

The Train

Clark sat in his grey and white repair truck and watched the train roll by. There was nothing that he could do. Well there was, and he considered the same situation a million times in his life. He could drive down Miller's Road that ran alongside the train tracks, up into the hills and come back down by Shady Creek. That would take 15 minutes. And it was just possible that the train would have passed there and he could continue onto his next call, still about 25 minutes late. Or, he could drive all that way and the train would have passed in just a few minutes right here if he had waited. Some folks feel lucky and make the run and some get worn smooth like a rock in a river and just wait. Clark felt that he had waited on that train for most of his life.

He climbed down from his truck with his thermos in hand and walked up front. Way up ahead, the sound of the train's horn stretched like a long swath of lonesome, well before it reached Forrest's Crossing. Leaning his blue jean butt on the bumper of his truck, he watched the cars rush by with a sharp clickety clack, the air full of diesel fumes and a sway. The passenger cars had a few people who stared at him with vacant eyes. He smiled at them only because they weren't smiling. Maybe they will think some middle aged country boy was the happiest guy on earth. Twisting the thermos cup open, Clark reflected, they would be wrong. His mind drifted back about thirty years.

"Mary, now hush. You know I'll take you even if I get called into work." Clark sat in a plain wooden chair on the porch of his gabled two story home, looking down into the creek bed that marked the left side of his land. He didn't notice that one of his cows had ambled down to get a drink. All of his focus was on the other end of his cordless phone.

"I know. I know. I just want to be sure," Mary said.

"Well, I took a vacation day and even if there's an emergency, I can still take you."

"But, my father's funeral..."

"That was different Mary. I didn't have a vacation day and," he paused to consider the impact of his next words, "well, it wouldn't have been a problem if he had been my father in law."

"Clark, let's not go into that. Missionary work is something that I've wanted to do my whole life. I want to make a difference, Clark." Mary had no idea how much that hurt him but she could sense a pullback. "I want to help somebody that needs help. Surely you know how that is. With the volunteer fire department."

"That's different. That's here. Not half way around the world with people you don't know and can't even understand. Besides, I thought that's why you became a nurse. I figured you'd work at the hospital. I always thought we'd put off our wedding until you graduated and became a nurse. And you are. You're a damn good nurse."

"Oh, we talked about this. You know I wanted to do this." Her voice rose and a flush warmed her cheeks. "You've known me all your life."

Close to that long. He still remembered her smile and her auburn pigtailed in Mrs. Fletcher's second grade class. "I thought you'd go for a month, maybe a little more." But he was fibbing. He knew she wanted more than that. He just wished she'd stay.

"Oh you knew better."

"Mary," he started.

"It's just a year. That's all it is. Besides we put off our wedding when you got called in to help with the tornadoes."

"I couldn't do anything about the tornadoes. You know that. We had to go where the company sent us. Besides, I don't want to talk about it again. I don't think I can. It's as much as I can do just to let you go."

"Now wait just a minute." Her voice bit into his ear. "It's not about letting people do things or holding onto people or holding back..." Mary continued, still in a huff.

He didn't want her angry so he broke in. "No, Mary, it's not. I agree. You're right. I didn't mean it that way." Clark held the phone up to his ear but his head was down. "So what's your plan? How are you getting there?" He knew the answer already. He just wanted to talk about something that didn't hurt so much. He was losing her again.

"You're going to drive me to Washington and I take the train to St Louis. A plane to New York. Meet the church group. Fly to Paris. Then another flight to Cairo. Then go south."

It was too far for Clark to comprehend.

A few days after the phone call, Clark picked her up just like he had said he would. Through the winding hills, he tried to make small talk. He didn't dare talk about how much she meant to him. It would be too hard to drive with tears in his eyes.

"You got everything?"

"Yes."

"You gave me your address."

"As much as I know. If you mail something, I'll get it." Mary held his right hand. "If you lose the address, my mom or the pastor will know."

"Ok." He waited, and then said, "I'll check in on your mom."

"Jim's there."

"Jim?"

"I know. I know. He's not a man yet. Not really. But I got to do this. If I don't do this now, I'll never do it." She nervously ran her hand over his. "Thank you."

Coming down out of the hills, Clark caught sight of the river and knew that the station wasn't far away.

"I love you." He squeezed her hand.

"I love you, too." She squeezed back and laid her head on his shoulder for a second.

"Write me, will you?"

"You know I will."

"I wish," he started to say but he didn't have the heart to continue. He changed subjects. "I got called in again. Tree took down a transformer."

"From the storm?" She said it less as a question.

"Yeah, I got to go back." They had already checked the bags and Clark grabbed Mary with a hug. "I'd go with you as far as St. Louis if I could."

"Oh Clark."

"I would have too. Here's my ticket."

She snatched it from him and hit him with it. "You wasted your money." She sniffled, "it wouldn't have made it any easier" and wiped at a tear on her cheek.

"No, it wouldn't but it would have been that much less that I'd have to wait for you to come back."

As the train passed him, now thirty years later, he had watched many another go by just the same.

Before the car behind him could honk the horn, Clark hurried into the cab of his truck and drove across the tracks.

For a long while, he had heard from Mary though she never came home. He'd get letters and homemade birthday cards and even a phone call once in a while. He read her letters several times over although every correspondence hurt, just as deep and just as much as she had been his reason for living. She was making a difference. She went wherever they asked her to go. The Sudan, Kenya, Somalia, back to Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, The Congo, and, the last time he had heard, Zimbabwe. Each country, each town, each mission outreach needed her skills. With a plea for forgiveness in her letters, she stayed. She couldn't turn them down. She had been so many places and knew so many languages Clark wondered if she remembered English. She switched mission sponsors depending upon their need and their financing. His heart ached when she signed his letters with a kiss. She had long ago quit telling Clark that he shouldn't

wait for her because she knew him as well as he knew her. She accepted his gift to wait as a treasure.

But then, he hadn't had a letter in almost three years. He couldn't understand what happened. Jim had gotten a very few, quick, scratch and run letters from her and she'd add, 'tell Clark, love' but almost nothing else. She was 'busy' and 'unable to stop' and 'these people are crushed'. He didn't know what she meant.

From all appearances, he handled it well. But the neighbors didn't see the bitter tears before the fireplace or the time he turned the ATV over in the creek, drunk as a teen age pole cat. Scratched and bruised from the rocks, he crawled up onto the gravel bank and sobbed. He wanted to make a difference too. He had wanted a wife and then kids and that dream was long gone. The only woman he ever loved was sitting cross legged before a bonfire singing God knew what songs to who knew what gods.

Clark retired from the electric company and settled in at home, raising a few more cattle, chickens and growing a vegetable garden. The first part of most summer nights was spent on the porch, re-reading her letters, listening to a ballgame, and wondering what might have been. Winter nights were spent before a fire with a book and a dream. He tried to stay busy during the day with the farm and as a volunteer fireman. He also helped out at the hospital. He made new friends and even met some women but he could never forget.

Mary's mother fell seriously ill. In desperation, Jimmy tried to call his sister through the missions but was told one vague thing after another. He didn't trust them. He could hear the indecision in their voices. He left messages with every missionary effort that he knew and then he called Clark for help.

Clark called the last group, the Christian African Outreach Mission. They didn't have any information on-hand about her but he did learn that, months ago, Mary had been with them. She had moved onto another group that had asked for her. A surgical nursing position was very difficult to fill and they tended to move where the surgeries were needed and supplies were available.

"You can imagine the horrors of a civil war."

"She's in the middle of a war?" Clark lunged forward in his living room chair unable to breathe. His mind raced. He was unable to believe that Mary was dodging bullets in the middle of a war somewhere while he could hear the evening locusts just begin to trill.

"No, no. But she is on the run, caring for the refugees. There are hundreds of amputees. And there's worse, you know."

Clark didn't know the horrors of war but, as an EMT assistant with the fire department, he knew about highway fatalities. He couldn't imagine going from body to body to body. Now he understood why she didn't write.

"I don't want to scare you and I won't but I want you to know how much she is needed."

"Yeah, I realize that," he said with his stomach wedged in his throat. A tear welled in the corner of his eye. He struggled to think beyond himself, "but her mother is very ill and she may not have long to live."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But it could take a while to find her. It just depends on where the next camp is located. Give me a couple, three weeks."

After he hung up, he leaned back into his chair and wondered what kind of world she fell into.

The mission called back and had located her but had no quick way to contact her.

"Short wave is the best we can do and we have no control over that. We had to pass on a message about her mother. I'm sure she'll call whenever she can."

"Yes, thank you. We appreciate it." Clark hung up. He didn't tell them that her mother had died. If they couldn't connect her directly, he thought it was best for her to talk with her brother when she called.

Jimmy and Clark arranged the funeral. A small group of friends attended the service and the burial. Jimmy laid a daisy on his mother's grave and cried. Clark put his arm around Jimmy. He had hoped that Mary would call or show but she never came.

A couple of days after the funeral, Clark did something he had wanted to do since the day he had dropped her off. He wanted to follow her, at least part of the way. He arose early and drove to Washington. Up and over the same hills that he had driven years before. As he drove down the last hill, before the river, he caught sight of the Amtrak station. Washington boasted a new red-brick, green trimmed building with waiting room facilities. There were a few people scattered across the chairs and Clark sat beside a young man, dressed in a dark blue suit, light blue tie and Sunday patent leathers.

"Going far?" Clark asked to pass the time.

"Just to work." The man shifted to his right and dug into his briefcase.

"To work? Where? St Louis?" Clark marveled. If so, things had really changed.

"Yeah, sure. Excuse me." The man began to work on a laptop.

"Of course. Sorry." Clark walked over to a window that looked out on the tracks. The day was clear and the weather mild. He went outside and sat on a bench. Across the tracks, the river slowly rolled by. Same old river, different folks. He checked his watch. Another 10 minutes, at least.

He heard the train long before he could see it. He had no bags, no itinerary. He waited. The people inside grabbed their bags and hurried out. Clark sat until the train stopped and the attendant dropped the stairs. The others climbed and Clark boarded last. He didn't need another look around.

Clark sat at a window and watched the trees whisk by with every click of track. He tried to turn his head to focus on just one before he snapped back to try again. There were a lot more houses and towns than he remembered from driving out this way years before. There were more roads and crossings and over passes. They arrived in St Louis before he could really get settled. He wondered if that had been the same for Mary. Did things happen before she really knew how or why?

He climbed down from the train when they had stopped at Union Station and on an impulse, bought a ticket to New York City. Except for the nightmare of the tornadoes in another state, he had never been as far as St Louis and here he was, buying tickets for the Big Apple like he was going to a movie. He knew from TV what to expect. Everybody knew. A ton of people, crime, Broadway shows, murder, immigrants, pick pockets. He ate in the club car and, too excited for his sleeper, he slept in a passenger car next to a window. The train kept filling up with people as they pushed further and further east. He didn't have long to wait until people with strange accents surrounded him. Somewhere between Philadelphia and New York, he realized that he was a stranger in a stranger land.

With the stealth of a kid sneaking back into his room after being out all night, the train pulled into New York's Grand Central Station. Stiff from 24 hours on a modified roller coaster, Clark ascended the station's stairs to the sights and sounds of an everyday 42nd Street play - hawkers, gawkers and walkers everywhere! He jumped back from the honk of a taxi as if it had been the horn of a rhinoceros. He fell between a light post and a mailbox and held on. He leaned as far back as he could and tried to see the top of the buildings just to get his bearings. He walked down Fifth Avenue and marveled at the glass shop windows, cafeterias, news shops, street vendors and he even looked for minstrel monkeys. Tempted for breakfast, Clark bought a dog in a bun from a cart and ate it in 3 bites. He bought another.

"Hungry?"

"No. Clark," he said as a joke.

The vendor just nodded. "Kraut this time?"

"Sure."

"Ketchup, mustard?"

"Yeah," Clark paid him as he was handed the dog. "Say? Do you know where the Empire State building is?"

The vendor laughed. "You're kidding, right?"

Clark's face twisted like an unfinished puzzle.

With another laugh, the vendor walked 2 steps and patted the side of a building.

"You're kidding," Clark's eyes flew as wide as a heron in flight as his head tilted back. "Really?"

"Really," the vendor walked back to his cart, "Fifth and 34th. Where you from?"

Before Clark could answer, and he didn't know how he was going to answer, the vendor was serving others. Clark walked on. Men in dresses, women in suits, dogs in sweats with headphones. Hookers and jumpers and painted people, blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians and Indians in native dress and in business wear, with noises and smells all around. In the middle of the chaos, he realized that no one said hello. Then he tried to say hello but found it impossible. "Hello. Hello. Hi, hi, hi," he said as fast as he could and he still couldn't greet half the people that walked by him. He felt like Groucho Marx with a cigar. He finally quit when he saw a cop.

He hailed a cab and asked to see the Statue of Liberty. He figured that, if Mary had flown out of New York, then that might have been the last thing she would have seen. The cabbie dropped him off on Madison. Clark had never seen anything as beautiful as the green Lady Liberty. Proud with the patina of the ages. He watched the planes from Newark International fly over her and tried to imagine Mary flying overhead, years ago. She had found her freedom and was using it to save lives in the rages of war. He thought he was beginning to understand.

Jostled by a street gang blaring Eminem and playing grab ass, he suddenly knew he didn't belong there. Mary was gone. He couldn't stay in New York City. Hell, he thought, he didn't even have a change of clothes. He had to go home. He hailed a taxi for Grand Central and, with a sigh, left Mary way over the ocean, far from the torch. He didn't want to leave her and he never wanted her to leave. But at least he knew why.

With a ticket in hand for St Louis, Clark climbed aboard the train and crashed next to a window. He didn't wake up until Indiana and, with vacant eyes but a head full of New York, he stared out along the fields and railroad crossings.

Clark bought a box lunch from a porter and munched on his sandwich and his thoughts. It was a wide, wide world. He

pulled out a pickle and laughed. Life could be just like that - sour and green but crisp, fresh and tangy.

He decided to stretch his legs. There were a lot fewer people on the way home than on the way out. He squeezed by a fat lady and continued forward. When he reached the front car, all he saw was a black kid sitting next to a straw hat - his momma, Clark thought. He leaned down, looked out the window once more and walked back to his car. Bone tired again, he sat all the way into St Louis. His eyes wouldn't close but they wouldn't stay open either. He bought his ticket to Washington and dozed until they arrived. He got up and stretched. Having spent over 48 hours in the same clothes, Clark climbed down from the train as his body begged for a shower.

The black kid stepped down from the front car and Clark shifted his feet to avoid him. Then he noticed a white woman in a straw hat climbing down. She seemed familiar. The black kid, Clark saw, was missing the lower half of his right arm.

"Dakka, wait," the woman said though Dakka wasn't going anywhere. He was in Clark's way. "We're home." She took a deep breath and repeated, "Thank God, we're home."

The woman took off her hat and Clark noticed that she had shoulder length grey hair under a bright blue bandana. She wore a calico shirt and blue jeans. She was bent over a suitcase. She didn't look up but Clark didn't pass either. He stopped. He couldn't believe the transition he had from a stranger to someone vaguely familiar to "Mary?"

"Clark? Clark!" Mary almost shrieked. "Oh my! It's you, it's really you," and she grabbed him. He grabbed her and held her close.

"Mary, how?"

"They told me about my mom and I hurried as fast as I could."

"She's," Clark started.

"I know Clark. I called Jim. I know, I am so sorry."

"Jimmy held up well. He's all grown up, Mary."

They stood apart and held both hands like the beginning of a slow dance.

"So have you Clark. I can't believe it. The one person I wanted most to see."

"Me too." Clark beamed. "Mary," he said in disbelief.

"I've got so much to tell you. But it's so good to be home. Finally." She dropped one of her hands, turned her head and said, "Now here's someone I want you to meet. Dakka, this is Clark. The man I told you about. Say hello."

Dakka was maybe 13, 14 years old and awkward but he held out his left hand, and said "hello, sir," with a shy smile. Clark just then saw the scar along the side of the kid's face

and the missing lower lobe from his right ear. He wondered what other scars he had. Scars deep inside. Sometimes those scars hurt worse than the ones outside.

"Clark, this is Dakka, Dakarai, my son." She put her hand on Dakka's back. "He lost his entire family when he was ten." She ran her hand across the top of his back.

At that Clark knew she had been healing Dakka for a long time and she was willing to wait - just as he had been willing to wait. The thoughts of the loneliness through the years, the long train ride and she was right there with him, the sights and sounds of New York where the world exploded for him, how much more was the shock of the whole wide world for Mary. The horrors of wars way over there, the changes in life that come on like a shock, her bottomless ability to give of herself, the freedom to love, her belief that people were worth waiting for, came to him in a flash and overwhelmed him. He felt that he had been small, so small in his life. Always waiting. But he realized, he did love. Deep down, he did love and that was freedom too. With tears in his eyes, Clark took the young man's hand and with his other hand grabbed Dakka at the shoulder and said, "Welcome home."