

## The Crescent Limited

By James Lambert

This is a story my birth mother told me thirty-seven years after it happened. We were on a train from Hartsfield Airport to Downtown Atlanta. She told me about the start of another journey, in another time, on another train.

My mother, Marsha Gay Wilson, accompanied by my grandmother, boarded a city bus to Terminal Station. She stuffed what she could squeeze into an old suitcase given to her by her Aunt Suzie. This had not been the plan for her departure. Bobby was supposed to pick her up in his daddy's car and take her to the station, but he called a couple of hours before and claimed he was called off to work on a construction job. Bobby was the father of the fetus my mother was carrying, only a few weeks old. That would be me. The two women sat in the White section of the bus, passing the first few miles in grudging silence.

"I told you that boy was no good," Grandmother finally said. "Look at this. Call me at the last minute. Expect me to see you off. Hell, he didn't even have the decency to pay for your ticket." She continued to stare straight ahead, not expecting a reply from her daughter.

They disembarked outside Terminal Station amid a swarm of taxis and busy men darting in all directions, forming a strange sea of dark felt fedoras. Mother drug the suitcase to the curb, while Grandmother went in search of a porter. Mother had been to

the station to see off relatives over the years, but had never ridden an express train, one with Pullman sleepers, dining cars, even an observation deck. This was different. This time she would board that fancy train and never look back. Kind of like old Lot. Don't you dare look back!

As she stood on the curb, the smell of diesel fumes from the locomotives and exhaust from the many taxis and cars stung her nose and made her cringe. Grandmother returned with a smartly uniformed porter in tow. He placed the heavy bag onto his hand dolly and set off to check it through to New Orleans.

The two women began to make their way to the coffee shop to await the boarding of The Crescent Limited. Newsboys at the front entrance, hawking both the morning and afternoon papers, blurted out the headlines – all about the battles in Korea. As they walked deeper into the cavernous space, a cacophony of sounds presented. A voice on the intercom blared the names and destinations of trains, conductors shouted for straggling passengers to board immediately, wives bade goodbyes to their travelling husbands, horns blew from the departing locomotives. Filtered rays of bright sunshine pierced the darkness and illuminated the haze of cigarette smoke and diesel fumes. The pair entered a mass of humanity, each one with a particular destination in mind, each with a story.

Marsha Gay's story was shocking, even shameful, to her Southern Baptist parents. She was a good girl gone bad. That's what her daddy claimed. She was pregnant, not married. Had no prospect of marriage. She had thrown away a college scholarship, a chance to make something of herself. For what exactly? For a night in the

back of Bobby Haverty's car, for a couple of hours of fun? Her daddy washed his hands of the business. That's what he said. But he didn't mean it. That's what she told herself.

Grandmother talked to their pastor, who made a call to the Baptist Baby Home in New Orleans. It's where good Baptist girls went in these circumstances. That's where Marsha Gay was headed that crisp fall day in 1951.

"Two coffees and an order of biscuits, please," Grandmother said.

The porter approached them and handed Grandmother a bag claim stub and a train schedule. "Here you are, mam. Checked through to New Orleans, Canal Street Station. The Crescent Limited, leaving on Track 9 in twenty minutes." She handed him a quarter.

Grandmother looked at the schedule. "Says here you'll arrive there tonight around eleven," she said. "Pastor Green said there would be a lady there to meet you. She'll be holding a sign with your name. She'll take you to the baby home. You call us collect when you get there, you hear? No matter what the hour, you call me."

After a silence passed between them, Mother said, "Momma, what kind of woman gives away her baby?"

"Marsha Gay, you're just making things harder. You got one job to do now. You got to bring that baby into the world and give it a chance for a better life."

"And then, what? Where do I go? The college won't want me back. Oh God...."

At that moment, a seeing eye dog led a Negro man into the White section of the coffee shop. Everyone stopped whatever they were doing. The shop manager eased over to the pair and whispered something in the blind man's ear, then gently escorted them into the Negro section.

A male voice came over the intercom, "First call for all passengers departing on The Crescent Limited to New Orleans, with stops at Montgomery, Pensacola, Biloxi, and Gulfport. Leaving on Track 9 in fifteen minutes."

They walked past several waiting trains and arrived at the sleek Virginia green locomotive emblazoned with the Southern Railway logo, accented with gold and silver stripes. Following it was a long string of stainless-steel passenger cars. The two embraced as Mother stood before the steps into her second-class car. She took a seat inside and waived to Grandmother, who turned and left the station.

Before The Crescent pulled out, Mother made her way into the dining car. She was amazed to find an ultra-modern round stainless-steel counter with mirrors on the walls. Behind the counter was a smartly dressed Negro bartender wearing a starched white serving jacket and a black bow tie. She sat at a round stool and ordered a Coca Cola on ice. The train started to move as she sipped the drink which Atlanta made famous.

In the dining car were several nicely dressed young couples, probably from first class. They looked to be close in age to her. She was a single woman, no man. She didn't think she was showing yet, but women had a sixth sense. They looked her up and down. Did they know, suspect? Women were so cruel to each other. So quick to judge. That's why she had to leave Atlanta -- all those women, some her old friends, who would talk about her. What about her parents? What would their friends think? Certainly, those older women would condemn her mother. No, this was the best way, the only way.

Mother returned to her seat and stared out as the suburbs gave way to the hard red clay of the Georgia countryside dotted by hay bales, tractors, and Negroes picking the

fall crop of mature cotton. She began to read a Look magazine which Grandmother bought her at the station.

A few hours passed. The train reached Montgomery shortly after noon. A young man entered her car. He was wearing a brown pork pie hat along with a brown suit with a white shirt accented by a skinny red tie. With him was a tall lady wearing one of those old-fashioned wide brimmed flowered hats from the twenties. She was old enough to be his granny. She hugged him, kissed him on both cheeks, called him Eddie Baby, then left. He gently positioned a case he was carrying, and then plopped down in the seat across the aisle from Mother. She suspected it held a musical instrument and returned to her Look. The Crescent headed south for the Gulf Coast.

“Excuse me mam,” Eddie said. “Sorry to bother you, but I see you’re reading Look. Can you tell me, is there an article in there on jazz? I think it was Look, they were publishing an article about the new trend in modern jazz. Do you mind? Can you check the contents for me? I might have to buy me a copy.”

Mother flipped to the contents page. “No, nothing in here. Must’ve been Life. Or maybe Esquire, or Harper’s, one of those artsy magazines.”

“Yea, I’ll have to check. Hey, so you think jazz is artsy as you say?”

“Well truthfully, it’s not something I listen to,” she said. “They never play it on the radio in Atlanta. My parents listen to big band. Daddy played the clarinet in a band before the war. Travelled around the South. He’s loaded with Benny Goodman records. I just figured jazz was something they play in fancy clubs in New York or Chicago, that’s why I called it artsy.”

“Where you gettin’ off?”

“New Orleans. I’m starting college there.”

“Why heck, you’re going to the birthplace of jazz, did you know that?”

“You mean like the Dixieland music, the Negroes play?”

“Well mam, yes and no. It’s true jazz started in New Orleans. Players like Louis Armstrong and King Oliver. But us White players, we’ve added a lot. Jazz spread all over the country. That’s why I’m on this train. I’m gonna’ get me a job playing music down in the French Quarter. I hear they got a whole slew of music clubs there. I play the sax. Here, you want to see it?” He pulled up his case and opened it slowly, like it contained the crown jewels.

“Can I touch it?”

“Why sure, scoot on over and have a seat.”

She sat next to him and fingered his precious sax. “This sax is so much bigger than I remember. I had a friend in the Grady High band, but I don’t recall his horn was near as long. Does it make a different sound?”

“It’s a baritone sax, so it’s a bit larger. She supplies the soul in a combo. This baby’s my life. I don’t think I’m college material. I played in my high school band back in Selma. Always wanted to join in a travelling band, like your daddy. So, I’m twenty, Montgomery and Selma, they got nothing for me. I’m off to the Quarter.”

Mother slid back across the aisle. Eddie closed his horn case, and asked “So, which college are you going to?”

“Oh, Newcomb College. It’s a girls’ school. My parents insisted on a proper girls’ college. They’re very protective. But I may take some classes with boys at Tulane. Newcomb’s kind of paired with Tulane, so sometimes, boys and girls are together.”

“What you goin’ to study?”

“I’ll major in English. I love Southern writers. Faulkner, Williams. Do you know Tennessee Williams? I think both of them lived in the French Quarter. Maybe that’s what drew me down there.”

“We tried to read Faulkner in high school,” he said. “It was over my head. Who’s the other one you mentioned?”

“You know the movie Streetcar Named Desire? I saw it at the Fox in Downtown Atlanta. Marlon Brando. Sure, you heard about that movie. Tennessee Williams wrote it.”

“I guess I heard about that Brando fella. I don’t get to movies often. I spend my money on records. You ever hear of Charlie Parker? They call him Bird. He’s my hero; like the Brando of jazz. Say, you mind if I come sit next to you?”

Mother felt that old twinge of excitement that nice young might be interested in her. But no! Where did all that lead? You have no sense girl. That’s what she told herself. But he looked harmless, so she nodded for him to come sit beside her.

“So, you like stories?” he asked. She smiled and nodded again. “Here’s a game my grandma taught me. We used to play it to kill time. We’d sit on a park bench and make up stories about the people we saw in the park. Wanna’ play?”

“Sure,” mother said. “You go first.”

“Ok, see those two young ladies at the far end? The one with the black hat? See her? She just escaped from a nunnery. And the other, with the shawl? That’s her best friend from back in Huntsville. She swore she’d come get her friend if she ever changed her mind.”

“Why did the nun change her mind?” Mother asked with a smile.

“One too many whacks on the wrists by Mother Superior. She found out she wasn’t the only Bride of Christ in that nunnery. Got tired of cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors.”

“Wait, so why are they heading south, Huntsville’s north.”

“You ever heard of that book, You Can’t Go Home Again? No, ain’t nothing for them in Huntsville. The few Catholics up there would burn them at the stake. Momma and Daddy are madder than wet hens. So, they’re headed to New Orleans. Plenty of sinners there I hear. At least I hope so. The only people who listen to jazz are sinners.” Eddie poked her in the arm. “Ok, you’re up. Wait, you never told me your name, college girl.”

“I’m Marsha Gay Wilson. Atlanta, GA. Pleased to meet you, Eddie from Selma. Ok, you see that man three rows behind us. The one in the gabardine suit? I saw him look funny at you when you opened that case. I think he’s a Red. Look at those thick glasses, and all those pens stuck in his pocket protector. Must be a spy. You see, he didn’t want to do it, but the Reds are blackmailing his daddy. You see that briefcase beside him? He’s carrying some top secret blueprints his daddy stole from the Pentagon. He’s on his way to a dock in New Orleans to meet a Russian agent. After that both he and his daddy will defect.”

Eddie craned his neck around and took a furtive glance at the spy. “Damned girl, you’re good. Watch out, his bow tie is really a camera.” At that they both broke out in laughter. The stories flowed for a few more rounds, after which the two walked to the



dining car for a late lunch. They perched on the round chairs next to the counter and chatted over soup and tuna sandwiches.

“Tell me what you know about New Orleans,” Mother said. “You said it was filled with sinners.”

“I said I *hoped* it was filled with sinners, due to my work in smoky music clubs. But truthfully, Miss Marsha, I don’t really know. I read some things about the French Quarter. They have strip joints there, I know that. It’s a big city, maybe about the size of Atlanta. Plenty of money down there I hear. I just hope I can grab a little and learn to play my horn better. I know they got a lot of Catholics there, and they started Mardi Gras, so they must like to have a good time.”

“Eddie, what’s a good time to you?”

“Oh Miss Marsha, I been living in a small town outside Montgomery, Alabama, so I hadn’t had too much fun so far. Listening to my records and drinking a beer or two with my old buddies. Maybe a dancehall here and there. I guess I’ll have to find out at the end of the line, down on Basin Street where all the clubs are.”

“And you?” Eddie asked. “What’d you do for a good time?”

“Me? Oh, I’d go on double dates with a girlfriend and her date. Dances at our high school. We’d get cokes and hamburgers at the Varsity. Movies, lots of movies. My uncle has a farm out in the country, and I loved going there in the summers.”

“So why you leaving Atlanta? They got plenty of colleges there. Sounds like you got it made.”

“Well to be honest with you. It’s my parents. They hate this boy I’ve been seeing, so they’re sending me off to New Orleans, to a girls’ college. They said I’d be better off with a new start.”

“What’s his name, your guy?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. That world is dead to me. My new world begins eleven tonight when we pull in.”

“Wow, I guess that hurts, but at least your parents care about you.”

Mother shook her head. She ordered a coffee, then asked, “Eddie, that lady who saw you off. Was that your mother?”

“Grandmother. I ain’t seen my real mother since I was a baby. She left me with Granny and took off for Atlanta. We ain’t heard from her in many years.”

“And your daddy? Do you see him?”

“Momma never would say who my daddy was. My Granny has a couple of ideas, but she never said who she suspects.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” Mother said. “Must have been tough on you.”

“Tough? Oh no, not in the least. You see, my Granny and Gramps, they spoil me silly. They always had hell with my mamma. She was a firecracker from the start. They got another chance with me. Give me everything they can. I never thought of them as anything but my parents, even though they was grandparents. I always knew I was loved. They took me to church and raised me right. They even bought me my horns over the years. Gramps ain’t too keen on my jazz, but he never objected as long as I didn’t play it too loud.”

Mother thought that over. Was it that simple? Was she simply a childbearing machine, playing a small part before the main attraction? Was love the answer? She looked at Eddie. “Really?” she asked. “And you never missed your mother?”

“No, sometimes wondered where she was, what kind of life she had. But I think that the people who raise you, year in and year out -- they’re your real parents. I knew they loved me, so I didn’t miss out on the thing you need most. Not in the least. And Miss Marsha, even though I don’t know your family, I gonna’ guess that your parents are doing this out of love for you.”

“Eddie, it’s a long story. Very long and twisted up. But yes, I think I do know they love me. It’s just hard leaving your old world, the one you grew up in. You must know that.”

“Do I know that? You bet. Leaving my grandparents and my records the same day. For how long, I don’t know.” He raised his half empty coke and toasted it against Mother’s coffee cup. “Here’s to our new world!”

They returned to their car and their original seats – her by the window with her magazine, him across the aisle next to his beloved horn. She dozed off late in the afternoon. When she awoke, the Crescent was crossing the long trestle across Mobile Bay.

Once again upon arrival in Mobile, she alighted into a swarm of bodies propelled by their purpose driven lives. She wondered where they were all going in such a hurry – to jobs, families, war, lovers, schools? She had no purpose as far as she could see, except to do what she had to do. She had no choice, just a duty imposed upon her by a society she was leaving forever. She wasn’t going forward like all these busy people. She was

caught between the past and the future. Later in life she would learn about liminal space, but in that train station in Mobile in the year 1951, she felt like a fly caught in amber.

The train left the station at dusk. Mother could still see the huge live oaks lining the tracks and stared out at the expanse of marshes which welcomed the Crescent to Mississippi. Light gave way to darkness. Eddie dozed off and was leaning against his baritone sax, snoring very lightly. Eddie had been abandoned, yet life had worked out well for him. The most important thing was he knew he was loved – by someone. It didn't have to be his momma. Just that he was loved, was worthy of love. He knew that, thanks to his grandparents. Maybe that would be possible for the young life inside her. Maybe these people at the Baptist Baby Home would see to that. She wasn't sure she could give that to another human, at least not right now. She was too young, too selfish, too scared, and all alone.

Just after the train pulled out from the Biloxi station, Mother slid over the aisle, gently repositioned the sax case, and woke Eddie. "Eddie, sorry to wake you. Can I sit here and talk?"

"Oh... sure. Where are we now?"

"We just pulled out from Biloxi. We got about another two hours."

"Well, thanks for waking me. I needed to be up. So, what's you got sis?"

"I lied to you Eddie. I'm not going to Newcomb. I'm not going to any college. In fact, I just finished my first year in college on a scholarship, and I'm losing that. You see, I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby, probably in June. But I'm not married Eddie."

"So why are you going to New Orleans?"

“There’s a place there where Baptist girls go in cases like mine, to have their babies. It’s called the Baptist Baby Home. They place the babies with good parents who can’t have one of their own.”

“So that guy you talked about, the one your parents hated, is he...”

“Yes. I met him on summer vacation after my first year of college. He looked and talked like Brando. I went crazy over him. We had a great time, for a while. When I found out about being pregnant, he told me he already had a fiancé. He was promised to be married. So here I am, on a train to New Orleans, lying to a perfectly nice boy.”

“Just what’ll you do in New Orleans?”

“All I know is that some lady is going to meet me at the station. From there, I guess she’ll take me to my new home for the next few months.”

“Can I come visit you?”

“Eddie, that’s very sweet. But first I need to get through this. The people at the baby home will help me. I need to bring this baby into the world, healthy and strong. I can’t think about anything else right now, even making a new friend. Tell you what, after all this is done, I’ll look you up and come see you play your music. I’m sure you’ll be a headliner by then.”

“Maybe so, college girl. Just look through the listings on Basin Street. If I’m still in New Orleans, that’s where I’ll be playing.”

“Eddie, can I ask you a question?”

“What type of woman gives away her child?”

“Miss Marsha, I don’t think there is any one type. I don’t think my momma thought too much about leaving me with family. She knew she couldn’t do it. Not by

herself. I suppose there's women who just leave a baby alone, like in a basket. You hear tales about that. And you, I think you're doing the only thing you can do right now. Sounds like these baby home people have done this before. They know about these things. You gotta' trust someone. Sis, we both gonna' be alright in New Orleans. It's the City of a Million Dreams, don't you know?"

The Crescent Limited made its way along the Mississippi Sound. Mother stared out at the moonlight sparkling on the waters of Lake Pontchartrain. The train pulled into Canal Street Station. Mother alighted and met a lady holding a sign with her name written on it. She was taken to a large home on Peniston Street in Uptown New Orleans. There she lived, surrounded by the love and support of the staff and her fellow expectant mothers, until my birth in the summer of 1952. Later, she tried finding where Eddie was playing, but never got a chance to hear his saxophone wail.

