Punkanut

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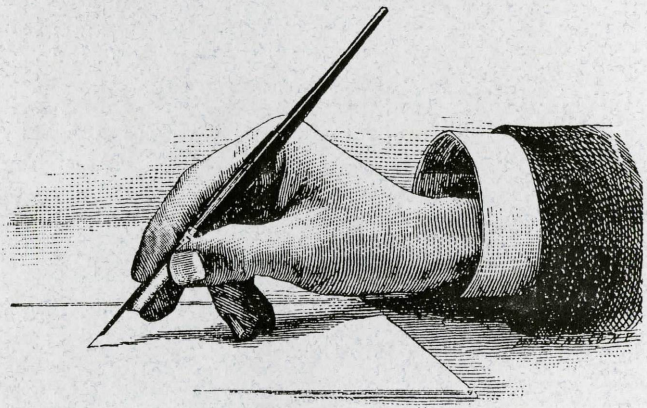

Well, here it is, a short story made long. It covers experiences that have aged a few years, to boot. I suppose I found that, once I started writing, my memory was more substantial than expected.

Part of the time discussed includes the week I spent at Active Resistance 1998. I chose not to include any in-depth analytical reflection on the movement and strategy issues that served as the subject for many of the workshops during the conference. People more thoughtful than myself have already done so. Still, I do want to say here that in spite of the light tone I employ in the following pages, the event was incredible, the result of a lot of hard work by some magnificent people. As spontaneous as it might have seemed at the time, such a thing happens only if serious organizational effort is put forth.

I hope you enjoy the stories. Keep in touch.

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In every individual we see that feelings have grown and developed in the direction and to the degree which were essential to the attainment of his goal. . . . A man who accomplishes his goal of superiority by sadness cannot be gay and satisfied with his accomplishments. He can only be happy when he is miserable.

--Alfred Adler

It is quite ridiculous to confine the evolutionary factors to work. It was *play* rather than *work* which enabled man to evolve his higher faculties--everything we mean by the word "culture". There is no aspect of culture--language, war, science, art or philosophy, not even religion--in whose evolution play does not enter as a creative factor. Play is freedom, is disinterestedness, and it is only by virtue of disinterested free activity that man has created his cultural values.

--Herbert Read

When I was very young and the urge to be someplace else was on me, I was assured by mature people that maturity would cure this itch. When years described me as mature, the remedy prescribed was middle age. In middle age I was assured that greater age would calm my fever and now that I am fifty-eight perhaps senility will do the job. Nothing has worked. . . . In other words, I don't improve; in further words, once a bum, always a bum. I fear the disease is incurable.

--John Steinbeck

One

A Cadillac convertible--a Coup De Ville, to be precise: that was supposed to have been my ride from Austin to Toronto for Active Resistance 1998. I was lounging on the porch of the Entropy Haus (where I would rent a room for three months that summer, before I figured out that it wasn't worth it because I was always traveling) when Chris suggested it to me. The vehicle belonged to a friend of his, someone I was not destined to meet. Putting aside my magazine to better consider the proposal, I conjured images of Hunter S. Thompson streaking across the desolate highway in his Red Shark. That would be us, I thought romantically, except that we would be headed through the Mid- rather than Southwest, our destination would be a conference of radicals rather than a desert motorcycle race, and there would (presumably) be fewer drugs.

Alas, I never saw the Caddie. Eventually, during more neurotic moments, I would doubt that the car, or indeed its owner, even existed. I fantasized that my housemate, who was himself without transportation to Toronto, had fabricated them both in an effort to get me excited about the trip. Then, according to his devious plan, upon discovering that our ride had fallen through, I would naturally suggest that we take my vehicle. In fact, such a trick would have been required if I were to be convinced to make the journey. At the time, I was ready to spend at least a few weeks at rest, having recently returned home from an extended stint on the road. Although A.R. was appealing, and was in fact an event long pondered as a possible addition to my summer's itinerary, I had recently made the decision to stay put for a while.

Ultimately, however, Chris' ruse worked, and a few days later we were loading our bikes, packs and other sundry items in the bed of my truck. (Actually, to be more precise, all I packed was a single duffel bag and my bicycle, whereas he was bringing along two packs, a few milk crates stuffed with books and papers, video equipment, his bike, and those sundry items I mentioned.) I had spent a lot of time traveling in that little Nissan pick-up, even living in it with chickpea for six or seven weeks as we drove around

the country together during the previous summer. Still, I had certain reservations. I knew myself well enough to acknowledge that I had a tendency to be anxious and controlling, at least with regards to my property. (I cringe when I witness people mishandling my records; I fret about loaned books until they are returned; I get uptight when friends put my belongings in the wrong place after using them; in fact, I'd just rather everyone stayed out of my room altogether.) Part of the reason chickpea and I got along so well during our time on the road was that she didn't know how to drive a standard transmission, so I never had to sit in the passenger seat. I hardly knew Chris, which made it difficult to estimate how I might react to his conduct behind the wheel of my truck.

I'd been initiated into the world of tramping only a couple of months before, during a West Coast hitchhiking and train-hopping trip with friends--friends I'd made on the road, in the wild. It was this experience that demonstrated clearly the link between my more obsessive-compulsive tendencies and my property, in this case my truck. I discovered that I could be incredibly laid-back when freed from that burdensome responsibility, instead traveling on a freight train, or by thumb, or in someone else's car. (This is relatively speaking, of course, for my newfound easy-going nature had its limitations--I still got nervous whenever somebody handled my pack). This is one reason the idea of taking the Cadillac was so attractive: if property was the primary focus of my neurotic need for control, then the obvious solution would be to divest myself of that property.

In fact, I had recently made the decision to sell my truck. After all, I already used a bicycle to get around town most of the time and, as mentioned, I'd recently learned a bit about covering long distances without my own private vehicle. The truck was in good shape, and I figured that whatever I got for it could be applied to the small balance that remained on my student loan. So, this would be one last road trip, before I unburdened myself of this albatross around my neck and my psyche.

Then, I would be at liberty to focus on my other life-inhibiting anxieties, such as the nihilistic angst by which a person is consumed when confronted by the abyss representing one's insignificance vis-a-vis the universe.

Two

Of course, having decided to sell the truck meant that I now viewed it strictly in dollar terms: how much could I get for it? Obviously, I wanted to keep it in solid condition, so that it would attract a decent price. So, as Chris and I climbed into the cab at seven on a Friday morning (even though Chris had said that he wanted to leave by five a.m. or so, after having missed our original departure time of Thursday afternoon), my control freak tendencies were struggling against my best efforts to keep them concealed. Basically, it was a classical "odd couple" scenario, with Chris playing Oscar, while I easily assumed the role of Felix. Chris was habitually tardy, while I was obsessively punctual. Chris managed to quickly litter the car with food, wrappers and other papers, while I was forever picking up after him. Whenever we stopped for gas, Chris would manage to wander off, while I sat drumming my fingers on the dashboard.

We made it to southern Illinois by the end of the first day of driving. Since Thursday afternoon, Chris had managed to passively control our progress (while I attempted to do so overtly). Towards this end, we spent an hour in Dallas so he could buy a camera battery. A similar situation arose in a small Arkansas town, this time as we meandered about trying to obtain a notebook for him. Obviously, both of these items could have been more easily acquired in Austin, before we left town. Good-naturedly, Chris did his best to ignore my pointed sighs and my compulsively tapping foot. That first evening, he lobbied in favor of spending the night at a national park in Illinois, which seemed like a nice idea on the surface; the problem was that it would have resulted in us setting up camp around one in the morning, only to leave again as soon as

the sun rose, having driven several dozen miles out of the way in the meantime. Eventually, I played my trump card--I owned the damn truck--and we spent the night at a rest stop.

Early afternoon the next day, we arrived in Chicago. Although he had the directions to the Kafka Hotel, the building at which he was planning to stay, Chris was of little help navigating the city. Instead, he leaned out the window video taping everything, which meant not only that I did not get any assistance in negotiating the unfamiliar streets, but also that I couldn't see anything to the right of the truck (changing lanes took on a certain level of recklessness).

Occasionally, I would experience a flash of insight into my own behavior, realizing that I was being largely unreasonable, or at least hypersensitive. For some reason, when I attempted to drop off Chris, it turned into a major ordeal. His friend was not there to meet him, and one of the other housemates--a woman who was several months pregnant--became extremely agitated when she learned that a stranger was planning to stay in the building without her prior consultation. Obviously, I couldn't just abandon Chris, and obviously this was not his fault, but I still felt myself becoming annoyed; I felt that this inconvenience must somehow be his fault, that it was inevitably woven into the larger tapestry of his scattered behavior. I viewed the delay as an extension of the others I had endured as a result of his puttering and disorganization. His friend eventually did arrive, although more time was required for the conflict to be resolved. Finally, it was all arranged and I could be on my way. Strangely, Chris insisted upon unloading all of his belongings from my truck into the room where he'd be sleeping, a feat requiring several trips between the house and the spot where I was illegally parked.

Having temporarily relieved myself of my companion, I headed out of town towards Hoffman Estates, a suburban area north of the city where my cousin Karen and her family lived. It was a relaxing change of pace, as I chatted with Karen and her husband Michael, enthusiastically detailing my recent summer adventures. They seemed genuinely interested, even slightly envious. They joked about having married too young and suggested that they might like for me to show them the ropes once the kids were grown and out of the house. I almost had Michael in the car that night, to drive around dumpster diving at bagel and donut shops.

It just so happened that my maternal grandmother's relatives--the Schmidts--were having a reunion as I was passing through on my way to Toronto. Although my grandparents and my mother were unable to attend, I got to spend the next day with an

array of cousins and great aunts and uncles. I spent the whole day eating iceberg lettuce salad and baked potatoes (vegetarian fare being fairly unpopular amongst working class Chicagoans), playing a variety of silly, summer picnic games (including soft ball, which reminded me of my disdain for sports), and talking to relatives.

I spent time with Rose (Karen's mother and my grandmother's sister), who years ago had suffered a severe stroke at a fairly young age. She was lively but overly apologetic, her face clouding with a sad and slightly confused look as she struggled to recall a word or concept. My great uncle Ed and I discussed the value of finding satisfaction in one's work, as he did in construction before retiring. Dave, husband to a cousin of mine, approached me after the softball game, to talk about Christianity.

"So, what are your plans, now that you've finished school?" he asked.

"I don't know, really, I'm just sort of drifting right now," I shrugged. This seemed to give him the desired opening to gradually slip into evangelical mode.

"Uh huh? What did you study in school?"

"Majored in philosophy, although by the end I was enjoying my history courses more."

"I've read some philosophy. I read *Being And Nothingness* by Sartre. Of course, he presents a pretty bleak view of life--maybe that is why you find yourself adrift. Tell me, have you ever read the Bible?"

I shrugged again. Well, I replied, I'd read the Old Testament for a course in college. And sure, I silently conceded, probably my life would have been more fulfilling if I had avoided reading any existentialist literature and thus never realized that there was a valid intellectual movement to describe and justify my malaise (even as I failed to fully grasp the movement's tenets). *Being And Nothingness*, most people never actually finish that book. They read that everything is possible in the absence of God, and they become frightened, or depressed (or bored). But while Sartre may have said that we are condemned to absolute freedom, he argued that this freedom allowed us to invent and reinvent ourselves. Our lives are our own--we are defined by our works and actions--and in the absence of any external meaning we must take all credit or blame for our lives. I wondered which point Dave found bleak, the freedom or the responsibility?

"You know, I think you would benefit from reading the Bible," Dave suggested, predictably and sincerely. "In fact, I am going to challenge you to do just that. Spend the next year reading it, so that we can talk about it at the next reunion. Don't get bogged

down in the Old Testament, either. Concentrate on the gospels, especially the Book of John." John gives us that classic Christian one-liner, of course: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." Total and everlasting security based on faith alone. Religious faith is baffling to me, though at times I envy those who have it.

I shook Dave's hand, telling him that I looked forward to talking to him again the following year.

That evening, I returned to the city to collect Chris. I arrived to find him utterly unprepared, sitting on a bed with the contents of his bags scattered around the room. This was despite the fact that I had called before leaving my cousin's house (at least a half an hour's drive). I folded my arms, sighed pointedly (again) and then bit my lip, while Chris smiled to himself and gradually collected everything together. We finally got the truck repacked around eleven. We drove until quite late, and spent the night somewhere in Michigan.

Three

The next day, we crossed the Canadian border with relatively little hassle. It seemed that, no matter what, the bureaucracy involved in a border crossing is demeaning and dehumanizing, but we faced no special burden. (Fearing denial of entry, we had decided to go over at Port Huron rather than Detroit, and claim that we planned to go camping, not including the city of Toronto on our agenda at all. However, it appeared that the subterfuge was unnecessary.)

Once admitted to the foreign land, we poked around the tourist information kiosk, got some money changed, and talked to a fellow who was bicycling across the continent, west to east. He had been denied entry the day before, but today they let him slide through the cracks. My eyes glazed over as he and Chris talked about cranks, brakes and derailers.

Only a short while after getting on our way again, we stopped to fill the gas tank, at which point Chris suggested that he drive. He had been putting forth the offer since we left Austin, and over time it had taken on less the tone of a favor and more of a demand. Finally, I could think of no rational reason to put him off any longer. I reluctantly yielded the wheel to him, and climbed into the passenger seat. Tensely perched, I could not help but grind my teeth, as I imagined Chris to be grinding the gears. My body was sensitive to every lurch, and I bit my lower lip to keep from screaming, "Stop riding the clutch!"

Chris was still driving as we arrived in Toronto. Neither of us knew where we were going, but after motoring around for a long time (and getting caught in afternoon traffic), we eventually found ourselves in the University area. Sure enough, the gutter punks were crowding all the major intersections. As one crusty kid sporting red dreadlocks and a dirt-gray Amebix T-shirt

approached--squeegee in hand--I leaned through the open window and called out, "Where do we go to register for Active Resistance?"

"Go to Who's Emma, someone there will be able to tell you what's going on," he responded, gesturing ambiguously.

After more aimless driving, our mutual tolerance becoming increasingly strained, we parked and eventually found the info-shop / record store / cafe. (I looked up the address in a telephone book; who would've guessed?) There, the friendly volunteers offered us directions to the registration site, as well as dumpstered peaches and bananas. We were also warned not to drink from the municipal water taps, because people had been getting sick lately. (This last bit of information was delivered in a conspiratorial tone.)

Four

I was in Toronto more than a year before the anti-WTO demonstrations took place in Seattle. This was before liberals and cops everywhere were well acquainted with the protest chant, "Whose streets? Our streets!" I do not recall when I first heard the phrase, but I know that the first time I felt the strength of solidarity implied by the words, or had a vision of genuine personal liberation and societal transformation (however myopic that vision might have been) was during my time at Active Resistance. It was greater than the conference, as we spilled out to engulf the city. We really were everywhere; we really did lay claim to the streets.

It felt as if we were children who, during recess, had constructed on the school playground a make-believe city which included all our friends, and friends of friends. Sure, we didn't know each and every one of the other kids, but we knew they were kids, and that was enough. Walking along the sidewalk, we'd nod to each other, content in the knowledge that we had all come for similar reasons. Even those who didn't look like punks or squatters or tree-sitters, somehow they all stood out against the backdrop of all the playground monitors, those adults we just ignored anyway.

We moved about in pairs or trios or dozens or even once, during a traffic-clogging mobile demonstration, in a group of a thousand or more. Hordes ate from the dumpsters, played music in the parks, shoplifted from the corporate chain stores. Situationist and daydream influenced radical slogans were ubiquitous, in the form wheat-pasted posters or graffiti. "You can't imagine what you're missing when you're missing your imagination . . ." "Disarm authority, arm your desires." Or, more succinctly, "Never work!" The on-going battle between the advertising companies and the covert billboard liberationists provided continuous entertainment: at least once a day, we'd make sure to pass by an advertisement featuring the image of an over-sized Canadian flag with the maple leaf replaced by a cracker. Each night, someone would spray paint a circle A over the cracker, and each day someone would come to

restore the image so as to entice on-lookers to purchase more crackers.

It all felt so spontaneous. If one was struck by the urge to scrawl a manifesto about adequate housing in the bus stop shelter, one simply pulled out a marker and started writing. If a sexist advertisement required commentary, so be it. If cool, gray sidewalks cried out for decorations, people appeared with stencils and spray paint to beautify the neighborhood. While the workshops were informative and productive and serious, it was being witness to and a part of all this activity, this transient community that sticks in my memories.

Before we had even made our way from the info-shop to the registration center (which was at a building called Symptom Hall), I randomly spotted people I knew. The first were Craig and Heath, a pair of forest dwellers from Santa Cruz. We'd met at the Earth First! Rendezvous in Oregon, and had been a part of a massive train-hopping party from Eugene to the Bay Area. In fact, I'd talked to Craig about meeting up for the trip to Toronto, but the e-mail address I'd given him was cancelled and besides, I thought I might spent a while sitting on the front porch of my house in Austin. Riding my bike, I was half a block away when I spotted the pair crossing an intersection. I called out their names, and we excitedly embraced once I reached them. By the end of the plenary session, I had encountered several acquaintances from past events and travels.

However, in this swirl of activity, I somehow found myself alone after the meeting. Everyone appeared to be in a similar state of mind, excitedly engaging in friendly and often unexpected reunions. After the initial rush of enthusiasm, my social skills were now failing me. To put forth the effort needed for group conversation suddenly seemed both tedious and daunting. (I had grown used to these abrupt swifts in mood.) Besides, I wasn't certain where I'd be spending the night, and I was getting tired. One option was to bunk uncomfortably at Symptom Hall, along with dozens of other people. I could also sleep in the bed of my truck. Unsure of what else to do with myself, I aimlessly pedaled away on my bike.

I ended up back at Symptom Hall, and there I ran into Allie. She was in town with her sister Tiffany; I'd first met them in San Marcos, TX, at a grassroots media conference. There was a midnight stenciling brigade that she wanted to join, but for whatever reason that didn't happen. Instead, we ended up strolling around the neighborhood together and went to look at the lake, eventually running into Craig, who was about to head over to the park where an assortment of punks had been sleeping. He invited us to come along.

The little plot of grass was littered with urban campers, both those transients attracted by the conference as well as members of the more traditional homeless population. Along with several other folks, I spent most of my nights in Toronto at that park.

My days were spent at plenary meetings, workshops, free skool classes, and forums. The ambitious schedule of events set forth by organizers was, for the most part, maintained. In an attempt to have people come away with more information than can usually be gleaned from the standard, cursory two hour workshop format, four concurrent core groups were set up, running from one to four every afternoon, Tuesday through Friday. I participated in the Alternative Economics Core, in which we discussed and debated a variety of topics: participatory economics, mutual aid, syndicalism, reforming existing institutions vs. creating new radical alternatives, short terms solutions vs. long term models, etc.

In addition to the events themselves, housing, parking, and three meals a day were in included in exchange for the small registration fee. As the week progressed, I found myself drifting away from the formal conference structure, and gravitating towards the new friendships that were being initiated and strengthened and crushes that were being fostered (even if they were not brought to fruition). I skipped entirely the last meeting of my core group, instead choosing to go swimming with a bunch of other punks at the local public pool. That evening, I sat with Allie on a sidewalk downtown, in a park near city hall, eating a large mango procured from an open-air produce stand in the Kensington Market area. (As the business day came to a close, venders would simply move their unsold wares from the sidewalk to the curb--a distance of only a few feet--and suddenly, magically, all that food metamorphosed into garbage. Suddenly, magically, all that food was free.) It was so gloriously decadent, taking turns slicing the piece of fruit with my knife. We slurped in true Epicurean fashion, then shoved the peels down between the cracks in the pavement.

Five

One night during our stay in Toronto, in a synchronistic moment, Allie and I were both struck with the urge to make long distance phone calls. We soon found what we were seeking and stationed ourselves on a street corner, at a fire-engine red public telephone booth. When traveling, I often find myself similarly compelled; for me, these urges are fueled by a potent combination of homesickness and a desire to affirm both to myself and to friends and loved ones back home that my life is interesting, that I am off having grand adventures rather than merely avoiding responsibility--it helps to occasionally remind myself that others might harbor a bit of envy regarding my existence. (After all, says Sartre, a person "realizes that he cannot be anything . . . unless others recognize it as such. In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person.") With a passion matching Kurt Vonnegut's--even if my breath didn't reek of mustard gas and roses--I flipped through my address book and used up the remaining minutes on my calling card.

My longest long-distance conversations were always with chickpea. On the phone and in person, she has a great deal of trouble saying goodbye. It is not due to any apparent anxiety on her part: her genuine enthusiasm for conversation just typically gets the better of her, and she always has one more pertinent point to make. Because she herself had recently been to Toronto--having randomly decided to go traveling, she got on a bus in Houston and got off there--she wanted to get my opinion on the public transit system and the street vendors who sold vegetarian hot dogs, and to discuss the European flavor Canadian cities possessed, compared to and contrasted with major metropolitan areas in the U.S. Gradually, only single word comments were being uttered into my mouthpiece, sometimes even mere syllables: "Uh huh", "Oh yeah?"

My ears did perk up when chickpea advised me to check out the Cineforum, however. "It's a little independent movie house. The

films shown are all from the theater owner's personal collection of prints. He even invited me to crash on his couch when I got to talking to him after his screening of surrealist films." It sounded interesting, and after we finally said good-bye (or maybe after my phone card ran out of time), I suggested to Allie that we look into it.

Almost immediately after abandoning our post at the booth, we came across a poster advertising a film festival at the Cineforum. This wasn't as serendipitous as it might seem, however, given that the city was plastered with the leaflets. The wisely timed event was to showcase "anarchist, surrealist, hallucinatory" films, by the likes of Duchamp, Artaud, Man Ray and Dali and Bunuel. We decided to attend the screening on the following night.

Located on Bathurst Street, the small theater was, in fact, the front room of a house belonging to Reg Hartt, the owner of over a thousand old prints. (In addition to the Dadaist works, I eventually became aware of his passion for classic animation.) The long room had been painted black, and the windows were covered. Perhaps eight or ten rows of chairs were crammed between the front and back walls, and most of those chairs were gradually filled. At the designated time, Reg stood before the screen, his bushy salt and pepper eyebrows wildly askew (he looked a bit like a mad scientist, albeit one who favors ratty old t-shirts). I expected him to introduce the films, put them in historical context. Instead, he glared at the audience for several moments before speaking. He held up a book, and then in a booming voice he began his oratory.

"In the society that existed before our ancestors came and poisoned the spirit and the body of the earth there were words that did not exist." He waited a beat, and then continued. "Those words are: admit, assume, because, believe, could, doubt, end, expect, faith, forget, forgive, guilt, how, it, mercy, pest, promise, should, sorry, storm, them, us, waste, we, weed. These words, and the concepts for which they stand (which work like rust upon the soul) are our gift to the culture of the Red Man. It is no wonder, once these poisons were introduced into their cultural body, it took sick."

He grew increasingly aggressive, making deliberately discomforting eye contact with various audience members, as if his accusations were directed at specific people in the room. He spoke about the suffering of youth at the hands of a supposedly respectable adult society; he exhibited a particular venom when speaking of schools and educators, having no tolerance for the institution or the profession, which he said had nothing to do with communicating the essence of truth or art. Each tangent lead to another, and at first I mistakenly thought he was rambling--raving,

even--until he tied all the tangents together in a cohesive whole. I then understood that the polemic was rehearsed, it was theater. Finally, he did have a word to say about the films: he explained that, upon viewing them, if we became uncomfortable, or angry, or even if we had a physical reaction, then the filmmakers had succeeded in what they had set out to do.

The lights went off, the screen lit up, and the music chosen by Reg from his vast record collection to accompany the silent footage reached my ears. The music selection was perfect, as accurately timed to fit the visual cues as *The Dark Side of the Moon* does *The Wizard of Oz* (with the record started at the lion's second roar).

It is a physical challenge to sit through several hours of surrealist film footage, and the uncomfortable seats and August heat eventually got the better of us: after almost three hours, Allie and I agreed that it was time to go. As we walked out onto the porch, Reg was sitting there, a bottle of beer in his hand, staring into the distance, at the stars, or perhaps at a street lamp. I fumbled through an awkward string of words in an effort to express my gratitude and beg his pardon for leaving before the program's conclusion. He smiled, looked at us, and then said to Allie, "You have absolutely beautiful hair." She gave a shy shrug, reaching up to touch the thick orange mane. (He was right; it was the first thing I noticed about her.) I don't recall what was said next, but we were invited to return the following morning for breakfast.

When we arrived, part of me was worried that it had been an idle offer, or that he might have since forgotten about it. My concern was evidently unfounded, as we were welcomed into the house and ushered into the kitchen. Reg guessed our vegan status and so substituted margarine for butter in the sautéed potatoes and mushrooms he cooked for us. (Well spiced and expertly prepared, I have never been able to duplicate the meal he served to us.)

I found that I had little to contribute conversationally, and I was reduced to offering lame questions. (I think I might have even asked how many prints he owned--I wonder how many times he has heard that one?) Allie proved to be no chattier than I was. Fortunately, Reg more than compensated for our reticence, easily slipping into monologue mode. He spent the morning interweaving an anecdotal history of religion and film with his own personal narrative. Mae West's quips were quoted in the same breath and with equal weight as Lao Tzu's maxims. It was another performance, so thoroughly rehearsed that it had been completely internalized, and so seemed entirely natural as a result. He recounted the impact of discovering literature, silent horror films, LSD, meditation, his

own homosexuality. He talked about his experiences at an experimental college in the late 'sixties and early 'seventies, and about the time he spent at a mental institution. As during his oration the night before, Reg peppered his discourse with references to the Bible (both the Old and New Testaments), the Bhagavad Gita, the I Ching, Aldous Huxley, Seneca, and Bernardo Bertolucci's autobiography.

He told a joke I'd first heard in a Greek philosophy course, about Diogenes and Alexander the Great. "While Alexander was at Corinth, politicians and philosophers came to congratulate him, but he noticed that the famous philosopher Diogenes, who lived there in Corinth, did not come. So Alexander went to visit Diogenes at his home and found him lying down, sunbathing. Diogenes raised himself up a little when he heard the crowd approaching, and Alexander asked the philosopher very courteously if there was any favor a king could do for him. Diogenes only said: 'Yes, please take your shadow off me.' Alexander's companions, on the way back, were making fun of the simple-minded old man, but Alexander told them: 'Laugh if you must, but if I were not Alexander I would choose to be Diogenes.'"

As we said goodbye, Reg handed me a copy of an epic poem he'd written, a retelling of the story of Gilgamesh. I thought to myself, this man is like a Canadian Jean Genet; he is inventing himself, inventing a mythology based on his own life.

Six

I liked Marcus immediately. We ran into each other in Toronto, although I'd first encountered him a few months before, getting a ride in a random car from the forest into Eugene. He was pleasantly morose, often scribbling in his journal. Conversation often involved his verbal rewrites of stories that would eventually end up in his zine. When he spoke, he usually looked at the ground or off into the distance, avoiding eye contact. Those eyes were dark, like mine; superficially we looked alike, both of us hairy and dirty, yet we were neither punks nor hippies. His movements were slightly awkward, like mine, although I do not think it would be fair to say that we were uncomfortable with our own bodies. Eavesdropping on our conversations, someone might mistakenly think us "emo" (and we did talk about girls a fair amount), except that Marcus was too confident and I was too sarcastic.

Dancing together--or rather, near each other--to funk music in a club at a post-A.R. party, Marcus announced, "If I could be anyone, I would choose James Brown, circa 1968 to 1974." We gyrated for another couple of bars, then he observed, "I don't know why I said that." I admired the commentary, and wondered if he was mentally keeping count of the beat, one-two-three-four, like me. I imagined Marcus and I to be thinking the same thing: it seems that James Brown knows how to cope with existential angst.

We were together again behind Symptom Hall when a gaggle of excited punks impressed upon us the urgency of their mission: "We forming a radical cell, perhaps the first of its kind, of the Chocolate Liberation Front." Marcus and I were both down with cause, and quickly joined their ranks. Soon, there was a core group of a half a dozen people or so. All of us started walking south,

towards a commercial avenue, to the strips of stores where candy bars sat languishing and oppressed. However, like any collection of anarchists worth their mettle, we became hopelessly bogged down in debates (operating by consensus) over tactics, long before reaching our objective.

"Well, how are we going to do this thing?" someone asked. "Should we all go in at once and liberate what we can, then pool the results, or should we send in a pair to do recon, or what?"

"We could form teams to go in and, you know, just shoplift."

I piped up. "We could wahoo the chocolate." My suggestion was greeted with blank stares.

"What does that mean?" asked a spiky-haired girl with a black bandana tied around her head and "CLF" written in block letters with a marker on her bare shoulder.

Glancing from face to face, I realized that her question was repeated in everyone else's expression. "Oh, well, I suppose it must be an American phenomenon," I offered, speaking slowly. "I've always seen or heard about it as applied to beer, usually by underage or under-funded drinkers. Basically, it works like this: a car pulls up to a convenience store, and someone quickly gets out of the passenger side, runs into the store, grabs a case of warm, cheap beer on display near the door, yells 'Wahoo!' as loud as possible, and runs back out to the get-away car. Everyone knows about it, it is fairly ritualized. Essentially, by yelling 'wahoo', it becomes an acceptable form of theft, sort of. Maybe we could use it for the chocolate, and establish a social precedent here."

There was some mumbling, but my comrades seemed generally enthused about the tactic. Marcus commented, "I like it: it's public theft, an act of defiance."

"We have something similar here," the spiky-haired girl added. "The difference is, you would go into a store acting naturally, as if you were shopping, collecting the items you needed. Then, going up to the counter as if to pay for it all, at the last minute you shout 'Food for the poor!' and run out the door."

"Oh wow, that's even better, it's more obviously political."

"Yeah, but we still haven't settled on the specifics. If we steal publicly, how many people are going into the store? I have this nightmarish mental image of us all grabbing candy bars, yelling 'Wahoo' or 'Food for the poor' or whatever, and then getting stuck as we all try to go at the door at once, like the Three Stooges or something." It was a valid point, and it required more discussion. In fact, the matter was still unresolved as we rounded the final corner, only to discover that we were too late: the store had already closed.

After a protest march to demand an end to police harassment of the squeegee kids ("Hands Off Street Youth!"), during which we'd blocked downtown streets for hours with music and giant puppets and skits while the cops casually refused to attack and oppress us (despite our taunts), a crowd gathered in a park to unwind. Again, I found myself sitting next to Marcus, in the dirt. Somehow, a pair of long, heavy-gauge cardboard tubes came into our possession; maybe they were props in the march. Both of us were gripped with the nostalgic childhood thrill of finding a good box, or packing material. Those tubes became telescopes, megaphones, and vaulting poles. We banged them on the ground, a poof of dust exploding with every impact. My smile gave way to giggles, which in turn morphed into uncontrollable laughter. I simply could not imagine anything better to do with my time.

In terms of knowledge of the world's intellectual traditions, I had only a woefully incomplete mishmash provided by an undergraduate liberal arts college curriculum. My flimsy grasp of Existentialism was wedded to my rudimentary understanding of Buddhism. According to the former, it was my lifetime of decisions that described who I was and that had brought me to where I was. The latter reminded me that impermanence surrounds us, that change and chance are inevitable.

I had always accepted responsibility for the directions my life took, but for so long it seemed to me that I was forever trailing behind, only able to see what decision I should have made two years before, not what decision I ought to be making presently. I often agonized about wasted time. In high school, I made a chart to determine how much of my time was spent wisely. I figured that sleep was necessary, and therefore time spent sleeping was neutral at worst. Positive was all time spent reading real literature, listening to interesting music, and having sex. The hours spent each day at school might be lost--on a separate chart I figured that more than 90% of it was useless--but it didn't count against me because I was forced to be there. (Of course, Sartre would not have agreed, arguing instead that I merely chose the path of least resistance.) I do not recall the specific results, but overall they were bleak: there were precious minutes, hours, days lost, which could have been spent learning to play an instrument, studying a foreign language, or fleshing out that idea for a short story. Yet, it took me years to finally start the process of changing my behavior and attitude (in the meantime, I lamented at sixteen that I had not started learning to play the piano at twelve).

But on that day, from a perspective derived from a naïve mix of philosophical influences, I realized that I did not set out to sit in

the dirt in a park in Toronto, amusing myself with cardboard tubes. I did, however, put forth some effort to become the kind of person who would allow for such moments, to reject a rigidly controlled and predictable existence and instead seek a path that might lead me to such a random and mundane yet pleasurable experience. I was no longer rueful about the control I had over my fate: each decision seemed to be correct, if it brought me to this point.

So, sitting in the dirt, playing with giant cardboard tubes, I felt free--free of obligation and burden. This feeling still possessed me later that day as I handed over the keys to my truck to Chris, telling him, "I'll see you at home in Austin. I'm going to cross the Canadian Rockies on a freight train before heading back to Texas."

Seven

I'd met Elizabeth earlier that summer, at the Food Not Bombs gathering in San Francisco. I hadn't really talked to her much then, only once on the walk to the Haight after a serving downtown. Still, I recognized her easily when I spotted her in Toronto over the course of the week or so that I spent there, and I remained indifferent upon discovering that she was a part of the group with which I planned to travel west to Vancouver. As often happens, this group fluctuated in number and content. Originally, it was just Craig and Heath. Then, Allie and Tiffany lost their bus tickets, and since they live in Oregon, they asked to go along (although neither of them knew Craig or Heath all that well). When Allie told me about the turn of events, I decided to throw my lot in with them, despite the fact that it would take me a few thousand miles out of my way; it struck me as a positive alternative to the long drive back to Texas, which would surely be as anxiety producing as the trip north had been. As more people found out about the venture, various folks joined up and then dropped out, but the final configuration was rounded out by Karen (who knew Craig) and Elizabeth.

The original pair absorbed us all into their party with demonstrable aplomb. Heath philosophically remarked, "Yeah, of course, everybody is welcome. Trains are for everyone."

We spent the day prior to leaving collecting supplies--which mostly involved rescuing plastic bottles from recycling bins and loaves of bread from dumpsters--and saying our good-byes. Anne offered a quiet warning about Elizabeth, telling us, "She is not exactly a wingnut, but there is something off about her. What her problem is doesn't have a name, but it should." I did not find reason to actually become concerned until we were at the tracks. The plan was to hop out at a siding that Heath had heard about, where supposedly a short string of cars for a nightly westbound hotshot would be dropped around midnight, and picked up a few

hours later. As Heath was scouting for a hiding spot, the rest of us sat off railroad property and had a crash session in train riding safety rules: Allie, Tiffany and Elizabeth had never hopped before, while Karen's limited experience was about the equivalent of my own. The first clue that something was indeed off about her came when I noticed that Elizabeth was absolutely not paying attention, despite the immediacy of the topic being discussed.

Then, as we tried to move in a stealthy manner (as much as a group of seven is able) through a hole in the chain-link fence and down along the tracks, Elizabeth made no attempt to conceal herself. She just kept lagging further and further behind, dropping back perhaps fifty feet, totally oblivious to her surroundings and ignoring our prompting to stay out of sight. One of the most bizarre elements of her behavior was the way in which she insisted upon wearing her coveralls: the sleeves were tied around her waist, while the crotch sagged down, progressively lower as time passed, until it had reached her calves. Obviously, there would be no way for her to easily run or climb a ladder.

The tracks ran along a narrow elevated corridor, flanked on either side by fences. Thick lines of green vegetation grew enthusiastically between the fences and the tracks in a wild display of vines and small trees. Heath had found a little clearing, which was accessed by following a short trail down from the ballast. The plant life had been stomped down, and a mattress sprawled awkwardly on the uneven ground of the incline. (I carefully laid my pack down directly on the ground, not allowing it the touch the bed, the fear of scabies having been recently added to list of random anxieties.) Basically, there was little to do but wait, as our fate was now wedded to the seemingly random operations of the rails.

In an approximation of the buddy system learned on field trips in grade school, we started to break into pairs, preparing for the inevitability of becoming separated at some point along the ride. By this time, it was quite clear to me that I did not want to be stuck traveling across Canada with Elizabeth as my partner: I was too much of a novice myself to be responsible for someone who apparently lacked the ability to care for herself. Horrible images of train-related injuries worked their way into my mind, as I envisioned Elizabeth next to the tracks, the ballast stained red as the blood flowed from the stumps where her legs used to be. Her unwillingness to take an interest in her own safety was apparent, and tensions were rising. Even Allie and Tiffany expressed exasperation with her lack of attentiveness.

Suddenly, Elizabeth announced that she wasn't going with

us. While it was a relief, I didn't even have faith that she'd be able to get back into town on her own. However, she soon changed her mind back again. And then she changed it again, and again.

As Elizabeth oscillated, we all became more comfortable in our hiding place, developing a false sense of security based on the faulty logic that, if we can't see anyone else, no one else can see (or hear) us. The whispered conversations soon rose in volume to a normal pitch, as the original clandestine mood was abandoned. I found myself out of the loop, having not gravitated towards any one of the discussions. As the others chatted, I became acutely aware a rustling in the brush. Gradually, it struck me as a noise unlikely to be produced by the wind or other casual ambient sources. It was definitely more methodical than that. Even more significantly, it was growing louder, approaching the clearing.

I looked around, and made sure that I could account for all the members of our little band: nobody was missing. The thrashing of the trees and bushes grew more intense. Someone was definitely approaching, and yet none of my companions seemed to be taking any notice. Certainly, they could not fail to hear all that noise! I attempted to grab the attention of my fellow would-be hoboes, to convince them to be silent just for a moment. "Hey, guys, be quiet for second . . . does anybody hear that sound?" Alas, my pleas went unheard, or were deliberately ignored.

My eyes widened as I saw the bushes that lined the immediate edge of the defoliated area begin to shake. Still, impossibly, all the others remained oblivious; indeed, it was almost as if they simply raised their voices to overcome the intrusive cacophony. I stared as the brush parted, and the source of the ruckus emerged into the clearing. Finally, then, I only had to utter one word to capture everyone's full attention.

"Skunk!"

It was like a scene from an old Charlie Chaplin film, everyone's actions seemed to be slightly sped up for comedic effect, as we spilled out of the clearing and onto the tracks. All concern regarding maintaining stealth was gone. We moved around in an agitated dance, talking excitedly. In the panic, some unfortunate folks had left their gear down in the clearing with the surprisingly large, potentially smelly weasel. (It was all recovered later, without incident.)

As we stood on the tracks, hoping that the skunk would not pursue us any further, we spotted four figures moving towards us along the rails. It was obvious that they were not officials of any kind, so we made no effort to conceal ourselves (plus, given our options, I imagine that most of us would have rather risked

discovery than tangle with the alternative). As they drew closer, we realized that they were another crew from A.R., three young Canadians, and an older hobo named Geo, who now lived in Toronto. The latter had agreed to accompany his three young charges to the tracks and put them on a train, despite the fact that none of them had ever hopped before. It was immediately obvious that two of these kids were idiots, and none of us were thrilled that our number had suddenly swollen to ten.

The situation quickly became irritating. Geo was on some sort of power trip, unwilling to listen to anyone else or even answer questions. The two obnoxious kids who had just joined us tried to present themselves as train-hopping experts, even while admitting to their total lack of experience. Elizabeth still had not made up her mind as to whether or not she was actually getting on the train. To top it off, when the string of cars arrived, the ten cars dropped at the siding were less than desirable: five sealed boxcars and five car carriers, also sealed.

Once the engines had disconnected and rolled away, Geo immediately set about trying to break into the car-carriers with his multi-tool. I was not particularly excited about this line of action: the consequences for trespassing were minor compared to a charge of breaking and entering. As he busied himself with that task (having little luck), three units returned, and workers started to attach them to the ten dormant cars.

Heath walked down the line towards the spot where the pair of rail workers huddled together, bent over a coupler. Allie asked what I thought we should do. I glanced at Geo and his minions, and then back at Heath, who was nearing the units. I shrugged, and suggested that we follow Heath's lead; he and Craig were far more experienced than I was (at this point, I'd previous ridden precisely four trains). Although I didn't know exactly what he had in mind, I assumed that he was going to approach the workers to ask if we could ride on rear unit.

At least, this is what I thought until one of the workers yelled "Hey!" and Heath turned and ran. Acting on instinct, we all bolted, scattering along the tracks. I spied a trail through brush, leading to a hole in the fence, and swiftly followed it, slowing down as I made my way across the parking lot of a used car dealership. Upon reaching the sidewalk, I tried to stroll casually, perhaps as if I (with a bulky Army rucksack slung over my shoulders) took a nightly constitutional along this block. I turned around, assuming that everyone had followed me, but found only Craig and Karen to my rear. The three of us regrouped, and waited a short while before creeping back to the gap in the rusty corrugated metal wall. We

peered through the opening and up towards the tracks. Everything seemed calm, so we made our way back to the car carrier, where everyone else had rejoined the Canadians.

Actually, not quite everyone had returned. It soon became apparent that two from our group were absent: Allie and Elizabeth.

"Where's Allie?" I hissed.

"I thought she was with you," was Tiffany's startled response.

"Oh, shit!"

I dropped my pack and ran back down the line to go find them. When I estimated that I had returned to the spot where I'd last seen them, I called out their names in a stage whisper. "Allie! Elizabeth! It's safe to come out!" Unable to find the hole in the fence through which I had run, they'd concealed themselves in the thatch of vines. The two of them slowly emerged from their hiding place, their faces bearing scratch marks from the head first dive they'd taken into the brush.

We met up with the rest of the group, who had moved from the end of the train to a spot closer to the engines. Apparently, in our absence, a group decision had been made to attempt a ride on the rear units. I didn't understand the logic involved: had the workers not just spotted us? Why were we trying to get on this train at all? Doubting myself, recalling my own inexperience, I decided that there must be something I failed to understand. Surely, those who had so many more miles under their belts knew what they were doing.

I had allied myself with Allie and Tiffany as traveling partners. (Elizabeth was paired with Karen, by default.) There was that moment, like standing on a precipice, the last moment before making the final commitment to leap. We stood together in front of the rumbling engine; someone hissed that it was our turn to board. The three of us darted up the stairs of the third unit and slipped into the cabin.

I had never ridden a unit before, and the interior was much smaller than I expected. (Later, Craig told me that they were smaller than the units he had ridden.) The trio of Canadian kids was already aboard, crowded together on the floor. The two obnoxious kids started hollering together, so that it was difficult to understand what they were saying. "There's no room! Get out, get out!" Waiting for our eyes to focus and for our brains to fully comprehend the situation, the three of us stood frozen by the door. Probably only seconds passed, yet it seemed as if a spell had been cast on us. It was broken by the third Canadian, who was apparently much more cool-headed than the rest of us. He calmly

urged us to stay, to get down on the floor: he feared that we would be spotted if we tried to exit. The whole situation was so absurd--I felt as if I was viewing it from the outside as a spectator. What difference does it make, I thought to myself, if we've already been spotted?

Only a few moments later, Elizabeth and Karen climbed onto the unit. Obviously, there was even less room for them on the floor (a fact which Elizabeth acknowledged by loudly exclaiming, "Oh my god, there's no room!"). Still, we all managed to shift around to accommodate them. Were we going to ride like this, packed in together, all the way to the West Coast of Canada? My left leg was positioned awkwardly, and I realized that it was already growing numb. Something was jabbing me in the back. I couldn't quite grasp how I had gotten myself into this situation.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, certainly placed there because there was no where else for its owner to put it. It belonged to the kid who had remained calm and collected, and it was a source of comfort for me. I was not anxious or fearful, but it was reassuring to imagine that I now had a connection to someone rational and thoughtful. My respect for him grew as he whispered to us in the dark, attempting to ease tensions and reinforce the idea that all was well. My eyelids began to droop. (That's a defense tactic of mine, actually: in a moment of high stress, I get sleepy.) I let them close, and listened to the sounds of the train, vocal even while motionless.

We held our collective breath.

Eight

Thankfully, we did not have to wait long in that uncomfortable heap before being busted. The cops entered the unit from both sides, shining their flashlights in our eyes and yelling. Because I was blinded by the beams, I couldn't see whether they had their guns drawn, although--based on prior experience--I assumed that they did. I was startled when it sounded as if one of them barked, "Come on out, Wylie!" Almost immediately, I dismissed it as an impossibility, as an auditory hallucination.

We managed to untangle our eight bodies from the lump on the cabin floor. "Drop your bags over the side, onto the ground!" a cop with graying hair and a mustache ordered ("Don't worry, we're not gonna take your shit!" he assured us with a sneer). He was a Canadian Pacific special agent, and he seemed to be in charge. "You are all under arrest!" This is what we were told even before we were off the train, and the cops repeatedly reminded us of this fact. They asked if any of us carried weapons--and informed that we shouldn't lie, because our weapons would be found when our gear was searched--so we all turned over our pocketknives and multi-tools. Almost apologetically, the workers just kept repeating, "Jeez, you know, ya scared the livin' daylights out of us. We thought you were a gang, that you were going to attack us. We locked ourselves in the front unit, we were frightened for our lives." We all apologized, and sheepishly stared at our feet, as if we were children being scolded.

We were then herded onto a side street that came to a dead end at the tracks. Waiting for us were maybe six cars and ten cops, both Canadian Pacific and Toronto agents. We were broken into small groups to be interviewed, first by the city cops, then by the CP cops, and when they finally arrived, by the immigration officials. (The latter were the rudest of the bunch.) Of course, we were all repeatedly asked if we had been in town for Active Resistance, and of course, we all lied.

Over the course of the three or four hours during which they

detained us, the officers gradually became friendlier, once they dropped the initial macho stance. Cracks about anarchists were made, despite our feeble denials. When I asked for permission to retrieve a jacket from my pack, a cop smiled and said, "As long as you don't pull out a gun and shoot me, it's all right." They were obviously getting bored, and starting horsing around amongst themselves, shining their spotlights on each other, playing with their squawk boxes.

We sat around eating peanut butter sandwiches, pitching pebbles and drawing in the dirt with sticks, telling each other the same stories we had told the cops (as if simple repetition made them more believable), wondering about our fate. When someone suggested that we might be deported, Elizabeth began to cackle hysterically; apparently, she thought it would be to our advantage, since we all just wanted to get home, anyway. The rest of us were not as enthused about the possibility.

At one point, Tiffany suddenly turned to me and exclaimed, "Hey Wylie, how did that cop know your name? Somebody must have ratted you out!" It was disturbing to learn that I hadn't just imagined it. (Eventually, though, Craig would provide me with an explanation. Apparently, the cops had cleared the unit he was on before getting to us, and had demanded the names of some of his co-conspirators. Assuming, as many do, that "Wylie" was an alias, he had offered it up in an effort to placate his interrogators.)

Finally, after several hours, the police gathered us all into a single group, and the one who'd appeared to be in charge during the whole process made an announcement: "Well, we're going to jail."

We all groaned simultaneously. Then, pointing to himself and jerking a thumb at his partner, the cop said, "The two of us, anyway, we're going back to the jail. The rest of you, you're free to go." He paused for a beat, allowing us to absorb his joke. Then he bellowed, "Welcome to Canada!"

Nine

Actually, the Canadians did not completely escape penalty: they were issued fines, which might have something to do with the fact that two of them had spent the whole night openly referring to the cops as "pigs". Still, the ranking officer was gracious enough to offer us change for bus fare, while he warned us that although he had been in a friendly mood that night, his demeanor would undoubtedly be substantially less pleasant if he caught anyone trying to get on a train the following evening. As the police cruisers, one by one, left the scene, we divided into our two original groups, collected our belongings, and prepared to walk to the bus stop.

Suddenly, Elizabeth started screaming. She didn't respond directly to our urgent questioning, although we were able to figure out that something was wrong with her eyes: she was in pain, and could not see. Unable to aid or calm her, the police radioed for an ambulance. When the paramedics arrived, they couldn't find anything wrong with her eyes, and this fact seemed to annoy them greatly. They soon left, after giving us a plastic bag filled with a saline solution, which was handed to me to carry.

Gradually, we made our way back downtown, back to the apartment on Portland St. where Craig and Heath had stashed their packs during the previous week. (Fortunately, the Toronto public transit system ran twenty-four hours.) We all traded shifts guiding Elizabeth through the streets, since her vision still hadn't returned to her. As with everyone else, she remained silent when it was my turn to lead her. (I might have encouraged this apparent animosity when--quite unintentionally, of course--I allowed her to walk directly into a pole as we were boarding a bus.) However, when I reminded her that we'd previously met in San Francisco, she suddenly became animated, talking at length, discussing a broad range of topics (mostly concentrating on how she did not know what to do with her life: should she stay in Oakland, or go back to New Orleans to finish college?). Most interestingly, immediately upon our arrival at the house at which we were to sleep, she regained her sight.

Ten

Our traveling crew had now been whittled down to a modest and manageable trio: Craig, Heath and myself. (Allie and Tiffany called their mother, who offered to pay for their tickets, Karen was going to attempt the thirty-day advance purchase bus ticket scam, and about Elizabeth's plans I didn't inquire.) Our plan had been amended somewhat, as well. Instead of hopping out of Toronto, we would hitchhike to the next crew change point, in the town of MacTier. It had occurred to me that I was not making this trip out of necessity, at least not precisely. Somewhere in the city was my truck, if Chris hadn't left yet, if I could track him down. Also, I had five twenty dollar bills in my pocket, money that I'd set aside for gas (and far more than I usually carried when hopping trains); if I was unable to find my truck, I could still buy a bus ticket back to Austin. Yet, I decided that before me was the possibility of hanging onto the bulk of that hundred dollars, and having a grand adventure besides. Neither repeating my ride with Chris nor spending any amount of time on the bus offered such promise. So, perhaps uninvited, I chose to stick with Craig and Heath.

Standing at the on-ramp for Highway 400 holding a sign that read "BARRIE" (according to our map, it appeared to be a fairly major town and a good halfway point), we didn't have to wait very long for our first ride, despite our concerns regarding hitchhiking as a group of three males. This benefactor a fairly young fellow, perhaps in his late twenties. He'd attended school in Alabama, although he was a Canadian. We talked about racial tensions in the U.S., and he drew a connection between violence and population density, income, and the availability of social services.

The next few rides presented themselves quickly, as well.

Craig and I let Heath do the talking (rather, we avoided getting into the passenger seat, forcing him to do so). He seemed to be adept at chatting up those who stopped for us. Sitting in the enclosed bed of a pick-up truck, we caught a whiff of smoke from the joint that was being passed back and forth between Heath and the driver.

Our luck seemed to take a downturn after we were dropped at a ramp about fifty kilometers south of our destination. There was little traffic entering the highway, and while everyone slowed down to squint at our sign, no one was stopping. (Our piece of cardboard had been altered to read "FOOT'S BAY", a town which appeared on our map as being more prominent than MacTier; however, we eventually discovered that while most people knew where the latter was located, no one had ever even heard of the former. We decided to leave the sign as it was, enjoying the obscurity.)

Finally, having grown tired of waiting, we opted to move out onto the highway proper to see if we might increase our chances of scoring a ride. After crossing a long, narrow bridge (which took several nerve-racking minutes, with little room between the rumbling traffic and the guardrail), we took up our new position on a straight section of road with an ample shoulder. Still, our luck did not improve. We began to look around at our immediate environment, discussing the options for bedding down. The sun gradually slipped behind the trees on the horizon, so that we were left with only the pink light reflected off the clouds. Ten more minutes, we decided, and we'd call it quits.

Moments after making this pact, a white truck stopped on the shoulder. The driver was very efficient about the whole process, barely uttering a word as he quickly unlocked the camper and methodically shifted around the bed's contents in order to accommodate Craig and me, as well as the three packs. It was almost as if it was his occupation (or obligation) to offer rides to hitchhikers. Heath again rode in the cab, with the driver and his adolescent son. We were dropped at the turn-off for MacTier.

The walk to the train yard was a short one, through the heart of the small town. Conveniently, there was a tourist map posted on the main road, and the railroad tracks were clearly marked. Many of the local teenagers were still roaming the streets and hanging out at the general store; the three of us were quite obviously not locals. (We worked out a quick story about camping, but were not called upon to use it.) After scouting the small yard, we took up a position just northwest of the depot, on an embankment next to the tracks. Separated from the tracks by a field was a row of houses. A couple was sitting on their front porch, and we were able to hear much of the details of their debate as they drunkenly argued about the

Bible.

I may have been dozing when Craig nudged me. A train pointed in our direction had stopped on the mainline, some distance from where we'd been hiding. We collected our packs, crossed the tracks and followed a dirt road that ran parallel to the yard. Then we crossed back into the yard and moved silently through the small maze comprised of stacks of pipes, lumber and other accoutrements of industry. The shadows cast by the rail cars provided sufficient cover as we worked our way down the line, looking for an appropriate ride. An empty gondola soon presented itself, and we hastily climbed aboard. Only a short while later, the train departed. After relishing the thrill of being on a moving train once more, I rolled out my bag and went to sleep, echoes of the drunken couple's conversation insinuating itself into my dreams.

Eleven

The next morning, I awoke reluctantly, but necessarily: a thunderous crash resounded in my ears and a violent jolt rattled my teeth. This episode was quickly followed by another. Every few moments, with a deafening bang, our gondola was slammed down the tracks in one direction, then the other. Two things quickly became apparent: we were in a yard, and our car had been dumped. There was nothing we could do but wait until the workers had finished with us, wait until our car was motionless long enough for us to safely evacuate it.

Judging by the sun, I guessed that it was fairly late in the morning. Keeping my body braced for the next collision, I attempted to gather my sleeping bag, cramming it into the stuff sack. When it seemed as if a significant interval had passed since the last assault, Craig crept over to the wall, and cautiously peeked over the rim. At that exact moment, a switch engine was bearing down on us; the impact nearly knocked Craig off his feet. "He was looking right at me, smiling," he cried. "I think the workers know that we're in here, and they're just having fun with us!"

Whatever their level of malice, the workers must have eventually decided that the gondola (and its occupants) was no longer of interest to them, as it finally came to a rest. We slowly raised ourselves up from the squatting position, each of us gripping the lip of the wall. Our car was on the far side of the yard, on the line closest to chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. Perhaps ten rows of tracks fanned out on the other side of the car, and beyond them was the public sidewalk. Swiftly, yet without yielding to the urge to break into a suspicious sprint, we climbed down the ladder, shouldered our packs and exited the yard.

Across the street, a small group of people gathered, standing in the vague semblance of a line. Some of them blinked at us meekly; others completely ignored us. A sign suggested that they were waiting for a meal to be served by a Catholic Church charity sponsored soup kitchen. Another sign informed us that we were in

Sudbury, which meant that we had traveled about 250 kilometers from MacTier.

Disappointed that we had covered so little ground over the last couple of days since our initial attempt to leave Toronto, we felt it was time to take a more aggressive approach. The Sudbury freight yard did not look very promising; we needed to get to Cartier, the next crew change point. Rather than muck around with hitchhiking again, we decided to take the bus. However, none of us wanted to ignore the happy coincidence of getting off the train across the street from an opportunity for free food, so we pushed back our departure long enough to wait in line for the serving.

The regulars by and large welcomed us into their midst, surrounding us and asking earnest questions, almost treating us as celebrities. We downplayed the fact that we'd just been spotted emerging from a train yard, and tried to pass ourselves off as something like down-and-out tourists who just happened to be in need of a warm meal. A large man who possessed the physique I would have ascribed to Ignatious Reilly was particularly friendly, and rambled on and on about how we could stay with his mom if we wanted. Upon discovering our nationalities, he exclaimed, "So, you're from the States, eh?" He then proceeded to give us detailed, mind-boggling directions for getting back across the border, as if he assumed that we'd merely stumbled into Canada by accident, that we'd simply become lost to our country of origin and desperately wanted to return.

The actual dining situation was less lighthearted than the scene outside. Entering the poorly lit main room, which contained about a dozen small tables, each person waited for the next available spot. There was room to accommodate four people at each table. This arrangement meant that no one was able to sit with friends. No one spoke to me once I had taken the seat to which I was directed. I'd been excited when I spotted what appeared to be chunks of honeydew melon in a bowl, but upon closer inspection I realized that I had been looking at sliced cucumbers. Like Heath and Craig before me, I requested that the meat be withheld from my meal. I was given a strange look, and then handed a plate upon which rested a slice of white bread and a couple of carrots, all of it doused with gravy. The skinny, disheveled man to my left silently pointed at my serving, then raised his eyebrows several times in a gesture of excited sympathy. I smiled weakly. The bald, corpulent man seated across the table from me shoved piece after piece of chicken into his mouth, slurping loudly. His face glistened with grease, and he repeatedly wiped his stubby fingers on his shirt. I slowly chewed my soggy bread, staring at my plate.

I had grown accustomed to Food Not Bombs style food sharing, wherein there is a celebratory atmosphere and an attempt to erase the line between those who serve and those who eat. Everyone always eats together, and there is never any thought of charity, the food is not considered a limited resource set aside for those less fortunate. However, at that table, in that company, I felt a wave of guilt, the guilt of a middle class kid playing at being a hobo. Mainstream political rhetoric echoed in my head, as I caught myself taking advantage of a program intended to help those who could not help themselves, even if this idea of program abuse contradicted my own experience. (I knew that food banks and soup kitchens rarely run out of food--arriving at the end of a give-away, one usually finds an abundance of leftovers and servers desperate for someone to consume them.) Still, the feeling was reinforced by the obvious division between the pious volunteers and the hungry diners. I was aware that I could take care of myself, I had all my faculties as well as money to spend on food. The present situation did not suggest an anti-capitalist attitude, or the fostering of a community of those who feel that food cannot be commodified. Instead, it reflected a paternalistic, liberal ideal; it was a handout, pity instead of empathy.

I was glad to be out of there, out on the streets in the sunshine, the three of us making our way to the bus depot. We asked an older man with a cane for directions, and he threw up his hands in exasperation. His frustration had nothing to do with us: he rolled his eyes as he explained that we would first have to walk to the municipal terminal, and catch a bus to the suburbs, where the Greyhound depot had inexplicably been built. "Leave it to the fucking government planners," he muttered, shaking his head. At the terminal, we were handed passes for a free local ride, part of a promotional effort good for only that day--another happy coincidence. Tickets to Cartier were under ten dollars (Canadian) each. Once on the bus, all three of us soon fell asleep. My stomach gurgled as it struggled to digest lunch.

Twelve

I had spent all of July on the road, and about three-fourths of that time was passed in the company of Peter and Josh. This Florida-based pair was young, hairy and enthusiastic about whatever they happened to be doing at any given moment. I probably gravitated more towards Peter, if only because Josh was anal and neurotic enough to remind me of myself just a bit too closely. Along with various others--friends new and old--we descended along the West Coast together, finally parting company in Los Angeles. They were headed to Ohio, and I had decided it was just about time to get back to Austin, because rent was due in a matter of days, and I had originally planned to be away from home for less than two weeks. (Really, I was ready to keep going with them, meandering with no particular destination. Josh had impulsively announced that he was going to use his savings to buy a used motorcycle--despite not knowing how to drive one--so that he and Peter could travel to Ohio on it. I told them quite sincerely that if they found one with a sidecar, I would come along. Probably for the better, they ended up taking the bus.)

These two taught me a lot about frugal, transient living. (Whether they noticed my untutored behavior during our time together, I don't know.) Both of them were neophyte train-hoppers, and it did not seem as if they had hitchhiked all that many more miles than I had, so we were all on equal footing in that regard. What they imparted to me was an overarching approach to living on the cheap. I was already scrupulously thrifty, but these kids paid for almost nothing: if they couldn't make it, steal it, scam it or find it in a dumpster, they tried to do without it. In San Francisco, Peter chose to walk several miles rather than fork over the dollar for bus fare. Later, he derided me as a yuppie for spending $5 on a Thai meal in Berkeley. I was already used to agonizing about every dime spent and keeping a meticulous record of expenditures, but there were certain necessities I took for granted: food, shelter and

transportation had previously been an essential part of my budget. Yet with Peter and Josh during those weeks--aside from that $5 Thai dinner--I scavenged my meals, I slept outdoors or on strangers' floors, and I traveled by foot, by thumb and by freight train.

So, it was a change of pace traveling with Craig and Heath. By no means were they extravagant--they squatted in the forest in California, after all--but they did not seem to share my previous companions' reluctance to purchase food (although this is not to discount their willingness to partake of a meal at the soup kitchen in Sudbury). The bus dropped us in front of a general store in Cartier, and the establishment seemed to be the hub of the town's social activity (and the chief enterprise, aside from the trains); MacTier was a booming metropolis by comparison. Inside was a restaurant, and my two friends seemed eager to get something to eat. They settled on homemade pie, and I was able to withstand desire for only so long before I ordered a slice for myself.

The train yard was behind the general store, and the tracks were parallel to the highway. Heath kept watch over our packs as Craig and I took a stroll up and down the dusty road that ran along side the yard. A large rock formation lay at the far eastern end, and it seemed to supply ample coverage for us to wait in comfort for a train. It appeared that the crew change would occur at the depot, and we judged that this scenario would leave a long string of cars parked on the main line right next to the boulder. With scrub brush providing shade, we lounged on top of the rock. I felt myself being lulled by the sun into a comfortable doze as Craig sewed a tear in his pack and Heath read a Buddhist magazine.

It was not long before a train arrived. We quickly scrambled off the boulder and began to walk the line looking for a rideable car. Unfortunately, it appeared that the entire string of 48' well cars was floorless, thus being inhospitable to hoboes. Apparently, the crew changed out quickly, as we'd only spent a couple of minutes next to the tracks when the brakes took on air and the string got rolling. Heath looked frustrated as the train gathered speed. "Do you want to catch it on the fly?" he asked. However, neither Craig nor I answered. Instead, we just stared at the train, which was soon going much too fast to board, even if we had seen something to ride.

"Look, we have to decide whether or not we're going to get on a train. If we all just sit around staring at each other, waiting for someone else to make a decision, we'll never get out of here!" I was surprised by the harshness of Heath's tone. Despite being originally from the Mid-West, he had always previously appeared to

have a very laid-back, California-style demeanor. My social insecurities caught up with me in that moment, as I wondered whether this irritation was directed at me. After all, I had basically imposed myself on the pair of friends, and a trio is a much less manageable traveling crew than a duo. I felt my cheeks grow warm with humiliation as my treacherous brain labored to convince me that I was really nothing but an unwanted, barely tolerated burden. It was as if the true nature of the situation was being revealed to me: how had I been so blind as to not see it earlier? I had visions of being told to piss off in a backwater town in central Canada.

"I don't think it was a question of making a decision, Heath. There weren't any rideable cars." Craig's words offered some reassurance. I took deep breaths, trying to keep my anxieties hidden.

Missing the last train turned out to be less than the unmitigated disaster we'd supposed. A second train came along less than a half an hour later. It was not on the main line, but it was obviously a hotshot, so we decided to take it. As the train slowly rolled by, the ladder of a perfect well car presented itself, and we clambered aboard. The three of us were congratulating ourselves on a well-executed hop when the slow-moving train creaked to a stop. Peeking over the wall, we saw that our car was at rest almost directly in front of the depot. Falling silent, we flattened ourselves against the metal wall, rolling our eyes in acknowledgement of the mysterious workings of the rails. The air brakes hissed, and the train started to roll again . . . backwards. In fact, we rolled back and forth several times--presumably to add or drop cars--before finally leaving the yard, headed west.

Once we were finally on our way, we relaxed a bit, and broke out the fixings for what Heath called "California homeless rolls": pita bread, natural peanut butter, granola, raisins and honey. If all went according to plan, this train would take us all the way to British Columbia, over the Canadian Rockies, through the famous Spiral Tunnel.

As we munched on our pita bread, I made idle conversation, musing aloud, "Can you believe that those Canadians have never heard of the 'wahoo'?"

I was met with blank stares, similar in expression to those offered by my comrades back in Toronto.

"I mean, you guys know what I mean if I use the word 'wahoo' as a verb, right? As in, 'let's go wahoo some beer'?" Heath shook his head, while Craig blinked and offered an uncomprehending smile. So, once again, I offered my explanation of the act, repeating

the classic example of stealing beer from a convenience store. Craig did not react, but Heath became more engaged.

"I don't know, Wylie," he said, chuckling. "I think that's just a Texas thing. It sounds like a southern rebel call: Wahoo!"

"You're thinking of 'yeehaw'," I countered.

"No, no, it definitely has a cowboy origin, or perhaps a monster truck rally-related etymology. Still, I like the idea of theft as an act of overt rebellion. Does it only apply to beer, or can you wahoo anything?"

"Well, we were considering wahooing chocolate in Toronto. That's how I found out that Canadians were unfamiliar with it. I guess it's even less universal than I thought."

"Forget about chocolate. I'm thinking about wahooing radical literature from Barnes and Noble, and then distributing it. Or wahooing medicine from pharmacies." Heath was becoming more excitable as he spoke, his eyes widening at the mere thought of the potential social impact. "You really should promote the expansion of the wahoo beyond its narrow parameters. Maybe this is your calling, to politicize those who now only use it to get free beer. 'Wahoo everything!': that could be your slogan."

I liked the idea of having a calling, and of propagating a radical twist on an old concept. "I could be known as Wahoo Wylie," I suggested.

Thirteen

We awoke the next morning in the Thunder Bay yard. The sky was turning less encouraging shades of gray. As our train rolled through the plains, the weather grew increasingly dreary. Finally, around midday, the looming dark clouds made good on their collective threat and the rain began to pour.

We huddled in the rear well of a 48', pressed against the back of the double-stacked containers. Still, the rain whipped around and was thrown back in our faces. There was no way to avoid getting drenched. Craig and Heath both produced Gore-Tex clothing from their packs. Being Northern California forest squatters, they had to be prepared for wet weather (and as do others who spend extended periods in cool, damp climates, they had learned to eschew cotton). My own rain gear was less impressive. I had purchased the PVC vinyl pants and jacket set for maybe five dollars earlier that summer, when threatened with bad weather that never arrived. So, after languishing in the bottom of my duffel bag for a couple of months, this was the first time my gear was removed from its plastic pouch. I pulled on the pants, and let the elastic close around my ankles; I fumbled with the cheap, ineffective snaps on the front of the coat. My limbs fought to move against the stiff material. Unable to breathe, my body immediately started to sweat.

To top it off, the suit was an obscenely bright shade of yellow. I might as well have given myself a coat of fluorescent paint.

Once I was fully outfitted, Heath just started to chuckle, apparently endlessly fascinated with my gear. Feeling the material between his thumb and forefinger, he laughed. "Nice rain slicks there, Wylie! You look as if you ought to be going fishing." I smiled sheepishly, and glanced down at my Converse All Stars (which were not ideal for train hopping, but this was an unplanned

trip). The rain was quickly soaking through the canvas as standing water collected on the car floor. I'd thought far enough ahead to procure a large plastic garbage bag before leaving Toronto. With sidelong glances at the nice hiking packs Craig and Heath carried, I struggled to pull the thin black trash bag over my unwieldy sausage-shaped, Army-green rucksack. It seemed that I'd done a fair job of protecting my pack and its contents from the weather, but I discovered later that I had actually succeeded in funneling the rain directly into the plastic bag, so that standing water collected inside and dampened all my belongings.

The three of us stood, huddled together, while it rained and rained. We couldn't even sit down, because of the rain accumulating on the floor. It did stop for a while, so the metal had a chance to dry and I could shed my vinyl gear, but it soon started again. For all its bulky ridiculousness, the gear did keep the rain off my body, although I was perspiring so thoroughly that it made little difference.

When it seemed that the worst of the storm had passed, we were able to relax a bit, snack on our food, and watch the scenery roll by. Heath sat on the catwalk, laying down a foam sleeping pad to protect his posterior from the sharp metal grating. He appeared to go into a trance, a beatific expression washing over his face. (This image was reinforced as he perused a recent issue of *Tricycle*, although the mood was occasionally interrupted as he periodically and loudly blew his nose into a handkerchief--he was battling a bad cold.)

For the most part, we traveled through wilderness, with little hint of man's intrusion to disturb the panorama. Often, the tracks ran down narrow corridors cut through the trees. Unfortunately, the three of us were lulled into a less-than-vigilant state of mind, becoming careless about keeping ourselves hidden. Every once in a while, Craig or I would lean around the container to glance at the rapidly approaching territory. If it seemed that we might be intersecting civilization, we'd shout to Heath over the sounds of the train and then duck down below the wall of the well.

Inevitably, there came a time when we failed to get Heath's attention. We were swiftly moving to a point on the tracks where a pair of rail workers appeared to be inspecting a switch. We both called out--"Heath, get down! Workers!"--but the din of the wheels over the tracks and Heath's own meditative state conspired against us. He suddenly snapped back to attention and jumped off the grate and down into the well, just as we reached the switch. All three of us made eye contact with one of the workers in the split second that it took for our car to charge by him.

We had definitely been spotted, although there was no way to know whether he would call in to report us. Even if he did, there was little to do about it. Eventually, it got dark. After watching the stars for a while, we decided to bed down. Craig let me borrow his tarp, in case it rained again (he had a nice Gore-Tex bivy sack, himself). Heath and I carefully crossed over the catwalk to the front well of the next car in the string. I rolled out my sleeping bag and was soon rocked to sleep.

Fourteen

"There's two more over here, in this well!" cried the voice. It was followed by the rapid squawks and fizzes of walkie-talkies. A beam of light hit my face, trying to yank me from my slumber. Is it possible, I thought, that I am still dreaming? Optimistically, I tightened my eyelids and burrowed more deeply into my sleeping bag.

"Check the seals on those lower containers," another voice suggested. The sounds became more insistent and agitated. I knew it was the police, although I desperately wanted to believe that the voices belonged to surprised workers who were going to eventually leave us alone.

"All right, guys, get up!" We responded with a deliberate slowness. Heath and I stood up in our well, Craig in his. "Don't bother to pack up your shit, we're only going to search it later. Just dump it all over the side. Now!" We did as were ordered (although I stole a second to put on my shoes). One of the cops yelled into his radio, "They were all riding in the wells!" A disembodied and distorted voice responded, "Yeah, that's becoming a popular spot."

There were three cars and four cops next to the tracks. Two Winnipeg police officers, a man and a woman, silently stood back near their cruiser. The cop in charge, or at least the one doing all the talking, was a prematurely gray, uniformed CP officer. The other cop also worked for CP, although he was out of uniform and drove an unmarked car. (Both of them had mustaches.) After the train was given clearance to leave, all of us were patted down. When the CP cop found Craig's mace, he started hollering, as if he'd discovered a smoking gun. "Oh, carrying a concealed weapon!"

Craig quietly turned to the Winnipeg cops, who seemed bemused by the entire scenario, and asked if it was illegal to have mace. "Well," he was told, "you are only allowed to have it for use on dogs."

"Oh. Um, I'm really scared of dogs."

"Yeah, that's what I assumed," the female officer assured him, and slipped the canister into her pocket. In an even more hushed tone, she confided, "Look, this is Winnipeg. These guys don't see much action, so they get excited when they have an excuse to play with their toys. Just relax." As if on cue, the CP cop strutted in front of us and announced, "You are all under arrest, in case I forgot to mention that." He continued to pace in front of us. "So, where were you headed?" None of us answered.

"Calgary," Craig said finally, breaking the silence. Other than for the sake of adherence to the rule that one should never be straightforward with the police, I saw little reason for this lie. Were the cops going to go easier on us because we planned to spend less time on their trains? "We were going to meet some friends there."

"Oh yeah? With all those winter clothes, it looks as if you might be planning a trip across the Rockies." Yes, I thought, I suppose it is always good to be evasive with cops.

Abruptly, he stopped pacing and turned to face us, his right hand on the butt of his gun as he brought his left hand up to stroke his chin. It was a show, as if he wanted to pretend that the question he was about to ask had just occurred to him, and yet he wanted us to know that he was pretending. "So, are you coming from Toronto, from Active Resistance?"

"We got on this morning, at Thunder Bay," Craig said, after a pause.

Each of us was placed in a separate car. Craig rode in the Winnipeg police cruiser. Because Heath and I would be traveling in cars driven by a single officer, we were both cuffed. The silver-haired cop hooked them around my wrists, behind my back. When they clicked into place, the cop gave them a slight tug and asked, "Is that alright?"

"Um, yeah, sure, they're comfortable." I was still yawning, trying to shake myself awake. It was about midnight, which meant that we had been asleep for perhaps two hours before getting pulled off the train.

"Funny, that's the first time I have ever heard anyone describe handcuffs as comfortable."

We were taken to the CP Police Station. The Winnipeg cops left as soon as they had delivered their cargo. The three of us were taken into a small, windowless room with a table, three chairs, and a mirror on the wall. A telephone sat on the table, but one of the officers removed it before leaving and locking the door behind him. Craig talked loudly about getting on the train in Thunder Bay that morning, just in case our conversation was monitored. (I doubted

that this outfit was that sophisticated, although it was interesting that they even heard of A.R., let alone guessed we'd come from there. I wondered if this was just because the Canadian media was more astute, or if the rail police had more solid Intelligence than in the U.S.)

One by one, we were taken from the room to completely unpack our bags, to spread their contents across the floor. My soggy clothes and sleeping bag (which they had me unfurl) were of little interest to them, but my spiral notebook was immediately seized by the black-mustached cop. He flipped through its pages, furrowing his brow. Then, he looked up at me. "What is this, what are you planning to use all this information for?"

"It's just my journal," I snapped, exasperated.

By now, the uniformed cop had settled down significantly, and his partner had never been all that excitable. Individually, accompanied by one of the officers, we were each allowed to go to the restroom to urinate and wash. I amused myself by trying to figure out which cop was in charge; they both seemed so goofy. It occurred to me that I had a hard time taking seriously any of the Canadian cops with whom I'd interacted on anything more than a cursory level. In my mind, employing all the dopey Canuck stereotypes, I constructed elaborate plots for a police buddy drama for television, to be set in Winnipeg.

Finally, we were issued tickets, each for a fine of about a hundred dollars. (No thought was given to paying, of course.) As we were turned loose into the night, I could not help but cheerily thanks our hosts. It was habit, originally born of a knee-jerk politeness, and for a while I always cringed whenever I caught myself offering gratitude to a cop. However, I have since observed that they invariably become irritated as I grin and say "thank you".

Their annoyance gives me a very small sense of power in situations that otherwise usually leave me feeling powerless.

Fifteen

The prostitutes greeted us a couple of blocks from the Canadian Pacific police headquarters. I nodded as we passed. The uniformed bull had offered a stern warning to take care of our citations before leaving town, and certainly before leaving the country. "You never know, it may come up when you try to cross over into B.C. five years down the road," he cautioned us. He also adamantly reiterated that we had better not get back on the trains. However, I noticed that their office didn't appear to be significantly computerized, and we guessed that we might have a brief grace period before the carbon duplicates of our tickets found their way into the system.

The three of us had trouble agreeing on the correct interpretation of the cops' directions to a twenty-four hour coffee shop. (The two of them seemed to not be in complete agreement, themselves.) We wandered one way, then the other, eventually finding ourselves on a main downtown street. Craig and Heath wanted to get some coffee and a bite to eat, figure out our position in relation to the yard, and get there quickly.

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to go back to Texas, to go back home. I had something of an obligation in Houston--I'd promised my mom that I'd help her move--and the trip to Vancouver was more and more like an indulgence, one that would wind up taking me a couple of thousand miles out of my way. I fretted, silently conflicted about my next move.

It was maybe three in the morning when we walked up to the donut shop; the logo identified it as part of a franchise. I said something about hitting the dumpster, but Heath responded sharply. "You know, Wylie, sometimes a fresh bagel or pastry is better than one that's a day old. Sometimes it's worth paying for it." Still, I lifted the lid and gingerly poked the plastic bags, my nose wrinkling in reaction to the combination of sweet and sour odors. Finding nothing, I joined my friends inside. After washing a layer of grime off my hands, I placed an order. Sitting on a stool,

munching on the disappointingly dry bran muffin (purchased in a lame attempt to avoid eating something completely lacking in nutritional value), I noticed that the customers looked pretty much the same as the customers at every donut shop in which I've ever found myself at three a.m.

Craig and Heath each produced and began to study their notebooks. I sat quietly as they looked over the notes they had collected from others who had previously ridden this route. I tried to pay attention as they debated whether to stick with the CP line or switch over to Canadian National. Probably my decision to not go with them, to instead turn south and hitch to Austin, had been made at that point, but I hadn't yet recognized it.

I was still weighing the pros and cons of the two available options as the three of us stood at a bus shelter at a downtown intersection, trying to decipher the various lines available to us. It was largely a moot exercise, considering that it appeared none of the buses would be running for a few more hours. I'd caught myself scoping out potential spots to sleep as we had made our way from the donut shop. I should have recognized it as a dead giveaway that I was ready to sleep, that I was done with the trains, that I was ready to go home.

Still, I didn't say anything to myself or my companions until the cab Heath had called pulled up to the corner where the three of us stood. As Heath negotiated the price with the driver, I told Craig that I had decided to part ways with them, to head south. Part of the reason I had procrastinated for so long, I suspect, had something to do with having my fears confirmed: they would be relieved to be rid of me, the burdensome third wheel that I was. Somehow, I even managed to convince myself that I was responsible for us getting caught, if for no other reason than I was inexperienced and so brought bad luck. I always seemed to get caught, or dumped, or on the wrong train.

I preemptively made the self-deprecating points, almost suggesting that I was doing them a favor, remarking that it would certainly make things no more difficult for them to be free of my company. Craig offered a slight smile and gave me a hug, saying that it not been anymore of a hassle to travel as a threesome, and that he enjoyed my company. It was surprising, and a bit disturbing, how much these words reassured me, how much my emotions seemed to depend on his remarks.

"All these travelers, they're dropping like flies," Heath commented as he climbed into the cab.

Sixteen

The scent of the donut dumpster wafted at least a half a block from its source. In fact, I smelled it before I saw it. When I lifted the cover, a small swarm of bees buzzed and hovered around the sweet smelling bags inside. I promptly let go of the heavy lid, and it dropped with a bang. A donut for breakfast was not that much of a priority.

I was walking to the bus stop, to catch a ride to the southern edge of town. It was early, and I was ready to start hitchhiking south after spending two days and three nights in Winnipeg. That first night, after saying goodbye to Craig and Heath, I wandered around for a while, looking for a relatively safe and secluded place to sleep. I considered a small downtown cemetery, but eventually settled upon the rooftop of a small, partially subterranean shopping center. The funky design of the building and its landscaping provided a veritable stairway to the upper-most flat tar-and-gravel surface. A thin piece of cardboard provided a modicum of padding as I curled up next to an air-conditioning unit, which served as cover so that the office workers in the multistory building across the street would not be able to spot me when looking out their windows in the morning.

Early in the afternoon on the following day, I found my way to Mondragon. I had first learned about it during a panel discussion at A.R. that might have been titled "You can learn from our mistakes". Both a political bookstore and a vegetarian cafe, the workplace structure employed there was based on the participatory economics model of Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel. The name was borrowed from a town in the Basque region of northern Spain; the area is known for its extensive network of worker collectives.

The place was unlike any info-shop I'd ever seen. Apparently, the collective had received a significant donation, and it appeared that a good chunk of that sum was dedicated to interior design. It looked like a castle, everything wood and faux-stone. Ornate chairs and sofas crowded around a fireplace in a seating

area, beyond which was the cafe. Off to the side was the literature; it was more of a restaurant with a small (thought well-stocked) bookshop operating as a sideline, rather than the standard info-shop that also sells coffee and sandwiches.

The items on the menu were appetizing but priced higher than I wanted to spend. I sat reading for a while, spent some time browsing, and then finally approached a clerk behind the counter to ask about leftovers. I mentioned hearing about the shop at A.R., although mostly I just rambled, as I was feeling a bit lightheaded from not eating well the last few days. The fellow behind the counter was soft-spoken and sympathetic. When there was a lull in customer flow, he took me upstairs, showing me the office spaces shared by various local progressive and radical groups. He lead me to a pleasantly-cluttered room, said I could rest or read there without being bothered, and showed me the Food Not Bombs kitchen, suggesting that I get something to eat; he promised to check on the leftovers later.

I read for a while, then dozed on and off. Despite the kindness I had been shown, I was feeling a bit awkward. Surely, if I stuck around and tried to be sociable, I would be offered a place to sleep, and I would meet some interesting and like-minded people, but interacting with people felt like nothing but a burden. Even conversation seemed beyond my capabilities. I was in a solitary, almost isolationist mood; there was no way I could put forth the gregarious attitude necessary to ingratiate myself into a crowd of strangers. The rooftop seemed like so much less work by comparison. I felt like an interloper, an imposter.

Quietly, I descended the stairs and slipped out the front door. It had grown dark as I was napping. Wandering around for a while, I stumbled across the small Chinatown district, and decided to treat myself to a meal. Glancing at menus posted outside the various restaurants, I eventually picked a place that seemed inexpensive. My dress and odor clashed with the fairly swanky ambience, and the meal was terrible. I left disappointed, and went looking for a used bookstore I'd spotted earlier in the day.

As I was crossing at an intersection a couple of blocks from the restaurant, I heard a car horn, and a friendly voice called out to me. I turned around and saw a white sedan. The driver was motioning to me. It took a couple of seconds, but I recognized him as the plainclothes railroad cop.

"Hey, did you lose your friends?" he asked, a toothy grin beneath his dark mustache.

"Uh, they decided to keep going, while I thought I'd stick around town for a couple of days."

"Well, they didn't get back on a train, did they?" he admonished me, his tone and finger wagging exaggerated.

"No, no. I think they were hitchhiking."

I spent the next day in the library, and the following night on the rooftop. I was ready to leave town, ready to head home. After stirring up the bees at the dumpster, I splurged and bought a loaf of bread to go with my jar of peanut butter, caught the bus and rode it to the end of the line.

It was a fairly casual hitch to the border. A pleasant middle-aged couple provided my first ride; in fact, I would describe them both as jolly. They became a bit nervous upon discovering that I was an American, asking probing questions which aimed at determining whether I was carrying a firearm. I assured them that most U.S. citizens did not regularly pack heat. They seemed to relax a bit, and the man offered that he'd done a bit of hitchhiking in his younger days, "when my hair was a bit bigger and my beard a bit darker." We drove across the plains, through thick clouds of smoke from the fields of burning crop residue.

They dropped me in Morris, where I stood on an unpaved shoulder for about an hour, before a minivan driven by a single woman stopped. She was not much younger than my mom; indeed, she talked about her kids, who were not much younger than me. Again I was asked about gun violence in the U.S., and I was told about her family and her friends scattered across our two countries. Her plan for the day was to drive across the border to stay overnight with a friend. Apparently, she periodically made these trips in order to go shopping for items that are more highly taxed in Canada.

As we approached the border station, she pressed the brakes and pulled off to the side of the road a couple of hundred feet back from the building. "I think I'll let you out here. I plan to drive a few miles east to cross, and besides it might get complicated, having a hitchhiker of a different nationality. You understand." I said did indeed understand, and thanked her for the ride.

My fantasy had been to be picked up by an American driver, one who might be waved through the checkpoint without much ado. I'd even expanded that fantasy so that the American would continue traveling for several hundred miles after crossing the border. Beggars can't be choosers, I reminded myself. I would go across, and then maybe I'd get that long-distance ride.

I looked south, and hefted my back from the pavement.

Seventeen

"Hello, I'd like to return to America now."

I waved at the guard in the glass booth. There was no arrangement for pedestrian crossing, since this road hit the borderline independent of any city or town. The transition from Canada to the United States was demarcated by a small building stretched across four lanes of pavement. There was no automobile traffic, so I simply walked along the highway from the spot where I'd been dropped by my last ride, and strolled right up the window.

I think I caught the border guard reading. It took a moment to get his attention as I stood gesticulating before him. I could see my own reflection in the reinforced glass. Eventually, he looked up, scowled, and put his magazine down on the counter. Standing up, he indicated with a wave of his hand a door to my right, and then he disappeared from view. I walked over to the door, which was opened from the inside by the guard. "Come on in," he grumbled, and I mistakenly took his tone to be one of deliberately hyperbolic annoyance. I figured that he was irritated, but not greatly so. I thought he might even be thankful that I was relieving some of the tedium of his day.

He opened another door and indicated that I was to walk through it. I did, and suddenly realized that I was in a holding cell. I turned around to see that the guard was pulling surgical gloves onto his hands. He let the elastic snap tight around his wrist. "Put your bag on the table, and take off your shirt, shoes and socks, and roll up the cuffs of your pants."

Of course, in this situation, one is usually gripped by the urge to protest indignantly, to shout, "I'm an American, you can't do this, I know my rights!" This is before the cynicism blossoms--or maybe it is just pragmatism? Either way, I sighed, resigned to the fact that protesting would get me nothing. I knew that any rights one imagines oneself to have as a citizen are abandoned when border crossings are involved. I was carrying no contraband, and decided

to gamble on whether or not they would plant anything on me. It was that sad moment that I've faced before and since--when I decide to submit, because I just don't have the energy to fight. If I comply, according to that peculiar logic, maybe they will just let me go soon.

The first border guard (why do so many of them have mustaches?) was soon joined by a second. This fellow was young, perhaps younger than me. He was polite, almost apologetic. He gingerly unpacked my duffel bag, carefully laying out its contents on the table. The first cop demanded answers to questions, wanting to know how I got into Canada if I didn't have any money. "I have money," I said as I pulled the roll of five twenties out of my pocket and placed it on the table. Naturally, the next question was "Why the hell would you want to hitchhike if you have money?"

The younger cop tried to make conversation. He looked at my driver's license while I looked at the United States Marine Corps tattoo on his forearm. "You're from Houston?" I nodded. "I'm from El Paso, but I needed to get out of there. I hear Houston is a real tough town, isn't it? Lots of gangs?" I wondered if this was good cop-bad cop. I concentrated on keeping my answers noncommittal.

"I've never had any problems," I said with a shrug.

"Did you buy anything in Canada?" the first cop sneered, filling out a card on a clipboard.

"Well, I bought a used book, and a loaf of bread. I think that on those two items I spent a combined dollar-fifty . . . Canadian. Do I need to declare them?" The mustache cop just scowled. The cop from El Paso assured me that I need not worry about paying duty on such items, as he pulled a brown paper bag out of my sack. "Is this the loaf of bread?" he asked. I nodded. He just set it down next to the rest of my possessions, without opening it to look inside. I suddenly wished that the loaf had drugs baked into its center.

Rather abruptly, the two border guards walked out of the room without explanation, leaving the door ajar behind them. I remained on the cool cement bench, still shirtless and shoeless. After furrowing my brow for a couple of minutes, I slowly put on my clothes and repacked my bag. I went to the door and called out. No response came back to me. I pulled open the door and walked down a hallway, eventually finding myself in the front room of the facility, the room that I presumed would be the limit of most people's experience of that building as they crossed into the U.S.

There were three guards, all sporting mustaches, standing behind a counter. I stood next to it, waiting to be acknowledged. Finally, I cleared my throat and asked, "So, am I done here, or what?"

"Sign this," the cop said, shoving his clipboard at me. On it

was a card with the data collected from my driver's license and during the interview in the holding cell. I checked it for accuracy, scratched my name next to the X, and set it on the counter. The cops continued to ignore me.

"So, can I go now?"

"Yeah, get out of here."

Before walking out the front door, I went to water fountain and pulled my bottles out of my pack. However, when I pressed the button, nothing happened. I heard a voice over my shoulder; "It doesn't work." I also heard a snorted laugh. I put the bottles back in my pack, pulled the straps over my shoulder and pushed open the double doors and walked out into the sunshine. Only self preservation (and a dose of subservience) had kept from spinning around and screaming, "Welcome to America!"

I squinted as the sun reflected harshly off the white pavement. A worker who was bent over a wheelbarrow looked up, and gave me a measured look. I was too agitated to decide if it was meant to communicate sympathy or mockery. My chest was tightening, and I felt a slight quiver in my arms, as I was suddenly flooded with emotion. I was furious. Of course, given my circumstances, the smart thing to do would have been to stick around the border facility and approach people face-to-face to ask for rides (when the cars would be stopped!). However, I wasn't thinking rationally. I just knew that I wanted to put some distance between myself and this place, the scene of my humiliation.

I just started walking, stomping out long, swift strides along the shoulder of the interstate, headed towards Grand Forks, ND, which was the next big spot on the map, about eighty miles away.

Eighteen

There is a special place set aside in hell for motorists who honk and give the "thumbs up" sign when passing hitchhikers.

Traffic was light, so the passing of each car produced in me the repetition of a poignant cycle: anticipation as I saw the vehicle approach, hopeful expectation as I met the eyes of the driver, and finally disappointment as I turned and noted the absence of illuminated brake lights.

I had walked a good few miles from the border station--stopping to turn and thrust out my thumb whenever a car passed--before I calmed down, my clenched jaw relaxed, and I assessed the situation. Obviously, I couldn't just walk to Grand Forks (although the thought did occur to me, as I estimated my rate of speed and took an inventory of my rations, which were basically limited to bread, peanut butter, and a liter or so of water). I needed to get at least that far before deciding on my next move: I could keep hitchhiking, or I could hop a train, or I could buy a bus ticket. Hitching, I could continue down I-29 to Kansas City, then catch I-35 all the way into Austin. Or, I could take I-94 East from Fargo and head to Minneapolis, where I had an aunt and uncle who lived in the suburbs. I could probably rest up there, and then either hitch down 35 or catch a southbound train.

I was surrounded mostly by grassy fields, the flat landscape disturbed only by an occasional tree. In the distance, across a field, I spotted a group of people on horses. This sight was somehow reassuring, as if it offered proof that I would not starve to death. There was an overpass further down the highway, and I resolved to walk at least that far, if for no other reason than to get some relief from the heat.

The overpass guided a desolate road over the Interstate. Looking to either side, it appeared that the road continued into oblivion in both directions. At least I'll have shelter if it rains, I thought, squinting up at the cloudless blue sky. I had a cardboard sign on which I'd neatly written "FARGO". I sat on my pack,

standing up when a vehicle appeared on the horizon, readying myself to flash my thumb and a smile. However, I had little reason to brandish these attributes.

After a while, a truck came into view. I stood up, walked out of the shade so that I was clearly visible. I practiced my grins, trying to decide what expression was the least crazy looking. The truck drew closer, and gradually pulled onto the shoulder as it approached. My heart fluttered with anticipation--finally, a ride!

However, something was wrong: the truck wasn't slowing down. At first I thought it was a trick of perception, but I quickly realized that my eyes were not deceiving me. I grabbed my pack and jumped backwards, away from the paved shoulder and into the tall grass. As the truck raced by, my mouth fell open as I saw the driver, who looked right at me.

It was the border guard, the one who had been seated in the glass booth.

There I stood, on the shoulder of the highway (mouth agape after almost being deliberately rundown by a fucking cop) in the midst of what might be labeled at best a moderately successful attempt to repudiate my birth-order birthright. The oldest child by nine years, I had taken to the accompanying stereotype like a duck to water: I had grown into a conservative, fastidious, anxious, depressive, inhibited adult. (My little brother, on the other hand, exhibited the classic traits of the free-spirited baby of the family, born and raised after the parents have made their greatest mistakes and relaxed a good deal; he once remarked to me, "Yeah, I get depressed sometimes, but after a few hours I feel better.") Maybe I could will myself a new identity, remodel my personality, exorcise my bourgeois demons. Certainly, nobody who gives his car keys to a person he hardly knows, despite being two thousand miles away from home could be accused of being uptight. Right? Look at me, I demanded of the empty prairie, I'm like a Zen-influenced beatnik, shunning material possessions and hitchhiking from Canada to Texas! I'm Wahoo Wylie, and I am going to wahoo a ride home! I glanced around for confirmation.

Perhaps because no one was immediately present to acknowledge my transformation, I thought about Cate, about my previous life with her. Although hindered by her own neurotic tendencies, she had loved me, and tried to help alleviate my depression and social and spiritual anxieties. Struggling to find the passion, or at least the discipline to finish college, I remained unexcited about the prospects for post-graduate existence. Majoring in philosophy probably did little to help: I possessed the lexicon (largely since forgotten) to describe in detail my

existential angst. I did not know what I wanted from life, and I couldn't imagine a job I wouldn't hate. Worse, I couldn't imagine a job that wouldn't terrify me--just going to the grocery store was an overwhelming ordeal, one postponed until I'd consumed the last of the food staples to be found in the cupboard (including flour, which I'd combine with water and fry in a pan). During most of my school years, I'd held onto the same low-paying position in a warehouse, even as opportunities within the company were presented to me. I wanted absolutely no more responsibility, ever--no room for failure. Stocking shelves, there was little chance my mistakes would have significant impact, plus my laziness would go unnoticed. Still, I had enough self-esteem to dread the notion of being a stock boy for the rest of my life.

Cate grew increasingly worried about my mental wellbeing when she would come home in the evening to find me in a lump in the back room, hiding under the sofa, the lights off and the music blaring. I made efforts to explain my behavior: "Existence precedes essence," I would moan, even if I didn't want to admit it. "Humans are condemned to be free! I'm confronted with the abyss. 'We have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuse.'"

"Ain't nobody's fault but mine," Otis Redding would croon, his voice communicating an urgency that transcended the crackles and pops inherent in the surface of the vinyl LP. "Man is a useless passion," Sartre might add, although Cate could never hear him.

Over time, my moping grew worse. Cate was reduced to leaving "to do" lists around the house, and scolding me like a child when I failed to complete the simplest task. Any talk of the future terrified me. She had a friend whose adult daughter was a lot like me, inept socially and anxiety-ridden. This daughter worked for a company that produced technical manuals, basically doing what amounted to glorified data entry, plugging in information according to a set procedure. Cate imagined that I might be adept at a job that made no special demands, but which at the same time got me out of the warehouse and into a more professional environment. While I did fantasize that I would meet and fall in love with her friend's daughter (about whom I knew nothing, aside from her vocation), and that the two of us would become perfect hermits together, the career path otherwise left me without enthusiasm.

Cate wasn't a punk, and while maybe I wasn't the most shining representative of that subculture myself, we did have differing (and essentially diverging) worldviews. I made her mix tapes, and while she came to enjoy the loud, energetic music, she still couldn't understand why I never bought new clothes; why I

didn't put forth the effort to socialize with her friends even when we had nothing in common; why I spent several months bumming along the West Coast, dividing my time between sharing a two-bedroom San Francisco apartment with five other people and living in my truck. She might read from a zine I'd left on her coffee table, then cry in frustration, "Do these punks ever grow up, do they ever want to lead normal, happy lives?" Still, she tried to understand why I behaved as I did, even if my own efforts to communicate my motivations remained obscure.

I repaid her attempts at sympathy by breaking off our relationship a scant five weeks before our wedding day. On some base level, I had understood that some extreme measure was needed to escape the hole in which I found myself. Had I stayed the course, I could have been married, pursuing a career (in technical writing!), had a home and a car and arguments about whether it was a good time to have children. Now, here I was, standing on the side of a little traveled highway in North Dakota, my thumb extended in an optimistic gesture, in an effort to get a ride from a passing stranger. The sun was blazing, and I knew I'd be out of food and water by the following morning. I was starting to get weird, talking and even singing to myself. (For some reason, "You Give Love A Bad Name" took a hold of my brain and refused to let go, despite the fact that I could only recall three lines from the chorus.) I had a hundred dollars in my pocket and no plans for the future.

A fantasy, one in which I've occasionally indulged since at similar times during my travels, played itself out in my mind's eye as I performed a ridiculous dance in the August heat. I imagined Cate, her husband and maybe their young child driving down the highway. They never pick up hitchhikers, but Cate somehow, at seventy miles-per-hour, manages to recognize me. I have not spoken to her in a couple of years; the last time I saw her was shortly after our split. The car (probably an SUV) pulls onto the shoulder, and they offer me a ride. Cate complains about the smell--as she did when we were together--and asks me what in the hell do I think I'm doing? I resist the urge to be self-righteous, to impart the details of my rejection of mainstream culture. Instead, I simply say, "You know what Cate? I'm really happy."

In my fantasy, my words sounded convincing.

Of course, I entertained other fantasies that day, most of them focusing on a van driven by an all-girl punk band (and they usually had a cooler full of vegan ice cream in the back seat). Or maybe, instead of a van, they would be driving a Cadillac convertible.

Nineteen

I hate trying to get rides at truck stops; it has never worked for me, not once. Yet, people are forever insisting that they drop me at those places, smiling at their own generosity as they say, "You'll get a ride here, no problem." I never have the heart to tell them that they are wrong. People seem to not realize how much hitchhiking has changed since Jack Kerouac hit the road or the hippies went looking for America or good grass or whatever. It's not simply attitudes that have changed, laws have changed. Truck drivers cannot legally pick up hitchhikers, else they face a penalty for carrying cargo--a passenger--not listed on the manifest. Sure, I have scored tremendous rides from long-haul drivers, who have shared food and sleeping quarters with me, transporting me hundreds of miles. (I've also once been put out of a truck on the side of a highway, six or seven miles from the next exit, when the speed-addled driver became anxious as we approached a weigh station.) However, these rides have never originated at a truck stop.

Part of my resistance is the feeling that, in those circumstances, I am no longer merely hitchhiking, I am panhandling. Standing on a ramp or the shoulder, there's no high pressure sell-job taking place: if people are inclined to give rides to strangers who have their thumbs out, they just might stop for me. But going up to truckers and asking for rides on their own turf, where they stop to rest, shower, buy porn and socialize with their own kind, I feel as if I am invading a sanctuary, my palm crassly extended.

At that stop in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where my mostly silent ride mumbled, "You ought to be able to get a ride here," I approached a trucker and asked if he was southbound. "Right now, I'm headed inside," he growled, jerking his thumb in the direction of the diner. Screw this, I thought, and threw my pack over my shoulder and hobbled back towards the nearby interstate.

I was hobbling because I had managed to sprain my foot when making that sprint of gratitude to the spot where my first ride south of the border had pulled onto the shoulder. I didn't even realize it at the time, that I had hurt myself. I just opened passenger the door and gushingly expressed my thanks. I recognized the fellow behind the wheel as a construction worker at the border facility; in fact, he was the general contractor for the job. His plains accent was strong as he recounted his work experience, his teen years (which were only a bit more distant than my own), hunting with friends, the ignorance of animal rights activists, and how he came to be living at his current resident with his current fiancée.

The way he dwelt on the last two topics had me convinced that he was going to invite me to spend the night at his place. There was something in his tone--I could tell that he wanted to offer me a shower, a meal, a sofa on which to sleep. In my mind, I was already grappling with the inevitable awkward moment at which I would have to explain to him and his girlfriend that I didn't eat meat, and "no, I don't eat dairy either . . . really, I do appreciate everything, this will be plenty for me." (I'd feel guilty for rejecting their hospitality, and maybe they would be slightly resentful, even if only silently so.) Out loud, I was trying to keep the conversation rolling, to appear friendly and non-threatening. I even tried my hand at clairvoyance, attempting to implant in his brain the idea that he'd be doing his Christian duty by letting me crash at his place, that he would be able to feel good about himself for weeks or months to come.

It was a bit of a disappointment, then, when he pulled back onto the shoulder just before the turn-off for a rural road. "Well, that got you about twenty more miles down the road," he said, smiling. I thanked him, taking a step back from the truck and slamming the door. As he drove away, I pivoted on my secretly bad foot and my leg buckled as the pain shot up to my knee. Grumbling, I limped over to the shade of the overpass, to await my next ride.

I was limping as I made my way towards the highway after that second ride dropped me at the Grand Forks truck stop. I thought that I'd station myself at the entrance to the ramp, where those truckers would have a good look at me before shifting into higher gears. The sun was setting, and I was quickly becoming dissatisfied with my new spot, because there was no shoulder to allow a potential benefactor to safely pull over; most people only offer charity if it is convenient. So, I walked down onto the highway, figuring that even though cars would be accelerating, at least there was a long, straight stretch of road with a wide

emergency lane.

I hadn't even picked a spot before the horror began: a massive black cloud of ravenous mosquitoes descended upon me. My bare arms were blanketed, my ears filled with a deafening buzzing din, my face and even my eyeballs (as swarms of bugs became trapped behind my spectacles) absorbing the impact of kamikaze insects. Shrieking, I frantically tried to wipe my arms clean, but immediately after each sweep they were again enshrouded with black sleeves. I blindly swung around, waving my arms, and broke into a lurching gallop, with only luck to point me in the right direction. I made my way to next exit, leaving the bulk of the bugs behind, as they hovered around the shallow pools of stagnant water that had collected in the grassy ditches along the highway.

Momentum kept me going once I had climbed the off-ramp. I took a left and crossed over the interstate. I was headed towards what appeared to be the center of town. Perhaps I was following the railroad tracks, as I soon came to a small yard, which was geographically situated east-west. I thought about just finding a stopped train, a junker, and climbing aboard. Direction seemed to matter less to me at that moment than simple movement. A whole day of traveling, and I'd covered so little ground, barely a hundred and fifty miles. I figured I'd benefit from heading either south or east. I thought about that aunt and uncle in Minneapolis, and fantasized about the shower and bed I might find there for a night or two before resuming my trek back to Texas.

Maybe I would even consider taking the bus.

A train was pulling into the yard as I approached the western end. A bull sat in a Jeep parked perpendicular to the tracks, spotlighting the boxcars and grainers as they rolled by. Dusk had fallen quickly, and I hoped the darkness helped to keep me from creating a spectacle as I walked along the curb. It seemed that I was in a light industrial area, with little traffic in the street and none besides myself on the sidewalk.

I came upon a telephone booth. The number for Greyhound had lodged itself in my brain earlier that summer. I punched the numbers into the keypad, and eventually got to speak with a human being after negotiating several levels of an automated system. I told her my desired destination and my current location. She gave me a time and a price. I wondered if I had somehow accidentally revealed how much money I had on me, because the fare was almost precisely the same amount. ("How much is a ticket to Austin?" "Well, how much ya got?") I wrote down the address for the depot, although the information meant nothing to me; I had no idea where I

was.

There was a small drive-through burger stand across the street and up the road a bit. The lights suggested that it was open for business. It was strange, out of place, being the sole public-oriented business in the immediate area. I wondered how they enticed customers in such a desolate area; it seemed to be off the beaten path. Still, there was a car at the window, so I thought I might be able to find out what time it was, and maybe even get directions to the station.

The decision had not been made one way or the other; I was just gathering pertinent information. Once I had all the facts, I could weigh my options, consider the pros and cons of each course of action. The pain in my foot was foremost in my mind: it was definitely inhibiting my sense of adventure. I had enough money, just barely, to get home safely, easily, within twenty-four hours. I limped across the street and approached the car as it pulled away from the window.

"Excuse me, can you tell me the time?"

The car was occupied by two very young girls. The driver glanced at her watch and then gave me the hour. It was less than thirty minutes before departure time; there was not another bus until the following day. I then read aloud the address for the depot.

"Oh, that's way north, on the other side of town."

"Shit," I said as my shoulders slumped, although I was only partially disappointed. The decision had been made for me. It would keep me honest, I thought. I'd stick around that part of town, scope out the train yard, and see if I could catch out. With a smile I thanked the girls and started to walk away.

"Hey, do you need a ride somewhere?" the driver asked.

I explained that I was trying to catch a bus, and that it left in a little more than twenty minutes. The driver glanced at her passenger. From my vantage point, looking through the windshield, it seemed that her friend might have been reluctant, but she was not forceful enough to say so.

"We'll take you there," the driver said as she stuck her head back out the window. It was a coupe, and I fumbled over the seatbelt as I clumsily followed my pack into the back seat. I became aware of my smell as I settled in for the ride.

After we'd pulled out onto the road and we swapped introductions, the driver turned around and said, "Hey, since we are doing you a favor, you think you could do one for us, and buy us some smokes?" (Her accent was strong, and I had to bite my tongue to not mention the movie *Fargo*.) I was surprised with how insistent the request was; I had no doubt that I would have been put out of the

car had I refused. Of course, I was accommodating, although I did fret a bit about missing the bus. "Oh, don't you worry, we'll get you there in time."

After purchasing the cigarettes--and making the mistake of getting soft packs only to discover that they preferred hard packs--we continued to the station. The driver did most of the talking. She mentioned that they were going to a party, and for moment I even thought I might be invited along. In an instant I imagined myself at a teenage party in a small Midwestern town, having a couple of beers, getting a place to shower and rest up. However, the invitation never came, and we were soon pulling into the Greyhound parking lot.

The depot was in fact just a little shack, and a single bus sat idling in the parking lot. I thanked the girls, and quickly limped inside and up to the counter. The elderly man behind the cash register moved slowly; it seemed that the bus was being held for me. Nothing was computerized; instead, he filled out a little form and gave me a carbon copy to serve as my ticket.

As I walked across the parking lot, I realized that I had not consciously decided to take the bus--I just found myself there. It occurred to me that probably most people don't end up on the Greyhound as a result of well-laid plans, it is more often than not a spontaneous response to circumstance. (That is the only reason they can charge so much money: people who ride the bus are desperate, they need to be somewhere else immediately.)

Despite having just handed over all the money in my pocket, I didn't really feel defeated. Instead, I viewed it in terms of cost-benefit analysis: it seemed to me that life is finite, so that an individual has a limited number of days between birth and death. Every day spent doing something fun, creating memories, and living freely lent itself to a positive entry in the account books. I could have driven my truck home from Toronto, but I tried an alternative. It didn't work out, but I'd added a few extra days of real and memorable experience onto my total. I could acknowledge the privilege, admit to taking the easy way out. Still, I was striving to internalize the import of that absolute freedom, to recognize and detach myself from previously accepted middle class values. I was willing to take some abrupt measures--breaking off a marriage, giving Chris the keys to my car--but I was still operating with a safety net.

After years of school, and then years of work in which I made just enough each month to accommodate my needs and wants (and it always seemed that I started over again at zero at the end of every pay period), I was still learning, still being initiated into a

new way of living. I recognized that I was still straddling the fence. I once met a man, a punk who had been on the streets and living on the fringes of the dominant economic system for more than fifteen years; he compared me to Harry Haller, the character from *Steppenwolf*, suggesting that I was still working through my dual inclinations, torn between bourgeois and radical tendencies. Another friend told me about a ride he got while hitchhiking: the driver said that it was all well and good to have fun as a youth, but warned that if one does not integrate into mainstream society by the age of thirty-five, it will impossible to ever go back. My friend and I had the same reaction: you mean, if we can make it to thirty-five without succumbing, we won't have to keep struggling to resist re-entering the cycle of comfortable exploitation?

Eventually, maybe I would be resourceful enough so that I would not have to fork over that cash in a similar situation in the future. Yet, even then I'll probably still be straddling the fence.

I handed my bag to the driver, who stowed it below. The step up into the bus was painful. Incredibly, the back row, the coveted three-seat bench was vacant. I made a beeline for the rear, wafting potent musk in the aisle behind me. Collapsing, I stayed awake long enough to notice the cute young woman who was writing in her journal. Then, I escaped my all thoughts of freedom and angst in the arms of a twenty-four hour slumber.

Back issues of Punkanut #1 are still available. Included are tales of trains, hitchhiking, romance, jail, pooping, Iron Maiden, and attacking Tommy Lee with dumpstered donuts. If you care about such things, here is a bit of what has been said about it:

"This one reads like a book -- a well-written, attention holding 64 page book. ... Thoroughly enjoyed this!"

--*Slug & Lettuce* #66

"Oh my. This is a gem. ...I think that everyone needs to get a copy of this for themselves! Extremely well written travel tales that had me reading aloud to anyone who would listen. ... Highly recommended."

--*MaximumRocknRoll* #214

"*Punkanut* contains well-written stories by a person aware of relationships and interactions."

--*Heartattack* #29

"This gets my 'Best Debut' award. Well-written, straightforward ... highly recommended to fans of travel zines."

--*A Reader's Guide To The Underground Press* #15

(Address and prices are listed inside the front cover.)

Also, Punkanut #3 (out Winter 2001-02, hopefully) will have almost nothing to do with traveling. Instead, it will be all about my adventures working as a substitute teacher in Houston.

Thanks once again to Rachel, who has helped me tremendously in producing this zine, and to my mom for reading a very rough draft and making suggestions. As always, thanks to anyone who has ever given me a ride, given me a place to crash, or shared food with me; without that sort of generosity, I would not have had the preceding adventures.

Wahoo

Wahoo is the name of a small town in Nebraska. There is a large, vigorous fish--related to the mackerel--called by that word. Students at the University of Virginia are affectionately referred to as "Wahoos" (perhaps they were named after the fish).

This story is about none of these things; none of them are even mentioned. Instead, there is a lot of vaguely self-conscious talk about existential angst, learning to have fun (for free), and traveling by truck, by freight train, by thumb. It all takes place during a trip from Austin to Toronto and back again. Also, passing mention is made of family reunions, mangoes, surrealist films, chocolate, arrests, border guards, teenagers with Midwestern accents, etc.

Finally, contained within these pages is a brief philosophical discourse on a time-honored Texas tradition.

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