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THERE'S A BEAUTY ABOUT BOXCARS

A few weeks later I decided to make my first annual visit to the Wobbly class war prisoners in Walla Walla prison in southeastern Washington. I stopped for a while in Yakima to visit a friend. Then in the early afternoon I went down to the railyards to look for a freight headed east for Pasco and Walla Walla. My heart always beat a little faster when I got around trains. There's a magic about trains. And the paraphernalia of the railroad always seemed so much more solid, real, proletarian, democratic and exciting to me than most aspects of the world.

A big long freight was pulling in slowly just as I arrived. Off to one side, by some sheds, I saw a group of harvest stiffs waiting. As the train pulled almost to a stop, I saw a few 'bos hop off and mosey over to the stiffs waiting by the sheds. One of them, a guy about twenty, stood out from the others. He had a certain bright gentleness to his eyes. I walked up to him. He told me his name was Bill Douglas.

"Any empty boxcars?" I asked.

"Nary a one," he said in a friendly sort of voice. "Guess you'll have to deck it or ride the rods."

Bill was the sort of guy I could have told anything to. We had an immediate rapport. "I guess I'm too chicken to ride the rods,"

I said. "Seeing those ties flying by just a few inches under my nose gives me the creeps. But I guess I'll have to."

"The secret is to lay some boards across the rods," he said. "Then you're more comfortable and safer, too. Ther're some old boards around behind the shed there."

I had never thought of that. And apparently not many of the other 'bos had, either. I thanked him and went to look for the boards. I got three one-inch planks, and when no one seemed to be looking, I went out and slid them in over the rods beneath the end of the nearest boxcar. Bill Douglas knew what he was talking about: They made a neat little platform out of sight of the casual passerby. I threw my bindlê into my cozy little nest and climbed in after it.

After what seemed an interminable wait, the freight started up with a jerk, derailing my train of thought. But it didn't go far. The shunting of train cars back and forth began as cars were taken off and added to the train. Each time a new car hit, it sounded like a round of heavy artillery coming in, and I felt like John L. Sullivan had just slugged me in the ear. Now I was really glad I had the boards to protect me.

Then, when I thought I couldn't stand it any longer, we began sliding along smoothly, with almost imperceptible acceleration. It still remains a mystery to me how boxcars can be slammed together with such murderous ferocity, and yet hundred-car-long trains can suddenly slip from a standstill up to fifty so smoothly you hardly know you've started. We glissaded along between other trains and packing sheds and warehouses for a while, and then exploded into the open countryside and were on our way.

There's a beauty about boxcars. Secure in my hidden perch, I could see them strung out ahead of me as the long train made big swooping turns along the river, red and green and orange and every color there is almost, each a world of its own, cars from all over the continent, waltzing along merrily in the bright spring sunlight, shooting off to who knows what far-off destination, like true romantic footloose adventurers. The train took on a long swelling, dipping roll like a large ship far at sea, and its distant whistle whined and screeched like the plaintive call of sea gulls.

I lay looking out at the ripening crops, rocking gently back and forth, and had the feeling that it was all one big throbbing beautiful mass, that I was part of the train and the passing countryside and all of it, and that even if I fell I would, after all,

only be falling into a soft, watery, welcoming mass of earth and sky. And I often thought I'd like to stick with just one boxcar for a whole month, just to see all the places it goes. They were a home to us, the boxcars, and we felt about them just the way some people do about their houses or their boats, as if they were alive, individuals, each with a personality and human destiny. And trains were like many-colored caravans moving across the face of the earth.

As we swept past little lost farms and villages, I longed to look into the windows of the houses, to see the people there, to know what they were like, their views and feelings, their aspirations, to get to know and be friends with them all, to merge with all of humanity. Those fresh grassy vacant lots between the little frame houses seemed so real, so basic, so good, so unpretentious, so alive in a way the self-consciously famous places of the world did not seem alive, with the reality of mud puddles and kids with kites.

Yet, as all the sights and sounds appeared and then were swept away and lost forever, I felt the peculiar isolation of riding freight trains too—wanting to reach out and touch all that teeming life, but being unable to. But then I'd think: Sometimes it's good to communicate with humans and sometimes it's good to be cut off like this and communicate only with your own soul—but with the whole world waiting for you out there whenever the train stopped.

We passed out of the orchard country into winter wheat, which waved in the wind out there like a gigantic green-gold ocean, sudden breezes brushing currents across it like racing schools of fish riffling its surface, a vast, ever-changing spectacle.

I thought of bits of railroad memorabilia, of the notorious railroad bull, "Umatilla Red," who had terrorized migrants not far east of here. One day he tried to throw one 'bo too many off a moving freight and ended up hitting the grit himself; an Italian immigrant gandy dancer had come upon his corpse and phoned in to the section gang office to report: "There's a red-a bull lying on the tracks—what-a should I do?" The foreman, thinking he was talking about a bovine, said: "Toss him in the bar pit and throw some dirt over him." So...

As we swooped on east and darkness descended, I began to sing Wobbly songs, Joe Hill's "Casey Jones, the Union Scab" and "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum":

'Oh, why don't you work
like other men do?'
'How the hell can I work
when there's no work to do?...

'I can't buy a job
for I ain't got the dough,
so I ride in a boxcar
for I'm a hobo...

'Hallelujah, I'm a bum!
Hallelujah, bum again!
Hallelujah, give us a handout
to revive us again!'

It got dark and cold. When we stopped at the edge of one little town down near the Columbia I decided to make a quick dash into the weeds to take a leak, not having the faintest idea how long the train would be stopped there. As I started to climb back under the car a couple minutes later, a brakeman or bull suddenly swung down from the ladder at the end of the car and yelled: "Hit the grit, bum!"

I dashed back out into the woods before he could catch me. In the darkness, I didn't think he saw the boards I had laid under the car. I ran through the bushes about two cars down. When he was turned the other way I ran in between two cars and up over the bumpers to the other side of the train. Then I walked quietly up to my car and slipped back into my hiding place. As soon as I was ensconced the train began to move. Soon we were rocking along at fifty again, rolling from side to side like a ship at sea, plummeting and bucking as from the lash of waves, off into the night.

Now that darkness and cold had come, I began to get scared. I thought again of Umatilla Red. What if the bull *had* seen me get back on the train? I had heard stories of mean bulls or shacks who would dangle a steel coupling pin on the end of a cord under the cars and cut the poor 'bos riding the rods to pieces. Later we'd see an obituary in the local paper about a tramp who apparently had gotten drunk and passed out on the tracks.

The train rattled on east, picking up speed. The rushing wind blew cold against my face. Suddenly I heard a kind of clattering clunking noise getting closer to me. My god! I thought. It was like a self-fulfilling prophesy—here I'd been thinking about that most

murderous of all the brutal tricks of the railroad bulls, and now could it actually be happening to me?

In another minute all doubt had been dispelled. So the bull had seen me get back on. The loud beating and ricocheting of steel on wood and metal that kept getting closer and closer could be nothing but a metal coupling pin at the end of a cord, bouncing around murderously under the car. In another moment it was hitting the tracks and the boards directly beneath me. And I felt more grateful to Bill Douglas than I'd ever felt toward anyone in my life for suggesting the boards—without their protection I would already be a corpse.

The pin seemed to beat right through the boards, and I felt like I was being pummeled in the ribs by a hundred expert boxers with brass knuckles. I wondered how long it would be before the boards would be battered into splinters and the pin would be hitting my bare flesh. I was so scared I even found myself praying to Jerusalem Slim that I'd survive the ordeal.

I suddenly got an idea: I remembered the gloves I always carried in my mackinaw in case I had to do some heavy shovel work. I fumbled around as the pin beat the boards beneath me, and finally slipped one glove on my right hand. My only hope, I reasoned, was to grab the cord and pull it out of the hands that were holding it on the other end.

The train roared on. A big piece from one of the boards was battered loose and fell out from under me. I could hear it being pounded to bits along the track bed as it bounced between the ties and the bottom of the speeding train.

I turned a little to one side and watched the bouncing coupling pin throwing out sparks as it jumped back and forth, helter-skelter, a few inches from my feet. The cord that held it whipped back and forth like some frenzied, constantly moving snake. I grabbed at it once, twice, without success. It lashed against my gloved hand like a high tension wire shooting electricity through me.

Then I concentrated for all I was worth. Remembering the speed I had used to kill flies with my bare hand back on our porch in Missouri, I reached out swiftly and grabbed the cord and jerked with everything I had. The cord suddenly lost its tautness. I dropped it and heard the pin go clunking back behind me along the length of the train. Did I just imagine that, a second later, I half-saw some dark mass pass under me on the road bed? But

surely the bull or shack wouldn't be dumb enough to have kept holding on to the other end?

I gave a gasp of relief and lay back on what was left of the rattling boards beneath me. With a trembling hand I wiped the dripping sweat from my brow. My heart seemed to be beating a thousand times a minute.

After a few minutes, when I felt a little calmer, I started worrying about what to do next. If the bull was still there, he must be madder than ever by now. And if he was crazy enough to murder people deliberately in that way, I could imagine what he would do to me when the train came to a stop. I was just praying that when the train stopped next, there would be other people around so that maybe at worst he'd have me arrested for trespassing. A month in jail looked good about now. But what if there wasn't anybody around?

I looked out through the darkness at the rods stretching toward the other end of the car. There was no way I could get up on the sides or top of the car with it underway like this. But if I could just shimmy my way to the other end of its underside, at least I would have a few seconds' leeway at the next stop while the bull looked under this end for me—and maybe I could make my escape before he caught me. It might be my only chance.

I put on my other glove and gingerly began to crawl and slide my way along the jolting rods, trying not to see the flying ties and cinders inches below me. I would wriggle my way a few feet, stop to rest, then slowly go on a few feet more, holding on to the shaking rods for all I was worth. In twenty minutes I had made it to the other end of the car. I'd had to abandon my bundle, but that seemed a small sacrifice under the circumstances.

I lay crouched under the other end of the car, ready to spring down the instant the train came to a stop. It seemed it never would. But finally, at some indeterminate hour in the middle of the night, it pulled into Pasco. The instant I saw the wheels weren't going fast enough to run me over, I leaped down and ran for the bushes. I didn't take the time to look around to see if anyone was following me. I ran off through the darkness for three or four blocks before I stopped behind a shed to catch my breath. Nobody was in sight. Then I slowly circled around the town through the surrounding countryside before entering it a mile or two from where I'd left the train.

I sat shivering beside an abandoned shack until it began to get light. Then I found a greasy spoon and had breakfast, praying that a bull or shack wouldn't come in and recognize me. Later, after cleaning up in the rest room, I took a bus on east to Walla Walla. And all along the way I gave thanks to William O. Douglas for giving me that tip about laying boards across the rods—otherwise I would have been cut to ribbons. I guess the memory of his days as a harvest stiff stuck with him. Because fifty years later when he was on the U.S. Supreme Court he wrote the majority opinion on a landmark case aiding in the union organization of farmworkers.

When I got to Walla Walla I bought some tobacco and magazines and fruit and headed for the prison. It was a grim-looking place. I thought of Eugene Debs and Bertrand Russell and their years in prison for obeying the teachings of Jerusalem Slim and refusing to kill—what a weird world it was where working people were thrown in jail for refusing to kill and for wanting everyone to lead a happy life.

As I was entering the prison I met our Wobbly shyster, Elmer Smith, coming out after a visit with the prisoners. He remembered me and greeted me warmly. We had a long powwow outside the prison gates. I told him of my ordeal of the night before, and he told me he was trying to take some legal action to curb illegal activities of the railroad bulls. He had heard of my reputation as a boxer and urged me to join one of our flying squadrons, but he cautioned me to be careful. For the rest of his life Smith continued traveling constantly, speaking and working for the release of the Centralia prisoners. I finally bade him goodbye and went on into the prison.

The seven prisoners seemed a little gaunt but cheerful. Most of them remembered seeing me in the Centralia jail or in the courtroom in Montesano. They were extremely grateful for my gifts. I told them of my pledge to visit them at least once a year as long as they were in, and of a new vow I had just made to become an IWW delegate at the first opportunity. When visiting time was up, I gave them all a warm handshake and the clenched-fist salute Bill Haywood had used in the Lawrence textile strike to symbolize solidarity. I felt sorry for the poor stiffes as I walked out of the prison, but I felt good about having visited them and filled with a strange emotion—it was like a religious experience, like a pilgrimage.