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Train Talk

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I was standing on the platform waiting for the train to pull into the station. I had just given up on the crossword puzzle and I had nothing else to read. Half-consciously, I allowed my eyes to wander across the sea of faces. I watched as strangers maneuvered into a haphazard queue so as to board the train quickly in the hopes of finding a seat.

We glanced at each other at precisely the same moment. Somehow, we recognized each other, but I couldn't place her and I thought no more of it as the 7:03 pulled in. It was late, I was tired, and all I wanted to do was board the train. But to my surprise, the lady sat down next to me and she began to speak as soon as the doors closed.

"Are you Jeffrey Miller?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied sheepishly, but I admitted that I couldn't remember her name.

"I'm Ellen Goldstein, Suzie Wiener's friend."

Ellen's name jogged no memories, but Suzie Weiner's certainly did. Suzie and I were in ninth grade together, some twenty-five years ago. We dated a couple of times in eleventh and twelfth grades, but it was no more than a friendship really. We took in a movie, went bowling and ate some ice cream. I didn't even have the nerve to kiss her, although I wanted to. Ellen told me that Suzie is still in touch with some of her high school friends.

Even though I didn't remember her, Ellen and I spent a few minutes catching up. I told her that I had been a congregational rabbi for about a decade but had left the pulpit a few years ago to practice law. She told me about her work as a bank executive and about her three kids. I told her about my son and my wife of nearly twenty years.

After a few minutes of light conversation, Ellen paused, bit her lip, and blurted out, "My husband died of cancer a year ago." She turned her eyes away from me as she spoke, and I could see the sorrow in her face. I glanced down at her hands, which were quivering.

Then she spoke to me again, and it was as if she was speaking to the closest of friends.

"How will I ever find someone to love me again, someone who won't be frightened by a woman with three small children?"

Her words caught me off guard. They erupted like a volcano inside my head, unleashing a chaotic stream of memories. My thoughts shifted to my own mother. My father died in 1970, leaving a thirty-nine year old widow with three kids, ages fourteen, twelve, and nine. I was the nine-year-old. With the help of her own mother and siblings, my mother patched together an existence which included caring for her kids, working full time, and attending night school. I was far too young to appreciate either her loss or the continuous sacrifices she made just to keep us afloat.

I told Ellen about my mother. "I'm sure she must have felt much like you do now."

There was so much more I wanted to say but I only had three stops left. I desperately wanted Ellen to believe that her loneliness and guilt would end in time. I wanted to convince her that she would find someone who would love her and her kids, as my mother had.

"My mother eventually remarried," I said. "She was married for twenty-eight years before my stepfather died."

I started to tell her that my childhood was more like "Step by Step" than the "Brady Bunch" or "Yours, Mine & Ours." There are problems in merging two separate families under one roof. Conflicts and tensions abound because the renewed commitment to rebuild a home is often overshadowed by the sense of loss and compromise that everyone in the house feels. This was especially true of me. My stepfather just couldn't measure up to my ever-fading memories of my father. I felt cheated. I was angry.

Then I let Ellen in on a lesson that I learned from my mother one day.

"I was sixteen years old and having a difficult time accepting my stepfather's imperfections. My mother told me, patiently and lovingly, that only an extraordinarily good human being would not be scared off by a woman with three small children."

I looked directly at Ellen.

"But such people do exist," I continued. "I know they do. My stepfather opened his life completely to my mother, and to her children, and to her family. Even to my deceased father's family. And to the day he died he never complained about any of it."

We were nearing the stop where I would have to get off the train, but I still had more to tell Ellen.

"After telling me that about my stepfather," I said, "my mom gently informed me, with a wry smile I never noticed before, that my own father wasn't quite perfect either. That really helped me accept my stepfather. It took a while but I gained a deep affection for my stepfather. I felt honored to be able to recite the *Kaddish* for him when he died recently."

Ellen was nodding her head as I continued. "That lesson from my mother has stayed with me throughout my life. It gives me strength whenever I get sad or angry or frustrated. She found someone to love her. Things worked out. And her kids were fine, too."

As the train pulled into the station, I wrote my home number on the back of one of my business cards and gave it to Ellen. As I did so, I realized that at heart I am still very much a rabbi, despite the fact that I now carry business cards proclaiming me to be an Attorney at Law.

I don't know if I accomplished much between 7:03 and 7:24 p.m. that evening. But I hope I gave Ellen some small bit of hope that she would be able to build a new life for herself and her children.

I walked down the steps of the station, finding comfort once more in my mother's strength and wisdom, and the kindness of my stepfather, of Blessed Memory. *mc*