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LAST TRAIN TO HELL 9/11/01

By Janet Martin

8:30 a.m. Heading north on Amtrak Crescent Train #20 on the morning of September 11, 2001, the dining car windows telescope the sun, slicing the green landscape into a glittering moving stream. We are two hours north of Charlottesville, Va., where I climbed aboard. This train is due in New York City around 3 p.m.

"Pleasant on a train, as time stands still," a slim woman named Wendy from Lynchburg, Va., unfolds her white linen napkin and smiles over golden French toast.

"Twenty minutes to Washington, DC," a cheery female voice rings over our heads across the public address system. "Laaaaast call for breakfast in the dining car"

8:55 a.m. A woman bound for Philadelphia smiles at her 12-year-old son. It's his birthday today. He stirs slightly, still asleep.

A cell phone rings. A woman placidly working with yarn over a floral needlepoint design answers. Everyone in the train car can hear her voice.

"Hello?". Silence. "Two planes have hit the World Trade Center?" The woman's tone is hoarse.. She puts the phone down. Her party is cut off.

9 a.m. A senatorial-type man in an open collar shirt gathers his suitcase to get off at the next stop, Washington, D. C.

"Ill see if I can find out more about this," he nods.

9:30 a.m. The Amtrak train goes through a tunne emerging into light. Another cell phone rings. Someone's mother in Atlanta . . .

"They've just bombed the Pentagon! An 80-year-old news watcher is concerned about her daughter. "You're in Washington?"

Now the train stops. We who are passengers look at one another, wondering. The conductor walks through the rail car. His keys jangle. His white shirt is starched. The Pentagon is across the water we have just traveled under. Did anyone notice a lurch? No one.

We start up again, rolling faster than before. In retreating windows on the west side of the train, we see smoke--an ominous dark cloud over the nation's military complex.

"Look at that smoke! " The Philadelphia-bound woman puts her finger on the window glass. She glances at her 12-year-old. Her eyes fill with worry.

"My other son is going into the Marines," she says. "I hope they don't start a war."

A voice from a few rows back chimes in, "They think they know who hit the Pentagon. Now they're waiting to see what Bush will do!"

The 12-year old birthday boy is slowly awake. "What's the Pentagon?" he asks, rubbing his eyes.

10 a.m. The train hurtles forward as America's small towns slip serenely past . . . quiet main streets with maple trees beginning to turn red . . .milk-white mists of morning across green combed pastures with cows running, as if called for breakfast.

10:30 a.m. This train is no longer stopping for passengers. It stays stationary about three minutes in Baltimore. Then it picks up speed.

11:30 a.m. We on board unconsciously have formed a news network—CPNN--an impromptu cell phone news network. There is a call from Switzerland, "Mom, you're okay!" A woman's son says in her ear. He is watching TV in a youth hostel along with other young Americans traveling in Europe. "They've just blown up the World Trade Center! I *know* people who work there!" His message is telegraphed to surrounding faces, shamelessly leaning forward in their seats to listen to phone conversations. One slim blonde woman in her twenties nods sadly. She knows people in New York's financial district, too. And she is afraid. A train steward walks through the car. She has heard that 50,000 people have died in NY. "Unconfirmed, as of yet," she adds.

Wendy, whose golden French toast is now churning in her stomach says that at the next stop, she's "going to get off the train, turn around and go home to Lynchburg!" Unlike the journey's beginning, time on this train no longer stands still.

11:40 a.m. We arrive in Wilmington, Del. Four policemen in black uniforms approach. Passengers stare out their windows, watching. A tall Amtrak porter imposingly strides through the cars. He wants us to "sit down in designated seats and write down our names, destinations and the phone numbers of next of kin." He waves his arms defensively. His eyes are wide; his hands make loops in the air. "For your safety!" he says. "They have just declared a 'national emergency, '" He repeats himself. "A national emergency."

11:55 a.m. A cell call alerts us that a plane has crashed just south of Philadelphia. A passenger pipes up from the front, "Tom Brokaw says 'We are at war!'"

12 Noon. A porter announces that Amtrak will likely terminate the train here in Wilmington. "All transportation is off," he says. Amtrak trains are no longer running. Amtrak officials are checking passenger identification; Amtrak employees are checking tunnels, bridges, rails--everything.

12:30 p.m. Amtrak manager Pam Montgomery boards the train. She introduces herself and tells everyone to "stay calm." She says Amtrak will rent yellow "cheese" (school

buses and put us all up in a hotel. Wendy nervously protests. She wants to rent a car to return to Lynchburg. Montgomery tells her the highways are packed.

A youth in baggy slacks, head wrapped in a handkerchief, groans. He is 22 and has a four-month-old baby. He wants to be in New York, not spending the night in Wilmington. Amtrak's Pam Montgomery says delays are inevitable now.

"This is the greatest country in the world. You cannot attack this country and think that nothing is going to happen," she says.

1:p.m. New York is gridlocked. That is the word from a man with a small black and white television, which he shares. Moving pictures of the World Trade Center bombing reel over and over and over. People hang over backs of train seats, saying "Hmm-uh."

In the dining car, Pam Montgomery meets passengers who want to go back south. One small woman, her chin set tight, wants to see her mother in NY. She is tearful. Montgomery says, "We're going to feed you." Earlier she has dispatched the kitchen staff to "Git those hotdogs going!" Meanwhile, she tells the tearful woman, "Have something to eat and relax. And we'll talk again. "

Evelyn Brown is a librarian who lives in Brooklyn. Can she get there? She wants to know. Pam Montgomery says this train will be going to New York after all

"They have checked bridges and tunnels. Amtrak is cleared for safety." And, she reports other news. There's a way back south for those who want it. Amtrak Train #19 will pass through Wilmington. "Who wants to go?" she asks. A few hands go up.

Feeling closer to one another, we passengers begin to share our thoughts out loud. Decisions change your life. We discuss that: adventure or safety. Being part of history or watching it. Where to go? North to hell? Or South to safety?

"But *where*," someone asks, "with terrorists, can you be safe? *Nowhere* is safe. Most people on the train press on toward their original destination: New York. Meanwhile, Amtrak feeds its flock hotdogs, hamburgers and packaged turkey sandwiches. Employees apologize for the delay and the company picks up the lunch tab.

2:20 p.m. The Amtrak Consolidated National Operations Center slips the window. Pam stands on the train platform flipping through her papers. The train whizzes past. Her calming job is done.

When to flee? Where to flee? It's an unyielding, quiet voice in the mind. What does history show? Before the Holocaust, the survivors sensed when to leave. Einstein himself a Jew, did not return to Germany from traveling abroad. Some of his closest kinsmen perished. He survived, relocated in the United States and became *Time* Magazine's Man of the Millennium.

A coach passenger quotes news he has heard. The hijacked lanes were on their way to California. "All were loaded up with fuel," he says. It was planned. "This is September 11. Ninth month, eleventh. 911. Emergency 2001.

We're rattling on to Philadelphia. Crossing bridges, we can see the mud flats and twinkling water eerily calm outside. Inside, over and over we view black-and-white images of two planes crashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. Fatalities are "much worse than previously thought." Tom Brokaw reports from New York through the small television set perched on a train pull-down serving tray. Tim Russert in Washington claims, "Our lives in America will never be the same."

He is right. We can see it in this microcosm of a train. People have hugged one another in leaving the north and south train. They don't even know each other's last name. One says, "God is with you wherever you are, remember that." I hope she's right. But where was God in the planes hijacked with innocent people aboard, men, women and children who were slammed—human arrows—into immovable targets—buildings, skyscrapers?

A discussion erupts. When was the last national emergency declared? Bay of pigs? Cuban Missile Crisis? We can't decide. We are moving targets toward the epicenter of disaster.

3 p.m. Into the Amtrak station in Philadelphia, some passengers get off. The train lights go out. The station is in twilight, illumined by dim fluorescent lights. Amtrak's Jim Davis checks the train station and reports, "This is a ghost station. Nothing open. Nobody here. Everything closed. Even McDonald's. Suddenly, the train lights return. Davis shrugs. "We got power." He climbs back on board.

More news: "This is the only train moving besides one to Boston. Everything else is stopped. Atlantic City trains, all stopped," Davis says. "No Long Island trains are moving. New York," he adds, "is under lockdown."

We trundle past East Fairmont Park. Under the same sunshine that stroked Virginia, this same sun feels ominous. "America Under Attack," the television titles scream.

Further north a sign along a suspended bridge proclaims TRENTON MAKES, THE WORLD TAKES. On the rocks of an underpass near Trenton, N. J., a scribbler has chalked a date 1/25/01, and signed it, "A Kid." Immortality in chalk, as it were.

"Today is 9/11 We'll always remember it," one passenger speaks for all. Immortality in the textbooks of history. Like December 7, 1944, today will live in infamy.

A grey-haired gentlewoman traveling with her granddaughter turns toward me. "Excuse me. I understand you are a reporter. Look at that."

Outside my window in Elizabeth, N. J., a band of brown foul-smelling smoke stretches high above the tall green paradise trees which border Amtrak tracks. The vault of sky is

baby blue. Innocent clouds form a frilly white ruffle like the hem on a nursery bassinet. As we throttle forward on the tracks the dark band in the sky becomes a plume, spewing from its source--the source of disaster we know is there, but we cannot see. Behind Union County College there is a darkened church, like the signature kirsch left in Berlin after allied bombing in 1944. But that church is still standing in 2001 and the World Trade Center, we are informed, is not

The train picks up speed. The band of smoke looms darker. It's like an injured caterpillar, writhing dark fumes in tortured humps. Evil. Loose. Evil intent to destroy good. Hitler personified it in the old century. Whose is the face of evil in the new?

4:45 p.m. Outside Newark, uniformed police board the train and walk through. Then a blond heavysset officer leaves the train and begins to cough. Uniformed officers remove his bulletproof vest front and back. They bring in oxygen, prop him up against station brick walls. The sun slats on the pavement cast yellow squares amid shadowed bands. It's as if the officer is in jail—just the way we passengers feel on this train, encased in a darkened grid of terror.

"What a day, what a day," says Amtrak's Gail collecting pillows from passengers. Meanwhile, outside the window, we see the police officer wheeled away on a stretcher.

5:20 p.m. Harrison, NJ The smoke is thicker now, an angry crawling thing bubbling up into the sky. We are stilled next to another train. The smoke from the window blows against the sky like the ovens of Auschwitz.

5:40 p.m. Eight miles from New York, the train conductor walks through with his baritone voice in full gear. "They are holding all trains from going into the city. Bear with us. We'll get you there We are close." His words are encouraging. But the day has worn him down as it has all of us. His shirt is less starched than earlier today. We riders are thoroughly rumpled with concern and fatigue.

The train creeps forward. More news. "See that new puff of white smoke? It's another explosion." The conductor shakes his head. We stare, transfixed. *There—right there--* is what is *no longer there*. Smoke coils where once there were 110-story twin towers. The World Trade Center, for God's sake. The skyline of a free world stands altered by unfathomable terror. We passengers are silent. We are a family now, forged by circumstance.

The train rolls slowly toward the tunnel entering Penn Station. The blackened hole approaching feels like the fiery center of the earth. Hell itself.

5:50 p.m. Amtrak Train #20 doors open. We are freed to destiny. We hoist our bags and climb the Penn Station steps leading to New York City.

One thing we know: This train ride is over. But this tragic story has just begun.

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