

Fast Train

Nothing is like a train. It has a serious presence, not unlike a woman with a purpose. It comes right up to you, stops, breathes on you, seizes you. Some keep you waiting. Many are hard to catch, and most are never on time. Some leave before you notice they're gone. Others may be going too fast to jump off. Each is unique and beguiling in her own way. And it's not her strengths or failings you remember. Rather, it is the way you were captured.

On a summer evening in upstate New York in 1954, my father brought my older brother and my ten year old self down to Utica's Union Station to watch the Twentieth Century Limited thunder through the city without stopping. Inaugurated in 1902 and running daily until 1967, the Limited carried fathers and brothers and grandmothers and lovers from New York City to Chicago each day. Every night it brought back another group of souls, arriving at Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan well after midnight.

At nine p.m., she exploded through Utica's station at full throttle, pounding down the platform at seventy miles per hour to where we stood. I felt my father's hand grab on to the back of my shirt collar, an oddly comfortable feeling. A tornado could not have wrested me away from his strong grip, so tightly did he hold me safe. When the train burst past us a mere ten feet away, the enormous sound and the blast of air were magnificent. A lighted blue eye on the end of the last car quickly sped away from us down the track to wherever trains go. She had taken my breath away and won my heart.

Eleven years later, the redheaded girl meeting me at Grand Central Terminal was quickly winning my heart. Each time her blue eyes rushed at me, they took my breath away. I had asked her to meet me in the center of the main concourse, under the clock, a romanticism from bygone movie scenes. We were going north to my parent's home for the weekend.

I arrived early so I could watch her as she approached, unaware of my presence. I hoped that viewing the young woman from afar would help explain why she was changing my ideas, my plans and my life. I looked up to see her descending the escalator. Like an angel she scanned the crowds below in search of the boy she'd been sent to make happy, and then I understood that a blessing doesn't need an explanation.

When she reached the floor and started my way, I hid behind the large round Information Booth, watching her for just a few more seconds. Then I popped out and spoke.

"Is it the man of your dreams you're looking for?" I asked.

"No," she said, "only the man I'm going to marry."

"And how could you be sure of that?" I said, surprised not by her intention, but her voicing it. She looked me in the eye, and in the most matter of fact way said, "Because it's you I want with all my heart."

I swallowed, or tried to.

"Then I won't be disappointing you," I said.

On the train, we held hands like teenagers, for we weren't much beyond those years. The river and the hills seemed to fly past us, but in reality they sat still, like old married couples on a porch, watching two youngsters hurry ahead into life. At my parents' house that weekend, we were never apart, never in separate rooms. Except at night, by patriarchal decree.

She went back to work in the city on Sunday evening. I followed a few days later, when I had finished helping my parents move to the small apartment they rented in readiness for their later years.

And then I was standing with my father on the rail platform once again, this time waiting for the train to take me back to New York. I told him I was getting married.

"To the redhead, is it?" he said, as if he'd been elsewhere for two days and not seen the girl and I mooning over each other and gamboling about like puppies.

I said yes.

"Is she the one for you, then?" he asked.

I said yes, she is.

The train arrived, pounding fast down the platform, coming to get me. My father put his hand up behind me and grabbed my collar and held on. When the last car stopped before us, he sighed. And this time, he let go.

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The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

www.windsweptpress.com