

A sepia-toned photograph of a wide river. In the background, a factory with several smokestacks is visible, with thick white smoke rising into the sky. The water in the foreground shows gentle ripples and reflections. The overall tone is historical and atmospheric.

River Ice

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For Rose



Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of HATE
To say that for destruction ICE
Is also great
And would suffice.

—"Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost

CHAPTER ONE

On an icy winter evening in 1930 Lewis Seagrove leaned against the wooden utility pole and attempted to stave off the full force of the biting wind from the Ohio River. He waited at the unlit crossing for a northbound train pulling coal cars from the downtown Cincinnati switching yard. The Salvation Army coat he had purchased for fifty cents offered little protection from the freezing January air. By nine o'clock the winter fog had rolled in and added to the dampness. Even before he saw the train, he could feel it shake the ground. As the vibrations grew stronger he stepped from behind the creosote-treated pole, glad to get away from the acrid smell.

Lewis checked to be certain the two burlap sacks were secure in his coat and then he blew into cupped hands to warm the fingers that protruded through holes in the gloves. A single amber light appeared through the fog. He squatted several times to loosen his stiff, cold muscles and waited for the train to approach. A warm blast of air from the engine was quickly replaced by the frigid wind of passing coal cars. He began to run alongside the third car.

An ice storm had enveloped the city of Cincinnati earlier that evening, and Lewis knew the icy metal would be hard to grip. Once, years ago, he'd seen a man who had slipped under a train, or at least he'd seen what was left of him. He knew the need for caution. Lewis lurched at the ladder and gripped the third rung with his right hand. After pushing off with his feet, he swung around and grabbed hold with his free hand. He pulled himself up so that his boots were secure on the bottom rung.

Heart pounding, Lewis looped his arm around the ladder rung to rest for a moment before climbing into the coal car. Knowing there were less than seven minutes to be off the car before it began to pick up speed, he heaved himself up and over the edge and landed two feet down on his back in the coal. Rolling over on his hands and knees, he felt for the larger pieces and threw them over the side. Each joint in

the track reverberated through the old train car, lifting him off his hands and knees every few seconds. As he landed on the chipped, jagged edges of the coal again and again, the jolts sent sharp pains through his knees and palms. The steam whistle screeched its low-high-low crossing warning, and Lewis knew he was out of time.

He clambered to the rough metal edge of the car and clasped the ladder. The combination of ice on the metal and black dust on his boots proved too much for any kind of traction, and his gloves and boots slipped from each icy rung but when he reached the last one, his right hand grip held. With his feet dragging in the cinders at track side, his hold loosened each time his boots hit the wooden ties. Desperate now, he summoned all his strength, heaved hard, clumsily swung around, and grabbed the rung with his left hand. When both hands were on the ladder, he pulled himself painfully up and hooked his elbow around the next icy step. Finally in position, he realized he had lost precious time and had passed the safety of the open dirt alongside the road crossing. He took a deep breath of the freezing air and pushed himself into the darkness of the night.

The biting cold pierced his body as he fell toward the ground. Ice-coated branches of a shrub near the side of the track scratched his face as he glanced around to make sure no one had seen him. After several minutes' rest Lewis began the mile-long walk back down the track, filling his burlap sacks with the tossed coal as he went. Back where he had started, he hoisted the sacks on his shoulders and headed home.

Lewis saw several shadows standing just out of the light at the first crossing. "Hey, Cap'n, you going somewhere with that coal? Why don't you just drop 'er right there," one of them yelled.

The men moved closer to the light and Lewis noticed one of them held something at his side. A piece of chain, maybe? "I ain't dropping nothing, friend. I just worked my ass off to get this coal." The other two men (one of them maybe a colored kid?) said nothing.

“My coal, you mean. Just drop ‘er there orst I’ll have to come and get it. You don’t want that, trust me there, Cap’n.”

“If you try you’ll find out if I brought my pistol tonight. I promise you that. You want to see if that chain’s enough if I did? There’s plenty of coal I didn’t pick up that you can get. Better that than the kind of trouble you’re asking for here.”

The three men seemed to talk, maybe laugh? “No harm, Cap’n, we was just messing with you.” And they were gone into the night.

With the trouble past, at least Lewis knew his family would have coal for their small stove. He wondered how much longer he could roll coal. Thirty-five is not old but it isn’t seventeen either, he thought. And how much longer could his family cope with these hard times?

Lewis yelled up to his wife, Bernice, from the street below their apartment. He could hear the relief in her voice saying she would warm his supper. Lewis began breaking up the largest pieces of coal with a hammer he kept hidden on the side of his building.

At one time the golden maple floors in their second-story apartment had a finish on them, but that was long gone. The once-white plaster walls were now yellowed from the soot of the coal stove. Old sheets covered the windows, and by sewing a border along the bottom, Bernice had made them as much like store-bought curtains as possible.

The kitchen had a four-burner coal stove with an oven, the only source of heat. The old porcelain sink was now more brown than white, from stains that Bernice had tried unsuccessfully to remove with Bon Ami. It was a common sight to see the barely over five-foot-tall woman pushing hair from her face with her forearm as she rocked back and forth scrubbing the sink. The wooden countertop was marred with cuts turned black with age.

On a good day there might be hot water, if the building super had kept coal in the old boiler in the basement. Being the largest room in the apartment, the kitchen was also used for bathing. An old galvanized washtub would be set near

the stove where everyone took a bath, usually once a week. Starting with twelve-year-old Dorothy, the three children would bathe in order.

The living room held a collection of mismatched stuffed chairs, a coffee table Lewis had built, and an end table almost completely occupied by their old Philco radio. On Sunday evening the entire family would sit by the radio and listen to the Shadow, a character in the popular radio show *The Detective Hour*. Sitting on Lewis' lap, his seven-year-old son Charlie would try to hide in his dad's jacket when he was scared.

After unloading his sacks of broken coal in the kitchen Lewis sat at the kitchen table to thaw his frozen fingers. "I had to chase those damn hobos away from the coal again," he complained to Bernice. "Second time this month. Same couple of bums as last time except this time I think there was some colored kid with them. It was dark, but I think so."

"Should be only a couple more months of winter, Lewis. After that we can get by with less," Bernice said as she put his supper on the table. She pulled out a chair and sat next to him. "The school's got a new rule. If you live across the tracks you can bring lunch, but if you live on this side of the tracks you have to come home for lunch. Just don't seem right to have children small as Charlie walking a half-mile home and back again in this weather. Charlie always gets sick so easy. It's not like we're rich just because we live on this side of the track, you know."

"Well, if I still had that old Chevy, you could drive them," Lewis said between bites. He was fond of the Chevy but had sold it for food and rent money when he couldn't find work.

"Nothing we can do about it," Bernice sighed. "The school says they just can't deal with so many hungry children. I guess times are tough for everyone. Still, don't make it right for my kids. Maybe Dottie it's okay, but Bridget is ten. That's too young for traipsing through the snow for lunch. I ought to take them out of school—it's not like anyone would care."

“We both know you don’t mean that. Maybe you’re right about the weather. It’ll break soon, and it won’t be so bad. Or just tell the school Charlie and Bridget are staying there for lunch—period. I’m sick of everyone reminding me how poor I am. When’d the kids go to bed?” Lewis asked as he put his plate into the sink.

When the kids got ready for bed, they would wrap themselves in blankets and stand by the stove until the blankets were warm and then run to the bed. Bridget and Charlie shared a bed, but Dorothy had her own. Lewis and Bernice’s small bedroom was crowded with a double bed, a chest of drawers, and one lamp.

Wearing the day’s toils in her expression, Bernice sighed, “Charlie fell asleep around eight, the girls by nine-thirty. Dottie’s driving me crazy to cut her hair short. I swear I don’t remember a time when she didn’t have long hair. Anyone with the dark, silky hair she has shouldn’t never cut it. I should let her cut it, though—we might be able to sell it. You know, she’s four-feet-ten now, Lewis. She’s growing up so fast it’s impossible to keep her in clothes. And poor little Charlie. I don’t think he’s ever going to reach four feet,” Bernice answered.

“Charlie will have a spurt and shoot up like a weed. I know I was short until I was a teenager. Sometimes when I was out with friends people would ask them if they were going to join the army and fight in the war. Not one time did anyone ever ask me.”

“You know, it’s easy to forget about that war. What did the people in England end up calling it, the Great War? Remember how the army would send a telegraph to the family of a soldier who was killed? They had those men on bicycles deliver them. You remember, the bikes had a bell on the handlebars. During the day moms would be sitting on the stoop of their tenement building and if they had a son or husband in the army, when they heard the telegraph man ring his bell coming down the street they would go in their apartment and

shut the door. Like it couldn't be a telegraph for them because they had locked their door. I guess when you think about that what we're going through isn't as bad as it could be."

"It can always be worse, but that don't make it easy. I'm beat—let's go to bed."

Lewis was up twice during the night putting coal into the stove and checking on the children. The next morning he sat next to Bernice at the old wooden kitchen table and cut thick pieces of cardboard to put into his boots where a hole had worn through the leather of the sole.

"There's a good chance I'll get laid off from the docks, you know. Freight's down to near nothing. If I can get another job, I sure hope it's inside. Feels like winter is never going to end. I'm tired of being cold. I heard there's a job at the library. Mopping floors. It pays twenty-five cents a week and you only have to do it twice a week. Only thing is they make you sign a paper saying you got no other work. That don't seem right. If a fella has to work some extra, how can they say no if he's got some other job?"

Dorothy was hurrying into the kitchen as Bernice lowered her voice, "Do you think it's easy running this house, Lewis? I know it's rough out there but when you have enough mush for one kid and try to stretch it for three kids it isn't easy for me either. If you lose your job, we'll get by."

Lewis frowned as he looked up at Bernice. "You know, I'm tired of dealing with it. I know it ain't easy for you but, hell, I made more money five years ago. This just ain't right. Maybe them fellas jumping off buildings when all this started was right. I see men out on the tramp every morning when I'm going to work. I know we got a place and all, but damn. Used to be I could jump in the car and take off. Now I ain't even got a car. If I did I couldn't buy gas anyway."

Lewis lowered his voice when he saw Dorothy was in the kitchen, the blanket wrapped tightly around her. Trying to put on her best "grown-up" face, she slowly approached Lewis and said, "I need to talk to you about something, Dad, and

don't say no 'til you think about it. I can buy a newspaper route for five dollars. It's got fifty customers, and I can earn four cents a customer each week if you and Mom can lend me the money. I could pay you back in a couple months."

He was caught off guard but reacted quickly, saying no. He didn't want any of his children to work to support his family. "Working's my job," he said.

"Just think about it," Dorothy interrupted. "I buy the papers for five cents for the whole week and sell them for nine cents. I just need money to get started." Giving her best "Please, Daddy" look, she went on, "Jeepers, Grandma was fourteen when she married Grandpa, and I'll be thirteen this summer. I can help if I want to. Two dollars a week's lots of money, and on the weekends Bridget and Charlie can walk with me. There are fifty people already taking the paper, and most of them are in the tenements, so one building might have four or five papers. The only thing I want for me is a new pair of shoes. Mine are so small they hurt."

Lewis felt the sting of wounded pride at the mention of Dorothy's ill-fitting shoes. "My breakfast is ready. Let me eat, and I promise that your mother and I'll talk about it. Now get back to bed and be quiet. You don't need to be up for school for another hour." Lewis just smiled as he watched his eldest child leave the room.

"Lewis, is there any way we can get Dottie some shoes? I told her to wear mine. She could stuff some paper in the toes and they'd fit okay, but she said some kids already make fun of her one dress and she isn't wearing her mom's shoes for nothing."

Shaking his head, Lewis said, "I've looked the last two times I was at the Goodwill and there was nothing, but I'll check again. They say these hard times are called a 'depression.' I don't even know what a depression is but I hate this."

A few days later, early on a Sunday morning, with the streetlight below reflecting off the frost-covered window panes, it was obvious a snow storm had swept through the city. Wearing both pairs of pants he owned, Lewis quietly left

the apartment and walked to the city maintenance yard. If it was shoveling coal into a coal bin for the coal company or shoveling snow, if he could pick up extra work, Lewis never missed a chance. Even on this overcast morning the glow from the street lamps on the snow reflected a soft light on the city buildings. The silence was interrupted only by the sound of the electric buses as the overhead cables snapped at the joints in the lines. Sometimes small showers of sparks floated toward the white-covered pavement.

He knew his children would be out playing soon. A small, shallow pond at the city park nearest their home was one of the first places to freeze. Park employees would chop a hole at the edge to check the thickness of the ice before allowing children on it. The pond was at the bottom of a long hill, and the children would get a piece of cardboard and slide down the snowy hill and across the ice. Even so, Lewis worried. After all, there was frigid water below the ice. That and the fact that more than once his children had come home with bruises from bouncing on the frozen pond.

At the maintenance yard the crew foreman for the street department regularly walked along a line of men gathered to pick up work. If he threw a man a snow shovel, that man could shovel sidewalks for a dollar cash. This Sunday he picked Lewis. When the crew truck dropped him off, he knew the foreman would expect twelve blocks to be shoveled, down to Shillitoe's Department Store and back, by the time the driver picked him up a few hours later. By then all the businesses were closed except for a couple of diners. Twice before, Lewis had been told to get out if he wasn't going to eat, so he fought off the temptation to step in and warm up. Outside, he just stood over the storm sewer grates to allow the warm air to be trapped, if only momentarily, between the two layers of his pants.

As he waited for the maintenance truck to take him back to the yard, Lewis was aware of two disheveled men heading toward him. It was getting more difficult to recognize the difference between hoboes and men who had been forced out

on the street. Down-and-out family men, out on the tramp, would ask for work; the bums for money. As the two men approached, Lewis stood. "Hey, bub, how's about a little money for me and my friend?" one of the hoboes asked with a half-sneer on his dirt-encrusted face.

As he looked the two men over, Lewis answered, "What money? What do you think I'm doing here? I wouldn't be out here freezing to death if I had money, would I? What the hell's wrong with you?"

As one of the men stepped closer to Lewis, he whispered, "You ain't doing this for free. We know you done got paid a dollar for this shoveling. All we need's some coffee money. We seen you before. We seen you a hundred times walking to work every day. Never can tell what might could happen to a fella walking home in the dark, either."

Lewis tightened his grip on the shovel just as the maintenance truck pulled up and stopped beside him. Without saying a word, Lewis climbed into the back, his shovel still in hand. As the truck drove off, he heard one of the hoboes yell, "You be careful now. That's a long walk from the dock."

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