

## The Man King

On the road, no one knows who you are. You might wander for a bit, hit a town for a few days and find a place here or there that takes pity on the poor stiff and gives him a slice of bread or a bar of soap. They don't ask you who you are because they don't want to know. They just want you to leave, but you're going to do that anyway.

A man might say, "Hey, look at this fellow, he needs some help. We've got a job for you, if you're willing. It only lasts a few days and you've got to sleep in the barn, but we've got a job."

He says this because he wants to think he's better than you. He's got a wife and good kids and claimed land that nobody else can touch. He's the king of his house or his fields or his business and wants you to become the king of something too. But he misunderstands.

"Why sure," you might say if you want to visit the saloon that weekend.

"Sorry, sir, but I've got a train to catch," you might say if you're itching for time cruising on the open road. That's what real men do. They have the freedom to travel around without having to stick by a lady's side. If they could, all men would be on the road making a life for themselves from what nature has to offer. But then, there's the women who want us to stay put with them. That's why you can't get involved with the ladies. Those who do fall into that trap have to make themselves feel better by thinking money gives them power and strength. There isn't any amount of money that could buy the freedom you have when only yourself is depending on you. That's what Holy Sam says and you reckon that's true.

After talking to that poor old farmer, you might hop that train and jump into the arms of another stiff when the train's still just starting off. Then you'll find yourself on your way somewhere else. This fellow that helped you up, he might be going to the same place you are and

he'll agree to be your partner. You'll stick together, make sure the other's got exactly what you've got, until it happens that you're going separate ways.

"The name's Ohio Slim," your new partner might say.

"The name's Scrapper," you might say.

Or you might not. You're just as likely to sit there with your new partner and talk about the long Nebraska cornfields, the thick drawls down south, or West Madison Street in Chicago without ever thinking about what the other guy might call himself.

It's not always that you're traveling by train. Sometimes you let it shriek right on by and walk through the long fields yourself, dragging your palm along the sturdy corn stalks and allowing the sun to beat down on you all day. You might pass eight or nine houses before you find the three-rock pattern along the front of the driveway, set there by other wandering men, inviting you in for a bite.

If they have anything to spare, the woman in the house will bring out a cup of coffee and buttered bread, always made by her sweet hands, and you thank her with a smile. If she'll let you, you'll take a turn churning the butter or mopping the floors before heading back over the hills. If you tell her you've got a family back home somewhere, and your wife's pregnant again, she'll be nicer to you.

"Now then, if you follow this road into town, ask for Mrs. Barker. She's in charge of the Salvation Army down there and a good friend of mine. She'll get you fixed up right quick, you poor dear, and they'll find something for you to do. Good luck and God bless," the farm woman says. You wish her the same and let her watch you head toward town before cutting hard right back to the tracks.

It's unlucky when the husband is around, because then she won't say squat. She might still give you food, but then again she might not. And even if she does, her husband will look out the window at you while you eat his wife's bread and make sure you walk clear away, regardless of which direction you end up going.

Many nights there will be a spot in the middle of a patch of trees or an old abandoned Iowa barn sturdy enough for keeping out the rain. Most men carry with them something, a blanket or a pillow case or something to lie with while night turns into day, or day into night. When you're lying upon a patch of unkempt grass, you can feel the earth under you shifting and squirming, moving like it was a living thing pulling itself in hundreds of different directions.

In the fall, when the nights are cold, you curl up on the brownstones for nature's heated bed. You squish your body against the smooth, planted stones and let yourself drift off. Sometimes there will be two, three, four stiffs all using different stones inside the yard as theirs for the night. When you can't sleep particularly well, you trace the letters chiseled into the stone and wonder what they mean all strung together. If the yard is fenced and locked, you know it will be worth it to climb over the metal for the warmth of those stones. That must be done after dark. This is a place where people buried those who gave up already, and it's a place where nobody wants you to be.

You can't remember your mother. It has been too many days on the road. At first, you tried to forget her, the way she was always telling you what to do, grooming you for a life like her own. But then, after several days of walking alone on the southern desert land, you think maybe it wouldn't be so bad to see her again after all. That's when you try to think of her face and realize you can't. You've seen too many men jumping on the trains, too many different

houses and trees speeding past you on the train, and shared a blanket with too many others at night to remember the way her hands felt against your chest when she tucked you in all those months ago.

Sometimes you think you know what she looks like, when you are sleeping really hard. Then you wake up and the first face you see before it turns into Holy Sam's, is hers. You'll be on the train or with the other men in the hobo jungle asleep in his lap until a whistle blows or the sun comes up and you see her face fading into his. She wasn't a beautiful woman, with her downturned lips and sunken eyes, but she was a woman. She has to be your mother, the one you left before you even knew how to be a boy, let alone a man.

"I picked him off the ground when he was just a young thing. Wasn't nobody around him and he didn't know nothing about where his home was. It was raining a bit too. So I says to him, I says, 'Boy, why don't you come now with me. I got a place where you can be staying and won't no more rain come on your head. I got some food too. You want some food? Of course you do. Of course you want some food.' So he come with me back down to the train yard and we stay there that night and he hop right up on the old Santa Fe the next day," Holy Sam would tell the other men around the fire. You joined him before you knew anything about the road. "I thought he could be a good jockey. That's why I keep him. And he is, a right near the best I ever had."

The other men around the fire would laugh at Holy Sam's story and look over at you with those smiles. And you would smile back, damn you. And Holy Sam, with all his missing teeth and loose skin, would put his arm around you then and shake your shoulder like it was his. He still does this sometimes, though you're older now and he has to reach farther up. You just look

into the fire and try thinking about things, all the things in the world that you saw, and maybe your mother's face will come back to you.

Probably it won't though, not unless Holy Sam gives you a sip or two of his brandy and even then he'll most likely lead you back to whatever he's set up as your bed, already grabbing at his crotch.

Down at the Salvation Army, they want you to be loving God. God is somebody who is always good, who loves everybody if only you love him back. God is somebody who wants you to work hard and live by the law and if you do that he will give you good luck. God will save you from all the bad things in the world, all the bad people, if only you love him in return. God is somebody who is wonderful and miraculous, and if only you love him everything will turn out all right. And if you love him really hard, the ladies at the Sally will give you food and a bed to stay in for the night, but you have to leave in the morning. Go back out into the cold.

You always say you're loving God at the Sally and so it must be true. Back home, you went to church with your mother because your mother loved God and you loved your mother. Every week at church she sat with her back straight and her hands folded in her lap listening to the preacher string words together and nodding her head every once in a while, saying amen. You knew the words the preacher was saying, but you could never tell what they meant. God was speaking through him in code only grown-ups could understand but you still had to sit in that sweaty chapel all morning and move your mouth during prayers.

You loved your mother because she cooked and mended and read you stories at night before you fell asleep under a quilt. Mother tended for you whenever you felt too warm to move, when your muscles clamped up and your head started spinning. Now, when those things happen,

Holy Sam tells you to get up, to be a man. You are a man. Mother earned love. God never did anything to deserve it, except for maybe give you to your mother and now look what's happened.

But the important thing is, if you praise the Lord, you can have some food.

Everything is dark inside the windowless boxcar where no cracks allow in the shining moon. The only noise is the constant scraping of the wheels on the tracks and wind against the flat wheeler, the boxcar, while the train speeds past the open prairie. Men lie close to one another, on top of one another, sweating and snoring and bouncing all together. A musky smell lingers inside the boxcar, one of stale air and yesterday morning's dew. It stings your throat with every new breath you take. You have gotten so used to this that you don't even think of it as a discomfort. The train groans, fleeing the sun coming in from the east. In the morning, you wake with your pants unzipped and your tiny prick out for everyone to see.

Jumping the rail is only dangerous if you think about it. Say the stiff next to you is green and all the time you're waiting for the train down at the yard, all he's saying is something about what if he falls. What if he accidentally lets go, or you accidentally let go of him, and he loses his grip and falls underneath the train? That's easy, you say, you die. But that won't happen because you aren't thinking about it. Instead, you're thinking about the women on West Madison and with them in your brain, you're basically invincible.

The train starts coming and you can see its black smoke. You've got to be careful of the bulls, hanging by the railroad thinking they are police, because if they see you you'll be spending the night in jail instead of on West Madison. So, you and the green stiff wait in the fields behind the yard while the train stops and only start running for it after it gets going again.

The train is slow enough so you hop on quickly. You grab the ladder on the side of the car and hold your feet up. Then you grab the green stiff and he holds onto your back like you were his magic charm.

“Get the hell up,” you yell to him, with the wind slapping you in the face while the train goes faster and its chugging knocks you all round. There’s the sound of the train’s whistle and the metal wheels and the smoke sifting into the air while the green stiff maneuvers around you and steps on your shoulders on his way to the top of the flat wheeler. Maybe you scream just to scare him and he jumps. Maybe you just stay still and wait for it all to be over.

Once he’s up, you climb up too and on top you stand there together and look out over the rows of corn or open grassy hills. You might be looking far into the distance, at the forest, at the mountains, at a river following the train tracks before turning sharply to the east. Maybe you are standing there and looking out over all this green and blue and brown colors melting together and you think to yourself once again that you are the king of the world, it’s just that no one knows it yet. And you won’t tell a soul.

During cotton season down South, you bend and you pick and you bend and you pick. The milky white goes into a gunny sack and you turn it in for your pennies and sandwich at the end of the day. All week the men do this and they give you a bed in a room somewhere to sleep on, resting for the next day’s picking as soon as the sun starts rising.

“You men get on out there, you’re wasting our time,” the foreman might say. He’s saying it to the Mexican men who are his tenants, but he’s also saying it to you and your partner, the traveling help he doesn’t understand. If it was so easy being on the road, why didn’t he think of it?

“You men get out there,” he says again, making sure we know he’s also talking to us, making sure we know whose boss.

“I ain’t nobody’s slave,” you say when he passes and maybe you spit on the ground, if you’re feeling ornery. When he raises a stink, you walk off the job, the last few days’ wages jingling in your pocket. He might yell at you that there ain’t no unions on the farm, but you don’t care about unions anyway. Nobody helps you more than yourself, except for maybe Holy Sam. You keep walking over the hills and through the towns until another farmer comes up and asks you if you’d like any work and maybe you say yes.

But as it is, you’ll hear the union hollerings on the train and if they’re old army men it pays to get in with them. Everyone rides together in those groups, hundreds of men even, and every decent fellow wants to help them because they served our country against the Krauts. They were brave and somehow missed out on everything American while they were overseas so now they’re traveling around trying to find it. Ordinary folk want the vets to find it so they’ll give up an extra thing or two for an old vet and if you’re traveling with them nobody knows the difference. You might even get a kiss or two, on the cheek, from little ladies with their hair all done up in last year’s curlers. That’s enough for a while.

The girls on West Madison are the smartest girls in the world. They make themselves beautiful, framing their skinny legs in skirts made of beads and chicken twine, painting their faces and piling their hair all up on top of their heads. They know everything, about how to schmooze the men, about how to hold them tight, about how to listen to them and stroke their heads before turning them loose into the waning moonlight. They know everything about how to



make more money, money that was stolen before it became theirs, and you never feel cheated at all.

When Holy Sam died, your hand was still on his dick. And then you were free. He fell asleep that way, with your fingers down there and at least it wasn't your face. He taught you how to jump the trains, how to throw yourself at the moving cars like a hungry bear and then to hold on like tomorrow would never come. He taught you how to swindle food from the farm women, coins from the Christian women, scraps from closing restaurants and corner cafes. He taught you to carry your belongings, your blanket and silver cup and spoon, close so nobody stole them even when you were sleeping. He taught you how to carry your junk, his junk, and how to be a real man.

It was a cold morning that morning when you woke and he didn't, when no steaming breath came from his lips, there under the naked oak trees in the jungle. The other men, they were shaving and poking at the fire. Bear Stacey even had a case of sardines for the Mulligan stew, you could smell them smoking from clear away where Holy Sam last took you. You had known what to do but now he had wilted in your hands and your heart was beating like crazy. Chugging, it felt like, far away.

Nobody said anything after he died. Your heart doesn't know about poetry. The other men gathered around him, after you told them he was gone, and that was your first mistake. Holy Sam had things. He had a bowl and a cup and a spoon. He had a jack knife and three razors and his brandy. He had a hat and gloves and an extra pair of socks. He had a brass watch chain and two dollars that Peso Jack and Kentucky Stubs fought over. Peso got hold of the jack knife and

beat out Kentucky for the money and then ran out because the other stiffs turned on him. Bear Stacey took the rest, because he was the biggest.

He already had a jockey, though, and left you with Holy Sam's naked frame. It had always been dark during the nights when he was undressed with you and you had never seen his wrinkles before. You lay next to him for a moment. He is small and shriveled and his whiskers prickled.

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They only let you go to the government camps if your family says you can and since you are your only family, you don't get in. Jumping trains is all you want to do anyway. Not like those poor old pussy boys whose fathers lost their jobs or killed themselves and their mothers were sick with other babies and the big boys had to leave the family to help the family that couldn't feed them anyway. Those boys were always saying they were turned away from the house and asked to send money home. They were the boys who cried until they laughed in your face because the government gave them somewhere to go and all you still had was them trains. The trains were beautiful, though.

One time you felt sorry for this pussy stiff because an older fellow jacked him in the face and smashed his guitar for not sucking up on him. You saw it in the boxcar and grabbed him and jumped out of the moving train. Now, who knows why. You both rolled down the hill and then got up and walked until you saw a town in a gully with houses near the edge. It was snowing before but the cold wasn't too bad when you were right up against the other stiff looking down at the houses. There was one with a tree inside, lit up with different colors. The pussy stiff stopped moving forward.

“What the hell?” you said but he kept looking down at the house. Just when you thought he’d gone crazy and you’d freeze up, he began saying something.

“I was going to be home on Christmas Eve. Mama makes pumpkin pie and Pop buys us oranges and cinnamon sticks from town, for our stockings. Then we have roast chicken or duck and evening services where Santa comes with a gift. Last year, I got a teddy bear. Wish I had that teddy bear,” he said.

“What the hell?” you said. “Come on, don’t you want to get going?”

But he doesn’t. You looked down at the house and the family in there with all the lights was eating bread and meat and drinking something, probably milk the pussy said, and they were talking to each other. They were talking and smiling and gathering around the decorated tree. They had a fireplace and a fire.

Back at your house, you suppose your mother is cooking up some soup. By soup, you mean melted snow, lard, a few dried carrots and potatoes to celebrate the holiday. She used to cook up a chicken and mash potatoes for the meal and your mother would make hot chocolate and cranberry sauce for the bread. The cranberry sauce always reminded you of chicken guts. They have the same texture. Then you’d be going to church with no money to offer the Lord’s basket, and listen to some damned preacher tell something about the Christ child and marked by a magical shining star. Sometimes you see that same star high up in the sky, but it never leads anywhere before morning.

If you were good, and you always were, Santa would leave a nickel under your pillow the next morning and you’d save it to buy a soda and stick of gum the next time you were in town. Then there’d be left over food for lunch and your mother would bake a pie to celebrate the birth of the Lord.

But there's no way they could afford those things now, not after your father lost the farm and your mother stopped paying attention. You wonder how long it was before they noticed you were gone, those years ago. Maybe they went all night without realizing it and only found you missing the next morning when your breakfast was still on the table at lunch.

You look over at the pussy stiff and he's crying like a damn bitch in the morning.

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Out on the road, if them guys in the jungle don't kill you and the bulls don't catch you and you don't starve to death, there's a good chance you'll end up in one of these homes where they put old people who never had nothing. There's a bed and food and a nurse comes when you're hacking up blood, but maybe that's not what you want. If you could ride the rails forever, you would, and watch all your trees and lakes and fields go by. You could take in everything and when you got too tired just lie down in the boxcar for a nap and at least there would be a stiff next to you when you didn't wake up.

That's what would happen when you rode the rails during the Depression. There were stiffs dying right and left as the train was passing between here and there. Sometimes, the stiffs would throw the dead man into the ditch while the train was still moving. Other times, they just left the man sitting in the corner. If you had gotten to die on the road, you'd have preferred to be left alone in the boxcar. At least that way you're still moving.

As it is, the nurses only attend to you when you make noise. When they come, they don't want to talk to you, they just want to stick pills or needles in you and then leave again. You're an old man, they say, and nobody belongs on the road anymore these days. They smile and say no person has to go without a home anymore. What if you want to go without a home, you say, don't they respect independence? Those nurses had dead eyes when they took you away.

After you're in the hospital, they don't want you to sit up or go outside or gum your food or move at all except your chest for breathing and even then they don't know why they're keeping you alive. You don't have any money. It's humanitarian, they say.

It was one nurse, a blond nurse, who checked you in after they found you sleeping in the bushes and she said you could put your possessions in a box. You told her you didn't have any possessions, the tin cup wasn't yours and the razor wasn't yours and the clothes on your back weren't yours so she could do what she pleased with them. They were things Holy Sam stole for you or things you took from Frigid Tom's pockets while he was sleeping. All those things were swindled from stiffes who swindled them from other stiffes. You said you couldn't remember the last time you even owned a pair of shoes.

But then, last night in a dream, you remembered something. There were shoes once. All you can remember is seeing things, a pair of legs, a window sill, hot rolls on the table. There were these things and you had shoes on your feet. But then you left that house and were with the stiffes. Holy Sam put you under his arm and ran through town away from the other men. You were running with him and then he picked you up and you were bouncing in his arms and screaming something. And then the next day there weren't shoes on your feet anymore. Holy Sam wrapped green leaves around them and taped them up right before jumping the train. That was your dream and now, sitting in that white room with nobody else around and feeling the late afternoon sun on your back through the window, you think maybe it was true.