

JOSEPH BATHANTI

The Crescent

I BOARDED IN LAUREL, MISSISSIPPI, dropped my bags in my berth and headed straight for the dining car. It was packed, so I knew I'd be seated with at least one person—maybe two or three. I didn't mind eating with strangers at night on the last of the Crescent run to New Orleans—across the black interminable bayous, on nothing but a streak of humming iron rails.

I ended up in a booth across from another guy. With a broad smile, he held out a trembling hand, a star sapphire on the pinky finger—we both stood—and introduced himself as Big Clee Oustalet, who wasn't big at all, but whipped and slight. He owned a Lincoln dealership in Culpepper, Virginia. He explained that Oustalet was a Cajun name, that his Christian name was Clarence, but he went by Clee. His destination was Lafayette—the parish seat of Lafayette Parish, its nickname the Hub City—to be with his mama, old and dying. He hadn't seen her in twelve years, his sorrow and shame, and there he stopped smiling and teared up.

In a single choreographed flurry, as he talked, as we both stood there—he hadn't let go of my hand—among the thrumming car of strangers, barreling through a world of forgetfulness, breaking bread in the dark swampland—he thrust upon me a key fob, his card, and a ballpoint pen, each imprinted with *Big Clee Oustalet Lincoln*, as if Lincoln was his last name and not Oustalet. Then he reiterated, like he was doing a commercial, *Big Clee Oustalet*. I told him my name, not my whole name, but Jack, which I sometimes go by. I knew that would be enough for Big Clee. The stories I heard at those dining car tables were never about me, nor did I want them to be.

Even before we sat, he confided he'd been a Marine. He was a Marine. You're always a Marine. His voice was soft and squeaky. *Semper Fidelis*. Did I know what that meant? I told him that I did know what it meant. He smiled again—as if to say *I know I don't look like a Marine*—and we sat down. He wore a Hawaiian shirt and heavy black glasses. His dark oily hair was trained back and he smelled of cigarettes. A carafe of white wine, a glass of ice and can of Sierra Mist sat before him on the table. He wore bracelets on both wrists. Not heavy plastic memorial bracelets with *POW* or *MLA* etched into them, but delicate gold and silver

bangles that tinkled as he moved his hands. His shirt opened into a deep hairy V. Around his neck hung a gold chain with a large gold Crucifix.

“Wine?” he asked.

“No thanks.”

“This is my first time on a train. I can’t fly anymore. I haven’t seen my mother in twelve years.” His eyes got wet again.

Our booth was in the middle of the car. At one end was the kitchen. Its clattering mechanical door split open every few seconds and disappeared into the jambs. The wait-staff filed in and out with big laden trays they miraculously balanced, one-handed, weaving down the narrow aisle between tables, dodging one another, swaying, as if on a tightrope, in time with the car, as it shimmied and bucked.

At the other end of the car, to Big Clee’s back, was a similar door through which diners passed on their ways from the sleeping cars. Each time this door noisily opened, he swiveled toward it with a start.

“I’ve never been on a train before,” he reiterated.

“I’m really sorry about your mother,” I said.

“She’s ninety-five. That’s a long time, I reckon.”

“That is a long time; but, still, you never want to lose them, no matter how old they are.”

“My father died while I was in Vietnam. He was forty-nine.”

I worried Big Clee would tear up again, but he seemed unfazed by his father’s death. He yanked a silver flask out of his back pocket and spilled a stream into his Sierra Mist. He held up the flask, like *You want some?*

“No thanks,” I said. “Really sorry about your father too.”

“Eh,” he grunted and waved it away, the bracelets chiming on his hairy wrist.

A dying mother, a prematurely dead father, probably a bad drinker across the table from me. A Marine. Now Vietnam in the mix. The night outside insisted that anything, anything at all, might happen, that all there was to anchor this interlude—that’s all that it was, but it had to be lived through—was that well-lit corridor of tables filled with travelers eating and drinking, having a lovely time, it seemed, bent on destination, united in the moment, maybe the very last moment. But it was bright. There were laughter and children. There was

promise. That blackness out there, that expanse of water, was merely the moonless night, not the end of the earth.

We entered a tunnel and, in that interstice, Big Clee and I—reflected flawlessly in the mirror the window at our elbows became in relief against the black stone wall of the tunnel—formed an odd tableau. Again, he was not large at all. But he suddenly seemed bigger than life with his crazy jungle shirt, swirling with Imperial Pheasants, monkeys and coral snakes, his hand still aloft, bracelets twinkling, his spectacles glowing as if about to gout fire; and I, merely his second, his footman, nondescript, slumped in my seat in a rumpled Seersucker suit and badly needing a shave. The door behind Big Clee clattered open and he wheeled to it, a tiger on the back of the shirt.

“I can’t sit with my back to the door,” he said when he turned to face me again. He held a *Big Clee Oustalet Lincoln* pen and clicked it ferociously. “I was in the very first draft lottery,” he said. “December 1, 1969. I was 19 years old, still living in Lafayette County. My birthday is April 24 and it fetched Number 2. Number fucking 2. Can you believe it?” Of course, I believed it. “A one way ticket to Southeast Asia,” he went on, clicking the pen like a maniac. “Just bad luck, I reckon.”

Our waitress, in a short-sleeved white shirt with epaulets, and navy necktie with an Amtrak tie-bar, suddenly stood against the table, officiously dropped tabs of paper on our place mats and said, “Good evening. I need a signature, your car and berth number.” No *My name is*, no smile, no small talk—dogmatic, her loyalty to the railroad absolutely unquestionable.

I hadn’t realized it, until I met Big Clee that night, that there were plenty of train trips when I hadn’t wanted to be alone, when I had a premonition: maybe the water the train skated over on its narrow railheads so precariously would never end. Not just that I wouldn’t reach the other side, but that there was no other side. On those nights, I was grateful for the bubbly overwrought waitress—a kind, concerned friend during a highly stylized encounter in the dining car. She tells you you’re tired, you need to eat, that a restorative good night’s sleep awaits, that in the morning you’ll feel like a million bucks. Looking up at our waitress—heavy, funereal retouch spackled beneath her diluted bespectacled eyes, no lipstick, maybe a wig—I reminded myself how exhausting her job must be: how odd, living on a train, struggling every waking moment against the ceaseless centrifugal force that wants to hurl you over, serving

food and drink to strangers, crossing water. I realized I was afraid, of what I wasn't sure, and I was glad to be paired that night with Big Clee.

The waitress scooped up our signed tabs and asked, "Can I get you started with some drinks? Anything besides water?"

"Water's just fine," I answered.

Big Clee ordered another carafe of wine.

"I'll be back with those drinks in a minute, and to get your orders." Then she trudged off toward the kitchen.

"I'm gonna use the bathroom," announced Big Clee.

He swayed with the train along the aisle between the tables. He was a little bald on top and stooped. If he'd been nineteen in '69, then he was sixty-six years old, three years older than I to the day. What I hadn't confided to him is that he and I shared the exact same birthday, April 24, a more than unlikely coincidence—though the inexplicable presents itself often when one is thrown into the intimate company of strangers on a train.

The year I was in the draft lottery, 1972, April 24 popped out of the hat on the 362nd pass. I was eighteen, in my second semester of college. For me: no draft, no army, no Vietnam. I celebrated in a nasty bar that served underage drinkers, The Ostrich, then puked in an alley. I had been delivered. Other kids went to war, so I could stay home.

Big Clee, his arms out for balance like a high-wire artist, walked back into the car. It was more than the bumping train compromising his gait. He was loaded. I guess I knew that all along, from the minute I met him—his quaking hands and voice, the hallucinatory image of him in the train window as we zipped through the tunnel. He arrived at our table the same time our waitress showed up. He smelled powerfully of cigarettes. Everyone in the car must have smelled it. She set down my water and his wine, and then just looked at him.

"Smoking's prohibited on this train, Sir," she said. "The next smoke break's in New Orleans. We're only about an hour or so out. You can smoke in New Orleans when we stop."

"Yes, Ma'am," said Big Clee. He'd taken up that pen again, clicking it over and over.

"Okay," she said. "Just so you understand that."

"I don't smoke, Miss."

She looked over her glasses at him for an extra click, shot me a look, and asked both of us, "What would you like to eat?"

"I've never been on a train before," answered Big Clee.

“Have you looked at the menu?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“Well, why don’t you take a look at it, and I’ll be back shortly.” She looked at me again—as if perhaps I were to blame.

When she took off, I said: “You can’t smoke on the train.”

He’d been surveying the menu. He glanced up and took a long swallow of wine. “I don’t know what to order,” he said, his voice tremulous, effeminate.

“You can’t smoke on the train,” I said again.

“Can I ask you to watch that door at my back for me? I can’t stand to have my back to a door.”

What I’d been watching was the unearthly lights flickering on the water, coming from what looked like tiny houses sitting on the surface, maybe boats, maybe lanterns. We crossed a trestle, then hit another spit of swampy land, then another tunnel. An announcement came over the PA reminding everyone that there was no smoking on the train. When we emerged from the tunnel, the waitress returned for our orders.

I ordered Mahi Mahi.

“For you, Sir?” she asked Big Clee.

“I’m a vegetarian,” he said.

She looked down at him expectantly over her glasses.

“I’m a vegetarian,” he said again.

“Yes, Sir?”

“Why don’t you get the lasagna,” I prompted. “It’s vegetarian.”

“I’ll get the lasagna,” Big Clee said.

“Very good,” said the waitress.

The second she departed, Big Clee whipped out the flask and poured the rest of it into the Sierra Mist.

The dining car had gotten loud. Each time the door behind Big Clee stammered open, then clacked shut, again and again, as diners queued just inside the lintel waiting to be seated, he wheeled warily toward it. In the booth across the aisle from us sat a very young Asian man and woman. They leaned across their table toward each other, giggling, staring at the squawking cell phone the man held.

We passed through Picayune. Beyond the depot was jungle. A vague haze hung over the vegetation. Shadowy shapes hunkered at its fringe. The dirty light pressed against our window and, again, there was that same reflection of Big Clee and me; and, superimposed over our image, that of the Asian couple across the aisle.

Big Clee took a huge swallow from the yellow soda and worried his pen again, a nearly imperceptible *tick, tick, tick* just beneath the loud conversations in the car. “These people around us could all be ghosts.” He stared at me as he spoke. His eyes clouded and pooled. He rose. “I need the bathroom.” Again I watched him, the Bengal tiger swaying on his back, as he paced toward the door. Ghosts, massed at its entrance, parted as he passed.

The waitress marched in with our salads and a basket of bread. She looked at me again, then walked off. I needed to explain that I didn’t know Big Clee, that I had been seated randomly with him, that this was not my story at all, but Big Clee’s. Then it occurred to me that all he’d told me might have been mere fabrication: about Vietnam and his dying mother. On the table in front of me, however, were the key fob and pen, his card: *Big Clee Oustalet Lincoln*. That much had to be true.

I smelled cigarettes the moment Big Clee staggered back into the hammering car, and so did everyone else. To keep himself from pitching over, he steadied himself with a hand on each table along the aisle. Each set of diners stared up at him as he juked off their tables. For a moment, the animated chatter of the car halted, except for the yakking cell phone of the Asian couple. People continued to stare, even after Big Clee plopped across from me. Again, I felt the need to explain that I wasn’t with him. He smiled at me, drenched his salad with thick white poppy seed dressing, heavily buttered a piece of bread and began shoveling it in.

A minute later, the waitress placed our entrees in front of us. She obviously smelled the cigarettes, said nothing, fixed me again with a portentous look, and disappeared.

Twin pieces of Mahi Mahi lay steely, like a couple of spearheads, on my plate. I cut a bite with my knife. Tough and tasteless. Big Clee pushed the soupy red lasagna about his plate, stabbed a few pieces into his mouth, intermittently nodded out, gazing at me wildly each time he reopened his eyes. I wanted him to eat, sober up and get a purchase on the night. We’d soon careen into New Orleans, the Crescent’s crowning glory. His feet would be back on earth. He had to make his way to Lafayette: his dying mama.

He was asleep when we screeched into Slidell a moment later. The doors behind him retracted in sudden revelation, and there loomed the Conductor. In his big blue, brass-

buttoned uniform coat, fastened over a blazing white shirt and wide crimson neck tie, bristly gray mustache, insignia, and vintage hat, he looked like an admiral or general, untouchably mythic, powerful.

He paused in the lintel, all eyes, save those of Big Clee, upon him as he inspected the diners and whispered into a walkie-talkie held against his lips. Then he marched into the car. Behind him paced two Amtrak policemen, bulging with body armor. On their cartridge belts were mace and riot batons, Glocks fastened to their thighs with Velcro straps. They were hatless, heads shaved, masks of dispatch and resolve. All three wore bright gold badges over their hearts. They walked to our table, scanned me for a second, then regarded Big Clee, sleeping peacefully, slumped against the window. He smelled of smoke and booze. The car was silent. Everyone eyed our table.

The conductor placed a hand gently on Big Clee's shoulder and shook him. Big Clee grimaced, and quivered, opened his eyes, then closed them again. The conductor shook him with a little more vigor. This time Big Clee came to, blinked, ran through the channels in his brain, and finally focused on the three men hulked over him. They hadn't looked at me.

The conductor, very slowly, carefully enunciated, "Sir, we are putting you off the train here in Slidell because smoking on the train is strictly prohibited."

Big Clee gazed up in wonder at the conductor, then he slowly took in the two Amtrak cops. "I wasn't smoking," he said.

"Sir, we have to put you off the train. You can't smoke on the train," said the conductor in the same flat tone.

"My mama's expecting me in Lafayette."

"You can wait here in Slidell for the next train."

"I have to see my mama."

"You have to leave this train right now, Sir. We have a schedule to keep. Please get up and come with us."

The two big cops, absolutely still, stared down at Big Clee.

He stood and followed the conductor toward the door leading to the sleeper cars. With the train at a standstill, a lousy thirty-five miles out of New Orleans, he didn't have much trouble walking, though several times, he reached out to steady himself on the tables. The Amtrak cops followed him. The Asian couples' phone nattered away, though they, like

everyone else in the car, watched the procession out of the car. The tiger on Big Clee's back quivered.

I scanned the platform for Big Clee. There was the sign hanging from the depot eaves that said *Slidell*. Through my reflection in the window, I spied Big Clee, just on the other side of it, literally a foot away, on the platform, smoking a cigarette. He stared directly at me. About him, in the misty depot lights, swarmed mosquitoes and translucent Luna moths. I raised my hand, but he didn't acknowledge me. I tapped on the window. He stared straight ahead, smoke hovering him in the swampy night.

Then we lurched ahead, inch by inch, mounted the six mile trestle over Lake Pontchartrain, 630 square miles of black fathomless water and ancient alligators, toward the cemetery on its southern shore where the dead hadn't been buried at all, but resided above-ground in fantastic shrines.

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