dream of crossing him. We had a lot of fun together, Hancock and his gang and me. Petty thievery, occasional break-ins (but never homes, you understand, just shops and warehouses), pranks and so on, and always some not too awful place to spend the night.

There were people who sought to hire us for various unsavory tasks but Hancock had the last word. We dealt only with those he trusted. We had a good reputation and did well for ourselves. Of course they paid us next to nothing but in those days food was pretty cheap, even in New York. And it was all we spent our money on. Well, smokes and beer for the older boys.

Anyhow, when I first got to Nebraska I used to dream about Hancock. The same dream, more or less; I had it many times. I was standing on the platform at the rear of the train, with Lem and Lillian behind me, and he was running along after, trying to catch up, begging us not to leave him. Unheard of for him to beg—he was scared of absolutely nothing, and didn't much care who came and went—but in my dreams he would be pleading and I'd be standing there, helpless, Lem's hand on my shoulder, unable to change a thing.

She was a fresh and lovely woman, Lillian. Or I should say, young woman, or even girl. She seemed so much older—I wasn't yet nine, and very ignorant besides—but I discovered that wasn't the case.

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That winter was very mild. And the one that came after. I remember because our first year Lem and I spent all of the cold months under the goose down comforter—"Warm enough yet, Lil?" he asked with a smile, every night—but the next two we hardly used it.

I remember also how Lem warned Oscar that our winters were a lot harder than in New York. Sitting there in the courthouse in Alma. When he said that the boy looked at him in a peculiar, astonishing way, almost like he was grown, a knowing way, not exactly disrespectful but almost despairing of the possibility of being able to discuss it. What was meant by 'hard winter' that is. And 'New York.' He looked steadily at Lem and I had doubts, terrible doubts. It was still a daily challenge to get along with Lem's family and my own aunt and uncle, never mind this strange child from a city far away. Who'd been through Lord knows what, things we couldn't imagine. Just then I almost wanted to give him back. But Lem—you know Lem, if he ever had a worry you never saw it—Lem just laughed and said the winters would be cold, long and cold, but much easier than in New York because Oscar would be with us, we'd all help each other out, and he patted his knee and Oscar climbed up onto it—already a bit old for that but he did—and I sup-

pose then it was done. It was decided. He was my new little brother, maybe my nephew or my cousin, but he was coming to live with us.

And after all that his first two winters were awfully mild.

Lem has been dead for a number of years and I am very, very old. Older than I should ever have been allowed to become. Almost everyone is dead. Lem's parents and older brothers and their wives, for instance, and several of their children. Even one grandchild that I know of, killed in an ambush in Vietnam.

My own parents passed before I was twenty. My mother's nieces are gone and their children widely scattered. My baby sister Frances is still living but has lost her mind entirely, is little more than a corpse, and I haven't seen her in years. Her husband died of a heart attack when Nixon was president. Her son—my wifeless, childless nephew Victor—is unheard from, at least by me, since 1987, twelve summers ago. Victor's sister, my niece Geneva, lives in Paris near the Louvre and writes to me regularly, sends me presents at Christmas time and photographs of her grandchildren. She's a darling but lives, as I say, in Paris, France, and chooses not to come home.

The friends I had are like riches that have all been robbed away. Sometimes I sit for hours recalling their faces and habits, their passages through my life; sometimes the merest thought of one makes me mournful and bitter. It can't be true they're all gone, can it? But it is.

Most of the people I talk to were born so long after I was that they haven't a clue about how I lived. Even my thirties and forties are just history to them. As time passes the old ways must be replaced and then forgotten but to some they stay real, vitally real, not for their substance or qualities—a train is not superior to an airplane, after all, it was just what was available—but because they were there. There with us. I rode that train to Omaha, to Des Moines, to Chicago. I've flown in airplanes too but no one is trying to take those

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from me. Whereas the railroad—the one that brought Oscar—is dead and gone.

It's very difficult to describe what it's like to last this long. You know how you go to a funeral and end up at the graveside and the clergyman is talking or they're shoveling in the dirt and you look at the mourners and the markers all around and somehow rise from your immersion in the recently departed who is, after all, completely and thoroughly dead, entirely erased, despite the prayers and the eulogies and grieving hearts, and realize that no one will escape, one day all these people will be dead and you'll be dead too and the marker on this grave will lose its meaning altogether and become merely a cryptic message for passersby to ignore?

Oscar is alive, of course, but Edna is long gone. Like us they had no children of their own.

"Hank and Betty are heading over to Alma tomorrow," he told me. My eye were still closed. In those days I kept them closed, almost, from the beginning until the end. Even when it was dark. I don't think it suited Lem but as always he made allowances. He may have assumed that I was shy, or even afraid.

I waited for Rascal to finish his nightly barking at the wind.

"To see the orphans?"

"The New York orphans."

"Just to see."

"Well, yeah," he said, chuckling a little and turning over. "Just to see."

This was late in October. The harvest and slaughter were finally finished, over at Lem's folks' place; the smokehouse and the hayloft and the corn crib were full, their root cellar and ours fully stocked. He had time, at long last, for something other than work or me.

I wasn't the least bit afraid, not ever. I probably was a little shy but I imagine there were very few women of nineteen in the Nebraska farm country in 1922 who weren't a little shy in bed with their husbands. Even those who adored it. Like me. Not my pleasure but

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his. I don't know why but I had a keen sense of how it was for him, what it felt like, the promised land that opened up and stretched to the horizon the first time he took me, *his* Lillian, knowing I was there waiting for him to do it again, every night, that I *wanted* him to, because I was sure he had never, I knew he'd never but I also knew he'd thought about it every single day since he was thirteen, probably, and here was his time at last. That he found me so desirable, that I was one of those pretty girls he'd been watching all those years and now was his, that holding and kissing and stroking me made him so hugely excited—all this was highly satisfying. If anyone deserved pleasure Lemuel K. Hanover did, and I was able to provide it. Just by welcoming his presence. Just by my hands on his back.

I kept my eyes closed for a year because I didn't want to spoil it. I didn't want, for even an instant, to see him look awkward or foolish. For him to mistake something in my gaze, to know a moment of doubt. I was afraid I might somehow fail him.

I was afraid I might laugh for joy.

Naturally we had nothing for a child, nothing at all. As soon as we got him home we put out the word, though, and between Lem's family and mine and various friends we collected quite a lot, clothing and books and games and so on, within a fairly short time. We didn't want to overwhelm him or magnify the importance of things, especially for a boy who'd had so little, so we just passed them on to him in a casual and occasional fashion. And in truth he didn't seem to take very much notice.

I'd had few childish things myself. My parents had little to spend on me, and even less for toys. But I did have a doll—Cindy Lou was her name. She meant a lot to me, that doll. We went everywhere together. And she was a tough one, Cindy Lou. Between my care and Mother's repairs she somehow held herself together over quite a few years until I finally got older and stopped playing with her, put her up on the bureau, next to the mirror into which I was suddenly spending a good deal more time looking.

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And there she stayed, I could have sworn, until my move to Spring Valley. But she never came with me. I didn't notice until the wedding, until after the wedding, my mother's passing and the wedding, Lem carrying me through his door, and then I wanted her rather badly. I searched the house before it was sold but she was gone.

This house is much too big and inspires some sadness in me but moving's not worth the trouble. As long as I can get by. No one is clamoring for the space I'm taking up, or eager for an inheritance, and I've money enough to pay all the people who come in. On occasion it's hard to be here but there is plenty of comfort too. When Oscar visits it's like old times. Almost like old times. Puts us in mind of old times, that is, of times so long ago that we share a quiet amazement. How could it be? I am—impossibly—ninety-six, and even he is eighty-five. We've known each other, been family now for almost seventy-seven years. How do you explain a thing like that?

He was a scrawny little boy. Small for his age. Very polite. If he had any doubts at all he didn't show them.

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They almost beat me to death. That was the worst of it, you know. Of my whole time out there. If Hancock hadn't come along they might have finished me off.

"Where you from?" he asked at last, when he had driven them away and we had been silent for a while, him sitting on the stoop like he was taking the air in his grand, jaunty rags, me bleeding on the sidewalk.

I sat up, slowly. "Saint Joseph's." I tried not to vomit.

"Run away?"

"Yeah."

"How come?"

"Fed up."

"Fine time for it," he said. "Whyn't you bust out in spring?"

He pulled a piece of dirty cloth out of his pocket and tossed it at me. It was better once I got the blood out of my eyes.

He laughed. "Ain't you a sight?" Then he stood and looked down the street, the way they'd run. "Couple a real toughs, knockin' the crap out of a little guy like you." He spat and took half a bagel out of his pants, started chewing. "Course I seen you had your chances to get away and didn't take 'em. Did you want to be killed?"

"I guess not."

He held out his other hand, helped me up.

"Goin' back?"

"Not likely."

Until that moment I hadn't known what I was going to do. I hadn't been out very long, not long enough to get really hungry, even. Half a day and a night. I had taken the banana less because I wanted breakfast than because I figured it was the way I ought to behave. I had been told how easy it was, most of the time, if you watched in the early morning as they were setting up, going in and out of the back and so on and so forth, not many people about. And it had worked, or would have if those boys hadn't seen me.

"Let's get goin'," said Hancock. People were starting to pass and they were all looking at us. He led me into the alley.

"How'd it happen?"

"I took a banana from the stand."

He laughed. "Kid, you can't just do as you like. You know all those rules at Saint Joe's? We got rules too. This is their block; you can't waltz in here and take their bananas."

I may have been from Saint Joseph's, but not stupid. Not very.

"*You* could, if you wanted to."

He laughed again. "Sure. But not you." We turned into another alley, that led up to a rickety fence with some ash cans along the bottom. There was a rotten meat smell. "That was right of them to fight you. You deserved it. I'd of done the same thing."

"How come you ran them off me then?"

"They didn't have to *kick* you," he said, motioning for me to climb the fence. "Not do you so bad. Just a little." Exasperated by my hesitation, standing on top of a can, he grabbed me by my waistband and practically heaved me onto the fence. I caught the top and scrambled over. It was a long way down on the other side, and there was junk at the bottom, some of it nasty looking, so I closed my eyes and leapt. It hurt plenty when I landed—they really had knocked the crap out of me—but I tried not to show it.

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"What's your name?" he asked me when he'd followed. I was still on all fours.

"Oscar."

He offered his hand again, but I stood up on my own.

"So Oscar, you don't do nothin' without knowin' whose block you're on, OK?" He started off down the alley and I followed.

"Do they have families?"

He stopped and turned around. "Who?"

"Those kids. I mean, are they on the street?"

"Nah. They got families. Eight in a room, eat maybe once a day, get strapped for no reason when their mom or pop is stewed. But they got families."

I really had been fed up. Not so much with the rules and cold treatment—decent treatment, not harsh really, they'd never laid a hand on me at Saint Joseph's but there was zero warmth there, absolutely none, when you cried they looked through you—but with the pointlessness of that life. Where would it lead? Months went by and nothing was changing, I wasn't gaining anything, just getting older and less appealing, less able to excite pity or concern. As little as anybody cared they'd care much less when my voice changed. Nearly eight years old with no idea of what it meant to 'have a family' and I didn't think I'd find out, but anything had to be better than going nowhere that way.

"You're on the street."

He stopped and turned again. "You'd chat the scanties right off a hooker, wouldn't you?"

"Sorry."

"Of course I'm on the street. What do you think, you little simp? Take a look at me, for crysake."

I knew he didn't mean his rags.

"If you think it's so swell to 'have a family,' go find one, kid." He walked away.

"Wait." I ran after. "Who're you?"

"I'm Hancock."

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"Hancock, I was just asking. I don't know anything about families. I'm an orphan."

"Who cares?"

I knew better than to inquire as to how long he'd been one, or how it happened, or anything else at all. The shock and confusion were wearing off and I was getting awfully scared, beginning to appreciate what I'd done, where I had landed. But I knew he could take care of himself.

We came to an old basin filled with rainwater and he motioned for me to wash. Which I did. I understood I was conspicuous, wearing the signs of my beating. I couldn't do anything about the blood stains on my shirt but after I'd scrubbed my face and slicked my hair, fixed up my clothes as best I could, I was sure I looked better. Certainly his rags were more noticeable than my stains, which would keep my decent clothes from being more noticeable than his rags.

In a few yards we came out on Second Avenue and turned north.

"We're goin' uptown a ways," he said. "I got a job to take care of." We walked a block or two together. The sun was all the way up and there was lots of activity—it was a somewhat more well-to-do neighborhood—shops all opening up, plenty of pushcarts and wagons and trucks, men going to work and kids to school.

"The reason I ran 'em off you," said Hancock, "is they should pick on someone their size. The reason I stuck around is you didn't make no noise when they was beatin' you up. I seen you try to fight back and not shout or beg or nothin'. The reason I'm takin' you with me is you didn't scream or cry when you come down off that fence, even though it hurt like Jesus. So keep your mouth shut, OK?"

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I met him at the church fair. Just like these things are supposed to be. We were properly introduced, by my cousin I was staying with, and I saw his eyes go wide.

"You two ladies," he asked at once, seizing the day, "wouldn't like to have some ice cream with me, would you?"

Letitia rolled her eyes. "Oh Lem," she said, "aren't you the charmer? It just so happens we're expected by my mother very shortly." She was often quite sarcastic, and played at being hard to get. She was a town girl, which I was not. I looked up to her for her nice outfits and her ease, her self-assurance. Later on I found out she had her eye on him herself. Typical of Lettie that she would go out of her way to bring me to his attention, as if it couldn't do any harm.

"How shortly is that?" he asked. "I heard the ice cream's pretty good and I haven't seen you in a while, Lettie. Like to hear your news and all."

She sighed. "I suppose we'd be rude not to let you treat us, wouldn't we?"

He turned to me. "Miss Thurman?"

"Yes, I like ice cream."

Lettie howled.

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Over at the picnic tables, in the shade, he looked around until he found an open spot. “Sit down, won’t you?” he said. “I’ll be with you in just a minute.”

“His people are farmers like yours, Lil,” said Lettie as we watched him move away. “Like yours were.” She said it as if we weren’t surrounded by farmers in every direction. As if hers hadn’t been farmers too. Letitia’s father, my mother’s brother Arthur, had left the homestead, gone to work at a feed store, now had one of his own. Married a big strong farmer’s daughter, my Aunt Grace, now a prominent lady in town. They had three girls, Lettie the oldest, and a handsome house on the corner, lots of trees, with a large parlor and plenty of bedrooms. Including a spare for my sister and me.

“You know him from school?”

“Where else? Although he quit after the tenth grade. Still came to all the dances though. And they sit in the next pew but one.”

As Lem came toward us, carrying two dishes, I tried to imagine him as a schoolboy. It wasn’t easy. He was tall and somewhat good-looking, not enough for it to show much in his overalls, probably, all sweaty in the cornfield, but he had spruced up considerably, put on town clothes and shaved and brushed, and he would do.

I sat silent for a while, slowly spooning strawberry ice cream, while they gossiped about their classmates. It was sunny but not as hot as it had been the whole previous week. Since I’d arrived there, in fact.

“What brings you to Spring Valley, Miss Thurman?” Lem asked me, sitting back a bit on the bench.

“Her mother has gone into the hospital in Grand Island, Lem,” said Letitia, “and she’s come to stay with us.”

“I can speak for myself, Letitia,” I said quietly.

She looked wounded. “Just trying to help.”

“Of course you are,” said Lem.

“I’m sorry, Lil. You’ve been so shy.”

“Please don’t mention it.”

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Lem smiled at me. "Many's the time your cousin has helped me with my own shyness, Miss Thurman. It's her generous spirit." Looking back on this exchange I am amused by how much I learned about Lem, all in a few seconds. About his own generosity, and his humor, and exactly how shy he wasn't. And his interest in me rather than Lettie, truth be told.

"Your father?" he asked.

"Passed away during the war."

"I'm so sorry," said Lem.

"He caught influenza in Saint Louis."

"I'm so sorry, Miss Thurman. I hope your mother is expected to recover?"

"She's not, I'm afraid."

I saw Lettie look triumphant before I turned my face away.

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The way it happened was we were sitting at the kitchen table, just finishing our dinner—Lil made a nice chicken stew that I couldn't get enough of the first months I was there—and Lem started sniffing the air. Just like Rascal. At first I thought he was clearing his nose but then I saw the worried look and I started sniffing too. Absolutely something burning. He started to rise but I was closer to the range and I looked around and saw this little curl of smoke coming from one of the cabinets next to the chimney, so I stood up and pulled it open and it was like looking into hell. The flames were raging.

I flung it shut (I'd burned my hand but didn't realize until later) and Lem was galvanized right away. Told her to take me up to the Curriers, then grabbed the phone and reported the fire, then started looking for things to save. She led me across the road and up the hill and went back to help him and the Curriers went too (they gave me a blanket first) and I stood there despite the cold (this was late in January) and watched that house burn to the ground.

I had been there long enough. I had been in the attic. That was where they'd put the toys they'd collected for me, games and balls and books from Lem and his brothers and oh, there were so many interesting things up there. I thought it would all disappear. They

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were going in and out until the last possible moment and they were able to save a lot of the worthwhile things, in the end, the things that couldn't be replaced, including much of that attic, but I didn't understand. I was too young to understand. I thought it would all be gone.

I don't remember worrying about the people, just the things.

And then there was Rascal. I imagine he was scared. We tried to take him up the hill with us but he resisted and broke away—scared and frustrated too, I guess—and ran back and hid beneath the porch. He expired in the fire.

Seems like awfully bad luck. That it wasn't just the house, but Rascal too—I don't know. I was safe, and Lem and Lillian. I still had my place. But I'd had such a ridiculous childhood until that point. I was missing so much. When I told you before that I had no identity, no role, you just passed over it, didn't you, without pausing to think what that might be like. I'm not sure you could ever really see it anyway. Lem and Lillian meant nothing to me, the truth is, or rather they meant everything but nothing I understood. I had no real grasp of their behavior, no clear sense of my worth to them, no way to describe, even to myself, what our relations had come to be. Whereas a house and a dog—things I had wanted all my life, things only rich people had, things that neatly represented the non-orphan life—I knew how blessed I was to get those. And how I grieved that they were gone.

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The way it happened was my husband made a mistake. It wasn't like him to do so but there it was, plain as day.

When Oscar pulled the door open I saw the smoke, certainly, and just as surely flame below it, but my impression was of a fire that could still be contained. If we acted very quickly. I wanted to grab the bucket and try but Lem wouldn't have it, he stopped me, he thought it beyond our control and there was no way to change his mind. He made me take Oscar out while he called into town. He actually cursed and I had to obey. I felt I had to. I've regretted my actions for over seven decades now but in those days when your husband bade you do something, you did it. Especially with that sort of alarm.

Precious minutes were lost and by the time I got back it certainly was much too late. Lem was very organized and rational about what he hauled out, actually, and gave me and Ida and Richard very clear instructions, so maybe he was right in the first place. Maybe nothing could have stopped it. And his priorities were good; we saved the child and ourselves, and most of the heirlooms and other possessions that mattered most, that had value, and the building was replaceable. All's well that ends well.

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Still I've always been sorry. Maybe it's just that I missed that house so much, felt such doom in its destruction, that I've held on, all these years, to the idea that it might have been saved, that in this one instance he failed me.

And Rascal, also. We found his body the next morning. Of course we kept it from Oscar. We just said he'd run away.

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Saint Joseph's was just the last stop on the line. Or the second to last, actually, if you count Childrens Aid, where I went to sign up for the train. I was passed around plenty. I don't know, it could have been something in my eyes or my manner, maybe I gave them the impression that I'd never take root and grow. Like a houseplant that would die if you stuck it in the ground; better to move it back and forth from the windowsill to the counter, and out to the fire escape in summer. They meant to keep me alive and healthy but never to make me a part of anything permanent, apparently. Just a portable accessory. I don't know what they imagined they were preserving me *for*. At sixteen, I suppose, they would have kicked me out on my own, on the assumption that they'd in some way prepared me to get a job, raise a family, never bother them any more.

By that time the notion that you were of good or bad blood had more or less fallen by the wayside among the relatively enlightened sort who cared for the likes of me, but still they might somehow have held my origins against me. I mean the grocery, the beans. The clean mundanity of it all. Not a tragic figure, really, or even a victim, but just a blank foundling, a zero. I was not a missing piece. Early on I must have been a perfectly appealing adoptee—thanks to the Internet and the kid who cuts Lillian's grass and the Orphan Train

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Historical Society of Davis, Arkansas, I have a photo I'm pretty sure of, I was a cute little boy—but no one ever chose me. Which I suspect was because they didn't want me chosen. They couldn't have tried very hard. Something about me, as I say, though what it was I can't tell you. In fact I know it was a relief to all the staff at Saint Joseph's when I left and didn't come back.

Which leaves it open to speculation why Lem acted as he did. He always loved to talk about how they had come to town that day without the slightest desire for a child. Never even occurred to them. He used to say, "I was blind, but God made me see." He was a young man, after all, and though it had been a whole year he and Lillian still hoped for one of their own.

To me it's somewhat amusing that nowadays so many people have the expectations they do, of infants to be had for the asking. If you don't get knocked up right away you go to a doctor for a hundred procedures, then maybe try to line up a third party to use their seed or egg or womb, and if it's still no dice and no local babies to hand you can go to Cambodia or Guatemala or China. In those days childless couples simply endured.

I think that was part of what made the trains so intriguing wherever they stopped, for decades, aside from the thrill of gawking at the city kids (and, let's face it, the appeal of free labor): the idea that you make such a transformative change in almost the wink of an eye. Redraw your life so dramatically in a single afternoon. Of course many of us were taken by households that already had children—mostly as workers or servants, not sons or daughters at all—and most placements were lined up beforehand. So it wasn't all that sudden or magical, in fact. Hardly ever. But it was possible, always.

And in my case lives were altered in exactly that fashion. Was it God, as Lem said? Was it Lem? Was it me? I had changed on the street, I have to admit, I'd really changed, I was a different boy that fall than I'd been the fall prior. I wanted what I hadn't known enough to want before. Maybe my yearning caught his eye.

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I remember the woman at Childrens Aid. She was smiling as I pushed through the door and walked to her desk.

"I want to go on one of your trains, please."

She laughed. "Hold on, young man. What's your name?"

"Oscar Allen."

"Where have you been?"

"On my own, ma'am." She would have known that by my appearance. "Before that I was at Saint Joseph's and a few of the other homes."

"So I suppose the people at Saint Joseph's have been looking for you."

"Maybe last winter."

"It's been some time since you ran off."

"Yes, ma'am. I left last October."

She eyed me for a long while, that woman. Miss Ballou as I later learned. A social worker. Her hair was yellow and she wore it behind her in a bun, and smelled heavenly.

"You've managed pretty well, I see," she said. "Have you kept out of trouble?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"With the police, I mean."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What brings you here now?"

I wouldn't answer.

"Well, Oscar," she told me, kindly, "we have a number of forms to fill out before we can make any decisions. But for the moment I expect you want a meal. And a bath, how does that sound? And some new clothes?"

"Excuse me, ma'am, like I said, I want to go on a train."

"Wouldn't you rather we found you a family here in New York?"

"I want to go on a train."

After studying me some more she surprised me by smiling again. But it was sadder.

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"I don't know what you've heard," she said, "but the trains don't go as often as they did."

I told her, "I can wait."

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