

## Stations

When you visit Sacramento, don't stay at the Hotel Marshall. Mapquest will position the giant pushpin right near where you want to be—between historic old town and the bustling capitol, but Papa Dean lives at the Hotel Marshall, as do a number of other characters who were recently removed from the downtown Greyhound station and given a grant for housing themselves on a week to week basis.

Papa Dean rides RT. A stinky good-natured old man of 82, he wears a hat and tells off color jokes that make some people squirm. He's got a monkey on his back, he says. "Know what that is?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Do you want mine?" He reaches in his shirt back collar and pulls out a 1x1 plush monkey and tosses it to a woman, unsuspecting. She's a good sport and chuckles.

"He'll talk to you if he likes you. Throw it up!"

The woman gives the monkey a few low tosses into the air.

"I guess he don't like you. But did you have fun playing with my monkey?"

The RT light rail is air conditioned, which is more than Papa Dean can say about the Hotel Marshall. And if I don't get a new job fast, more than I'll be able to say for my house, the house I inherited from my dad a year ago this week.

The lady with the good nature straightens her skirt, pulls it over her knee and works to align her part, combing her hair with her fingers. She gets off at 13<sup>th</sup> Street and I have to look at the lady in front of her who has some kind of zit in her head. She scratches her scalp and looks under her fingernails. Scratches her eyebrow but does not look under her fingernails. She daubs at her part as if it was a jar of rose scented face cream, with a middle finger.

“Cover yo damn mouth when you cough!” She says this to no one in particular.

Public Health should provide sunscreen for all homeless people. Their skin is just melanomosis. Sunscreen made with something that when applied topically will make them sterile, or sane, or dead. Forget that. Will make them happy—shit, while we’re at it, will make them go getters full of prospects.

The city had to fill in the pool by my house and convert it to a basketball court. That’s when I started taking note of the changing tone of the neighborhood. A Super Mercado opened where the Safeway used to be, the next hint. Still, when I lie awake at night, listening to the racket coming from the bungalos on either side, louder, and either angrier or more festive depending on which bungalow it blasts out of, I never hear gun shots.

The neighbors used to be old folks, like my parents. When my parents bought the house I’m living in now, it sat between Marge and Peter and Agnes and Bob. Marge had a yippy dog who never ever shut up. More than once Dad considered poison, but never did anything and the dog died anyway, and so did Peter; and Marge moved away to live with one of her five children. Agnes on the other side died and left old Bob. He still struggles along, starts a fire in the kitchen about twice a year, forgetting about the prunes he set on the stove to stew, or burning up the bottom of the teakettle. I help him when I can. Life is more complicated for old folks these days.

Like nearly everyone else on the train, the woman across the aisle has punched numbers on her phone and holds it up to her head. “Sonombitch ansya damn phone niggamothafucka!” she says. Her son, who looks about 13, not too much younger than his Moms, rests his head on her bare shoulder, but the niggamothafucka doesn’t answer his phone, which means that they have gone all this way for nothing.

I feel for her, this obscene and inappropriate young mother, who maybe works hard all day and has raised a son who still cares for her, but who, probably, will end up as fucked up as she is. If you've ever gone to some degree of trouble to meet someone who doesn't pick up the phone as you get near to where you're supposed to meet them, then you probably feel for her too.

When you visit Sacramento, you can pretty much rely on this Light Rail to take you from the Amtrak station to Lake Natoma upriver where you can rent any kind of boat or a bike or just walk and enjoy the American River habitat. If you're a resident in need of a job or an unemployment check, if for some unknown reason you've been laid off after ten years of faithful service in favor of cheaper labor, the light rail can take you to any of the government buildings downtown.

Or places in between. Today, I get off at University/65<sup>th</sup>. I walk a block to have meal and a margarita and sit down at the bar at El Patron, figuring I might as well start making my plans here as anywhere. Two men chatter away at the bar, and it isn't long before they begin to turn their heads to look at me. Sauntering up, one of them hands me a business card. It says his name is Rudy and he is a massage therapist; that is what it says if you can read Spanish, which is what it is written in. I can't read Spanish, but when he hands me the card he tells me I look like I am working too hard and could use a little treat, like, for instance, his hands all over my body. His friend looks like he wants to apprentice. I'm not ready to go there, yet. I walk back to the light rail to head home.

Home, as I started to say, isn't the same place today as it was ten years ago when I moved back in to take care of Dad and got my ideal job. Nothing is the same now, in fact.