Postmistress

Verda Aegerter*
As sure a good thing Susie had her party yesterday," said Ma Schultz. "Rain would of spoiled everything."

"Yeah." Clem wasn't exactly listening. He rubbed the thick heel of his left hand first over the windshield, then took a few quick jabs at the window by his shoulder. It was raining hard. "Sure can't see worth anything," he muttered.

The car swayed and jerked along the muddy road. Ma Schultz and her son-in-law rode for several minutes without speaking. The windshield wipers kept up a steady rhythm like twin metronomes.

"How much you s'pose it's rained, Clem?"

"Plenty. Been comin' down just like this since milkin' time last night."

"Well, it was a nice cool night after such a hot day. Sticky this morning though," Ma Schultz pushed her faded blue slicker back off her shoulders and ran the back of her hand across her forehead. The air inside the car seemed very heavy. Clem chewed on a dry cigar, wallowing it from one side of his mouth to the other as he stared at the road ahead with squinted eyes. She was glad he hadn't lighted the cigar.

"Dern fool idee. You goin' home in a storm like this! Ain't fit to be on the road." Clem jerked at the wheel to hold the car straight.

It was not that he objected to taking her home this early in the morning. She knew that was not it. It was her needing to get back to town to open the post office that bothered Clem. He and Edith always got in a dig whenever they could about that. They didn't like her living alone or keeping the post office in her front room.

Ma was proud of her job and she took it seriously. There were twenty-four boxes on the wooden panel that held also a stamp window and a small counter. The town folks always
came in and sat a few minutes when they got their mail. It was nice having folks in and out every day. Lots to talk about. She always kept the coffee pot on low heat and shared a cup with anyone who could stay.

Ma knew every person in town and all their kinfolk. Minnie Peters always heard from her girls on a Thursday. Mr. Foster got his Indiana paper on Thursday too. He always looked forward to that. He would sit right down in the brown rocker and read the news aloud; all about his people “back East.”

The county seat papers would all be out today too. Ma just had to be there by eight to get the mail sorted and open up.

“This is Thursday, y’know, Clem. Be a big mail.”

“Big mail. Nuts!” said Clem. “Don’t see why you hang onto that Post Office. Don’t make enough to feed yourself. Government just oughta close it out and put a route through.”

“O, no! Clem, we couldn’t have that. Why, folks in Cedar Center need the Post Office. They count on — on, gettin’ stamps — an’ money orders — and — everything!”

“Yeah, sure — and rolls and cookies and coffee!” Clem grinned with one corner of his mouth.

Ma Schultz didn’t answer. She looked out at the rain and wondered how much longer the Post Office would be in Cedar Center. Town was growing smaller every year. Young folks left and old folks died. One store left now and the creamery and the elevator. A pity too it was. Used to have a nice feed store and a church. Even had a lumber yard before the war. Only two trains a day now, and they didn’t stop. Just put the mail on a hook outside the depot as they slowed for the crossing. Picked it up the same way.

Ma felt kinda glad Pa hadn’t lived to see the town go down so. He always was real proud when he had the barber shop next to Sam’s grocery. He always did a lot of talkin’ about an industry comin’ to Cedar Center. He really thought it might happen some day. It could have too, except the highway was changed and went through on the other side of Cedar Creek missing the town entirely.
"What's wrong, Clem? Why you stoppin'?"
"Water! Clear over the road, Ma."

They were both out of the car now and they stood staring silently at a sea of water before them.
The road was visible only about twenty feet in front of the car.

Somewhere out there was the wooden bridge across Cedar Creek. They could see nothing but water. A great wide rushing river of water. Up beyond it on a higher level rested the town.

"Good Lord," Clem swore softly. "We musta had a helluva rain! Sure never saw ole Cedar go out like that!"
"Clem, I just gotta get home."

"You lost your mind, woman? You’d ha'fta swim!") He snorted. "We just better go back 'fore it gets any worse." He opened his car door, then turned resting one arm across the top of the car looking once more at the rising flood waters.

Ma stood still in the road looking helplessly around at the rain and the mud and water. She wished there was some way . . .

"Clem, I know! I'll go up the railroad track." Several hundred feet north of the road the railroad crossed Cedar Creek on a high wooden trestle. They both looked toward it. Clem shook his head.

"Sure, Clem, it's real high. I can get there in no time. Water won't ever get up there." She buttoned her coat and reached into the car for her little black purse. Hands in her pockets she started quickly off up the grassy hillside without looking back. This was the only way to do it. No use arguing with Clem.

"Want your suitcase?" Clem yelled rather angrily after her.

"Leave it in the car. I don't want to carry it. Nothin' much I need anyway." She turned around and waved to him. "Thank you, Clem. I'll call up tonight."

He muttered something about dern fool stubborn women and slammed the car door.
She walked slowly up the hill looking back as Clem turned the car on the slippery road and then disappeared into the rainy distance.

Ma hurried now and soon reached the railroad track. She stood for a minute breathing hard from her climb up the embankment.

The track lay straight and shining before her. She stepped between the rails and walked along on the crunchy cinders. Suddenly the cinders were gone and she could only step on ties with large open spaces between them. Now she was out over the water. She bit her lip and went a few more steps slowly, trying not to look down at the gray, swirling water below.

A large tree limb cracked against the trestle as it was carried downstream. Ma stood still watching it go. The rain had almost stopped now and she was suddenly very warm. She pushed her headscarf up from the side of her face, planning to take it off, but it came loose and caught by a stiff breeze went swishing down to the water.

"Tarnation! and there goes one of my combs, too." She put her hand to the heavy braids wound about her head. Taking the other little side comb and burying it deeper into her hair she straightened her shoulders and took a few more steps.

"Glory, it's a long ways — what if I fall?" She stepped slowly onto the next tie. Suddenly she felt dizzy and sat down on the railroad track. She looked back to the spot down on the road where she had left Clem. No use hopin' he would come back. She just had to go on. That was only thing to do. She pushed her hand on the rail and started to stand up. Another great wave of dizziness went through her and she fell back on the track closing her eyes to shut out the sight of that open space between the ties and the water below. The heavy plastic of her rain coat clung to her arms and back like an extra coating of skin. Her forehead was wet with perspiration and the dry sticky feeling on the back of her tongue was relieved only by constant swallowing. Somehow it was better if she could hold onto the boards with her hands. Didn't feel so dizzy sitting down. Then because she was afraid to
try standing again she started to crawl like a child on hands and knees. That was better than just sitting. The coat was more than she could stand. She stopped to take it off and remembered her little purse in the pocket. “Dear Heaven!” she whispered, “don’t let me drop that! Key to Post Office and everything’d be gone. How to carry it and the coat and have hands free to crawl was her next problem. Carefully removing the coat she pulled the belt from its loops and put it round her neck tying the small loop handle of the purse to the belt and then fastening it snugly up against her throat. Then she folded the raincoat against her body and tied the sleeves like a belt.

“Looks crazy,” she thought, “but who cares? Well, here goes again.” She clutched each railroad tie tightly with her hands and crawled steadily forward keeping her eyes shut most of the time and moving her lips in silent prayer. She crawled with one rail of the track between her hands thinking it gave extra assurance to her quivering body. Besides there was a nice heavy timber beneath the rail on the under side of the trestle and it helped to shut out that awful view when she opened her eyes for quick glimpses of her progress. She scarcely noticed when one shoe caught on a board and came off. It fell with a distant plop. She didn’t look down.

“Sure hope nobody ever finds all that stuff of mine in one place,” she thought. “They’d have me drowned for sure.” She shuddered and swallowed an extra gulp of air.

After what seemed like hours, Ma saw the bank on the other side of the bridge just a few feet in front of her. She covered the space quickly and scrambled off the track to lie exhausted on the wet grassy bank. She tried not to think about the fear that had gripped her, but suddenly great sobs of relief came up in her throat and she cried like a baby.

Slowly Ma became aware of distant voices. She sat up and looked around. Down on the road below the town a small crowd had gathered to view the flood. They were all talking and gesturing excitedly. Ma could make out most of the familiar figures of her townspeople and friends.

“Good,” she thought aloud. “Now I can slip up past the depot and get home without them seeing me in such a state.”
She stood up and straightened her clothing. She put the coat and purse into a bundle under her arm. Her hair had loosened and now both braids hung down her back. Her hands and knees were very dirty and both stockings were torn beyond repair.

She pulled at her wet skirts, then brushed some loose strands of hair from her face and bravely walked toward town.

The street behind the depot was deserted. So far so good. She cut through a neighbor’s yard and hurried up to her own little porch. As she unlocked her door, she glanced quickly around to see if she had been noticed. Only old Tom, the brown and white cat, had seen her. He arched his back and purred a greeting as he rubbed against her leg.

Just as she stooped to touch the cat she was aware of a distant train whistle. The eight o’clock was comin’ through! Cedar Center would have mail.

She scooped up the cat and went into the kitchen where she put him on the window sill as she reached for the coffee pot.

The Postmistress was on the job.

Verda Aegerter, Sc. & H. Jr.

The Chariot Cometh

A STICKY SWIRL of dry, dense dust choked the last august city father of Postville as the battered Ford pounced to a stop, spewing its final puffs of bilious blue smoke into the clinging July afternoon. The driver was out, the door slamming behind him, before the pleading engine had stopped, and he stood knee-deep in the unsettled dust with a worn Bible under one arm. With his free hand he waved chaotically up and down, nearly lifting his bony body from the ground with each upward jerk. “Blessed, blessed be thee, O great and glorious city walls, for in thy humble arms