

Traveling Mercies

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Otis Sacks shifted uncomfortably in the high-backed seat, trying without success to avoid the glare of the snot-nosed kid sitting opposite him. Otis hadn't said a word since they'd all boarded the old locomotive and shuffled like cattle into a stuffy coach car redolent of cigarette smoke, cheap perfume, and stale body odor. Nevertheless, the kid glared at him like he just shot Santa Claus. He'd first noticed the boy—whom he figured to be five years old—inside the terminal, ripping train schedules from the wire rack beside the ticket counter and shredding them like confetti across the polished marble floor.

For an assortment of reasons—his current station in life being first and foremost—Otis had recently begun to doubt the existence of God, but *someone* had conspired to seat Otis and his wife practically knee-to-knee with the young ruffian and his family. And, sadly, three months after VJ Day, when the economy was bustling, the country celebrating, and most of the population thriving, Otis was not. Whether it was God (if, indeed, He existed) or the devil who'd brought these tribulations upon him was not of particular concern; they were his nonetheless.

Otis's theological musings were interrupted by the imperious voice he'd come to know so well over the past twenty years.

"We're the Sacks," Eunice proclaimed. "My husband, Otis, and I are on our way to Little Rock. What about you folks?"

"I am Crosby Milton," snot-nose's father replied. He gestured toward his entourage. "This is my wife, Helen." The plain-looking woman held an infant of indeterminate gender and nodded politely as her husband continued. "The young one is our daughter, Ruth, and this"—he pointed to the kid—"is our son, Archie." Archie smirked and inserted a forefinger into his nostril. "We're going to Oklahoma City. I've just secured a position there with the Shell Oil Company as Sales and Marketing Manager for the Southwest United States."

The man's chest swelled so far it reminded Otis of a rooster readying to crow. He waited for his wife's inevitable response.

"We should be so fortunate," Eunice said right on cue. "Otis lost his job at the textile plant. They made uniforms for the Army, you know, and now that the war's over, all those soldiers coming home, they didn't need him anymore." She sniffed and sighed. "We're going to live with my sister."

There is a hell, Otis thought, *so there must be a God after all*. He let his gaze wander to the window of the coach car. Outside, a family gathered next to the boarding platform, an older man and woman exchanging hugs and kisses with a younger couple. After a moment, they all clasped hands and bowed their heads. Otis lowered the coach car window a few inches, and the older man's words carried to his ear.

"We thank you, Lord, for this time of wonderful fellowship with our family. Now, please grant traveling mercies to Robert and Lenore as they go along their way—"

"Otis!" Eunice harped. "Please close that window immediately. Fumes are getting into the car. Can't you see them? I see them plain as day."

He could have told her what she was seeing was only steam from the train's braking system, but it wouldn't matter. Nothing he said mattered anymore. Nothing he did mattered either. It was far easier just to comply.

He reached for the window latch, and, as he did so, a small dark object plinked off the glass and landed in his lap. He stared at it. For one horrific moment, he thought it was a booger. Closer inspection, however, revealed the pellet to be nothing more than a shriveled pea. His eyes slid to the kid, who sat with one polished Buster Brown planted on the seat, a satisfied smile on his face, and a peashooter dangling from his fingers like a Cuban cheroot. Otis thought to snatch the offending tube and toss it out the window, but the train conductor appeared at that moment asking for tickets, and sanity prevailed. Otis settled for a resigned sigh.

"How long before we arrive in Atlanta?" Eunice asked the conductor.

The man consulted a round, silver watch retrieved from the pocket of his vest. "It'll be three hours and twenty-six minutes, ma'am. We'll have a short break there, and then it's on to Memphis and points west."

It was going to be a long trip, Otis thought, a very long trip. And at the end would be Eunice's sister and a much longer—perhaps never-ending—recitation of his shortcomings as a husband. He leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes, hoping the train's movement and the monotonous murmur of the wheels would lull him to sleep.

"What is it you plan to do in Little Rock?" Milton bellowed.

Otis blinked, realizing the man had addressed him. "I'm not sure. The only thing I know is textiles—worked at it more than twenty years before I was laid off."

Milton leaned forward conspiratorially. "Sales, sir, are the future of our country. I grew up in sales. I've sold everything from can openers to used automobiles. That's how I got to be where I am today. America is product-oriented. We manufacture and we sell. If you're good at selling a product, any product, you can make a living no matter where you are."

Otis felt an elbow in his side.

"You see, Otis," chided his wife, "you should listen to this gentleman. Success speaks for itself, and he is certainly successful."

As opposed to me, Otis thought. He turned to the window, wondering if it might be possible to sleep with his eyes open. He was not a rude person and had no wish to offend anyone, even the blathering Milton, but the prospect of spending hours on end in that particular coach car might well be more than he could bear. As the landscape changed from rambling urban structures to rural fields and forests, he fell into a trance-like state, his mind drifting back to a time when his future was filled with life's possibilities.

In his youth, he'd dreamed of traveling, of perhaps becoming a merchant seaman and exploring exotic ports of call all over the world. And he might've, but for his father's untimely death and an ailing mother he was reluctant to abandon. So he'd gone to work at the textile plant where his father had worked, and his father's father before him. At nineteen, he'd met Eunice, fresh out of high school and pretty as a picture. In no time, he had wooed her away from her current boyfriend. Three months before his twentieth birthday, they were married, and notions of buying a decent house and raising a family replaced dreams of faraway travels. Sadly, notions were all they would ever be. Life in a four-room mill house—and no children—became Otis Sacks' albatross. Eunice began to

question the wisdom of her matrimonial choice, and Otis himself reached the point he could hardly summon the strength to mount a successful argument in his defense. The final blows in Otis' defeat—the ones draining his last vestiges of pride and energy—had been the layoff and Eunice's decision to move in with her sister.

An unrelenting *thump, thump, thump* intruded on Otis' ruminations, and he turned away from the window to survey the coach car. Eunice, Milton, and his wife and daughter appeared to be dozing. Archie had again focused his implacable and unblinking gaze on Otis, one heel drumming a steady rhythm against the lower part of the seat. As Otis watched, the boy brought his other heel into play—*thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump*. It was as if the kid challenged him to say something, to see how much it would take before Otis screamed at the top of his lungs. Otis looked to Archie's parents for support. *Surely, the sound was as maddening to them as it was to him.* But no, they slept on as if the incessant pounding was little more than a gentle wave breaking on the shoreline.

Finally, Otis rose from his seat, careful not to disturb the others, and made his way to the small bathroom at the rear of the train, where he sat on the closed toilet lid with his head in his hands and wondered at his fate. Some time later—he wasn't sure how long, but the sun had lowered a bit—he emerged and trudged back to the cramped quarters of the coach car. The air was thick with the odor of grease. Stained white cardboard boxes lay stacked on Otis' seat, a scattering of chicken bones protruding.

Eunice frowned at him. "Where have you been, Otis? You've missed lunch. I'm sure the porter won't be able to accommodate you now. We'll be pulling into Atlanta soon."

Otis lifted the boxes gingerly and placed them on the floor between his feet. "It's no matter, Eunice. I wasn't hungry anyway. I'll get something later." Across the aisle, Archie grinned, oily residue coating the boy's lips and fingers, and began thumping the seat again.

Within minutes, the train slowed and eventually ground to a stop, brakes hissing and steam billowing from under the cars. The conductor came around again saying they'd be in the station only long enough to take on mail and cautioned the passengers against dallying if they chose to step off for a bit of air.

"I'm going to stretch my legs," Otis said. "Then I'll stop by the dining car and see if there's any fried chicken left."

Once outside, Otis meandered through clusters of people and baggage carts and eventually found himself inside the terminal. It was an impressive structure with a tall, domed ceiling. Gilded, ornately carved support struts came together at the dome's apex, reminding him of a king's crown. On the other side of the terminal, more rows of track stretched out and away from the building. On one, he saw a sleek, powerful-looking diesel locomotive, its green and gold paint glinting brightly in the early afternoon sun. He squinted and just made out the name lettered on the side of the big engine: Crescent.

He had heard about the Crescent as a youth. His father was fascinated by trains, and, before his death, had spoken of the legendary Crescent in reverential tones. The original steam-powered engine had been replaced by a diesel, and, since the war ended, the train was again used exclusively for passenger service, operating all the way from New York to New Orleans.

Otis threaded his way among the empty tracks, stopped beside the shining behemoth, and slid his hand along the smooth, cool metal surface of the sleeping cars. Finally, he climbed a thin metal ladder attached to the outside of the engineer's compartment and looked inside, awed by the array of dials and gauges.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Otis looked down from his perch at the uniformed man wearing a Sam Brown belt and standing with his hands on his hips. "I was just admiring the train," he replied, somewhat embarrassed. "It was one of my father's favorites."

"Well," the man said, "your father had good taste. But if you don't mind, sir, you need to climb down from there and return to the main building. These tracks can be dangerous."

Otis followed the man back into the terminal, then crossed through the massive domed room and out to the tracks on the other side. He looked left and right for the steam locomotive he'd ridden into the station, thinking perhaps he'd gotten turned around. Momentarily, he spied a gentleman in a blue, three-piece suit and conductor's cap. "Excuse me," he said. "Can you tell me where to find the train to Memphis?"

"Yonder." The man pointed to a gray plume of smoke followed by a file of coach and freight cars appearing as a speck in the distance. "Hope you weren't supposed to be on it." The man chuckled, tipped his cap, and went on his way.

Otis stood scratching his head and wondering what he should do. Eventually, he wandered back inside, shoulders slumped, hands in his pockets, and sat down on one of the long, glistening mahogany benches. About now, Eunice would be wondering why he was taking so long in the dining car. He wondered how long she'd wait before flagging a conductor or porter to inquire whether they'd seen him, wondered what her reaction would be to their response. *Just like him*, he imagined her saying. *Can't do anything right.*

After a while, Otis walked to the far side of the station where he'd seen the Crescent. It was still there, but as he watched, the powerful diesels fired up and the train began to edge down the track. Bound for New Orleans—probably arriving there sometime in the early evening tomorrow. The passengers would have dinner soon, on white linen tablecloths with thin china plates, and then prepare for a good night's rest in one of the big Pullman sleeping cars.

New Orleans had been one of the ports he'd imagined traveling to as a merchant seaman—seafood gumbo, jazz, and the dreamy allure of the French Quarter. Otis pushed through the heavy terminal doors and onto the loading platform, keeping a steady pace until he reached a spot near the Crescent's track, where the line of cars wound slowly through the rail yard like a big green-and-gold serpent. Once the caboose rolled by, Otis stepped onto the track and continued walking. He maintained his course well after the train disappeared in the distance, blindly following the twin silver rails, hardly noticing as he cleared the yard and then, much later in the day, the outskirts of the city.

Twilight found him in a forested area where tall pines rose like mountains on both sides of the tracks, and pink and purple fingers of light reached up over the treetops, the sun fading slowly behind them. Birds nestled in the trees, chattering like partygoers before settling in for the night to come.

Still, Otis walked on, unsure if he was walking toward something or away from it. The answer was of little consequence. All that mattered was that he kept walking.

Before long, the moon rose and the air cooled pleasantly. Otis took deep breaths, filling his nostrils with the crisp scent of the pines. He no longer thought of Eunice, or her sister, or his snot-nosed tormentor from the train, or even of past failures, real or perceived. As the darkness engulfed him, he moved to the side of the tracks where fallen pine needles masked his every footfall.

The almost preternatural quiet filled him with nirvana. Periodically, he climbed the gentle rise back to the track bed, where the sharp crunch of cinders under his feet assured him he was still there.