

GUTHRIE JUNCTION

Corporal Sloane Albert Hale had been on the train three days when it stopped in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, May 15, 1919. The porters had been bringing him water, but he hadn't been able to keep down anything solid since Joplin. Now, after over a thousand miles, his joints ached. Passengers, eager to chat with a man in uniform, kept asking about France, fighting the Hun—as though it had all been a sporting event. He kept his eyes closed now and tried to sleep. Somewhere in Missouri he'd managed to get off to piss a burning stream into the dark hole of a country depot, but now there was no urge for even that. If he lasted to see the junction at Cadillac, he didn't know if he could get himself off the train. Finally, he raised his eyes to look at the girl across the aisle who had got on at Ft. Smith. She was staring at him.

“How'd ya do,” she said.

“How'd ya do.”

“Goin' far?” she asked.

“La Flore County,” he said. “You?”

“I'm going to the country for my health,” she said.

He looked away, out the window at the big pine trees of western Arkansas. She didn't want him to know where she was going. This girl—bright eyes, full perfect figure—didn't have to go anywhere for her health. She was probably his age but would never be as old as he felt.

Still, she was a soft little thing, smelling of rose water, the sort of girl he might have brought home to the old man whose letters had always urged him to come back to the farm and start a family.

Maybe she *was* going to the country. Some rich farm where all the young people would go swimming under the willows—laughing, shrieking. Wearing those little bathing dresses that showed their stockings, the girls always shrieked—he gritted his teeth and sniffed—shrieked and ran from the boys. Naw, she was steering him off with that answer about her health. This was somebody else's prize who wouldn't have spoken at all if he hadn't caught her staring.

Sally Packard looked out the window and vowed to keep her mouth shut, shut, shut the whole way. This poor soldier must be sick and tired of silly girls wanting to talk to him. Musta been hospital food left him shrunk up like a scarecrow. What a pity—handsome lad like that. Would the army actually let a sick man get on a train by himself? Skin so gray. Eyes dull. Just look at him. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to stare," she cried. "My brother was a soldier."

"Did he come home?"

"No. He lost his leg. Got infected."

"Lucky."

She gasped and turned her head. This was a cruel person, not even grateful he'd survived to go home. Still she imagined his folks would run down the lane when the wagon drove up, carry his skinny bones into the house and lay him in his old bed with his boyhood things around him. His mother would fry up her best hens and make biscuits and fatten him with heavy cream and tastes of every jam she'd put up while she waited for her boy to come home.

Sally put her handkerchief over her nose and blew. The only saving grace was her brother didn't have to know about this trip. Her folks had told everyone she was going to nursing school in Philadelphia. But she didn't catch the train east; they put her on the westbound, and probably the whole town knew by now. The stationmaster waved with a smirk on his wrinkly face, and Mr. Crawford, who'd said she was the smartest dry goods clerk he'd ever had, and the girl of his dreams, stayed home, of course, with his wife. Sally knew it was all her own fault. She'd been foolish, weak, grievously in error to let her head be turned by Mr. Crawford, the first man to say sweet things and treat her like she was something fine. She unfolded her shawl and draped it, casual-like, across her swelling belly.

Corporal Hale dropped off to sleep and woke up falling. He'd let the hospital volunteer send a letter to his folks: *Corporal Sloane A. Hale is in the hospital in Baltimore and will return home when his wounds heal.* But he had no wounds. No scars or stitches. He'd had dysentery on the troop ship, then, before he could get on his feet in the hospital, he'd caught the mumps, a god damned funny sounding child's excuse for missing a few days of school. His anger with his mother made him tear the sheets. She'd never let him be exposed. He should have caught the mumps as a child. Now they'd settled and burned up his seed, the doctor said.

When he'd been seventeen and playing baseball every afternoon, he hadn't thought about the future. The muscles had strained across his broad back as he'd cracked that ball way out into the trees, where the little boys would be running around still looking for it after he had hiked across home plate in easy strides, waving at the girls, smiling the stupid smile of a kid who had so much future he couldn't see it.

“You have to eat something, soldier. You can’t last without food.” A big, redheaded porter with a mustache stood over him holding a tin cup of water. Sloane looked down at his uniform. In the hospital he had stopped feeling like a soldier. The other men were healing, going back to their wives, their girls. He couldn’t stand being there, taking up a bed in a crowded hospital, so he told the doctor he felt well enough to travel.

The burly porter held the tin cup to his lips. After only a sip, Sloane leaned his head against the cool window glass.

When he woke again the windows were inky black and the car buzzed with snoring. They were stopped. His eyes drifted across the aisle, and he saw the girl was no longer there. He dragged in a long breath in search of her rose water fragrance, but his burning head filled only with cigar smoke. His joints were as frozen as those of a lead soldier. Suddenly, he had the idea he wouldn’t get off at Cadillac. No one knew he’d left Baltimore, anyway. He’d stay on as the train moved west. Eventually, somewhere in the desert, he wouldn’t have to worry about getting off anymore.

“Corporal Hale, your destination.” The big, redheaded porter lifted his pack off the rack above him. “We’ve passed Wellston?” Hale asked.

“Yep. This is Cadillac.” The Porter pulled him to his feet, and held him around the waist to walk, stiff-legged, very slowly through the door onto the platform between cars. “Can you step down, Corporal?”

He stared into the darkness. There was a lantern way down the track and the sound of a horse’s hooves, but nothing else. The porter took hold of a rubbery arm, looped it over his shoulder and, with a firm grasp, practically carried him down the steps.

“Someone meeting you, Corporal?”

“Yes, my father, thank you. That’s him there with the buckboard, just coming.” The porter leaned him against the hitching rail, laid his pack beside him, and re-boarded. With a slow chuffing the train pulled away to leave him under the stars. Once the smoke had cleared, he smelled the new wheat on the wind, and his eyes watered with a surge of love for this place, Cadillac, Oklahoma, out there sleeping in the darkness, innocent and fertile. He swallowed hard and tasted the shame of his own dead seed. A damaged thing like him with no wife, no children, could never find a place in this town again.

The lantern swung, and he caught a glimpse of the girl from the train standing with a man beside the buckboard. He imagined she had been staring deeply into the man’s eyes while the soldier was being dragged off the train and propped up in the dark like a broom. The man lifted the girl’s grip, then gave her a hand up— Wait! Wasn’t he going to put her on the seat beside him? That’s not right, a lady like her riding on the back, feet dangling like a hired girl. The man gave a mean toss to his head and bent to collect his lantern before taking the reins. Sloane Albert Hale struggled to straighten and fill his lungs. “Wait,” he called.

The girl looked into the darkness, then hopped off and hurried to him. “Ain’t nobody coming for ya?” she asked.

The man jumped down and brought the lantern to hold it in the soldier’s face. “Who’s this?” the man asked.

“He’s sick. Help me get him to the buckboard.” She put her arm around the soldier’s waist.

“You’re crazy,” the man said. “Let him go!”

“Can’t you see he needs help?”

“I see a drunken soldier and no business of mine.”

“Please! He’ll die here alone in the dark.”

The man reached to grab her arm. She jerked away. “You have to help him!” Her eyes flashed in the lantern light. “He’s my husband.”

“What I been told about you, girlie, is you ain’t got no husband.”

“He’s been in the war, but now he’s come back to me.”

“Pack o’ lies. You was leaving him here ‘till he hollered.”

The girl said nothing but stood with her chin up. The man scowled, then held the lantern again to the soldier’s face. “You married to this girl?”

“Who’s asking?”

“I’m her uncle.”

“Then show her the proper respect. *I’ll* ride on the back.”

THE END