

Boxcars and Bravery

By Frances Killea



Carolyn and her boyfriend had been dating since September 14th. They met on the second day of school, the 6th grade, in a new building for not-quite-middle-schoolers. They happened to get lost in the same stairwell and found not their classrooms, but each other. They didn't kiss. They didn't talk. They pointed one another in any direction that seemed right, and Carolyn sweated through her t-shirt. He was cute. He was nervous. They were both late.

They didn't start dating right away, but after discovering that they had the same lunch period, and after spending those 25 minutes smiling at one another in line for bad pizza every day for two weeks, Carolyn decided that they ought to try themselves out as a couple. She approached him in the cafeteria and asked if he wanted to sit down, and Bryan—that was his name—led her to his usual section, with his usual friends, and that was that. He held her hand under the table and she blended in with his group seamlessly. The following week, she introduced him to her pals, and that was that. Over soggy tater tots, a romance was born.

Now it was late October, and that pleasantly easy period at the beginning of the fall semester, when everyone is still getting used to being back at school, was over. Bryan and Carolyn had spent September lazily working on homework assignments side by side, but now things were getting harder. Now, during study sessions, they were less chatty and more...studious.

After school, they took separate buses home, but their developments weren't that far away from one another, so they'd take turns riding their bicycles to the other person's house to do work. Carolyn's parents were divorced, and her mom was always at work when she got home

from school, but the babysitter played Led Zeppelin and made homemade lemonade and stayed out of the way. Bryan's parents worked, too, but his grandmother lived in a suite above his garage, and she always had chocolate chip cookies waiting when Carolyn came over.

Today was Tuesday, and it was Carolyn's turn to ride to Bryan's. Her bike was a red mountain bike, and it was a little too small, but it was comfortable for a mile or two, which is all it took to get to Bryan's and back. She always leaned it against the front of the garage, behind the house. He always just let his fall into the grass on her front lawn.

"Hey, Bryan!" she called out as she pushed open the back door to the house.

"In here," he called out from the living room. It sounded like his mouth was full.

Carolyn kicked her shoes off and wandered into the den. She threw her backpack on the ground next to Bryan. "Quit being lazy!" she said, and stepped on his leg as he lay on his belly, staring at the TV, his books stacked lamely beside him.

"Quit being a jerk!" He turned around and glared. He had cookie crumbs on his cheeks. Carolyn laughed.

"You're sitting here rotting your brain when you should be reading for social studies or doing math." She wasn't really being mean. Neither of them really wanted to get started. "I want a cookie."

"Go get one. Gram just made them. They're in the kitchen as usual, and bring me another one." Bryan went back to the television, but he wiggled his way to the set and switched it off. Carolyn ran to the kitchen and back, and by that time, Bryan had spread his books out around him, ready to tackle some work.

With a math textbook as a table for her plate, Carolyn flipped open her binders and started to read her assignments out loud. "Which do you want to do first?" she asked Bryan, who was already opening his history book. "Oh, okay, that makes sense." They had a chapter to read and 10 questions to answer. "I call evens!" She shouted.

Bryan jumped. "Jeez, ok! You always answer the even questions but whatever." He settled for odds and the next 30 minutes were nearly silent, before they shared their answers with one another.

Their relationship was a quiet one. They were only 11, and so dating meant mostly being best friends and holding hands, although Bryan had gotten up the nerve to kiss Carolyn in the school bus lot after school once, hidden from others in a cloud of exhaust. It had been quick. They'd both coughed.

They lived in a suburban neighborhood, without much of a main drag to speak of, since their quiet cul-de-sacs were just a short highway's trip away from the city. Between their small town and the skyscrapers downtown, industrial parks had paved over grass and trees, and a train yard gave idling locomotives a place to rest before chuffing on east or west.

Carolyn's parents had divorced when she was 9, and while her father still lived in the city, he was on the opposite end of town. The split hadn't been pretty, so she didn't see him as much as she wanted. She was lonely sometimes but hadn't lost any friends; she chalked the loneliness up to being without a dad, and acted out her anger by making what her therapist called "reckless decisions." They were exciting decisions, though, and while she knew she ought to cut it out, she always felt, for a moment, like she was in control of her life. No one else could own her "reckless decisions" but her.

Bryan's life was calmer than Carolyn's. His parents both worked long hours, though, so he knew what it felt like to be lonesome. His grandma was great, but even she had a life outside the house, so Bryan often felt like his world was limited to the orbit of school and home, two buildings with no one inside them but himself. Meeting Carolyn made him feel less like an outsider, because even with friends at school, he felt like an invisible wall had kept him from really knowing anyone. Carolyn had punched that wall down somehow, and extended her hand.

"Okay!" Carolyn exhaled loudly and flopped onto her back. "Now I'm bored."

"Me too," said Bryan, but he reached for his math workbook.

"No! Put that down," said Carolyn. She sat up. "I need a break. Can we please take a break?"

"Um, sure. What do you want to do?"

"Ride bikes. Let's go somewhere." Carolyn thought for a minute. "I want to explore."

“Okay, where do you want to explore?” Bryan asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s just GO! That’s the fun of it!” Carolyn grabbed Bryan’s hand and pulled him up. He made a quick survey of the mess of papers and books on the floor and then hopped along as Carolyn tugged him to the door.

“Let’s bike to some of those warehouses. They have big parking lots we can do tricks in,” Bryan offered. He couldn’t actually do anything exciting, but he liked to try.

“Sure! Yes!” Carolyn pushed off on her bike and headed down the driveway. Bryan followed, and they turned onto the street.

It wasn’t a long way to the industrial park. The nearest one took Bryan and Carolyn just 10 minutes to get to, and it did indeed offer several open lots for riding. Cars mostly parked in the lot closest to the office building, which left lots near the outer building empty for play.

They rode in circles and figure eights, and they picked up long branches from underneath the few trees along the edges of the buildings and played like medieval jousters. Carolyn stopped for a moment to stare at the sky, and Bryan took the opportunity to poke her in the side. She threw down her bike and tackled him.

“What was that for!” Bryan laughed as he fell over. His bike landed on top of his legs, and Carolyn landed on top of his bike.

“You took advantage of me not paying attention!” Carolyn countered. She laughed, too, and when she stood up she helped pick up the toppled bikes. “I’m bored here.” She could see the train yard from where they were, just beyond the warehouse buildings and over a creek festured with shrubs. “Let’s go check out some trains.”

“Yeah?” Bryan tested her. He was nervous about going to the tracks, although he’d done so once before. He’d wanted to leave pennies on the tracks so that after a train passed, they’d be flat and smooth, tokens of his bravery—but he’d been frightened both of being run over himself and of causing the trains to jump the rails and end up deadly runaways. “Sure...if you think it’s a good idea.”

"It's fine. I'm not talking about riding them. They're never moving through the yards very fast anyway. Mostly they're just sitting there. Train yards are for lazy trains." Carolyn was already pedaling towards the creek.

They found a spot that wasn't too overgrown with vines and bushes, and pushed their bikes through the water. It wasn't deep, and it wasn't moving. It was too cold now for frogs to be out, but Bryan looked anyway. Carolyn called up for him as she set her bike down on the grass before the first set of tracks.

Looking left and right across the yard, checking for people and moving trains, Carolyn stepped into the gravel. She picked up a handful and threw it, piece by piece, across the tracks. "Come on!" she urged, and Bryan followed. There was no one around. A few lonely coal cars sat to their left, unattached to any engine. The only long train was at the far end of the yard, in front of them, and it wasn't moving. It wasn't even making noise. Carolyn pointed at it.

"I'm going to go check it out." The graffiti on the side of the boxcars was interesting. It was colorful, and some of it was beautiful, although most of it was unreadable or profane. Bryan flipped the hood of his sweatshirt up and followed her. She was pretty, he thought, and braver than he was, and the combination made him nervous. It also made him very glad that she was on his side.

When they reached the train, they just stood there, both of them in awe of how big it actually was. "I'm nervous," Carolyn admitted, staring into the mouth of an open boxcar. She unbuttoned her jacket but left it on, and she tied her hair back, and she reached up for the bottom rung on the ladder that was welded to the side of the car.

"You're crazy," Bryan said, but inside he was excited. For once, a dangerous adventure that didn't feel so threatening; the cars were standing still, and he wasn't alone. He jumped up to the ladder, too.

"This is awesome!" Carolyn grinned and stood with her arms spread wide as she faced the parking lots where they had just played. She saw their bikes in the grass. Bryan dusted off his knees and ran up and down the inside of the boxcar.

"This is huge!" he exclaimed. And then, in an exhilarated burst of confidence, he walked up to Carolyn and kissed her. He nearly missed her mouth, and he knocked her off balance, but she

grinned as she sat down to avoid falling over and he joined her, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the car.

It was the first real kiss for both of them.

“I hope my breath doesn’t smell,” Bryan said.

“Only like cookies,” Carolyn replied, and slowly they leaned towards one another, kissing again, very lightly. 20 cars away, the train engine hissed. Bryan couldn’t believe he’d been brave enough to kiss her again, and this time for real, not in a cloud of school bus smoke for a half-second. He pulled away and smiled, and she smiled back, and he kissed her again. He was on top of his world.

Then the train started moving.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is the relationship between Bryan and Carolyn?

- A Bryan is Carolyn's boyfriend.
- B Bryan is Carolyn's brother.
- C Bryan is Carolyn's cousin.
- D Bryan is Carolyn's stepfather.

2. Where does the climax of the story's action occur?

- A in a stairwell at school
- B in the living room of Bryan's house
- C in a parking lot
- D in the boxcar of a train

3. Carolyn makes risky and exciting decisions.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A Carolyn sweats through her t-shirt when she meets Bryan.
- B Carolyn does not see her father as much as she wants.
- C Carolyn climbs into the boxcar of a train.
- D Carolyn smiles after Bryan kisses her in the boxcar.

4. How does Bryan feel after meeting Carolyn?

- A Bryan feels less lonesome.
- B Bryan feels less cheerful.
- C Bryan feels more tired.
- D Bryan feels more annoyed.

5. What is this story mainly about?

- A a moment when two young people kiss in the school bus lot after school and cough as a result
- B two young people, the feelings they have for each other, and the bravery they show
- C a girl with divorced parents, her loneliness, and the reckless decisions she makes
- D a boy who lives with his grandmother and likes biking to train yards with his friends

6. Read the following sentence: “. . . she chalked the loneliness up to being without a dad and acted out her anger by making what her therapist called ‘reckless decisions.’ They were exciting decisions, though, and while she knew she ought to cut it out, she always felt, for a moment, like she was in control of her life.”

What does the term **reckless decisions** mean?

- A ideas that never work out in the end
- B actions that are harmful to other people
- C strong feelings of worry and doubt
- D choices made without using caution

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Bryan kisses Carolyn _____ they climb into the boxcar.

- A after
- B although
- C so
- D yet

8. How does Bryan feel about going with Carolyn to the train tracks?

9. Give one example of something brave that Bryan does in the story. Then give an example of something brave that Carolyn does in the story.

10. Which character in this story is braver, Carolyn or Bryan? Explain your answer using evidence from the text.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 860

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8. How does Bryan feel about going with Carolyn to the train tracks?

Suggested answer: Bryan feels nervous about going with Carolyn to the train tracks.

9. Give one example of something brave that Bryan does in the story. Then give an example of something brave that Carolyn does in the story.

Suggested answer: For Bryan, students may cite such actions as going to the train tracks, checking out the boxcar, climbing into the boxcar, and kissing Carolyn in the boxcar. For Carolyn, students may cite such actions as going to the train tracks, checking out the boxcar, climbing into the boxcar, and approaching Bryan in the cafeteria.

10. Which character in this story is braver, Carolyn or Bryan? Explain your answer using evidence from the text.

Suggested answer: Students may argue that Carolyn is braver because Bryan just follows her lead most of the time. For example, she is the one who suggests going to the train tracks and is the first to climb into the boxcar. Conversely, students may argue that Bryan shows more bravery by overcoming a naturally cautious disposition, which Carolyn lacks. They may point out that he does everything she does at the train yard and more, by initiating the kiss.