

# Enterprise

a story by

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“Golly Moses, Bert!” hollered Eunice Ball as she muscled her rust-streaked Model T flatbed truck across the Santa Fe tracks. “That fool boy’s gonna end up a puddle of mush, runnin’ across this here road like that! He don’t even look up! Ya’ ever seen him look up, Bert?”

What with the blazing sun and Eunice’s driving, Bert wasn’t doing a lot of looking up, herself. Even in the enlightened days of 1929, women didn’t drive much around those parts. Eunice seemed hell-bent on taking up enough space for all the rest of them, though. Folks that knew saw that old truck coming and gave her a wide berth. Bert remembered one spring day, on the section road out there by the Watson place, how some insurance salesman down from Omaha had gone up to his axles in muddy wheat after an encounter with old Eunice. And not that Eunice stopped to give that slicker a hand, no sir! Bert had got a ride with old man Watson back to the spot to check on him, but he’d walked off somewheres by then. Watson had gone ahead and winched him out anyhow, and it was a darn good thing, too, because the weather turned overnight and them wheels woulda froze in good, otherwise.

Bert couldn’t say how she and Eunice got on so, being such an unlikely pair. Eunice was awful crude, cussed like a sailor and got a little ripe on a hot day, where Bert kept quiet, minding her own beeswax and keeping herself busy most days down at the Methodist church. Folks said Eunice spent as much time hauling hooch up outta the Balkans as she did flour from the mill, but Bert made it a point not to know anything about that. ‘Neath all the bluster, Bert knew Eunice to have heart of gold, helping whenever she could at the church she’d never set foot in otherwise, running donated goods out to folks who’d come upon hard times. Just then they were heading on up to the Taylor place with a couple of sacks of corn meal and some lumber after those poor folks got hit bad by the Independence Day twister.

While Eunice walked the truck over the tracks, humming some honkytonk tune she’d picked up in Kansas City or such, Bert turned to watch Billy Carson running along the bottom of the grade, wondering why he didn’t just run up between the rails or on the road, for that matter—the going down there was pretty rough in spots, even baked dry like it was by the August sun.

Clear of the crossing, Eunice gunned the truck's long-abused motor, her tanned forearms set dark as chestnut hides across the wheel and her neck turning left and right, left and right, like an old crow. Always alert, that Eunice, like there wasn't nothing but miles of stubble out there, what with the wheat in and all.

"What the hell is the matter with that boy?" she hollered again. "Any kid might get a little tetched with his kind of troubles, but damn, Bert! Wouldn't you think them Meyers folks coulda got a handle on him by now, fer cryin' out loud!"

Bert just nodded absent-mindedly to Eunice's prattle, her gaze trailing back to where Billy disappeared behind the cloud of dust the old truck was kicking up. The boy didn't seem all that much of a handful to her. Kept to himself a bunch—not unusual, him coming from Mennonite country—though he was always polite enough to the gals at church when he came around for pot luck or a pancake breakfast. Let him run on to the ends of the earth, Bert reckoned—there wasn't anything worth standing around Enterprise for ... good heavens, no!

Billy Carson kept right on running, following the tracks down to the Old Smoky River and crossing the trestle. He turned west at the Rock Island crossing, toward town and the Hoffman Mills, running along the edge of shadows clinging close by the massive grain elevators looming over everything else in Enterprise. Three years since his old man had been buried alive in one of those silos, and still Billy couldn't keep his wind when he run by them. He stopped to pull a red kerchief out of the back pocket of his dusty dungarees and mopped the sweat off his brow and out of his eyes. A few deep breaths later, he started up again, turning for Grant and Third, where the Meyers house squatted dingy and dark even on that unbearably bright sunny day—longtime too weary to beat back the sun or the wind or anything else come pounding 'cross the prairie day and night.

"Bam!" went the screen door behind him.

"William Christopher Carson!" hollered Rosa Meyers from the tiny kitchen, where she was

stirring up a batch of cornbread. “How many times I told you not to slam that screen door? You bust that thing again and the old man’s gonna take it out on you good, you *hear* me?” she warned him, blowing a lock of graying hair off her cheek with an exasperated puff out the side of her mouth.

She maybe heard a “sorry” out of him, but the boy was already up the ladder to his attic room by then. It didn’t matter none—she could only do so much! The child had a wild streak, just like his mother. Rosa remembered when the Carsons had showed up out of Marion County—how you could hear them two fussin’ clear across the stock yards from that little shack of theirs. Beulah Parks had told Rosa once that folks’d seen Connie Carson half-nekkid and chasing Billy’s father with his own Browning army rifle, right down Mill Street in the middle of the night—even getting off a wild shot, though Rosa couldn’t imagine them pretty little hands managing it.

Constance Carson surely was a little thing, and a far sight too pretty for her own good. The gals said she run off from her Mennonite folks down there, but that didn’t explain where she learned to paint herself up like she always done, or where this side of St. Louis she’d got hold of them short flapper dresses she’d wear sometimes, even in the daytime. A real Jezebel, she was, fillin’ god-fearing Enterprise men with sinful thoughts. Why, she’d even been known to join up with them “socials” the men liked to hold for themselves, drinking that devil hootch and singing indecent Army songs right along!

Rosa quit staring out the kitchen window and looked down at what she was doing. “Land sakes!” she cried, seeing herself stirring the cornbread like a madwoman, and no idea how long she’d been at it. Probably come out flatter than a mashed cat, but that served the both of them boys right, getting her upset like they done. Well, she wasn’t gonna to do anything about it now except maybe toss in a little more meal and baking powder and hope it don’t come out too bitter. She checked the coals were caught good and put the pan in the oven. She oughta have her head examined, baking on an afternoon like this! She didn’t even care for cornbread, for heaven’s sakes!

“Lord, it’s hot!” she moaned, taking a glass off the shelf to draw herself some water. Pulling the pick off a hook, she opened the icebox and chipped a couple of shards into the glass. The rough edges of ice immediately began to melt off as Rosa took a little too much time to back her sweaty face out of the cold air and shut the door. She took the glass outside, around to the little strip of shade at the rear of the house, where she kept a small wooden chair and table for herself.

Settling into the chair with a long sigh, she set her drink down and reached underneath for the cookie sheet she’d lately been using for a fan. Holding it edgewise with two hands, she fanned herself, starting with her chest and moving up to her face. It didn’t help none, so she set it back down, grabbed her glass and leaned back slowly, determined not to move one bit more until the timer for the cornbread rang.

Her thoughts wandered back to Constance Carson, if that ever was her name—there wasn’t any reason to believe she’d ever married Billy’s father. Rosa just couldn’t understand how even a wild one like her could run off and leave a ten-year-old boy like she done. Rosa and Hermann had prayed for a youngin so many years and never had been blessed. If Rosa had lost Hermann like that, well, she couldn’t say how she’d get by, but running out on a kid—never in a million years!

And when that trollop had told Billy she’d be back to gather him up when she got settled, well, Rosa hadn’t believed her one bit, but didn’t Hermann agree to take the boy in anyways, even when Rosa knew he’d known better? Didn’t that just mean he’d had his heart set on it, so what could she do? Three years gone by now, and still no one did much talking about any of it.

Upstairs, Billy sat at the desk he’d fashioned from three planks the grocer had let him have, set up on a couple of scrap saw horses. Pinned to a board nailed across the rafters close behind the desk were four months of an Abilene Central Bank calendar, put up there ever since he’d found out that summer’s schedule of the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus. All the dates up to the current one were marked with a big X. He stared at the gap from there to the red circle drawn around

September 25<sup>th</sup>, his focus drifting in and out, willing the space to narrow. Old Zeke that used to work the water tower on the Santa Fe had tipped Billy off about that glorious night when the circus would be loaded on four trains in Emporia, bound for the next night's show in Salina. At Neva, they'd switch off the main line and head north for the Union Pacific. That's when those trains would pass right through Enterprise! They never moved too fast anyway, Zeke told him, on account of the animals and all, but there was a long curve just north of town where the Santa Fe tracks turned west, and those engineers would be takin' extra care along that piece, for sure.

Billy reached under his desk and pulled out a cylinder wrapped in brown paper. After untying the string binding with care, he unrolled the contents on top of his bed. Inside was a section of the *Kansas City Star*. Carefully, Billy turned over the front page, revealing a full page advertisement for the Ringling Brothers Circus on page three, filled with fine detail of clowns and animals and tents and all the rest, but all Billy could see was those four trains charging out at him from an oval drawn right in the middle of the everything.

You saw a lot of trains in Enterprise, no doubt about that. What with the Rock Island and Santa Fe crossing a few blocks away from Billy's house and the Union Pacific passing three miles north of town, not to mention the spur the U.P. run those three miles on down to the Hoffman Mills, there was always something coming or going or passing through. Except in winter, Billy liked to keep his bed over by the little gable window Hermann had cut in for him, listening late at night to the powerful rhythms of pistons chugging under them long, sorrowful whistles. He knew where every one of 'em was at and how fast they were moving. Most times he could tell the engine type just from the sound.

But Billy Carson had never seen nothin' like no circus train, no sir! Maybe his Ma would take him to see a circus someday, once she come back to gather him up, but one thing was surer than sure—he was gonna see all he could of these trains, come hell or high water!

Careful not to drip any sweat down on it, Billy rolled the paper back up, tied the string back

‘round and set the works down careful back under the desk. It was too hot to be up in that attic, so he climbed back down the ladder, hoping Rosa would have something sweet for him. Seeing as she was outside somewhere, he eased on through the screen door gently this time and found her sleeping in the shade out back of the house. Looking at her in that peaceful state, her arms folded across her belly and snoring gently, he felt a little tug on his heart. She wasn’t so bad when she didn’t boss him around like she did, and Hermann wasn’t too tough on him, neither, at least since he’d mostly given up trying to get Billy working down at the mill that had killed his father. For his part, Billy helped out down at the church now and then, even risking life and limb going on deliveries with that crazy Eunice Ball when he had to.

Mostly though, he spent his days off of school out alongside the tracks. Sometimes he’d run, and sometimes he’d work on the path he’d worn down alongside the grade, clearing rocks and filling low spots with a shovel old Hermann still expected to find out in the shed. “*Was zur Hölle!*” old Hermann would holler, tossin’ stuff around something fierce looking for it—never quite giving up. Sometimes Billy would walk on up the spur to the U.P. line, where the trains were bigger and faster. When he was just six—when the ’23 floods on the Platte had washed out the U.P. main line up in Nebraska, he’d scared the wits out his Ma when he hiked the three miles up to Detroit so’s he could spot the Overland Limited pulling hard to make up time for the reroute.

Back in the kitchen to hunt for a treat, he nearly jumped his skin when the little timer rang. When Rosa didn’t come busting in, he figured she didn’t hear it, so he took a peek in the oven. The cornbread that’d been teasing his insides since he come home sprung back from his finger about right, so he took it out and banked down the coals. He knew better to keep his hands out of it, so he reckoned he’d let Rosa snooze just a little bit longer ‘til it cooled a bit, and then he’d wake her up and see if she was in a generous kind of mind.

Billy went back outside to lay in the cool grass back of the shed. Chewing on a blade of grass,

he took a lazy look at the sky—not a single cloud up there that might cool things down a bit. Nothing moving at all, in the sky or anywhere else, ‘cept a freight coming north up the Santa Fe line. What little southern breeze there was carried the sound some—he could hear her blowin’ seven miles off at the crossing in Navarre—the engineers usually gave the whistle a pretty good tug in town. ‘Bout ten minutes and she’d be making the crossing down by the Welander place. She was an old friend—a Baldwin 2200 series 2-6-0, doing about thirty with a good load, so he closed his eyes and listened to her work, nodding off under the hypnotic chug-a-chug.

The days passed slowly. Rosa kept on baking while the hot old sun burned. Bert kept on turning her head while Eunice ran moonshine. Hermann kept on about the gosh-darn mill as Old Zeke filled Billy’s head with railroad stories. Connie Carson kept on keeping away, so Billy kept to the tracks, marking off the days. Seemed so long he didn’t think it would ever happen, but day by day the gap shrunk. Old Zeke had the skinny—no change in the schedule. The billers came through town a week early, pasting flyers on just about everything that wasn’t moving. The U.P. would be running an excursion train for the Salina show—folks could grab it up in Detroit.

Two days before the big event, Billy started getting his camp ready. He’d cut himself a little clearing out of the brush about halfway round the inside of that long curve. The first train—the Flying Squadron—would come through some time after midnight, covering the hundred or so miles from Emporia in about four hours. Billy knew the trains mostly got loaded according to when things were done with, starting with the food wagon, once the five o’clock supper got served for the workers. Next came the sideshow cages, animals and folks not needed once the big show got under way, plus enough draft animals, crew and equipment to begin the unloading and start driving stakes for the tents to follow. Billy had an old surplus pup tent and fire ring ready to go. He’d be there when that unit came through, sure enough. There’d be a quarter moon up—he was hoping for clear skies.

One day out and it looked like rain. Hadn’t rained more than a taxman’s teardrop in about a



month, but the radio was saying it was coming. Never did come, though. Billy tried to get himself some sleep in the afternoon, but it was no good—just too much excitement.

Nine o'clock on the big night, Billy was ready to go set up. He hadn't told Hermann his plans. He reckoned the old man wouldn't approve, so Billy had to wait for him to head for bed. Rosa, though, knew what it all meant to the boy. Quietly, she helped him get ready, packing him some biscuits and even a coffee pot and fixins to help him get through the long night. About quarter to ten, Billy took a hug from Rosa and slipped out the door.

It was a powerful muggy night, dead calm pressing down itchy like a wool blanket you couldn't shake off. Billy crossed the river and continued up Bridge Street. Once free of the trees, he could see the moon starting to come up in the east, but there was a lot of haze—he didn't reckon it was going to be much help. He'd have to build a decent fire to get a good look at the trains passing by, but not so big he'd spook the crew. About a half mile up the road, he cut right and crossed a stubbly field over to the Union Pacific spur, where he turned north another half a mile to the Santa Fe crossing. To the right, about a hundred yards down the tracks, he reached his camp.

As he pulled off the pieces of scrounged-up tarp he'd left covering his firewood stash, a far-off whistle gave his heart a good kick. He knew it had to be too early, but listened close—it might be a Mikado, but she was coming hard from the east on the U.P. line—definitely not a circus special.

Billy built a small fire—just enough to light things up a little, cuz it was still plenty warm. He got the coffee ready to go, but held off on that for later. Except for the crickets and toads, things were pretty quiet, so he rolled up his jacket for a pillow and lay down to listen for what was coming. Excited as he might be, lack of sleep started to catch up with him and he caught himself starting to doze off. Back and forth he went, one moment scared of sleeping through the whole thing and the next knowing there was no way any train was going to sneak by just ten steps away. That battle taking the last bit of energy he had left, he drifted off.

Next thing he heard was a whistle, loud and close. In an instant, he was on his feet. Did he miss anything? The moon was high enough to light things up, so it didn't matter that the fire was long gone cold. He reckoned it wasn't much past two o'clock. Given that a circus train would do the hundred miles from Emporia in something like four hours, it seemed about right. Should be the first section—packed up and rolling even before the big show got done.

The train came around a gentle curve, putting its light right onto Billy's eyes where he stood in the middle of the tracks. She was over the trestle now—Billy could hear the difference in the echoes she sent up and down Big Smokey. The vibration starting up through his feet, he couldn't believe the time had really come! Staring at that light, he began to feel like he couldn't do nothing but stand there and watch her come, but then the engineer gave him a toot, and finally, he stepped off the tracks and fifteen feet or so back.

In less than a minute the huge Mikado, flying the white flags of special trains, was upon him, the fireman giving Billy a friendly wave. Billy couldn't be sure if his legs were trembling more from the excitement or from the earth shaking under those six massive driving wheels. The tender passed, and then Billy watched the red stock cars rolling by, them being in front—old Zeke had told him they did that to help keep the animals from getting jostled when the train took up slack. There were slatted cars where Billy could catch glimpses of horses and maybe zebras and camels and what not. Billy could see the seventy-foot steel flat cars coming next. On the first was the cook wagon, also to be the first off, because the number one order of business in the morning would be to get hundreds of hungry workers breakfast. Had to be the first section! He hadn't missed a thing. The stock cars would be heavy with draft horses to get the unloading going.

Next came the colorful wagons of the sideshow and cages from the menagerie. Billy began to notice shapes under the wagons and even up in the seats. On this hot night, an open air ride was blessed relief for a hard-working roustabout looking to get some sleep. The cages were mostly Ringling

Brothers red and yellow, but festooned with many other amazing shades. Even awash in silver moonlight, the colors leapt out at a person. It gave Billy quite a fright to imagine the terrifying beasts sleeping in those canvas draped wagons. Imagine the train derailing right here in Enterprise, Billy thought, and lions and tigers and who knows what all chasing him through these fields in the middle of the night, hungry for their breakfast!

The cages were something to see, but Billy let out a small sigh of relief when the sleepers started coming by. Not so many of those in this first section—just for those that weren't needed for the big show, and then the Santa Fe caboose came along. Billy could see the conductor sleeping with his head against the window.

Frozen in place, he watched the caboose rattle on off. When the sound settled down some, things got so he might've dreamt the whole thing. The engineer blew the whistle at the UP crossing, and that was that. Except for a squeal of a wheel every now and then, all was crickets and toads once more. It would be a while—the second section would be hauling some of the big show and wouldn't have pulled out until midnight or so. Billy was so kicked up he couldn't sit still, so he took a walk south along the tracks toward town a ways and back before relighting the fire.

Watching sparks dance above the fire, Billy got to thinking about it all. He thought about his Pa, dying like that afore his time. He wondered if his Pa had ever seen a circus, or anything at all 'cept that awful mill and the dusty old streets of Enterprise. No one ever talked about him, not even old Hermann who, near as Billy could tell, had been his only friend. His Ma didn't say boo about him afore she met that slicker and they run off ahead of Billy, and that got him thinking about California. His teacher had brought him back a book about that far-off place from the library in Abilene. It didn't even seem like part of this world. When would he ever see it? What was taking his Ma so long?

He heard a whistle, far off this time but definitely from the south. Billy sat very still, listening to the rumble gathering beneath the relentless measure of the great machine's pistons, his

eyes closed. Not a Mikado this time. This section would be bigger and heavier, and though you could get by on six drivers in flat country, hauling a heavy circus train up this section of track would call for eight. Billy tried to figure what she might be, eyes closed, 'til the locomotive was well across the Big Smoky, and then he got up and moved closer to the tracks to watch her approach.

She was a Baldwin 2-8-4, a new type Billy had heard about but never seen chugging up this crooked old line. Shiny black, the proud engine rumbled past Billy at about twenty-five miles an hour, her crew no doubt less than thrilled to be shuttling this “special” load when they could be highballing some express across the prairie behind this powerful young champion of the rails. Billy couldn't take his eyes off the locomotive until he began to notice a difference in the stock cars that followed. Four of the big cars weren't slatted—they were solid with vents near the top. These were for the elephants, who couldn't abide drafts—so old Zeke had explained. It was hard for Billy to imagine those massive animals packed into those cars.

The flats started rolling by, loaded with baggage wagons and pole wagons from the side tents. People coming out of the big top at the end of the night would be in for a surprise finding most everything else on the lot packed up and gone by then. Even at near four in the morning, that night was plenty warm for Billy, but cooled down enough that there weren't so many folks sleeping out on the flat cars. The sleeper cars on the end of the train looked pretty quiet, too—there were a lot of unloading crew on this section and they had three trains to get to before their next chance at any sleep.

Billy was getting pretty sleepy himself. Halfway through the train, he'd settled back against his roll and watched the red and gold cars rattling by, catching himself nodding off just before the weathered, old Santa Fe caboose trailed the sleepers. It would be a while for the next section—maybe a couple of hours off. Probably a little before dawn.

Billy slept some, dreaming he was riding on top of one of those wagons, heading west through Colorado somewhere, the front range of the Rockies laid out before him. Next thing, he was riding

down the Cajon Pass into San Bernardino, an hour out of Los Angeles, whistle blowing long and hard and Billy singing Al Jolson's "California, Here I Come" at the top of his lungs.

"Hey, kid!" he heard a squeaky voice holler.

Billy opened his eyes, and then opened them a little wider. Sitting right in front of him, stopped dead, was one of Ringling's shiny red, seventy-foot steel flat cars, loaded with baggage wagons. And sitting on the edge of the car, their legs dangling over the side as they faced right at Billy, were a couple of very rough-looking characters and a lady that looked to be about three feet tall!

"Not much of a singer, huh?" the one on the right said to the gal, who let out a raspy little giggle before answering, "Entertainment's a bit lacking out here in God's country, ain't it?" Turning to Billy, she asked, "What's that you're trying to sing, little fella?"

Billy had no idea what she was going on about. He just stared on.

"Don't be shy now. What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?" the man asked, before taking a drink out of something in a bag.

"I'm here to watch the trains," Billy finally told him, getting up slow in case he had to make a run for it.

The man gave him a kind of scrunchy, sideways look before replying, "Is that right? Well, I think you might watch a little harder then, because this train seems to have snuck right up on you!"

The three of them had a pretty good laugh at that, the lady shaking the bag bad enough that the quiet one on the left reached out and grabbed it from her before she could drop it.

Billy started gathering his senses. It was getting light out—the sun not quite up. There was no water stop up here—that was down by the mills. He could hear horses and elephants and some other things he wasn't sure of, but didn't see any animals about. He looked to the right and saw a wagon loaded with sixty foot poles. Section three, he knew from Old Zeke. The big top had to move out ahead of all the stands and what-not going back inside it at the other end. At least he hadn't missed

more than half a train or so.

“Why you stopped?” Billy asked the circus people, whose curiosity over a boy on the side of the Kansas tracks had already begun to dry up.

“Probably Goliath splashing around again,” said the talkative one. “Who knows? Who cares? All I know is I not getting breakfast anytime soon.”

Billy knew Goliath was an elephant seal that travelled in its own car—one of the elephant cars with a water tank built in it. The man must have meant that too much water moving around could derail the car. Billy wanted to see the car and how the railroad people would get it back right, but then, just as he was collecting his stuff, he heard the whistle blow two longs and the train started to take up slack, taking it easy so’s not to shake up the animals too bad.

“Looks like the show’s back on the road,” shouted the man over the clatter, pulling up his legs and stretching out along the car bed. “Don’t get too comfortable, kid,” he warned Billy through a fedora pulled down over his eyes. “The last section is held up just five miles back.”

It was all happening too fast, thought Billy, as he watched the train pick up speed. Quickly then, the rest of the flats passed, and then four coaches, on which a few more show people were catching some breeze at the windows and in the vestibules. Some waved and a few even shouted out after him. The caboose crept bashfully at the rear, unsure of its place coupled to the old Pullmans. Billy watched it round the curve. Already gone.

Not more than a moment later, the whistle from the fourth section blew two blasts, ready to roll and close enough that Billy could hear the pistons’ first thrusts echoing in the still, early morning air. He felt a panic setting in—it was too soon. All happening too fast! Billy turned to the south, where not more than two minutes later the shiny black engine came into view, the two white flags flying ahead of rhythmic, violent bursts of white steam blasting low from either side. The sun was just up in the eastern sky, so Billy crossed over to that side of the tracks to keep the glare out of his eyes.

The locomotive, another new 2-8-4, thundered by, the engineer waving down to an awestruck Billy, who in that light was able to fully appreciate the incredible scale and intricate detail of that amazing machine. As the stock cars began to roll by, Billy started running alongside. A man walked along the top of them—his job was pulling handles that released grain to the animals below, mostly filled with the last of the “baggage stock” charged with loading the show.

Next came the flats, loaded with sections of stands from the big top, a few baggage wagons and anything else needing to go into the big tent after it got set up. The very last wagon on the last flat car was the unit that had lit up the night’s loading operation.

Next came the sleepers, Most of the performers would have been on the third train—these were for the roustabouts needed to finish the fourth load, and very few of them appeared in the windows or at the vestibules—they’d be too bone-tired from the work.

The best nearly saved for last, the private car *Jomar*, named for John and Mable Ringling, rolled by, its bright red paint capped with a silver top. On a varnished wood observation deck at the end, a distinguished looking gentleman sat reading a newspaper. Was it John Ringling himself? It had to be, thought Billy. He tried to shout to the man, but his breath was so shortened with running, he could barely get the sound out. The man never looked up from his paper. To imagine such a life! To travel the country in such luxury, a butler and cook and maid at your disposal!

While the private car was designed to be coupled to the end of a passenger train, this was a working train, so it was followed by the office car. In that would be cash—alfalfa, the agents called it—and guards with guns. That thought slowed Billy just a bit, until the final Santa Fe caboose, so humble and plain to the end of anything so grand, overtook him.

His lungs searing with pain, Billy did the best he could to keep up. A trainman stood at the back rail, a bemused look on his face as he considered the chasing boy. Billy watched it all shrink away. The track lay directly west—toward Salina. Toward Denver. Toward California.

At last, Billy's legs gave out, dropping him to a slide on his stomach, the dry earth and rough ballast at the edge of the roadbed tearing at his skin and clothes. Unable to move and searching for breath, he could barely hear the sound of rolling wheels fading. Far off, it seemed, the whistle blew, shifted to mournful.

Billy sat for an eternity, staring blankly toward the infinite west. Only after a light rain began to fall did he begin to understand his surroundings. Only after seeing his own blood mixed in the puddling rain did he understand he had to move. Painfully, he struggled to his feet and looked one more time to the west, despite himself. With a sudden rustle, a crow set itself on the telegraph lines, all quiet-like and staring Billy right in the eye.

Shaking his head slowly, Billy turned back toward Enterprise.