

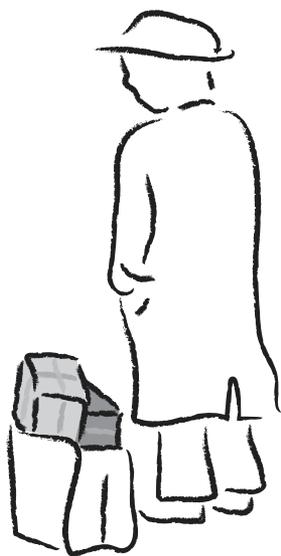
Missing the Last Train:
A Christmas Tale



Kent M. Keith

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Missing the Last Train: A Christmas Tale by Kent M. Keith

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To Roger Jellinek and Eden-Lee Murray
with thanks



It was the last train, and he missed it.

He stood on the open platform, watching the red tail lights of the train rushing away from him into the night.

He clenched his fists.

Christmas Eve, and he had missed the last train home.

I shouldn't have tried to finish that last report. How could I be so stupid?

The kids would wake up early and rush to the Christmas tree. Their presents wouldn't be there. They were in the bag by his side on the dark empty platform.

I've been missing a lot of trains, lately. I'm just not getting it right any more. Not at home, not at work, not anywhere. What happened to me?

As he stood in the cold wind in front of the train station, he became aware of someone standing nearby.

He turned and saw an old man in a uniform.

“Can I help you?” the old man said.

“Not unless you have another train up your sleeve.”

“Sorry.”

“Yeah.”

The wind sharpened. The man in the uniform didn’t go away. “Cold out here.”

“Yeah.”

“My office is over there. I’ve got some hot chocolate, if you’d like,” the old man said.

“That won’t get me home.”

“No.”

Another cold gust.

“Okay. Thanks. No point in freezing out here.”

*Stuck at a train station on Christmas Eve. This is pathetic!
I can’t believe it.*

He picked up his bag and followed the old man into the office. There was barely enough space for a desk and two chairs.

This isn’t an office, this is a phone booth!

The old man pulled out a rickety old swivel chair.

“It’s a small office, but it’s big enough for at least one visitor,” he said. “Have a seat.”

The traveler sat down.

“So— I guess you’re disappointed you missed the last train.”

“You got that right.”

“Want me to call a cab?”

“No. If I went to a hotel, I’d only be there a few hours before I would have to catch another cab right back here again. No, I might as well stay here until the next train.”
The milk train special.

“Well, you’re welcome to stay.”

The traveler checked his watch and sighed.

“Yeah. Thanks. I’ll do that.” *Just what I deserve. Sitting up all night in a tiny, cold office at a train station.*

The traveler looked around. The walls were covered with train schedules, calendars, reminder notes, and Christmas cards.

Well, I suppose it could be worse. I could be an old man like him, doing the night shift on Christmas Eve.

The old man was looking out the window toward the tracks.

The traveler sighed, “Tough luck, you pulling this shift, huh?”

“Beg your pardon?”

“Working Christmas Eve has got to be the worst shift of the year.”

“Actually, it’s my favorite,” the old man said. “Rest of the year I work during the day. This is the only time I work the night shift.”

The traveler shrugged. *Strange old man.*

He lifted his bag of presents onto his lap and looked at them. They were beautifully wrapped in reds and blues and greens. They were from all the right stores.

“Presents for your kids?”

“Yeah.” *Waiting in those miserable lines, and spending all that money...and now the presents won’t be under the tree when the kids wake up.*

The old man put the kettle on the hotplate to boil some water.

“You know, there’s just one thing I don’t like about Christmas,” the old man said. “The frenzy. People full of stress instead of joy.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s pretty much that way all year round for me. Why should Christmas be any different?”

“That’s too bad.”

“What?”

“That you’re always so stressed.”

“Well, it comes with the territory.”

“What territory?”

“My job. My career. Providing for my family. All that stuff.”

“You don’t seem very happy.”

What’s happy? I don’t know anyone who’s really happy. We’re just going through the motions. Pretending. What are we pretending? I don’t even know, anymore.

The traveler put his bag of presents on the floor. He wanted to stretch his legs, but there wasn’t enough room.

“I remember wanting to be happy. I even tried to find ‘the secret of life.’” He chuckled.

Find the secret of life? That was a long time ago! Now I can’t even make it to the train on time.

The old man turned off the hotplate and poured the boiling water into two cups with cocoa powder.

“So... did you ever find it?”

“Find what?”

“The secret of life.”

“Nah...” *Stopped looking, actually. Don't know why.*

“I'd be happy to tell you what it is.”

“What?”

“The secret of life.”

The traveler stifled a snort.

Right. The night manager at a small train station, working alone in an office barely bigger than a phone booth, and he's got the secret of life.

The old man frowned. “You want to know or not?”

The traveler was silent. He looked down at his hands.

The old man handed him the cup of hot chocolate.

“Here, you sip your chocolate, and I'll tell you the secret of life.”

The traveler shrugged and carefully sipped the sweet hot liquid. Its warmth spread throughout his body.

I remember those Christmases when I was a child. We used to gather around the table to drink our hot cocoa and talk and laugh and... just enjoy being together.

He looked up, and saw the old man standing, waiting,

sipping his own hot cocoa.

“Okay. So go ahead...tell me the secret. We’ve got a night to kill.”

The old man sat down.

“It’s simple: The secret of life is not a secret. The answers to the most important questions are all around you. If you don’t see them, you just have to stop, step back, and look more deeply.”

The traveler swiveled in his chair. He looked at the old man and laughed.

Everybody’s a guru!

“Look, I think I’ve heard enough philosophical mumbo-jumbo to last me a lifetime. How about being a little more specific?”

“Okay. You’re stressed out because you’re focused on the wrong things. You’ve lost touch with the things that are really meaningful in life.”

“How do you know that?” *A pretty bold statement from someone who just met me.*

The old man smiled. “Observation.”

The old man was watching me? On the train platform?

“So... how do you propose that I get back in touch with

those meaningful things—whatever they are?

“Start with the Four Rules.

“The Four Rules?”

“The Four Rules for finding personal meaning and deep happiness. They’re really basic.”

“Okay...so what are these really basic Four Rules?”

“Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“All right, here they are: Love people. Help people. Do what’s right. Enjoy things without owning them.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. There are lots of other good rules out there, but these four are the best place to start.”

The traveler just looked at him.

“I know,” the old man said. “It sounds too simple to be true. But you know, all the great truths are simple, aren’t they? And that’s good news. It means that each of us can understand them.”

“So, how do people learn these four rules?”

“Usually, they learn them the hard way. They learn them

by going after lots of other things—things that people say will make them happy, but don't."

"Like what?"

"Like power. Wealth. Fame. Winning."

"What's wrong with those things?"

"Well, they aren't necessarily bad, they just aren't *enough*. They don't give people the deep happiness that they are searching for."

The traveler frowned. *Deep happiness...*

"What is 'deep happiness?'" he asked.

"Some folks call it self-fulfillment. Others say it's about living your passion or following your bliss. For many it's about finding God's will for your life. Whatever people call it, I'm thinking of the kind of happiness that touches your spirit. Something that connects with your soul."

The old man waited, but the traveler was silent.

That's what I was looking for—once. Something that touched my spirit and connected with my soul.

The old man watched as the traveler shifted in his chair.

"You want to know more?"

The traveler nodded.

“Good. Let me tell you a little about each of the rules. First, love people. People all over the world have learned that love gives them the greatest meaning in life.”

“What kind of love?”

“All kinds of love. The love between couples. The love between parents and children, brothers and sisters, and friends. The love between the faithful and their God.”

“Why do you think that’s so important?”

“I think it’s why we were created: To give and receive love.”

A shadow crossed the traveler’s face.

“But it doesn’t always work out very well,” the traveler said. “You know that. Love can lead to a lot of pain and sorrow.”

“Sure. But it can also lead to incredible joy.”

“It’s risky.”

“Of course love is risky. But the way I see it, emptiness is worse than pain and sorrow. A life of love is never empty. It is full to overflowing.”

He’s right. I remember when I fell in love with my wife...I remember when our first child was born...I love my family. Why don’t I spend more time with them?

The old man looked out across the tracks again, as if he expected something to appear. He turned back to the traveler.

“The second rule is, help people. It follows from the first rule. When you love people, you want to help them.”

“That’s a good thing,” the traveler said. “People certainly need help.”

“Yes, we *all* need help. We all need friendship. Advice. Support. We also need to give. Giving brings purpose and meaning to our lives.”

“You know, my uncle used to tell me that whenever I felt discouraged, I should go and help someone, and that would make me feel better. It always did.”

“Yes, it always does.”

So why don't I spend more time helping people? Even a few people...

“Okay...number three?”

“Do what’s right. This follows from the first two rules. When you love and help people, you want to treat them right.”

“I suppose.”

“Now, most of us know to treat people right. But just *knowing* is not enough. We have to *do* it.”

“For example?”

“Do good, and avoid harming others. Be honest and fair. Be generous. Be kind to strangers. Respect all life.”

“Well, I guess we could argue about ethics all night.”

“Actually, people around the world pretty much agree about how we should treat each other.”

“How would you know?”

“I travel.”

“So?”

“People everywhere know that they should not lie, or steal, or murder. People everywhere understand the golden rule. They agree that it is right to be faithful to your family and friends. It is right to take care of your children when they are young, and your parents when they are old. It is right to care for those who cannot take care of themselves.”

“But when we do what’s right, what does it get us?”

“When you do what’s right, your life is more meaningful. You stand taller. You have what people call moral energy. You are clear-minded. You sleep better.”

That sounds good—maybe too good to be true.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. It’s hard to be deeply happy if you aren’t living ethically. And hard to look at yourself in the mirror.”

He’s right. That mirror thing is definitely a problem.

“Tell me about the fourth rule.”

“The fourth rule is to enjoy things without owning them. It follows from the first three rules. If you love people, and help people, and treat people right, you are more focused on people than on things.”

“I suppose.”

“It’s no good being focused on things, because if you crave things, if you’re obsessed with owning them, you’ll never be deeply happy. You’ll always want more. And more. And more! You have to learn to treasure things without owning them.”

“And just how do you do that?”

“You start by enjoying the little things that are all around you. The taste of that hot chocolate, for example. A comfortable pair of shoes. Flames dancing in the fireplace. A beautiful song on the radio.”

The traveler looked at the bright colors of the wrapping paper and the ribbons on the Christmas presents in his bag.

“And then enjoy big things. The stately columns of a grand old home. The dramatic colors in a striking

mural. The windows of the office building reflecting the afternoon sun. The sleek lines of a sailing ship.”

“And then?”

“Enjoy the things that nobody can own. White clouds. Green mountains. The smell of a pine forest. The sound of the waves rolling up on the beach. The brilliant yellow and pink of a sunset. The melody of an unseen bird. You can’t own them. You can only enjoy them.”

“It’s been a while since I took the time to enjoy any of that stuff.”

“I know. You should. There are gifts all around you. You just have to notice them.”

The traveler smiled.

“I remember that my grandmother used to say: ‘Some things are so beautiful they can’t be owned, they can only be shared.’”

“She was right.”

Yes, she was right about a lot of things. Things I haven’t thought about for a long, long time. She used to say that real wealth was just knowing how to enjoy the richness of daily life—family, friends, hobbies, sunsets.

“So, now you know the Four Rules. The secret’s yours.”

“But I’ve heard these rules before. They aren’t new.”

“You’re right. They aren’t new. I learned them from the greatest teacher of all time. In fact, we’ll be celebrating his birthday in a few hours. Christmas is a good day to remember what he taught us about how to live. It’s a good day for new hope...a fresh start.”

The traveler nodded. “So he taught us two thousand years ago, and people have been trying to live these rules ever since.”

“Uh-huh. If you look carefully, you’ll see many people living them every day. They’re people you’ll want to know better.”

The traveler sat back and crossed his arms.

“But if the secret of life is not a secret, and the answers are all around you, why aren’t more people deeply happy?”

The old man looked into his empty cup and sighed.

“There are no secrets, but there are challenges. The great truths are simple, but living them isn’t easy, is it?”

“No.”

“Living the Four Rules takes courage. And focus. And passion. You can’t worry too much about what other people think of you.”

“What do you mean, what other people think of you?”

“You can’t worry about being successful in the eyes of others. You have to remind yourself each day that power, wealth, fame, and winning are fine, but they aren’t where you will find the most meaning in your life. The meaning comes from loving and helping others, doing what’s right, and enjoying things without owning them.”

The traveler sat quietly. *Funny. When I started out in life, I knew that. I wasn’t caught up with “success.” I just wanted to make a difference with my life. I just wanted to be the real me. I wonder...do I have the courage to live that way now?*

“It’s hard. But the truth is, no matter what the world does to you, you can live by the Four Rules and be deeply happy.”

The old man shook his head slowly. “What’s sad is how many people settle for less along the way, and give up doing what they know is right and good and true.”

The traveler looked down at his hands. *That’s me, all right. I’ve settled for less. I’ve settled for a lot less. Why? When did I give up? When did it happen?*

He sat very still, frowning.

The old man leaned forward.

“Deep happiness is waiting for you. It’s waiting for each one of us. And we know where to find it.”

“Yes,” the traveler said almost in a whisper. “You’re right.

We know where to find it. It really isn't a secret."

The traveler took a deep breath. *Maybe it isn't too late... Maybe I can still do something about those dreams I started out with, so many years ago. Maybe I can still be the person I always wanted to be. I'll start with the Four Rules, and then...*

He noticed that he felt lighter, somehow.

He shifted to get more comfortable in the unforgiving chair. Feeling the old man's eyes on him, he looked up into a face of infinite empathy. He found himself smiling.

"Thank you," he said.

The old man smiled back.

"You're welcome. By the way, I have a hunch that if you follow the Four Rules, you won't be missing many more trains."

The traveler nodded, rubbing his eyes. The old man rose.

"Why don't you see if you can get some sleep. The early train is 5:45."

The old man rinsed his cup in the tiny sink, and slipped out the door to the platform as the traveler drifted off to sleep.

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The sun was already rising when he awoke, feeling oddly peaceful.

A man was looking down at him. The word “Conductor” was embroidered on his uniform.

“Sir?”

“Hmmm?”

“I was just wondering how you got into the office,” the conductor said.

“The old man invited me in. The old man on the night shift.”

“Sir, I’ve worked here for thirty years, and we’ve never had a night shift. We close down after the last train at midnight.”

“But he was here. He invited me in and gave me some hot chocolate. He was wearing a uniform.”

“You mean that uniform over there?” the conductor asked.

In the corner, neatly folded, was the uniform the old man had been wearing.

“Yeah, that looks like it.”

“It’s not one of our uniforms,” the conductor said, unfolding it.

That's strange... “Look. An old man in that uniform was working here last night. He gave me hot chocolate. We talked.”

“All right, sir, have it your way,” the conductor said. “The 5:45’s on time this morning...Oh, Merry Christmas!”

The traveler bent over to pick up his bag of presents.

The presents!

They were gone. His peaceful feeling vanished.

“Did you see a department store bag with presents in it?” he asked the conductor.

“No, I didn’t.”

“I had a bag—a big bag full of Christmas presents.”

“Sorry. Sounds to me like you were set up. Probably some guy posed as a station official and was friendly and chatted with you until you fell asleep. Then he took your bag and disappeared.”

So much for a Merry Christmas!

Sagging with disappointment, the traveler started out the door. He fumbled for his cell phone. It was early but his wife and children were probably up already, circling the Christmas tree, looking for the presents.

She picked up the phone immediately.

“Hi, honey,” he said.

“Where are you?” she asked. “Are you okay?”

“I’m still in the city. I missed the last train last night. I stayed at the station. I’ll be catching the train in a few minutes. Honey, I’m really sorry, but I fell asleep and somebody took the presents, so—

“Oh, the kids love them.”

“They what?”

“They love the presents.”

“They love the presents?”

“Yes. They were under the tree when we got up this morning. I thought you had come in really late, and put them there. But we couldn’t find you. We thought maybe you were hiding. You know, playing a game with us or something.”

“No, I’m still in the city.”

“Then how did you...?”

“I didn’t.”

“I guess I don’t understand.”

“I don’t, either. All I know is that I’m catching the next train. Tell everybody that I love them and I’ll be there

real soon.”

He walked slowly toward the platform.

“Do you need a ticket, sir?” the conductor asked.

“No, thanks. I bought one last night. It’s here somewhere.”

He reached into his pocket, searching for the ticket. As he pulled it out, a folded piece of paper came with it.

What’s this?

He opened the piece of paper to find a note. It said:

The Four Rules are the present that I think you need most this Christmas. Live them, and find the deep happiness that awaits you. Share them, and see the happiness they bring others!

Merry Christmas!

Nick

The Four Rules

Love people.

Help people.

Do what's right.

Enjoy things without owning them.

About the Author

Dr. Kent M. Keith is the CEO of the Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership-Asia, based in Singapore. He has been an attorney, state government official, high tech park developer, university president, YMCA executive, and full-time speaker and author. From 2007 to 2012 he served as the Chief Executive Officer of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in Indiana.

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Dr. Keith is known throughout the world as the author of the Paradoxical Commandments, which he first published in 1968 in a booklet for student leaders. More information about Dr. Keith and his work is available at www.kentmkeith.com and www.universalmoralcode.com. Dr. Keith's publications may be ordered through www.paradoxicalcommandments.com and www.toservefirst.com.

