

Poor Boy

Rob Lee

When the trains rolled by and the passengers looked out their windows at the countryside and saw the little cabin home a stone's throw from the tracks, they didn't think much of the people who lived there. If they passed by at night, they might see smoke coming from the chimney and a glow from the window, but no one ever thought that that was the only way the family could stay warm on a cold night. If they passed by at dawn, they might see the silhouettes of a man mending a wooden fence and a woman hanging clothes on a line, and they might think it to be a quiet, peaceful way to live, but they never thought of the endless exhaustion that came with it. If they passed by when the sun started to set, they might see a boy in dirty overalls watching the train go by, just close enough for them to see the whites in his eyes. They might think, "What a hard working boy he is," but no one ever thought that he may dream of being one of them on the train. They might see him leaning on the handle of a shovel or an axe, and they might nudge their spouses to look out the window and see how interesting this boy in the field is, but no one has ever thought enough of him to even guess his name.

Eli was eleven when the tracks were first laid. At the time, he was excited by it, but his father felt differently.

"I wonder where the tracks lead to," Eli said at dinner one night.

"The smoke will kill the cattle," his father replied without looking up.

Eli continued cautiously. "Maybe we can ride one day."

His father sighed and rested his chin on his hand. "No," he said. "We *can't*." With another sigh, he picked up his fork again and sifted through his dinner. Finally, he repeated, "The smoke will kill the cattle."

From the dinner table, Eli looked out the window and saw the faint lines of the steel running alongside the hills and tried but could see nothing wrong with it.

"Well, *I'm* gonna ride it someday," he said.

"Eli, hush," his mother said softly.

"Why? I am. I'm gonna ride it someday. I bet it goes out to California. That's what my friend, Henry, says—that it goes out to California. Says by 1880, you can take it anywhere—

load up in Cheyenne then off to New York or Maine, or off the other way to California. *That's* where I wanna go. Henry says it drops you off right at the ocean. He says he's going with his ma and pa over the summer. We should go, too—"

"Eli," his mother snapped. "Hush."

Eli looked to his father who stared at the table with a look of defeat about him. His forehead was still sweaty from working the land and his shirt had dark patches where the straps of his overalls had rested on his shoulders. He looked as if his head was too heavy to keep upright.

"Well, I'm *gonna*," Eli mumbled as he got up from the table. He walked to the door with excitement still twitching inside him. "*I'm gonna ride it someday.*"

Eli sat at the edge of the property and waited. The night was as dark as it was going to get, but the moon lit up the pasture enough for him to see the silhouettes of the clothesline, the cattle sleeping in the field, and a portion of fence his father intended to mend the next morning.

A throaty whistle sounded and Eli turned to see a faint cloud of smoke just above the hills and a train coming from around the bend. As the unlit cars passed in front of him, he felt their thunder deep in his chest. An undulant wind came across him as each car passed and the odor of combustion followed. He closed his eyes and pretended he was one of the sleeping passengers on his way out to California or wherever it was that the tracks led.

He had no way of knowing what people even did out there, but he knew it must be exciting. He knew from the folklore of his classmates that the West was a land of unimaginable adventure. It was a place where one could sleep till noon and wake up without a worry because there was never any work to be done. A place where bad things seldom happened and the little things figured themselves out. But most of all, it was a place far away from home.

A touch on his shoulder took him out of his reverie and he turned to see his mother standing above him. She was shouting for him to come inside, but the train made it impossible for Eli to make out the words. Finally, she motioned toward their home and he got up slowly and walked beside her, looking over his shoulder the whole time.

Eli lay in bed while his mother folded and put away his clothes by candlelight.

"I don't want you sitting so close to the train tracks again," she said. "All that whistling and screeching'll hurt your ears."

"I can hear just fine," Eli said, though his ears did ring.

"And I don't want you talking about riding that train to your father again. Y'hear?"

"What's Pa got against riding trains?"

"Eli," his mother said solemnly. She had no intention of explaining further, but saw in Eli that he wouldn't go easily without an answer. She stopped putting his clothes away and sat on the edge of his bed. "It ain't about the trains."

"What then?"

She looked at him with tired eyes and touched his cheek. "Your father works hard, Eli," she said. "Lord knows that when you go to school, he could use your help here. But he don't want you to be doing what he's doing when you're as old as him, so he sends you off to school to learn." She thought for a moment then said, "He bears the load for the both of you so you'll never have to do that for your own family someday."

Eli looked away from her with a strange, unfamiliar feeling of guilt.

"Eli," she said again, and he hesitated to look at her heavy eyes. "You're just a boy, so I don't expect for you to get all this—not yet at least. But just know your father wants what's best for you. Do you hear me?"

Eli tucked his chin into his chest and looked away again.

"Hey," his mother said, gently patting him on the leg. "Do you hear me?"

He nodded.

"Say you hear me."

"I hear you," he said. The words came out in a broken way.

His mother cupped his cheek in her hand again and smiled. "Now, get some sleep," she said. "I don't want you to be tired for school tomorrow."

But Eli had no intention of going to school in the morning. He lay awake in bed and pitied his father for the burden he held with him. His father's life, Eli now understood, was so unfulfilling that he had dedicated it just to making sure his son's wouldn't be the same, and Eli felt indebted to him for this. He also knew that if he went to school like his father wanted him to, he would always be afraid of embarrassing his father with the education he didn't have. It all

seemed so unfair to him. And so after a sleepless night, at the first glimpse of sunlight, he put on his overalls and boots and went out to the pasture.

The sun was just beginning to rise, and the dew hadn't burned off yet. It tinted the toe caps of his shoes as he trudged through the grass and soaked his hands as he rolled hay bales toward the cattle. The morning was still cold, but Eli already had sweat rolling down his forehead and cheeks.

He tried rolling one large hay bale toward the grazing area, but he struggled to push it up a small hill. He got halfway up before the weight of it drove him back, so he backed up some and tried rolling it faster to get it up, but he slipped on the wet grass and the hay bale rolled away again. Eli got angry, and so he dug the edges of his boots into the ground and squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to push it up. Somehow, Eli felt the hay was lighter this time and managed to get to the top of the hill. When he got there and opened his eyes, however, he saw another set of arms giving the bale a final shove into the pasture.

"Eli," his father said. "You should be getting ready for school." He looked composed even after pushing the hay while Eli was panting and red in the face.

"I ain't going to school today, Pa," Eli said, lifting his chin.

"Why's that?"

"I'm gonna stay here with you and help out with the land." Eli spoke with certainty, but coming from such a small boy, it wasn't enough to convince anyone. His father put his hand on Eli's back, guiding him to the house to get cleaned up and ready for school.

"Come," he said, but Eli ducked below his arm and stayed put.

"No, Pa. I'm stayin' here with you."

"Don't cause trouble, Eli. Come inside and your mother will make you breakfast before you leave."

Eli didn't move. "I *ain't* goin' to school," he said, and he turned to continue pushing the hay bale across the pasture. He heard the sound of a train whistle blowing from beyond the hills, but he looked forward and kept pushing.

"Eli," his father said, but Eli kept on. The whistling got louder. "*Eli*," his father said, but Eli didn't respond. The dew had dried up by now and the grass felt brittle beneath Eli's boots. The whistling got louder still. He struggled with the weight of the hay bale, but kept at it. The

louder the whistle sounded, the more Eli lost track of how hard he was panting. “*Eli*,” his father shouted, competing with the train. He grabbed Eli by the arm and turned him around. Holding him by the shoulders, he shouted over the train, “Go inside.”

“*No*.” Eli shook off his father’s grip and went back to pushing the hay bale.

“Why not?” The train had come out from behind the hills and roared as it rolled by.

“*Because*,” Eli shouted back to him. He saw the train passing by behind his father.

“Because *why*?” his father said.

Eli could hardly hear his father over the train. In a fit of anger, he ran over to the tracks. He scraped pebbles off of the ground, getting dirt beneath his fingernails as he did it, and threw them by the handful at the passing cars. He started to cry, but that sound and the sound of the rocks hitting the cars was overpowered by the whistle and roar of the train. His father grabbed his wrist before he could throw again and pulled him away from the track.

He grabbed him by the shoulders and shouted, “What in God’s name are you *doing*, Eli?”

“The smoke will kill the cattle,” Eli cried. “It’s gonna kill the cattle.” He threw another handful of rocks past his father at the train, then collapsed into him and sobbed. His father picked him up and carried him toward the house. As he was being carried away, Eli saw through his tears the last car pass by their land and disappear again into the hills.

“What’s this about, Eli?” his father asked him as he sat him down at the kitchen table.

Eli stared at the floor and refused to look up. “The smoke’ll kill—”

“What’s this *really* about?”

Eli shrugged.

“I know you did it for a reason. Tell me.”

“Ma told me you could use the help.”

“Help with what?”

“With the land,” Eli said. “Ma told me—”

“She tell you to skip school?”

“Well, no. But—”

“Then why did you?”

Eli looked out the window where the sun glared off the steel near the hills. Then the words came out as if a dam had burst. "Ma told me you make me go to school so I won't have to work the land all day the way you do. But that ain't fair. You shouldn't have to do it alone."

His father sighed and sat back in his chair. "It might not be fair," he said. "But that's how it is." After a quiet moment, he leaned forward and tapped Eli's knee to get him to look him in the eye. "But I'm alright with it," he continued. "When I was a kid like you, my pa didn't give me or my brothers the chance to go to school, and I know he didn't get the chance when he was young neither."

He sat back in his chair again and smiled reflectively while Eli sat stiff in his seat.

"I remember being your age and working my pa's farm," his father said. "We didn't have so much land back then, so we had to work hard just to make sure we got enough out of it, and we never had nothing to spare by the time the season was over. Then one day, I remember seeing kids running down by the road in the afternoon holdin' their books, and I asked my oldest brother, Joe, why we didn't go to school like those kids. Now, Joe was only five years older than me, but he was a good bit wiser. Joe looked at those kids then said to me, 'We ain't like them. And I know what ya thinkin', but don't ask Daddy about it.'" Eli's father chuckled then continued, "But I did ask him about it, and you know what he said to me?" He waited until Eli met his eyes. "He said, 'Boy, you just lucky I'm tired or I'd have at you for talkin' that way. You ain't leavin' this family behind.'"

His face fell solemn. Eli sat motionless, careful not to make a sound. His father said, "Even then, I knew that if I had a boy, I wouldn't want him working like that. I figured if I didn't change something, it would just keep going on that way."

Eli's eyes moved about the room. His chest felt tight and his stomach hollow.

"Hey," his father said, patting him again on the knee. "Look at me." Eli looked toward him then quickly away again. His father leaned in close to him and smiled reassuringly. "Look," he said, and Eli looked. "You don't owe me nothin', alright? I chose this."

Eli still looked unsettled and his father saw this. He saw on Eli's face the guilt he felt and the shame that followed from not being able to say it outright.

"I know it's a lot," his father said, "but just try to understand. Sometimes people have to sacrifice something of their own to help another. But it's worth it if they're grateful and try to make somethin' out of it." Eli's sobbing had since let up and he listened intently to his father

though he still couldn't look him in the eye for very long. His father stood up and smiled. "Listen," he said. "Since you're already late, why don't you stay here with me for today. But tomorrow I want you back at school. Okay?"

Eli nodded and followed his father back into the pasture. While Eli started lugging slabs of wood for the fence, his father walked to the clothesline where Eli's mother was to assure her it would just be one day home. She seemed to understand, and Eli worked alongside his father the whole day through.

At night, as Eli lay in bed, his body sore and hands hard from lifting, he tried to picture what his father was like at his age. He wondered if his father's hands hurt the same at the end of the day and if they hurt less the more he worked. He wondered if he would have been as excited had tracks been laid by his own home as a child and if he, too, would have wanted to ride. And then Eli wondered if his father ever dreamt of leaving home and what it must have felt like the moment his own father told him he never would.

Eli heard the distant wailing of an incoming train and thought about what his father wanted of him. It made him sad, but Eli felt his father wanted him to leave his home one day and never think of it again. He couldn't bare the thought of abandoning his mother and father and their pasture, but he knew it was the only way to make good on his father's sacrifice. The whistle grew louder as the train came around the bend and Eli's throat got tight and his lips trembled. He understood full well what his father expected of him, but it didn't make anything any easier. The whistle blew louder, and then the sound lowered. Then it was gone around the bend.