



Missing Lena and Finding Work

The three men turned to walk to the back end of the boxcar. There were a few crates at one end, so they headed for cover there. They could sit behind the wooden boxes and remain unseen if anyone looked in at a station farther down the line. This train went straight to Kearney, but there might be a stop or two on the way, like in Omaha.

Charley stepped behind the crate, and felt something move next to him, on the floor of the car.

“Hey, watch yerself, buster!” said a scratchy voice.

It was dark and he couldn’t see anyone, but there was someone there, for sure.

“Sorry, didn’t see ya; it’s pretty dark in here. Is there room for three of us back here?” Charley asked, in what was probably a too-polite tone.

“Well, if there’s three of ya, I can’t stop ya. Hang on here and I’ll move my bindle. I’m Joe.”

So, Charley and the brothers settled in and made acquaintance with the older bum. He said he wasn’t going anywhere in particular: he was “just goin’, that’s all.” Said he had no family. His wife had passed and they had no children. He’d lost his job and the bank took his house. Joe had a typical story for those times. He was homeless, unemployed, and grubbing the towns on the railroad lines for food handouts and maybe some odd jobs.

The boys shared some of their family story, too. The taller older brother was Henry, and the shorter and younger one was Mel. Their parents had owned a leather goods store in St. Paul. After the stock market crash and the bank failures, their business got slower and slower. Folks didn't have much money for leather luxury items. People in this depression had to get new soles on their old shoes, not buy expensive new ones. The store closed and the bank foreclosed on the building. Then, the bank foreclosed on their house. Henry and Mel's parents were offered a room in the basement of a kind neighbor, but there was no room there for the two sons. Their parents were totally against it, but the boys jumped on a train one day.

They found a little work at a blanket mill in Faribault, Minnesota, but it didn't last long. They sent all the money they made back to St. Paul and moved on. Then they heard about the work in the wheat fields. People told them they were hiring thousands of men out there, for a few months, and paying decent wages.

Being city boys, Henry and Mel had never harvested or shocked wheat before, but they were young and figured they would learn fast. So, they were on their way, and Mel even said he was sure God had sent them Charley, who was a farmer and could teach them what they needed to know.

As they told their stories and the train clattered along towards the west, Charley started thinking about what he should tell them about himself. Them boys was nice young fellas, but that poor ol' Joe was a sad case. Maybe Charley didn't need to tell the others anything, but they seemed nice enough. He was pretty certain he could trust 'em. He didn't have to get real personal 'bout it, just tell 'em about the house fire, and his wife and son workin' so hard. Sure, that couldn't hurt nothin', he thought.

The brothers finished up their tale, and the three men looked at Charley.

"What's your story, farmer?" asked Mel.

"Dang, I ain't as bad off as you kids or Joe, but I got a family to support. Our farmhouse burnt down a while back and we had to move to town in a dingy little room. My wife is workin' two part-time jobs and my son...he's seventeen...he's workin' a milk route with my wife's brother. He ain't livin' with us; he's with my wife's ma. We ain't got room. I got land, but I don't know how long I'll have it. The bank is auctioning off places all around me. I'm not aimin' to lose my place, so I got to get enough money to build us a little house out there again, so I can work my fields and take care of the animals. A neighbor cousin of mine is helpin' us with it right now, but I can't 'spect that to go on forever." Charley took a deep breath.

"I'll work as hard as I need to for the money they pay... 'til I gets enough to start a little house. I don't care if it's got dirt floors, but I am determined as all blazes to get back on my land. That's all I know." He crossed his arms tight across his chest. "That's all I know."

"Well, God bless you and your family, Charley," Henry said.

"Amen," said Mel.

Charley smiled for just a flash. "Thanks, and God bless all three of you, too."

It was bright daylight outside now, and the western Iowa farmland was flying past them. They sat in silence for about ten minutes, and then they felt the train starting to slow a little bit.

"Are we fixin' to stop, do ya think?" asked Charley.

"I believe we is coming up to Omaha," Joe said. "Been here a few times. They might throw a few more crates in this car. We need to get these ones arranged so they can't shove them in here and crush us."

Henry stood up and looked over the crates that were there. "We can make a little space back here and stack these crates around us. If they push more against us, we can push back with our feet and they will think there is a crate here."

Charley jumped up and said, "Let's get it done. That'll work. We sure don't want 'em to find us here. Won't none of us get to where we want to go if we get caught."

Henry and Mel started moving the crates while Charley and Joe moved all their belongings and made sure there was room for the four of them back there. Then the brothers climbed in and each man figured out where he was going to push if he needed to. The train stopped and sure enough, Joe had correctly predicted what was going to happen.

The four freeloading riders laid low, and men piled crate after crate into their boxcar. Their plan worked. Just the right amount of pressure at the right time, and their safe spot was preserved.

As the train started forward again, Charley asked, "Ain't we about halfway to Kearney, Joe?"

"Yep, not that far to go. About three hours and we'll be in wheat country."

Charley really got quiet then. He had some thinkin' and plannin' to do, at least as best he could. He went inside his head, pretending to be asleep. First, he thought about Lena. He'd not really been able to do that since he jumped on the train. Gettin' to know these fellas and tryin' to keep hidden had taken up most of his time.

With his eyes closed, Charley could see Lena. He could see her peach-colored house dress and her blond wavy hair. Not a lot of curl in it, just a little. It was pretty. She wasn't very tall, but she had a big personality. He felt lucky just to have her. She was the kind of woman who really didn't need a man; she was self-confident and knew how to do a lot of different things that most women didn't even try to do. Lena could fix a wire fence, and plaster over the lathe on a hole in the wall. She built their henhouse all by herself! She could replace broken pane of glass in a window, and she was a formidable cook. Her food was always the best Charley had ever tasted. Other women was always askin' Lena for her recipes. She jest had 'em all in her head!

Charley missed Lena somethin' awful, already, and it wasn't even noon yet. When he got himself settled in a wheat camp, first thing he was gonna do was write her a long letter. It was way too bumpy and jumpy on the train to even think about writin' her.

His mind turned to Harley. He was so proud of that son of his, he felt like bustin' out of his overalls. The kid never complained and did everything his parents asked him to do. He was work smart and book smart. He knew how to work hard to earn a dollar and he knew how to figger out all sorts of big math problems. Thanks to Lena gettin' that Reader's Digest magazine, Harley was a kid who loved words and loved to read. Charley's son was darn smart, and handsome, too!

When Harley finished high school next spring, Charley and Lena wanted him to go to college. Harley really wanted to go too, but so far not a dime could be saved for his education. If Charley could just earn enough shockin' wheat, maybe Harley could get to college after he graduated next year. Charley didn't know exactly what his son wanted to be, but he knew Harley didn't want to be no farmer. Charley didn't understand that, and Harley couldn't explain it. Harley only knew he didn't want to be poor. Charley woulda felt poorly when Harley told him that, if it hadn't been the truth. There just weren't no rich farmers anywhere around them in these terrible times.

Charley knew there musta been rich farmers somewhere; he just didn't know any of 'em. Harley didn't want to be no doctor or lawyer; he said he wanted to own his own business. That always puzzled Charley. What kind of business? He sure hoped, for Lena's sake, that he would own his own business in Iowa. She refused to discuss it, but she warned her husband that he'd better find a way to keep their grown son in close proximity of them, or Charley would be wishin' that he lived with the devil.

He must have fallen asleep thinking about his family; then he awoke, feeling the train starting to slow down again.

"Are we comin' into Kearney now?" Charley asked as he jolted himself awake and sat upright.

"Yep," said Joe. "And we gotta have a plan to get you three offa here without gettin' arrested by the Kearney bulls. They is as mean as they come. When they open the door and move these crates, we are sittin' ducks, so here's the plan: First of all, don't worry 'bout me at all. I'm goin' to jail and get a free meal. I'll be out in three days, with a full stomach, clean clothes, and a shower."

"What in blazes is you talkin' about?" demanded Charley. "I don't want to go to no jail!"

"You ain't goin' to jail, I am! I'll get out on the station side, where the bulls will be waitin'. They mob me and snatch me up right away. While they're all distracted and such, you three will jump out the backside of the car and run like crazy. Head south, and you'll find the co-op in about two miles. Big ol' grain bins. You can sign up for the wheat fields there." Joe explained it as though he had been through this many times before.

"You *want* to go to jail?" asked Mel.

“It’s usually the hottest meal in town, for free anyway. I start out in the jail of almost any city I gets to. That way I’m always washed up and fed when I start lookin’ for work.”

“You are pretty smart for a bum, Joe. Sure am glad we met up with ya,” offered Henry.

Charley just shook his head. Joe was a different kind of guy than he’d ever known. That man couldn’t wait to get to jail! It made Charley even more grateful for his small, but loving, family.

Joe’s time-proven plan worked perfectly. The bulls swarmed him just like he’d predicted.

Charley wasn’t sure whether it was harder to get on or get off the train, but he was trying to get all set for jumping off. The train was stopped, so it had to be easier to get off than it was to run and climb on. That had been very scary and hard. The brothers were right behind him, so he would have to be the first to jump. Henry reached to give him a little shove, as he teetered over the edge. He wasn’t even sure he could do it, but he knew that he had to, so over the edge he went! Curled himself up in a ball and rolled out like a brand-new hallway carpet.

The hobo farmer got to his feet quickly and took off in a jog, hugging his pack and bindle. Joe had told him that’s what the hobos called their bedrolls. He didn’t know why, they just did, so Charley did, too. He didn’t want to stick out too much as different, so he would try to fit in by talking like them. Pretty soon after he started running, the brothers caught up with him. They didn’t have time to look back. They heard a few shouts behind them, but couldn’t tell whether it was the bulls hollering at Joe, or chasing after them.

The three of them ran for a little bit and then walked the rest of the way to the co-op. It was the middle of the afternoon when they got there. Charley had never traveled so many miles, from Des Moines to Kearney, in so little time. He’d never been on a train before, and they sure was faster than cars. He guessed that was why so many people liked to ride ‘em; they sure got ya where you was goin’ in a hurry!

The men straightened themselves up before they walked into the co-op office. Charley led the way, since he looked most like a farmer, and not a like a hobo.

“Howdy,” said the man at the desk, who was wearing a seed cap, just like Charley’s.

“Howdy back at you, sir,” Charley replied. “We three is lookin’ to get on a wheat team that might be leaving out of here. I heard about it over in Iowa a couple of days ago. Ya know what I’m talkin’ about?”

“Sure do. They are going in trucks tomorrow to a couple thousand acres west and south of here. If you wanna sign up, you need some identification; so you can get paid proper. Got some identification?” he asked as he looked at the two brothers doubtfully.

“Sure, we have some,” said Mel. “Who don’t?” he added rather defensively.

Don't get all riled," the man said. "We get a lot of no good free-loading bums in here, who try to sign up just to get a meal that night, and then take off before the truck leaves in the morning. Just show me your identification and sign up. Didn't mean no offense, honest."

"It's okay," Charley rushed to assure the man at the desk. "We came here to work, that's for sure."

They showed their identification, and each signed a contract for two weeks. After that, their jobs would be from week to week, if they proved themselves to be hardworking. This was exciting. Charley would have his first batch of money in only fourteen days! He really had somethin' to write to Lena about tonight.

"Looks like everything is straight and good here, men. You can head on down to the blacksmith shop. It's at the end of town, just a little over a quarter mile from here. Head south. There will be about a dozen other men sleeping in the barn behind the shop with you tonight. A truck will pull up at dawn tomorrow morning, so don't be thinkin' about carousin' all night in town. If ya miss the truck, they ain't comin' back to get you later. You won't be working for us. Don't bother to come back and sign up for another crew. If you'd rather hug a whiskey bottle than a shock of wheat, we don't want ya! Understand?"

"We ain't drinkers, we work. We'll head over there now and be ready bright and early," Charley assured him.

The three new friends left the co-op and took off towards the blacksmith shop. They had their bindles, but they were getting hungry. Since they would be eating at the wheat camps starting tomorrow, Charley decided to offer the brothers some of the food Lena had packed for him. They stopped in a small woods, started a quick fire, and set up some logs so they could sit down for a while. Charley opened his pack and dug through all the food Lena had carefully packed. There was some dried beef, some bread, a big bag of cookies, and some canned chicken parts. Nothing they needed to heat up, but the fire felt good after a day of being crammed together in the freight car. Charley made up some sandwiches with the beef and the chicken parts.

Henry and Mel ate heartily and thanked Charley many times. They told him the worst part of riding the rails was begging for food at the back doors of farmhouses. They knew the farmers were poor, too, and they hated to ask for any of their food, especially if they saw kids around the place.

Charley kicked dirt on the fire to put it out and said, "Let's get goin'. Don't know how crowded that blacksmith's barn is gonna be and I don't want to be sleepin' outside tonight."

Three of them approached the blacksmith's shop and the barn. They stayed on the backside of the main street just to make sure they didn't bother anyone. There was plenty of room in the barn; there were only about five other men there when they arrived. Shortly after it got dark, more men trickled in, most of them by themselves but a few groups of three or four. By the time the blacksmith came by to count them and close up the barn for the night, there were maybe

twenty men in there. Most of them did not try to look anybody in the eye, which made Charley suspicious.

“I think we ought to sleep close to the door,” Charley told the boys, “in case anything goes wrong. We could get out of here fast.” He continued, “Some of these dogs don’t look very honest.”

“I’m with you. I don’t like bein’ in a group this big. If somebody was to start a fight or something, we could get hurt. Let’s move now before someone else puts their bindles down over there,” said Henry.

So they moved closer to the main door and as it turned out, there were no fights. No drunks. No problems. These men, after all, were just as worn out and tired as they were. Most just laid down where they were, rolled over a few times getting kind of comfortable, and went to sleep. Riding the rails was exhausting. Charley was relieved and fell asleep quickly himself.

