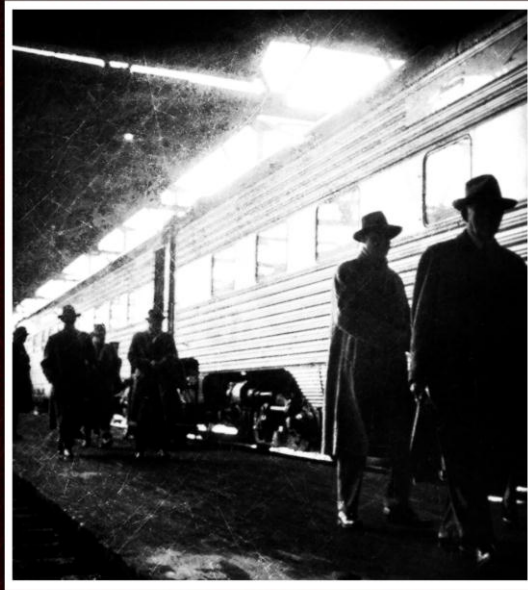


Strangers



David K. Hulegaard

An Excerpt From

Strangers

David K. Hulegaard

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Chicago

Matt sat on the bench—resembling a church pew, only about half as comfortable—inside the Portland, Oregon train station. He knocked his knees together as he watched the second-hand circle the face of a clock above the gate. He read the bronze letters on the wall above an exit.

TO TRAINS.

"All aboard!" the conductor called.

Matt slipped his duffle bag over his shoulder and got out his ticket. He presented it to the agent at the gate who tore it in half and handed back the stub.

"Do you know where you're going?" the agent asked.

Matt scanned the stub, but failed to make sense of the jumbled text from a misaligned printer. "I don't think so."

"Okay." The agent took the stub back and tilted it for better light. "You're in coach car zero-zero-nine, which is outside to your left and past the Diner Car. Look for the number outside the door."

"Great! Thank you." Matt re-collected the ticket stub and exited the station through two sets of double doors. He walked across rows of tracks to reach the train and turned left as instructed.

"Please stand behind the yellow line, sir. It's for your safety," a uniformed woman said.

Matt looked down at his feet and saw his toes encroaching over the painted barrier. "Thanks!" He smiled and took a step backward.

The train's engine roared so loud that Matt couldn't hear the P.A. system. A car attendant stopped him and leaned in toward his ear, "Sir, you need to hurry and get on board. We're departing in just another minute or two."

Matt's lollygagging had gotten him into trouble before, but he wasn't about to miss this trip. He looked at the next car down and saw "006" illuminated next to the door. He swung his duffle bag behind his back and ran three more cars down to "009." He held on to the side of the train for support and handed his ticket stub to the attendant. He wheezed as the attendant patted him on the back and waved him on board.

Matt admired the interior design of the train. The wood paneled sides and vinyl seats made it look like a seventies flashback, but he loved it. He found his seat next to a man right about his age, maybe a year or two older.

"Hi, I'm Matt." He reached out to shake the man's hand.

The man pulled a pair of ear buds out of his ears. "Hey dude, I'm Brent." Brent awkwardly fist bumped Matt's limp hand.

"Nice to meet you, Brent. What are you listening to?"

"Korn. You a fan?"

"Oh, I like all kinds of different music. I'm kind of a patchwork of musical taste."

"Right on, bro. How far you headed?"

"All the way to Chicago."

Brent whistled. "Damn, dude! That's a hella long trip."

"What about you?"

"Twin cities."

"Minnesota, huh? Are you from there?"

"Born and raised. Family's still back there, so I have to make this trip a few times a year. Normally I'd fly, but I'm out of work these days and need to save a few bucks wherever I can."

"Well, it's good that you get to go back. Is it nice there?"

"At this time of year? It's going to be cold as a mother fucker, bro."

Matt observed Brent's choice of clothing: A Slipknot t-shirt and frayed cut-off jeans.

A Dining Car attendant walked by and leaned over Matt. "I hope you're both getting all settled in and comfortable. We're now taking reservations for the Dining Car. Will either of you be joining us?"

Matt looked at Brent and said, "Oh, I, uh..."

Brent gave a thumbs up. "Yeah, bro. Let's do it. I wanna get my grub on."

"Fantastic!" The attendant said, "What time would you like to eat? We have spaces open for 5:00, 5:30, 6:00, 7:00, and 7:30. 7:30 is the last call for dinner tonight."

"Put us down for 7:00 then," Brent smacked Matt on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "That cool with you, bro?"

Matt nodded.

The attendant took out a card and checked a box. She started to hand it to Matt and then said, "Oh, oops! Whose name should I put the reservation under?"

"I guess me is fine. Put it under 'Matt,' please."

The attendant wrote Matt's name down on the card. "Okay, you're both set for dinner. Just hang on to your card and be listening for the announcement. We'll start calling you back around seven."

"Okay, thank you!" Matt smiled.

Brent leaned out into the aisle as she walked away. Matt settled back in his chair unsure of what Brent was doing.

"Bro, tell me, have you *ever* seen an ass as fine as that one?"

Before Matt could answer, Brent laughed and smacked him a couple of times on the arm. He relaxed back against his chair and put his ear buds in.

Matt could hear the music seeping out from Brent's ears and wondered if anyone around them was going to complain. The train lurched forward and they were on their way. Matt picked up a magazine and thumbed through to a section about Chicago hot spots.

~ * * * ~

Brent poked at his dinner plate with a fork, ogling the food with discontent.

"What's the matter, Brent?" Matt asked. "Is it not any good?"

"Not any good? Dude, I don't even know what the hell it is!"

Matt chuckled and said, "You ordered the seafood risotto, right?"

"Yeah, but the rice is coated with so much butter that it looks like mucus, and I don't know what kind of seafood they're using, but if I had to wager a guess, I'd say Loch Ness Monster balls."

"Well, that's a shame, because I am loving my burger over here."

Brent gave him the once-over. "You really are a happy fella, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" Matt swallowed a bite.

"I can't quite put my finger on it, man, but you're like straight out of the fucking Brady Bunch or something. You're just, I don't know, *happy*."

"Is this the part where you want me to apologize?"

"Nah man, it's kind of cool, actually. Refreshing even. It must be nice to not have anything bother you."

"That's not true. Things bother me, just not right now."

"Oh yeah? Why's that? What's so special about right now?"

"I've never been on a train before, so this is exciting for me. Uncharted territory, I guess. I don't know, it feels like an adventure."

"Just like the pioneers did it. Eating burgers, sipping Pepsi, and reclining in leather seats."

"Yours is leather?"

Brent flipped him off, then went back to stirring his risotto. After a couple of failed attempts to slide a clump of it into his mouth, he threw down his fork in frustration. Matt smiled and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"Seriously, bro. This ain't funny. I paid like twelve bucks for this shit! I want a refund or at least one of those burgers."

Matt took his steak knife and cut the burger in half, giving the untouched portion to Brent. "Bon appetite, my new friend."

"You know, I wouldn't normally accept this, but I'm so hungry that I'm going to make an exception." Brent sniffed the food, then devoured it in three bites.

Matt shook his head.

"So, Matt, what's the deal with Chicago? You a Bears fan or something?"

"No, not really a big sports guy. It's a business trip. I'm going for work."

"For work? And they won't fly your ass? Might be time to start looking for another job, bro."

"Actually, they want me to fly, but I can't. I'm terrified of planes."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious? I mean, if a plane goes down, there's zero chance of survival. You're just dead."

"But aren't they safer than cars or some shit like that?"

"You can get into a fender bender and survive. People only die in car crashes when someone does something really stupid. If you're careful, you can

avoid that, but a plane? You can't do anything. You just have to live in total fear as the plane plummets toward the earth, knowing that the last seconds of your life are ticking away."

"Wow, bro." Brent belched, turning the heads of a few disgusted patrons. "For a happy guy, that is pretty fucked up. You should take that shit into therapy."

"Maybe you're right," Matt smiled. He poured the last of his Pepsi from a miniature bottle into his glass.

"But what about trains? I mean, have you looked outside? We go over some sheer cliffs and shit. Don't you worry about a strong wind tipping us off-balance and sending us over the edge?"

"Nah, trains are pretty safe. Before airplanes, it's how anyone got anywhere. I don't know, they kind of make me feel connected to history in a way."

"Right, right. The pioneers or whatever. So, what's going on in Chicago that you'd be willing to ride a train all the way from Portland?"

"I'm overseeing a project."

"And you have to go all the way to Chicago to do that?"

"No, I wanted to. It's a big deal to me because it's my first big project—My brain child. I want to see it come to fruition in person, not by looking at digital photos someone sends in to the office. Plus, it's Chicago!" Matt shook his fists with genuine enthusiasm.

"Yeah, I've been there. It's all right, I guess."

"*All right?* Come on, man. Chi-town! The Windy City! Are you kidding me? I've wanted to see Chicago since I was a little kid, but I didn't think I'd ever get the chance. When this opportunity came about, I knew it was my only shot."

"How can you romanticize a place that you've never been?"

"Easy. All that history? What's not to love about Chicago? So many amazing things have happened there. I want to see all the historic landmarks, buildings, and museums. I can't wait to set foot anywhere in the city and imagine what historical figure might have walked that same path." Matt rubbed his arms. "Ooh, I just gave myself chills!"

A server approached the table. "Can I interest either of you two in dessert? We've got warm chocolate cake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream, a delectable crème brulee, an apple crumb cake that will change your world, or if none of those options sound appealing, we also have a hazelnut roast coffee to wash down your meal."

"I'm gonna go with the chocolate cake," Brent said.

"I think I'll have the coffee. That sounds delicious," Matt said.

"Excellent choices, both of you. I'll be back in just a few minutes." The server walked away to put in the order.

"Probably a good call on that coffee, bro," Brent said. "I have a bad feeling that I'm about to get another dose of that snot risotto."

~ * * * ~

Matt glanced over at the empty seat next to him. He missed Brent, which surprised him. It had been quiet since Brent detrained in St. Paul. However, he appreciated the silence after the gospel choir that had boarded overnight and sang until three in the morning. Then, he wouldn't miss.

He scooted over to the window and gazed out at the tall buildings of downtown Chicago coming into view. He felt butterflies swarming in his gut.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the conductor's voice came over the loudspeaker, "We are about to reach our stop here in Chicago, so please be sure to check your area for any items that you may have left behind. If you lose them, they will not be sent back to you... because I still need to pay for my kid's college education one day."

Matt chuckled and gathered up his things. The train passed under a bridge and then disappeared into an underground station. After the train came to a halt, the doors opened and Matt jumped off. Water dripped down from the ceiling as the sound of cars zipping by overhead filled the dank tunnel.

The terminal looked like a movie set, or at least something he had seen on one of his favorite procedural TV shows. The concrete walkways were coated with dampness and patches of steam rose from the ground. All that was missing was the hard-boiled detective removing his sunglasses after delivering his big pun.

Matt walked for what felt like a mile before reaching the inside of the terminal. The multi-level station was unlike anything back in Oregon. The Portland station was clean, and the architecture of the old building had been carefully preserved, but the Chicago station had escalators and flashing electronic billboards. It was very "bright lights, big city" compared to back home, but not even the rude baggage handlers could erase his perma-smile.

He followed the signs guiding the way to a taxi stand outside. He went up two floors and got lost for a moment before finding the next sign. A cartoonish drawing of a finger pointed up a flight of stairs toward the exit. About halfway up, he made eye contact with a man in a leather trench coat.

"Excuse me, sir? Do you need a taxi?"

Matt looked around to see if he was cutting in line, but no one reacted to the man's offer. "Yeah, that would be great!"

The man met him at the top of the stairs and took his suitcase. "Follow me." He led Matt out through the double doors and wheeled his suitcase over to an old, black Buick. He popped the trunk and put Matt's suitcase inside, then opened up the rear passenger door and stood aside.

"Is this a cab?" Matt approached the car slowly.

"You bet, buddy. A little competition for those yellow cab drivers is good for everyone's business."

"Oh, okay." Matt climbed into the car.

The man shut the door behind him, then jogged around to the driver's side and got in. He

started up the engine and a blast of rap music pummeled Matt's ears. The man turned down the radio and said, "Sorry about that. I musta bumped it when I got out earlier." The man signaled and pulled out into traffic.

Matt alternated back-and-forth between the windows, looking outside and taking in the city.

"Where we headed, boss?" The driver looked at him in the rearview mirror.

"Um, the Drake."

"Oh yeah? Well, pardon me, your highness," the driver said flashing his pearly whites. "She's a pretty one, that Drake."

Matt smiled, but he couldn't wait to break eye contact and get back to checking out the city. Every five seconds the scenery changed.

"Wow." He kept muttering his amazement over and over.

"So, what brings you to our fair city, if you don't mind my askin'?" The driver looked at him in the mirror.

"Work. I've never been here before."

"No kiddin'? First time in Chicago, uh? Well, yer in for a treat, let me tell you."

"I just can't get used to seeing how many people are out walking around! I think we've only got about six-hundred-thousand and change back home."

"Really? Where you from?"

"Portland, Oregon."

"Ah, home of them Blazers! Clyde the Glide, baby, right?"

Matt saw a hotel across the water that said "DRAKE" in large letters on its exterior, but the driver went left at the signal, turning away from the hotel.

"Excuse me, but wasn't that just the Drake back there?"

"Oh, nah, nah, man. There's a road closure that way, so we need ta go around it ta get you there. It's a little longer drive, but I won't charge ya extra."

Matt looked at the dashboard and noticed the lack of a meter. He wondered how the driver planned on calculating the mileage. Though he didn't look straight on to verify, he caught a glimpse of the driver's eyes checking on him every so often, which started to bother him.

"Hey man, can I ax you a question?"

"Sure," Matt said.

"Are ya a religious man?"

"Not really. I mean, I don't know. I guess I don't think about it all that much to be honest with you."

"No? Well, I am. Jesus saved my life, don't ya know."

Matt smiled and turned to look out the window some more.

"Yes, sir, he did. Mind if I tell ya a little story?"

"Um, no. Go right ahead."

"Ah, thank ya for the kindness, my friend. Not a lotta kindness left in this world these days." The driver switched lanes and turned left at the next signal. "You see, we was poor growin' up in the Southside. I gots three brothers, and we shared one pair a shoes between us. That may sound like I'm

jokin', but I ain't. No laughin' matter, sir. We didn't all get ta go ta school at the same time, see? There weren't enough clothes ta send us all at once."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Matt said. "That's terrible."

"It was, it was. But I never gave up. My mama told me that times can be tough, but Jesus is always lookin' out for me cuz he loves me. And I needed that, see? I started going ta church instead of school. They don't look down on ya none if you show up with no shoes on yer feet at church." The driver turned left at the next signal. "I learned a lotta things in that church, yes I did. Learned how ta be a man. Learned how ta take care of myself. Learned how ta accept the love of my Lord and my Savior, Jesus Christ. And most importantly, how ta repay that love."

The driver's story started to make Matt uncomfortable. Growing up in the suburbs, he had never been exposed to the harsh reality of inner city poverty. He appreciated the man's willingness to talk about such a sensitive topic, but he was ready to get to the hotel and leave it behind.

"What about you? Have ya given yer life over to Jesus?"

"No, I... you know, like I said, I don't think about religion all that much."

"That's a shame. He's comin' back, don't ya know? Sooner than ya think. Not a lotta time left to repent." The driver turned left at the next signal.

Matt recognized the stretch of road. In the distance was the same hotel with "DRAKE" spelled out in an elegant font on the building's front. Even

without the famous glow of its red neon letters that were illuminated at night, Matt would've been able to spot the hotel anywhere. He shifted around in his seat to get a better look.

"Don't ya worry now. We almost there. I'll have ya all checked in before ya know it."

"But, isn't that... weren't we just here?"

"What? Ah, nah, man. Chicago is so big that after a while all the buildins start ta look the same. It's a damn concrete jungle out here!" The driver turned right into an alley.

"Where are we going?" Matt asked.

"It's that construction I was telling ya about. This is a shortcut we can take and come out right in front of the Drake."

"Oh, okay," Matt gulped.

The car followed the alley to a brick wall at the end. Two huge men in baggy pants and tee-shirts stepped out from behind a dumpster. The heavier-set of the two opened Matt's door and yanked him out onto the asphalt. "What do ya got here, Ronnie?"

"We got us a Richie Rich mutha fucka headed to the Drake!"

The rotund man picked Matt up off the ground and threw him against the side of the car. "Well, ain't this mutha fucka fancy?" He worked Matt over with a couple of heavy punches to the gut. Matt dropped down to his knees and threw up.

"Aww, Richie Rich ain't much of a fighta." The smaller of the two men taunted.

Ronnie opened the trunk and started rifling through Matt's suitcase. He emptied everything he didn't want out onto the ground.

"What 'chu got, Ronnie?" the heavier man asked.

"Nothin' but garbage mostly, but this laptop oughtta be worth a few bucks."

"Dat's it? Just a fuckin' laptop? Bullshit. Help me get dis mutha fucka up!"

Ronnie and the smaller man scraped Matt up off the pavement and restrained him. The heavier man patted Matt's pockets and snatched his wallet. He combed through it, flipping through IDs, credit cards, and pictures of Matt with a woman. He pulled out the seventy-five dollars in cash Matt had and then tossed the wallet into the dumpster.

"What do ya wanna do, Zeke?"

"You know the drill. Hold this mutha fucka up."

Ronnie and the smaller man cinched their arms tight on either side of Matt's defenseless body. Matt's legs shook, unable to support his weight, but the two men held him steady.

Zeke reached around to his back pocket and took out a switchblade. He unfolded the blade, locking it into place, then closed the gap between them.

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