MURDER ON THE COAST STARLIGHT

Train travel has always interested me. The scenery can be superb -- especially in the countryside – and the people you meet are varied and interesting too, at least most of the time. The train crew men and women that you have interactions with are usually professional, capable, friendly and helpful. On a train, you can read, snooze, chat, eat, daydream, listen to music or watch a movie if you have such a device, or simply gaze out the window at the passing views. Taking the train is perfect for those not generally in a hurry, although high-speed commuter trains are also available.

I have ridden the rails in Europe, Japan, China, India, Canada, Australia, and Egypt, to name but a few. In the United States, the passenger rail network is called Amtrak. It has several transcontinental runs. One of its most famous is the Coast Starlight, which runs every day (one southbound and one northbound) from Seattle to Los Angeles, with continuing connecting service to San Diego. Foreign and domestic riders especially enjoy its segment offering spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean coast in southern California.

I have ridden this particular train more than a half-dozen times, but this last ride provided me with a very unsettling and unique experience. That was because I discovered a dead body toward the end of my journey in one of the lower-level restrooms! Was it a natural death, a suicide, or even a murder? I was soon to find out.

Unlike some Agatha Christie mystery novel, Amtrak had never had a murder occur on any of its trains. A handful of fatal heart attacks or strokes, or drug overdoses, or non-fatal assaults over the years, but nothing like this.

So here is exactly what happened, as it was reported by me to the police…

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I boarded the Coast Starlight in Davis, just before 7 a.m. on the first Friday in May. (I knew from experience that a fresh Amtrak crew always boarded at the prior stop in Sacramento.) It is a long, shiny silver train, composed of a dozen cars: the locomotive, a baggage car, an observation/café car, a dining car, four coach cars, and four sleeper cars. I was headed on a coach ticket to Oxnard, for a Saturday all-day boat trip to the Channel Islands. Because Davis is a University of California college town, several students boarded with me. They were heading for the other college town stops of Emeryville (for UC Berkeley and UC San Francisco), San Jose (for San Jose State), San Luis Obispo (for Cal Poly), and Santa Barbara (for UCSB).

As an fledgling writer, I had acquired the habits of noticing certain people in crowds who appear 'interesting,' and also of eavesdropping on conversations if they hold promise of being animated or unusual. All possible fodder for future stories, you might say.

When you board the train after your coach ticket is scanned and you are assigned a seat, you can stow your large bags -- if any -- in the lower level luggage bins, then head upstairs to your place. (Downstairs seats are for seniors -- if they prefer not to negotiate the narrow stairwell -- and for persons with disabilities. The coach restrooms are also downstairs.) If you have a full-size family room, or a smaller one- or two-person roomette instead of a coach seat, you board at another car. These have their own windows and sinks, and long cushion seats that convert into beds in the evening. All of your meals are included with a sleeper room ticket. The room cars also have a shared hot shower area with soap, shampoo, and towels, as well as their own restroom toilet area.

The coach cars are rarely full, so a pair of seats is usually yours alone. The seats are huge and comfortable, with plenty of hip and legroom – almost better than a first-class airline seat! Plus, the seats tilt backward to nearly a flat position for sleeping. On this trip, I saw my typical assortment of people from Oregon or Washington or Northern California still sleeping in their seats, as early morning light peeked through slits in the window curtains – folks curled up with their own pillows and blankets, or bundled up in their coats with their hats over their faces. Some passengers were waking up and stretching, then going downstairs to wash up and use the toilet.

Breakfast was being served in the dining car at this time, however, so those who didn’t bring their own food could eat there. I brought my usual yogurt, banana, and granola bar from home, and purchased a fresh, hot cup of decaf coffee from the Café car. This usually lasted me until lunchtime in the dining car around 12:30. I then settled in and resumed reading my current paperback book. (There is no wi-fi reception in coach class, in case you wanted to know.)

In addition to the assortment of young college students, there are usually a few scruffy-looking folks, or lone travelers who may or may not suffer from mental issues. These souls either don’t like to travel by bus or plane, nor can they afford (or safely drive) a car. The train conductors rarely have problems with these sorts because they tend to keep quietly to themselves.

The morning passed quickly as we went through the farmlands of the eastern Central Valley and into the delta city of Martinez. Soon, we arrived at Emeryville, where the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco were visible in the distance. A short hop next to Oakland, then we stayed on schedule to San Jose by 10 a.m. As we approached Salinas, one could see the vast crop acres of broccoli, lettuce, and strawberries, with many Mexican workers busy in the sunny, irrigated fields. This was when Annette, the dining car attendant, came down the aisle and took lunch time reservations. I booked a 12:30 spot for one.

Dining car meals are always exciting for me, because you are seated in groups of four, and hence get to meet your fellow travelers. There were eight tables. Topics of conversation were always surprising and stimulating, as were the quick life stories of one’s fellow diners. Meals usually lasted about an hour before the group split up, but if you were in the last seating, it might extend for another thirty pleasant minutes until the staff needed all diners to vacate in order to clean up.

Arriving at my appointed time, I was seated by Annette with Claude and Penny, a retired couple from Oregon, and Misha, a young Ukrainian student touring America by train. Our server was Yolanda, a cheerful, older African-American woman who had been working for Amtrak for seventeen years.

I ordered the hefty Angus burger with all the trimmings, which also came with kettle potato chips. I had cranberry juice for my beverage. Misha – a vegetarian – had the black bean and corn veggie burger, while Claude had the Prince Edward Island steamed mussels, and his wife, Penny, had the romaine and goat cheese salad.

Claude and Penny lived in Ashland, in southern Oregon, a town famous for its annual outdoor Shakespeare Festival. Claude had worked at Boeing Aircraft near Seattle for 33 years, and Penny was a retired speech therapist. They had three grown children. Misha was studying metallurgy in Kiev. He was combining sightseeing with business for a month on this, his first trip in the United States.

While we were eating and talking, we were startled by some unusual public conduct at the dining table across the aisle from us. The young couple seated there appeared very uncomfortable but remained quiet, while the single woman in her early 40’s and the single man in his mid-20’s next to her were engaged in a heated argument about something.

Yolanda quickly stepped in and asked the two to please keep their voices down.

“Why should I?” the woman demanded. “It's a free country, or at least it used to be...This man challenged my political views. He insulted my intelligence!” she wailed. Meanwhile, the young man seated next to her looked perplexed and calmly replied, “So YOU claim…”

“Look, dear, talking politics or religion at mealtimes -- especially with strangers -- is bad for everyone’s digestion,” Yolanda gently suggested. “Why don’t we all just let it go...Now, how about a nice dessert...anyone?"

“Who are you to preach to me?” the woman countered. “Oh never mind…I’m done here. Bring me my check. I’m in Room 24.”

Yolanda mustered as much professional courtesy as she could under the circumstances. “Yes, ma’am, right away. You’ll just have to sign the check and mark your room number.” I noticed that the crew chef, whose name tag said ‘Lawrence,’ stepped briefly out of the galley -- in his toque blanche and white double-breasted jacket -- to see what the commotion was all about. The whining woman’s back was to him. He frowned, then shook his head in disgust as he caught Yolanda’s eye.

After the offensive woman signed and then departed in a huff, the rest of the lunch diners looked relieved. “I wonder what that was all about?” Claude at my table remarked. “Some people…” he trailed off, rolling his eyes. We finished our meal, paid up, and the four of us then split up.

At 1:12 p.m. – only four minutes late – we pulled into Paso Robles. I briefly chatted with a young Chinese couple, Ling and Lin, who were seeing America by train for their honeymoon. They had taken the Lake Shore Limited (New York to Chicago), the Empire Builder (Chicago to Seattle), and were now enjoying our current train (Seattle to Los Angeles). From there, they planned on taking the Southwest Chief from Los Angeles back to Chicago. Their final rail adventure would be from Chicago to New Orleans on the famed City of New Orleans. From there, they would fly back home via Houston to Shanghai. “America is so big, with so many different sceneries,” they gushed. “And it is not so crowded, like China. Except for New York!” It was always fun seeing newcomers to America get so excited.

Back on schedule, at 3:20 p.m., we pulled into San Luis Obispo. Quite a few college students got on and off, ‘SLO’ being the home of Cal Poly -- California Polytechnic State University. Here, our locomotive engineer was relieved by a new man, and we had a nice sunshine/fresh-air/leg-stretch stop for twenty minutes. Any smokers aboard could light up outside away from the train doors here as well. I saw the obnoxious dining car woman in her beige pants suit and peach blouse exit her sleeper car and then pull out a pack of cigarettes and a gold lighter from her handbag. She paced restlessly after she lit up, puffing away. What an unhappy person, I thought sadly. I also noticed -- out of the corner of my eye -- the young man whom the woman had violently argued with in the dining car. He stood well away, but was staring at her, unnoticed. Soon, the Coast Starlight blasted its horn, and it was “All Aboard!” as we continued our journey southwards to the City of Angels. Our next stop would be Santa Barbara, just past 6 p.m.

The observation car was now filling up, as expectant scenery-lovers and shutterbugs prepared for the long-awaited and stunning ocean vistas that would soon unfold. The rails wove their way around rolling hills -- one stretch featuring a huge 'horseshoe curve,' where one could see the front of the train from its rear -- and then gradually went downward to the sea. Soon, the delighted passengers saw cliffs, beach sand dunes, and crashing white surf coming from the impossibly blue, vast Pacific Ocean. We passed some state park beaches, then some deserted stretches. Next came a few seaside trailer parks with palm trees, then families enjoying themselves under beach umbrellas, and even groups of surfers in their wetsuits, continuously practicing their technique in the chilly waters. Seagulls, pieces of driftwood, and long ropes of washed-up green kelp were also visible on the wet sands from our elevated beach cliff vantage. The afternoon was brilliantly sunny, but we -- inside our air-conditioned train car -- had no idea what the outside temperature was. I settled in, put in my ear buds, and listened to soothing music on my iPad while looking out the windows as the pleasant scenery slipped by at around 50 m.p.h.

Annette came through all the cars next, taking times for dinner reservations. I booked a 5 p.m. for myself, and she again gave me a little Amtrak paper receipt with the time marked on it, as she had for lunch.

I was hungry as I re-entered the dining car on time, seeing as I had not snacked since lunch. Annette seated me with Jerry & Terry, and Darron. These were the people, I remembered, who were across the aisle from me at lunchtime, the group that the argumentative woman sat with. At the far end of the car was that same woman, only she was now seated with an old white-haired man with a cane, and the Chinese couple from Shanghai I had earlier talked with in my coach car, Ling and Lin.

Yolanda greeted us back warmly, then took our orders. I chose my favorite -- a seared salmon fillet with rice pilaf and green beans, and, of course, cranberry juice. Darron, a young software entrepreneur from the island territory of Guam, selected the Indian spiced shrimp biryani with a bottle of domestic beer. The young couple from Sioux City, Iowa, picked the thyme roasted chicken breast for Jerry, and the butternut squash risotto for Terry. They would split a bottle of chilled Chardonnay. We immediately plunged into conversation while we waited for our meals.

"Forgive me," I began, "but I was across the aisle during lunch during that incident with the woman in the beige pants suit. What was that all about?"

"Thank God we weren't seated with her again," said Terry. "It was awful!" Her husband, Jerry, added, "We would have asked for a different table if our luck was bad. No way we could handle another session with her. She was nuts!"

Darron, who had the misfortune of having the most direct confrontation with the belligerent woman, simply said," Karma will settle the score, believe me..." He looked away out the window. But then he unexpectedly turned and vented in a torrent of words. "She was rude, overly aggressive in her opinions, bossy, and inflexible. Her name was Sybil Barrington. She lives in Portland, and takes this train several times a year to L.A. on business because she can't stand the long drive or the hassles of flying. Did you notice she was not wearing a wedding ring? Pity the man who gets stuck with someone like that. She bragged about her computer start-up company, and how much money she had invested and has earned so far, and how she fires anyone who doesn't measure up to her standards, and how she loves being her own boss with nobody telling her what to do. She barely showed any interest in Terry and Jerry here, such was her selfishness and egotism. She brought up the topic of politics, and when I asked a few innocent questions, she flew off the handle. Anyway, let's just drop it for now...I'd rather relax and enjoy our food and any other topic, O.K.?" We others smiled and nodded in agreement.

Darron had the darker skin of a native Pacific islander. He was handsome and sharply dressed but still single at age 26, and was headed to San Diego to meet up with a group of fellow software entrepreneurs. "There are no jobs in Guam for my skills and interests, so I'm leaving the island," he confessed. "I specialize in gaming software and virtual reality programming. Lots of exciting opportunities for those with the smarts and the guts to try. It's like a new Gold Rush."

Jerry spoke next. He was a manager in the ethanol industry in Sioux City, in the western edge of the corn belt in Iowa. His wife, Terry, was a nurse at Mercy Medical Center. I shared that I, too, came from the Midwest. "We kind of guessed that by your Midwest accent," they teased. "It never really goes away. Bet you don't miss the winters either!" We laughed together, then reminded Darron how lucky he was to grow up in a place with no brutal cold or snow.

Yolanda came to clear our table and present us with our checks. I had been occasionally noticing during our meal that Sybil Barrington was sitting stone-faced at her table at the far side of the dining car, where neither the young Chinese couple nor the old man with the white hair appeared to be making any attempt at small talk with her. She was being served an elaborate chocolate dessert and coffee. I soon asked Yolanda what it was.

"That's the Amtrak Chocolate Volcano," she replied. "A chocolate brownie, covered with chocolate ice cream, with chocolate sauce on top that oozes down like lava. But it's an overdose of chocolate, if you ask me...just too much of a good thing!" Our table paid up -- leaving Yolanda generous tips -- then got ready to leave. Suddenly, an announcement came over the intercom as the Coast Starlight slowed to a stop: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Conway, one of your conductors. We have to stop here for about thirty minutes due to freight train congestion on the tracks ahead. We apologize for the inconvenience and the delay. Our estimated arrival time now into Santa Barbara will be 6:35 p.m. Thank you for choosing Amtrak."

I knew that Amtrak leased its use of the Union Pacific tracks in California, and that the higher revenue-producing freight trains always had right-of-way priority. So announcements of this sort were not unusual.

As I rose and said goodbye to my table mates, I noticed Sybil grab and ask Anthony -- the other train conductor who happened to be walking through the dining car -- where the nearest restroom was located. "It's an emergency, and I don't think I can make it back to my sleeper car," I thought I heard her say in a lowered voice. Anthony told her to go the next door observation car and descend to the lower level. "Demetrius is working in the Cafe there, and he'll show you where to go." Sybil rushed by me in a hurry, holding her stomach and looking distressed.

I headed back to my coach seat and checked my watch. With the delay, I should arrive in Oxnard around 7:35. I decided to watch part of a 'film noir' movie on my iPad that I had previously downloaded. But first, I wanted a last look at the sun heading down west into the ocean, so I doubled back to the observation car. Once there, I sat for a few minutes admiring the colorful mix of sun, sea, and sky. Then I needed to take a leak, so I went to use the closest restroom near the downstairs Cafe.

Most Amtrak coach cars have four regular restrooms, a large handicapped restroom, and a lounge room which includes a toilet, a sink, a large mirror, and a padded bench -- to be used for changing clothes, etc. These are located past the side train exit doors opposite from the big luggage racks and the compact Senior/Handicapped seats area. But in the downstairs Cafe area, there are just two regular restrooms and a lounge room, located behind a tall partition.

I said hi to Demetrius (who had made my coffee earlier that morning, I remarking on his Greek accent), but he didn't respond because he was busy feeding coach passengers who chose not to eat in the dining car. He was serving up the usual Cafe fare of hot dogs, hamburgers, french fries, sodas, nachos, and such.

As I approached the restroom area, I was surprised to see that the lounge door was unlocked and partly opened. I went to close it as a courtesy, because the door would bang back and forth once the train began moving again. But when I reached for the handle, I saw a person's leg lying sprawled on the floor! I slowly opened the door fully, with some pushing and difficulty. It was then that I saw the body of Sybil Barrington on the floor. I knew it was her from her beige pants suit and peach blouse. Her eyes appeared lifeless, staring at the ceiling, frozen in a pained facial expression. Recalling my advanced American Red Cross first aid training, I quickly shook off my disbelief and instead checked for her pulse. Nothing. Nor was she breathing. I yelled out loud for help, then began emergency CPR. Demetrius came first. He said, "Oh,no..." then ran back to his Cafe station and called for Conway over the intercom to come immediately on a Code 9. Meanwhile, my CPR efforts were to no avail. The woman was dead.

Within moments, Conway came with an AED defibrillator box, and set up the wired pads on Sybil's upper torso through her unbuttoned blouse. After several electric jolt attempts to start the victim's heart, he stopped. "She's gone," he sighed. "Demetrius, go get Taryn right away. She has to call this into the police in Santa Barbara." The Coast Starlight chose this moment to start up again, because our freight train delay was over.

Taryn was a short but tough-looking young African-American woman. I had casually noticed her on my many walks down the coach car aisles, but now I discovered that she was actually an undercover Amtrak police security officer. Now, she had her official badge displayed on the outside of her jacket. When she unzipped her coat, I saw that she was also armed with a holstered revolver, handcuffs, a spray can of either mace or pepper spray, and a walkie-talkie, all attached on a thick leather belt. She likewise checked the corpse, then called the locomotive engineer on her walkie-talkie to radio for the police to meet the train in Santa Barbara, a short time away now. She questioned me on the details of my discovery. "The woman either died an unexpected natural death, killed herself with a pill overdose, or was murdered," Taryn declared. "The authorities in Santa Barbara will want to question you -- and everybody on the train -- if they determine that she was killed. It's the law. Too bad about this lady, though...so sad."

Conway went over to the Cafe console and made the unwelcomed announcement over the intercom.

"Your attention please, all passengers. Attention please. Due to a medical emergency on board, we will need everyone to stay in their seats or sleeper rooms when we arrive in Santa Barbara in about eight minutes. Paramedics and police will join us then. When they are finished with their duties, we will be on our way again. Amtrak thanks you again for your cooperation."

Once the train came to a halt at the station, the Coast Starlight was met by one TV media van, four police cruisers, and an ambulance. The officials boarded and went directly to the lower level of the observation car. I was introduced to Santa Barbara detective Hector Ortez, after the paramedics declared Sybil Barrington dead. (During this time, a policewoman also took photos of the body from various angles, then left.) In their careful professional analysis, she had either been poisoned or had taken a fatal drug overdose. "We'll take her remains quickly to the County Coroner now, and find out for sure," the head paramedic announced.

"Nobody leaves this train until we know exactly what happened," Ortez ordered. Conway said he would contact Amtrak Central Dispatch and inform them of the reason for the train's delay. Meanwhile, I told the detective everything I could remember about the mystery woman and how I had found her. Then I gratefully relieved my full bladder in the neighboring restroom.

An hour crawled by. Conway stayed with me and the detective. "There are 86 passengers and 8 crew aboard including the engineer," he told Hector when asked for an exact train count. Then Ortez received detailed autopsy information from the coroner on his Smartphone as to exactly what caused Sybil's death.

"She was fatally poisoned with ethylene glycol. You know it better as common antifreeze, like you mix then add to your car radiator. One ounce -- about what a whiskey shot glass holds -- will kill you within 24 hours. Bad citizens secretly kill their neighbor's annoying pets with it because it tastes sweet and the dogs or cats eagerly lick it up and then croak. Bingo. It's cheap and easy to buy without any suspicion. Plus, it's colorless and odorless. You can easily mix it into beverages that are sweetened, such as soda, coffee, tea, energy drinks, or cocktails. This woman died fast because she had both alcohol and several prescription medications in her bloodstream which combined to accelerate her kidney failure and brain coma, thereby killing her. So what we have here is a straight up murder, gentlemen," the detective proclaimed.

Ortez then ordered that all passengers be lined up in groups of ten for identification and questioning. "I'll call for more backup, with eight officers doing the job. Figure ten minutes for each passenger, so we are talking about an hour and a half train delay. I'll question the crew, so assemble them here in the observation car for me. Try to keep everyone calm and we'll try to get you on your way as soon as possible." Hector generously invited me to stick by him during the whole process.

More police squad cars arrived, as well as two more TV media vans with their cameramen and reporters, for the news had already leaked out regarding a probable murder on the famous Amtrak Coast Starlight.

After about ninety minutes, the detective and his men had excused everyone as a possible suspect except for seven people: the three passengers who had dinner with Sybil (the Chinese couple, Lin and Ling, and the older man with white hair and a cane, whose name was Cyrus Harding, from Wyoming), Darron from Guam, and three Amtrak crew members -- Yolanda, Lawrence, and Demetrius. "Those seven, with all their belongings, are coming with me to the station. Conway, you can take your train out of here now." I asked to come with Hector, and he said, "Sure...you say you're a writer, so maybe you can write this all up someday. Just make sure you spell my name right," he added with a wink. And so the Coast Starlight finally resumed her journey southward, with a half-moon now rising in the clear night sky. Oxnard and the Channel Islands would have to wait for another time, I realized, as I clutched my overnight bag and joined the detective in his unmarked car.

At the main Santa Barbara police station, I waited for two hours while the seven people were further questioned behind closed doors. Shortly thereafter, Lin and Ling came out, looking relieved, along with the old man, Cyrus. "We were all cleared. The police will now drive us to our hotels in Los Angeles. They basically wanted to know what Sybil had for dinner and what little we talked about and how her mood was then," Lin revealed. Then Cyrus chimed in, saying, "Hell of an adventure! My friends back in Cheyenne probably won't believe none of it neither."

Perhaps thirty minutes later, Yolanda was excused, followed by Darron. "The detective wanted to know all the details about exactly what we both spoke to that poor woman about," Yolanda explained. Then Darron said, "Specifically, they checked to see if I had known her before today. Of course I hadn't." I said goodbye to both of them. The police then drove the pair to the airport for a complimentary flight to San Diego on Southwest, the last one leaving that evening.

That left only Lawrence and Demetrius as possible suspects. Because both men handled food that Sybil could have been poisoned with -- Demetrius in the Cafe and Lawrence as the dining car chef -- they were questioned the longest of the seven. Ten more minutes passed before Demetrius emerged. "The detective finally believed that the woman never visited my Cafe, nor did I have any police record, nor did I even know her prior to today. So I'm free to go. What a night! They said they would get me on the same flight as Yolanda and that other guy," Demetrius explained. We shook hands, then he climbed into a police cruiser and likewise took off.

It was just past midnight when Detective Ortez emerged with a defeated, downcast-looking Lawrence, who was handcuffed and being led away by another officer.

"He finally broke down and confessed. All the guilty do, sooner or later. Just like that Russian book 'Crime and Punishment,' I'm sure you already read it. It seems that Lawrence once worked for Sybil Barrington in Portland. Surprise. But after a year or so into his employ, she started to get the 'hots' for him, even though he was already happily married with children. She began to corner him whenever no one else was around, and it went from there into sexual harassment territory, with her overtly pawing and pursuing him. When he demanded she stop, she got furious and fired him, later suing HIM for sexual harassment! Crazy. It went to court, but the judge threw the case out. The expense and damaging publicity, however, cost him both his marriage and the custody of his two daughters," Hector paused and scratched his head and let out a tired sigh. "Lawrence was a broken man. Yet he remembered that Barrington took the Coast Starlight frequently from Portland to L.A. So a twisted plan popped into his head. He got some basic training at a culinary school in Seattle, then applied and got a job as an Amtrak chef on this particular train. He watched and waited, his small container of antifreeze going unnoticed because it was such a common, ordinary item. Anyway, at lunch today, he heard Sybil's voice raised in argument in the dining car and stepped out to confirm his suspicions that it was really her at last. When he was positive, he waited for her to show up for dinner, then secretly dosed her dessert with the sweet, fatal liquid. She gobbled it up unknowingly, but barely made it to the restroom before passing out and dying. That's when you found her," he concluded. "Well, that's the whole story, and that's also it for me tonight...I'm beat...I'm going home now," Hector declared, shaking my hand goodbye. "It will be in all the papers in a few days...unless, of course, you write it up instead and beat them to it. Good luck."

Because I had voluntarily stayed around for the investigation, the Santa Barbara police could not comp me for a hotel room or for any additional transportation. So I took a Lyft to a nearby Marriott for the night (after canceling my Oxnard hotel and Channel Islands cruise ticket), called my wife -- giving her all of the day's dramatic details -- then flew back to Sacramento ( just a half-hour drive from Davis) on Southwest the following morning.

It was an experience I'll never forget...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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