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The Old Lineman

BY ROBERT GRANAT

BECAUSE I don't travel very often, I suppose, I still find myself as alert as a boy to the sensuality of departures. Even by train. The huge hermetic steel tubes, shivering and hissing impatiently, the cool machined air, the carpeted hush after the sweaty confusion outside, the sense of enormous power about to be released—all this excites me. And, last Tuesday in Los Angeles, the potential adventure of that empty seat beside me.

I peered down through the newly washed double panes at the cluster of humanity on the platform squeezing slowly into the car. Which of those shapes held the ticket for the seat and was coming to relax into the endometrious foam beside me to share the body-to-body intimacy of the long hurtling night ahead? Looking them over, my eyes rested on one, a blonde who seemed to have been blown into her pink suit like a balloon, one of California's finest fruits. I could almost smell her perfume through the glass and steel, a lemon orchard at night. Something told me it was she.

Something which, as usual, lied. I saw her, followed by a suntanned male equivalent of herself, swallowed by the coach ahead.

People were filing past through the aisle and no one stopped. I was beginning to think I was going to have the entire section to myself when somebody, while looking directly at the clearly marked number plate, asked me, "This here seat thirty, young feller?" It was an old man. He too had his aroma—like an old ash tray.

I nodded, my fantasies snuffing out like candles without oxygen.

"That's what I figgered."

I said nothing, but stood up and helped him stow his suitcase in the rack. Then I sat back down and shifted emphatically away from him and toward the window. Behind me I heard the whistling sounds as he caught his breath, and for a long time after the train had glided away from the platform I could feel his eyes on the back of my neck like a pair of fingers.

Finally I turned and faced forward, hoping to doze.

"Sure nice and cool in here, ain't it?"

I looked over at him. His mouth hung slightly open. For some reason I thought of a featherless nestling parrot.

"Yes it is." I sighed. He talked from Los Angeles to Needles.

Eighty-two years old he was, this comin' Friday . . . (Is that so? You don't look it.) Winfrey Yates, his name was. Winfrey—that was his mother's family name before she married his dad. Didn't have no regular first name. Win was what they all called him. (Pretty hard name to live up to, isn't it?)

I was thinking about the blonde. Not lusting. Just reflecting how her charm lay in her suppressing her individuality, which nobody was interested in, successful to the degree she became a thing, a lovely thing among things. At the same time I scanned my companion's conversation like a newspaper, which seemed to me as much attention as he wanted, since he kept beaming at me contentedly. And I realized suddenly I too, like the blonde, was most desirable as fantasy, a thing. A nice young feller, who didn't call him Pop, who had forgiven him the sin of being old, as if age were a venereal disease one caught in dirty ways.

"Lineman," I heard him say.

"Lineman?"

"You betcha, that's what I was, a lineman—and a good one too—since way before you was even a gleam in yer daddy's eye."

"With the railroad, you mean?"

"Railroad? You don't mean to tell me you don't know what a lineman is, young man? Who you think puts up all them telephone and power lines? Us fellers! Heck, I was on them lines fer nigh on forty years, crew foreman fer most of 'em, shimmy up them poles like an old monkey. Wouldn't believe it to look at me now."

He looked at *me* now, waiting for an answer.

"Oh, I don't know. You still look pretty spry to me."

"Use to weigh hunnert ninety-five and a half pounds. Did a little boxin' on the side—and mind you, wasn't none of this here padded-gloves stuff you fellers go in fer nowadays, no sir!"

I looked at his hands. Large and square, splotched with brown, their skin shiny and fragile and scaly. He wore a large gold-onyx ring with lodge insignia, and smelt of musty tobacco.

"Well," I said. Which was sufficient for such conversations. The train had reached Barstow and I got out for a little air. A blast of desert heat drove me black to Win's side.

"Yep, been retired now seventeen years this comin' January. Got me a little room out by Santa Monica, nice little pension check comes in first of the month like clockwork."

"Like California?"

"Oh, it's purty nice, I guess, fer some folks. But I'm a feller used to workin' hard all my life . . . git awful tired settin' around looking at the TV. But just can't do nothin' no more. Start in to puffin', head starts clickin' like this old train here. You can bet your life though, if I was your age, I'd be out there climbin' them poles right now . . . none of yer eight-hour days neither. Ten, twelve, fourteen—I mean, we really worked!"

I found myself thinking it was unjust that this man had been blighted with age, wishing somehow I could arrange a second youth for him.

"Yep," he sighed, and was silent for a stretch. We watched the Mojave flying by outside, the writhing misshapen Joshua trees being persecuted by the sadistic sun. There was no sign of man except for the endless pickets of telephone poles, the crosses of progress, with their network of wires dipping and dipping and dipping between them.

"I wonder what God made the desert for?" I remarked, realizing this from some archaic instinct to talk of eternal things in the presence of old men.

"Betcha it's hunnert twenty-five degrees out there . . . many a time we was out puttin' in poles in heat jes like that. That big fat son-of-a-gun we raised up in Albakirk now. . . ."

And so on to the Arizona border.

By the time we reached Needles, I thought he'd told me everything he had to tell me. Hadn't been back East, he said, fer goin' on fourteen years now. Was on his way to Sandusky to spend couple, three, weeks with his daughter and her family. Youngest daughter, that was. Got three daughters, middle one lives in Santa Monica, husband works at Lockheed, makes good money, that's how come he moved to California....

"Say there, young feller, where'bouts you hail from?"

"Me?" I was startled.

"Where you headin' fer?"

"New Mexico."

"That right? Albakirk?"

"No. Little village in the mountains above Santa Fe. You wouldn't know it."

"Wouldn't eh? Hell, boy, you talkin' to a man that's been in ever' town in New Mexico. Was workin' in that state before it even joined up with the Union. Us fellers put up the first lines in Albakirk, back when it was nothin' but a little old Messkin town. Jes wait'll we git there. I got a little surprise fer you. I got something I want to show you. I want to show you that pole, the one I put up right this side the depot. Can't miss it, one of the biggest poles you ever saw, axis pole, carry twenty-five, thirty lines. I remember settin' up that pole jes like it was yesterday. Had a great big Irishman working with me, Jimmy Noonan, name was, bright red hair, you know, tough as they come. Well, that old pole give us one helluva time, I'll tell you. We hit rock about four feet down—and mind you, that there was all hand work—we didn't have none of this fancy power equipment you guys use today. No sir, that was man's work in them days. Well, gettin' on about three in the afternoon, hot as the hinges of Hades it was, and old Jimmy says to me, 'You sure ain't figgerin' on gittin' that bastard up there this afternoon, are you, Win?' 'I sure's hell am, Jimmy,' I told him. 'Five bucks says you won't do it,' he says. 'OK, old boy,' I says to him, 'you can pay me any time you feel like!'

"And young feller, would you believe it? Time that old sun hit the tops of them Sandia Mountains, that old pole was standing up there just as stiff and solid, like it growed there!"

I said, "So you won, eh Win?"

"I sure did!" He chuckled contentedly. His old blue eyes, faded like much-laundered denim workpants, gleamed, and I knew they were seeing the red hair and face of the Irishman Jimmy Noonan, and perhaps the big steak-and-whisky meal he'd enjoyed at his expense.

"Just you wait," he said, reaching out and slapping my knee, "Just you wait till I show you that old pole me and Jimmy put up there!"

Pillows were distributed and the coach lights dimmed, so that the old lineman was obliged to subside or else disturb the other passengers. He had the kind of voice that can't whisper. But twice during the night he turned in my direction and, waiting until I opened an eye, spoke to me. The first time he said:

"Dead now, poor feller, been dead fer forty years. Used to drink heavy, you know, and one time he come to work drunk and fell off of a pole . . . broke his back."

And the second time, an hour or so before dawn:

"Eighteen inches thick, it was, weighed a ton and a half easy. . . ."

We were due in Albuquerque a little after one. It was dull out and

blowy. Small whirlwinds whipped and frolicked across the deserted prairie like the whelps of some dangerous species while tall blue twisters stood guard on the horizons. At Belen I returned from the club car where I had gone for a little break, and found the old man sitting in my seat. "That's OK, stay right there," I told him and sat down in his.

"She's twenty-two minutes late, make it up in Kansas I expect. Good thing you come back. We'll be gittin' into Albakirk purty quick. Want you to keep yer eye out now. Don't want you to miss that old pole of mine, standin' right this side the depot, about ten, fifteen feet from the track, don't want to miss it now, keep yer eye out. . . ."

I stood bending over him and we peered out, both of us, through the now-dirt-streaked window.

"Git ready now, git ready . . . here she comes . . . keep yer eye out. . . ."

Albuquerque came hurtling in as if someone were throwing it at us. Shacks, dry mud walls, wood, iron, cars, bridges, a maze of switches and signal lights, the low Spanish slums of the south side. . . .

"Right here! Right here now . . . look sharp, look sharp, it's ri. . .i. . . .i. . ."

His voice drained away as the station sidled up to us in slow motion. There was no big telephone pole.

"What the . . . where'd they . . . right there, it was right there, right in that spot! . . . I swear, son, I ain't one to lie to you! We set it in right there, Jimmy and me, right exactly *there*!"

The faded blue eyes darted about the station in panic, like those of a little child who has lost his mother in a crowd.

If I were one who took an interest in such information, I could have told the old lineman back in Arizona that the power lines around the Albuquerque station had been taken down and buried years ago.

It was over an hour from Albuquerque to Lamy, but during all that time the old man hadn't a word to say. He sat and stared out the window at the barren, piñon-studded hills over which his face was flying in wan and ghostly reflection.

"Lamy . . . Lamy next!" the conductor called, and I reached up and gathered my belongings together.

"Well, Win, here's where I get off," I said. "You take it easy now."

The old man turned and looked up at me . . . vacantly. I saw at once that he didn't know who I was. His blue-denim eyes had been washed almost white by tears.

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