

## Wait Upon

Dan Evans, May 1982

“...this cold since the winter of...”

Todd walked the aisle in and then out of range of the travelers' conversation about the hardships of weather in middle America's plains states. “The winter of '91 or '97 or, maybe '03?” he wondered to himself as he crossed the coupling platform between the first two coaches.

It was cold alright. Moving between the coaches in the darkness of a February night somewhere in Nebraska, registered that truth strongly. But Todd, tired of listening to bragging brush and soap salesmen that amounted to about half of the passengers on his twice-weekly run between Ogden and Chicago.

He stopped to check on the coal burning stove in the second day coach, passing the conductor who was speaking with a young girl traveling alone to Cleveland. Todd then settled into to an empty window seat at the rear of the car. It would be another hour or more before this east-bound Union Pacific stopped again. If he was lucky, he'd have a seat through the night. However, there was no way to know when they might take aboard enough passengers to deprive him of this much appreciated convenience and send him back to the cold baggage car. Cold and rough riding.

It was Todd's forty-ninth run. Yet, the trip and the people and the change that took place every few hours outside those windows, still held his interest. The summer job became permanent when he decided not to return to school in September. He didn't dislike school. It just went along too slow for Todd's purposes. Now, at sixteen, he felt he was learning more about the world and himself on this train and in the towns it passed through, then he ever could behind the varnished wood desk of a northeastern Utah schoolhouse.

“Not much to see out there this time of the night son. The fact be, I ain't never seen nothin' out there worth a second glance at high noon. Might as well get some shut eye. I'll wake you before Rome Junction.” Todd waved Bill, the conductor, on with a nod and returned his gaze out the window.

Bill and Todd had between them, a different appreciation for the plains. Bill, his second wife and three daughters, lived on Chicago's south side. He'd never lived anywhere else and didn't care to. Todd, on the other hand, had moved with his parents through a fair portion of the west.

When Todd's father died in a copper mine accident near Wellsville, Utah, his mother took a job in the county hospital. That had been little more than five years ago. The few chores to be tended to at home were easily handled by Todd's two sisters – one older by a year, the other just ten years of age. His mother was disappointed with her son's decision

to quit school and work the line, but the growing need for additional family income couldn't be denied either.

The area trisecting southern Idaho, southwestern Wyoming and northeastern Utah was prospering in the wake of a new wave of westward migration. In reality, the prosperous were few; the poor represented the majority. Emma Winters, her son Todd and daughters Sondra and Bernice, were among the majority.

Todd was startled when the image of a man appeared in the window he was looking out of, then realized it was the reflection of a passenger standing in the aisle.

"Yes, sir," Todd said, sounding as surprised as he appeared. "Can I be a help to ya...uh, reverend?"

A smiling, rather round man with a parson's collar and perhaps fifty years of age, stood in the aisle, gripping the back of the empty seat next to Todd and the one forward. "Gotta be careful on this stretch reverend. Much of this track is on the original road bed." As he spoke, he stood half upright beneath the overhead satchel rack. "The road's soft in places through here. We get to swayin' somethin' fierce at times."

"Sit down young man. You needn't give me your seat. I've one of my own up there," the man said, pointing. The smiling man dropped into the empty adjoining seat. Todd glanced over the tops of the other seats, hoping to contrive an excuse to head off to perform some meaningful duty. But, he wasn't quick enough. "Sit down, sit down," insisted the man. "I've already checked with the conductor. You're free to keep me company until our next stop."

Todd timidly reoccupied his seat, bumping his head on the overhead rack in the process. "Would you like an apple?" asked the preacher. "Oh, no thank you sir...uh, reverend," Todd replied. "I have two. Take one," the preacher insisted. He pulled the other apple from a pocket in his black wool coat and handed it to Todd, who took it. "Thank you," Todd said.

From another pocket, Todd's new traveling companion removed a small penknife, sliced off a piece of his own apple and began to eat. Todd rubbed his apple on his pant leg for a moment. He stopped abruptly, though, and quickly took an enormous bite, not wanting to suggest that the apple was not already clean enough to eat.

"The conductor told me your name. You're Todd, Todd Winters." The lilt in the man's voice and his sideward glance suggested the statement was a question. Todd replied, "Yeh...yes, sir," finding it hard to talk and chew with a full mouth. "I'm Floyd Brasket. I'll be going through to Washington...Washington, DC... for a conference on Indian diseases. I serve in the Laramie children's clinic."

The minister was still looking at Todd. Yet, Todd's basic preoccupation was with a lesson in consuming an apple with the unlearned delicacy he presumed was called for in

the presence of a religious gentleman. He wasn't sure what to expect or how to conduct himself. He'd never before spoken to official clergy and hoped down deep that preacher Floyd would either carry the conversation or go to sleep.

"How old are you, Todd?" "Sixteen," the boy responded.

"Sixteen. So you can't be much of a veteran at this job," suggested the preacher. "Just since last summer," Todd was quick to reply. "Two runs between Ogden and Chicago every week, sir." "Did you quit school?" he was asked. "Yes sir. Pa's dead. I got two sisters at home. Ma helps out in the hospital, but it ain't enough; it don't go far. I got me enough learnin' and the railroad gives me breakfast and dinner, a place to sleep half the week and three dollars every round trip. 'Bout as much as the county gives ma for six nights work in the hospital laundry." Todd sat back more relaxed now and took another bite from his apple.

"What ya planning to do with your life?" As the question was asked, the man covered the remainder of his apple in a handkerchief and placed it in one of his large coat pockets. He fumbled with the penknife while looking to Todd for an answer.

The boy knew he was looking directly at him. "Don't reckon I got any plans," he spoke thoughtfully and deliberately, suggesting this was the first time he'd ever contemplated the future. "Ma's spoken some 'bout an uncle, my pa's brother," he continued. "He's supposed to have a ranch somewhere in New Mexico and she mentioned I might care to learn the cattle business from him. But, there's no reason not to figure on stayin' with the U.P. I could be a fireman or even an engineer with time."

As Todd spoke, his eyes danced between the man next to him and the first light of dawn being revealed out the window. The minister's questions and his own response had surprised Todd. His mind was exploring a new dimension – his future.

Something hit the coach floor with a thud and Todd saw his apple wobble out of sight. He looked sheepishly toward parson Floyd, who pretended not to notice.

"My boy, did you ever consider that God might have plans for your life?" "Well, sir..." Todd tried to respond, but Floyd continued, "Have you ever given God a chance to show you His desires for your future?"

The concerned minister paused, apparently ready for Todd's answer. The boy was trying to recall his best religious vocabulary, hoping to provide Floyd with a suitable response.

"I expect the good Lord's powerful busy and so am I, helpin' Ma. I figure I can wait a spell 'til God's got the time to show me them plans. I believe He'll do it though reverend; believe he'll do it for sure." Todd sounded pretty sure of himself and felt pretty impressed with his spontaneous theology. He concluded, "Ma always is quick to say that we need to wait on the Lord, wait upon the Lord for His direction."

Parson Floyd smiled and nodded his approval. Todd slid back against the seat and suddenly became aware that his fingers were sticky from the juice of the apple.

For a few moments, the only sound was that made by the iron wheels rolling across the track joints and the squeaking of an oil lamp swinging from the coach ceiling. In those moments of quietness following the young man's remarks, a shift of moods was taking place. The boy no longer concerned with what to say, was now anxious to learn if what he had said had been found acceptable. Todd waited, searching the minister's expression for an indication. The minister, however, was now exhibiting the same distant, contemplative mood that had earlier preoccupied Todd. He gazed straight ahead, deep in thought and unaware of Todd's anxiety.

Then, the preacher spoke; quietly, thoughtfully.

"Wait on the Lord. Waiting upon...the Lord," he spoke to himself thoughtfully, methodically and barely audible. He paused, then continued slowly, more determined to be heard now, but not looking at Todd.

"I've spoken those words – that counsel – to many. To other brothers, to children at the school." He grinned and poked Todd's knee with a finger and flashed a squinting eye "even Sister Martha once." Todd didn't know who Sister Martha was, but Parson Floyd's smile caused him to sense some hidden humor. Todd moved to the seat facing the man so he could see Floyd's face better.

Floyd continued, "Is it my role to bide my time while the Father's clock ticks away moment of my life? Is that what I'm asked to do?"

"I do not believe that we are simply living out our lives according to a calendar God maintains for us. I don't feel that the milestones of my life are necessarily meant to occur at a certain time." The preacher, speaking more to himself than to Todd, shifted to the edge of his seat. He seemed to be thinking out loud and his voice and enthusiasm with the subject matter was creating within him a certain vigor, not that Todd really understood the discussion.

Floyd turned his attention to Todd and told him directly and with authority "My son, don't wait for the Lord, wait upon Him as a servant waits upon his master. Get him new believers. Provide Him with the spoken joys of your heart. Offer Him thanks and your praise. God is waiting for you, not you for Him."

Parson Floyd sat back in his seat, emotionally winded; pleased, satisfied. Todd listened intently as his teacher calmly continued.

"God gave us His Word in the scriptures, which are more than sufficient for our daily instruction. God is waiting. . . waiting for us; waiting to find us living according to the plan He's already given us so that he can proceed to the next milestone of our lives."

A cold gust of Nebraska winter washed through the coach as the conductor quickly shuffled through. "Rome Junction," he called from halfway down the aisle. The train was still three or four minutes from the coal and water stop and not yet slowing.

The gray light of dawn and a soft low fog occupied the scene outside the coach windows. The preacher looked to his left to survey the scene and then slid across the smooth leather cushion to gaze curiously through the glass. He sat back comfortably next to the window, then looked across to Todd again, who mirrored the preacher's move in his own seat.

"This train is moving across this land much as we move through life," the man continued. "A stop is ahead of us. A station and a station keeper. That stop is a permanent, unmoving spot." The changing rhythm of the track noise and the rate at which the telegraph poles appeared alongside the road bed, now indicated that the engineer was slowing the train. Awakened to his duties, Todd stood and stepped to the aisle, one hand gripping the ceiling luggage rack.

"Todd," the preacher questioned, looking up at the boy, "are we as travelers on this train waiting for the station to appear? Or, is the station keeper awaiting the arrival of us?" Pointing at him with a certain gentleness, he concluded, "are you waiting for the Lord or is He waiting for you?"

As the train slowed, the locomotive's smoke settled over the coaches to blend with the low fog. The brakes were squealing and Todd teetered on his heels. "I gotta be goin' sir. Better stay put here 'til we stop. I'll try to drop by later on."

Todd hesitated briefly, not really wanting to leave. But, he did so quickly at the reappearance of the conductor through the far door. "I'll stop by your seat later reverend," he said as he hurried down the aisle.

It was a full hour after leaving Rome Junction before Todd could return to the parson's coach. A large number of passengers had boarded during its stop and Todd had been kept busy securing their baggage, as well as an occupied, shiny bronze coffin.

Todd timidly scanned the seats as he walked the aisle. At one point he paused and backed up a couple of steps. What had appeared at a passing glance to be a large shape huddled beneath a dark blanket, turned out to be a motionless, large round preacher in a wool coat.

The young and pretty (he now noticed) Cleveland-bound girl sat in the window seat next to the reverend. She sat upright and held up a hand to attract Todd's attention, then placed a finger to her lips to signify the need to be quiet. The girl's pretty smile, a slight inaudible giggle and her eyes bouncing back and forth between Todd and the softly snoring preacher, stopped him from waking the man. Instead, he reached out and accepted from the young woman's extended fingers, a slice of an apple that she had cut with a familiar, tiny penknife. "You must be Todd," she spoke.