

Kudzu

The chalked sign said *'No trips, River closed, by order: Harbourmaster Port of New Orleans'*

Pam wondered how you can 'close' a river, especially such a mighty one swollen with history and with the brown water from weeks of rain. She and Jim wandered away, their river outing cancelled. Still seeking adventure, they dived into the dank fog which was oozing round corners and clinging from wrought iron balconies, towards the hipster stalls.

They were approached by a street vendor offering free candy coloured sticks.

'Ya'll not eat them,' he said, and then repeated his injunction more urgently as Pam picked one up to sniff. Jim reached out, attracted by the pretty display. Pam jumped in.

'He said don't eat them!' She had to repeat this a second time, Jim hadn't seemed to have heard and he popped a lime green stick in his mouth, spluttering with indignation as his mouth filled with soap.

'That's what comes from not listening,' Pam said tartly.

'It's horrible, I need some water and something to eat quick that'll take the taste away' said Jim foaming, 'what's in your bag?'

'A satsuma, it was to share, it's hopeless getting fruit round here,' said Pam, making a poor attempt to control her laughter.

'Well, I am not sharing it, I have a nasty taste in my mouth and you should be more sympathetic,' he said. He tuned his being to the drum beat spilling into the street, forgetting his woes, disinclined to hear anything else.

Next day brought a repeat misunderstanding. They boarded the Amtrak and the conductress carefully explained where to sit. The conductress's courteous instructions ran on parallel but unconnected tracks to Jim's ebullient lines of enquiry about the seat reservation system, he could see methodological problems. They continued talking at cross purposes for quite some time. Eventually, having finally untangled the crossed lines, the kind conductress cheerfully promised to keep a weather eye out for Jim. He was clearly an eccentric, unpredictable but endearing passenger, contained in his own world, eager to solve problems that others were unaware of. Pam was unsympathetic, she said he should listen before speaking, and she threatened him with a tangerine soap stick, by mouth.

Jim was quiet, the seat reservation system had gotten him into thinking up an entirely new, complicated and infallible betting system. Meanwhile, Pam looked forward to a long untangled day of reading and effortlessness. Above all, she wanted to re-visit the spirit of the Christmas just past, and look back at the beings and the doings of all those who had peopled it, a lot of them her relatives,

The train moved slowly through settlements of clapboard houses, rusting machinery, trailer homes and a coon dog cemetery. Jim and Pam went into to the dining saloon for breakfast. The car attendant Lala and Pam swapped compliments about each other's hair, Pam had a gold thread in hers and Lala blue glitter blingy bits. Lala said

that 'New blue equals New you.' Emboldened, Lala decided to embark on some social engineering by matching up her breakfast customers on the various tables.

She told Pam and Jim to sit side by side and placed Donna and Dan opposite them. The party introduced themselves, conscious of Lala's hovering supervision. Dan ordered cheese quesadillas, eggs and tomatillo sauce filled with Monterey Jack cheese, topped with scrambled egg, served with salsa and a flaky croissant (985 cal). Donna ordered the Amtrak Signature Buttermilk pancake trio (410 cal) served with a breakfast syrup (158 cal).

The foursome settled down.

'I am an agent for StateFarm Insurance, been in business for 50 years,' said Dan.

'I've heard of that' replied Jim, 'good company'.

'And I continue to work mighty long hours with Donna alongside' said Dan with pride and love in his voice.

'Well I am here to do some work as well as travel, I am interviewing.' said Jim.

'I hope you are not interviewing Millennials' Dan replies, 'We have Millennials working with us.'

'What's a Millennial?' Asked Jim.

Donna looked quizzically at Pam, as though silently asking 'Where's this man been all his life?' All four joined in the debate about the relevant age band and characteristics of the Millennials, Dan continued,

'One of them took a day off to care for a friend with a sick cat. They don't work the long hours we did or want to take the same responsibility.'

'But they care for each other and they are not so motivated by money. The world ahead is looking very uncertain for them; I don't think it was the same for us,' said Pam.

'Yes' agreed Dan. 'S'pose you'd call them.....,' he searched for the right word and tentatively settled on 'sensitive.'

Donna and Dan had been to New Orleans for the football game and a restaurant spree, yellow fin for lunch and Texan steaks for dinner, visiting some of the restaurants that Pam and Jim had looked up but had failed to make the requisite advance reservations for. They had had to eat very rubbish food instead, but they really hadn't minded. Pam and Jim told their breakfast companions about the WW2 museum they had visited, preparing to compliment the Americans in general on the balance and curiosity factor of their museums. Dan and Donna listened proudly, but said they didn't know much about any of that stuff. The War' meant the Civil War in these parts: North v South, rural v urban, brother v brother, 'You can't change people's minds on stuff like that.'

Lala brought the food.

'Please excuse us for a moment whilst we ask for God's blessing on our breakfast,' said Dan with utmost courtesy and charm. Their silent prayers seemed to become part of the conversation all round, enveloping their table like a fine mist.

However, no sooner than the grits were blessed, they started to talk about how divisive America was becoming.

‘We are screaming republicans,’ said Dan. ‘Trump doesn’t do everything right but you shouldn’t expect him to. *He’s not a politician.* People take sides and we are seeing our friendships being blown apart.’

‘Tell us more.’ Pam enquired kindly, hoping for stories and flavour. It was her own conviction that the difference between believers and atheists was pretty insignificant compared to the gulfs and fractures being driven between people through politics, poverty and resentment. She didn’t accept the idea that people can never change their minds because they are too fixed in their own beliefs, but she did feel she couldn’t challenge her new breakfast companions. They were kind but cushioned against hearing. Suddenly, her own life’s experience felt narrow and her imagination lacking.

It transpired that Dan and Donna’s best friends had turned against them because of a disagreement about Trump, they had felt could no longer do business together or go to each other’s houses, their children likewise. Donna looked sad. She looked as though she had lost something unfathomable, perhaps her friend had made her life more bearable. In any case she had hardly contributed to the conversation, her husband tended to do the talking, her own thoughts trapping her into silence.

Happily, the talk turned to family and to stories which were less troubling and there was fun to be had all round. Notes were exchanged about grandchildren and all four parties united in a common bond. Pam half listened to the chat about the family Christmas just past. The other three were connected and entertaining each other now. Pam took a quick break and made a dive back into her own hidden world. She smiled a grandma smile at the thought of her own four year old Joy, and made a note to self to tell Joy about some of the things that had changed since she herself had been a child. ‘We didn’t have tights or TV, we used tippex instead of the delete button, we didn’t do re-cycling and we sometimes ate meat for breakfast, lunch and supper!’

Donna caught her eye, glimpsing her absence, the other two didn’t notice.

They passed closed to Memphis. Jim had been deep in a novel about the underground railroad. He asked for the whereabouts of the stations where runaway enslaved people had halted, waiting for the next instructions in their journey north. He assumed this might be local knowledge. He had heard there was a good museum in Memphis, could they recommend it?

‘You best avoid Memphis, there’s issues there,’ said Dan in a warning tone. Donna shifted and sipped her chocolate. There was a tense pause. Jim thought of changing the subject to Chuck Berry, but he stayed quiet.

Back in their own carriage, later on in the afternoon, Pam had remembered discussing this episode. They had reached the conclusion that Dan and Donna had been referring to the race conflicts which were continuing today. Pam had told Jim that she hadn’t pressed on with the discussion because she’d reckoned that ‘issues’ usually mean difficult conversations, and that Dan had warned them off. Her thoughts had gone back to that time in the motel in the rural corner of Tennessee. They had had to spend frustrating ages trying to find somewhere to stay. Eventually they had found the motel on a block with drive-in pharmacies full of products to counteract chronic health problems, awash with plastic throw-aways. The entrance was through a video store. They had been trying to find something to eat too, but

giving up this quest they had asked the receptionist where to go for a drink, indicating a local bar. She had looked at them perplexed, she hadn't been able to fathom this underfed looking couple in worn out clothes, but who apparently had money to spend, shouldn't they be safe in bed?

'Y'all not go there, it's a smoking establishment, it's got issues', she had said firmly, using the same euphemism as Dan.

Meanwhile the breakfast scene was beginning to sag and limp. Food which had been crisped and puffed for peak presentation, now softened and sank. Pam was used to making a clean plate whereas Dan and Donna had hardly touched theirs. Donna's flamingo nails tapped a pathway through the pastry flakes.

Dan had leaned across the table and proffered his business card along with an effusive invitation to stop by for lunch, they lived only 50 miles or so from Nashville. The card has a photo of Dan and a strap line saying, "The greatest compliment you can give is a referral."

'You are very generous and have been so open to all our questions,' Pam said across the table. Dan and Pam exchanged warm smiles infused with a smidge of flirtation, appreciated and appreciating. Pam fancied the thought of lunch at their ranch, but knew it wasn't going to happen.

The train slowed, it crept slowly through a dank malevolent wood unkempt and unloved. Swampy sodden branches were choking with invasive creepers. From her newly acquired knowledge from the Natural History Museum, Pam reckoned the various species probably included Montana var Lobata, popularly known as Kudzu, introduced by the Japanese at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and then planted in the 40s to reduce soil erosion on deforested lands. It grows at the rate of one foot per day. Pam thought that this was roughly the speed of the train making its sluggish way through the swamp. The Underground Railroad had snaked its way through this landscape, facilitating the escape of thousands of enslaved people through its networks. The teams who aided the fugitives used an elaborate code of railway metaphors and biblical metaphors too, Canada was the Promised Land. She was sorry they wouldn't have time to visit the museum in Memphis. She wanted to see how the memorials to the fugitives and to those who had assisted them were presented. She thought of her own lack of knowledge of the slave trade from her own childhood growing up in her native town of Bristol.

Jim was sitting opposite Pam. She broke into his reading.

'I was just thinking about what is changing. I guess these lands were deforested as part of the massive preparation for the war. Just think of vast scale of the industry required to supply an America uniting against the Japanese after Pearl Harbour.'

'Yes' said Jim 'when you think about it, it's amazing to think that the factories produced one tank every hour! Everyone was working to a united mission, a spirit of "we're all in it together." We had that in the 50's, but we've lost it now. What would it take to re-create it now, an unstoppable virus that knocked out all our IT? I doubt that's going to happen though.'

Pam wondered what it would take to get people to unite across today's borders and boundaries. She thought about the enormity of the endeavour which had brought everyone together in extracting mountains of coal and tearing down forests to fuel the war. She thought back to the woodlands near her home in Hampshire, smiling at the thought that purple loosestrife, trailing honeysuckle and ivy were all invasive species too, tangling across the native landscape with their swathes of colour, delicious scent and promise of Christmas wreaths. What kind of intertwined bonds do wars and viruses create?

She made another attempt on Jim's attention, food talk usually penetrated his hearing. 'People do seem obsessed with food, despite the calorie counts on menus. On the aeroplane the announcement was about giving priority to "people who needed more time to board". I guess that was a euphemism for size.' She told him that she'd not felt safe queuing behind some very big people who could easily not have seen her if they had stepped backwards. Jim laughed at her and said she needed a flag.

They were interrupted by an announcement that the train was now three hours late, due to flooded tracks. A stillness enveloped their world, containing them. Pam thought about the silence and the pause in time and how being enclosed on a train as well as being wakeful at night conjured up a steady stream of her life's friends and companions. They wandered slowly and unbidden through her night time wakefulness, freed up from day time constraints. 'It's rather like watching at a waterhole, or being in an empty room,' she said to herself, 'and not knowing what creatures or strangers or friends or family will show up. In an empty space you don't know what or who will come.' She knew she was lacking sleep with lots to think about and lack of time to do it. Last night she had found that a good way of trying to get back to sleep is to have a conversation in your head with someone you know so well that you can imagine what they will say. She thought about difficult conversations and how stuck they get when people get upset and feel attacked. She reminded herself that her plan this morning had been to find some empty space on the train, but the unbidden creatures kept coming and mingling with today's characters and stories.

She remembered she had promised to make a New Year's call to her friend Jenny who was in neighbouring Alabama. She took a stroll down the train corridor to get out of Jim's earshot .

'Hey Pam, great to hear from you, how you doing? What did you do for New Year's?'

'Oh, can you hear me? It's a very bad line We just went to a music bar, I had only just arrived, what about you? What were you two up to?'

'Well, Jess and I went to this club. It was different. Some friends of Jess' had told her about it, they'd been there, they told it might challenge her pre-conceptions. It was doing a NYE special, so Jess had said "c'mon it's New Year's Eve, let's go." It was in a suburb on what looked like an industrial complex – lots of rooms, we were chatting on a sofa, I was going to tell you about it, I thought you'd be intrigued.....'

Jenny carried on through crackles and gaps.

'There was a real assortment of people there. At one time two really overweight guys came and sat at each end of the sofa, I guess they'd have been conspicuous and kind of gross outside the world of the club, like out in the street, but in the dark, kind atmosphere of the club they could just hang out and laugh and chat..... they were fun

and courteous and great to talk to. It was a really nice space, quite elegant behind the garage doors, but such different kinds of people there, if you know what I mean.'

'Not sure I do,' said Pam, 'sounds like some kind of sex club or outsider artists' event?'

'Hey, Pam, haven't we moved on from that label?' Jenny was trying to make sense through the distorted signal. 'Can you hear me ok? Sorry, that's not really the point, I am just trying to say something about being in a place where the usual sanctions and assumptions didn't seem to apply, and how everyone seemed to have a capacity for fun and pleasure. It felt quite resistant and freed up.'

'Hmm, resistant to what?can you hear me?'

'Well, I s'pose a kind of reclaiming of pleasure, outside of conventions, people having fun in ways which haven't been appropriated by adverts, and narrowed down to what's acceptable and talkable.'

'Sounds good,' Pam whispered loudly into her phone, 'whatever you've been up to, tell me more when I am not on a train going through God fearing lands.' She resumed her normal voice and said 'By the way the gallery I was telling you about had a whole section for self taught and outsider artists, they'll be changing their labels now, I expect.'

'Sounds good too,' said Jenny. 'How's it going with Jim?'

'OK,' said Pam, 'he seems to be developing slight loss of hearing I think, but actually I really should be going now for lunch in a minute. Ah, signal's better here, I'll just quickly tell you about a difficult conversation he broached with a Republican guy we met in a snack bar. The guy had approached us, it happens quite often, I guess we do look like a pair of funny ducks! We got chatting and Jim asked him a pretty sensitive question about how he could countenance a president who was so dishonest. Jim made a comparison with the Jeffrey Archer case and how Archer had resigned when he had been caught lying about paying off a prostitute. The Republican had a couple of mates with him, there was quite a long pause as you might imagine, but then he said that he respected Jim for asking the question. He said The President was a trade off for what was desperately needed, increased prosperity in The South. 'Bottom line' he'd said, 'more jobs'.

'Who were you talking to for ages?' Jim complained, 'I could hear you from miles off and I've been waiting for you to go for lunch.'

'Sorry, it was Jenny, she was telling me about this odd sounding club she went to with Jess for New Year's Eve in Birmingham.'

'What, Birmingham! you've been calling UK?'

'No, Alabama, she's there, remember? Let's go for lunch, looks like we'll be having supper on this train too.'

Jim wasn't really listening, he was anticipating his lunch.

'Let's not sit with that couple from breakfast, let's just talk to each other', he said. He started to talk about how much he was enjoying mulling over his latest project. 'It really might get somewhere, he said. Pam asked what it was about.

'Idiosyncratic Prediction,' he replied.

Pam tried hard to listen but her mind was like a trampoline today, voices and ideas were bouncing around which would not stay still. She thought of the academic hopefuls at the conference they had been to, she multiplied the number of them all gathered in a skyscraper hotel and then multiplied that upwards until the world was

filled with research tangling , virtual and viral, like vines growing unstoppably over the skyscrapers, green in the summer, brown and sticky in winter. She always remembered her father predicting that an unstoppable fungus might one day ravage the world as we knew it. She wanted to catch and connect her thoughts, it was difficult. 'The two of us should be having a date lunch', she thought and tried to find a way of starting a more romantic conversation.

'Do you remember what we talked about the first time we had lunch together?'

'Yes, I remember having fish fried in breadcrumbs, chips and peas' Jim replied, so what do you fancy now? What about apple and maple chicken sausage? Actually, I might have the Hebrew National All-Beef HotDog, there isn't much else. Would you believe this pudding? Chocolate raspberry tart with whipped cream on a creamy yoghurt cheesecake base with cinnamon graham cracker crust.'

The afternoon passed. Pam recalled the NYE resolutions she had made during a long wakeful patch a few nights ago, trying to keep them simple this time. 'Just try to read and write and exercise every day, get into good habits.' Then she went back to the difficult conversations theme and started to list them: sex, money, families, personal responsibility.....'

'I just learned a new word.' Jim jolted her into attention, 'Ataraxia, it means a lucid state of equanimity.'

For the third time that day, they were called to the dining car. Their plans for a music bar at their destination had been cancelled due to the train's delay and persistent mists. 'Mists have cancelled our plans again, just like in the river closure,' thought Pam. She thought of a day on the Thames when the river had been closed for the lock keepers strike over safety equipment. 'How can you close a river?' she thought, remembering yesterday.

Lala has gotten listless and wasn't trying so hard anymore. With all the stoppages in the swamp her twelve hour day is rapidly becoming a sixteen hour day. The incessant rain is drowning the tracks and each passing train must be waited for.

She is not bothered with a seating plan for her passengers, so Pam and Jim tuck into a corner. They put a pin in the menu and came up with the Amtrak signature steak with a complementary sauce and a garden salad complimentary for sleeping car passengers. A discussion about the muddle between complementary and complimentary energises them for a short while.

Then Pam caught the eye of a man seated at the other end of the dining car. There was a woman beside him in a grey woolly boiler suit.

'Are you up for some company?' says the man. standing up and returning her look. He had dark shadowed eyes and a lime green floppy jersey.

'Sure', said Pam. 'Come over and join us.'

Introductions are made and another conversation begins to take shape. So much for my effortless day, Pam thought. The couple are Susan and Jo. Lala hovers, keen to get on with the food business, but she can't get a word in edgeways due to the general excitement and urgency of the potted biographies which are being exchanged by the two couples.

Lala must be listened to though, and eventually the table calms down and the order is made, it has been today's refrain. Susan has black bean and corn veggie burger (928 cal) both the burger and the bun are vegan compliant. Jim has a child's portion of macaroni. They had been in the car for lunch too and "there is only so much eating you can all do". They all agreed on this point, and then the talk turned to train journeys, contrasting European and American ones. Susan had been married in France and Jim asks whether her partner was a she or a he.

That's a good question,' says Jo.

Jim was pleased with himself for thinking of it.

Jo and Susan described themselves as energetic and lively Democrats on their way back home to NY. Their talk is a mesh of despair and optimism. Susan said that they were so pleased about the news about the 41 new members of the House of Representatives. They were teachers, health workers, social entrepreneurs, mixed colours, genders and ages.

'Sounds good' Pam ventured.

'Why yes,' said Susan, *'They're none of them politicians.'*

'Funny' thought Pam. 'That's exactly what Dan said this morning.'

Post Script

It was truly a 'Rainy Night in Georgia' when they arrived, eventually.

'What's the first line of that song?' asked Pam.

'It feels like it's raining all over the world.' Jim tried to sing it, but couldn't really remember how the tune went.

Pam switched on Fox News. The channel was celebrating "National Quitters Day". This is the day most people give up their resolutions and stop going to the gym or resisting the temptation of cheap flights. The table in the TV studio was laden with mounds of fried food, sweet and savoury and slathered in sauce. On a small adjacent table was some crusty grey porridge/muesli mix in a cracked bowl. The plump, glistening presenters joked and poked fun at each other and at the 'Liberal Types' who would undoubtedly prefer the oats to the pile of pancakes and waffles.

'Food has gotten to be political too,' said Pam to no one. She tried to close down her thoughts, attempting to get off to sleep. Her lasting impression of the day was framed by a train window - surreal. She watched those TV presenters trying to hack their way out through the kudzu vine which was climbing around their enclosed and sticky world.

