

A Bite of Salt

A train rattled into the dusty town every Sunday morning. The blare from the whistle reached for miles. The bellow of the train delighted Luke, and he loved waking up with the sun on those special days. Luke awoke and pulled his blue jeans up to his waist. He lay on his back across his bed and yanked hard.

Every morning Luke's eyes opened to the squeaky weather vane on the roof above his head. He would look up and scrunch his face at the intrusive sounds. Only on Sundays Luke jumped up when the train's whistle sang.

His room was dark and drab. The weak light reached in through the thin pale yellow curtains. His small mattress sat askew in the middle of the room, its single brown sheet spun into a forest of crevices and wrinkles. Luke stood by the window and gazed into the morning light. A golden glow emanated. The dry rotted fence outside encircled the simple house. His blue eyes peeked through his auburn hair and lay fixated on the aura of the golden radiance. The train whistled again, awaking Luke from his daze. He smiled his little toothy smile. Just like his mother. He heard their voices from the other side of the wall, they were quick and sharp and half whispered. He failed to make out any of the words, but he didn't need to.

Luke's friend Patrick was waking up and preparing for the day too. Patrick lived a mile up the road in a house similar to Luke's. Patrick would be pulling on his boots and fitting his head through the tight neck of his favorite sweater. He wore it everyday and it made him happy to have a favorite thing. Pat was shy and he rubbed his sweater sleeves across his face whenever he felt unsure of himself.

Luke stepped across the mattress and found his shoes strewn about the floor. He reached down and snatched them up and plopped himself back down on the mattress, sliding his dirtied feet in. He yanked on the shoestrings. Luke got up and tiptoed toward the yellowed door. His hand latched around the cool brass handle and twisted.

In the hallway he still heard murmurs coming from the next room over, they were getting a little louder, more discernable. Luke crept past the closed door and into the living room. He stopped and looked behind him to see if they had heard. They did not.

The living room endured a clutter of papers. His father worked at the local print press. It was his pride and joy. Luke's mother hated it. His father stayed up late at night and placed all of the pages out, on the desk, dining table, couch, even over sections of the floor sometimes. His mother screamed at the sight.

Luke unlatched the lock on the front door and turned the handle. The little bell on the door jingled as he opened it enough to squeeze through. Outside the sun shined bright. He took a deep breath and felt his feeble lungs fill with fresh air that cooled his insides. Luke scanned the bleak plains and looked up the road and saw a bicycle in the distance. The three wooden steps creaked as he stepped down. His bike lay on its side in the sand over near the fence, half rusted and topped with a worn seat.

Off in the distance Patrick waved and shouted. His grey sweater rippled all over in the wind. He peddled faster, in love with the manufactured breeze on his pale face. His reddish hair flew around in big strands as he sped toward the dreary house. Luke looked up and smiled and waved high above his head. He ran out to the dirt road and put his hand up to shade his eyes. Patrick was close and Luke could see the green handlebars that he gripped at. He stopped pedaling and coasted up to Luke.

“Hey Luke! You ready to see what we can get our hands on today?”

“Yeah. My stomach is starting to ache. I’m hoping for a good loaf and maybe some stew or something.”

“A nice bread would be good. All I have back home is past stale.”

“Same.” Luke kicked at the rocks under his feet.

“Well, we should be going now. Don’t want to miss our chance.”

“I’m going grab my bike.”

Luke snatched the handlebars and yanked his bicycle up out of the sand. He pulled it toward his body and walked it over into the road. Patrick sat staring off in the direction of the train. A look of desire pasted across his face.

“Ready?”

“Yeah,” Patrick answered.

Luke climbed atop his bike and readjusted himself on the worn seat. His feet flicked the pedals a time or two.

“Want to race?”

“How’s about once we see the tracks?”

“OK.”

The boys started out slow. Off the road a desert plain reached in all directions. A couple trees scattered the land and some horses grazed or stood in paltry shade. The sun pierced through Luke’s thin shirt and warmed his back. Luke and Patrick talked while they rode the mile or so into town. They spoke of school and their blooming interest in girls and of the feeling that life could be better in some places than others.

Luke thought of the beaches of Carolina. He had learned of them in class when the teacher spoke of where she grew up. She talked of their sandy shores and exciting waves. He thought of the Atlantic Ocean and its big and refreshing waters. Luke could almost imagine the beach air. He sometimes felt he tasted the salt in his mouth and when he thought he had it, he would chew on the inside of his cheek. Sometimes he tasted it in class or recess or even at night when he lay in bed trying to shut his eyes.

Patrick rubbed his dark sweater against his face with one hand as he rode. He swerved a little, but steadied himself. He looked over at Luke and saw him chewing on the inside of his left cheek. Patrick sniffled and wiped his nose.

The tires were spinning quicker now and the two boys worked into a stride. There was no one else around and the tires and their voices filled the silence. Some white birds flew overhead. Luke bent his head back and squinted as they flew past. He yelled, "Wrong way," but they disregarded his advice. Pat looked over at him and agreed with a little laugh.

The train tracks came into view. Luke saw its dark shade lay out against the rusted sand.

"Want to race now?"

"Yea."

The boys sat up in their seats and leaned forward.

"Sure you're ready?"

"Sure am."

"OK. 1...2...3 GO."

The two boys broke out into a sprint. Patrick stood up in his seat and peddled hard and fast. Luke sank down low, his frail shoulders shook side to side. The black line of the tracks became less murky and fell into sight. The heat waves that massaged it dissipated. Pat bit down

on his lower lip. The two boys reached a good speed and their hair blew all over in the rushing wind. Luke looked over at Patrick and saw how hard he peddled and he knew that if he stuck by him until they got real close he would have the steam to beat him.

The boys raced by some sparse trees and cacti. The tracks fell into clear sight. The train exhaled black clouds into the pale blue sky and steamed from its mouth. Luke bent down lower in his seat and pushed the pedals harder. Patrick stood tall and rocked side-to-side, falling behind. The tracks were close now. Luke saw the grooves in the black metal and the wooden slats on the sides and a little dusty ramp that led up to it. Luke rode into the slant, catching air as he jumped the tracks to the other side, right before Pat followed. The bicycle wheels slammed down into the hard dirt and the boys each jolted in their seats.

“Woohoo!”

“I almost had you.”

“Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”

“Yea, yea. Let’s put our bikes up over there. Against the post.”

The little race provided a short distraction for them. The boys cycled slow over to the wooden post and jumped off their bikes. Sweat ran down their brows and Luke’s pale shirt stuck to his little chest like tree sap. Patrick waved a sweater sleeve across his forehead and sniffled the snot that reached out of his nose. Luke tied the bicycles with a rope to a thick post near the train station.

“That should do it.”

“You ready to find a loaf or two?”

“Sure am.”

The two boys scampered up stairs to the station landing. Luke pulled at the crotch of his jeans as he climbed the steps. Pat rubbed an arm across his face and sniffled again. The desert or wood or something about the town's air affected him in this way.

“Come on quick, they're coming off.”

The patrons stepped out of the cabins, grizzled men with thick ragged beards and worn hats. They came on the trains in droves to expand the railroad down to the southern corner of the territory. The men all had rough hands and dirtied faces full of sadness or regret or sometimes even a buried hope. Some women, sometimes pretty, sometimes ragged, stepped off the train too.

Luke and Patrick found a spot in the middle of the landing and stood where they could see almost everyone coming off onto the station. Several people stepped around the boys without looking down at their faces and hands. The friends looked up and pleaded for bread or anything that could be given. Pat again wiped his nose with a sleeve.

“Excuse me sir, can you spare some bread or something?”

“Ma'am spare bread?”

“Please, anything?”

“Anyone got anything they can give?”

Many people passed by and some tossed coins down to the boys and others paid them no attention at all. They stared up and saw worn faces that glared into the far distance. A few women in colorful and fitted dresses looked down and gave a half smile as consolation. Steps echoed past all over the wooden floor and it creaked everywhere. Luke stepped right and told Patrick to go left, thinking maybe if they split up people would feel more inclined to spare food or money.

After several minutes of continued pleading, the boys reconvened at the spot in the center of the station. Luke looked dispirited and sulked. He rubbed two coins between his fingers and looked down at his dusty shoes. Luke raised his gaze and found Patrick's eyes. Patrick smiled.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing."

Patrick started to slip something from underneath his dark sweater. The bottom poked out and it looked smooth and round. It gleamed like burnt gold. His smile widened as more of the loaf came out of his clothes.

"Look at this!"

"You actually got one?"

"This nice lady pulled it out from her purse and handed it right down to me."

Luke slapped Patrick on the shoulder and smiled wide. He couldn't believe Patrick got a whole loaf. Normally it was just pieces of the corners of loaves, the tough corners too, that were hard to chew and made their jaws ache.

The station emptied and the boys stood alone in the middle of it. Luke could still smell the musk of the men who stepped off the train, it smelled of dirt and grime and determination. Luke waved, "Come on, let's get back."

"OK. I think we did good today."

"I'd say so," Luke answered, walking toward the bikes at the post.

Pat scurried down the steps after Luke and stuffed the large loaf back up into the folds of his sweater. It sat up against his little chest and he held it like his baby sister, tight and close. As Pat stepped off the last stair he tripped, tumbling forward, and the bread shot from his sweater and toppled into a stagnant dirty puddle. Luke turned, fixated on the loaf sitting afloat in the

grimy water. Its golden edge met the black water with a sharp line. Patrick glanced up and saw. He wiped his nose again and salty tears descended down his puffy cheeks.

Luke walked over to the floating prize. He knelt down on his knees and picked it up from the sides and raised it up above his head to look at the bottom. His face scrunched.

“Ruined.”

Luke exhaled and dropped the bread to the ground. Pat pulled himself up.

“Hey don’t do that, that’s still good. We can use it. We can cut the top half off or, or something.”

Pat walked over and picked up the loaf and wiped off the top and the sides. He wished to salvage it, stamping the bottom of it against his belly several times. The muddy water glistened on his sweater.

“It’s no use. Let’s go.”

“No but, it can be all better. I can make it better. I know I can.”

“I’m tired and if we’re lucky there might be some apples to pick at McLain’s farm.”

Patrick’s arms fell down to his sides. The bread tumbled down to the dusty ground and rolled back into the puddle. It bobbed up and down as the boys turned to walk away.

“I’m sorry.” Pat hung his head and sniffled.

“It’s okay.”

The two boys shuffled over to their bikes and Luke bent down and untied them. The rope felt coarse in his tender hands as he wound it up, put it in his pocket, and patted it away. Luke grabbed his bike and placed his leg over the side, adjusting into the seat again.

The boys did not race over the train tracks this time, but peddled slow and soft, as to not exert too much energy or agitate the ground. The friends were too tired for that now. They

stopped and Luke reached up and snatched a few apples from McLain's tree on the way home. Dark clouds rolled in overhead and sprinkled down a soft rain. Pat looked up and forced a smile and rubbed his nose against his sleeve. The friends arrived at the rotted fence in front of Luke's house.

"I'm awfully sorry Luke."

"It's okay. Better luck next time. See you."

"Bye."

Luke led his bike into the yard and placed it down on its side and walked toward the front steps. He went inside the same way he came out, careful and slow, wishing to avoid the sounds of the little bell attached to the door.

The papers made their way into more organized piles, stacked in high mountains on the dining table. Luke's father sat on the couch in the corner, hovering over a small mound of documents, cigarette hanging loose from his mouth. His low gaze never lifted. Luke plopped a couple apples down on the dining table and tiptoed through the living room. It was quiet in the house except for the noise of clanking dishes in the kitchen. He stepped through the hall and kicked off his shoes in his room and walked over the mattress to the window. He stood there and looked out at the rings of the golden sun through the soft showers. His blue eyes ached in their sockets, but in a way that felt good. After Luke stared for a while he walked back over to the bed on the floor and stepped inside of it. He pulled the brown sheet up over his head, chewed on the inside of his cheek, and tried to rest his eyes.

