

## Treasure

When I lived in the Hudson Valley in the 1980s, I often traveled by rail a hundred miles south to New York City for business or a Broadway play, or to visit one of the city's many museums. Each time the train brought me home, making its way north along the shore of the wide and beautiful Hudson River, it passed through the small cozy towns tucked into the highlands east of the Catskill Mountains. I remembered long ago days when a wonderful girl often sat with me on the train and tightly held on to my arm. She seldom let go. From the moment we left Grand Central Terminal, the young woman and I glued ourselves together in happy disregard of whatever else may have happened that day in the world. We gazed out on the mountains, asked their blessing and told each other why we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together. Each time she squeezed my arm or quickly dropped her head to my shoulder, my chest would ache from wanting to hold her.

More than two decades later such thoughts provided me a bittersweet reverie as I sat deep in the seat of the railroad car and stared out the window at those same mountains. The setting sun gilded their peaks with golden light and evoked a haunting beauty as it shined through the hemlocks and oaks and cascaded down to the river. But the beautiful scene held an unwelcome truth. It heralded the dying of the day. The sun would desert the mountains as they disappeared into the evening gloom, a reminder that nothing lasts forever. Everything grows cold.

These somber thoughts were interrupted when an older man approached me soon after we left Manhattan.

"You look so comfortable," he said when he walked up and lightly touched me on the shoulder.

"I hate to disturb you, but might I take the window seat next to you?"

I smiled, nodded my head and turned sideways for the man to squeeze by me. I always sat by the aisle so I could stretch my legs. My new seat mate had a full head of white hair and a narrow, patrician face. He sat down and introduced himself. His name was

Daniel and he immediately launched into one story after another that at first concerned his exploits in business as a young man. Although many of his yarns were not entirely believable, they did entertain me. The man said he was in his mid eighties. His sense of humor was infectious but incessant, like a song that loses its frisson when played over and over. His voice was cultured and urbane, and it matched his good looks. He spoke with an odd cadence, but the effect was pleasant and summoned to my mind movie heroes from the 1940s and 50s.

When he wasn't telling me how he became the president of his company by age 30 or how he met the king of a Tanzanian principality during an African Safari, Daniel wove his narratives around the only thread most rail passengers had in common, the daily stories flooding the newspapers, many exhibiting the unfortunate trend toward an emphasis on celebrity rather than real news. The evening headlines mentioned a young man who married a rich woman for her fame and fortune, with tragic results.

"Marrying for money is never a good idea," Daniel said, the smile leaving his face.

I laughed. "I wouldn't know, but I always imagined it would be a great way to pay the bills."

"That is certainly a consideration," he said.

"When I was a youngster," I said, following Daniel's example of exaggeration, "all of us boys wanted to grow up and marry a billionaire widow or a young woman of wealth."

"But you were too young to appreciate the complexities of such an arrangement," he said.

I laughed. "Maybe so, but we were serious about our futures. We sat on the steps of the neighborhood grocery store and sucked root beers up our noses through straws and discussed who we wanted to have conjugal relations with."

"That brings back memories," he said, and smiled.

"Most often on our lips were the names of famous actresses," I continued, "and just about any neighborhood girl with boobs. And I can truthfully say 'billionairess' would have caught our attention."

"And so did you marry a woman of great wealth?" he asked.

"No," I confessed. "I didn't marry money. I married the first girl who laughed at my jokes."

"I hope it was successful," he said.

"Well ... we're still married, but ..." I replied.

"But?" he said.

"We seem to argue an awful lot," I said.

"Ah," he said. "Perhaps, the thrill is gone?"

"I sincerely hope not." My voice trailed off with a degree of resignation. I shifted my gaze out the window.

The sun was down. The mountains were left in the dark. I could barely see their outline. When the sky soon turned black, I saw nothing, but knew they were there. I wondered why we humans lacked a facility deep inside to tell us when our eyes lied and something immense stood just beyond our awareness. Across the river or across a room.

"I knew a young man in high school who married an heiress," said Daniel, interrupting my thoughts. We were not far from my station.

"Gee," I said, afraid I'd have to sit through another tale from the old man, "my stop is up ahead and I have to get off. I should get my coat and –"

"He was a very quiet boy," said Daniel, who didn't acknowledge my mild disinterest in hearing one more story. "A few of the students thought he might be a deaf-mute and tried sign language to communicate with him." He gave a quiet laugh.

"And he married well?" I said, trying to move the story along.

"He had a rather curious relationship with his French teacher," he continued.

"Curious?" I said.

"She was quite young," Daniel said. "He asked her to his Senior Prom. Of course, she refused, but helped find him a date."

"Why did you say 'curious,'" I asked.

"Well, you know ... he loved her," he said.

"When I was fifteen," I said, "I was in love with a woman on my paper route who made great meat balls, but I never thought it was all that 'curious.'"

"They met after school in her classroom for extra lessons," said Daniel. "She was French and very pretty. So sweet and so very friendly.

"But if he couldn't speak –" I said.

"Oh, he could write," said Daniel. "He sometimes did so in his classes."

"And after school?" I said.

Daniel looked at me and smiled. "Ah hah," he said with mischief in his voice. "The boy asked her for *lessons*, and he didn't mean the French language."

"I hope she refused," I said.

"No," said Daniel, "she didn't. There was more going on than most of the students realized."

The conductor announced my station. I had to leave, but Daniel had captured my attention.

"So what happened?" I asked as I gathered up my newspaper, magazine and umbrella.

"Yes, well what do you think happened?" said an almost leering Daniel.

"I don't know," I replied, tired of this game.

"The boy won the door prize at the Prom," the old fellow continued without answering his own question. "As he walked to the microphone to claim his prize,

everyone was embarrassed for him and they wondered what a person who couldn't speak would possibly have to say."

"Not much, probably," I said.

"But for the first time in anyone's memory, he piped up and spoke! Everyone said he had a warm and deep voice, and sounded just like the actor, Charles Boyer. Every girl in the gym immediately fell in love with him."

"Wait a minute, Daniel," I said. "Charles Boyer had a French accent."

"That's right!" said Daniel. "She had been teaching him English."

"Oh, c'mon," I said.

Daniel laughed at my reaction. "He was a war orphan from France. Just learning English. That's what he asked her to teach him after school."

"But someone in the school must have –" I began.

Daniel interrupted and rushed on with his story. "When he spoke into the mike that night, he became an immediate hit with the young women at school."

The lights of my station came into view and I reached up for my coat on the overhead rack. I had taken it off because the train was so warm.

"The young man ended his senior year in a blaze of romance and glory," Daniel said. "His entire high school social life took place after the night of the Senior Prom, from May 18 to June 22, 1947. Movies and cokes and milkshakes with 34 girls in our senior class."

I laughed at yet another tall story.

"OK, I said, "But wasn't he in love with –"

"*You* try refusing 34 girls," said Daniel.

I smiled. The train slowed almost to a stop.

"Please tell me he married the great love of his young life, his French teacher," I said. I held my coat and umbrella, ready to hop off the train.

"His *English* teacher, as it turned out," he said. "But no, she wouldn't have him. Instead she married the principal of the school."

"Well, that ruins a good story," I said.

Daniel's smile faltered.

"OK, sorry," I said, "what happened to the boy? And when did he meet the heiress?"

"He had no money," said Daniel, "but a college scholarship took him to New Hampshire where he met and married the daughter of a lumber merchant who was as rich as Croesus."

"As a consolation prize," I said, "money isn't all bad."

"Money can be a terrible consolation," he said.

The conductor called out the name of my station, the city of Hudson. I stood up and stepped into the

aisle. I turned to say goodbye to Daniel. He stood and gathered up his newspaper and a small valise.

"You're getting off here?" I said.

"Juliette is here," he said.

We stepped off the train on to the platform as a brisk wind blew up from the river, my damp shirt chilling me after the warm interior of the railroad car. So many years ago a cold breeze often caused the girl to pull herself closer to me. She would whisper in a husky voice, "Keep me warm," and I'd reach my arm around her and sweep her to me.

With the few passengers leaving the train, Daniel and I walked down the platform and through the station out to the small apron of sidewalk. We stopped at the edge of a circular driveway and were soon alone as the others got in their cars and headed home to their firesides. My impatience to do the same had evaporated. I was concerned for Daniel and wondered if at his advanced age he was senile and roaming around the countryside following people home.

"I live a few miles from here," I said. "Do you live here in Hudson?"

"Not in a long time," he said.

We stood like two gentlemen waiting for our carriage. I wondered if Juliette was the French teacher and if she really lived here with the man she married, if he was still alive.

"I can see the city has changed dramatically over the years," Daniel said, as he gazed up the hill at a mixture of new and old buildings, their faces lit by streetlights in the downtown area.

"It probably didn't look like much in 1947," I said, wondering how he would respond.

"It was a far better sight than the bombed out buildings on the Rue St. Pierre," he said.

"Are you the French orphan?" I asked.

"Mon Dieu, vous es un bon détective!," he said.

"Your English has no accent," I said, but I now realized why his speech had sounded a bit odd. "Not easy to rid myself of it," he said with a chuckle. "It was a hit with the girls in my class, but a handicap when doing serious business in this country."

"I guess Juliette is late," I said.

"Juliette is not coming," he said. "I'm the one who is late."

As he spoke, a black limousine bounced into the circle from the street and pulled up in front of us. A middle aged man in a white shirt and black tie jumped out and came around to us on the passenger side of the car. I thought he might ask us the way to the nearest hotel or nearby town.

"May I offer you a ride?" Daniel said, surprising me.

"Are you Mister Droulette?" the driver said to the

empty space between Daniel and myself.

Daniel indicated the rear door with a slight wave of his hand and the man quickly stepped to open it. I moved out of the way.

"I have my car here," I said, "but thank you."

The old man carefully folded himself into the back seat of the limo and put a frail hand out to stop the driver from closing the door. He looked up at me.

"I lost my heiress three years ago," he said. "It was not a happy marriage for either of us."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"And Juliette," he continued. "Now I've lost the opportunity to speak with her one last time. I always meant to call or write her. Her funeral is here tomorrow."

"I'm very sorry," I said. I felt awful for him.

"Neither of the loves in my life worked out very well," Daniel continued. "Perhaps I should have looked for someone who laughed at my jokes. She would be a treasure."

Daniel smiled up at me and nodded to the driver. The man closed the door. The limo carried Daniel off to the funeral of a woman to whom he could never again speak of his love. A funeral can be a regrettable end to an unfinished conversation.

I turned from the driveway and found a public telephone in the station.

"I saw the mountains," I said into the phone.

"Across the river ..."

She said nothing.

"I can meet you at the restaurant you like in the village," I said.

I heard her breathe, nothing more.

"When did we stop sitting together on the same side of the booth?" I asked.

She began to cry.

"I still want us to spend the rest of our lives together," I said. "I want to keep you warm."

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