

# “Coast Starlight”

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Fiction

March 2023

The boys rendezvous at Emeryville station at 9:20 PM. More accurately, Griffin and Aaron arrive at that time. Cal’s parents deliver him at 9:36 PM, five minutes before the train is scheduled to depart. They individually hug and kiss the boy farewell, then hug as a family unit, his mom sobbing openly. Cal lugs two stuffed canvas duffle bags and a bright turquoise backpack, which, likewise, is near bursting.

“Let’s go, jackass!” Griffin yells as Cal wobbles to the platform, looking as if he might snap like a popsicle stick under the weight of his possessions.

“Where do I get a ticket?!”

“We got you one, cupcake!” Aaron says.

The train – the legendary Coast Starlight – is right on time and the boys select the third car back of the engine. They stuff their things into the luggage compartments and slide into bench seats facing each other.

“Settle in, boys,” Griffin advises.

“How long is it?” Cal asks.

“Like twenty-two hours or something.”

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I forgot my food.”

“What food?”

“I had a bag of sandwiches and snacks and Snapple and shit. I left it on the damn kitchen table,” Cal laments, brushing his hooked bangs away from his eyebrows.

Aaron says, “They have a dining car. You’ll survive.”

“I prefer my sandwiches.”

“Did your mom make them?”

“Of course.”

“Poor baby,” Griffin chides.

The train rolls north through Northwest Berkeley along the bay. The seawater is pewter under a cloudless and star-speckled, late-summer sky. San Francisco glimmers softly in the distance. The boys, best friends, are heading to the University of Washington in Seattle to begin their freshman year of studies. Together, they had also considered the University of Southern California and the University of California – Santa Barbara, but Griffin was rejected by both. His GPA was pedestrian and his test scores were slightly below average. However UW, as Griffin put it, saw something in him that the others missed. As part of the application, the school required a “creative element,” a custom project that in some way would express the candidate’s personality and values. Griffin, despite his limited experience with arts and crafts, composed an abstract watercolor painting that vaguely resembled a deep-space supernova and entitled it “Unlimited Potential.” It was on a three-foot by five-foot canvas and, at considerable expense, he

packed and shipped the thing to the admissions department. “It was an epic gesture. They couldn’t reject me after that,” he declared.

On the other end of the spectrum, Aaron was offered a substantial financial scholarship to attend UW. He likely could have earned a berth at most universities in the country (his parents were rooting for UC–Berkeley), but he was deterred by the stuffy elitism of various places and wanted to get away from the Bay Area with his crew. “I’ll be happier, healthier, and in far less debt at the end of the day,” he asserted to his parents, who are both academics in their own right. With degrees from Spelman and Princeton, his mother Leslie is the Chair of the anthropology department at Berkeley. His father Bradley (University of Maryland bachelor’s and Cal Tech doctorate) is the CTO for a Bay-Area civil engineering firm.

Aaron is the only one of the three young men who knows exactly what he wants to study at Washington: bioengineering. He was a standout in math and science at Piedmont High, substantially more comfortable with advanced concepts than even his most gifted peers, and aced all of his related Advanced Placement courses. The humanities, on the other hand, were his Achilles heel, dragging his GPA down into the mid 3s. His mom has always suggested that his problem is his cynicism. Aaron, however, just doesn’t enjoy reading books that are not devoted to technical concepts. While he is not sure exactly what he will do with his degree upon completion, he knows that the field combines all of his primary areas of interest.

Griffin wants to “play the field” a bit before declaring a major, to no one’s surprise. He is the first member of his nuclear family to attend university. His parents, savvy entrepreneurs, linked up shortly after high school and, in lieu of pursuing degrees, founded the very successful Monteverde brand of retail spices and seasonings. Griffin knows that he will ultimately have the opportunity to take the reins of that operation if he doesn’t find his own niche.

Meanwhile Cal is having a hard time deciding between architecture and environmental science. He is also contemplating a dual degree in those areas, “to bring the built and natural environments together,” he says, having learned a bit of the lingo in recent months. The combo, however, will likely require over four years to complete. Cal tends to make things a bit more complex than they need to be.

By the time they reach Sacramento, just shy of midnight, all three of the boys are nodding off in their seats. Griffin, who is built like a brick shithouse (which is why he started at linebacker for Piedmont High), repeatedly encroaches on Cal’s personal space. Cal frustratedly relocates to the other side of the car, biffing Griffin in the head along the way. Aaron, ultimately, cannot find a comfortable position and decides to head to the dining car for a cup of coffee.

There is only one other person there and, to Aaron’s astonishment, it is his Piedmont classmate Bella Brooks. She is sipping tea and writing intently in a notebook, her wavy, almond hair hanging to her shoulders and framing her squarish face. In the moments before she notices Aaron’s presence, the boy grows nervous. For four years, even during other romantic entanglements, he had a lingering crush on Bella but never summoned the fortitude to act upon it. They ran in different circles, hers a bit higher in the social pecking order than his. They interacted on several occasions, but almost exclusively in the academic environment regarding academic matters: she was in his history and English classes both sophomore and junior year. They saw each other at the occasional party, but she seemed to be perpetually surrounded by a forcefield of confidantes and hangers-on. Once, he told one of Bella’s friends that he thought Bella was “intriguing”, a term he later realized was completely wonky. Alas, either the message never reached its target or Bella dismissed it out of hand.

Aaron considers turning on his heel and avoiding the interaction when Bella looks up with wide eyes.

“Aaron Keeler? You have to be kidding me!”

Aaron clears his throat, adjusts his checkered button-down shirt, then: “Bella! I thought that was you. What are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing. I’m heading up to Seattle.”

“Wait. This is wild. So am I! Are you going to UW?”

“Totally!” She grins. “Come sit. Sit, sit.”

Aaron slides into a seat at her table. He has never before found himself in such close proximity to Bella. Their knees nearly touch. “This really is crazy. Why aren’t you flying?”

“Same reason as you, I would guess,” she says. “I thought it would be cool to see everything on the way up. And, you know, I kinda want to clear my mind before everything gets started.”

“I didn’t know that you decided on Washington.”

“It was a last-minute thing, really. I got waitlisted at UCLA and Northwestern, but they didn’t come through.”

“Well, don’t feel bad. UW is cool as hell.”

“That’s what I’ve heard. Do you want some tea?” She gestures to a small stainless-steel pot.

“Oh, tea’s not really my thing. Maybe coffee…” He looks around and spots the café counter, where an older man in a brimmed cap sits and stares into space. Aaron hurries over and requests a cup of joe, then returns with it to Bella’s table.

She is writing in her notebook again and continues for a few long moments before setting her pen down and looking at Aaron. “Any good?”

“The coffee?” He takes a sip then makes a disappointed face. “Nope. It’s barely hot.”

“Yeah, it’s late. Probably been sitting there all night.”

He nods. “Whatcha writing?”

“Oh,” she blushes ever so slightly. “Just a story.”

“True story?”

“No. Fiction.”

“You made it up?”

“That’s what fiction means,” she deadpans.

“What’s it about?”

Bella thinks for a moment, smiles, then slaps the notebook shut. “I hardly know you, Aaron.”

“True, he says. We were like two ships passing in the night.”

“But the night lasted for four years.”

“I guess so.”

“How come?”

“How come we don’t know each other well?”

“Yeah.” She places her elbow on the table and rests her chin in her palm and looks into his face.

He squirms a bit. “Oh, shit, Bella... Don’t ask me that?”

“Why not?”

“Because the past is the past.”

She considers this briefly, then: “You know what? You are totally right. Let’s get to know each other now. It’ll be a new beginning.”

Aaron chuckles. “Sure. Let’s do that.”

They proceed to interview each other, first about their plans for college, then about their families. Aaron learns that Bella is an only child who was raised by a single mother. She refers to the woman alternatively as a “rockstar” and a “superhero.” He learns that Bella wants to be a journalist – “the next Katie Couric-slash-Oprah,” she notes – but has been convinced by her grandfather to study a technical discipline as well, which will set her apart from other aspiring journalists and give her something to fall back on should that angle not pan out. She is going to double-major in journalism and bioresource science. Her ambition makes Aaron think that he should probably add a second major to his own agenda to keep up with the Joneses.

“Sounds like quite the load,” Aaron says.

“Probably not as hard as bioengineering.”

“Who knows.”

“Yeah, we’ll find out.”

“You should talk to Cal. He might be in that school, too.”

“Cal Radcliffe?”

“Yeah, he’s on this trip with me. So is Griffin O’Neill. They’re up near the front.”

“No way!”

“Yeah. They’re my boys.”

“How did I not know that? You know, I hooked up with Cal last year.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We made out at the Coldplay concert. It was totally nuts. We haven’t even talked since then.”

Aaron swallows. He is perturbed that Cal never revealed that juicy detail, especially since the skinny bastard knew that Aaron had a thing for this girl. She wasn’t off limits, per se, but Cal should at least have come clean about it. Aaron makes a mental note to give his boy a hard time as soon as he goes back to his seat.

“Well,” Aaron says, searching for words, “Cal is like that I guess.”

“Like what?”

“Aloof, or whatever.”

She hums, a reaction that Aaron is unable to interpret.

He wonders whether he is performing well in this interaction. He knows that he is not the most couth of young men, certainly the consequence of having a rather geeky father. However, against all odds, his old man overachieved with Aaron’s mother who is beautiful, sophisticated, and well-adjusted. Aaron hopes that he will grow out of his awkwardness early in his college career.

They chat for another long while before Bella checks the time and announces that she needs to get some sleep.

“I have a sleeper cabin,” she notes.

“You mean, you have a bed?”

“You guys don’t?”

“We’re sleeping in chairs.”

She purses her lips. “Well, I can’t let you suffer like that. Why don’t you come share my bed?”



“Share your bed?”

“Yeah, it’s small, but I don’t bite.”

Aaron feels his pupils dilate and his spine tingle. He attempts to stifle his enthusiasm as he stutteringly agrees to her proposal. He follows her to the sleeper car, admiring her confident gait and her appealing form – compact but curvaceous, exactly the way he likes it. He quietly thanks God for orchestrating this moment, although he knows that he is about to commit a sin of the flesh.

When they step into her cabin, Bella says, “Now, don’t get the wrong idea. We’re just going to sleep, nothing more. Maybe cuddle. That’s it.”

“Whatever you say.” Although Aaron hopes that she is just playing coy, he will gladly take what he can get. They will have a lot more time to get to know each other, socially and physically, over the coming years. A cuddle would be a good place to start.

They take turns climbing up to the bunk, which barely fits the two of them. “We’re gonna have to spoon,” Bella says, turning onto her side. Aaron follows suit, his body conforming to her shape, and cautiously places his hand on her hip. She lays her hand on top of his, then guides his hand to her breast. He cups it and sighs happily.

“Feel good?” she asks.

“Feels great.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Bella.”

When he wakes, Bella is no longer in the bunk. Outside, the sunrise is illuminating the chains of scrubby hills and, farther out, stony peaks that characterize the Northern Californian landscape. Aaron rubs his face, then hops down.

Cal and Griffin are asleep when Aaron returns to their car with three coffees. He had expected to find Bella in the dining car, but no such luck. He sits down and gives each of his friends a poke. Griffin wakes up and stretches, but Cal keeps his eyes shut. Aaron hands Griffin a cup.

“Coffee?”

“Yep.”

“With sugar?”

“The way you like it.”

Griffin sips audibly. “Where were you?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Tell me.”

“Cal has to hear, too.”

Griffin roughly smacks Cal, who wakes with a start.

“What the fuck?”

“It’s morning.”

“Too early.”

“Aaron has a story.”

Cal takes a deep breath and smacks his lips. “Fine. Fine.”

Aaron holds out a coffee.

“Cream in it?”

“The way you like it.”

Cal sniffs his cup, then drinks.

“Guess who’s on the train,” says Aaron.

“Who?”

“Guess.”

“It’s too early to play games,” Cal whines.

“Fine. Bella.”

“Bella Brooks?”

“Yep. I slept with her last night,” Aaron announces with a prideful grin.

“You banged her?” Griffin asks.

“No, we kept our clothes on.”

“Why?”

“That’s just how it happened,” Aaron says. Then, to Cal: “By the way, she told me that the two of you got busy last year.”

“That we did what?”

“That you made out at the Coldplay concert.”

Cal furrows his brow, an indication of sincere befuddlement. “Wait a second. That was Bella?”

Griffin says, “You’re seriously confused?”

“Dude, I was such a mess at that show. I barely remember a thing. I knew some girl was kissing me, but I thought it was a random chick.”

“How could you not know it was Bella?” asks Aaron.

“I told you, man! I was drunk. I was high. I was in the damn shadow realm!”

“You’re a dipshit.”

“Did she say I was good?”

“She said you were the worst. Absolute slop.”

Griffin laughs and jabs Cal in the shoulder. Cal shakes his head dejectedly.

Around noon, they pass through Eugene, Oregon. The train conductor announces that this stop will last fifteen minutes. The boys decide to step down from the train for a bit of fresh air. It is cooler up here, the environment pristine, minty. Griffin pulls out a pack of American Spirits and offers them around. Cal considers for a moment, then takes one. Aaron, as always, passes.

“So this is Oregon...” Griffin muses.

“You’ve never been up here?”

“Maybe when I was little. Can’t remember.”

“You have the memory of a hamster,” Cal says. “You should get your brain checked for soft spots.”

Aaron looks up the tracks and spots Bella, who is facing the other way, stretching.

“There she is.”

The boys watch her, Cal and Griffin puffing their cigarettes. In a moment, she turns around, spots them, and waves.

“Hey, Bella!” Griffin shouts.

“Hi, boys!”

“Come see us!”

“OK! I will!”

“Fuck,” Cal mutters.

“What do you care, Cal?”

“I don’t want to have to explain the Coldplay thing. I know you guys are going to sell me out.”

“Bro,” says Griffin with a wry visage, “you really think I want to make things awkward for you?”

Late-afternoon, after the Portland stop, as the boys are playing poker with the rolls of quarters Cal’s mother gave him for laundry, Bella saunters up the aisle. Aaron spots her and his face grows prickly.

“Here she comes.”

“Shit,” says Cal.

Griffin chuckles.

“Look at this motley crew!” Bella announces.

“What’s crack-a-lackin’, Bella?” Aaron says overly nonchalantly and immediately registers that he sounded like a weirdo.

“Not much. Four hours to go! I see you boys found a way to pass the time.”

“You want to get in on this?” Griffin asks, then: “Slide over, Cal. Don’t be rude!”

Cal glares at him, then shifts toward the window. Bella takes a seat. She looks fresh-faced and happy, adorable, an archetypal college babe. Aaron is careful not to gaze directly at her for too long – precarious, like staring at a lunar eclipse.

Griffin starts. “Aaron tells us that you have a sweet setup down there.”

“It is pretty sweet. I bet you wish you could have snuggled with me last night, huh Griff.”

“Snuggle? Aaron said it was a lot wilder than that.”

“Jesus Christ, shut your mouth for once, Griffin.”

“What? I’m just relaying what you said!”

Bella cackles. Her voice rings melodically throughout the car. She doesn’t seem to have a self-conscious bone in her body.

“It’s so cool that you’ll be at school with us,” Griffin continues.

“That’s what I was telling Aaron,” she says. “I hardly know you guys. It will be fun to figure things out together.”

“Exactly. Speaking of figuring things out, whatever happened between you and Cal at the Coldplay concert? He says he didn’t even realize it was you that he was sucking face with.”

“Good God,” Cal grumbles.

“Is that true, Cal?” Bella asks, thoroughly offended.

“I... I...”

She mocks him. “You... You... what?”

“Don’t blame me. Blame the weed. Blame the Jim Beam!”

“Wow,” scoffs Bella. “And here I thought that I made a big impression on you!”

“If I was sober, you would have!”

Griffin and Aaron laugh at their floundering friend.

Bella grins and gives him a nudge. “Oh, calm down. I’m just giving you a hard time. It wasn’t that memorable for me either.”

Bella watches the boys play a few hands before excusing herself. “I’m going to go to the observation car,” she announces. “It’s just so beautiful out there. I don’t want to waste it.”

“There’s an observation car?” Aaron echoes.

“Yeah! Come with me, Aaron.”

He lays down his cards and sheepishly follows the girl down the aisle. They cut through five more cars before arriving at the observation car, which features large picture windows, skylights, and comfy seats that face outward. Aaron and Bella find a spot near the middle of the car.

“This is so cool,” Bella says.

“Really cool,” Aaron agrees.

North of Portland, they ride along the Columbia River through verdant landscapes and pine forests. Another clear day offers them grand vistas, including an extended viewing of the snowcapped Mount St. Helens some thirty miles to the east of the track.

“That thing blew up like forty years ago,” Bella says. “My mom was a toddler.”

“I think I knew that,” Aaron replies.

“It was a totally massive eruption and it caused the biggest landslide in recorded history. Half of the mountain collapsed. It wiped out like miles and miles of the surrounding forests.”

“What happens if it blows up again right now?”

“It would be quite the show. Maybe the last show we ever see.”

Aaron thinks, opens his mouth, shuts it, opens it again: “Well, I’d be glad to watch that show with you next to me.”

Bella grins and wraps her arm around his. In his head, Aaron pumps his fist triumphantly.

They ride in silence for a long time, Bella pressing her head against Aaron’s shoulder. He is content – more than content – and afraid to move an inch lest he cause her to readjust or pull away.

Finally, she says, “If we do this, you have to be in it to win it.”

Aaron looks at her, squints his eyes. “What are you saying?”

“I mean, if we, you know, date and become a thing, you can’t blow me off. I have abandonment issues. I never really knew my dad.”

“That’s rough.”

“I’ve processed it, for the most part. I just need my man to be sensitive.”

Aaron grins. “So, if I’m lucky enough to get with you, then I’m locked in for good?”

“Not just ‘get with’ me, but date me proper. Take me out to dinner and shows. I like stand-up comedy, FYI. Help me with my assignments, which I know you will understand way better than I will.” She draws a breath and releases it. “Hold me when I cry.”

He thinks quietly, then says, “I think I can do all of that. But what happens if it doesn’t work out? What happens if we break up?”

“Just let me be the one who initiates it. I can break up with you, not the other way around.”

“Sounds like a lopsided deal.”

“Trust me. I’m worth it.”

“I believe you,” Aaron says, and he means it. He puts his arm around her and squeezes. She hums affectionately.

As the Coast Starlight chugs into Washington state, Bella says that she wants to finish writing her short story before they arrive in Seattle. They share a long and very tight hug, then Aaron walks her back to her cabin.

Returning to the coach car, Aaron finds Cal and Griffin arguing about who is the better golfer. It seems as if the dispute has been ongoing for some time. When Aaron sits, they quiet down and look at him expectantly.

“Did you?” Griffin asks.

“Nope,” Aaron replies.

“Come on, man.”

“It’s not like that.”

“No surprise,” says Cal. “I didn’t get very far with her either.”



“You can’t blame her for that,” Griffin huffs. “What’s next?” he asks Aaron.

“Not sure. Baby steps I think.”

“Fuck baby steps. We’re in college now, dude. We’re going to be swimming in it. You won’t remember Bella’s name six months from now.”

Aaron chuckles to himself and shakes his head.

The train pulls into King Street Station just before 8 PM. The boys collect their things and disembark. They walk along the platform in the direction of Bella’s car, but do not see her exit. Aaron quickly hops back onto the train and checks her cabin. It is empty. He experiences a complex emotion, sighs, then heads back outside.

“I knew that was going to happen,” Cal says, lighting an American Spirit.

“She’s just playing hard to get,” Griffin advises. “Don’t let her suck you into that. Chicks can really fuck with your mind if you let them.” He nudges Cal, who hands him the pack of cigarettes.

A comment rises in Aaron’s chest, but he catches it and, instead, nods wordlessly. The boys shoulder their duffle bags and, their entire lives in front of them, head for the exit.