Opening extract from

Stop The Train

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The Red Rock Runner

LIKE a bad-tempered queue-jumper, the train rolled up against its buffers and gave a vicious jolt. Then it gave another, in the opposite direction—a jerk which travelled from one coach to the next, tipping passengers back into their seats or forward out of them. Skillets and coffee pots clattered to the floor. Above Cissy's head, a pair of spurs scraped on the carriage roof, and a saddle slithered past the window, flailing its stirrups. But still the train did not move off.

From end to end came the noise of men and children imitating the guard's whistle, but another ten minutes crawled by without the train making a move, and every second the carriage became hotter and hotter.

'I paid for first class tickets!' protested a latecomer, hopping up and down outside the carriage door in a red-faced rage.

'All first class on thissun,' said the Negro guard and he offered the latecomer a leg-up on to the roof. 'Make room. 'nother one a-coming!' he announced cheerily, and there was a crump and an outburst of curses from over Cissy's head. She had never in her life heard so many curses as she had heard today.

She glanced sideways at the couple alongside her: a pasty pair, both shaped like cottage loaves whose dough was still rising as they cooked in the sweltering heat. She half expected their crusts to turn brown. When they had got in and plumped themselves down beside her, they had smelt of cinnamon and biscuits, but now they smelt more like old cheese.

words fell from their mouths like peanut shells: Swedish.

The black-haired woman with the spade clenched between her knees glared at Mr Sissney as if he had asked to see her drawers, and Cissy's mother jabbed him in the ribs. It was not the done thing to ask where fellow 'runners' were headed. Though the people on board the Red Rock Runner might all be united in a single historical journey, each harboured separate dreams of where it was taking them. They would not endanger that dream by confiding it to a stranger.

Oklahoma's north-west had been opened up to settlers by Government decree, and tens of thousands of people—desperate, ambitious, hopeful, last-chance, stake-all, make-or-break, dare-all, nothing-to-lose people had become, overnight, a colony of ants moving their nest. Each one was intent on grabbing his own particular patch of the patchwork earth and on staking his claim to a future.

'We're going to Florence,' said Cissy, unhappy to see her father snubbed, hoping to smooth the scowl off the spade-wielding woman.

'All right, Cissy,' snapped her mother. 'The people don't want to know our business, thanking you kindly.'

The cottage loaves, though, had bulged forward in their seats, poppy-eyed with glee. 'Florence!' said the man, banging his chest with a blue-white hand.

'Florence, ja, ja! We go!' said his wife, and her cheeks, glistening with sweat, crimped like apple-turnovers.

Though most of the land-runners were dreaming of farms—of a future complete with a house and a barn and a cow and a harvest of corn—there were some with different ambitions. Every so often, on their patchwork-quilt map of Oklahoma, the Government had planned for a town—a centre where those homestead farmers could go for their supplies, for their entertainment, for their hair to be cut and their cash banked, their lawsuits settled,

down from Cissy's carriage. It remained as tight-packed as a jar of plums.

By four o'clock, Cissy had been lifted into the luggage rack, to ease the cramped seating. The luggage of three families lay under and on top of her, and she drifted in and out of a nightmarish dream in which she arrived in Florence to be told, 'No room! No room! No chairs left, but the baker says you can sleep in the bread oven!'

Drowsily she looked out of the window for the millionth time—then started so violently that a frying pan on her chest drove its handle into her chin. A huge black pyramid—like a haystack but for its colour—was moving across the landscape, slow and stately, keeping pace with the train. She could not see the wagon which supported it, nor the horses which pulled the wagon. The cargo alone was visible, now and then screened by blackjack trees, but keeping a course parallel with the railroad tracks. It was an omen, a portent. Cissy was sure of it.

In the suffocating heat, oppressed by boxes, blankets, and bins, half awake and kept in virtual ignorance of her parents' plans, Cissy saw plainly now the dismal warning behind this gloomy sight. Coffins, stacked twelve high and twenty deep, swayed with the motion of the cart and, as they swayed, they listed towards the passengers of the Red Rock Runner, as if beckoning them all on towards early graves.

Then above her, spurs scraped again on the carriage roof and someone shouted, *'Train stopping! Alight here for Florence and the Bison River!'*

but this was not Florence. This was Nowhere, in the State of Nowhere. An empty space waiting to be filled.

Others had got down out of other carriages: more would-be citizens of Florence. One man, in a dark suit, had no luggage but for a flaccid carpet-bag at his feet. What kind of man starts a new life in a good suit with nothing but a half-empty carpet-bag? The newness was hardly scuffed off his city shoes, Cissy noticed.

There was a middle-aged man in overalls and a woman's broad-brimmed straw hat, his baggage packed in two burlap sacks. There were a pair of brothers with a box of tools, a storm-door, and a bale of tar-cloth. There was a widow in black, with a net purse swinging from her wrist, a knitting bag, and a goat.

One family descended from the roof like an avalanche of melting snow—a tattered couple, eight children, and a grandmother, along with a chair, a tent, and several baskets, all of which spilled.

The Negro guard blew his whistle. A roar of protest went up—'There's one not off yet!'—and Cissy's father went to join a crowd of men at the rear of the train trying to help a man off-load a large, black, metal cube. 'A stove?' Cissy wondered. As the train pulled away, fellow passengers threw the man's hat out as well, and he shouted his thanks.

'What was it?' asked Cissy's mother above the clickety-clack of the train wheels turning.

'A safe,' said Mr Sissney in a voice full of wonder. 'Fancy that, though! A danged strongbox!'

'Language, Hulbert,' said his wife tersely. 'Hope you haven't hurt your back none. Last thing we need. You with a busted back.'

The sun glared down with the same raging ferocity as Cissy's mother. Cissy's heart seemed to come to the boil inside her, bubbling up into her throat. She knew she should not cry—that it would do nothing to soften the

wife, but he was much too far away—being a fuel merchant and a doctor's surgery and a law court.

'And over there—on that bit of up-ground, where the trees are?—that there'll be the church!' he shouted. *'White clapboard with a wind-vane and a little vestry out back for the sewing bee to meet in, Thursdays!'*

The newcomers eyed him, suspicious that Florence had already acquired its resident village idiot. Those who did not like his town planning moved down the non-existent high street to positions they preferred.

But Cissy had begun to see them—those ghost buildings, materializing out of the heat-wrinkled air—shop fronts and hitching rails, windows and shop signs, a schoolyard, a library, a stable. Her father climbed up on a wooden cabin trunk eighty paces away, and she had a clear view, through the arch of his bandy legs, all the way to the non-existent churchyard.

'And here's the municipal horse trough!' he declared, working his way back down the street.

''Taint so!' protested the mother of the eight children. 'That there's Pickard's telegraph office. Cain't you see the Morse key?' She was laughing as she said it.

Cissy's mother hooked her lips between her teeth so that the last trace of colour was lost from her pinched face. But her glare did not have the range to reach Hulbert and knock him off the cabin trunk.

'What am *I*, Poppy?' called Cissy, feeling her heels rise off the ground with excitement. 'What's going to be here, where I'm standing?'

'Well, you're the railroad station, nat'rally, kitten! Porters with hand carts. Buggies pulled up, waiting for folk off the Medford train. Folks buying tickets. A newsstand. Mail sacks down the end of the platform. Crates stacked up ready for shipping in the freight cars. This here's a railway town, see? Kinda place is always jumping.'

point living so close we get no sleep, and get cinder burns in our sheets and have the place fall down round our ears with the vibration. Didn't come all this way to sleep in a railyard.' He leaned back on his hands to admire the firefly stars. Cissy copied him, and the bigness of the starry sky made her feel better. At least it made Oklahoma feel a little smaller—not such an edgeless wasteland. Then a shape loomed out of the dark and she gave a squeal of fright.

But it was only the good-looking young man with the carpet-bag.

'Good evening, folks,' he said, white teeth catching the firelight. He sat down beside Cissy and she could smell the palm-nut oil on his well-groomed hair. Something about him made her heart beat quicker.

'Nathaniel Rimm,' said the young man. 'Well? Not quite the paradise you envisaged, I imagine? Nothing but a patch of dirt, in fact.' Hulbert Sissney sat more upright, whereas Hildy Sissney was finally persuaded to sit down. 'You fine people deserve better, and I have a proposition for you! Have an acid drop.' He produced a paper bag, its top already rolled back, and offered it round. Cissy was even more charmed by Nathaniel Rimm's speaking voice than by his bag of candy.

'Coffee, mister?' said Cissy's father.

'On behalf of the Red Rock Railroad Company, I am empowered to offer you fifty dollars—yes, fifty dollars—for your claim.'

Out came the money, offered, like the acid drops, to one face at a time. Mrs Sissney was a great deal more charmed by the money than by either sweets or speaking voice.

Hulbert lit his pipe. 'You made this offer to any folks else?'

Nathaniel leaned eagerly forwards. 'This is just between you and me.'

Nathaniel Rimm's eloquence, and Cissy began to feel tree roots underfoot as she stumbled uncertainly down to the waterside, the empty jug banging against her knees. The moon had gone behind clouds. The Bison River was hardly more than a trickle in the summer drought, and she could only fill one third of the jug by lying it on its side in the water. The insects were loud and biting. The dark was disorientating; she could feel her eyelids straining after more light.

And what eyes were watching her, as she crouched down, afterwards, to relieve herself? If the moon were to come out again, in this flat country, everyone from Cleo Springs to Wakoumis might see what she was doing. Waterside pebbles crunched against one another; she gave a squeal of alarm, lost her balance, and fell over on to her elbow. Something was moving about at the waterside—a mountain lion maybe, or Indians, or Mormons or vaudeville actors or any of the other dangers her mother had warned her about. Cissy tried to disentangle her shoe heels from her skirt hems. *'Who's there?'*

'Habakkuk Zebediah Warboys!' came the whispered reply. 'You a Indian?' It was a boy's voice, high and piping and scared.

Crossly, Cissy straightened her clothing, felt about for the jug and stood up. 'What's your mother do, buy names by the yard to sell by the letter?' But a part of her was pleased to hear another child's voice in this place-invented-by-adults. 'We're the grocery store. Came on the train. Cecelia Sissney.'

'That's not a name. It's a sneeze,' said Habakkuk, but he too moved towards the sound of a fellow child. 'We're the telegraph office. But you're going, ain't you?'

'Going?'

'Grandma says your dad ain't got the sticking power of a monkey on a greased pole.'

'Excuse me!' retorted Cissy. 'I don't know that

Nathaniel Rimm counting one dollar bills into her father's open palm.

'. . . others didn't . . . !' she panted, and found she hadn't the breath to say more. '. . . others didn't . . . !'

Hulbert Sissney closed his fist around the dollar bills, reached across, as though he were going to pat Rimm on the shoulder . . . and pushed the folded bills into his breast pocket. 'In that case, Mr Rimm, I believe I'll be staying, too. Hildy, be so good as to pass Mr Rimm his hat.'

Nathaniel Rimm did not seem very put out. He dusted the tails of his jacket, snapped the fastening of his carpet-bag. 'Don't decide now. I shall return in a while—when you have become better acquainted with Oklahoma. Goodnight, sir . . . madam.'

Hildy Sissney's eyes still rested longingly on the young man's breast pocket, her hopes dashed of ever again seeing so many notes back to back.

For the first time, Cissy realized something, and that something weighed like a stone on her stomach, as she lay wrapped in her blanket that night. She had seen that her mother was journeying to Oklahoma with bad grace—but then Mrs Sissney did everything with bad grace; it was just her way. What Cissy had not realized before was her mother's complete lack of faith in Florence, Oklahoma. She believed in none of those phantom stores and businesses. She did not believe a livelihood could be grubbed up out of this rectangle of balding earth. For Cissy, it was a scary feeling, to think of her parents pulling against one another—as though the legs on one body had set off to walk in two different directions.

The question was: which of them was right?