Eighteen Eighty-Three

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Abstract

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THE SKY was dark, though it was afternoon, and the air still but not peaceful. You stood beside your father — your small hand enveloped by his strong one. There were others too — some neighbors, and a few clerks who worked in the stores. They stood around in small groups — close together, and talked quietly. Every few minutes they would stare silently at the sky, large and ominous, and at the black funnel that was small and far away. They were not sure in which direction the funnel moved, but their eyes prayed it wasn’t theirs.

They stood in the middle of the wide, dusty main street of town. Brave store fronts faced the street — but they had no cellars, so could offer no safety. Transfixed the people seemed to be — all looking at the sky now, hardly daring to breathe. Then, even as they watched, the black funnel came nearer. You could see it moving — closer and closer towards you and your father as you held tighter to his hand. People looked at each other helplessly, and little children began to cry. You didn’t cry, though. Father was there beside you. You weren’t afraid. Some of the people were starting to run, they didn’t seem sure where, but your father stood unmoved there in the street.

“What shall we do, Erik?,” asked a man with a lot of thick beard who stood next to your father. The man’s face was a ruddy color, and his eyes were large and dark with fear. You peered up at your father too, and wondered — what should you do? Then suddenly, he knew. You were sure of it because confidence and defiance and strength seemed to surge through him all at once. He swooped you off the ground and began to run. You felt like a small package clutched in his arms. “The railroad,” he was crying, “run for the railroad!”

After your father’s shout, the others were running, shouting it too, “The railroad, the railroad.” And then you real-
ized that you had your eyes shut very tight, so you opened them and peered over the rough black wool sleeve of your father's Sunday suit. You could see only the skyline, where brown prairie met dark sky. It looked vast and frightening, so you shut your eyes again. You weren't so afraid, then, because it was warm and secure in the rough, wool-clad arms. You were flying across the prairie, farther and farther away from the black roar.

But, then you weren't flying anymore, weren't moving at all. Your father lifted you to the ground, and then his own weight, heavy, stifling, was on top of you. You opened your eyes again, and this time saw the railroad tracks stretching before you. You were lying between the tracks, and your father was above you. His breathing was hard and deep and felt hot on your neck. You saw his hands as they grasped the tracks—the muscles and veins standing up along the tops.

Then someone screamed and someone else yelled, "Hold on, everyone." You weren't sure after that whether your eyes were open or not—only it was very dark and the noise was louder than anything you'd ever heard before. You imagined the dark funnel whirling over you, and you felt your father's body rising and falling with its force. You cried out, but couldn't hear the cry in the rushing roar like a hundred winds. You felt the ground on which you lay whirling around in the funnel. It tipped and turned. It swiveled and swerved. It vibrated with the noise.

And then the noise became smaller. Slowly, it faded into the waiting sky, and there was light again. You could hear someone sobbing. Then you felt the sobbing and knew that it was you. Your father took off his coat and let it fall to the ground—his best Sunday coat. His shirt was wet and stuck to him. He sat down on the ground, lifting you gently onto his lap. He patted and rocked you until the rhythm of his body became stronger than that of the sobbing. Again, it was still, and you felt it beginning to rain. The rain was quiet rain.

Everywhere was peace.