My Last Trip on Amtrak

We were scheduled to catch Amtrak train number 91 at the Rocky Mount, North Carolina Station at 6:14pm on Sunday July 10th. The train was originally predicted to be 30 minutes behind schedule and then for reasons unexplained to the waiting passengers, it was delayed incrementally for a total of 2 ½ hours. During this extreme delay, my six-year-old daughter slipped and fell on the tile floor of the passenger waiting area. She complained of some knee pain and exhibited a slight limp, but she never cried and didn't appear to be in that much pain. After we eventually boarded train 91 at approximately 8:45pm, talked, read, played games and had a snack before taking deciding to sleep.

At about 6:00am on Monday the 11th of July, I went to the lounge car to buy some breakfast for the kids and myself. There were about four people waiting in line at the snack counter when I arrived and since I was in no hurry I stepped across the room and leaned against the wall to rest my back after several hours of sitting. The man working the snack counter told me "the line is over here." I responded with "yes, but I just want to stand for a while and I'm in no hurry." Again he repeated, "sir you cannot stand there, the line ends over here." To this I responded, "okay, your in charge" and then positioned myself at the end of the short line of waiting customers. As I was in no hurry, I encouraged two elderly women to go in front of me as I waited.

Once I made it to the head of the line, I was surprised to find there was no cereal for the kids. I quickly checked the menu and ordered sandwiches and cinnamon rolls for my daughters and simply a large coffee for myself. I paid the tall, bald cashier in cash and as he returned my change. As I reached for the receipt and change he abruptly placed it on the counter and slid it away from me. I said nothing as I collected the change and began stacking my purchased items in a manner which would allow me to traverse the shaky path back to my seat. As I am about to walk away, the guy calls out to me "do you need anything else?" As I looked at him to answer I was shocked to see that he was giving me the finger. And not just displaying it, but actually pumping it at me. I told him that I had everything I needed and proceeded three cars back with my purchase in hand.

As my six year old woke up, she complained of really bad pain in her leg. She was unable to lift it, slide it, or move it at all without suffering severe pain and she started to cry. I looked at it but saw no bruising only slight swelling at the right knee. I rubbed her leg, talked to her, placed a pillow under it to try to make her feel better. She could not sit up to have breakfast and I had to carry her to the restroom. This continued for a while until I finally asked an attendant if they had any sort of nurse or medical personnel as part of their crew. He told me that they did not, but that they could radio ahead and have an ambulance meet us at the next station. I told him that I wasn't sure we need to go that far yet, but that I would consider it. When I returned from taking my daughter to the restroom again, the attendant met me outside the bathroom door and said that the paramedics had been contacted and would meet us at the next station in about ten minutes. He also advised us to gather all of our belongings in the event that she required transportation in related to her care. I was surprised by this announcement, but quickly decided it might be for the best. We prepared our bags and waited to see what would happen next.

When train 91 stopped at the station in Sanford, Florida, paramedics met the train and checked her out. They found no major cause for concern, suggested keeping ice on the knee, and she was cleared to continue travel. I phoned ahead to my daughter's mother, explained what little I knew about her injury at this point and told her we were going to stop in the emergency room upon our scheduled 3:30pm arrival in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

A little more down the tracks in Lakeland, Florida, what appeared to be a pipe bomb was discovered and closed down the rail for about four hours. Once we eventually resumed travel, the entire signal system was down and we could do no more than inch along towards South Florida at much less than half speed with frequent halts.

By this time my kids were asking for food. Lunch time had come and gone and I dreaded looking at my watch. Since the little one couldn't walk, I went to the lounge car by myself once again. This time I reported directly to the line. I discovered that much of the menu was unavailable due to the stock having run low on this horrendously delayed journey. I placed an order, retrieved my purchase and once again fell for the "slide your change across the counter" trick. I said nothing, but once again as I was about to depart he called out, "do you need anything else?" I looked and once again he was wagging his middle finger at me. I asked, "are you having fun?" To which he averted his eyes and did not respond.

Just as I made it back to my seat, Mr. Kenneth McTear arrived and asked if I would accompany him to the lounge car so we could fill out an accident report on my daughter's incident. I told the kids I'd be back in a few minutes and they asked me to bring back hot chocolate. Mr. McTear was very polite and professional as he explained the forms and documentation required. We completed several pages of the report and he asked if I'd like a coffee. I told him no, but that the kids wanted hot chocolate. He said he would pick them up for me and got up from the table. I asked him to sit back down then explained that although I had originally decided not to report the incidents at the snack counter; since I had him here I would like to relay the events to him. He gladly listened and expressed surprise at the treatment I had received. He told me that although the guy had recently transferred from New York he had not received any previous complaints. I reminded him that the guy was being slick about it and although there was no way I could actually prove it, I was very disturbed by such anti-social behavior. Mr. Kenneth McTear said he would address these concerns with the rude cashier. When he returned a few minutes later he told me that there was no more hot chocolate and that the guy had of course denied my allegations.

Dinner was neither announced nor served on train 91 that endless day. My inquiries revealed that they were just about out of everything and only offered dinner to the first class passengers. This meant that if passengers didn't come prepared, then they and their children would have to go without. Although we were several hours behind schedule and making frequent stops on a regularly traveled route, Amtrak staff failed to acquire desperately needed re-supply of toiletries, food, drinks and snacks. As common as Amtrak employees indicated these delays are it is incomprehensible that extra stock is neither onboard nor that a system of having supplies delivered along the way is not already in place.

Several hours later I became aware of the absence of any Amtrak personnel. In fact, it was at least three hours that I didn't notice even one attendant walking through the cars. Noticing the need for several important articles, I conducted multiple searches of entirely empty passenger cars to retrieve and disperse toilet tissue, hand paper hand towels, toilet seat covers and pillows. Passengers began complaining to me and asking me questions because they assumed I worked for Amtrak. I explained to them that after spending 32 hours on a 21 hour trip I had both gained a familiarity with the train and lost confidence in Amtrak's ability to provide even the most basic customer service.

As if all of that wasn't quite enough, at 11:30pm we came to an abrupt halt in complete darkness, in the middle of nowhere. Shortly it was announced that the unionized crew had worked their bargained maximum of 12 hours per day and the train would move no more until a relief crew arrived. At the time of this work stoppage train 91 was currently running in excess of nine hours behind schedule. Why they didn't just stop at the previous station or look at the clock and call ahead several hours before I have no idea. No one can claim that there was insufficient advance warning that this train would run way past its originally scheduled arrival time. Any organized operation could have arranged for a relief crew to meet at one of the actual existing stations to prevent such despicable abandonment of helpless customers.

During the last couple hours of this incredible trip, there was one attendant on duty in the passenger area. He was a very unhappy fellow that clearly wanted to be elsewhere. He forced people to move seats including my daughter who he knew suffered extreme pain from even the

slightest touch or movement. He insisted on waking everyone to collect the pillows almost 2 ½ hours before the journey's end and gave smart-mouthed responses to passenger questions. He even announced loudly that he didn't care how late any of us were because he had been on this train since Friday. When another passenger politely reminded him that some passengers were sleeping, he raised his voice even more and boasted "you think I care about any of them? I'm working on a 56 hour shift here!" He communicated quite clearly and very loudly that he was the true victim in this situation.

At 12:45am on Tuesday July 12th, we came to an abrupt and bouncy stop. This time the angry train attendant told us that the train had struck something and that no one was to leave their seats until they determined who or what had been hit. Fortunately this time we resumed after only a short delay. The attendant blamed the problem on the amateur driver who could not recognize the local stations because he is from Boston.

At 2:20am, Amtrak Train #91, the Silver Star, finally arrived at Fort Lauderdale Train Station. A mere eleven hours late, but boy was this an adventure we will long remember.....our LAST trip on Amtrak!

Immediately following our arrival my ex-wife had an extreme fit. She managed to vandalize some of my property, make both of the kids cry and topped it off by telling me that she would make sure that I never saw my children again. What a wonderful way to end an otherwise enjoyable vacation.

Tired, hungry and extremely annoyed, we conferred with my daughter's pediatrician and followed his directions to take my little girl to the emergency room at Miami Children's Hospital. It took six hours to get her seen by an x-ray technician and another two hours for a doctor to actually review the films. But of course they still remembered to bill me the $150 for the honor of spending the entire day in their elite, disorganized facility. In fact, my poor injured six-year-old spend so much time waiting for assistance in the emergency room that she actually reached the point of such restlessness that she got up to walk around without regard for the pain! Over eight hours were spend in this one location designated as "emergency treatment" just to find out that they could find nothing, assumed it was simply a sprain and prescribed rest…..which we were all in dire need of at that point. Duh!!!

Apart from this, which all took place on the return trip, my two weeks in North Carolina were enjoyable and relaxing. Guess there is some force demanding balance in the universe. And it has an odd sense of humor.

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