

# The Last Train Ride

By Michael Groetsch

It is the summer of 1962, a typically torrid August day in New Orleans. Darryl Jacobs and I crouch behind a dark- blue '59 Chevy. We patiently sit on our bikes equipped with angel- wing handlebars, anticipating the arrival of *Mosquito Man*. Every Monday afternoon, an overweight and bearded driver dressed in green Army fatigues, commandeers his military looking vehicle through our neighborhood. His weekly mission is to spray for blood- sucking insects whose buzzing sounds like mini chainsaws.

As the mosquito truck turns the corner leaving a dense cloud of DDT in its wake, Darryl yells, "Let's go, Mike! Let's go!" Within seconds, concealed within chemical smog, we pursue the welcomed invader on our banana- seat bikes as if we are chasing the ice cream man.

"Hurry up, Darryl," I scream. "We're losing him! He's getting away!"

The bearded man always seems to speed up whenever he sees us coming.

"Oh what the heck, Mike, he'll be back next Monday."

As the white mist dissipates, the strangely pleasant odor of insect repellent is immediately replaced by the scent of freshly cut grass. Finding ourselves standing with our bikes in front of Darryl's home, we look up just in time to be scolded by his father who is mowing his lawn. "You boys are just plumb crazy," Mr. Jacobs yells. "Don't you guys realize that the smog you are playing in kills insects on contact! How many times must I tell you and Mike not to follow the mosquito truck? Inhaling its fumes is a very dumb thing to do! You boys are going to end up like big cockroaches lying on their backs and kicking their legs!"

Nodding our heads to give the appearance that we are absorbing his unsolicited (worthless) adult wisdom, we smile and retreat into Darryl's home to watch our favorite television show, *Father Knows Best*. For the third time in less than a month, we have nearly conquered *Mosquito Man* and his truck. While it is difficult for adults to comprehend how we get a thrill out of chasing a truck while breathing DDT vapor, it is the same excitement that we feel when we straddle the narrow pipe that crosses the wide canal. In conquering both, we are conquering our youth.

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It is now the fall of 2002. Four decades have passed since Darryl and I conspired in ways that seem logical only to young boys. I drive through my old neighborhood to familiar surroundings. My son Gene is fishing at the lake. I have to pick him up before sunset.

As I drive slowly past Darryl's former home, I notice an elderly man cutting his perfect lawn. Perspiration drips from the man's frail and shirtless body like a leaky kitchen faucet. Through my side window and rearview mirror, I continue to carefully study his tall stature and distinguished face and become surprisingly aware that it could be Mr. Jacobs. Although I initially dismiss the possibility that it is Darryl's father, I back up my car and pull next to the curb. With curious anticipation, I roll down the window and call out his name.

"Mr. Jacobs? Mr. Jacobs? Is that you? It's Mike, Mr. Jacobs, Darryl's old friend."

Appearing startled at first, he turns off his lawnmower and approaches apprehensively.

Again I ask, "Mr. Jacobs?"

He smiles and softly responds. “Mike? Did you say your name is Mike? Please pardon me if I don’t remember you. Did you say you’re an old friend of my son Darryl?”

“Yes, Mr. Jacobs. Darryl and I use to hang around together when we were in grammar school. It’s been a very long time. How are you? How’s Darryl and your wife?”

“My wife is fine. She’s inside the house in her robe, otherwise I would ask her to come out and visit. Darryl is living somewhere in California with his wife and kids. Just can’t seem to remember the city right now. My memory isn’t what it used to be. It seems odd that I can sometimes recall things from long ago, but often forget what happened yesterday. ”

Almost as if apologizing for his age, he says, “Mike, I’m 82- years- old now and I’m on my last train ride. It’s been a long life and it’s been a good life. I’m just waiting for the train ride to end.”

Dropping my eyes, I respond. “Awe, Mr. Jacobs, you’ll probably outlive me. Who knows, maybe I’m on the train before yours.”

As we speak and reflect on the rapid passage of time, I seem to jar his memory when I mention the *Mosquito Man*.

“Mike, now I remember who you are! You and my son would chase that truck driver who sprayed for mosquitoes. I also remember how concerned I was that the fumes you and Darryl inhaled would harm both of you. In those days, I even thought that the chemical fog was responsible for some of my outdoor plants dying. Oh well, you seem to be doing fine.”

“Mr. Jacobs, do you remember when I use to come to your house in the morning so that Darryl and I could walk to school together?”

“No, Mike. I can’t even say that I remember the name of the grammar school that you and Darryl attended. As I said, my memory is spotty. It isn’t what it used to be. Although I can seem to recall some things, I have totally forgotten others. ”

It is nearly 6:00 p.m. and I remind myself that my son Gene will probably be waiting for me at the lake. A glaring sun silhouettes Mr. Jacob’s aging physique. The lines on his face look like a road map of where his life has been. As we bid each other farewell, I am aware that we may never meet again. I am suddenly compelled to step out of my car and embrace him. He responds with a gentle hug and assures me that he will tell Darryl we spoke. Shaking hands, his wrinkled fingers tightly clutch mine in an affectionate gesture. He grips my hand as if he doesn’t want to let go.

I drive away and once again gaze at the reflection of Mr. Jacobs in my rearview mirror as he slowly walks back to his lawnmower. A flashback image of a much younger man filled with vitality emerges by his side. The reality that he may be on his last train ride occurs to me as I begin to contemplate my own mortality. On my last visit to his home on my custom- made bike we were young. Today’s visit reveals how quickly everything has aged. It’s seems like we blinked our eyes and fast- forwarded our lives.

While I know that I’ll be late in picking up Gene, I have a sudden urge to visit my aging parents. They still live a block away in the tan brick home where I was raised as a young boy. Mom and Dad built the spacious three- bedroom house with its bowling alley size den in anticipation of a large family. My brief visit with Mr. Jacobs reminds me that I should never take such moments for granted.

As I drive towards my childhood home, I begin to notice how the neighborhood, like us, has matured with time. A variety of tall trees shade both sides of the narrow

street. Squirrels scurry across plush green lawns. A fire- engine red cardinal flutters in front of my car. Although I travel this area often to visit my parents, my conversation with Mr. Jacobs has left me more aware of my surroundings.

In the 1950s, indifferent to the presence of nature, architects and contractors razed our emerging suburban neighborhood in pursuit of quick profits. As the canopy of trees disappeared from the virgin soil, so did the wildlife. For years, frogs, squirrels, lizards, turtles, and other small creatures gradually disappeared from the landscape. The re-emergence of the trees and vegetation, however, has enticed their return. A sense of oneness has returned to a neighborhood that had lost its balance. Two gray-tan doves cuddle on the roof of my parent's neighbor's house. Others feed on the blue-green lawn below.

Approaching the home of my parents, I recall that it is Friday. Neither of their cars is parked in the driveway. Friday is the day that Dad plays poker. It is also the day that Mom goes grocery shopping and gets her hair done at the beauty parlor. Although their absence at a moment like this is disheartening, it provides me time to reflect. As I allow my heightened awareness to nourish my soul, I hear the crackling sound of the summer rain falling through the tall trees. An emotional rush travels through my body while the bright orange sun settles in the west. My eyes begin to moisten. I leave to pick up Gene. He will be waiting. The sound of a train can be heard in the distance. Life is so very brief.

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*We are not powerless specks of dust drifting around in the wind, blown by random destiny. We are, each of us, like beautiful snow flakes-unique and born for a specific reason and purpose.- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross*