

Waiting on Bert

By Patrick Guttery

The clang and clatter of the diner mixed with conversations of the locals accompanied the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, gravy, peas and cornbread. I left a dime next to the coffee cup and headed to the cashier.

“What did you have, hon?” she asked.

“Blue plate special and coffee,” I said.

“Let’s see, that’ll be fifty cents,” she said. “Hope you enjoyed it.” She handed my change back and then pushed a stray bit of gray under her hairnet.

“It was just right,” I said.

Letting go of the screen door, I nodded goodbye to the curly headed blond who reminded me of my own daughter as she smiled from behind her buttered delicacy above the words “Reach for Sunbeam Bread”. Judging from the rust around her edges, she spent many years on that door, and welcomed locals and travelers alike.

I walked across the courthouse square and cut behind the granite Confederate soldier whose prominence gave silent testimony to the heroic futility of division and resistance.

I waited as a blue cab Ford flatbed truck passed; *Jasper City* lettered on the doors, loaded with white saw-horse street barricades. The big truck was followed closely by a pickup crammed with grizzled Legionnaires. Dressed in blue uniforms, caps pushed down at the crown with points at the front and back. Some held wooden carbines painted white. Some held furled American and Alabama State flags. The men in the pickup bed sagged and bulged in contrast to

what they must have looked like when they served in WWI.

I turned the corner and headed down the four blocks toward the FRISCO Depot. My train wasn't scheduled to leave for another hour, but I was anxious to get home to my family. A week is a long time to be gone.

I walked up the worn steps and entered the green-trimmed, white wooden building and approached the counter. The bespectacled Stationmaster wore a navy blue uniform complete with bowtie and officer's cap. His ruddy complexion indicated he was probably a Scot or Irish as so many here were.

A Negro porter dozed in a chair, his red cap on his knee. Hank Williams crooned from the radio on the shelf behind the counter.

"Birmingham train, three o'clock," I said, handing my ticket to the Stationmaster.

He stamped it, tore it, and returned my half.

"Is it on time?"

He pulled the chained watch from his vest pocket and said, "Yes sir. You'll hear the whistle when she rounds the bend."

"What's the occasion?" I gestured towards the two black Cadillacs parked beside several US Army dull green sedans in the lot. The civilian and military vehicles all displayed small American flags mounted on the front fenders.

Without looking up he said, "Got a soldier coming home today." He put a tag on my suitcase and nodded to the porter. The Red Cap took the case and thanked me when I handed him a nickel.

"You expect a big crowd?" I asked.

"No more than usual," he said.

"He's been gone a long time," I said. It was three years since the Japanese surrendered from what they started at Pearl Harbor, but not before we blew two of their cities to smithereens.

"Yep, he was up in Alaska, on one of those islands. They had to do a lot of cleaning up after the war," he said. "Had to get all that equipment and the war supplies out of there."

I nodded.

He continued, "Released him just last week." He stuck the pencil behind his ear. "He got into Memphis last night and is coming in on the two-thirty-five, southbound."

I walked outside and settled in on a bench on the platform between two waiting room doors; one marked "Colored", the other, "White".

The hypnotic October sun, warm on my face, hung in the crystal-blue

vault of Alabama sky. The air light and crisp, nudged the leaves into a shimmering dance that belied the feeling of coming winter when dark branches scratch against the cold grey clouds.

Four sidings in the switching yard merged into one set of shiny topped tracks on the railroad bed. The single track snaked out of sight through the hills. North went to Memphis. South headed to Birmingham. The elevated landscape, dotted with trees; green pines among red, brown and yellow leafed hardwoods. In the distance they looked like pointed artist's brushes dipped in brilliant hued paint and stood up on end.

A nice looking couple, perhaps in their early fifties, came up the middle steps. They walked onto the high-roofed platform and stood looking northeast up the tracks. He was slender. She was solid, a hair this side of being stout. She wore a navy dress and sturdy shoes, a hat pinned to her hair. His tan suit fit well. The left sleeve of his coat neatly folded up at the elbow and pinned to the shoulder. A tan fedora sat on his head. Empty space occupied where his arm should have hung below the elbow.

The solitude of the afternoon settled over me. I loosened my tie and drifted into a pleasant state of comfort.

A younger man bounded onto the platform two steps at a time up the south stairs. He walked past me towards the couple. As the woman turned to greet him, a flash of gold came from her collar. He hugged the woman and shook the man's good hand. They chatted in hushed tones. He hugged her again and turned toward me on the bench.

He approached and said, "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," I replied.

"Are you waiting on Bert?" he asked, sitting down.

"No, I'm going home to Birmingham. Who's Bert?" I asked.

"My best friend. We grew up together," said the young man. His lean frame settled in next to me and he crossed his legs. His tanned muscular arms had several small scars as did his right cheek. "He's coming home today," he said.

"Are those his parents?" I asked.

"That's his momma. That's not his real daddy," he said, gesturing toward the north end of the platform. "His real daddy was killed in a car wreck on the Birmingham Highway when Bert was a baby." He continued, "Mr. Claude there, married Miss Cordye several years later and raised Bert just like he was his own." He glanced at the couple.

"Are you visiting kin up here?" he asked.

"No, I come up to north Alabama each fall to buy timber for our saw mills. We are having a hard time keeping up with lumber demand since the war. Need houses for all the vets and their new families," I said.

"Yeah, I'm fixing to get married myself in January. I figure that's as good a way as any to start the New Year," he said, uncrossing his legs. "I haven't seen Bert since we shipped out of Camp Blanding in Florida." he said. "That was in forty-three."

"How did you like Florida?" I asked.

"It was all right, except for those dang mosquitoes. We liked the weekend passes. Some of us hitchhiked to Saint Augustine or Daytona" he said.

"Got to travel some?" I said.

"Daytona was farther, but had a lot more gals, he said. "Bert found him a pretty woman and married. Had one kid about a year old and another in the oven, last I heard,"

"What was your unit?" I asked.

"Thirty-First Infantry," he said. He gazed up the tracks north of the station.

"Dixie Division?" I asked.

"How did you know?" He said.

"I read about your outfit in the papers. You fought in the Philippines." I said.

"Yes sir and New Guinea, too, except Bert didn't go with us. They made him an officer in the Signal Corps. He went off to Alaska, real close to Japan," he said.

The distant sound of a straining locomotive caught our attention.

"Well, I better be going. Sounds like the train is coming," he said, adding, "by the way, my name is Bobby Jones."

"I'm Sam Stewart, from Birmingham," I replied.

"Nice talking with you, Mister Stewart," John said.

"My pleasure, Bobby. Enjoy your time with Bert," I said.

His demeanor changed to a humble posture as we shook hands.

By now, people milled about on the platform and in the parking lot. I expected they came to admire and well-wish the returning hero. A group of soldiers stood together, smoking and talking. The wind shifted and the smell of

creosoted railroad ties mixed with the faintness of ladies perfume.

The crowd was made up of farmers in coveralls; some with starched white shirts, some with blue work shirts. The men wore brogans on their feet and straw hats on their heads. They were accompanied by ladies in calf-length gingham or soft polka dot dresses and pillbox hats. Red Cross shoes and matching pocketbooks made this their Sunday best.

The incoming train whistle pierced the stillness of the countryside. My watch showed two-twenty-seven.

A low, slow moan emitted from up the hill at the town center. It continued to rise in pitch and volume until it became the troubled sound of the fire siren. It went on that way for one full minute before it began its long wail into nothing.

I looked up the hill toward the square and watched merchants in slacks and short sleeve white shirts lock their business doors and join the crowd. Some of the merchants stood with customers along the street leading back to the square. The fire siren must have sounded to alert the locals that the train carrying the VIP approached.

A giant locomotive and stoker rounded the bend from the north, the long pull up the final grade behind it. It coasted. Black smoke emitted from the stack and turned to gray, then replaced by iridescent white steam as the power backed off. Four cars trailed the engine, each rocking side to side, independent of each other.

The engineer leaned from the left side of the cab and guided the rumbling and shaking engine into the depot. The insatiable appetite of the locomotive's angry belly signified its power. The continuous clang of the single bell atop the steam engine punctuated its arrival.

The screech of the steel wheels on the tracks ended the train's forward movement. The bustle of activity took over. Baggage boys, conductors and the Stationmaster went about the business of train stations. Step stools placed at the front of each passenger car. One, by one, passengers stepped from the train cars. Both military personnel and civilians came off, some quicker than others.

A train car door opened and there appeared the most squared-away soldier I have ever seen. He stood at perfect attention, his uniform immaculately pressed with creases just right. His waist-length Eisenhower jacket tailored with no extra material for his body. A row of medals and campaign ribbons adorned his chest.

The soldiers on the platform came to attention and moved to greet their hero.

The ranking officer faced the train and gave a salute, returned by the soldier on the train. Movement in the crowd opened a gap and I could see the rest of the soldier in the baggage car. Trousers bloused over spit-shined dress boots. Red and white reflected in the toe of the black boots.

A perfectly aligned American flag covered the casket next to the soldier, its forty-eight stars over the fallen hero's heart, its thirteen red and white stripes parallel to the sides of the container.

I removed my hat and realized the only sound came from the rumbling of the locomotive. Muted whispers gave way to reverent silence.

In two lines, eyes riveted to the casket, gliding at ramrod attention, the soldiers moved in slow, deliberate motion. Twelve white-gloved hands came up to receive the casket's slow exit from the train. Held chest high by his comrades, the precious strongbox floated effortlessly at eye level.

I moved closer to the man and woman and saw the pin on her collar. *The flash in the sun*. The gold star awarded by the military to the mothers of fallen soldiers.

She looked used up, old before her time. She had cried all she could. She shook in silent convulsions, her hand to her mouth. She sagged, held up by her husband on one side and the young Bobby Jones on the other.

I wondered if it was the fire siren I heard. Or was it the deep groan of a mother who has given up her son to war? Could it have been the wailing from the hills and valleys of Walker County as another man came home to rest forever in the fertile earth?

The soldiers turned parallel to the casket, lowered it to waist height and slow-stepped toward the edge of the platform, away from the train.

Popping and crushing sounds came from tires on gravel as the hidden hearse entered the lot and backed into position.

The honor guard approached the vehicle and slowly settled the warrior for the journey to church. The ranking officer faced the casket in the hearse and saluted as before. The six bearers did the same.

The men turned and stood at silent attention facing each other over the space they had moments ago carried their friend.

Each man faced his counterpart and as the hearse door closed with a dull thud, they all winced.... the slightest movement of eye and body.