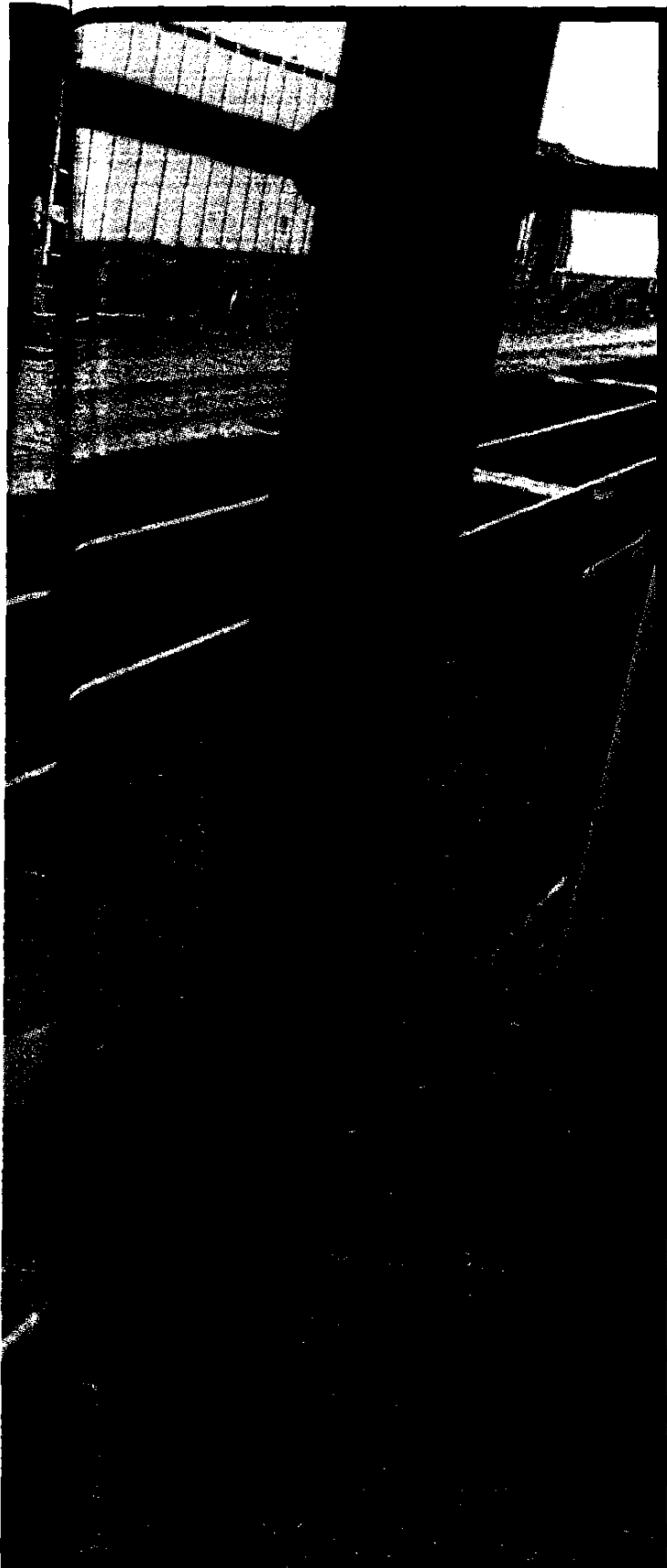




MEET THE Crusties



Hopping freights with members of the new hobo-punk movement, our outlaw reporter finds out how far seven defiantly dirty young tramps can go with no money, hardly any sleep, and the rail cops in hot pursuit

BY SARAH FERGUSON

I HARDLY RECOGNIZED Dumpster when I found him, carting a couple of watermelons through the soupy humidity of Alabama's Talladega National Forest. Dressed in a filthy brown T-shirt and muddy blue jeans with a battered Los Angeles Kings cap shading his thick, unruly beard, Dumpster looked surprisingly at home amid the hordes of half-clothed hippies and born-again flower children frolicking in the woods. Like them, Dumpster had come to experience the twenty-second annual countercultural powwow known as the Rainbow Gathering. He might have been a touch more soiled than his hippie cohorts, but he was still a thousand times cleaner than when I'd first met him, two winters ago, slumped against a tenement wall opposite Manhattan's Tompkins Square Park.

Back then, Dumpster epitomized the antiaesthetic of the "crusties"—loose bands of punk-rock vagrants and squatters known for taking filth to extremes. His black hair was matted to his face in thick, unkempt dreadlocks, and whatever skin peeked out from the layers of baggy clothing was so covered in soot and grime that he looked as if he were masquerading in blackface. But what struck me most was Dumpster's pious commitment to living "outside the system." I remember him boasting about how he had no money, how he could "dumpster dive" plenty of clothes and good vegetarian food from the trash—hence the alias (he wouldn't give his real name). Why get a job and support our corrupt government when you could simply live off society's waste?

It's a well-worn line, but Dumpy truly lives the ethic. He's been on the road for the past nine years, ever since he dropped out of high school in Long Island's Suffolk County at fifteen. He started out hitching to punk shows. Eventually some tramps showed him how to hop freights. After his first ride, he was hooked.

"It's just as close to, like, complete freedom as I've ever

Jumping a freight: Dumpster boards a grainier in Willmar, Minnesota. The trick is to not get killed in the process.

had," he explained to me at the gathering, kicking back on a log to sip some mint tea from a sawed-off plastic jug. "It's just a total adrenaline rush. . . . Plus there's all this—I dunno, this might sound cheesy—but there's just, like, the total rhythm of the train, too. Because it's all steady, it's like a steady banging, and it sounds almost like a metal jam."

At the gathering, Dumpster may have shed some of his crustiest layers, but he was still totally committed to the downscale life. In fact, at age twenty-four he's kind of a pioneer in the hobo-punk scene—a growing subculture of run-aways, misfits, self-proclaimed freaks, anarchists, and unrepentantly dirty crusties who roam the highways and freight lines of America. The punk movement that grew up around the club scene has migrated into the stark world of urban survivalism, picking up traits from the hippies, paganists, radical environmentalists, and homeless. Hobo punks hop trains, squat abandoned buildings, collect welfare, and dumpster food. Anything, in short, to exploit and condemn the consumer culture they so despise.

But their greatest freedom lies in transience. They migrate through a loose network of ever-changing squats and collective houses in New York, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. The more committed hobo punks have stamp routes—designated stops where they can pick up food stamps and general-assistance checks.

For Dumpster, the hobo life seemed an effort to achieve social parity with the poor. Yet he lacked the self-righteous contempt his peers show for the rest of us duped wage slaves. Wandering with him through the Alabama woods, cadging meals from the gathering's various soup kitchens, I got the sense that he dumpstered less out of protest than for the sheer love of scavenging. "That's Jamba," he proclaimed when we came across a kitchen offering freshly baked cookies, speaking in half-joking def-

erence to the crustie god of trash. "Jamba always kicks down."

After the gathering, Dumpster was headed to Iowa to join a crew of migrant laborers detasseling corn. It wasn't hard to convince him to leave early and take me north with him. And by the next day we'd accumulated a whole posse of travelers: Matt and Jeff, two rather morose squatters from New York who could have been stand-ins for Beavis and Butt-head; Matchstick, a pixieish art student from Minneapolis with canary-yellow hair and a penchant for wearing grimy slips over her stretch pants and knee-high combat boots; and Matchstick's friend, April, with orange-tinted hair, who'd scrawled "Romance the ugly" on the back of her canvas pack.

We piled into my rented Nissan and headed off to Birmingham, with Extreme Noise Terror and Rudimentary Peni blaring on the tape deck. By the time we hit Birmingham, we'd picked up two more for the road: Bones, a former-skin-head-cum-born-again-Christian, whose lanky body was a comic-book canvas of ghoulish tattoos; and Barney, a six-three nineteen-year-old from New Orleans who looked as if he could have been a star jock—were it not for his budding dreads and the word *hate* tattooed across his knuckles.

The plan was to catch the Burlington Northern line to Memphis, then ride the Illinois Central up to Chicago. Because Birmingham has a notoriously hot, or well-patrolled, train yard, we'd have to catch a freight on the fly. The hardest part about riding is finding the right yard with the right train and then the right spot outside the yard where you can safely hop without getting busted. Dumpster usually traveled with a set of train maps (copied from the public library) and a road atlas, but those had been ripped off by another tramp. Since he'd never hopped this route before, we'd have to wing it.

Dumpster diving: Dumpy (right) and a friend on the hunt for discarded food. There's nothing like a good scavenged meal.



Farting and picking one's nose in public are considered de rigueur—a liberation from the constraints of false modesty. "I just love to fart, man," Dumpster said.

IT WAS WELL INTO THE EVENING of another sweltering Alabama day when we finally wandered over a small highway bridge and spotted some tracks stretching northward. "Do you think those are motion detectors?" Barney whispered urgently, leaning over the bridge and pointing to the metal boxes casting an ominous pink glare on the tracks. "Nah," Dumpsy scoffed. "They wouldn't spend that kind of money on security." But there was definitely a video camera—enough to shake Barney and Bones, who'd already been thrown out of the yard by the bulls (rail police) when they'd gone to scope out the tracks. If they were caught again, they'd be facing anywhere from a night to thirty days in jail.

We slid down the embankment and crawled under the overpass. "Shhhh!" Barney scolded as my pack and water jugs sloshed across the rocks. "You'll have to tie all that stuff on your back," he hissed.

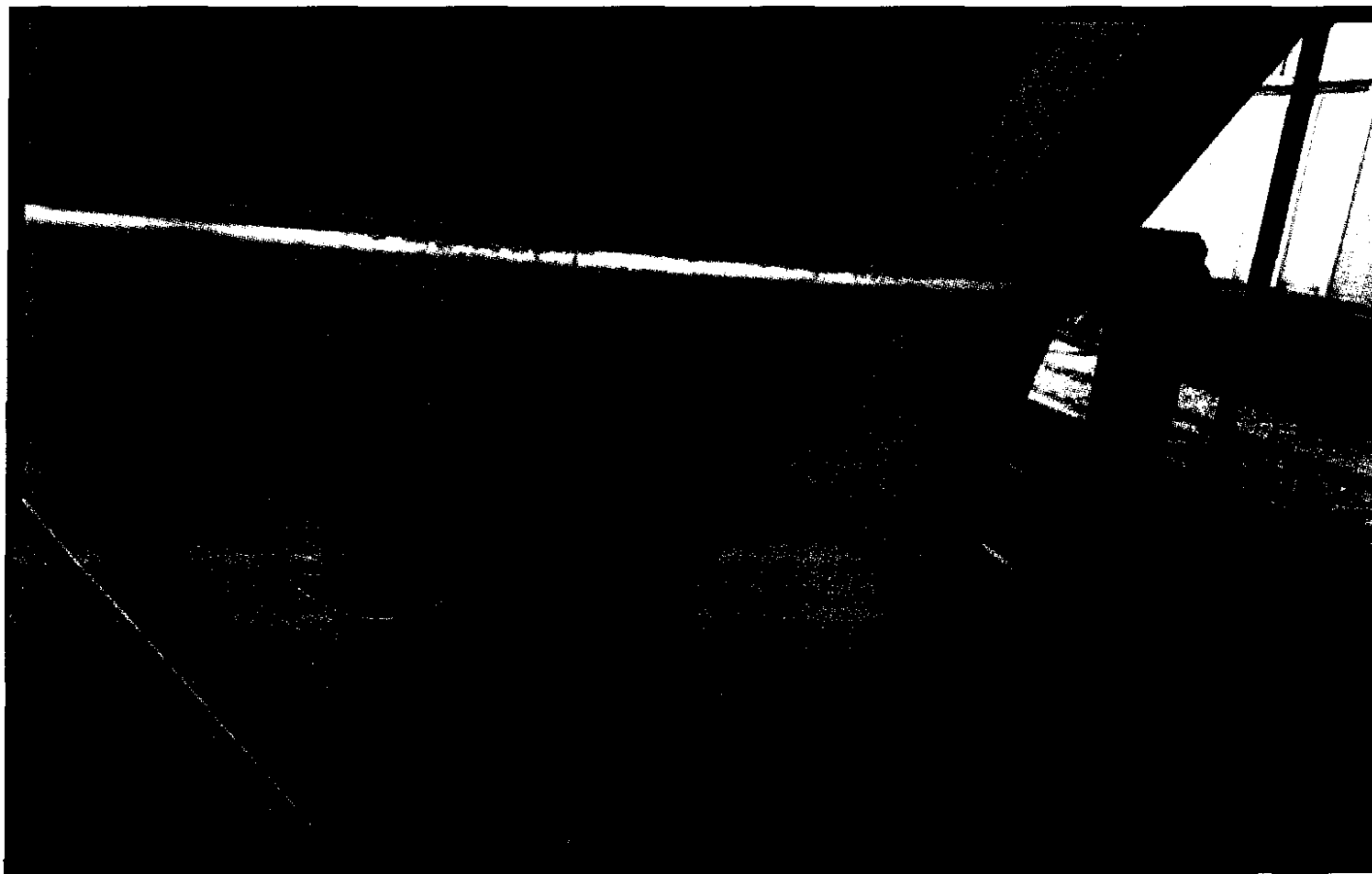
Frantically, I began fastening the jugs to my already overloaded pack. Until this point I'd been so caught up in the kids' lives, I hadn't really thought about the mechanics of heaving myself onto a freight. Suddenly I realized I didn't have the slightest idea what I was doing. I knew I was supposed to pick out a suitable car, run alongside, grab the ladder, step up, and pull myself onto the platform. What platform? I'd never really looked at a freight car that closely. What if I slipped?

In the hole: Grainers are among the best cars to ride. There's comfort, shade, and refuge from the dreaded rail police.

Dumpy had already gone over the basics of which types of cars were rideable, but now, as I fixated on the possibility of my legs being ground to bloody stumps, my head began to swim. We were waiting for a hotshot—a fast train that would take us directly to the main yard in Memphis—so we'd probably hop a "forty-eight." That's a flatcar that carries a forty-eight-foot shipping container. Since the cars themselves are fifty-two-feet long, there's usually a well of about four feet at the end of the container where you can hide from the bulls. Then there are piggybacks, flatcars that have a semitrailer bolted on top. You ride between the trailer's wheels and mud flap. Other rideable cars include grainers and gondolas, huge roofless containers that usually carry scrap metal or wood.

Most people think of tramps riding in rusty boxcars, but Dumpster steered clear. He'd come across too many old-timers who'd lost their feet and hands in the boxcars' sliding metal doors. Even if you pegged the door securely with iron spikes from the yard, you never knew who might be lurking inside a boxcar. Dumpster and the others were full of stories of the derelict gangs Goon Squad and Wrecking Crew, who pillage the freights for their cargoes and might strip a rider naked or steal a bum's last welfare check.

It was morning before the first rideable train came thundering toward us. Dumpsy pointed to a car, and I lurched after the ladder but missed and kept running. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Barney and Bones, then Matt and Jeff, swinging themselves onto the train. Finally I reached out for the next ladder and pulled and . . . I couldn't do it! The



ladder jerked out of my hands and I stumbled, nearly toppling back with the weight of my pack.

April and Matchstick hadn't gotten on either, so the others jumped off. Turned out I had forgotten to step up. "There's no way you can pull yourself up by your arms," Dumpy reassured me. "You have to get your foot or your knee on the ladder, then pull yourself up."

When the next train came by I jammed my foot on the first rung, heaved—and I was up! I was on a car with Matt and Jeff. Our exhilaration faded when we realized that there was nowhere to ride. We'd meant to get on a forty-eight, but this car was carrying an extended container; there was no well between the car and the container in which to hide, just a mesh grille (what the tramps call a cheese grater) on the four-foot steel platform, where we baked in the sun.

Dumpy and the rest of the crew had nabbed a piggyback a dozen boxcars back. But with all five of them crammed on one car, they, too, were hardly inconspicuous. We were barely forty miles out of Birmingham when the train suddenly slowed to a halt outside a miserable little town called Jasper.

YOU THERE IN THE BUSHES. Y'all wooden be thinkin' about gettin' back on that train, wood-ja?" a thick southern voice called out from the other side of the tracks. It wasn't a bull, just the switchman—a tall, white-haired guy peering into the brush where we'd fled when the train stopped. "We can't have you ridin' the freights is all," he continued in a loping drawl. "Too many young folk gettin' killed out here, ya see." The train lurched away, but we just crouched there, trying to pretend he couldn't see us. "I'd advise you to head on up to the interstate and catch a ride."

Dumpy cursed under his breath. "Yeah, all you care about is your fucking property. Fucking asshole." He didn't want to hear the switchman, but the stats are real. According to the Federal Railroad Administration, the number of "trespasser fatalities" grew from 372 in 1976 to well over 500 in 1991. Most of those who died were in their teens and twenties.

Dumpy said there was no way he'd hitch. He had principles. He'd rather wait all day for another train—which is what we did, festering in a chigger-infested patch of weeds.

Dumpster had the metabolism of a goat. He didn't smoke or drink much, but food, he readily admitted, was an addiction. That afternoon he scarfed down five cans of barbecue-and-jalapeno-flavored sardines and half a box of crushed saltines smothered in peanut butter, farting and burping the whole way through. In crustie circles, farting and picking one's nose in public are considered *de rigueur*—a liberation from the constraints of false modesty. "I love to fart, man," Dumpy said, lifting up a cheek to let one slip by.

Another favorite pastime of hobo punks is boasting of all the insects and infestations that plague their bodies. Dumpy and the guys spent the next hour swapping tales about the lice that camp out in dreadlocks and occasionally drop off into the morning coffee. Then there was the time Dumpy and his friend Dirtbag hopped an open freight car in the middle of the night and woke up to find themselves sleeping in a pile of maggot-infested grain. "There's no way you can squat and live on the road without getting bugs," Bones promised me.

I looked down at the raised welts on my arms and hands, scratched raw and bloody. I hoped they weren't flea bites. I was too hot to eat and too tired to think straight, and the stench emanating from the polyester-fur mud flap sewed on the back of Jeff's pants was starting to make me sick.

Who was I to be rubbernecking on their road trip, anyway? Up until now, I'd been operating under the delusion that I could experience the journey as one of them. But maybe I was no better than those yuppie riders who pay seasoned hoboes to show them the rails. There's even an organization, the National Hobo Association, whose members—mostly white-collar types—spend weekends roughing it in Gore-Tex running suits with a Gold Card tucked in one shoe, as if they were bungee jumping into poverty.

Matchstick must have sensed my discomfort, because she edged over to offer up a corner of shade. This was the first time she or April had ever hopped a freight, too, and they were clearly exasperated, though determined to hold their own with the guys. And in that sense, Matchstick and April were also pioneers. From the vagrants of the '30s to the Beats of the late '50s and early '60s, the freights have represented a proving ground for men—an outlaw's West Point. But now more young women are seeking freedom on the rails. Matchstick seemed particularly determined. Last summer when she tried hitching cross-country, she'd been disgusted by all the pervers propositioning her. And now here she was hopping freights in a slip!

I kept catching myself staring at her pear-shaped breasts puckering the yellowed nylon, so defiantly exposed. The look wasn't sensual, not with the Pebbles hairdo. It was a challenge, a way of showing that she could move through the world without compromise. Yet here in the Deep South, I couldn't help but wince at the vulnerability of her pose.

We were a long way from the liberal environs of Ann Arbor, Michigan, where Matchstick grew up. She started leaving home when she was thirteen, though she never really explained why. Her parents, she allowed, were decent enough; her mother is a psychotherapist, and her father a quirky inventor who used to build geodesic domes in the backyard. Perhaps it had something to do with living in the shadow of an older sister who was "perfect in every way." She couldn't compete with that. "Either I do something perfectly or I don't do it at all," Matchstick said.

I'd been ready to write off April as your standard middle-class suburban rebel hopping freights because it was the in thing to do. I was surprised to learn that her parents were junkies, that they'd sent her off when she was eight to live with her uncle, who was also a junkie but strong enough to kick his habit. April had been studying art in Minneapolis, where she met Matchstick. But she quit when she got sick of selling her plasma to get by. Before she left Minneapolis she was working in a plastics factory for \$4.35 an hour.

For his part Dumpster seemed happy to have some female partners. "Lots of times the engineers'll slow down if they see a woman by the side of the tracks," he said. But we weren't going anywhere with that switchman on guard. By sundown, after spending an entire day watching trains barrel past, we gave up and headed for the highway.

IT TOOK A GOOD TWENTY-FOUR HOURS to travel the next 250 miles to Memphis—long enough to make me realize why Dumpy hated hitchhiking. We were accused of loitering outside Jasper and nearly arrested twenty miles down the road in Carbon Hill by a steel-eyed sheriff and his hulking deputies (the biggest one wore a T-shirt that read *I FELL DOWN AND CAN'T REACH MY BEER*). Maybe they thought they were being lenient when they dropped us across the county line in the middle of the night, a good ten miles from the closest town.

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Jeff rolled himself up in the bedclothes at the edge of the bed. "I just like sheets for some reason," he muttered, embarrassed to be caught enjoying a clean bed.

Sleeping in the woods was out of the question, Dumpy said—too many snakes. "Yeah, well, I'm not waiting for some redneck to come take me out with a shotgun full of buckshot," Bones said, quivering. Fortunately, we stumbled across a UPS shipping center, where Dumpy picked out the name of a local preacher in the phone book and somehow convinced him to put us up in a motel for the night—with a police escort and free breakfast vouchers to boot (the cop chosen to ferry Dumpy, Matt, Jeff, and me to the motel promptly closed off the partition and cranked the air conditioner as soon as we got in the backseat).

Scamming a free stay in a motel was cause for celebration. Bones and Barney jumped on the beds. Matchstick dyed her hair orange, April tinted hers yellow-green. Even Dumpster broke down and had a shower; it had been so long, I had to show him how to work the knobs. "What are you doing?" Matt sneeringly asked Jeff, who was rolling himself up in the bedclothes at the edge of the bed. "I just like sheets for some reason," Jeff muttered, embarrassed to be caught enjoying a clean bed. Matt seemed so cruel at that moment—I had to remind myself that he was only eighteen.

The next day was easier. We rode all the way to the outskirts of Memphis in the back of a pickup truck, then got a lift downtown from an eighteen-wheeler. We headed straight for the Antenna Club, a punk-rock venue. But the place was

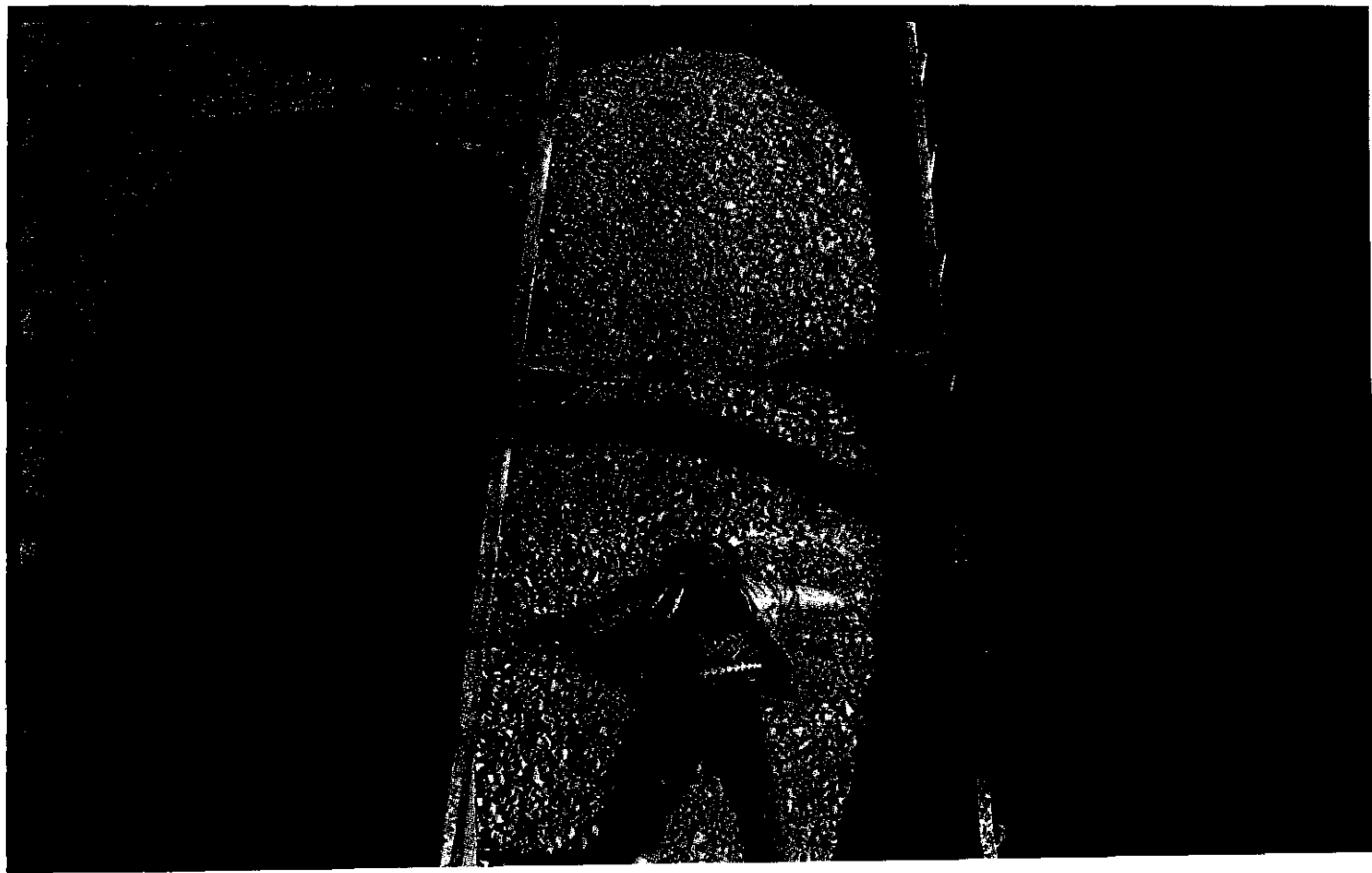
Surfing a gondola: Dumpy riding out of the Willmar train yard—"It's as close to complete freedom as I've ever had."

dead, so we straggled into Murphy's Tavern, across the street. We spent the night getting soused with some crack-addicted southern belles and a rather pathetic grifter named Carl, who was so whacked on mushrooms he kept giving us money. Soon the kids had the waitresses buying them catfish sandwiches and pitchers of beer while an old drunk serenaded us with Al Green tunes. Near closing time, he clamped a big fatherly hand over my shoulder and offered a word of advice: "These kids here, they're your family. Stay with your family."

"Yeah, she's our mom," April giggled. Matt and Jeff were horrified. "She's not our mom!" they retorted in unison, eyeing me with disgust.

But that night we did feel closer to one another than ever before. Barney and I shot pool with the crackheads, played songs on the jukebox. He wanted to hear Pearl Jam's "Jeremy," the one with the video of the kid who blows his head off in school. "I was raised to be violent," Barney said. "When the adrenaline comes, my eyes go red. I can't see anything, I just fight. I'm trying not to be violent like that anymore." His right forearm was tattooed with the image of a little boy crouching in a field of fire.

Barney's father left home when he was two. His mom, a hippie with a bad taste for PCP, raised him with a series of "dads" in a trailer home in the swampy outskirts of New Orleans. When he was twelve he slashed a preacher with a razor blade. From then on, he was in and out of detention homes and psych wards. Sometimes he'd get violent just so they'd dope him up with Thorazine, so he could dream. By



the time he hit the squats of San Francisco, it was a quick slide into heroin abuse. He kicked last year in a Christian community in Cincinnati, where he met up with Bones, an old junior-high-school buddy.

"I want to be happy," Barney said, shrugging, when I asked him about his life goals. "I don't know, I think back to the days when my mom was a hippie with her hair in braids and bells on her toes." He smiled dreamily. "That's how I want to live." Meanwhile, Matt and Jeff were busy smuggling forty-ounce beers onto the back porch. Bones was puking in the bushes.

The next day we copied some train maps from the public library. Dumpster figured we could catch the Illinois Central line to Chicago running north along the Mississippi River, a mile or so out from the main yard. But when we finally got there, around midnight, all we found was a rusty spur line that ran for about two miles through an industrial ghost town of decrepit factories and empty grain silos.

We walked quietly among the dark hulks, our pockets filled with rocks to ward off the feral dogs eyeing us from the shadows. There was a switchman's shack up ahead, but when Dumpy knocked no one answered. Maybe he was asleep? Dumpy said he didn't dare walk in, lest the guy wake up and shoot him.

We'd have to sleep in shifts, Dumpy said, with one eye out for the switchman and the other for the dogs. The rest of us groaned as mosquitoes dive-bombed us like F-16's. I was too tired to care. I spread my sleeping bag out on the gravel and fell into a dense slumber. I awoke at dawn with a mouthful of dust to the taunts of some workers from the upper floors of a mill: "Hey, sleeping beauties! Get a haircut!"

The yard we were looking for was on the other side of town. When we arrived, there was an old-school hobo named Pete already waiting by the tracks with a couple of forty-ounce bottles of beer and a paper sack full of cheap cigarettes. He was a friendly sort, not at all fazed by the sight of eight funny-looking kids tramping on his turf. When Dumpster asked which way the Illinois Central line was running, Pete took a long swig of beer and shook his head.

"You can catch 'em here, but the train runs back east through the main yard, and I've never seen the place so hot. Bulls wand'r in' all over the place. I had m'self stowed away in a grainer and three of 'em come, yank me out, chase me right outta the yard. Got bulls ridin' the cars, too.

"If they catch me again they'll arrest me," Pete continued. "I figure I'll go around 'em. Take the SLSW west to Little Rock, catch the UP north through Missouri." There were reports in the papers about rising floodwaters engulfing freight lines throughout Missouri and Kansas. But we didn't have much choice; we were going to Little Rock.

An hour later a train pulled into the yard. Dumpy and I grabbed the first couple of grainers while the others headed for the forty-eights in the rear.

GRAINERS ARE GOOD TO RIDE. At either end of the car there's a circular opening—about a foot and a half wide—that leads to a sloping three-by-four-foot cubbyhole just big enough for a rider to curl up and hide in. If you're lucky, you'll catch a Cadillac grainer, which has a double set of openings, the tramp's equivalent of a king-size bed.

I jammed my pack in the hole and crawled in after it. Inside, all the sounds of the train were magnified, as if I were sit-

ting in a huge kettledrum. There was the sudden whoosh of the air lines being hooked up to the brakes, then the gentle ping of the brake shoes releasing, then silence, then a shuddering jolt and we were moving, banging and clanging over the uneven tracks, slow and haphazard at first, then faster, building to a steady rhythm—*ram-pam-lama-lam, ram-pam-lama-lam*.

The gondola in front of me was making music, too, an eerie whistling and creaking so loud I found myself laughing. I scrambled out of the hole just as the train took the bridge arcing over the muddy Mississippi waters into Arkansas. And suddenly I understood the magic of the freights, how the sudden rush of movement could vanquish the anxious tedium of the wait, leaving an incredible feeling of lightness. I stood on the platform, watching sparrows flit and dive over endless fields of rice and soybeans, a landscape so rich it seemed to feed me. For once, there was nothing I wanted, nothing I needed.

Except to piss. Gingerly I unzipped my jeans and leaned my butt over the edge of the car, hanging on to the ladder with both hands. I managed to get most of the spray downwind. Just in time, too, because the next moment there was Dumpy hanging off the ladder at sixty miles an hour, having climbed across the top of the car to pay a visit. We were barreling through the heart of Clinton country now, past burned-out shacks and trailer homes dwarfed by deep-dish antennae and stores with hand-painted signs—*GAS AND BAIT, ITCH TO FISH*. Every now and then we'd spy some old folks with binoculars and picnic lunches, hanging out at the side of the tracks as if it were a day at the races.

I didn't think much when we passed a cop car idling by the side of the tracks. Until the train stopped. I scrambled back in the hole and waited. No footsteps, nothing. In a few moments we were moving again. Later, Dumpy clambered back over the ladder to inform me that Bones and Barney had been busted. "And maybe some of the others too. I don't know. I saw someone else in the squad car, but I couldn't make 'em out," he gushed, breathless but clearly exhilarated. Our road family was gone like a bend in the tracks, but we had escaped—no time to miss anything. "Getting busted on a freight," he joked, "that's ten punk-rock points right there."

As the train gathered speed, Dumpster sat there, edgy, eyes darting to either side of the tracks, then crumpled into a heap on the platform. In seconds he was fast asleep, his mouth slack and his eyes bulging open. In his faded green jumpsuit, he seemed to blend so naturally into the pale-gray steel of the platform, the soot rendering him invisible, protected, the rocking car cradling him through the countryside.

I must have drifted off, too, because when we hit Little Rock around 9:00 P.M. I was alone again in the hole, wondering when the hell to get off. Finally I saw Dumpy running along the car, waving frantically. I grabbed my pack and pitched into the gravel, collapsing on my elbow. "Fuck, man, you could have got killed," Dumpy scolded as I picked the rocks out of my arm. "When you step off the ladder, you gotta have your feet already running."

He was pissed at my clumsiness, but more pissed at the others—Matchstick, April, Matt, and Jeff. Turns out they hadn't been arrested, but they'd jumped off with Pete at the edge of the yard about six miles back. But Dumpster wasn't waiting for them. It was Saturday night and he'd already made up his mind to check out Little Rock's "thriving" punk-rock scene. We'd dumpster some food, go find a show, then catch a ride back to the yard, he said. I knew better. Little Rock was a desolate place. Away from the posh downtown hotels, the

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streets were hot, empty, and edged with serial-killer violence. I was so tired I passed out on the sidewalk, until I noticed a pair of creased tan slacks and a bulging gun holster hovering over my head. It was a guard ordering us to move on.

"Fuck it, man, there's no way I'll go back to the yard. Not now," Dumpy vowed. I wanted to kill him. In the distance I could hear packs of drunken men yelling. I'm not sure how I managed to boost myself onto the roof of a doctor's office a few blocks away, but we slept there safely till 8:00 A.M., when I awoke dizzy and coughing up globs of phlegm.

THE NEXT 160 MILES to Van Buren, Arkansas, were a rough ride. I'd hopped an open gondola carrying a load of rough-hewn steel gaskets, and there was nothing to shield me from the sun. But dirt, I found, is a surprisingly effective sunblock. When we stopped in Van Buren I saw Dumpy running toward me along the tracks. The train was breaking up. We'd have to run back thirty cars to stay en route to Kansas City. I staggered after him, feeling the sweat pour out of my body, passing cars marked with ominous red-and-white tags that warned of toxic chemicals. There was no choice; we climbed aboard one of the tagged grainers. As I leaned over to catch my breath, the train lurched forward, throwing me headfirst into a railing. I slumped to the ground, fighting back the tears. My water jugs were dry and it was at least a ten-hour ride to Kansas City. But the train stopped again farther into the yard, and Dumpy finagled some water and chicken McNuggets from the engineers, so I perked up.

"Congratulations, you're in Oklahoma," he announced, smiling at me beneath one of the makeshift bandannas I'd fashioned out of my T-shirt to protect us from the toxic dust. We were train bandits now, plowing through fields of black-eyed Susans glowing in the sun, past chestnut horses racing alongside white plank fences.

Dumpy crawled into his grainer hole and fell asleep, but I couldn't let go of the scenery, traveling up the swollen Arkansas River into Tulsa, watching the horizon broaden around me so wide the fields seemed to curve with the earth. When we hit the plains of Kansas, the clouds began rolling in, layers and layers of cumulus thunderheads billowing for miles above the thick carpet of leaden gray, the gilded white domes punctured by sudden bursts of sunlight—like a page torn from my Sunday-school primer.

And when the rain came it fell in heavy sheets that blackened half the sky, sweeping over the still-sunny fields like a ghostly shadow. This was the rain that had flooded the Mississippi and Missouri basins; it overtook our train with a roar of thunder so ripping it seemed we might be crushed. The train stopped and we cowered in our holes, watching the lightning fracture the darkness. Dumpy said he'd never heard of tramps getting fried on the rails, but when a bolt struck the tracks next to us, we felt our train shudder.

That night the sky opened up to a cathedral of stars, more stars than I had ever seen, dazzling in a field of deep sapphire-blue. It was a velvety blue, softened by the faintest wisps of a haze that swirled around the stars as if to em-

brace them. I spread some cardboard on the platform and lay flat on my back, feeling the weight of whole galaxies press down upon me. It was cold now. I crawled back in the hole and spread out my sleeping bag on the frigid steel, only to be jolted awake by the train coupling and decoupling in a yard just outside Kansas City. Dumpy was still sleeping soundly in the grainer facing me, and I was too scared of the bulls to step out and wake him. It was verging on dawn when we drifted to a halt in Independence, Missouri.

Back in Kansas City we found streets glazed with mud from the receding floodwaters. And in the train yard, we saw switching boxes torn from their concrete moorings like uprooted trees. Most of the freight traffic was being rerouted.

Dumpy resolved to hitch across Iowa to Minneapolis. With all the flooding, he figured, drivers were more likely to be sympathetic to folks on the road. But I was too tired for that kind of optimism. When we stopped to pick up some sandwiches at a Catholic-run shelter for Central American refugees, I bailed.

MAYBE IF I'D ASKED DUMPY to wait, let me take a shower, a nap at the shelter? I kept grilling myself on the flight home, unable to reconcile the week's ragged journey with the tray of pasta salad and foil-wrapped cookies in front of me. It seemed so wrong, soaring a thousand miles in a mere three hours. The rhythm was off. On the road I could feel the land, every piece of grit jammed in my skin. If I'd silently raged at Dumpy for his willingness to forgo comfort, now I realized those long hours tramping down diesel-fumed tracks had given measure to the distances we traveled.

I'd set out thinking that the punks had taken on the tramp's life as a political metaphor for their own sense of marginalization in an America of diminishing returns. But on the freights, time flows around you—there is no goal other than movement. These young travelers weren't making a statement, they were looking for an edge. But how do you find that edge at a time when every form of youth protest is immediately co-opted by MTV? These days even downward mobility is chic.

Beyond the apocalyptic road myth, there was a nostalgia in Dumpster's hobo trip, as if he were longing for a time when class lines were clearly drawn and the struggle of the poor was still heroic. Back at the Memphis library he had pulled out piles of books on tramps along with Eugene Richards's *Below the Line: Living Poor in America*. The books were like his family album.

Three weeks later I ran into Dumpster again at an anarchist gathering in Philadelphia. He bounded through the parking lot and threw his arms around me, already babbling about the great vegetarian food he had just eaten and the ride he was hoping to get to Maine. He had such a talent for living in the absolute present; my moments of weakness on the road were long forgotten. I watched him move through the clusters of punks, squatters, and crusties assembled for four days of political schmoozing. This was his tribe. But already his eyes were moving past them, looking out for the next stop along the line. ■