

Sound of the Night Train

by Pat Schneider

Only once in every twenty-four hours the train comes through my town--in the dark, still center of the night. Sometimes I am awake to hear it, its wail a long sound-tunnel back to another time, another place.

1934. Early March in southern Missouri, northern Arkansas. The air cold, the night wind hard in the open doorway of a boxcar headed south toward Louisiana.

My mother told me this in the winter of her dying. Always she said my father was just no good--her Ozark accent persisting to the end: a woman warshed and rinched the clothes. A man who didn't treat a woman right was just no good.

It was the heart of the Depression, she said. I never did tell this to anyone--I was so ashamed. We wanted to go to see Papa and Mama in the Socialist Colony down in Louisiana, but we didn't have any money. So we rode the rails. One night a man in the boxcar with us said, "If y'all know what's good for you, you'll jump right now." We were scared; we jumped. And me six months pregnant with you. Isn't that awful?

She lay very still then on her high hospital bed, the wedding ring quilt she had pieced when her eyes were good pulled up around her shoulders. What made me sad, listening to this story, was the strangeness of my mother's not saying, He was just no good. For the first time in her eighty-six years she said, He was good to me then. I was cold, and we were sleeping on the ground. He covered me with leaves. He covered her--covered me--with leaves.

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