

## A Storyteller's Stories

by Larry Johnson

Truck drivers like my books. That's what my publisher tells me. And lonely, over-the-hill divorced middle-aged guys. I can spin the books out faster than my publisher can sell them, so they're staggered for the market, like pumpkins sold only around Halloween, or Thanksgiving turkeys.

There are lots of them in the can. Class B mystery-and-violence novels sold next to the supermarket magazines in racks, just under the top 10 bestsellers, and there's some sex in them, too, but not too much.

Paperbacks you read for roughage, then you toss them in with the other garbage. It's a living. Beats the 9 to 5 routine.

Nice thing about my books, as opposed to movies: not much overhead. You crank them out and sell, say, 50,000 of them, you're doing OK. So my publisher, until recently, stuck with me like a talent agent for actors who always get about 20 lines in a tough-guy movie before they get shot and disposed of.

The lower rungs of the food chain. But it's a living.

Speaking of movies, my fourteenth novel, *Dead Letters from Malcolm*, was almost made into a movie, which would have been my big break. A Hollywood star, whose name I can't mention or he might sue me, bought the option on it, it was a good tough-guy part for this actor, but he let the option lapse.

Oh, well.

My problem right now is I'm stuck with what to do with this novel I'm now writing. I tried coming up with something different from the usual trash I write, but my characters are stuck. I gotta find a way out.

What I do, see, I invent the characters first, I forget about the plot except for the start of it. Then I just let the characters take over, I let them tell their stories, let them fuck things up, then I try to figure out how to get them out of their jam, or I just let them die or go crazy or disappear. It's like what God does, you create

something, then you just let it go out of control. Then you try to wrap it up and put an ending on it.

But I can't sit around all day and jerk around with my characters. I have deadlines.

Take *Last Toll Exit*. I put these five losers in a room, all down-and-out guys with nothing left to lose. They're collecting welfare checks or Social Security, they hang out most of the day in a coffee shop just to get the hell out of the house and away from their bitchy wives.

They have interesting pasts and are funny guys, so I have them talking about stuff that is funny. That keeps the pages turning. Then I get to the point: one day out of nowhere, they decide their only hope is to rob somebody or steal something or con some people. This becomes their main topic of conversation, they start to get serious about it. Making plans is something new to them.

These guys conclude that going after raw cash is a mistake, there is simply too much security put on greenbacks. Banks are out of the question, and knocking over a gas station or a liquor store ain't worth it either, too little cash on hand and the owners more likely than not have guns within reach to pop you. So they settle on an art museum, heist a few famous paintings. One of the guys, who looks less like a loser than the rest of them, offers to get a job there and be in place on the inside to smooth the deed when it comes down, no problem.

And that's what they do, they make off with three famous paintings worth zillions of bucks. Before the heist they had done their research and found shadowy agents in Switzerland who bought high-end art on behalf of anonymous Asian collectors. They fence the paintings at a big discount but still wind up being millionaires. Their money sits in impenetrable accounts in various Caribbean island banks. They think they're home free.

Only problem is, the paintings turn out to be forgeries. As luck would have it, a scholar had examined these very paintings a few months before they were stolen, and his findings, printed in *Art Today*, coincided perfectly with the the paintings' disappearance. The museum squawked and refused to return the insurance money paid on the stolen items.

So now the paintings are probably worthless. These characters of mine were making it hard on me, I had to figure out ways for them to dodge the investigators of the insurance company that paid out for the stolen paintings but still wanted them back to prove they were forgeries, but worse yet were these ninja assassin types trying to hunt them down, hired by the pissed-off anonymous Asian art collectors.

It took me weeks to figure out what to do.

So I really had to stretch on that one. I invented these heirs of Nazis who had escaped a dragnet right after World War II and settled in Paraguay, a couple of high-ranking SS guys who had decades ago taken the original paintings with them, stolen from French museums. When these heirs, sitting around coffee in Asunción, read about the heist of the fake paintings, they see their chance to flog the originals. They get in touch with the insurance company for the museum (the policy was for \$300 million), and they make a deal.

The Nazi heirs pretend to be the real thieves of the museum robbery, being now in a position to "return" the original paintings. They take \$22 million from the insurance company, and they give half of that to the ninjas, so the Asians and their Swiss agents make out OK and are mollified. In return the ninjas tell the Nazi heirs where the real thieves are.

In an ironic ending to the novel, the real thieves are pinned down by Paraguayan thugs in what looks like what is going to be a big shoot-out, and my loser heroes think they are done for. But what happens is they get paid off, too...about 1% of the whole deal the Nazi heirs made, or \$220,000, just to keep their mouths shut and leave their own trail back to the ninjas and Paraguay covered.

A Happy Ending! The losers spend their money wisely and frugally as beach bums in Mexico.

*Last Toll Exit* sold 27,232 copies. Nobody wanted the movie rights. I don't mind telling you now how the story comes out, because the book's out of print and Clint Eastwood hasn't called me lately to pick up the movie rights.

Not long after that, my publisher dumped me. They sell mostly diet books and New Age spirituality titles now. If I tell you who they are, they'd probably sue me, so I leave that alone.

My new publisher, by the way, is owned by a group of Japanese-Taiwanese consortiums that sell mostly electronic gadgets. So ninjas don't figure prominently in my books anymore.

I get my royalties in yen or Bitcoins. I'm not complaining. The cheapskates don't believe in advances, but they do let me run up a lot of big and iffy expenses on a credit card they let me use, like strip clubs and race track bars, but they don't complain. Maybe for them it's all just a tax write-off, anyway. Or their accountant doesn't know English.

Anyway, I am writing this new novel about a guy who is minding his business on a business trip when he discovers a body in his Standard Deluxe Compartment on the Amtrak train to Los Angeles. My character, Andy Lubbock, got on the train in Tacoma, Washington, and when he first gets on the train there is nobody in his room. He has a leisurely lunch in the dining car, then he goes to the place on the train where booze is sold, a kind of 7-11 on rails, a dinette kind of thing where he downs two beers and two Jack Daniels poured into plastic cups.

With Andy is a gym bag stuffed with \$285,000 of freshly embezzled money he's taken out of his bank account, money he told his banker was to be used as payroll for migrant workers in Yakima. Good old Andy is on his way to Mexico to get lost with the money. He takes the train to avoid the intrusive TSA security checks at the airport. He clutches the bag close to him as he chugs the alcohol, sweat and angst on his face.

When he goes back to his room in the sleeping car, he finds a corpse staring out the window, a body that is still warm. Seeing no blood on the body, Andy doesn't know if this passenger simply croaked in a room he wasn't supposed to be in, or what. He takes a closer look and sees that this guy has a thin red line impressed around his neck. That doesn't look good, even with no blood around.

He figures the guy's been strangled and dumped in his room. He checks the body for an ID and finds nothing in the corpse's pockets. Foul play, Andy figures. Who boards a train with nothing on his person?

And now he tries to figure out what to do. He can't call the cops, that's for sure. Andy could see this was not a natural death. Hell, anyone can figure that out.

Andy frets. Is this just bad karma, or does this murder here have some perverse connection with his own crime? How does he report this dead guy to the conductor without the police coming on board and getting his name and asking all sorts of questions at a time he is on the lam, with the clock ticking on the discovery of his own misdeeds? Where does he safely stash his bag of loot on this train, in his compartment or in the ceiling or...what??

And so, once again, one of my goddamn characters lets me down. Andy has no idea what to do, and so I have no idea what to do, either.

So I stop writing.

That's where I'm at. That's where you're at, too, come to think of it.

So what do I do? I get myself a ticket on the same Amtrak trip Andy was taking, and I hope the passengers en route will help me get out of this mess. The story, by the way, I call *Mexico Skies*. That's the working title, anyway.

I have run up 1,800,000 yen on my bottomless Japanese-Taiwanese credit card so far on this stalled project, which is about \$17,000, so this desperate Amtrak journey is a drop in the bucket.

I can't invent Nazis in Paraguay to get me out of this one. So I'm sitting here on the *Pacific Coastliner* to Los Angeles, hoping to get something going.

Well, one good thing: I love trains. Love that clickety-clack rhythm and the rocking back and forth of the cars that puts you to sleep. You close the curtains over the door to your roomette to shut out the corridor outside; you close the other curtains to your window; you stretch out on the narrow bedlette and pull the covers over you; you rock this way and that, and then you...sleep and sleep.

## Chapter 2

First thing I do once the train pulls out of Tacoma, I go to the dining car and bribe the head waiter. It's really easy. I slip the guy \$50 and tell him I'm traveling alone, and at mealtimes I want to be able to point out to him the table I want to be seated at, and then he's supposed to do the rest.

I tell him I'm eccentric and don't want to sit with certain types of people.

For \$20 I'd have had to explain things to him or even risk getting rejected; for \$50 he shuts up, nods and keeps his opinions to himself. It's a good investment.

This way I get to sit with people who are possible characters for *Mexican Skies*, not some blue-haired ladies from Iowa who are going to tell me about their operations or their grandchildren. No way are they going to fit the mold of the person or persons who did in the dead body in Andy Lubbock's compartment.

But the 50 bucks may not be enough to do the trick. I need to push the odds in my favor, you see. I tell the head waiter there's another \$50 in it for him if he does a good job. He's glad with the arrangement and is polite enough to not show how crazy he thinks I am.

So far, so good.

Now, back to Andy, because I forgot one important part I should tell you about right now. When Andy finds the body and figures the guy was garroted, there's nothing he can do without putting himself into a police investigation that will only derail his plans to get to Mexico. Hell, he would be the prime suspect. They'd haul him off the train, and then he could kiss his \$285,000 and Mexico good-bye.

So Andy does the only thing that is open to him. With considerable effort and several curses, he stuffs the body into the overhead pull-down bed and closes it shut.

The overhead bed in these Amtrak compartments, in case you've never seen one, is for a second passenger in this roomette, if there was a second passenger, which in the case of my trip now (and Andy's fictional one), there isn't. If you travel alone and book one of these rooms, the steward simply slams down the two seats facing each other so that these fold into a bed, then he/she puts sheets and a blanket over

them and wishes you a good night. There is no need to mess with the pull-down bed above.

So to sum up one more time: The overhead bed, if needed for a second passenger, pulls down like an airplane storage bin, and it can be clamped back up again and closed. That's where Andy stuffed the body, and then he closed it up again.

Andy hoped nobody would know the body was there until Andy got off the train, or until the sleeping car started to stink up.

Andy thought maybe he would make it to Mexico by then, but he left me in a terrible spot. What if the killer was still on the train and had plans for Andy? What if the killer intended for the body to surface that day and make the 11 o'clock news, and what then if there were no such news? What then, Andy? Would the killer then start coming to look for *you*, Andy?

Or was the dead body in Andy's compartment *even the killer's intended victim?* *What if the killer thought the victim was Andy, the intended target? What if the embezzled employer was already on to him?*

Thanks, Andy, for leaving such a nice mess and not giving a shit.

Once again, I have to clean up the loose ends. And in fairness, Andy had in fact thought and worried to some extent about these things, but only fleetingly in his panic.

And now he needed my help.

## Chapter 3

I'm hopeful by going to the dining car three times a day, picking my chow mates, I'll come up with some good candidates for the killer of the body in Andy's/my compartment. Andy's roommate's killer had to be still on the train, or alternatively, the killer could re-board the train at any time, otherwise there's no plot, no novel here, and I can't have that.

And of course, retracing Andy's journey, my job now is to figure out the killer's motives — and what to do with Andy, either let him make it to Mexico or see him go down in ignominious flames. I suppose I want to save him, but I have to admit I don't really care. I mean, I made him up, he's not real.

I am getting pressure from the Asians who claim some Russian pornographers with mafia money have invested in the movie rights to my story, a story with no contours yet. The Russians don't care if there is an unresolved mystery as long as there are plenty of lurid sex scenes in the sleeping cars; that the train is not Amtrak but the Siberian Express; Andy has to be Andrei, and where he is fleeing to is Mongolia.

Jesus, rewrites before there even is a script or the novel the script is based on. But this would mean my break, at long last, into movies. There's that.

In *Three's Too Much Company*, I let the hero get shot in the back by his girlfriend, just when he thought he was scot-free, and she takes his money and runs off with an ambitious born-again politician from Ohio. It was a rotten thing for me to do, because Rod McFadden, the hero, was just trying to recapture money rightfully his so he could send his loving kids to college. I let the poor bastard down, let him get snuffed by his bitch girlfriend.

But I was under deadline and needed to wrap the story up. Easiest way was to kill the guy off. My publisher liked the ending, saying its marketing people said most of my readers were divorced and would empathize with a hero who was two-timed by a cunt girlfriend with a thing for right-wing politicians.

Misery likes company.

But this time, I want Andy to make it, or I think I do. I just need more plot. That's, again, why I'm riding this train. I am not enjoying it as much as I otherwise would. Hell, this is work.

I need clues.

Oh, and I forgot this, too. My Andy Lubbock had taken on board with him, besides a suitcase full of new clothes and the gym bag stuffed with \$285,000 in cash, a 9 mm Glock automatic. Just in case. So I had on board with me, too, a suitcase of clothes, *sans* the gym bag full of \$285,000, but I, too, had put in a shoulder holster a 9 mm Glock automatic. I had no permit to do that and was breaking state and federal laws, but such are the demands of art. I had to feel the part. The only way to go if you're a crack novelist like me. I needed to sense the danger about me and have the security of knowing I could counter it.

Ok, call me nuts. But you want to tell a story, you got to get into it. No other way about it.

## Chapter 4

My Andy Lubbock had worked for TriStar Defense for 15 years, rising to the level of Assistant Vice President for Procurement. He was a mild-mannered, intelligent and meticulous accountant, a gray guy who blended into the gray corporate background.

Nobody at TriStar knew of his divorce, and how after that his life had slowly unraveled. His kids grew up, left home and distanced themselves from him, the way kids do.

He lost his home in the divorce and lived in a drab and bare one-bedroom apartment three blocks from work so he could walk to work. He kept his old blue Subaru with over 100,000 miles on it locked up in a rented garage out in the country.

Actually, the only anchor left in his life was his work. He did his job well, but that was it. He rebuffed approaches from fellow workers to join in drinks after work, or attend company picnics or the annual Christmas parties. In time, everybody left him alone.

Andy liked it that way.

Like most white collar criminals, Andy first thought about how sloppy his company was with its multi-million dollar defense contracts, how deeply in trouble TriStar could get if the idiots in the Pentagon ever looked twice at the inflated bills they were paying. And he soon figured out how he could profit from this sloppiness and waste and make some of it become his own instead.

TriStar was a master in the arts of cost overruns, which included knowing when to put sizable portions of its profits back to work for it in the form of campaign contributions to key Senators and Congressmen. Its chief products were "smart" weapons, laser-guided bombs, and drones that flew without pilots. Defense budgets were being slashed year after year, but TriStar prospered in its own special, well-greased orbit.

Andy wanted out of there, not because he was disgusted or hated his work all that much, but because he knew he had to start something totally different in his life or

he would go out of his mind. He called it his "inner gyroscope," a kind of early warning system that went off telling him he was on a collision course with his neurons. His job was so routine and dull that it tasted like chalk in his mouth.

Andy wanted to let go, to lie on a beach somewhere for days on end, with a frosty fruited drink in his hand with a little paper umbrella in it, and a chocolate-skinned girl by his side, one who would massage and caress him and speak not a word. This was the life he wanted.

He didn't jump into embezzlement with all fours, he experimented with it at first.

He set up his own off-shore corporation, Western Technologies, Inc., and opened a Cayman Island bank account for his new company. Then at work he changed a few lines in the computer's software so that monies paid to a small subcontractor, Western Engineering Services, Inc., were increased by 8% and paid to Western Technologies. When TriStar was invoiced by Western Engineering Services for its services, Andy wired them their payments out of his Western Technologies account and kept the 8% override.

The first time he did this he waited to see what would happen. He was confident nothing would happen. If anyone did squawk, he knew it would take TriStar weeks to figure out what went wrong, since, although Andy had access to the company's computer to correct errors, he was not ordinarily in the system, and there were dozens of other persons who would be suspected first before he would be questioned. He would only get caught if and when somebody decided to investigate the corporate papers of Western Technologies, Inc. and its opaque maze of convoluted transactions and multiple money transfers. But long before even that might happen he would be long gone.

After crossing the line for the first time, making a deposit of \$456,000 in his bank account and paying Western Engineering \$419,520, Andy sat back and waited. The next payment to Western Engineering would be in approximately 45 days.

Nothing happened, as Andy expected. The amount of money was peanuts compared to the billions rolling in and out of TriStar, and Andy figured the way he would succeed was not to get greedy.

In the course of several weeks Andy's bank account swelled past the \$200,000 mark.

Then one day he came to work and announced to his superiors that he was being treated for a rare degenerative disease of the nervous system. Andy had found a doctor who accepted Andy's convincing act that he was progressively losing sensations in his left hand and arm. Andy knew how to react to the needles and the examinations, and he applied for permanent partial disability with TriStar.

Andy made a brave effort at staying at work until his bank account now reached the \$285,000 mark, his goal. He bravely told co-workers he would manage with the benefits from the disability insurance, and he quit.

Andy was given a quick and self-conscious farewell ceremony on his last day of work, with most of this co-workers who hardly knew him glad the party was over after the decent amount of time was spent on wishing him all the best.

A month before his flight on Amtrak, Andy had donated his furniture to the Good Will and given most of his clothing to a shelter for street people. He bought what little clothing he'd need in Mexico, cleaned out his off-shore bank accounts in an overnight private flight to the Cayman Islands, and today he had his Amtrak ticket in his pocket and a gym bag full of cash.

All was going well until he found the dead man in his compartment. That's where I lost track of him.

It even occurred to me that Andy had killed the man and left the body there so *Andy* would be declared dead, and all traces of Andy would then stop there. But then Andy would have been smart enough to leave some kind of identification on the body, identifying the dead man as him, no?

Or was Andy trying to give me the slip, too? I shudder at the thought.

## Chapter 5

Michael Jordan was the name of my sleeping car steward. He was an amiable black man whose grandfather had worked on Pullmans in the great hey-day of passenger trains. Like a lot of kids in Chicago's Southside, Michael was raised by his grandparents after his parents got ground up in drugs and repeat visits to correctional institutions.

Michael's grandparents raised him well, and he wanted nothing more than to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather. Right out of high school he got aboard Amtrak as a sleeping car steward, and unlike Andy Lubbock, Michael loved his job.

He also liked the fact that through no effort of his own he had a famous name. If you're one of the three people who don't know, his pro basketball namesake is a national icon.

"I'll give you my autograph if you want," he told me, and he gave a hearty laugh. I liked him right away.

When Michael came to puff up my pillows and kick the seats down into a bed, I slipped him a \$50 bill as I had done the headwaiter just a couple of hours ago. Dinner was going to be served in a few minutes, I had a reservation for the second sitting, but Michael was already making my roomette's chairs into a bed, maybe just to have something to do.

"Michael, I want you to have this," I said, when I slipped him one of the new \$50 bills that look like play money.

"Whoa, thank you, sir," he said, "but this is *way* too much, folks maybe give me \$5 or \$10, but this is too much." He half-heartedly extended the bill back to me.

But I waved him off, told him the tip was for information. I told him I was writing a story about travel on Amtrak, and I needed to know something about the other passengers in our sleeping car. I told him not to worry, I wouldn't use anybody's name, but I needed some background and profiles for the story I was writing. He would be my source.

Michael Jordan hesitated. "Well, I see...but, ah, sir, I don't really know anything I can tell you that'd help you, and I don't go poking around into the passengers'

belongings or business," looking worried like that was what I was asking him to do.

"No, no," I reassured him, "I just want you to report to me what you see and hear, let me know if there are any interesting-looking passengers on board, people I might want to interview. Just information you may see or hear, nothing illegal."

Michael could see that would be OK and immediately pocketed the \$50. "Well, that's no problem, that's all you want. Can I get you something to drink, I have my own bottle of Wild Turkey in my bunk, can I interest you in some of that?"

Michael seemed anxious to put the \$50 to good use right away.

"Sure, Michael, why not?" I said. I really didn't want the drink, but I felt like bonding a little with Michael would do some good. It was going to be a long trip, two whole days. I like to chatter, get to know people. Who knows, if I stay stuck in a dead-end with *Mexico Skies*, maybe I can use a character like Michael in another story. I'm always thinking, you see.

Michael turned in the corridor to head for the booze, then turned back and stuck his head into my tiny compartment. "Oh, sir..."

"Call me Drew," I said, which was the name on my ticket. You can call me Drew, too. I use a different name on my books, or in other ways as well, but I think I'll leave that out of here.

"OK, Drew... You wouldn't be wanting me to keep a special eye out for unattached good-looking females, too, now would you?" giving me a wink.

"Well, that can't hurt, Michael, that can't hurt at all!" I winked back.

Michael gave out a big laugh. Now I could see he was happier now that we had a little conspiracy going on here between us. I could still hear his laugh as he weaved away from me, down the corridor.

Maybe Michael has done this before.

## Chapter 6

The announcement that the second seating for dinner was now being called came over the loudspeaker just above my head. Michael had given me a water glass with a generous pour of his Wild Turkey in it, and it felt good going down, the auburn liquid warming my tummy. Stretched out on top of the heavy wool blanket and nestled into the tiny pillows I had bunched up so I could get my head high enough to look out the window, I was in no hurry to get up and eat. America rolled lazily by.

As I held the glass in the embrace of my hand, I made a mental note to do this the next time I rode the rails, to tip the steward at the very start of the journey. Set things right upfront for all concerned. Win-win.

I had decided to put Andy Lubbock on a train for a reason. As I said, I love trains. I go to Europe now and then with a Eurailpass each time, just to ride the trains. Some of them are truly elegant, some are terrible. But I love them all. I once went from one European train to the next for three days straight, not caring where they went, the trains serving as my moveable hotel.

I like the glide at slow speeds, that feeling of just slicing through the countryside, being all comfy contained in an hermetically sealed tube of people suddenly shut out from the cares of the world out there, floating like a slug sliding over a mirror.

And I like the jostling, the sudden jolts when the engineer lets it all out, and you look out sometimes at highways running parallel with the tracks, and you see you are going faster than the cars on the road, and you could just lie back and snooze, look up at the stars at night, and you'd know you were zooming along, steadily and surely, without having to do a damn thing.

There are these great sounds on trains, too, the "woonk-WOONK" from the engine every time it approaches a road crossing, then the sudden "ding ding ding ding" of the flashing red lights telling motorists to back off, then, just as you pass the blur of the flashing red lights, the Doppler effect kicking in as the ding-dings drop an octave or so behind you. Sheer music.

Of course, the eventual owners and masters of *Mexico Skies*, the Russian pornographers, would not be moved by such delicate sensibilities; I needs must get the plot-line done, and then *basta*, on to other pastures.

I noticed when I first got on the *Pacific Coastliner* that on board were a lot of old people and kids who looked like college students. I have this theory that old people are afraid of flying, they fear anything that might hurt them. But then again, Amtrak gives good senior citizen discounts, and there are deluxe rooms they can get with the big toilets with the big steel bars in them where old folks can hang on to something as they get on and off the toilet seats. So that was another theory for their abundance here: safe toilets.

As for all the college kids, maybe it was cheaper than flying. They'd all bundle up and sleep in the coach seats, and after a day's travel they'd smell from not changing their clothes, and with that smell was added the vaguely putrescent scent of rotting fruit and stale sandwiches. On top of that, the coach cars, after a while, carried the slight odor of shit and piss that must get stored up somewhere in the sleek cars' lavatories whose windows don't open, and so there was also this undertone smell of human waste adding to the general stink in steerage.

You travel Amtrak, you gotta fork over the extra bucks for a room of your own. No other way around it.

The announcement came over the loudspeaker in my room: "Last call for the second seating for dinner. Last call."

All right, time to get off my butt. I had to get into character. I was Andy now, trying to figure out what he would do next. Andy's had his welcome shot of Wild Turkey after cramming the dead body in the fold-away bed above him, now securely shut tight.

Andy would think, and therefore I did, that Michael would have no reason to busy himself with opening up that overhead bin of a bed until Andy was safely off the train in L.A.

Andy would have booked his seat under the fake name of Drew, as I had done, so there was no problem there about getting confused about my name. I could tell you now my real name, but what would be the point of that? Just call me Drew.

I reached into my tiny closet, where I had hung up my bag, and reached behind some towels where I had hidden the 9mm Glock. I stuffed it into the small of my back, put a jacket over that (a nice new and roomy silk thing), and I went out into the corridor, in the direction of the dining car.

## Chapter 7

The train was picking up speed, and a couple of times I had to stick an arm out to balance myself before coming to a stop to press the big square cushion on the exit door to each car, following which the door would open with a sudden release of air, a "whoosh" sound. Then in a brief space between the cars, the noise of the train would go up several decibels while you stand on this jostling bridge. Then "whoosh" you are back into the womb of the next car, which is another sleeping car with rooms.

Two more sets of whooshes took me through two almost-full coach cars, the first one with little children running up and down the aisle, one of them barreling right into my crotch.

"Melissa, *come here*," a mother somewhere shouted, eyeing me suspiciously.

One set of adjacent seats was occupied by two lovers, covered to their chins with one big blanket with Navajo designs in it, moving around erotically underneath it. The couple appeared oblivious to the passengers nearby or me as they groped each other as best they could underneath their little tent.

I wasn't envious. These two would spend a good deal of the next two days fooling around, coming close to orgasms but too afraid to make too much noise. Or maybe they wouldn't care, who was I to say. It's been a while since I last engaged in covert mating rites in public. I think you have to be broke and pretty young for that. I wasn't either.

The dining car whooshed open, and I was about to see how well my other \$50 investment was going to pay off.

Unlike Michael, who had an Amtrak name tag on his uniform, the head waiter was a guy in a black suit and tie with no name tag. When I caught his eye, he jumped to and came right at me. "One for dinner, sir?"

I said, "Yes, but let me first take a quick look."

At first puzzled until he remembered who I was, he nodded knowingly and let me walk on past him so I could survey the landscape of opportunities..

That took little time. I quickly saw that there were all sorts of unacceptable dinner companions grouped together at the tables being served: married couples; a pair of nuns; a bunch of old people, again mostly couples; one table with a mom and her whiny kids; and three guys talking loudly with military haircuts, on furlough no doubt.

A few cars from the dining car was an observation lounge car with huge windows and a trough-like thing running the length of the car on both sides, a gutter beneath the windows where passengers could place their drinks and snacks bought in the mini-bar and fast-food vending place downstairs. Down there was where my Andy Lubbock had purchased two beers and two tiny bottles of Jack Daniels before returning with the plastic cups to his/my compartment and finding the dead body there.

Beyond the observation car were two more coach cars, then a baggage and mail car, then the locomotive.

From my previous trips on Amtrak, I knew that people with dinner reservations tended to congregate in the observation car, have a drink or two, then enter the dining car when their seating was called. Propped up on opposite ends of the observation car were two television sets, where videos of family-fare movies were shown. That was the one thing I really hated about Amtrak. The damn Tube was ubiquitous in America, even here. Luckily, no movies were yet showing.

In a seat near the entrance to the car, a young co-ed was clacking away on a laptop, no doubt getting a last-minute shot at an assignment that would be due tomorrow when she got back to campus. Possible Character No. 1.

Further down the aisle sat a lovely woman, I'd say in her late thirties, reading a paperback novel. I squinted to see the cover. I saw she was not reading one of my books. She sported no wedding ring.

My brain filed her away. Possible Character No. 2.

Past her was some old fart who'd gotten the attention of some foreign young man, and he was telling him about the virtues of Oklahoma and how much better life was there than in Germany. The young man nodded politely and looked trapped.

No possibles there.

Then just beyond them were three women traveling together, two of them looked to be as if in their late 60's or early 70's, the other around 40, with a wedding ring. They laughed hoarsely at just about everything and looked like they were drunk. They were having a good time.

One of the older ladies saw me coming and shouted in my direction, "Hey, here comes a likely one," and she gave an effort to put me into focus. "You play bridge, honey? We're lookin' for a fourth."

I looked over her head and noticed, sitting in a penumbra between two overhead lights, as if he had chosen the shadow to hide from these biddies, a big thick, muscular guy with a handle-bar mustache. He wore a leather jacket and had huge hands, which were being used at the moment to hold a can of Budweiser and a bag of peanuts that he popped, daintily for such a large man, one at a time into his mouth.

He was staring out at the dusk-kissed landscape and beyond it, his eyes suggesting reverie.

Possible Character No. 3.

"No thanks, ladies. I'm not a card player."

That was a lie. I play a lot of blackjack in Vegas and always lose what I set as my limit. I tell myself it's money well spent just for the entertainment and the glitz. But it pisses me off every time, losing. Winning is better than losing.

"Oh, com' on, hon', we'll teach ya."

The two old ladies spoke over each other: "We can play hearts," and "Yeah, we'll teach ya." All of it pretty well slurred.

Anywhere else in the world, I would have backed out of there right away. But what the hell, I was on a train that was going nowhere, as far as I was concerned, and loitering for a while, letting them feel their oats, gave me a chance to study Character Possibilities Nos. 1, 2 and 3, so I played along.

"Well, what are the rules? How do you play bridge?"

Again, another lie. I knew how to play bridge, just about as boring as a game can get. I played it in college because it was something to do at 2 AM with the other insomniacs in the dorm. I hated the game then, too.

The 40-plus-year-old was a little dumpy, and there was something about her that said *alcoholic divorcee-to-be*. But she had a great set of tits, and she knew how to show them off. She wouldn't be Andy's corpse killer, but I hadn't laid down any firm rules yet on what constitutes a Possible, so I made her a Possible Character Candidate in a newly devised category. It's nice to be the one making the rules.

And yes, the Russians also had their movie demands that this lady might readily satisfy in on-the-fly plot changes that were now suggesting themselves.

She piped up, "Aw, darlin', all you gotta do is cheat like Gladys here." She managed to add a few s's to Gladys's name.

They all laughed like hell at that. I laughed, too, and noticed that neither Mr. Mustache nor Madame Student Librarian bothered to look in our direction. The guy made another delicate pop of a peanut into the space beneath his mustache. Possible Character No. 1 clacked away on her laptop.

"Tell ya what, ladies," I said, "give me a raincheck. I'm late for dinner. Try me later."

Possible Character Candidate leaned down enough to give me an even better view of her cleavage and barked, "Hey, we'll try you anytime, sugar!"

I waved amiably and set to turn my back on them.

"Would hate to spoil your party," I said, lamely.

"What's the name, hon'?" Gladys wanted to know.

I turned at the level of the lovely paperback reader, Possible No. 2, and said, more for her benefit than the bridge players, "Drew. My name is Drew." Possible Character No. 1 still didn't look up, and the peanut eater didn't break his rhythm, either. He was off in his own space.

"Well, this here is Gladys and this here is Betty, and my name is Helen," said the head above the tits. "Can you remember that? There's going to be a quiz later," and again they all laughed and slapped their thighs.

"Right, right," I said, pointing: "Gladys, Betty, Helen. Nice to meet y'all."

I'm not from the South, but I love saying "y'all."

Betty had still to be heard from as a solo voice. "You're kinda cute, Drew." Now she had been heard from.

I headed back towards the dining car.

I wondered as I made my way through another whoosh and into the smells coming from the bowels of the kitchen below if Possible Character No. 1 thought I was cute, too.

## Chapter 8

I told the headwaiter, after surveying the diners in the car, that I'd like to be seated alone, but if either the guy with the mustache or the single lady with the paperback or the single lady with laptop came into the dining car, he should seat them opposite me.

"Very good, sir. Consider it done," and with a bullfighter's flourish he used both hands to signal me where to sit, right next to a window, and propped up against that was a vase with plastic flowers.

For the first time, I noticed the man spoke with an accent. From his swarthy looks, he was either Hispanic or Southeastern European. I'd get around to asking him.

Then a pleasant thought hit me: who says the help can't also kill on the side? Now I had Possible Character No. 4.

I ordered a red wine before taking a pencil from a jar on the table and marking off the items on the menu I wanted to eat. This slip of paper would also serve as a bill for anyone in coach, but my meals came with the room. Except the red wine, which was served chilled. Another annoyance.

I waited, and passengers came and left. I ate my meal alone, drawing it out as long as I could. My waiter fussed over me unnecessarily. Word must be out that I'm The Big Tipper.

Railway food is better than airplane food, but that isn't saying a whole lot.

I left a \$10 tip. If I had had to pay for the meal, it would have been a tab for \$21. So an almost 50% tip. I had an image to keep up.

I didn't mind. Working on your feet and keeping your balance while doing it, that's hard work. Harder than what I do. Reluctantly, I got up and left. Just as I was about to reach the end of the dining car, I noticed that Possibles 1 and 2 entered from the observation car together, and they were seated together at the table I just left.

Damn, damn, damn.

Well, there was tomorrow.

## Chapter 9

Alas, after breakfast the next day in the dining car with Possible Characters 1 and 2, everything miraculously fell into place in one swift inspiration that made it possible for me to finish *Mexico Skies* with a flourish. My story as I wrote it would have rivaled *The Orient Express* for cleverness, mystery and originality.

But all was for naught. All of my wondrous art was in the end jettisoned by a pack of obtuse Russians whose only concern was their bottom line. They paid me handsomely for my story and told me to buzz off.

Still, I must tell you this much about how the plot resolved itself in the story I wrote but never saw filmed: The mustachioed fellow on the train was a hitman, hired to kill the young lady with the laptop, Possible Character No. 1, and her lover. She was having an affair with her professor, the strangled victim in Andy's roomette. The professor's wife had paid for the hits, and the mustachioed man was going to do in the student next.

Through a series of Columbo-like clever deductions I must alas spare you (since all has now been thrown to the Russian mafia winds, anyway!) — deductions made by a world-famous writer named Drew relayed to the train's conductor — justice is served. The police board the train and Drew brilliantly unmasks the mustachioed man as the assassin, for on the back of his large hands is the same telltale red line as is found on the victim's neck, made by the garrote he used to strangle his victim. And thanks also has to go to the fictitious Michael Jordan, who, it turns out, has an excellent sense of smell and told Drew where to find the body that propelled Drew into the mystery.

I made more money from this story than from all my other books combined. But I was not acknowledged in the movie credits, and I am afraid all that I have earned from the movie will go to the lawyers I hired to get my good name back.

On the other hand, perhaps I should back off from the lawsuits and deny any connection whatsoever to what has become known as *Mexico Orgasms*, made famous by the many grossly raunchy and highly graphic bridge game sex scenes.

And yet on the other hand, I have to carefully consider this, too: a major studio wants to do a sequel, but this time with strip poker instead of strip bridge.

I may have a whole new career niche here.