

Train Rhythms

by Foster Trecost

He pierced the aisle looking left and right until he found a seat he liked. Soon after, they were moving. Train rhythms seduced his thoughts and lured him to long ago. He closed his eyes...

"Jeremy!" said his mother, loud enough for all to hear. "We were so worried."

"But I told you I wanted to sit up here," he said. "I told you when we were walking down the stairs."

"Come on," she said. "We're in a compartment. And your father wants to talk to you."

They passed through a few cars lined with seats, then entered into a skinny corridor that contained the compartments. "Son, why must you worry your mother?" His father sat facing where he had been. He wore a dark suit and smoked a long-stem pipe. His hair was slicked back with a high shine.

Jeremy continued his argument: "But I told her..."

His father looked at his mother, who nodded. "It's still not wise to stray," he said.

Focusing on his feet, Jeremy asked if he could leave. When his father said yes, he rounded the corner and ran. He did not know where they were going, but he knew why: it was because of his dad.

When he reached the forward car, he slowed and studied the floor. He spotted the gum wrapper and thought, "X marks the spot." He wanted the same seat and dropped the wrapper so he could find it. Undeterred by a man sitting in the aisle, he scooped his way past to reclaim his spot by the window.

After a short while, the stranger spoke: "Where you going, kid?"

Jeremy knew not to talk to strangers, and considering he did not know the answer, he kept quiet.

"It's okay," said the stranger. "My name's Klevenger. John Klevenger. Me, I'm heading up to Boston. Business trip. Sales."

Jeremy had heard his parents mention Boston. "Is that where we're going?"

"Well, I don't know about you," said Klevenger, "but that's where I'm going. Great city, Boston. You traveling by yourself?"

Jeremy shook his head. "My parents are in a cabin."

"The cabins are nice. Why you sitting up here?"

Jeremy knew why, but offered only this: "Because of my dad."

"I wish I could sit with my dad. He's been gone a long time."

Jeremy faced the stranger. "My dad's sick," he said. "They think I don't know, but I heard them talking."

"Oh," said Klevenger. "Well, you must be going to Boston for a doctor. They got real good doctors up there. Real good."

Jeremy shrugged.

"My dad went without warning," said Klevenger. "But if I knew he was going to die, I mean if someone had told me before, I'd have spent every minute right by his side. Every single minute."

Jeremy thought about his dad. "But he doesn't look the same." Jeremy paused, realizing something he knew all along, but never admitted: "He scares me."

The train reached cruising speed and gently swayed as it made its way north. The whistle announced progress in short bursts.

"Kid, let me tell you," said Klevenger, "your dad, he's scared, too. Maybe what he needs is for you to be sitting with him."

Jeremy asked an unexpected question. "What happens when we die?"

"Oh," said Klevenger. "Well, that depends. Some people, they go to a very good place. And some go to a very bad place. And some don't go anywhere. Just depends on what you believe."

"Where do you think my dad will go?"

“Well kid, it's hard to say, but I think anybody with a nice boy like you can't be all that bad. I'm sure your dad will go to the good place.”

“Is that where your dad is?”

“My dad? He's definitely in the good place.”

“Maybe when my dad gets there, he'll find your dad and they can talk about us like we're talking about them.”

“Maybe so, kid,” said Klevenger. He was about to say something else, but realized there was nothing else to say.

“Excuse me, but I'm going sit with my dad.”

Klevenger smiled. “I think that's a good idea.”

At the compartment, he slid the door. “Can I come in?”

A broad smile formed on his father's face. “Of course you can. Come sit next to your old man.”

Jeremy protested. “You're not old.”

“No, but I may as well be. You know, your dad's sick. Real sick”

“I know, dad. I know you're sick. But you're gonna go to the good place. And when you get there, a man will be looking for you. Don't worry, he's a good stranger. It's okay to talk to him. His name is Mr. Klevenger.”

Jeremy's father was unsure what his son was saying, but saw no need for questions. The three sat together and Jeremy wished with all his might he could make up for the lost time.

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The train slowed to a stop and Jeremy watched the other passengers stand. It had become crowded and everyone was in a hurry to exit. He looked back toward the rear of the car, almost as if he expected someone in particular to appear. No one did. He faced forward and his eyes were drawn to a gum wrapper. “X marks the spot,” he thought with a nostalgic smile.

“Mr. Littleton,” said the conductor, “is everything okay?”

“Just fine, young man.”

“You've been quiet. Something on your mind?”

“Just thinking.”

“About anything important?”

“Yes,” he said. “About things very important.”

“Well, you know how it is when you pull out late. You spend the rest of the run trying to make up for it. This is your stop, right?”

Jeremy gave a final glance toward the rear of the car. He was all too familiar with making up for lost time. And knew all too well that no matter how hard one tried, it could not be done. “Yes, I believe it is.”

