Mr. Jordan's Arrival

a short story by Keith Lee Morris

When I was a boy, we lived in a shotgun house — bright white paint, green shutters — on a little street near the Riverbend in New Orleans. The area is "improved" now. Tourists know it because of Cooter Brown's, the Camellia Grill, and the streetcar line. But then it was very quiet, just average families like ours and the slow days by the river in the heat.

I played across the street on the River Road and the railroad tracks. I assume my fascination with trains was fairly typical. There was nothing I liked better than to stage an imaginary battle on the tracks, or to charge from the trees at the sound of an approaching train, up and over the levee, blazing away at the engineer with my cap gun.

My family didn't travel much, and the tracks represented for me all that was mysterious, dangerous, and far away. I manufactured elaborate daydreams of hopping trains on hot afternoons, riding coal cars in the starlight, nestling into a bedroll in some hobo jungle outside a small Western town.

Again, these fantasies were probably not unusual, but I entertained them long past the age when most boys move on to other interests. I read fanatically about the railroad — books about train robbers' daring heists and the great railroad barons with their monumental schemes and the drifters whose lives were centered around the tracks. Later I steered my interest onto more conventional paths. I became a history major in college and went about getting my degree in a more or less normal way, although I had a tendency to write excitably about events that didn't arouse much feeling among my professors. After college, I got married and went to graduate school at Tulane. But somehow, in the back of my mind, there were always the tracks, and the desire to be somewhere else, and the belief that I was destined to arrive at some defining moment in my life, when I would achieve fulfillment.

So when my wife, Hannah, told me, during my last semester of grad school, that she was pregnant, it was not particularly welcome news. I felt that fate was being short-circuited somehow, that an insurmountable obstacle had been raised in my path. At the very least, I imagined the baby's arrival would be a drain on my time and energy.

Then Seth was born, and my mind changed completely. Fatherhood stirred in me a powerful response I could never have foreseen. Hannah held Seth's little hand as if it were exactly what she'd been waiting to do all her life, but I had only skimmed the child-care books, had pouted away the previous nine months in secret misery. Now I was stunned by the shape of his tiny red feet. I stood taut and speechless in the interval between each of his fragile breaths. I wanted to breathe for him, if I could. From that point on, only Seth mattered to me.

My decision to leave New Orleans was unexpected, even to me. I was driving through the Quarter one afternoon. I'd made the mistake of meeting a friend for drinks at the Napoleon House and was now caught in rush-hour traffic, trying to make a left from St. Louis onto Dauphine. This was in the seedier part of the Quarter, beyond Bourbon Street, where tourists were warned not to venture. On the corner was an old bar that had become part of the drug scene, and stretched out in front of it on the sidewalk, maybe ten feet away from me when I reached the stop sign, was the body of a man — a street person, judging by his clothes. He was on his back, and little streams of blood meandered from the side of his head down the cobblestones into the gutter. It was a hot day — Seth was born in June, so this would have been late July — and the blood already looked sticky. Flies buzzed around, landing on the bloody sidewalk or the man's wound, and the pigeons strutted around the body with growing curiosity.

Two policemen stood on the sidewalk a few feet away, smoking. One of them puffed on his cigarette, then held it between his fingers as his hand pointed west and zigzagged, presumably indicating the direction in which the suspect had escaped. I couldn't hear what he said (my windows were rolled up), but the other cop grinned, and his fat belly jiggled.

Even through the closed windows and over the soft hum of the radio, I could hear sirens on Dauphine Street: the ambulance was having trouble getting through. Traffic was backed up all the way from Canal. The cars on Dauphine were stationary for the most part, moving slowly forward only when a light changed up ahead. The streets in the Quarter are very narrow, but no one attempted to pull up on the curb, or into the few restricted spaces between the parked cars, to get out of the way. None of the emergency-response team bothered to leave the ambulance and walk to the scene. As I said, it was hot out.

The sirens wailed purposelessly. Cars behind me began to honk, urging me to wedge my way onto Dauphine Street, but I stayed put. Before the ambulance arrived and pulled up on the sidewalk, blocking my view of the body, I had several minutes to think. I thought about how the dead man on the street had once been someone's son. Though he lay dead in the gutter, he had once been held in someone's arms. Where was this man's father? How had he let his son come to this, lying dead among strangers?

When I got home, Hannah was breast-feeding Seth on the sofa. "I don't think this is a good place to raise children," I told her.

It took a year to find a job in what I thought would be a safer place. We moved to a small town in northern Idaho, and I became a junior-high-school history teacher. The town was situated on a large lake, but we lived on its far outskirts, several miles from the water, the small downtown, and the seasonal tourists. Our house sat a couple of hundred yards back from an old dirt road. We bought it from the original owner, who'd built it himself, and he was a pretty good carpenter, apparently. It was a rustic A-frame, white pine, the natural color of the wood. There were no architectural flourishes other than the small upstairs balcony attached to Seth's room. But every time it rained and the roof didn't leak, or it snowed and the cold wind didn't whistle in around the windows, I thought to myself, *Pretty good carpenter, apparently.*

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the first five years we lived there. Seth grew up putting puzzles together on the living-room floor and learning to scale the split-rail

Photo: Bruce Meisterman

fence in the backyard while I stood by to catch him if he fell.

The summer of his sixth birthday he discovered the railroad tracks. They had been there all the time, just a few hundred yards across the weedy field beyond our fence, and the trains came twice a day, at 3 P.M. and midnight, their slow thrum vibrating our floors. But only that summer did Seth discover the magic of the tracks, begin to feel the rhythm of iron and wood.

Every afternoon, after I'd washed the dishes from lunch, Seth would grab his blue duffel bag and his baseball gear (that was his other obsession at the time — he had already graduated to a real ball and glove and a small wooden bat), and we'd head for the railroad tracks. Sometimes on days when Hannah wasn't on duty at the hospital, or hadn't worked the graveyard shift the night before, she'd come along, but usually it was just me and Seth and his springer spaniel, Ted.

We walked across the dusty field, where grasshoppers whirred away from us on their yellow wings. It was a hot, parched summer, and they were everywhere. The hills and woods beyond the tracks shimmered with the heat. A few houses dotted the edges of the open field, and I wondered if my neighbors ever watched us walk the tracks, and what they thought of our routine. I didn't know my neighbors, had always used the fence and the field as a shield against them, and they seemed somehow sinister to me, staring from the dark of their kitchens.

We walked up the tracks. It was the middle of the afternoon, the sun still high overhead, and the heat waves surrounded us so that, looking around, you could believe none of it was real. Seth walked the rails, teetering along, his shirt off already, grimy, sweating, just like I was at that age. He liked to pick up rusty spikes and broken tools and put them in his bag. Most days it would weigh so much on the return trip that I'd have to carry it. Ted scoured the underbrush on the far side of the tracks for quail, or loped along the ditch gathering cockleburs in his fur. He was a rebellious dog, high-strung, apt to disappear for minutes at a time, would never come when you called.

The baseball field had just wavered into sight up ahead when I heard the three o'clock train. Seth had been nattering at me, asking questions I only half listened to, my mind on some worry, as it always was back then. I used to imagine horrific circumstances that Seth and I might find ourselves in: Seth would get his foot wedged under a tie as the train approached, and I would kneel there, calming him, convincing him not to scream and writhe, but to quietly, calmly twist his foot a little this way . . . Maybe I would ease his foot from under the tie, or maybe it still wouldn't come clear, and I would untie his shoe with swift dexterity and lift him from the tracks just in time, rolling with him in my arms down the rocky bank. Sometimes I couldn't get his foot loose, and at the last second I would throw my arms around him and wait for the impact of the train.

Seth followed our regular procedure, stepping carefully on the ties and over the rail and down through the field to stand at a safe distance. "How does it stay on the tracks, Dad?" he asked.

I was looking at the train, which had just come into sight up ahead. "Well, the wheels are designed to fit the rails." I scanned the area for Ted, who I always doubted was smart enough not to run in front of an oncoming train.

"But doesn't the train ever fall off?"

"Yes," I said. "Sometimes the track gets warped, and sometimes bad kids put things, like logs, across the tracks, and then the train can fall, and people might get killed. It's really very sad." Seth was quiet, and I could see the scene take shape in his head — the screeching wheels, the tumbling boxcars. But he could only guess at tragedy; that's the way it is with children. He looked down at the ground and shuffled his feet.

When the train drew near, Seth motioned up and down with his arm, and the engineer smiled and let out a blast on the whistle. Just before the train cut off my view of the woods on the opposite side, I saw a covey of quail explode from the bushes, and I knew Ted was over there. Then the cars were rolling by, *thock-thock*ing hypnotically along the rails. Seth and I watched from the edge of the field. The caboose swayed past, and the last of the train's hot breeze, and I could feel the silence widen and then shrink back again, the grasshoppers whining in the weeds. Looking up the tracks, I thought I saw movement in the trees.

We walked on. Seth was talking about baseball, and we were looking forward to our little game, when we heard Ted bark: two sharp, eager barks coming from the woods. As we got closer, we heard what sounded like a whimper. And then a voice, a command. Seth looked up at me — who was out there in the woods?

Seth veered toward the trees and picked up his pace. He dropped his duffel bag in the grass, but he held on to his bat. I followed, walking faster but still not giving in to any sense of urgency. "Seth," I yelled, "slow down!" Ted barked at the sound of my voice. Seth stopped and waited for me at the edge of the trees.

The underbrush was scratchy and wild. I led the way, holding on to skinny branches and twigs so they wouldn't snap back on Seth. We reached a little clearing, and there was Ted, sitting on a patch of moss beneath a cedar tree. A man was sitting cross-legged next to him, holding his collar in one hand, rummaging through an old beat-up backpack with the other. I stopped short and grabbed Seth's shoulder. The man brought out a cigarette, and then a lighter. He lit up, looked our way, and smiled. He had a way of smiling that put you at ease. Every time he smiled that day, I felt a brief calm, as if everything were going to be all right.

In the cool shade, the sweat was starting to dry on my forehead and under my shirt. On through the trees was a little creek, and I could hear the water gurgle over stones. Sunlight filtered through the high canopy of birch leaves and cedar branches and danced across the patch of moss where Ted and the man sat resting. He barely held Ted's collar at all. Ted seemed content, now that we were near, to simply lie there and pant.

"Nice day for a game," the man said, seeing the bat in Seth's hand. "Hot days like this — perfect for baseball. That's just how you'll remember it years from now. Dust and sweat and grass and sunshine." He looked away, back through the

trees toward the sound of the creek. He was always doing that, too: looking away into the distance, at some place I couldn't see, past the mountains and the trees.

"Yep," I said, "my son's a big baseball fan. Isn't that right, Seth?"

Neither Seth nor the man said anything. I took a good look at the man then, while he sat there staring toward nothing in particular. He had convinced me with his small talk that he posed no threat; I didn't think instruments of fate came discussing baseball. I studied him out of my old interest in transience — he had obviously jumped from the opposite side of a train as it passed, to loiter in the shade awhile, and no doubt planned to move on soon. I wanted to remember him.

My eyes were drawn to an unusual tattoo. It stretched from the tip of his right shoulder blade to the middle of his biceps, and wrapped almost all the way around his arm. The picture was remarkably well done; the artist had a good eye for depth, especially. In the foreground was a street sign with black letters reading, PRIMROSE LANE. Behind it was a picket fence that stretched around the arm, and bright red roses weaved their way through its interstices. Behind the fence was a row of identical houses sketched in black ink — two-story Victorian models with windows and doors arranged to look like faces. From behind the houses, a set of railroad tracks emerged, snaking up to the top of a distant peak, where they were lost in a bright orange sun. Above the sun, in an arc across the shoulder, was a red banner with the inscription "Life's a Holiday."

"Well," I said casually, "if you and Ted are through visiting, we'd better hit the road. Or the tracks, I guess." . . . I called Ted again, and again the dog lurched toward us, and again the man held him back. . . . "You can talk to me all you want," he said, "but I'm not going to give your dog back."

He was dark-skinned, but you couldn't tell how much of it was from the sun. His black hair was long and kinky and hit him around his shoulders in an even line, a touch of gray at the temples. His cheeks were freckled, or mottled in some way. He had one dark brown eye, almost black, like a widened pupil; the other eye was a washed-out blue. He was thin, but his muscles were cord tight. He looked slinky and powerful. He wore a faded blue tank top, baggy gym shorts, black socks rolled down to his ankles, and what looked like brand-new black Reeboks. He was dirty, but what could you expect?

Demetrius Herrera (I still puzzle over that name) had no criminal record to speak of, just a few shoplifting charges, vagrancies, a teenage auto theft that landed him in a boys' home. I learned this afterward, from the police. Later, on my own, I found out a little more — that he'd lived all over the map, had a daughter in Houston he'd never met. This information came from a sister I tracked down in Oakland. This was all I learned; either she wasn't interested in telling me more about her brother, or she didn't remember him well.

"I see you found our dog," I said. I snapped my fingers. "Here, Ted."

Ted lurched to his feet, but the man gripped his collar tight. "Or he found me," he said.

"You let go of my dog," Seth told him. He knew better than I did from the start.

"Hold on, Seth," I said. I laughed. "He just wants to pet him."

The man stared at Seth then, not at me, as if they were already having a separate conversation.

"You can pet him a minute," I said, "but then we'll have to get going. Big game planned and all, you know." I winked. I ruffled Seth's hair. Seth pushed my hand away silently.

The man laughed.

"What?" I asked him.

"You talk to me like I was a child," he said.

I apologized and told him I had a habit of doing that, probably because I spent most of my time with Seth.

"Your dog's friendly," he said. On cue, Ted got to his feet and began wagging his stump of a tail. He jerked his head around and licked the man's wrist. Then he tried to pull away and come to us.

"Come *on*, Ted," Seth said.

But the man held him firm. "Is he a purebred springer?" he asked, as if there were nothing unusual going on.

"No," I lied. "His father was a mutt."

"He looks purebred," he said.

"No," I said again, "he's no show dog." I tried to laugh. "But he's a good pet for my son." I reached for Seth's hair again, but stopped myself. The birds were chirping in the trees.

"I'm sure he is," the man said, putting out his cigarette and starting to scratch behind Ted's ears. That was Ted's favorite spot. "The 'better' the breeding, the less intelligent the dog, generally speaking."

What a sight he was there under the trees. His weird skin, those eyes that seemed to belong in two different heads. He looked utterly wild. I decided he was crazy. This helped me deny that he had any firm intentions.

"Well," I said casually, "if you and Ted are through visiting, we'd better hit the road. Or the tracks, I guess." I laughed and sort of waved. If he was crazy, I thought it best to be polite. I called Ted again, and again the dog lurched toward us, and again the man held him back. He stared at me, and I tried to decide which eye to look into.

"You can talk to me all you want," he said, "but I'm not going to give your dog back." He looked at Seth.

(end of excerpt)