's eyes were the only thing to change.

"I didn't say they were the only thing, now did I?" she says angrily.

I turn away, afraid to follow up.

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The first big break-through in teleportation occurred in the late 1990s when a team of Austrian scientists successfully completed a transfer on the sub-atomic level. The physics of the break-through was too complex to explain to the layman in the popular newspapers of the day, so many journalists attempted (unsuccessfully) to put the discovery in layman's terms.

I have tried to hunt down the origin of the example used for the laymen and have been, to date, unsuccessful. I suspect either one of the scientists got exasperated with the journalists' stupid questions and used the example to explain, poorly, what was going on, or a journalist attempted to translate what he thought he understood into language that he thought other people could understand.

Their experiment, said the news organizations of the day, was as if the scientists had taken a red ball in one room, made it disappear, and then reappear in another room -- although what was teleported was not the ball itself, but the quality of redness which was then transferred onto another ball.

It is not what we experience. We experience the teleportation first imagined in pulp fiction stories of over

a hundred years ago. Our bodies literally disassemble in one location, are transferred to another location, and are then reassembled. There are documented cases of malfunctions, most dating from the early days of the technology and almost all of them having to do with apes who arrived dead. These deaths were not pretty or simple: they had to do with parts being reassembled in the wrong order, rather like taking a puzzle apart, then trying to put it together by placing all the corners in the middle. Those details were resolved long before any human being stepped onto a teleportation pad. The things we must worry about are simpler: power failures and computer malfunctions, both of which can lose us mid-transfer. This problem is the greatest in Third World countries, in devices built out of scrap metal, most likely, by the operator's Uncle Ralph. Teleportation is not sanctioned to those countries, or is done purely at the user's own risk. Here and in "approved" countries, every device is scrutinized, overhauled, and replaced more often than anything else in our technologically advanced society.

This is what the literature tells me. It is what exists in all published reports, the meetings before Congress, and in several teleportation companies' legal databases. I know there can be problems -- we all do. The problems are called "acceptable risk," something we all assume when we step on a teleportation pad, or even when we walk out our front door. What varies from person to person is how acceptable some risks are.

It is the idea that we can be disassembled and reassembled that unnerves people the most. A large number of people (actual estimates vary, depending on the reporting agency) refuse to use teleportation, allowing other forms of mass transit to remain in business. Most of these people are not TVSo?'s. They simply don't like the idea of being taken apart and put back together without it being necessary, and are not willing to sacrifice their original unity for the sake of instantaneous travel.

Others cannot imagine traveling any other way. Frequent teleporters receive a discount on each trip. "Frequent" is defined in the industry as anyone making more than ten trips per day. I have only hit the ten trip in one day milestone once, and it left me feeling disoriented and unnerved -- not, I hasten to add, because I was disassembled so many times, but because, after five different teleportation stations, I lost track of my surroundings. Later I learned that frequent travelers set their wrist-top to remind them of their location and their purpose for being there upon arrival.

I have read all the literature, examined all the records, and while I still feel a twinge of nerves when I step on the platform, I prefer the instantaneous shift, the delight at having been in Manhattan one moment and Rome the next. It is not different, my grandmother once told me, than that frisson of fear she used to feel whenever an airplane's wheels left the ground or whenever a train went over a particularly high and narrow bridge.

It is human nature to worry about the accidental, the unexpected, the unknown. It is also human nature to magnify those things into problems so strange as to be somehow plausible.

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The TVSo?'s have three banquets at their weekend meeting, and I have bought tickets to all three. Ruth did not want to eat at the banquets. In fact, she soon made it clear that she did not want to spend time with me. She says my attitude is too cynical, my remarks too cutting. She is right. I am already thinking in the tone I've decided to take for this article, a tone that my brain established while part of it tried to concentrate on the seriousness of the vid personality's loss of charisma.

The first banquet is on Friday night, and there I am happily surprised. The food is excellent. It is free-range chicken, brought in from a nearby ranch, local vegetables grown and stored here, marinated in local wine, mixed with spices grown in the chef's own herb garden.

Nothing was shipped in: no risk of teleportation tainting the food. And somehow it does seem fresher. Or perhaps the chef, a world-renown man who refused to allow me to use his name in this article, has simply lived up to his spectacular reputation.

The speaker that night is a transportation historian who is, believe it or not, duller than he sounds. He reads his speech off the TelePrompTer modification in his contact lenses, probably much as he does in class, which forces him to stare straight ahead. That, combined with his monotone, makes him seem as if he's teleported one too many times.

The diners at my table, which is toward the back, immediately deduce the problem and begin whispering, as I imagine his students often do. We introduce ourselves and tell each other why we're here.

The woman to my immediate left looks like a Hollywood grandmother, which is to say that she's round, gray-haired and jolly. She confides that she went to see her grandchildren on her only teleportation trip, and instead of arriving in Pittsburgh as planned, she arrived in Philadelphia. The teleportation operators claim she simply told them she was going to Philly, but she claims that they punched in the wrong destination. I take mental notes, knowing that what is at stake here is more than a simple trip. She lives on a fixed income and she scrimped to afford the teleport. She could not afford to then go from Philly to Pittsburgh and back home. She missed a trip, and probably several meals, for that one abortive visit.

This is a problem I can get behind. It is not magic woo-woo incantations in which she claims that she suddenly ballooned in size because her protons expanded or that she got skin cancer that should have belonged to someone else. This is the kind of operator error we all worry about. I have had nightmares about getting on a teleporter in Portland and ending up in Beijing.

The woman next to her confides that there is a lawyer in the legal section who is trying to get enough contacts to initiate a class action suit for just that sort of problem. The grandmother thanks her, and then asks her, whispering politely of course, why she's here. The woman, who is in her mid-forties, has the prettiest lavender hair I've ever seen. She flushes a nice shade of pink that somehow complements the lavender and admits that she would rather not say.

I am beginning to think I've hit a lucky table. Imagine someone who has come to a TVSo? convention who is unwilling to admit why she has come. It is almost antithetical to the purpose of the conference.

I make a mental note to pull her aside later, then ask the man to my right why he has come. "Reporter," he says tersely, not whispering. "Just like you."

He gets shushed by the people at the table behind him, who, believe it or not, are engrossed in the teacher's speech. At that point, I surface briefly, realize the man has droned on for thirty minutes and hasn't yet reached the invention of the automobile. I signal a waiter for more coffee.

The woman to the reporter's right bursts into tears when asked why she's here, and we get shushed again. I actually don't mind because I get an odd sense that the tears are fake. Still, we dutifully lean forward after she dries her eyes with her linen napkin.

"My baby," she whispers, and stifles a sob. The entire table behind us glares at us with angry eyes. We glare back, then lean as close as we can.

"My baby," she says again, "was a boy when he went into the device."

Suddenly I don't want to hear any more, and neither, it seems, does anyone else. The reporter hands her another napkin, and makes sympathetic noises, but as quickly as he politely can, he rises and makes his way to the men's room.

Ten minutes later, when he has not returned and the speaker is rhapsodizing about the uses of airplanes in World War I, I excuse myself. The corridor outside is empty, but I find a new convention going on at the bar.

"I don't know why they invite him back," says one woman to a gale of laughter. It seems that this is the fifth year the historian has spoken on Friday night, and this year he is actually more interesting than he has ever been.

One of the conference organizers overhears, and says rather stiffly, "We invite him so that you all have an historical overview of the problems we face."

"Oh," the laughing woman says, "but don't you think that teleportation is a little different than, say, a Model T?"

"No," the organizer says, and I realize that this is one of those dangerous people to whom the phrase "sense of humor" has no meaning at all, "it is all a manifestation of our need to make the world smaller. Once everyone thought that instantaneous travel would solve all our ills. They didn't realize that it would cause more problems than it started."

"Do you believe," one woman asks, "that everyone who has been in a teleportation device is still human?"

Not even the conference organizer answers that question. It is too touchy. Most of the people here are here because they have been in a teleportation device. If the woman's right, that would mean none of us are human. I don't believe that. I believe we're very human, although the more I see, the more I wonder what side of humanity we actually belong to.

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The next morning, I wander over to Legal, and listen to lawyers pontificate on ways to collect damages from teleportation companies. I hear the familiar litany of successful lawsuits -- there aren't many, and most are nuisance cases much like the grandmother's of the night before -- but the audience is attentive and asks polite questions.

In the afternoon, I poke my head into Education, and see the historian. I don't run from there, although I'm tempted. I walk slowly, pretending I had ventured into that area by mistake.

Ruth is nowhere to be seen. She did show up in our room the night before, but long after I was asleep, and I thought I smelled brandy, but by that point I didn't really care. I wonder idly who she has found to entertain herself with and how she can use him to further her career. The thought, though accurate, is uncharitable, and I then wonder when I stopped thinking with fondness of Ruth's tendency's to exaggerate and began to be annoyed by them. Probably around the point when her manufactured breasts became her most fascinating feature.

That night's speaker is an expert in teleportation technology and I am assured by almost everyone who's been here before that he makes the historian look glib. I am sorry to give up the free range chicken, but I cannot bear another two hours trapped in those uncomfortable wooden banquet chairs.

I go into the restaurant, where I've had two delicious breakfasts, and cast about for a table. It seems to have a lot of patrons, considering there is a banquet going on in the next room.

Ruth is at a table near the window. Even though it is dark, I can make out the ghostly shape of the nearby mountain, snow-covered and shiny. She waves me over.

She is sitting with the lawyers. They have asked that no other tables be filled around them, and so far the

restaurant is able to comply. Ruth, it seems, has been spending her time with the entire legal wing of this conference and learning "a whole heckuva lot."

I sit down, and listen for a while. This seems like an informal version of the panel I had attended in the morning. I order a steak, and do not ask if it was shipped in or slaughtered locally, for which I am razed, and then one of the attorneys, an overweight vegetarian who consumes way too much wine during the evening, informs me of the many ways that beef could kill me. Since I have heard this lecture before, I add a few insights of my own, all the while chomping heartily on my dinner.

Finally they ask me why I'm here, and I tell them that I'm a paid observer of human nature.

"He's journalist," Ruth says, breaking my cover.

They eye me as if I'm the slimy species and I explain that I'm a practitioner of New Journalism almost a century after New Journalism was introduced. It is my way of gaining legitimacy among the illegitimate: pretend to a literary value that I don't really have.

The New Journalism comment seems to have silenced them, so to break the ice -- and to make my dinner worthwhile -- I ask them what they really think about teleportation technology.

"It makes lawyers rich!" one of them said and the others laugh. But I press them, and finally a dark-suited man next to Ruth says, "I used to laugh at these folks and then questions started coming up, questions I couldn't get an answer to."

One of the female attorneys nods, and still another, the overweight vegetarian, says, "Yeah, like why is there a ban on kids under the age of three taking teleportation?"

"It's not a firm ban," a New York lawyer says. "You can get around it with a doctor's permission."

"Yeah," the vegetarian says. "Why a doctor? And what does he give permission for?"

"I've never seen any instances of babies traveling. They don't allow it, with or without the doctor," the woman says.

"But I met a woman who says her baby -- " I start and they all shake their heads sadly, silencing me.

"She's here every year," the vegetarian says. "I checked the story out. She doesn't have a kid. I don't even think she's female."

They chuckle again, and the joviality is back. No matter how I push them, I can't learn what the other questions are. The vegetarian promises to tell me if I come to the bar later. I do, and he's passed out in a pile of corn chips. I vow to try and find him the following day.

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The next morning, as the speakers are setting up, I go to the Technological Secrets area. It's in a wide auditorium with holographic capabilities. My mind boggles just at the thought of seeing strange machinery in life-size and 3-D.

It takes me a moment to find a speaker who'll talk to me, who doesn't try to get me to wait until his presentation. I tell him about the lawyers' collective unease about the baby ban.

"You ask the teleportation stations they'll tell you it's because babies are too fragile for most kinds of travel. Like they'll ban an infant from a jet." The guy I'm talking to is six feet tall and has a honking nasal

voice. I'm glad I elected not to stay for his presentation, even though he seems nice enough. "But it's really because of the stress to the body."

"I thought there is no stress."

He looks at me as if I'm the dumbest thing he's seen at this conference, and given what I've seen, I'm almost insulted. He holds up a glass of water. "You can't teleport crystal either," he says. "Sometimes it shatters. And it shouldn't. I mean, they perfected this at the subatomic level, or so they say."

"You don't think they did?"

"Between you, me, and the wall," he says, "I know they perfected it. The problem is that they don't use the right equipment to teleport people. It's like building a house. We can build a damn fine house with everything correct. But we hire contractors who want to make as much money as possible, and they do it -- have done it -- since time immemorial by using inferior parts and charging the same as they would for good parts. I try to tell the lawyers that, but it's not glamorous, and it's damned hard to prove. They tell me they'll help me when I can show damage caused by inferior parts. I can show damage. I just can't make a credible link."

Later that day, I check his statements with a few other technology wonks. They agree that the problem with public teleportation is that it's public. The system used by the President and other heads of state is state of the art, so protected that nothing can go wrong. The system used by the rest of us, well, these guys would have us all believe it's held together by spit and glue and pieces manufactured just after the turn of the century.

It makes me think of all those bans on teleportation travel to Third World countries. If our technology is bad, what is the technology like that was hammered together by someone's Uncle Ralph? The very idea raises images of those poor puzzlebox monkeys with the corners where their middle should be.

Of course when I get back home, and call the various teleportation manufacturers, they all give me the company line and swear teleportation is the safest form of transportation since walking. Even that can go wrong, I say. Think of pot holes. Think of missteps, twisted ankles and tripping over small children. But the manufacturers don't find me funny. When I get belligerent, forgetting, for a moment that this is supposed to be a puff piece and not investigative reporting, they transfer me to their legal departments who remind me of libel laws and how careful I need to be in questioning their companies.

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The free range chicken is gone by the third banquet, but the speaker is delightful. He's a comedian just starting out, and he proves to me that the TVSo?s have a sense of humor, since most of his jokes are aimed at them, and they laugh uproariously. I don't. I feel vaguely embarrassed, mostly because I know I would have laughed if I'd been watching this guy in any other setting but this one.

As I head out, I look for Ruth. She's still surrounded by her lawyers, and when she sees me, she waves me over. She puts a hand on the overweight vegetarian's arm and informs me that he has hired her as a paralegal. I pull her aside, remind her that jobs aren't always that easy to come by and that she'd better check his credentials. She frowns at me, asks me if I think she's dumb or something -- a question which I decline to answer -- and then stalks off. I gather, from that whole exchange, that she's not taking the train home, and I turn out to be right. My wish has been granted. She has forgotten thoughts of Marriage and believes that our break-up is her idea. I find that I regret the whole plan, not because I wanted to marry her, but because I had hoped that I would at least get to try all parts of train travel, from meal to sleep to sex. We had neglected sex on the way there, and I was hoping for a bit on the way home.

Instead, I spend the next week finding a way to ship her clothes cheaply without using teleportation technology, since the vegetarian likes to keep his office "pure."

I am beginning to understand the sentiment. My moment of hesitation as I step on the teleportation platform in Bend -- I see no point in train travel all the way to Seattle if I'm not going to be able to have nookie in transit -- lasts nearly three minutes, and customers behind me get angry. But I keep thinking of those banned babies, and Uncle Ralph, and inferior grade equipment, and the way that the sheet rock in my condo flakes like someone's untended dandruff, and I find myself more and more reluctant to travel in that instantaneous sort of way. After all, why am I in such a hurry? I'm a journalist, for godssake, a man who makes his living off observing, and observation is something that can't be rushed. I am proud of my observation skills, and proud of my capability for contemplation that makes them possible.

But what I've been observing since I got back is my own reflection in the mirror. There's a line down one side of my face, an instant wrinkle that really doesn't look like a laugh line or something that would naturally occur as I age. It looks more like a fold, or a crease, something incorrectly ironed in, as if a section of me were miscut and hemmed wrong.

I never noticed the wrinkle before getting on that teleportation station in Bend. I have been obsessed with it since. And I think, I really think, that my obsession is a product of the TVSo? convention, but not for the reason that you'd think. It's not that I suddenly believe the teleporter has given me a new wrinkle. It's just that I find the idea of a wrinkle induced from the outside better than the idea that I'm growing older. It's easier to believe in the fiction. It's nicer.

It takes the responsibility for that particular line off me.

Or at least, that's what I tell myself. Because I do need to teleport on occasion for my job. Journalists observe, yes. But they must observe in the right places. And when my editor tells me to get to London yesterday, I do the next best thing. I get there two minutes from now, new wrinkles be damned.

But I find that I do examine mirrors more, and I wonder, when I think something particularly cruel, like most of my thoughts about Ruth lately, if I've become less than human. Is humanity something we can lose, little bit by little bit, like the vid personality and her charisma? And if so, how can we tell it's gone? Is it replaced by paranoia, by worry, in equal degrees? And am I, in worrying about this, showing signs of latent TVso?ism?

I don't know. But I do suspect that my recent desire to take the train to the far reaches of the United States has less to do with my unfulfilled sexual fantasy than it does with my desire to avoid a technology that I may have learned to fear. Then I remind myself of the history of this form of paranoia; I know that being a reporter from the fringe requires an ability to cross over into that land and appear to be a native. I'm simply afraid I've taken it too far. Going native requires residency in kooksville, and while it only takes an instant to reach that particular destination, it takes years and expensive psychotherapy to get out.

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When I turned in this essay, I thought of asking for a bonus, a sort of combat pay to compensate for the wrinkle, for the increased harrassment as I take an extra minute of other people's time while I hesitate before stepping on a teleportation platform.

But my editor vid-conferenced with me this morning, wanting to discuss what he calls "proper compensation." My article, he says -- (this thing you are currently reading, without this coda) -- has given him an idea. Teleportation has overtaken other forms of transportation so much that his younger readers have probably never flown in a plane or driven a car. He wants me to do these things, and report back

about my experiences, as if I have gone to yet another frontier, even if it is a part of the past.

He asks what I want to do first, and then reminds me this will be on the magazine's expense.

"A ticket on the Orient Express," I say.

"Ah," he says. "You'll title it 'Strangers on a Train?'"

I'm thinking not of Patricia Highsmith and Alfred Hitchcock, but of luscious, willing blonds with breasts the size of helium balloons and the ca-thunk, ca-thunk of the wheels on a track suggesting a rhythm that no teleportation device can hope to match.

"I hope so," I say, and realize this is the kind of fringe I like. "I certainly hope so."