

The End of the Line Kid

Christmas Eve's
Falling snow
Causes horses'
Living breath
Melting flakes
Of transmutation
Into steam

His name was Dave, but everyone called him "The End of the Line Kid," at least when they talked about him. No one talked to him much because he didn't have much to say. Being taciturn was acceptable in a land where and at a time when, so many people were alone for so long. So no one said or thought much about it. He was just "a quiet kid." He lived at the end of the school bus line. Beyond it quite a ways, actually, for there was always a pinto pony picketed in the meadow at the end of the road. And the boy rode the horse some distance, at least to get home.

Evidently, his folks lived beyond the gap and tended toward the Johnsonville side. At least that is what people assumed, since they were seen only a few times a year. The Town had its share of prospectors, trappers, and isolated ranchers, so quite a few people were scarcely seen but assumed to be in the vicinity. The school bus itself was a rickety affair and serviceable perhaps three quarters of the time. The remaining days were covered with a standby buckboard, or sometimes, in the winter, a horse-drawn sleigh.

As the fifteen or so students waited along the twenty mile route, they sometimes tried to outguess the variables of worn machinery and weather to predict what manner of conveyance would pick them up. They were sometimes right and sometimes wrong. One thing was for sure, the End of the Line Kid never missed a day. He got on silently, usually in the same worn buckskin pants and shirt. A horse blanket served as a winter coat and, seemingly out-of-place, a bright, red knitted wool cap signaled cold weather.

He was about twelve, maybe a bit older. There were no grades at Miss Joyce's school. The children read with whomever was at their level. So, eighteen-year-old Cleve Stoner read with ten-year-old Millie Shoemaker. Such nervousness as might have developed over such mismatches was quickly dispelled by the friendly persuasion and hard work of

her classroom.

The Kid was a hard worker himself and about average for his age. His slightly freckled face had a concentrated look as tousled, backwoods hair encroached on its borders from several directions.

School had started in September, and already, after only a few weeks, the first signs of autumn were evident in the few golden patches of cottonwood leaves here and there in the draws and along the river. Up on the mountain there was more intense color. In places, the aspen were already bare where an early freeze had turned the leaves from green to brown and the wind had plucked them from the branches like so many dried insects.

Talk in the valley had it that more placer than ever was coming out of the hills and that spring would sure enough bring another run for the gold. At this, the merchants and saloon owners smiled broadly and made plans for increased business. The ranchers and farmers and plain folks of the community put it out of their minds if they thought about it at all. What would come would come. And then they would make whatever adjustments to their lives were necessary. Miners were a good enough lot, but with them always came a rougher crowd—the parasites lured by fortune, both real and imagined, both earned and taken.

To the children of Miss Joyce's school, all this made little difference. It didn't increase the book learning or interfere with recess. If they thought about it at all, it was in terms of adventure and money, of being done with school and parents and off into the real world.

The Kid sat in the school yard eating lunch. For him it was dried venison and fried cakes. As he ate, he stared off toward the east, toward the aspens on the high flank of the mountain. He sat alone, but soon a girl came to sit by him. "Give me some cake, and I'll talk to you," she said pertly. He silently broke a cake in half and handed one part to her. "I guess that's not fair really," she continued. "But my lunch is all gone."

Another pause began during which he glanced at her. "There wasn't enough."

He handed her a second piece. "How come?"

She looked at him suddenly as though unable to believe he had finally spoken. "Well," she said matter-of-factly, "there's nine of us, so there's not always enough to go around."

"Seems like something's always short," he replied.

"I didn't come to sit by you just for the cakes," she said, a

slight pout showing on her long, narrow face. "But they are good."

"Have as many as you want," he said. "I didn't mean what you think. I meant that some folks are short on one thing and some on another."

"I guess." Her hair was long and black. It hung considerably below her shoulders and was pulled into a single greasy ponytail with a chipped barrette. Her name was Mary, and she and the Kid ate lunch together from then on. By mutual unstated agreement, they did not talk about families. She lived in town and walked the half-mile or so to school. He was the last to arrive each day because the seat left for him, as the last to board the bus, was at the back. So they talked only at noon.

Winter arrived early, as had seemed likely, and with it came the snow and cold. By late October, the sleigh had replaced the bus, and those students who had to ride in it arrived even later for school. Lunch was inside now, with the students sitting in a circle around the pot-bellied stove.

"Everyone's sick at our house," said Mary, breaking the agreement, "except me."

A question suddenly formed in his mind. "How come you're the only one to come to school?"

"Some work—the older ones," she replied. "Some don't want to. I don't want to be poor."

He nodded silently.

Just before Christmas, the Kid stopped coming to school. He had never missed a day, but now he had missed three.

Mary asked Cleve Stoner who drove the sleigh. "Horse hasn't been there so I reckon he's not come down. Sick probably. Lots are."

She pondered all afternoon. At four o'clock she got on the sleigh with the others. An hour later, as the next to last child got off, Stoner turned to her.

"You gonna check on the Kid?"

"Yes."

"I'll show you where he gets on. Don't know how he goes from there. Be a trail more than likely."

"I know," she said.

As the crunching sound of the sleigh grew faint and then ceased, she realized that it was bitterly cold and soon to be dark. She pulled her ragged coat around her more tightly and headed across the meadow. The trail was badly drifted and pocked from the passage of a horse. It headed into the trees

and along a small creek. Far under the ice, she could hear the burbling of the water.

Soon it was near full dark. She continued at a slow, uneven pace. Her feet felt like blocks of wood. After what seemed an hour she came to a clearing. The pinto snorted at her from a corral hard by a small cabin. It looked dark and cold. The need for warmth overcame her sudden fear of whom or what she might find.

Without knocking, she pushed open the door. It seemed pitch black inside, but soon she saw a dim glow from coals in the fireplace. A lantern was on the table. She found a match, removed the chimney, and lit the wick. The Kid lay on a bed in the corner. She could tell that he was sick and that her arrival had awakened him. There was confusion in his eyes.

“You didn’t come,” she said, “so I thought....” She looked around, taking in the scant furnishings and various signs of living. “Where are your folks...you’re alone here?” He nodded. “My folks died last summer.” “But....” “There’s food, and I wanted to go to school. We’ve that in common, the school I mean.” She stood thinking, and suddenly it just spilled out of her. “I’d like to live here,” she said. “There’s too many at my place. I’ll tell my folks I’m helping out your family—it being Christmas and all.”

The End of the Line Kid got very slowly off the bed. “Happens to be the truth, I’d say.” Painfully, he got wood from the pile and started to rebuild the fire.

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