

Train Ride

By Jacqueline Guidry

Even at four, I'd eavesdropped on enough conversations to know all Texans considered themselves superior to everyone else. Especially superior to everyone in Louisiana. Especially, according to my mother, superior to us. But those Texas relatives were the only people my grandmother and I could think to visit, so they had to do.

Mom-Mom packed egg salad sandwiches, apples, and sugar cookies and bought our tickets. A neighbor who worked for a railroad company chauffeured us to the station. He was a cheerful man, a disposition he shared with his wife; the ride would've been even jollier if she'd joined us. Still, good cheer ushered us away from home and into the station.

Mom-Mom and I crossed the platform, our train looming over us, much larger than any I'd witnessed barreling down a track. Puffs drifted from the engine as it took mighty breaths to marshal its strength, readying itself for the engineer's command to start pulling.

We walked through two cars and down the aisle of a third before reaching seats Mom-Mom deemed satisfactory. These, identical to the others she'd rejected, were red leather and wide enough to accommodate two or three of me. Why were we sitting here instead of on seats we'd passed earlier? My grandmother knew what she was doing, knew exactly where we belonged, and there was nothing to be gained from questioning her decision.

She gave me the window seat, and I stared outside. A few stragglers on the platform paced. Others stood rooted in place. Were they struggling to make up their minds, deciding whether to board? Unlike them, I had no choice on most matters, momentous or not, my days laid out by others in a pattern this journey was disrupting, a prospect that stirred me with both exhilaration and trepidation.

I felt suspended in a world gone strange.

There was a woman wearing the same style hat my mother favored, but she wasn't my mother. Over there was a man with his hands clasped behind his back. Wasn't that exactly how my father stood when he warmed himself at the gas heater in our kitchen? But he wasn't my father.

When I turned back to Mom-Mom, her lips were moving in silent prayer. Two fingers massaged each rosary bead only long enough for a cursory Hail Mary or Our Father. She was blessing our trip so talking wasn't allowed.

I knelt for a better view and pressed a cheek against the glass to see the train extending far beyond our car, then switched cheeks to get a glimpse in the other direction. Out front was the engine, still puffing away. Out back, too far for me to see, was the caboose. Friendly caboose men waved back when I stretched out of our Oldsmobile window, waiting with my mother at the edge of tracks for a train to speed past. Now I was the one on a train, the one who would speed past.

The door at the front of our car opened. A conductor appeared. I knew about conductors. I knew about caboose men. The conductor stopped at the first row of seats and punched a passenger's ticket. He said something then grinned. A joke, I thought, and wondered what it was. He made his slow way towards us, pausing

at each row and extending a hand for tickets.

Was Mom-Mom nearly done with her rosary? She often refused to respond to interruptions when praying, liked to pretend she'd been transported to a holy realm. Really, I thought, she was reminding the world who was boss. She decided what merited attention and what didn't. I wasn't foolish enough to ask whether I was right, but like Mom-Mom, I knew what I knew.

What I didn't know was what I should do if she didn't answer when the conductor demanded our tickets. What then? Was I expected to scavenge through her purse and overnight case and larger bag too? Would he glower over us until I produced tickets or, instead, quickly lose patience and escort us down the aisle with everyone staring? Would he march us to the exit and throw us off his train, forcing us to stand, humiliated, on the platform until my annoyed mother fetched us? She was supposed to be rid of us for a couple of days, and now this?

I fixed my eyes on Mom-Mom and refused to be distracted by the approaching conductor, willed her to finish that rosary while there was still time. Then, with the conductor nearly upon us, she slipped her pearl beads into their velvet, drawstring bag, pulled our tickets from her purse, and presented them.

"Bonjour, Madam. Comment ca va?"

We relaxed. He wasn't some Texan with an exotic accent, not even another sort of American spitting English faster and faster until meaning was camouflaged by the onrush of too many syllables. Mom-Mom's prayers had saved us again. We were safe on this train carrying us from Louisiana to Texas. The good cheer of our neighbor had proved prophetic.

They exchanged pleasantries as he punched our tickets. She told him of the relatives, her son and his family, we were visiting in Orange, Texas. This was my first train ride, she said. At that, he gave a broad smile, as if it were the most delightful news he'd heard in days. Leaving the place you knew to explore a place you didn't know? Nothing more gratifying.

As the train jerked to life, he swayed. "We'll have a good ride today." He gave me a friendly nod and a two-fingered salute. "Perfect day for a train ride." The brass buttons on his jacket sparkled with their own good cheer. Then he was gone, off to promise someone else a good ride, a perfect day.

Outside my window, the station disappeared, mainly replaced by stores and offices. Almost immediately, those were followed by open country with scattered houses and fields of cotton, sugar cane, and corn. An occasional herd of cows munched grass. I'd chewed blades myself and knew how sweet they tasted. Here and there, I spied people going about their business. Two boys played catch. A girl swung on the rope her daddy must've hung across the high branch of their live oak. She looked about my age. Did she also have a baby sister in the house? A mother whose time was now devoted to someone else? Did the girl yearn to be on one of the trains speeding past her

house each day? Or was she content with the rope swing, her sister too young to claim that, at least for now?

The train braked as it approached a town, larger than Carencro where we worshipped on Sundays, smaller than Lafayette where we'd boarded. As we neared the center of this unfamiliar place, we slowed even more, barely creeping forward. Ahead, a line of vehicles marked time behind the lowered crossing gate. Was a girl sitting in one of those cars, eager for the chance to announce her presence? I strained to see but didn't spot a girl stretching out of her window. Still, if anyone looked at my window, they'd see me waving. Here I am. It's me.

No answering wave and I decided if a girl was watching, she watched only for the caboose. Did she guess how little I'd seen compared to those

men who traveled the rails daily and witnessed many sights? Maybe. And maybe that was reason enough to keep her hands at her sides, to save her greetings for the caboose men who'd seen so much, who probably held clues to what lay past her town's narrow borders.

As we left that crossing behind, we picked up speed again. When I glanced at my grandmother, who hadn't spoken since the conductor left us, she was as mesmerized as me by everything flashing past our window. "Where are we?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Je ne sais pas."

If Mom-Mom didn't know where we were, no one knew. We might be anywhere, some place very special or a place not special at all. I didn't think we were in Texas yet because we hadn't traveled long enough to unpack our sandwiches and, though I'd never ridden a train before, I knew Texas was far away. "We're not in Texas," I said out loud to see whether she agreed.

"Non," she said.

I turned back to the window, satisfied. We weren't in Texas, which meant we must be in Louisiana. Louisiana, the only place I'd ever lived. Texas, the only place I'd ever imagined.

Just as my stomach started growling and I was about to complain, Mom-Mom pulled out the sandwiches—egg salad with chopped onions for her, plain for me. While I ate my first bites, she peeled, cored, and sliced an apple. The train glided smoothly, food balancing easily on our laps. I chewed and thought about how you could eat anything on a train without worrying about spilling. Next time, we might bring fried chicken and potato salad, two of my favorites. More work for Mom-Mom, though. I'd probably have to settle for another egg sandwich.

"We'll be in Texas soon," I said, after awhile. "Before supper."

"Yes, before supper." Already, I considered myself an expert in such matters.

She handed me a cookie. "You miss your mama and daddy, you?"

I considered before shaking my head. I'd seen them, my sister too, that morning when those of us old enough to eat regular food had shared a pot of couche-couche poured into individual bowls, soaked in milk, and sprinkled with sugar. I could almost taste breakfast. Milk warmed by the hot couche-couche. The couche-couche softened by that milk. All of it sweetened by the sugar. Why would I miss my family this soon, the flavors of home still with me?

"They be missing you."

Again I considered before replying. "Not yet." Truly, I didn't know whether they'd ever miss me. But this much I did know: Right now, my departure only hours old, they didn't miss me.

"They miss you, them." She was insistent. "Soon, you miss them too."

I turned back to the window. Mom-Mom didn't want me forgetting I was tightly bound to the family I left behind. Even when I crossed into Texas, my rightful place remained with my parents and sister. This train was a temporary interlude and nothing more. I wasn't to forget this central fact of my life.

Hadn't she noticed my mother's farewell that morning? Forgotten, if she noticed? Mom-Mom missed little, forgot even less.

Instead of a tearful hug, expected from any properly sad mother bidding her firstborn farewell, my mother had smiled almost as cheerfully as our neighbor. While I was only leaving for a few nights, didn't that absence call for an inkling of regret or apprehension? Apparently not. Already, my place in her arms was filled by my baby sister, too small, you might think, to take anybody's place. Perhaps our futures were laid out that day—who would eventually leave, who would stay—but I didn't recognize the omen, if that's what it was.

I pictured my family as they'd be that even-

ing, supper finished but bedtime not yet arrived. After putting my little sister down for the night, Mama and Daddy would tune to a radio program—the Grand Ole Opry, one of my best shows, if it was the right night. Old Minnie Pearl, her high-pitched cackle of a greeting making us all laugh before she shared her first story about Brother or someone else from Grinder’s Switch, her hometown where excitement crackled every minute of every day. I’d never heard of anyone like Brother or Minnie and as much as I liked to open my ears to every conversation, surely I would’ve heard if anyone like those two lived nearby. Some towns got all the entertaining citizens. Other towns, like mine, were stuck with the plain and commonplace.

Minnie was a crazy one, my father said. So were all those Opry stars up in Tennessee. Even the singers weren’t quite normal underneath it all. Could you be on the radio, if you were all the way normal like us? Never let yourself get put on a radio show or live in Nashville where many strange people congregate. Or Texas, for that matter. My tante, who would greet us at the station alongside my uncle, was fond of reminding us that their state was huge. No telling what lurked in all that space.

Maybe later tonight, after the radio was turned off and my father crossed one leg over the other to make a foot horsey, he’d miss me. Just as that girl I’d spied might have a sister too young to play on the rope swing, so was my sister too young to bounce on a foot horsey. When she was awake and watching, my sister whimpered when I squealed too loudly at another toss into the air—giddy-yap, giddy-yap. She wasn’t ready to be a rider. Maybe tonight when my mother wanted a big girl to bathe in the big tub, she’d miss me. But for now, I was certain, my absence remained unmarked.

By the time I looked to Mom-Mom to ask what she thought of these ideas playing in my head, she was reading devotions from her missal. She was devout but also believed in getting a head start on required prayers to give herself time for other activities, to enjoy more visiting when we arrived.

I spent the rest of that trip watching whole mysterious worlds appear then disappear. We crossed a body of water sprinkled with ships larger than I’d known possible. “Lake Charles,” Mom-Mom announced, and I nodded as if this was the very place I’d been waiting to see. Cotton fields gave way to rice paddies. Towns, then country, then towns again. Scenes changed so rapidly, I could not discern more than fleeting details here and there, sometimes not even that much. I saw acres of sugar cane, but couldn’t describe a single individual stalk. A farmer rode a red tractor, but was his shirt striped or plaid? By the time we crossed the border, I’d seen so much yet still knew so little.

In Texas, I played with my youngest cousin, a boy six months my junior and not yet fully Texan. I listened in on adults’ conversations and ate strange foods, tamales you had to unwrap being my favorite. But the whole time, I waited impatiently to reboard. I wasn’t homesick, never missed my father or mother or sister despite Mom-Mom’s prediction. What I did miss was being on the train and seeing so much even if I saw all of it for the briefest of moments.

Though the tracks we rode only swept across Louisiana and into the easternmost tip of Texas, they revealed enough to provide a glimpse of the size of the country, much larger than I’d imagined. If a

girl was swinging on a rope in the middle of an unknown part of our state, what might girls and boys be doing all across Louisiana and Texas and elsewhere? Trains went everywhere, saw everything. I wished we had relatives in other states so Mom-Mom would buy us tickets, then pack food— chicken and potato salad if I was very lucky. My mother, for her part, would merrily

send us on our way.

I knew all about Tennessee with its unfair burden of abnormal residents. But what about New York where other radio programs broadcast? Or California where still other shows originated? What were they like? Tree swings or more exotic playthings? Washington, D.C.? What did the capitol of an entire nation hold? Forty-eight states, according to my older cousin, a fourth grader who took great pleasure in doling out bits of knowledge to me and her younger sister. Forty-eight and who knew what any of them held?

Until this journey, I'd assumed leaving Louisiana was a leap into the completely foreign. Wasn't that what my mother meant when she complained of swellheaded Texans? Wasn't my father's message the same when he described the Nashville misfortunates? Now I'd seen some of this country for myself and knew leaving my state only required stepping onto a train to discover what the next station and the vast spaces between offered. With Mom-Mom guarding over me, I was ready to see more, some of it startling, some of it familiar, all of it compelling. But because our relatives never managed to move beyond Texas, she and I never saw another part of the world in swift, ever-changing tableaux.

Back home, I expected my parents to bombard me with questions. Who were the conductors? Where did I sit? What did the other passengers look like and what did they do? Most important of all, what did I see streaming past my window? To my surprise, they only wanted to hear about my tante, uncle, and cousins and turned to Mom-Mom for those reports. Nothing else piqued their interest.

When I whispered stories of the train ride to my sister, she swatted at my breath tickling her ear and laughed at everything I said. I wouldn't have minded, if I'd been telling a funny part.

Because my parents weren't interested and because my sister was too young to distinguish the serious from the silly, I kept the treasure of this trip to myself. For days and weeks afterwards, when I closed my eyes, I saw the country, huge and varied, racing past a train window. "Look here," the vista cried. "No, there. Don't miss that," came tumbling after. And, finally, "There is so much to see in this world." I listened and tried, as I had on the train, to see it all and to remember it all.

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