

Lisa Freeman

Running for the Train

For years I have lived in a home that backs up to our towns small train station. Even though there is a small expanse of open land between my back yard and the train tracks, some say that my house is poorly situated. They say that the loud train whistles would drive them batty. But the sounds of the trains don't bother me. In fact, I have come to depend on them to keep me on schedule.

Around 10 am every weekday, a train races through the station giving two long whistles. This signifies that it is time to get going to the market. At 3pm, another whistle reminds me to get the boys from school. The whistle at 5:15 means that if the roast isn't in the oven yet, dinner will be late.

But it is the morning train, the 7:56 to be precise, that actually brings me enjoyment. Starting at around 7:45, through the large glass window in the kitchen door to my home, I can see men and women dressed in smart business attire, assembling on the platform outside the station. I watch them greet one another with a casual raise of their drive-thru coffee cups while I stand there giving the dishes I washed the previous evening a final drying with a dishtowel. I think about their morning routines so different from my own. How exciting it must be to travel downtown every day. How thrilled they must be to see the beauty of each little town they pass on their way to work. I somberly realize that although only a grassy field and thin metal train tracks separate us physically, we are worlds apart.

The real draw of the early morning train comes just as the train rounds the bend from the left and the screech of brakes announces its arrival. I tilt my ear to the window and listen intently. I wait for the sound of a car door slam and then watch for a man in a dark overcoat to come charging over the hill from the parking lot with a thermos of coffee in one hand and a briefcase in the other. He races to the platform at breakneck speed and I crane my neck to watch him run until the parked train blocks him from my view.

Then I wait. The train pulls away from the platform and I always think I will see the man left standing there, but he always makes it in time. Every day the train leaves the station and not a single soul is left standing on the platform. Some days I am certain I will see him there. The train is already beginning to pull away before I hear his car door slam and yet he still makes it.

I wonder why he is late every day. It upsets me that he is always late and suffers no consequences. I strive so hard to be on time and it seems like every time I am late there is some sort of penalty to pay. I try to tell myself that after the man's sprint up the hill, his shirt is probably not very fresh. I remind myself that before he started carrying his coffee in a thermos there were at least a handful of times he dropped his cup on the ground, and his coffee was left there, pooling on the sidewalk. There was also that time when he took a nasty spill. It looked like he had been severely injured but he popped right up, dusted himself off and continued his charge for the moving train, and made it in time.

Shaking my head and softly laughing I reach for another plate as I hear the whistle announcing the start of today's race. I hurriedly walk back to the door watching and listening for any sign of the man, and see and hear nothing. I scan the somewhat familiar faces and attire on the platform as the train slows to a stop, blocking the platform from my view. Moments pass and the train begins to move. Then I hear it—a car door. I catch the slightest glimpse of him rounding the corner with only a briefcase. Perhaps he was just too late for coffee or mistakenly left it in the car. He disappears behind the train that is now quickly clicking away from the station. I count the cars as they go by, four, five, six, and then I see him.

My hands clad with dish and towel pump triumphantly into the air. Yes! Finally, he missed the train. But the grin falls quickly from my face as I witness his dejected posture. Even across the small grassy field, I feel his despair as his head hangs low. My arms descend slowly to my sides and I set the plate and towel down on the table not taking my eyes away from him. He sinks onto the bench next to the station, and rests his elbows on his knees. His head falls forward and a wave of sadness echoes through me. I watch as he sits up, pulls his phone out of his pocket and makes a brief call.

I expect him to get up and leave but he continues to sit and I continue to stare. After several minutes pass, I pry myself away from the door. I stand at the kitchen sink for a few moments before I grab a mug from the cabinet, fill it with coffee, and walk out the door.