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## Two Tickets for the Cured Variety

by

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The old ticket master watched as the woman approached his window carrying an infant-sized bundle in her arms, wrapped meticulously in a white baby blanket. Crocheted teddy bears of white thread roamed across the fabric. The woman was fairly young, and it was evident that she was at one time very beautiful. It could be seen, even at a distance, that time had treated her poorly. The most damning evidence of this was her hair. It was mostly white, with vibrant, shimmering tips as black as India ink. It was as if one day she woke up, and the machinations which previously grew her hair black had stopped working. A woman her age with that color of hair revealed something, and a thoughtful onlooker would be apt to wonder what ghosts in her past had taken such a visible toll on her presence. Nevertheless, if she had sorrows she never made them known, and her bright, bubbly demeanor showed only the bliss of a young mother.

The old ticket booth attendant smiled at the young woman, who smiled back.

“Two tickets, please. One for myself, and one for my beautiful baby boy” she said, looking adoringly at the bundle in her arms.

“Two tickets miss. Have a nice trip” he said, handing her the tickets, but charging only for one. His assistant noticed this straying of procedure, but said nothing. He was new to the job, and thought that maybe there was some stipulation in the rules about charging a ticket for young children.

The next customer who approached the ticket window was an elderly woman, holding the hand of a little girl about the height of her waist.

“Do children ride at a discounted rate, sir?” she asked of the attendant, signaling to her granddaughter.

“Sorry ma’am, same rate for all” he said, ringing the old woman up for two.

“Perfectly all right my boy, just thought I’d inquire” she said, as she took the tickets and led the little girl to the train. “Thank you anyways.” A wave of nostalgia washed over him at the thought of being called “boy” by the old woman. He was nearly seventy, and the woman was obviously much older—old enough, apparently, to refer to him as “boy.”

The assistant now turned to the old ticket booth master, passing a look of judgment over him.

“You look confused, my boy” he said to the assistant. “Do you have a question?”

The assistant, careful not to seem critical of the old man’s obvious preferential treatment toward the young woman and her baby, worded his question carefully:

“I don’t mean to intrude, but I couldn’t help but notice that you gave the young woman with the baby two tickets for the price of one, while you gave the old woman with the little girl no such deal. Should I be giving infants free tickets? Because I hadn’t known that I should, and I admit I haven’t been doing so.”

“Oh, it’s a sad thing, my boy. A very sad thing. I’d much rather not talk about it; it’s just dreadful. You’re right to ask; I do give that particular woman a free ticket, but only her. Do us both a favor and don’t bother yourself with this thing. It’s best to leave that situation unsung.” At that, he gave his assistant a look that beseeched no further questioning and returned to his business. And the assistant, now more curious than ever, returned to his.

A week passed without any sign of the woman and her child, and the assistant did not bring the subject up again, though he had been thinking of ways to discreetly approach the subject. An opportunity came in the form of a slightly enlarged prostate, which caused the old man to visit the lavatory more frequently. As it happened the old ticket master left his post to visit the bathroom just before the young woman and her baby arrived to purchase their train tickets.

“Two tickets” she said. “One for me, and one for my beautiful baby boy.”

“Certainly, ma’am. Two tickets” said the assistant. Then, motioning toward her bundle, said “mind if I take a look at the handsome little man?”

And the woman, who heretofore wore a bright, cheery demeanor, took on a face indicating that she was appalled, as if the assistant had been too forward with her.

“Oh, no, sir. The baby is sleeping; it wouldn’t do if I were to wake him.”

“But couldn’t you just lift the blanket from his face, just for a moment, just so I could see your beautiful little baby?” he said, motioning toward the bundle from behind the ticket booth. The woman took a step back. The sudden appearance of the old ticket master broke the stand-off:

“Frederick, are you making a nuisance of yourself?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“No, no!” the woman exclaimed. “We were just having a conversation. But I have to go now or I’ll miss the train. Goodbye!”

The ticket master readied himself to unleash on his assistant, but before he could get any words out Frederick stopped him.

“Sir” he said, “I merely asked if I could take a look at her baby. I meant no harm. I didn’t question her about her—her troubles.”

The ticket master felt the nervousness emanating from his poor assistant, obviously fearful for his job, and let his steam fizzle out. He took a moment and let out a long sigh, noting the naiveté of his young worker.

“Boy” he said, “’tis not my job to raise you, though lord knows you need raisin’. And since you can’t seem to mind your own business, and since I piqued your curiosity about that woman, which is entirely my fault, I might as well tell you. But boy” he said, flashing him a stern eye, “what I tell you here, you repeat to nobody, never. It’s just the way it has to be, and you’ll know why when you’re no longer a foolish little child. You hear what I’m saying to you?”

The boy nodded, and the old man went on:

“The woman you see carrying around that bundle is the saddest poor bugger that you’d ever know. It’s a damn shame too, not the least because she’s so young and, well, had the ‘semblance of bein’ easy on the eyes. She’s only got a shadow of it now, you see, but not a year before she was the full spectacle, and not a man’d walk by without takin’ a peek. Didn’t matter though, ‘cause she was married, and her husband was such in love with her, and a handsome and well-to-do cuss as he was, that no man stood a chance of gettin’ between ‘em.”

As he spoke, he opened the cash register and took a count of the business for the day.

“Well, the two of ‘em used to come here every Sunday, takin’ the train to church. A few months went by and she was really startin’ to show, and then I didn’t see either of ‘em for about a month. Then they started comin’ again, this time with their new baby. Boy, I ain’t kiddin’ you when I say that it was a fine lookin’ little boy, and you’d have to be one cold hearted cuss not to feel soft for this new family, in all their happiness. You could see how much they loved that kid just by standin’ around ‘em. Well, to get to the point, when the kid was no more’n three months old, the young mother tripped on a curb while carrying the baby and fell on her stomach, crushing the kid. She blamed herself; and, as it were, the husband blamed her as well. He said he didn’t want a woman who was so careless with his son that she’d let him die in her arms, and he left. And so this poor wretched woman, dealing with the burden of killing her newborn baby, also had to deal with losing her beloved husband because of it—and had to do it alone, blaming herself for it all. I don’t know how she didn’t kill herself; Lord knows I wouldn’t be able to take it. But, she figured out how to manage her grief somehow, and now she acts like it never even happened. I guess whatever helps her function in life again is a God-send. Lord knows the poor woman’s had more than her share of heartache.”

“And what of the bundle she carries around, then?” Frederick asked.

The old ticket booth master turned and met his eye for a moment before turning back to the cash. “It’s a log of cured lunchmeat, my boy. Salami, I should think.”