trainspotting

by Wes Modes

It's raining. It shouldn't be raining. It isn't supposed to be raining. I'm trying to catch a train and I don't want to sit out in the wet. I'm in a cafe.



I hopped my first train on the west coast to pick up a stranded motorcycle in another state. I was thrilled. I couldn't believe it. I thought I was going to die from pure joy. I was smoking a cigar and drinking Scotch whiskey, watching the sunset from a rolling boxcar. Everything was perfect.

I'm cruising around in the dark looking for trains and hip coffee shops. I'm trying to keep my eyes open for a place to crash. I deeply desire sleep. In this strange city, I want the familiar safety and grungy emptiness of the freight yards.

I've hopped a few trains. I've ridden a few miles. A lot of hobos say they've ridden 30 thousand, 100 thousand, 300 thousand miles.

But I have no idea anymore. I've lost count. I started hopping trains because I didn't have any money, and I wanted to travel.

The trick to feeling safe anywhere is to always feel at home inside your body. Wherever you go, you bring your home with you.

Realizing this when you are scared and in unfamiliar surroundings is the trick. I still need to latch on to things familiar: the trendy, hip, young part of town, a used book store, a coffee shop, the railroad yards.

The guy at the cafe asks, "Why you wanna hop a train? You know it's dangerous, don't you? There are more derailments than they let you know. And they carry a lot of toxic stuff. The trains going real slow at 3 in the morning? Those are the ones carrying toxic waste."

"I used to work on the rails. I helped build the big yard in town. Back then it was the L&N, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad."

"I've seen people's lives ruined by derailments. Part of our job was to go and clean up the messes. Cars would go off the tracks and straight through people's houses. People come home and there's a train car sitting in their front yard. And where their house used to be, there'll be nothing. Just gone."

I hop because it's fun. As Duffy Littlejohn, train-hopper and trial lawyer, said, "It's a kick in the ass, the last red-blooded American adventure." I have the money to travel more comfortably now, but I prefer the real thing. Undiluted experience. The wind in my hair. The freedom of spontaneous adventure.

I have a professional job, a house, a car, and two kids. I guess I'm a yuppie hobo. There are a lot of people who know they are cogs in the machine, who's day to day life has nothing to do with what they love. So on weekends they go out and stir up trouble. Some of us hop freight.

The rain lets up, and I am waiting to catch a train. I have to urinate every few minutes. My body is sending me a message. It tells me that it doesn't want to haul around any extra weight if it is going to have to run for its life. It makes its demands heard loud and clear. Not just urination. I am glad that I packed little folded up lengths of toilet paper.

While I am pacing back and forth making false starts and nervous little forays, another hobo lies sleeping without a care in the world under a bridge in an old chair by a small fire. He is very neat and clean with an olive green Army duffel bag just like mine. He has short hair and clothes.

I assume he is another yuppie rider. Out for a cheap thrill. I find later that he has been on the road for 21 years, riding back and forth, far and near, out on the road just to be free. He is an ex-junkie and now mentions God like an old friend.

He says, "I've been out on the road for a long time and I figure this is just about where I belong, thank the Good Sweet Lord."



I am riding on a freight train. A freight train hauls shit made in one place to people who think they want to buy it in another. After a train delivers a load of shit, it returns empty to where the shit is made. Empty trains are good trains. At least, for riders like me.

I am a flea. No one knows I am here. No one cares. I am along for the ride. Nothing I do effects the train on which I am riding. If halfway through the ride, I decide I don't want to ride anymore, I can't do anything about it. If I throw myself in front of the train, it won't even slow as it rolls over me. Train riding teaches humility.

I have been lying in the weeds all morning. In all likelihood, there are thousands of tiny creatures hitching rides on me. Ad infinitum.

I wish I'd brought a novel. I am bored stiff. We have been in and out of the hole for hours. Fits and starts. I change from the back porch of a grainer to an empty gondola to get some sun. A grainer is a closed train car

for holding grain or gravel or powdered chemicals. A gondola is an open-top car for holding scrap metal or steal beams or coal. I stand up and let my hair blow in the wind. I nap. I pace back and forth. I read the one book I have which holds my attention for a few minutes.

Finally, in the hole again just outside of Nashville, I change to an empty boxcar. "In the hole" means the train is stopped on a siding, waiting for something. Sometimes the train waits for work on the rails to finish, waits for other trains to pass, or waits for seemingly no reason at all. I watch enviously as a mixed consist train rockets past us.

Train-hopping develops strange appetites. I've been eating dry granola, bagels, tuna, and peanut butter washed down with 20/20. 20/20 is a fortified wine popular with hobos because it is cheap, sweet, and has a high alcohol content. I get a hankering to eat the can of sardines that has been knocking around in my pack for the last few trips. For being such disgusting things, the little boogers sure are good. This is a "food" item I would never even consider eating at home.

I heard about a yuppie hobo who brings a tiny espresso-maker and camp stove on the road with him.

I walk up the length of the train and meet another rider whom I'd seen earlier.

He says, "My mom wants me to come home and take care of my dad. I don't want to disrespect my mom, but the Good Lord put me out here and I expect this is where he wants me to stay."

He is very neat and clean for a hobo. Trains are dirty and riders get dirty too. I am very dirty. My long hair is matted. I cannot run my fingers through it. I have put a bandanna over my head so others can't see that my hair is a single big mat. This hobo has stylishly cut short gray hair. He has many teeth missing though, and he makes me glad I brushed my teeth on the train after my meal of sardines.

He says, "But the Lord has been sorely trying me. He's making me think hard on this. I don't want to disrespect my mom. I suppose, the Lord could just turn me around and march me back there. But for now, I'm riding."

The train stops. My boxcar is on a small bridge across a stream. I wonder idly when it will go again. I stare across a grassy field at a distant factory. The factory is owned by the Olympic company which makes paint products. I watch the birds fluttering in the field. I watch leaves drift by in the stream. I wonder if the stream and the field are polluted. I spot a turtle in the stream and watch him for a while. He goes into deeper water and I lose sight of him.

I spike one door of my boxcar. I consider moving to an empty gondola for a better view when we go again. I watch the birds some more.

I look at my new hobo friend. He's living pretty well. He's not burning the candle at both ends. He looks healthy and happy and homeless.

He's found a way to live on the outside that isn't tearing himself or anyone else apart. He's found some kind of balance.

I have to respect that.

I wake up and have no idea where I am or where I'm going. I go to sleep in a boxcar and wake up moving. As I sleep, I am vaguely aware of movement, jostling, banging around. I don't care where I am going. I am

comfortable and sleepy. I am in my sleeping bag with an inch of carpeting under me. I found the carpet in the train yard and dragged it into my boxcar. I sleep like a log.

I wake up and I've made a round trip. Another journey and I'm back where I started. I'm exactly nowhere and glad of it.

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