Don’t Let Your Kids Play on Train Tracks

My mother’s eyes were staring at the windshield where a gruesome scene was playing itself out. In front of me, traffic moved on normally, but in her mind she saw a boy cut in half. Her eyes were dull and full of pain. Then she started the story that she hadn’t thought of in years.

We were in the middle of Logan Square. My mom plopped down in the passenger seat with two extra-large pizza boxes in her arms. She had a brilliant look in her eye as she pointed in the direction I needed to go. Her hair was thick and deep brown as it always was. She had a tall stature that brought eyes to her when she walked into the room. She has a truly beautiful mind. She tapped the box with her fingers as I pulled off of the curb; her brown eyes sparkled in the fading light as a slight smile, that was always there, sat on her face.

“Take a right on to Lawrence. It’s a couple blocks down,” she motioned with her head in the direction of the street. The radio was low in the background playing some pop song both me and my mom hated. I turned it down lower and put on my signal to switch lanes; there was a bus stopped to pick up a crowd of people half block down. The ignorant person next to me was in my blind spot and wasn’t letting me in.

“C’mon, guy!” I honked and gestured at him to hurry up. He sped forward enough for me to change lanes. The neighborhood was up and coming and everything around us looked brand new with clean brick and bright paint. The condominiums were newly renovated and taken care of. Hipsters walked around with Starbucks in their hands as they passed newer looking cars. We passed a deli that was boarded up. The windows were covered with plywood and the letters of the neon signs were hanging off of their hooks while others were missing.

“Wow, I can’t believe that place closed down. It was there for almost forty years. I remember going there when I was younger,” she twisted in her seat to glance back. I hit a pothole and swore loudly while she screamed. I let out a laugh and a smile crawled its way on to my face.

“Don’t make fun of me!” She laughed and threw her head back.

The wide smile slowly faded from her face. We went under a viaduct that had train tracks running over it. My mom glanced up as we passed under the train tracks flanked by rusting fences. Her eyes faded to a distant stare; the tracks pushed a powerful memory to the forefront of her mind.

She pointed at the decrepit tracks with a long finger that had a darker looking nail polish on her perfect nails. “We used to hangout up there.”

“Wait, you guys used to hang out on railroad tracks? Are you serious?” I gave her a sideways glance as my hand reached for the turn signal. The familiar electronic clicking sound came through the dash. She said something so incredibly shocking that my mind didn’t comprehend it.

“What?” I shook my head incredulously.

“Yeah, I was eighteen. He was, I think, nine at the time. That train track was never fenced off like it is now,” she pushed her nail into the pizza box as the words came to her. The sun was slowly sinking on the horizon behind us; an orange hue engulfed the streets that my car hustled through. “Danny and his friends were playing on the tracks when they saw the train coming. Danny got tripped up and his jacket got caught under a track.”

I was in the middle of my right turn when a kid on a bicycle came rushing into the street. I slammed on the breaks and shoved my hand in the center of the steering wheel. “Get the hell out of the way you stupid kid!” He didn’t look back; he just kept pedaling to the other side of the street with his butt in the air and his oversized shirt flapping in the cool breeze of the Chicago weather. “He didn’t even look to see if anyone was coming! What a dipshit.” I shook my head again.

“Danny didn’t think to take his jacket off or just stand up and rip it out. He was just panicking because, you know, panic sets in when you’re stuck somewhere,” she was making circles on top of the pizza box with her finger now. “The train couldn’t stop in time. It was braking severely, and the horn blared loudly. I remember hearing it from my house when I was in my bedroom. We lived just down there,” she pointed down a side street that had cars lined up on either side leaving a very thin thoroughfare for cars. The street was wide and pot holes plagued the concrete. The houses that flanked the decrepit street were rundown and old. “We lived in an apartment back then. I was in my room when I heard the horn blast.”

I shook my head. I stepped on the brake as a yellow light calmly shifted to red. People began to cross the street in the white lines in front of my hood.

“Danny’s friends ran through the backyard. They were yelling and screaming and being normal loud kids. I leaned my head out the window to tell them to knock it off. I feel so bad for doing that now. I didn’t know, I thought they were being the obnoxious little brats that they always were.” It was as if my mom was trying to justify herself to me, but I completely understood where she was coming from. Her eyes were still lost in the distance while she watched the memory on the windshield. “Danny’s mom’s name was Naomi. They were a Mexican family and they lived beneath us and another Spanish speaking family was across the street in a big house. I think it was for all the kids and family members they had living there. They were such nice people.” She shifted around in her seat anxiously, readjusting the pizza box.

“The kids told Naomi what had happened and she went screaming from the house.” The light turned green and I sped off down the street. “I remember it being such a nice day out. My mom was out on the front porch watching my father as he did the garden work. He loved doing that stuff, he’d get dirty and grimy and he just smiled as he wiped away the sweat with his gloved hand. The Spanish speaking neighbors across the street were out as well when Naomi busted out of the house. She was screaming in Spanish- turn at the next street,” she pointed with her finger at a street up the road.

The sun sank lower on the ridge and the beautiful day was about to turn into a starry night. The city was beautiful during twilight; the buildings were a burnt orange color and each car was illuminated with the brilliant glare of the sun.

“The neighbors across the street yelled at my mom, ‘Follow her! Something’s wrong!’ My mom burst from her seat and trailed Naomi the whole way there with the neighbor on the other side of the block. They were at a dead sprint toward the train tracks. By the time they got there the police were already on the scene. Take the ramp on the left.” I slowed to a stop and waited at the light just before the ramp.

“My mom got there just as Naomi did. I remember when my mom told me about what had happened. Her eyes were swollen and red from the crying. I was only eighteen when it happened and you know it just didn’t affect me like it should have. I was a teen who thought that she had the whole world figured out. When Naomi got there Danny was,” the light turned green and I turned on to the on ramp of 90. My mom stopped and swallowed hard.

“Danny was cut in half when Naomi got there,” mom started again. Her face was still blank.

“What? Like cut in half as in like a clean cut like you would cut a steak?” I laughed it off as if she was kidding. She nodded gravely.

“Cut right down the middle. Vertically. Cut in half,” she motioned with her hand down the center of her body. “Naomi tried putting Danny back together with her own hands. She grabbed both pieces of her son and tried shoving them back together.” She shook her head while her eyes watered. My heartbeat quickened; Danny was on the windshield. He blocked my view of the open highway before me. “She tried putting her own son back together. Jesus.” She shook her head violently.

“I can’t even imagine that. That would be horrific.” But in my mind, I did. I saw Danny lying on either side of the track. But what I saw wasn’t an actual child; it was someone in two pieces with blood splattering the ground around him with his eyes poking out of his flattened head. A child in half; a child no more. The vision had seared an image in my mind and left a sick feeling in my stomach.

“The police told my mom to get her out of there. She stripped Naomi from her son. She was still trying to put him back together. Naomi’s screams deafened the neighborhood as they made their way back. I remember hearing her screams from the house.” I shifted lanes and turned off the cruise control. I was almost at my exit and I didn’t want to be caught with my pants down.

“Nobody spoke the rest of the day. You could have heard a pin drop in the neighborhood. No one made a sound; no one was out playing or gardening. The rest of the day was reserved for mourning,” she was still watching it all unfold on the windshield. Her eyes were glossed over and her right hand was touching her face. The pizza box’s lid sat slightly open on her lap. “Naomi kept Danny’s room just as it was. Never touched it ever again.” She spoke surely and in soft tones.

The car was silent as it glided into the driveway. I put the car in park and her glossy eyes finally came back to the sparkle they once had. She sighed and got out of the car.

“The train conductor committed suicide a year later.”

“How did you find that out?” I closed my door and walked with her up to the concrete front steps. It was almost completely dark out now. The stars were slowly coming into view and the moon was making its appearance for the night.

“People running for office would go door to door. They would want to know the gossip and the news. Danny’s story came about and the guy running for office told my mom about the conductor.” We were standing on the front porch now. We had an unspoken agreement to finish the story before we went in the house. My mom shifted awkwardly. “He started drinking heavily because he *saw* the kid get hit. He saw him cut in half and he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. So he got drunk one night and ate a shotgun blast.”

I pushed my key into the lock. We both hesitated as we entered; another unspoken agreement to put smiles on our faces. My mom swung the door open, “Pizza is here!” She said it with a vibrant smile. I trailed her into the house and into a home full of loving smiles and jokes with Danny’s story painting the walls.