HARD TIMES

It was either 1937 or 1938, I forget exactly which year. The country was still struggling through the Great Depression, and I had left our failing family farm in Cash, Arkansas to try my luck picking apples in the Yakima Valley in Washington. I hitchhiked to Minot, North Dakota – an ordeal lasting almost two weeks – via St. Louis, Des Moines, St. Paul, Fargo and Bismarck. My plan was to hop a Great Northern freight in Minot and ride all the way west. I was probably 22 years old. It was early September. My name is Dwayne Curtis.

Those of you who have lived on The Road know of its perils, its odd characters, and its unexpected surprises. You get to see the beauty of the land, and you’ll see the best and worst in human nature too. It is an education unto itself. You get used to all kinds of weather. You learn what hunger is, and thirst. You learn to get hard or die. To always sleep with one eye opened.

Many men rode the rails in those days, of all ages and from across the nation. It was a time without much promise, other than for day-to-day survival. I had hoped to earn enough money picking apples for the season to send some dough back home to my folks and my three sisters in Cash. A funny name for a town in those days, when everyone needed some!

When I finally got to the rail yard in Minot, it was dark and windy. I had never hopped a freight before, but my Pa warned me that you had to watch out for the railroad bulls because they would try and catch you and turn you over to the cops or worse. Most were said to be mean, heartless sons-of-bitches who would just as soon bust your head or toss you out of a moving boxcar as spit.

While hiding and waiting for my ride, I saw the famous Empire Builder passenger train arrive, with a few nicely dressed families getting on and off. This train had been running regularly between Chicago and Seattle since 1929. It had a dining car and other deluxe features. I swear I could smell the fine cooking as it swiftly closed its doors and sped off. My stomach growled in frustration, seeing as my last meal had been two small raw potatoes and some murky ditch water. I surely missed my Ma’s fried corn dodgers.

A half-moon rose and the temperature dipped. The rail yard smelled of rusty metal, oil, creosote, and coal smoke. There were lots of busted beer and whiskey bottles lying around too. Suddenly, I heard a low moaning whistle in the distance. I clutched my small clothing bundle – with a now dirty spare shirt, a pair of socks, and some underwear -- and prepared to sneak aboard once the freight pulled in.

The old steam train was a long one, with many cars loaded with ripe Minnesota wheat. Luckily, it stopped to add some empty logging cars, and that was when I noticed three empty box cars in a row in the center of the train with their sliding doors slightly askew. Carefully looking left and right, I slipped into the middle car.

When my eyes adjusted to the even dimmer light inside, I saw six men scattered about– all tough customers, by my first impression. One was smoking a cigarette, the others just stared at me and said nothing. They smelled as bad as me in their unwashed skins covered with their unwashed ragged clothes. I was glad that my Pa insisted that I tuck a straight razor in my boot the morning I left home, and that I knew how to use it for protection should the need arise.

Mustering up my courage, I took a deep breath and announced: “My name is Dwayne Curtis, and I’m from Arkansas. I’m headed to Yakima to pick apples. I ain’t got no money, and I ain’t looking for any trouble. I just wanna ride in peace.” I was still a bit nervous, but I hoped I had sounded confident.

Two of the men responded with a nod and their names and place of origin, but the others were silent. They all looked tired and defeated. Hard Times had pretty much sucked the will out of them. They were just drifting, living off handouts or theft. Their ages were hard to reckon, but I was sure I was the youngest. They could be 30 years old or 60 years old under their dirt and matted hair and their whiskers. I found a safe place in a far corner of the box car, took off my cap, and lightly dozed off to the sounds and rhythm of the rolling train wheels.

The sun peeked in through the slit of the partly opened box car door the following morning, and then rose higher through the haze over flat fields of grain. I guessed we were somewhere in eastern Montana because we hadn’t hit the mountains yet. The other men stirred and awakened, some coughing and hacking. We were all very hungry. One of the men, “Charlie,” said we should all get off in Havre because there was a street mission there that gave free meals to the homeless in exchange for a sermon. “Coffee, bread, soup, and beans – a real feast! I was there last winter,” he boasted. This sounded good, so we all slipped off the train in Havre, which was the next stop.

Havre was basically a railroad hub town of about 6000 people. It was named after La Havre in France by its earliest -- mostly French -- inhabitants. During Prohibition, it was a busy illegal liquor transfer point from Canada into the rest of Montana. Charlie led the group through a hidden back way to the Christ the Redeemer Mission on Harcourt Street. On a wooden street pole in front of the mission was a tiny chalk “hobo mark” informing those just passing through town that here was a safe place for free food. Charlie proudly led them inside, like a big shot in charge.

The mission was simple but clean, and we could smell the coffee and the chicken soup bubbling in the kitchen. There were tables and chairs, and some other scattered men were already seated here and there. In the back of the hall was a lectern with a large crucifix hanging behind it. I figured that the lectern probably acted as some kind of pulpit for the sermon-giver.

A plainly dressed, unadorned woman maybe in her mid-50’s walked in from another side room. “Welcome, friends! My name is Sister Madeline. Please line up here and take a plate and a bowl and we will get you fed in no time flat.” She smiled.

The motley assembly shyly moved forward and formed a line near the kitchen alcove. First, an unnamed elderly woman ladled the hot soup into the bowls. Another elderly woman further down the line generously scooped beans onto the plates, and finally a boy next to her added a nice hunk of bread to each plate from a wicker basket. When the men sat down, there were mugs and spoons already placed at the tables, and Sister Madeline came by with a big blue metal coffee pot and filled each man’s mug. There was no sugar or milk, but no mind -- each man was ravenous, and grateful for anything to eat that was hot and filling.

“Let us first give thanks to The Lord,” Sister announced. The men bowed their heads in known routine. “We thank you Lord for Thy bounty and Thy mercy, and for this food. In Jesus’ name, Amen… Gentlemen, please eat hearty now and enjoy your meal. We will have a short sermon when you are finished. Please return your empty dishes and spoons to the kitchen alcove when you are finished.”

Because the mugs and spoons had been arranged together, the twenty or so men had to sit next to each other, leaving the other half of the hall empty. There was no conversation -- just chewing and gulping and slurping, with a few belches thrown in at the end. The food disappeared in less than five minutes. Afterwards, the men one at a time slowly returned the empty mugs, bowls and plates to the kitchen as directed. The room was comfortably warm and sitting in real chairs was nice too. The comfort of a full belly made one ponder the thought of dozing off, but Sister Madeline could read the communal mind as she quickly cleared her throat.

“Now, friends, I turn your attention to the Good Book. Specifically, Leviticus 25: 35-36.” She read the verse from a large Bible on the lectern. “And let us not forget Luke 14: 13-14, and Proverbs 19:17.” She likewise read those passages. “My friends, we are put on this Earth to help one another in times of need. Our country – nay, the whole world – is in the calamitous grip of seemingly endless economic misery, with jobs scarce, innocent babies hungry, and families suffering across the land. But if we pray to the Lord with humble and sincere hearts, and keep our faith strong, the Bible teaches us that all will be right again. So I urge you to have hope! Have faith! Turn not your backs on our Blessed Savior…instead, turn your backs on Satan and his wicked ways of despair and temptation! Better times will return, of that I am sure. Thank you for coming and for sharing this modest meal with us. God bless you. Amen. You are now dismissed. Don’t forget: you are always welcomed to come back here for a meal, served up hot at noon every day.”

A few of the men murmured an “Amen” as they exited the hall into the bright Montana sunlight. Others awkwardly avoided Sister’s friendly gaze as they filed out. Our ‘group’ of seven attracted two more men as we found our way back to the train yard. One of the newcomers introduced himself as Gus Travers from Tennessee. The other was silent.

We returned to our boxcar one at a time, keeping a wary eye out for any policemen or railroad bulls while we crouched in the bushes until it was our turn to jump on board.

I introduced myself to Gus when he sat down near me inside the boxcar as the train started moving. I guessed that he was in his mid-50’s, of average height and weight. He had at least a two-week growth of beard, and his teeth were yellow-browned from using chewing tobacco. His blue eyes were pale and watery, but there was intelligence and a strong will glowing behind them. Like all of us, his fingernails needed attention and were caked with grime. Like me, he wore thread-bare blue denim bib overalls over an old shirt, and he sported a soiled brown cap. His boots were coming apart at the seams, the laces knotted by way of repair in several places. When he talked, I noticed he was missing a few teeth from his lower jaw. He had a tangle of charcoal-black hair streaked with grey under his cap.

“So, Dwayne, you’re heading to Yakima, huh? I’ve been there. Mighty fine country, Washington state. Did my share of apple-picking in the Valley too. There are worst ways to earn a buck,“ Gus offered. “I’m headed to Seattle myself. Got a brother there who wants the two of us to head up to Alaska and get work on a fishing rig. I’m willing to give it a try. Ain’t got nothing else to do, so what the hell.” He scratched inside an ear with his pinkie. “And this is your first time riding the rails, ya say? Lemme give you some pointers. Most guys will leave you alone, but some of the mean ones will try to pick a fight over nothin’ just to prove they are top dog in front of the other men. A few queer ones might try to bugger the younger ones like you after it gets dark at the hobo jungles. Just use your fists then and they’ll back off. But other guys will help you out with useful advice, or even share food a little food with you if you get lucky. Life’s all about good luck and bad luck, I reckon. I’ve had my share of both. It’s like a card game. You got to play the hand you’ve been dealt the best you can.”

Gus went on a while longer, pausing to bite a chaw off a plug of Red Man and work the wad into his cheek in private contentment. He said that the country was in the shitter, and that a man had to use his wits to fend for himself and survive. “I reckon that only a major war could pull us out of this mess. Wars usually bring full employment.” he proclaimed. “Ya know, this Hitler guy in Germany has to be watched closely. Says some crazy stuff, if you believe the newspapers. I figure he wants to take over Europe, maybe even more, if he ever gets the chance. I guess the Germans want revenge for losing the Great War. I tell ya, I was in the trenches in France back in those days. Just a little older than you are now. God, it was awful. I can still smell the piles of dead soldiers, rotting where they fell…” Gus stopped, looked down for a long minute, then got up and stretched and went to take a piss out of the boxcar door and spit his tobacco juice. “I’m gonna take a snooze now for a while. We’ll talk more later, if you like.” He found a vacant corner in the boxcar and curled up, and was quickly snoring softly.

While Gus slept, the other drifters started casually chatting among themselves. The preferred topic was usually food, I discovered. Where to get it, how to get it, when to steal it or when to work for it. Which towns offered free meals and which didn’t. Favorite dishes that their Mothers or wives had made, like okra with bacon drippings, boiled hamhocks, cornbread, or chicken-fried steak with red-eye gravy. Then the topic turned to liquor, either homemade hootch or store-bought. The best ways to make moonshine were shared. How to beat the Federal Revenuers. How to build and hide a still. How to bribe the local police.

Next, the topic turned to favorite songs, as the train lumbered steadily across northern Montana. One man said he heard Woody Guthrie sing in person once at a migrant camp in Kansas. The song he best remembered was called “Ain’t Gonna Be Treated This Way.” Other men chimed in with their favorite Woody Guthrie songs, saying they liked this one or that. One old-timer even pulled a battered harmonica out of his vest pocket and commenced to play a rendition of “Lonesome Day” while a few of the others sang along: “…Today has been a lonesome day…”

After a while, the topic turned to the weather – specifically, who experienced the worst storms. The men bragged about surviving tornados, flash floods, thunderstorms, and lightning strikes that caused brush and even forest fires. I learned that some of my fellow travelers had been farmers, or truck drivers, or loggers, or cowboys, or just city slickers. One man – a former farmer named Willis from Oklahoma -- even recalled in detail the terrifying and destructive Dusters that had plagued the Great Plains, especially the Panhandle, just a few years ago. “Gawd, it was plum awful,” he recalled. “That dust blackened the skies for hours and hours, all the time with the wind moaning something fierce. It choked you if you was trapped outdoors. It killed the livestock what weren’t penned, and it buried the crops in big bone-dry dirt drifts. Some folks went crazy and lost their minds. Some even took their own lives and the lives of their little ones. It were like the end of the world, sure enough...”

The hours passed until it was late afternoon. The train blew its whistle at the rare road crossings, and barreled along at perhaps 50 miles per hour. Gus had woken up by now, and announced that they were probably coming into the mountains shortly. “Then it’s across the shortest part of Idaho, and before you know it, we’ll be in old Spokane by midnight. There’s a hobo camp near the train yard there where there should be some buddies of mine and some Mulligan stew bubbling on a fire. Maybe with some real beef or elk meat in it, not just bits of prairie dogs and varmints. Bet y’all’s as hungry as me!” He pulled out his chaw. “Keeps you from being thirsty,” he advised.

“I got another story for you, Dwayne,”Gus offered as he turned to me. “You are probably too young to be married yet, but you’ll need to deal with the fair sex sooner or later, and I don’t just mean ballin’ in the hayloft with the farmer’s daughter,” he winked.

“There was a fella once who married his one true love. Sweet, she was, and awful purty. Flaxen hair she had. He was on the top of the world, proud and content. The years went by. They figured that God would bless them with a child or two. But it weren’t meant to be. Maybe it was him, or maybe it was her. His pecker worked normal, but they never found out exactly what the cause was as to why they couldn’t have a baby. Then one day, he lost his job at the lumber mill. Half the crew was laid off. Hard Times, you know? They had a little money set by, but it was gone in six months or so. Had to go on the Government relief, but that ended too. Family, neighbors and friends could only do so much. They themselves were hurting too, and had to look after their own. Hunger and sickness hit them both hard, you know how it is, not eatin’ regular. Pretty soon, the woman started to change, to go downhill. She started talking to herself. She imagined things that weren’t there. She started arguing and would curse up a storm at the drop of a hat over nothin’. The man didn’t know what to do. Then the poor woman commenced to eating grass and dandelions. Crazy stuff. She would sit alone and rock back and forth and sing baby songs to herself. Once, the man lost his temper with her wayward ways and slapped her hard. She just looked back at the man and started to laugh. Next, she started to eat little torn pieces of paper like they were food. The man went out each day looking for work, even stooping to begging on occasion, but it was no use. Finally, he turned to stealing food. He stole apples from store barrels, raw potatoes from the fields, loaves of bread from delivery trucks -- even homemade pies cooling on kitchen windowsills. Once he got caught and had to spend a month in jail. Another time he got caught and was beaten up by local farmers. Meanwhile, his wife never got better. It was hopeless. One time, the man woke up in the middle of the night and found his wife hovering over him with a butcher knife, moaning something terrible, like the Devil got into her. He pried the knife out of her hands and hid it in another room and carefully put her back to bed. The next night, the man decided that it all had to stop. While his wife slept, the man got a shovel from out in the barn and stove his one true love’s head in like it was a pumpkin. It was all over. Then he walked out and never turned back.”

I had listened to this strange story with shock and sadness. How could such a horrible thing happen? I looked up at Gus Travers, and was about to ask him several questions.

But Gus suddenly looked away into the distance, let out a long sigh, and murmured, “Her name was Agnes. I swear she almost looked relieved when she opened her eyes that one last time, after I hit her…”

The End

by Jack Karolewski / July 20, 2015