Afternoon

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Abstract

FEBRUARY had been a damp, chill month with none of the violence of winter. Snow, which seemed to melt as it touched the ground, turned into spreading pools of water...
February had been a damp, chill month with none of the violence of winter. Snow, which seemed to melt as it touched the ground, turned into spreading pools of water. Then the rains came—sudden showers pelting the sodden earth, and slow drizzles that mocked the pallid sun. The country roads were rivers of mud, gutted with sink holes and treacherous, winding ruts.

In Miller's grocery and filling station, on the hard road, the fire blazed high in the old stove and occasional gusts of smoke spurted from the crooked pipe. Mrs. Miller, coming from the kitchen back of the store, shoved a spotted hound from her path with one foot and set a teakettle on the stove. The old dog stirred, whining in his sleep, and edged closer to the warmth. Mr. Miller snored peacefully on the long wooden bench along the wall.

"John—John," Mrs. Miller nudged him with the heel of her hand. "Ain't you goin' to grind that corn this afternoon?" She waited a moment for his snoring to cease.

"Um—" He moved his shoulder, shrugging off the weight of her hand and relaxed again. His withered lips fluttered as he breathed.

"John!" She shook him impatiently. "Wake up!"

"Umph" He awoke with a start, shaking his grizzled head. "Whatcha want?" His faded eyes were red rimmed and heavy with sleep.

"Joe'll be comin' after his meal, and he ain't a man to wait."

The old man yawned widely, wiped the dried spittle from his mouth with the back of his hand, and peered out the door. "Reckon he won't be comin' any time soon. Looks like hit might snow. Aouw—" He yawned again.

Mrs. Miller plodded toward the kitchen. "Well, 'tain't right for you to sit 'round in sech shameful idleness. You ain't no older than I am, and isn't a day passes but what I do more 'an enough
for two.” She rattled her irons on the stove. “Here I been ironin’ ever since noon, and if you’ve done ary thing I don’t know about it. Least you could do ’ud be to carry me some coal in.”

He wiped a clear spot in the window and stood gazing at the road. Traffic was slow this time of the afternoon. No cars out on the road. As he watched, a few flakes of snow fell, fine hard pellets which might be sleet. The wind moaned around the eaves and soughed through the chimney.

“Maw,” he said, “Think maybe we’re in for a spell of weather. Hit’s startin’ to snow.” He slid into a sheep lined coat and picked up the coal bucket. “C’mon, Spot.” The old dog stretched and followed him. The door slammed behind them.

Mrs. Miller walked back and forth in the kitchen from the stove to the ironing board, heavy slow steps. Down beyond Rector’s pasture the Panama Limited hurtled toward the spur, wailing a hoarse song of passage. Her husband stamped in and rattled coal into the stove. He banged the door, opened the draft, and sat on the bench to warm his hands. Sleet rattled against the many-paned windows, and a clock ticked away the slow minutes. Spot snuffled sleepily at his master’s hand, then crept toward the warmth of the stove.

“Maw, what time izzit?”

“Clock says almost four, but we ain’t set it in the last week.” She came to the door. “Whatcha want for supper?”

“Don’t make no difference s’long as there’s plenty of it.” He slumped against the wall. “After chores me and Spot ’ull be purty empty. Heh, Spot?” He prodded the dog gently with one foot.

“Humph—you and Spot. Eat more’n you’re worth, both of you.”

“Um—” He closed his eyes. The fire crackled, and the teakettle steamed quietly, a white plume of vapor rising from its spout. In a few minutes he slept.

When her husband snored steadily, Mrs. Miller went to the candy counter and selected one of the penny chocolates with pink centers. While she baked her fat hips before the stove she sucked contentedly on the sweet and gazed through the door at the swirling snow flakes. The old man snored peacefully on the long wooden bench. The Panama Limited, far beyond the spur, wailed a hoarse song of passage.