

## Train Austen

*I'm halfway there. It's just nine more hours. I can make it through this. It's not even bad. Think of what I can buy for fifty dollars.*

We passed by eerie ghost towns, colossal rice fields, stubby mountains and crowded apartment complexes. The elderly woman next to me fell asleep in uncomfortably close proximity to my arm. The men under the sign with the crossed-out cigarette boldly and unashamedly lit their Marlboros. The boy, who was no older than sixteen, had been standing silently and alone for eight hours. He had no books, no tablet, and no games. He was just standing. In front of me sat a mother, a father and their two kids. The four of them occupied three seats. To their right, someone had thought ahead and brought a stool to keep them comfortable as they sat in the aisle. The two people packed into the seat adjacent to the sleeping woman rounded out to fourteen people on ten seats. It was a two-hundred-passenger train car. I guessed there were two-thirty-five or so.

Over the eighteen-hour ride, I probably overheard five hundred conversations. Of all the words exchanged between passengers, I understood two or three. The woman and boy next to me prodded me for a couple of very long minutes in their native language. I returned a blank stare and attempted to communicate that I didn't understand. They were relentlessly curious and left their fingers pointed in my direction as they tried to interrogate me. I was the only foreigner in the entire train car, and they were asking me a question. "America... ummm... Megua," I said. I pointed at myself. The woman smiled. She seemed happy with my answer. The two of them returned their attention elsewhere.

*Pride and Prejudice*. It was one of a handful of readable books I could find in the library. I had ransacked the foreign language section, desperate for something to entertain. Given the choice between classic literature and physics textbooks, I chose the former. I had already finished *The Lord of the Flies* and had forgotten to pack *The Call of the Wild*. The snobbery of Mr. Collins was the only thing

to keep my mind off the hours ahead and the children kicking my leg in the seat across from me. They had previously been well behaved and were watching cartoons on their mother's tablet. Now they were getting restless. The high-pitched, unrecognizable, over-the-top voices blaring from their speakers could only keep them happy for so long. The noise from the cartoon complemented the Kung Fu movie across the aisle. The classical radio behind me made for an impeccable trio, a perfect blend of talking alligators, vengeful warriors and ancient flute.

A salesman forced his way down the aisle with a cart full of white bags. It was some sort of candy concoction; with labels smothered in gleeful cows. He was quite the salesman: Loud. His sales pitch blared through his microphone and out his battery-powered speaker. He really wanted to sell those candies. He pushed through the aisle, forcing its occupants to flee onto the seated passengers on either side. He didn't mind, and maintained his steady, vociferous stream of marketing. He must have been reading off the nutritional facts. Or maybe he was promoting a new product. He could have been bashing other brands of candy. Or was he offering discounts? I couldn't tell. I made out one word: *niúnǎi*. It means milk. He had a quick tongue, the kind of tongue that would put Mrs. Bennett to shame. People were interested. He probably sold a dozen bags before he got to my row. He gave us all a sample. It was a round candy in the shape of a giant Smartee. I gave it a try. It tasted like milk. The family in front of me bought a bag.

I pulled an apple from my bag and was getting ready to bite into it. To my surprise, the woman next to me pointed at me in a state of alarm. She shook her head and waved her hand at me and starting spewing off a river of words I couldn't understand. She sounded concerned as she gestured towards the apple. I was struck. I had to be quick and decisive. I calmly pointed at my water bottle and made a rinsing motion. She seemed encouraged. I went to the lavatory, rinsed the apple off with my water bottle, and returned to my seat. She approved.

The lavatory was interesting. It consisted of two small rooms with in-floor toilets. The sight and the smell were indicative that the toilets had a hard time flushing. The sink was outside the two rooms. It was closely guarded. Two men exchanged stories while enjoying a pair of cigarettes. A third man sat on his suitcase and leaned up on the sink to catch some sleep. Someone maneuvered around him to rinse their hands. I slowly and carefully did the same. I felt sneaky-- like Mr. Wickham.

After I returned to my seat, I spent the good part of an hour dissecting the gossip between the members of the Bennet family. Lydia seemed irresponsible. Her mom was kind of annoying. My brain grew tired, and I struggled to focus. I didn't know if I could handle any more courtship from Mr. Darcy. I decided to spend some time staring out the window. I saw a row of abandoned thirty-story apartments in the middle of a farm field. The landscape in the distance was littered with hills and small shacks. Someone was plowing the field by hand, and stopped to watch the train go by.

I had spent the weekend in a small, mountainous city hiking through the gorgeous, egg-like hills and eating fantastically low-priced noodles. The exotic scenery, the painstakingly detailed temples, and the persistent street vendors made it everything I had envisioned. I climbed a mountain with a friend. We took a tour of the mountaintop rice terraces. The fresh air and unfamiliar terrain were a welcomed escape.

Everyone I had traveled with was flying back. Not me. I was going to save the ¥350 and take the 18-hour slow train. I had some traveling experience under my belt, and was confident I was up for the task. I hopped on the bus to the train station, stocked up on food at the convenience store, and was on my way. I'd had an unfortunate incident with ramen at home that spring, which rendered the instant noodles highly unappealing. I opted for a pack of Oreos, a bag of Lays, an apple, a banana and a small loaf of bread.

The train ride didn't start out terribly. My confidence grew and my prospects looked bright. I had leg room. There were open seats next to me. I quietly pulled out my book and was blissfully immersed in the literature. The bliss didn't last long.

After an hour the train was past capacity, and never to return to "normal". The woman to my left used the entire community table as a pillow. The scent of instant noodles surrounded me on all sides and the airspace morphed into a cacophony of music, television and loud conversation. Hours passed. My legroom was gone, I was breathing in smoke, and my book was becoming hard to read. I checked the time on my phone and started imagining what the plane was like.

I had reached the ten-hour mark when a small child pounced through the aisle, stopping only to stare at me. We were in rural country, and these people were not used to foreigners. He stared for what seemed like ten minutes. I periodically returned his gaze, and when I did he would hide behind the man seated closest to the aisle. It wasn't clear who was more scared of whom in this instance. No one around seemed fazed by the exchange. Just us. I retreated to 18<sup>th</sup> Century England and the now-familiar world of ball gowns and marriage proposals.

We were about eleven hours into the ride, and the young man next to me was still standing. It was unbelievable. He must have sat down for ten minutes. His face was stone cold. *I wonder what he's thinking about. He's probably sleeping.* I tried to follow suit. My travel pillow had been commandeered by my neighbor. The wall to my right was cold and metal. *This isn't going to work.* I tried closing my eyes, but gave up after about ten minutes. A while passed, and eventually I was able to siphon an hour of sleep.

I can't complain. It was about as immersive a cultural experience as I could imagine. There was almost nothing about it comparable to what I knew from home. Everyone was comfortable with everyone. People shared seats with strangers. No one noticed when the train was past capacity. There

seemed to be an infinite supply of people willing to pay to stand on the congested, smoky and boisterous vessel. I waited for someone to get upset at a nearby passenger blaring music or film. It never happened. There was a common understanding among everyone on the train.

Train employees paced the aisles with food for sale. The selection included duck legs, rice bowls, instant noodles and Coca-Cola. Most people went for the instant noodles. The crowd turned into a display of the slurping of noodles and the spitting of bones. I quietly munched on my Oreos. I had picked the ones with strawberry filling as a way to make my meal feel more exotic. I finished off my loaf of bread and tossed my wrappers on the garbage pile of duck bones and empty noodle bowls. I decided to take another nap.

*Four more hours.* I celebrated inside. *Four hours is nothing.* I was sick of the book. I'd had enough of the Victorian moneyed class and their banter, but I had no choice but to return for more. I didn't want to know Mr. Bennett's opinion of his daughter's courtship, but I quickly learned. *How did they make a movie out of this? Nothing's even happened yet. Isn't the movie like seven hours long? I bet it's harder to sit through than this train ride.* We passed a row of bright red rose bushes about a quarter mile long. For a minute, the never-ending farm fields on either side of me were replaced with the neon glow of the bush, which was quickly accompanied by a large array of rundown buildings and clotheslines. We had reached a small city. It was probably double the size of Madison; a micro-city by relative standards. A couple of people got off the train. *I should have taken the quantum mechanics book. It would have been more tolerable.*

More time passed. I was struggling. I hadn't stretched my legs in hours and had taken in more secondhand smoke than a speakeasy owner. I would have traded *Pride and Prejudice* for the instruction manual of a swivel-chair. But alas, it was the only book I had, and we were still three hours from my

destination. I couldn't bear to leave my mind unoccupied for that long. I had to keep reading or risk going insane. I was sure the people around me were impressed by my dedication.

*One more hour.* Finally, we were almost there. I started thinking about what I would do when I got back. I would brag to my friends about my lonely feat and taunt them for wasting their money on airline tickets. I would take a long, much-needed shower and eat some real food. I would never touch the dreaded masterpiece of a book again. As we got closer my leg shook as I anticipated our arrival. I returned my thoughts to the world of Ms. Austen. *Mr. Collins? Seriously, Charlotte?* I was done.

I closed my eyes and waited for it to end. I awoke to the massive apartments and banks of the sprawling metropolis I had become so familiar with. With a population putting to shame any American city not named New York, the urban center still posed a serious challenge for the average traveler. I wasn't worried. I was too excited to get off the train to think about it. I shot up out of my seat in anticipation well before we stopped. I was happier to be sent off that train than Mrs. Bennett was to send her daughters off in marriage. I stretched my legs and took a gulp of fresh air as I searched for translations to the signs. I proudly hopped on the subway for a couple more miles, snagged a taxi and was back in my dorm. I returned *Pride and Prejudice* to the shelf, never to be touched again. I was proud of what I had accomplished. I had experienced something too uncomfortable and foreign for my friends, saved money and cultured myself. I bragged about my experience as we gathered together and planned future ventures. I was invincible and ready for anything. A couple weeks later a group of four of us boarded a train for the thirty-seven hour ride to the western mountains. I brought three books.