

GOING SOUTH

Scab was coming to when final flecks of snow had hardened back into sky. The weight of the nearby freeway was grinding a headache that bloomed, flourished and later subsided when he would take his first tastes.

Somewhere up the line he could sense the freight cars had settled; all the arthritic joints and fraying pulleys and that sing of wheel onto rail like a stubborn lock giving way. He was thinking that those he accumulated two days ago might have split, emptied the Hamms Ice half-racks and made their way back to the bus-mall downtown to panhandle outside Rite Aid for a bum-jug of Chablis he'd never taste. And here he was, with his flask nearly gone, halfway out to the North Portland switch yard and those fucking kids ditched him. Just like that.

These were the coldest days of December Scab could recall, he had explained as they drank under the Steel Bridge two days ago. One of the kids called himself Sue (you know, after the Johnny Cash song?) which was a shit nickname. The boy had never been locked up, not really.

But Scab, he'd been nabbed for everything from B and E to assaults. Freedom wasn't easy. "Shit", he told the freshly-grizzled faces, "my dad went up sometime after 'Nam. He rode with Barger and those guys out of Oakland." If they didn't buy it, he'd take out his paperback copy of *Hells Angels* and show them the highlighted parts, about someone he had adopted to be his dad who was probably dead right now and not stoking a fire back in Hawk Talon Minnesota while his wife knitted or performed some other menial, maternal task. But now, with the faint chicory wisp of fire sifting through the Evergreens, he regretted longing for that

hearth, for that basketball hoop in the driveway, for his XR250 that he wrecked and wound up parting out for a hundred bucks.

He'd met the kids down at Waterfront Park, having just scored two handles of Smirnoff from a bar that left their back door open for a moment too long. They were fresh in from somewhere, probably Seattle or Bellingham. They needed some sort of...guidance. Scab knew the city, knew where to score the best grub, tweak and ointments. He knew every city from here to Tempe and was happy to share. It was all about sharing. Because property was theft and for newbies like these, so fresh the soot on their cheeks would wipe away with Kleenex, knowledge was more valuable than anything. While one of the boys pecked his fingers on a cellphone, the other boy wandered off to lean over like he might vomit. This left the girl pulling the sleeves of her sweatshirt over her reddening fingers, gnawing a hole in the cuff as she looked north, and then south, and then to Scab who found himself smiling, showing off that gap in his dentistry, introducing himself as Scab.

It wasn't a hard sell. He knew a spot just across the bridge, a place where he'd camped plenty. It was close to the river but he had erected some scrap aluminum pilfered from a demolition site to block the wind. The police were likely to hurry people along from most places but this was tucked away, off the esplanade enough that they could only see or smell it when there was a fire going which they would hold off building until later.

Scab had been keeping the place under wraps since the last bunch moved on without him weeks ago. "It's too damn wet here for some people," he explained as the boys pulled up their hoods to guard against wind.

Every city was the same. Except for Utah. Or any state with Blue Laws. Honestly, Scab preferred the expanse and temperament of the desert. It held nothing back. But in that moment, he said something about heading south. "Bad time to be here. Some kid got thrown off an overpass the other day and the cops are busting heads about it."

This made them stop. Maybe that's why it seemed good to say. "Just out over the 405. If the impact didn't kill him, surely getting smacked head-on by a minivan did."

"Street kids?" The one with the fresh ink on his neck said.

Scab nodded. He sat down closer to the water; the frontiersman surveying his path, designing a mystique while the others were really whooping it up. They were wasted by the time traffic lightened on the bridge above them. It was getting colder, much colder, dipping into the teens. The vodka was good though.

They would inevitably head downtown, charge their cell phone in the outlets at Pioneer Square, cop a squat along some stretch of sidewalk to cup their hands and hold out their hats. But Scab didn't have time for that. This was a corporate world, he told them. There ain't shit you can do about it. Work it to your advantage. Like groceries: you just go look for receipts at the grocery store. They're anywhere, all over the place. And you go on, with bags already, like yuppies carry their shit in, and you fill those and with the shit on the receipt and then, at the end buy something, like a bottle of champagne or some shit so as not to arouse suspicion." He held out a bottle of Cooks Extra Dry to the girl and then showed off two tens and a five dollar bill. "Can't do it often but if you move around enough... You can make scratch off it too. Boost some shit people need. Keep some emergency dough in your boots."

They had moved north in the night. Maybe two miles or so north from the Steel Bridge, somewhere between Swan Island and Interstate 5. When he woke, Scab could see the necks of cranes out at the shipyards, hear the lowing of horns, and yes, out there, much further north, the faint pull and wheeze of arthritic latches pulling freight cars down the line. Surely they were gone. Probably scared away.

Luckily, as a rule, Scab always kept something in his flask. His mentor, Willy, taught him that. He would have liked the girl: Cat. He had a girl just like her when Scab and he met all those years ago in Golden Gate Park. That's when Scab was just called Tommy. He hopped a freight the first time with Willy and got his ass kicked inside the freight car. That was how the front tooth got cracked and finally rotted out. That was how his lips split and scabbed over. That was how his name came to be. And that girl, Willy's girl, had been over in the corner sucking on vodka and laughing, because shit like that happens and when Tommy finally went down, she crawled over to him and hovered right there, so he could see the greying rings around her neck where a tangle of chains dropped from her metallic skin. Willy stooped down beside her, licked her cheek and she poured vodka over his face.

Willy's girl disappeared as they all did in time. Or they'd turn up in stories passed up and down the riverfronts in Austin, New Orleans and Portland. They wound up doing this or that. It was marrying a yuppie and living it up with a stocked bar and hot-tubs or turning tricks for dime-bags. Most of the time, they went home. They gave up. They got jobs. Some took to cities. Others moved to places like Alaska to work at hatcheries, fishing boats, on the pipeline. The tattoos, applied with Bic pens and lighters under bridges would be blotted out, and they would disappear that way, become one of *them*.

And so would these kids. Especially that girl. Of course she was taken with Scab. He had a scar for every story and advice to boot. And there were stories about him out there. Of him working over the FTRA guy with a truncheon at the switchyard in East L.A. He didn't remember much now but the comical ding of metal onto skull and the give of jaw as it split under his knuckles, loosened to gravel and finally sand as blood and spit spattered over his forearm. That was the one that gave him respect. Even though the man was almost sixty, he was riding the rails since before Scab was born. Thinking on it now, the man probably gave in so that Scab could walk away, because he was young and afraid. It was about survival.

These kids wouldn't understand. Even the third one...Spud, that was right, another shitty moniker. Spud because (he claimed) he always had a black eye as a kid and there was that Budweiser dog and...He feigned confidence, talking loud about this friend and that acquaintance. It was nothing really. They were testing themselves. This was still just adventure.

Scab had nearly given up on them when he heard the snap of branches the knock of falling rocks. And what was that they were carrying? It was two fresh half-racks of...it didn't matter. They tossed him a can and before any talking he had the whole thing down his throat.

"Bet you given up on us." The one called Spud was grinning like he wasn't as green as Granny Smith herself.

It took everything for Scab to settle himself, to allow the beer and whiskey to calibrate his disposition. "Thought you had a change of mind is all."

Cat bit the hoop pierced through her lower lip. She was young. Late teens, maybe twenty. She would go to college someday and study sociology. She would do a thesis on people

like Scab. Her mind was already there. This was the last American adventure. He had heard her say that. She removed a bottle of Rye from her pack and handed it to him.

The one, the wiser one of them, Spud, glared at her. He might have been her guy. Or, at least, the one she cozied up to at night.

“Now,” Scab dug a dent into the sand with his boot-heel and planted the whiskey. He shed his pack and cracked his knuckles. “Friends can be hard to come by.” He let his voice trail off. He was the chief here. “Cat, I can tell you got more balls than most kids out here.” He let this dangle out there.

Spud accepted the bottle of rye when scab decided to pass it. “Where’re all your friends...Scab?”

“Dead.” Scab was as lucid as he could be. “My friends are dead.”

“It’s just you?” Cat said, typically sympathetic.

“I don’t make bones about it.”

“How long you been that way?” Sue had the tone of a reporter and his hands kept moving from his pockets to under his sweatshirt to behind his ears. His hair was cut into a Mohawk but was kinky and grown out, leaving a tuft of hair like a pom-pom over his forehead.

“Don’t know. Varies week to week really.”

In the ensuing moments Scab would learn that Cat was from Florida while Sue was from North Carolina and Spud stoically said, “around the way.”

Cat had become sick of the heat and the tourists. She wanted the miserable weather. She was in a band that played punk or grind or something and she always wanted to check out Portland. Her hair had been dyed pink and re-dyed blue, and now it was washed out into the

color of sky. She wore a hoodie done over with a patchwork of punk and metal bands, some of whom Scab recognized. He had gone to punk shows once.

Spud had taken a seat on what looked like an eviscerated telephone pole and rolled a cigarette. "Where you from, Scab?"

"Say," Scab, motioned, toward the pouch. "Share the wealth." He pulled his fingers inward, cupped them and waited to catch the bag of tobacco."

"I can roll one for you." Sue spit out a lock of hair he had drawn into his mouth

"That's alright there, San Quentin. I like rolling mine a special way."

Reluctantly, Spud tossed over the pouch, which was hand-sewn, a tough, burlap type-of canvas, with the letters, SPUD, embroidered in large cursive letters. "Damn, boy," Scab said, showing off the pouch. "You got some sewing skills. I can barely stitch a fucking hole shut but this, this is some professional shit. Fucking seamstress." Examining it, he continued. "Are you sure you sewn this? I don't know many guys who would sew their own names onto their shit."

Spud covered his mouth after drinking. "So it don't get lost."

"Well, shit Spud. You think someone is going to search you out if they find this bag?"

Scab removed his jacket, an Army Field jacket with an improvised flannel lining that was ornamented with lighter caps bent over the cuffs and collars. He pulled up his sleeve and showed off a scar, that one from flipping his bike at a motocross race when he was twelve. The skin had been rubbed off by the spinning rear tire. "I got this over a pack of smokes. Dude pulled a log out of the fire and I used my arm up to block it before he brought it down on me. Wasn't even a full pack." He pulled his sleeve back down. "So, you might not want to expect that sort of courtesy."

Scab took his time and rolled his cigarette better than any machine could. He passed one over to Cat before lighting his own and slipping two more into his chest pocket.

“There are some people out here who are good people,” Sue said. He took out a pack of Winstons and lit one.

“Oh, holding out with the tailor-mades. Well, geez Sue, don’t good people share? I mean, if being good is philosophy, wouldn’t sharing sort of, coincide with that? Or do you believe in private ownership, like landlords and American feudalism and all that shit?”

Sue rose, lit his cigarette and passed one around to everyone in the group. “I don’t have a philosophy,” he said, taking the bottle from Cat who coughed into her fist.

“What about you, Cat?” Scab said. “I’m sure you got philosophy.”

“Well,” she almost hesitated. “I believe in being free. I believe in absolute freedom.”

“Halleluiah,” Scab held up his fist for her to bump with her own. “And that’s the point.”

“What is?” Spud said.

Scab stood and stretched his arms wide. “This is all mine. I can go anywhere and do anything. I can drink all day and sleep under the stars.”

Cat rose and did a sort of pirouette before she fell and crumbled into laughter.

“She gets it man.” Scab stood close to her and offered his hand. “It’s all about being free. Most people got too many things weighing them down.”

“That’s why we’re all out here,” Sue said. “Instead of working at Taco Bell or some shit.”

“But you’ve got to keep moving.” Scab felt the onset of booze, the day crystalized into a patchwork of nostalgia and promise. “It’s always good to keep moving, and prepare.”

The next train, the Union Pacific line that ran all the way down to Calexico California, would haul out the next morning. That was the train Scab insisted on. "Now," he said, tossing a beer can into the brush, leading them further north, where they'd camp somewhere near the switchyard, "You guys probably want to go to San Fran or Berkeley but me, I'm going all the way, South of the Border. Got a buddy's down there. Schooled me hard on riding the rails. Dollar goes really far there too."

"People disappear down there." Sue crossed the tracks, lagging behind.

"People disappear anywhere." Scab stopped and turned, tilting his head to the sky as if in contemplation. "I don't mind disappearing."

It must have been a good four or five miles up the tracks before the switchyard was visible. Scab led them to a clearing where they'd camp. "Southbound heads out around dawn," He had committed the schedules to memory. There was a supermarket, Scab informed them, up over the hill. It would be a hike up the gulley, grabbing at briars and twigs for balance but it might be all that they'd see in the way of provisions for days.

It was the onset of dusk, the day dulling to gunmetal gray, and the faint pulp of smoke sifted down the hill that didn't seem as steep until, halfway up, as dirt peppered his eyes and mouth, all the beer and whiskey that tasted like handfuls of loose change, erupted over his chin. Climbing over the top, Scab stretched and caught his breath, never mind the dark sheen down the front of his shirt. "Anyone got any scratch for booze?" There was the matter of food too, but Scab could exist on cans of boosted chili if necessary. Even if they caught him on camera, one whiff of his opened bag would have security second-guessing duty.

He took up collection in his hat. It was mostly change which he would separate into dollars once confronted with a checker. From his own stash, he had three dollar bills and a handful of change left over from selling plasma two days before. Of course there was more hidden. There always was. That was emergency money. He was far from needing that.

Scab's senses began to return as he entered the store. He was enclosed in Tupperware, in the balm of sealing agents and preservatives and pesticides and baking soda and corn syrup. And the lights felt like he was turning on a spit behind a sneeze-guard.

But this was second nature. Even though his hands were shaking and that woman in the red parka just covered her face as he walked by, he could do this. It was simply a matter of ignoring *them*, nearly sprinting past cold cuts and zip-sealed shredded cheeses and yogurts and where the fuck was the beer anyway?

Down the next aisle, an entire aisle of beer where people examined overpriced six-packs of microbrew; IPA's and double IPA's , ciders and stouts. Natural Ice eighteen packs for 9.99\$ which Scab nearly bowled over some kid with a skateboard to get to.

He was off to the register with his dog-eared, peeling Minnesota I.D. The clerk may have expected a bottle return ticket but no, no Scab had cash and then he was dumping it on the man despite his pleas to pay the machine. That was enough money. It might have even been a few pennies over.

The clerk made a point to take his time straightening the bills, dumping the coins into the appropriate trays and attending to the other customers with bleak, exaggerated affability. He knew Scab was standing there. He could see that electric current ripple all the way to his fingers as he took that receipt, good as gold, and made for the door, almost to a trot, breezing

right by the Salvation Army guy dinging his bell and outside where he promptly found a place to squat, rip the box open and pour a beer down his throat.

“Where’s the wine?” there was no telling how long Spud had been standing there but there they were; all three of them so rested and, clean.

Had he forgotten? How could Scab had forgotten something like that? Of course this beer wasn’t going to be enough. Not for four people. But there also wasn’t any chance in hell he was going back inside. He held out the receipt. “If you go back in, grab another eighteen-pack too. If they ask you to pay, just show them this receipt.”

“No fucking way,” Spud said. “You forgot it. You go.”

Scab made like he was going to stand but needed another beer until he did anything. “I’m staying right fucking here,” he said.

“I’ll go back,” Cat said. “I don’t mind.”

“No you don’t,” Spud said. He tore the receipt from Scab’s hand. “I’ll fucking do it.”

While they waited, they shared a plastic dish of hummus and Triscuits. “We got some other stuff too,” Cat Whispered. “But this stuff is all that’s legit.”

“Are you okay?” Sue was standing over him, looking as though his mother might imagine him, sleepy, innocent and vulnerable.

“I’m good. I’m perfectly okay,” Scab said.

There tent wasn’t much, the sort of thing that kids used to sleep in their parent’s backyards. Fucking amateurs. What did they think this was, sleep-away camp?

Scab drained another beer and rubbed at the ink on his chin that never healed right. What began as a tattoo of a freight car beneath his lower lip had just become a smear of ink. Infection had come and gone, dulled by some antibiotics. Still the damn thing itched.

The air was so chilled it was surprising that the rain wasn't sleet. And there was Cat, soaking it all in. For a moment, Scab lost himself and felt enamored of her. He sat there foolishly devouring her across the fire like he was a fucking teenager.

And then the zipper of the tent slid down and Spud emerged with a nub of tobacco burning between his lips, ponying up one for Scab and Cat and slipping on a faded Braves cap stitched over with dental floss. "This time tomorrow, we'll be in the Haight."

"Speak for yourself," Scab said. "I don't do Frisco. All the way down the line for me."

"You don't go to San Francisco?" Cat sounded genuinely surprised.

"Bad shit happens in San Fran. Too damn expensive now too."

"What sort of shit?" Sue pushed himself closer to the fire that the evergreen boughs overhead were keeping just dry enough.

"The sort people don't talk about. Not with strangers anyhow." Scab kept his glare fixed on Sue who was busying himself with not eating the last bits of sushi they had lifted, sitting transfixed by the plastic tray as if Scab might flip it over. And he might. Who needed food? He could go days on beer alone if need be. But this wasn't about hunger. He stepped forward as casually as his body would allow, took the final pieces from Sue's tray, smeared them in the sludge of wasabi and soy sauce, mashed it into a patty and dumped it into his mouth.

Scab wasn't sure of the impression he left. He wasn't even sure why he'd done it. But no one said anything as he resumed his place at the fire.

Cat ate her final piece as nonchalantly as she had the one before. "I'm ready," she said, taking a drink from a bottle of water. "Let's go."

"Hold your horses there, Skipper," Scab said. "In three days time we'll be drinking mescal on Revolucion Street."

"What makes you think we're going all the way down there?"

"Scab's gaze drifted over to Cat. "Seems like some of you might want some adventure."

"I haven't been to the Bay in years," Sue said.

"That's what the plan was," Spud affirmed. "We check out San Fran."

"And what about you?" Scab remained fixed on Cat whose attention drifted from the fire to the sky.

"I want adventure," she said as if the conversation was redundant.

"And what is a better adventure than going to Mexico? Better than watching drum circles and yuppies playing Frisbee golf. Fuck that. Calexico. Down to Tijuana. From there we could go all the way down to Bolivia."

"And get picked up by Federales or some shit?" Spud gripped the bag of and sucked on the nozzle. "Is that what you want Cat?"

Scab found himself immersed in her, sinking into her contemplation, that inwardness which he found himself longing to know.

"I've never been to Mexico," Cat said after some time.

"You've never been to San Francisco either," Spud said. "And that was the plan."

"I don't want plans," Cat said.

“That’s right,” Scab pronounced. “Who needs plans? The best things happen without timetables or blueprints.”

At this, Spud went to Cat and whispered something to her.

“Hey,” Scab yelled out. He wasn’t that drunk. Not yet anyway. These were the best moments of drinking, those filled with promise and opportunity. “No secrets here.”

“This is between us,” Spud said.

Scab began to stand up but fell back backward, into his tent. He was caught in a web of tarp and pole, rope and stake, locked in battle like a knotted marionette. When he came out and shucked the whole contraption off, the three of them were bowled over, nearly hysteric with laughter. And what was this? That quickly, a puree of bile and foam amassed in Scab’s mouth, spilling out. Scab gagged. His innards turned outward. He couldn’t yell.

“You okay there?” Spud called out once Scab had recovered himself.

“Fuck you.” That’s what he meant to say but it must have been a gurgled mess.

After some wine, the inflammation cooled and Scab rebuilt his tent. The others were talking about something; television, movies. He didn’t need it. In fact, if he ran into any of his old buddies he’d tell them that he just met these kids, they were newbies and should pay a tax of some kind. They were virginal. Let them get worked over by some berserk necrophiliac FTRA guy for all he cared. They didn’t know the half of what was out there.

Their talk, the incessant jamboree of chatter whipping back and forth incensed Scab when he laid down, nursing one last beer and trying to finish this damned Superman comic he’d been carrying around since... It didn’t matter though because he was tired, so tired that his beer leaned back against his leg until it fell over, releasing its dregs under his Carharts.

Sometime during the night, everything cold and damp as whitefish, Scab woke to his breath crystallized and everything, every fiber a second layer of gelatinous skin. There was Cat's face, a glowing orb out there in the dark mouth of the tent, expressionless and phantasmal. She scooted herself forward, picked up the comic book to lay aside and moved in next to him. "I thought you were a ghost," she said. "You were making some strange noises in your sleep." She patted his head, ran her fingers down the side of his face and then to the tattoo under his lip, her fingers stopped, paused, reading it. "What is this supposed to be?" She said.

He could have told her anything. He didn't remember much about it aside from the itching. "I used to sleep light enough to wake up if someone so much as looked at me," he said. "Now, I don't know if I'm awake or asleep sometimes."

Cat allowed her fingers to remain on the side of his face, kneading lightly at his jaw and then his temples. "I bet you've seen some things."

"I don't remember most things." Scab moved his body up so that he could see his bare feet. His shoes were down there somewhere, dry hopefully, and then he saw them, the corner of a twenty dollar bills poking out like a flag. "How long you known those guys for?"

There was the contemplative silence again. "A little while," she said. "You've been to Mexico before, right?"

"I sure have."

"Ever been further south than that?" She said.

"Nope. That's as far as I've gotten."

"And you want us to go down there with you?"

Scab felt around with his hands, searched until he found a piece of her, her ankle and touched it. "Let those kids see the Bay. Let them hang out and bum change on Haight and Telegraph. You're not missing anything."

"And what will I do with you down in Mexico?"

Scab was sweating so much he began to take off his flannel shirt. "Is there another beer?" He just needed one. He realized that any further conversation might require a beer.

Cat must have thought ahead on this matter and laid one on his chest.

"What do you want to get out of this?" He said.

"I don't know. Anything. Everything."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing. A hangover in Spokane is the same as a hangover in Omaha. What you do between those places is what's important." The beer tasted as good as any that Scab could remember.

"What about Spud and Sue? I can't just leave them behind."

"The one, Spud, he calls himself. He's been around before, hasn't he?"

"I'm not sure. Sue, is an old friend though. Spud, I don't really know that well."

Scab fell off into sleep and woke with tarp pressed against the side of his face. He felt around but knew that he was alone. He checked his boots. Everything was still there.

They were already packed, faces ruddy, fists grinding into eyes. Scab could have said something but slipped on his shoes, exchanged his shirt with another from his bag and kicked over what was left of his tent. He turned to Cat and said, "Won't need that where we're going."

Across the clearing, Spud listened to a phone clasped to his ear. "It's called a phone," he said, noticing Scab's glare and rolling his eyes to Cat who seemed distant, like she nearly pitied Scab who fumbled with his belt. His buzz had withered into a dizzying fog. "Now that's cheating, wouldn't you say?" Scab said. "What the fuck kind of proper hobo carries a fucking phone?"

Spud approached. "That's not the point. Point is, you can come with us on that train if you want, but we sure don't need you."

"So, it's your train now?"

Sue and Cat were quiet until Cat began to say something, something reasonable and diplomatic, but then Spud stepped forward. "Anyone who wants to can grab it. It sure as hell isn't yours just because you say it is."

Scab laughed. "You're right," he said, searching further for Cat. "A phone gives you the conch in this group."

"Look at you," Spud took stock of Scab, sizing him up. "You're too haggard to hop a fucking wheelbarrow." He paused. "You know, I think you're bullshit."

A train grumbled somewhere down the line, the slow tumult of steel boiling over, drumming on the track and the light.

"That's our train coming." Scab's neck was rusted hinges, fasteners and flanges grinding up against one another, every piece a separate aggravation. In this condition he couldn't see himself taking on Spud or anyone for that matter. But he would get this train.

"Couldn't be," Spud said. "We should have another two hours."

"Got it loaded early." Scab shrugged.

The train gathered momentum. Maybe, if he found an empty boxcar, he could heave his pack in and pull himself behind it. He was weak. He felt for his flask but knew it was already empty. "Anything round here to drink?" He called out. But they had already gathered themselves.

"You're not even sure it's the right one," Spud said.

As it began to lurch by, first the engine and then covered hoppers, one after the other of sealed containers filled with grain or silt. The others were positioning themselves, decidedly adamant about getting a boxcar. Hell, if Scab was in better condition, he'd jump on one of those platforms attached to the car, as big as a tier of a fire escape. He'd sweat this one out going south as the weather softened. But, he found himself waiting.

"This isn't it," Spud said. "I'm sure of it. It's too early still."

"It's got to be," Scab said. "Fuck what your phone says."

"Get on then," Spud said. "Go ahead."

The prospect of arriving in southernmost California, of tasting the sunshine, of wandering into an orange grove and plucking one right from the tree, seemed so close but something was missing. Along with that, he was sure, somehow, that he was wrong.

They must have walked a mile by the time the train passed. The three of them walked ahead while Scab trailed behind.

The train was a gift, slow as a drunk elephant. No bulls to be seen anywhere. It was cold, maybe too cold for them to care. Last time Scab had been in this yard, he got chased and then beaten by a bull who seemed to have a grudge. He walked from that one with a cracked rib and a contused lung. This, this was deserved.

The car smelled like waterlogged wood, mildewed, abandoned. Someone had slashed initials up and across the wall with a Sharpie. A towel, crisp with weather lay in the corner. This would be their home for the next two days.

“It’s a gift from Union Pacificus, God of trains,” Sue said.

Scab staked a claim in the far corner of the car, away from the opening. He kicked the towel aside. Dark stains smeared the floor. Scab was sweating so much he removed his jacket then unfurled his sleeping bag and draped that over his shoulders. His thoughts wouldn’t hold steady. Every neuron and proton bumped and pushed in the walls of each cell. And he could feel each one pop and then reform, the whole symphonic dance bleating in one throw and then another. “Anyone got anything to drink?” he called out.

The others were laughing like this was grade school recess.

“Anyone got anything to drink? Come on.” It sounded more desperate than Scab might have wanted. The tremens were coming in undulations, knocking the pieces of him apart.

The train was moving again. Each grind of the wheels thrummed through his body. He’d been through this before. But this drunk had been months. And now it was over, all of it coming out in a membrane of gelatinous sweat. And they were over there laughing about it. Scab curled inward, knowing how he must look. But fuck them. They didn’t understand. The only one he was concerned about was Cat. From what he knew of women, she might be prone to sympathize. But he could handle this. Two days was nothing. He’d sweated this out doing thirty days in county before.

At some point he must have fallen asleep. It was impossible to guess just how long. The train was out of the city. Greenery flitted by crested by jagged, granite sky. The three of them had their legs hanging out of the opening.

Physical weakness inhibited Scab from asking. He had seen them passing something, a bottle, and there he was, every pore singing with sweat, and all he had was water.

Sue noticed first. He nodded to Scab who willed himself not to mutter some deprecating remark. And he nudged Spud who turned, a bottle of Jim Beam in his hand. He had been holding out. They didn't need him.

And it was Spud, Spud of all people, who flicked his cigarette out of the boxcar, out into the Sequoia and Firs, braced himself and brought the bottle over to Scab. "Your flask is empty," he said, handing the bottle over. "You could use a drink."

Cat stayed in the opening staring out into a bowl of balding greenery, turning once, once as if to say, this drink and this boxcar might very well be the last thing they would share.

The bottle was over half full. Scab held it for a moment while Spud began to roll a cigarette, presumably to also pass along. He held it to his mouth, breathed in the water-logged smell and then poured it into his mouth to let it wash around in his throat.

Spud lit the cigarette with a Zippo. He waited for Scab to drink again, which he did, greedily, mightily. Each drink was another breath of air. By the fourth or fifth, Scab began to come to, to wake up.

Spud stared at him. The visor of his baseball hat seemed to cover his face. His focus turned from Scab to Sue and Cat who still focused on the outside world.

Scab took another drink, a majestic drink, three-fingers worth that poured over his chin and down the front of his shirt. He was alive again. He was ready if Spud made a move to retrieve the bottle. Whatever might be thrown at him, he was definitely ready, hoisting himself to a crouch, drinking again, drinking deep and eyeing Spud, inviting him to provocation.

But he didn't. Spud just shook his head to his group who seemed to acknowledge something. He turned to regard Scab once again, to see that Scab had his own tobacco, his own pouch that he had just remembered and retrieved from the bottom of his pack.

It didn't take long to finish the bottle. When he had, Scab stumbled out to the door, muttered something like thank you, and pitched the bottle into the oncoming night. He paused, almost sat down with them and remarked about how the sky looked brushed over with charcoal and how expansive and unpredictable the world was. But...fuck that. Instead, he reached down and squeezed Cat's shoulder. Unsure of what reaction he wanted, he received nothing. And, in that moment, that suited him just fine.

Scab thought it was a dream. Hell, he hadn't really remembered even falling asleep. His sleeping bag snagged on a nail and was tearing. The ceiling moved. The graffiti trailed away, and the floor prodded him with each splintered, raised board. He was moving, being dragged. His sleeping back was zipped, zipped to the top and his arms were locked inside. No matter how much he wriggled and wormed the zipper only opened a couple inches.

Spud, it was Spud was saying something. "We have to," he was saying. "Him or us."

Scab yelled something and cursed into the hollow like a cough into a fist. Maybe he could have fought harder, with more purpose. But he didn't. He could see the sky, sense it,

lifeless, dense and heavy. He heard Cat's voice out there, somewhere else now, not pleading but concerned. A boot nudged his lower back and then the collar of his bag was being pulled.

"You can survive anything," Spud said in his ear. "So you'll be fine, right?"

The flooring slid from under him. There was a second, a blip of time so short that Scab could contemplate the word *second* before his knee met the ground and he rolled down an embankment, before a tree trunk thicker than his torso stopped him.

The pain didn't hit him first. It was there, waiting to be received. A bulge in his leg, a bulge he'd never seen before, like an ankle was raised from his shin. The pain arrived. Great furies of pain roiled in blinding waves. His leg was broken.

The snow started sometime before dawn. It wasn't heavy really but a steady downpour of fragile tufts. As the world came to light, he could see his shoes, one and then the other a few yards toward the track. It took him minutes but he was able to crawl toward them, thinking, nearly sure that there would be a note, something inside one of them.

Of course, the hundred dollars or so inside was gone. Somehow, he thought, if the money was still inside the shoes he might actually, could possibly, hate them. But now, as he thought this might be the last place he'd ever see, he knew that maybe they had learned something and maybe they would be okay.

END

