
Introduction

When I was a little girl in Hammond, Indiana, I would often lie awake on summer mornings and listen for the whistles of distant trains. The cool, dewy air carried their music through the open window next to my bed. I was still far too young to join them in their travels across the country, but they inspired me nonetheless. Perhaps someday, I, too, could travel to another city and become someone new: a confident girl who was neither painfully shy nor too smart, who was not the ugly duckling belonging nowhere, nor the one who tried too hard to be good and who read about life instead of going out to meet it, because inside a book she was safe.

Blossoming from that shy, lonely girl, I became a woman who is much more confident and outgoing, with only a lingering shyness. I have ridden trains, in truth and in imagination, to become the person I am. I am still smart, and glad of it. I still do my best to be a good person, but not out of fear and not because parents and nuns tell me to—although the lessons they provided made me conscious of the importance of goodness in the world. I still feel safe within the pages of a book, but I also feel sure of myself out in the world.

Sometimes, I wake up early in my grown-up bed, windows open around it, and hear the distant whistles of trains. It is then I remember that little girl who did not yet know the most important thing her grown-up self would learn: Life is all about choices. Learning how to change your mind, when the moment is right, is often the best gift you can give yourself.