

# WAITING FOR NOTHING

Tom Kromer

---

**his autobiography, originally published in the British edition of *Waiting For Nothing* (Constable, 1935).**

I AM twenty-eight years old, and was born and attended school in Huntington, W. Va. My people were working people. My father started to work in a coal-mine when he was eight years old. Later, he became a glass blower, and unable to afford medical treatment, died of cancer at the age of forty-four. There were five children and I was the oldest. My mother took my father's place in the factory. My father's father was crushed to death in a coal-mine. My father never hoped for anything better in this life than a job, and never worried about anything else but losing it. My mother never wanted anything else than that the kids get an education so that they wouldn't have to worry about the factory closing down.

I worked in glass factories and proof-read on newspapers at nights while going through three years of college. I remember that the Art Appreciation book was pink, and the Biology book was green. Other than that, I do not remember very much about my college education. I taught for two years in mountain schools in West Virginia. I do not remember anything memorable about that except that Emil, one of my star pupils, who invariably made six on the Intelligence Tests, and who wanted to do nothing in school or in life but catch flies and pull their wings out, caught fifty-four flies in one day without ever having completely left the edge of his seat. At the end of nine months I had taught him to count to sixty, which, I felt, left a wide margin of safety in Emil's life for any emergency which might come up. Since the best that he had ever done under any other teacher was forty-three flies, and as far as I know he never beat fifty-four, I feel that I was a passing success as a school teacher.

At twenty-three I started out for Kansas to make the wheat harvest. My intentions were to hitch-hike, and after hiking all day without a lift, a freight train pulled to a stop beside the road. I crawled into a box car. I never again voluntarily took up the responsibilities of hitch-hiking, but I always aligned my interests with the interests of the railroad companies. They generally got me where I wanted to go, which was never more definite than "east" or "west."

There were no jobs in Kansas. The Combine had come, and I got my first taste of men trying to buck a machine. I got my first taste of going three days without food, and walking up to a back door and dinging a woman for a hand-out. It was a yellow house, but not too yellow, and I made it. Since then I have hit a thousand such yellow houses and have never been turned down. Women who live in green houses will not even open the door for me.

I remained on the fritz for five months and came home. There was no work at home. I bummed to California and then back again to New York and Washington, D.C. I was sentenced to sixty days in Occoquam Prison in Washington for sleeping in an empty building during a storm. Some friends got me out in eight days. I did not like Washington after that and came home and hunted for work for three months. There wasn't any work, and it was about that time that people started laughing at you for asking for work. After a while I stopped asking for work. I started out again and have been on the road almost constantly since then, except for fifteen months I spent in a CCC camp. This last time has been four years. Sometimes I would stay in a town for four or five months doing odd jobs for a room and something to eat. Most of the time I slept and ate in missions, dinged the streets and houses, and used every other racket known to stiffs to get by.

I had no idea of getting *Waiting for Nothing* published, therefore, I wrote it just as I felt it, and used the language that stiffs use even when it wasn't always the nicest language in the world.

Parts of the book were scrawled on Bull Durham papers in box cars, margins of religious tracts in a hundred missions, jails, one prison, railroad sand-houses, flop-houses, and on a few memorable occasions actually pecked out with my two index fingers on an honest-to-God typewriter.

Save for four or five incidents, it is strictly autobiographical. Some of the events portrayed did not occur in the same sequence as I gave them, for I have juggled them in order to better develop the story. The "Stiff" idiom is, of course, authentic.

---

## CHAPTER TEN from *Waiting for Nothing*

WE CRAWL on our hands and knees and ease up towards the yards. It is so dark you can hardly see your hand in front of you. We can hear them banging these cars around inside this high board fence that separates us from the yards. We can hear the switch engines chugging as they make up our drag. We do not have long to wait. We hear this drag give the high ball. We ease up as close as we can get without being seen by the bulls. We scrape our knees and our hands on the sharp pebbles in the tracks and stumble over the ties that are higher than the rest. We cuss under our breath. We crawl to the side of the tracks and press up tight against these piles of ties. We are nervous. A stiff is always nervous when he knows he has to nail a drag in the dark. This drag is pulling out. We see this shack on the tops wave his lantern to the engineer. We can hear her puffing as she comes. I cock my ear and listen to the puff. You can judge how fast a drag is coming by listening to the puff. This one is picking up fast. She will be balling the jack when she gets to where we are. I keep one eye peeled for the bulls. If they are riding this drag out, they will be laying for us. I have too many scars already from being sapped up by the bulls.

I can see her coming now. I can see the sparks that fly from her stacks, and the flames that leap above her. She is puffing plenty. She is a long drag, and a double-header. I can make out the sparks from the two engines. That is why she is balling the jack so much. This is a manifest. She won't lose any time going where she is going. Passenger trains will take a siding and let these red balls through.

This old stiff picks up his bindle, and starts back towards the jungle.

"This one is too hot," he says. "There will be another drag tomorrow. I do not like to sell pencils."

Four or five stiffs follow him. They know when a drag is too hot, too. They do not want to sell pencils, either.

I crouch here in the dark and wait. Farther up the track I can see these other stiffs crouching beside the tracks. They are only a shadow through the dark. I hope I can make it, but I am plenty nervous. It is too dark to see the steps on the cars. I will have to feel for them. I pick me out an even place to run in. I look close to see that there are no switches to trip me up. If a guy was to trip over something when he was running after this drag, it would be just too bad. That guy would not have to worry about any more drags.

These engines bellow past us. I can see now that I have waited in the cold for nothing. I can see that a guy can't make this one. It is just too fast. The roar she makes as she crashes over the rails, and the sparks that shoot from her stacks, tell me she is just too fast. A stiff is foolish to even think about nailing this one. Christ, but I hate to wait all night for a drag and then miss it because it is too fast.

This stiff in front of me does not think this drag is too fast.

"Brother," I think, "I hope you are right, because if you are wrong you will not do any more thinking."

I see him run along by this drag. I see him make a dive at this step. He makes it. It swings him hard against the side of the car. I can hear the slam of his hitting from where I am. He does not let go. He hangs on. I see him begin to climb the steps to the tops. Damn, but that was pretty. No waiting all night for a drag and then missing it for this guy. He is an oldtimer. I can tell by the way he nailed this drag that he is an old-timer.

Another stiff runs along by this drag. I can tell that he is scared. He reaches out his hand after this step as this drag flies by, and then he jerks it away. This stiff will never make it. I can tell. He has not got the guts. A stiff has got to make up his mind to dive for those steps and then dive. This stiff makes up his mind to take a chance. He reaches out and nails this step. The jerk swings him around and slams him against the car. He hits hard. If he can hold on, he is all right, but he cannot hold on. He lets loose and flies head-first into the ditch at the side of the track. The bottom of that ditch is cinders. Christ, but there's a stiff that's dead or skinned alive. I cannot tell if he is moving in the ditch or not. It is too dark to see. I cannot go over there and see. I have waited all night in the cold to make this drag, and I am going to make it. That first stiff made it. If he can make it, I can make it. I have nailed as many drags as the next stiff.

"Be sure and nail the front end of the car," I tell myself. "Be sure and nail the step on the front end of the car. If you lose your hold, you will land in the ditch like that other stiff. That will be bad enough, but if you nail the rear end and lose your grip, you will land between the cars."

It is just too bad for a guy when he goes between the cars. I saw a stiff once after they pulled him out from under a box car. That stiff did not need to worry about nailing any more red balls at night.

I judge my distance. I start running along this track. I hold my hands up to the sides of these cars. They brush my fingers as they fly by. I feel this step hit my fingers, and dive. Christ, but I am lucky. My fingers get hold of it. I grab it as tight as I can. I know what is coming. I slam against the side of the car. I think my arms will be jerked out of their sockets. My ribs feel like they are smashed, they ache so much. I hang on. I made it. I am bruised and sore, but I made it. I climb to the tops. The wind rushes by and cools the sweat on my face. I cannot believe I made this drag, she is high-balling it down the tracks so fast. I am shaking all over. My hands tremble like a leaf. My heart pounds against my ribs. I always get nervous like this when I have nailed a drag at night going as fast as this one is.

I lie up here on the tops in the rush of the wind and wonder about that poor bastard over in the ditch. I wonder if he was killed. I know that these other stiffs who missed the drag will see to him, but I cannot get my mind from him. A stiff like that has no business on the road. That guy should be a mission stiff. He has not got the guts to nail a drag at night. He should stick to the day drags. A stiff can't expect to reach up there and grab hold of those steps. You have to feel them brush your fingers, and then dive for them. If you make it, you are lucky. If you don't make it, well, what the hell? What difference does it make if a stiff is dead? A stiff might just as well be dead as on the fritz. But just the same I am glad I am here on the tops and not smashed all to hell underneath those wheels that sing beneath me.

For two hours I lie up here before this drag pulls to a stop at a red block. I am as stiff as a board from the rush of cold wind and the frost that covers the tops. I will have to find me an empty. It is just as cold in an empty as it is up here, but there is not the rush of the wind that cuts through you like a knife. I climb down to the ground and run along by the tracks until I hear the voices of stiffs in one of these cars. I shove the door open and climb in. There are about ten stiffs already in this car. They are walking back and forth and stomping their feet from the cold. It is miserable in this car, and they are miserable. I am miserable myself. But then, what the hell? A stiff is always miserable. If he was not miserable, he would not be a stiff.

Some of these stiffs lie on the floor with last Sunday's newspapers around them for covers. They are not so cold. You will find a worse blanket than last Sunday's newspaper. I have no newspaper. I sit down in this corner and shiver. My teeth click together. On all sides of me I can hear other stiffs' teeth clicking together. The click keeps

time with the song of the wheels on the rails. I close my eyes and try to sleep. But all I can do is lie here and think. I think: Here I am. I am in a box car. I am heading west. Why am I heading west? Well, it is warmer out west. There will not be the snow and the rain. You will not have to be listening to your teeth clicking together every time you try to get a little sleep. It is too cold to lie here. I get up and go over where these other stiffs are.

We huddle in a bunch. There is a pile of tar paper on the floor. We tear this up into small pieces and light it. The flames flicker up and light up our faces, grimy and sunken. The black smoke roars up and fills the car. We crouch around this fire and choke for breath. We do not mind the smoke if we can get a little heat. We stomp on the floor with our numbed feet. We swing our hands back and forth. We are just a box-carful of frozen stiffs. We do not make a pretty picture with our redrimmed eyes and our sunken cheeks. We do not care whether we make a pretty picture or not. What we want is to get warm. I take off my shoes. I hold one of my numbed feet over the flames. I cannot feel the flame that burns my foot, but I hold it there until my sock is scorched and burning. Then I change to the other foot. Back and forth, back and forth.

We huddle here and hack and cough in the smoke. We do not dare to open the door. It will not do for the shacks to see the smoke pouring out of this car. They would sick the bulls on us at the next stop. These bulls would put you in and throw the key away if they ever caught you building a fire on a box-car floor. Pretty soon we are out of tar paper. We get out our knives and start cutting splinters from the beams of the car. The beams are hard. It is a tough job to cut fast enough to keep the fire going. It goes out.

I crawl back in my corner and wait for morning. The desert! That is a good joke. The books say the desert is scorching hot. I wonder did any of these guys that write the books ever ride across it at night in a corner of a box car? I lie here in my corner and listen to these stiffs' teeth clicking together. Even above the roar of the wheels I can hear them.

"Goddam it," says this stiff in the corner across from me, "I am not goin' to stand for this much longer. I will get my hands on a gat, that's what I will do. I will show the bastards I am not goin' to freeze to death in a box car."

He stomps his feet on the floor to get the blood to running.

"Up your fanny," says this stiff he is with. "I have heard that old bull for years. If you are a stiff, you will freeze in box cars and like it. That's where a stiff belongs, in the corner of a box car."

"If I ever get my fingers on a gat I will show the bastards where I belong," this stiff says. "It will be just too bad when I get my fingers on a gat."

"Yeah, I said that, too," this other stiff says. "But I have got my fingers on a gat, and what did I do with it? Nothin', that's what I did with it. Nothin'. A stiff hasn't got the guts to do anything but eat slop and freeze to death. That's all he's good for. That's why he is a stiff."

I lie here in my corner, and I know that that stiff is right. That is all that a stiff is good for. I had my fingers on a gat, too. What did I do with it? Just what he did. Nothing. I maybe could have been on easy street now if I had gone through with that bank job. I would have either been on easy street or been under six feet of ground. And what difference would it make if I was under six feet of ground? Is six feet of ground any worse than lying here with my teeth clicking together to the tune of the wheels that sing over the rails beneath me? There is nothing worse than this unless maybe it is being down in a hole with pecans on top of you for covers.

This drag pulls to a stop at this water tank. A draft of wind hits me. I can hear the door slide open. It would just be our luck to have some shack kick us off in this God-forsaken Place. But it is not that. Two new stiffs are climbing into the car. They carry big flashlights in their hands. I can see from the flash of the lights as they flash them around in the car that they are a couple of mean-looking eggs. Their faces are covered with dirty whiskers. They have not had a shave in a long time. They are filthy. There is no sense in a stiff letting himself get this filthy. There is too much water in the world. One of these stiffs has a black patch over one eye. He is wearing an

old raincoat. The other one is wearing a ragged brown overcoat and a blue toboggan.

This drag gives the high ball and pulls out. I lie here and listen to her puff, and wonder how many more miles.

"All you bastards get over in the other end of the car, and make it snappy."

I raise up quick. These two stiffs that just got on are standing there in the doorway facing us. They are holding their gats in one hand, and their flashlights in the other. They look plenty tough standing there. These big, black gats look plenty tough, too. One of these guys has got his gat pointed straight at me. This drag is jerking and swinging over the rails. That gat is liable to go off any minute. I do not lose any time getting to the other end of the car. I can see that these two mugs mean business. If they do not mean business, why have they got these gats? And why does this guy have to pick on me to point his gat at? Why don't he point it at one of these other stiffs? There are plenty of other stiffs in this car besides me. These other stiffs do not like the looks of these gats, either. They get to the end of the car as fast as I do.

We know what this is. We know what we are in for. These stiffs are a couple of hi-jackers. This is a hold-up. I have got my opinion of any stiff who will hold up another stiff and take his chicken-feed away from him. Any guy who will do that is a low-livered bastard. I do not say that out loud, though - not with those gats pointed at us like that.

"Hold up your hands," this guy in the blue toboggan says.

We do not lose any time holding up our hands.

"You with the red hair, come out here," says this other stiff. "Any of you other mugs try anything funny and we will drill you full of holes."

This red-headed guy walks out to the middle of the car. He is holding his hands high in the air. They are shaking plenty. He is scared, and I can't say that I blame him. I am plenty nervous myself. These two are the toughest-looking mugs I have seen in a long time. One of them frisks this red-headed guy while the other one keeps us covered with the gat and flashes his light upon us.

"Where do you keep your dough?" this guy that's doing the frisking snaps.

"In my pants pocket," this red-headed stiff says. "In my left pants pocket. I've only got some chicken-feed."

"I will soon see how much you got," this hi-jacker says. "If I catch you holding out on me, I'll beat the living hell out of you and throw you out on the desert for the buzzards."

I can see that this stiff who is doing the frisking knows his business. I can see that he is an old-timer at this little trick of robbing stiffs of their chicken-feed. He not only looks in your pockets. He looks in the sweat-band of your hat and feels in the lining of your clothes. He does not find anything but chicken-feed on this red-headed guy.

"Get back in the corner," he says, "and keep your hands in the air."

He starts on the next guy. In the lining of this stiff's coat, fastened with a safety pin, he finds five bucks. Can you imagine that? This stiff has got five bucks pinned to the lining of his coat, and he has been bumming smoking off the rest of these stiffs. A tight stiff like that deserves to lose his dough.

"You will lie to me, will you?" says this hi-jacker.

He slaps this stiff across the face with the butt of his gat and knocks him clear across the car. This stiff sprawls

on the floor and does not get up.

"Any of you stiffs make a move, and I'll drill you," says this stiff who is covering us.

We do not make a move.

One at a time he goes through the rest of us. I am the last guy. It is my turn.

"All right, you," he says.

I walk out to the middle of the car and hold out my hands. He goes through me. Four bits is all I got in my pockets. He does not find anything in my clothes.

"Where are you hidin' your dough?" he says. "Come clean or you will get what that other stiff got."

"Four bits is all I am holding," I say. "You've already got all the dough I'm holding."

"All right, get back to your end of the car," he says.

I get back. I feel pretty good. This bastard doing the frisking is not so smart. I bet I am the only stiff in this whole car who is holding a cent now. I am too smart for this bastard. I got two bucks hid under that bandage on my arm. I got iodine smeared over the tape. It looks like I got a plenty sore arm. But there is nothing the matter with my arm. That is only a way I thought up out of my head to keep these hi-jackers from stealing my dough. This is not the first time I have run into hijackers since I have been on the fritz.

This drag pulls over to a siding and slows down. She is going to let a passenger through. These hijackers pull the door open. They know she is going to stop here. I bet they pull this little trick every night.

"Lay down on the floor with your heads to the wall," one of them snaps.

We lie down. This drag stops. We hear these guys pile out the door. We hear the door close and the lock snap. They have locked us in. All these stiffs in the car get up to their feet and start cussing these hijackers. All but me. I do not say anything. I have got me two bucks under that bandage, with iodine smeared on top of it.

#### CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT IS NIGHT, and we are in this jungle. This is our home tonight. Our home is a garbage heap. Around us are piles of tin cans and broken bottles. Between the piles are fires. A man and a woman huddle by the fire to our right. A baby gasps in the woman's arms. It has the croup. It coughs until it is black in the face. The woman is scared. She pounds it on the back. It catches its breath for a little while, but that is all. You cannot cure a baby of the croup by pounding it on the back with your hand.

The man walks back and forth between the piles of garbage. His shoulders are hunched. He clasps his hands behind him. Up and down he walks. Up and down. He has a look on his face. I know that look. I have had that look on my own face. You can tell what a stiff is thinking when you see that look on his face. He is thinking he wishes to Jesus Christ he could get his hands on a gat. But he will not get his hands on a gat. A gat costs money. He has no money. He is a lousy stiff. He will never have any money.

Where are they going? I do not know. They do not know. He hunts for work, and he is a damn fool. There is no work. He cannot leave his wife and kids to starve to death alone, so he brings them with him. Now he can watch them starve to death. What can he do? Nothing but what he is doing. If he hides out on a dark street and gives it to some bastard on the head, they will put him in and throw the keys away if they catch him. He knows that. So he stays away from dark streets and cooks up jungle slop for his wife and kid between the piles of garbage.

I look around this jungle filled with fires. They are a pitiful sight, these stiffes with their ragged clothes and their sunken cheeks. They crouch around their fires. They are cooking up. They take their baloney butts out of their packs and put them in their skillets to cook. They huddle around their fires in the night. Tomorrow they will huddle around their fires, and the next night, and the next. It will not be here. The stiffes will not let a stiff stay in one place long. But it will be the same. A garbage heap looks the same no matter where it is.

We are five men at this fire I am at. We take turns stumbling into the dark in search of wood. Wood is scarce. The stiffes keep a jungle cleaned of wood. I am groping my way through the dark in search of wood when I stumble into this barbed wire fence. My hands are scratched and torn from the barbs, but I do not mind. I do not mind because I can see that we are fixed for wood for the night. We will not have to leave our warm fire again to go chasing through the night after wood. A good barbed wire fence has poles to hold it up. A couple of good stout poles will burn a long time. What do I care if this is someone's fence? To hell with everybody! We are five men. We are cold. We must have a fire. It takes wood to make a fire. I take this piece of iron pipe and pry the staples loose.

This is good wood. It makes a good blaze. We do not have to huddle so close now. It is warm, too, except when the wind whistles hard against our backs. Then we shiver and turn our backs to the fire and watch these rats that scamper back and forth in the shadows. These are no ordinary rats. They are big rats. But I am too smart for these rats. I have me a big piece of canvas. This is not to keep me warm. It is to keep these rats from biting a chunk out of my nose when I sleep. But it does not keep out the sound and the feel of them as they sprawl all over you. A good-sized rat tramps hard. You can feel their weight as they press on top of you. You can hear them sniffing as they try to get in. But when I pull my canvas up around my head, they cannot get into me.

"Sniff and crawl all you damn please," I say. "You can't get into me."

When I look at these stiffes by the fire, I am looking at a graveyard. There is hardly room to move between the tombstones. There are no epitaphs carved in marble here. The tombstones are men. The epitaphs are chiseled in sunken shadows on their cheeks. These are dead men. They are ghosts that walk the streets by day. They are ghosts sleeping with yesterday's newspapers thrown around them for covers at night. I can see that these are ghosts that groan and toss through the night. I watch. From time to time a white splotch gets up off the ground. He cannot rest for the rats and the cold. This is a restless ghost. Or maybe it is the gnawing pain in his belly that makes him restless and sleepless. The ground is hard. Damp and hard. There are many things will make a restless ghost at night in a jungle. I am a restless ghost myself.

I look from face to face about our fire. We are not strangers. The fire has brought us together. We do not ask questions about each other. There is nothing to ask. We are here. We are here because we have no other place to go. From hollow, darkrimmed eyes they watch the fire. Their shoulders sag and stoop. Men come to look like this when night after night they hunt for twigs through the dark to throw on a jungle fire. This hunchbacked guy across from me squats on his legs and talks. His voice is flat and singsong.

"I hit this state in 1915 with a hundred bucks I made in the harvest in Kansas. I pulled off this drag and made for a saloon in town. It was cold riding those rails, and I needed a drink to warm me up. Before I knew it, I was drunk and nasty. This spick lunged up against me at the bar, and I pushed him away. I never liked a greaser, anyway. Before I knew it, we were going after each other with our knives. I jabbed him one in the ribs. He dropped his knife to the floor and yelled. He wasn't hurt bad. Just a jab, but it scared him. Someone grabbed me and pinned my arms from behind. I thought they were ganging me. I was big and strong then. My back was hunched, but strong. I pulled away and let this guy have it. I got him right through the heart. He sagged to the floor. His hands rubbed against my face as he fell. Not hard. Just light. Light and soft like a woman's or a ghost's. I dream about those hands rubbing against my face light and soft when I sleep. I didn't know this guy was a deputy until they locked me up in the jug.

"Well, I got twenty years. That is a long time. It is a lifetime. I wrote my mother I was going down on a construction job in Mexico. That's the last time they ever heard from me. I wanted them to think that I had died

down there. Fifteen years in the big house is the stretch I did. It ruined me. It would have ruined anybody. I was like I am now when I got out. My blood is all turned to water. I can't stand the cold any more. My blood is all turned to water.

"I bummed around on the rattlers after I got out. A bindle stiff was all I was. That's all there was to do. I was an old man. Then I got this crazy notion to go home and see how things looked. I hopped myself a drag and headed east. Well, it was the same old town. You know the type. Hardly a new building put up in years. I didn't hang around town much. The first thing I did was to go out to the cemetery. I was hunting a grave. My mother's grave. I didn't hunt long until I found what I was looking for. I knew it would be there. Fifteen years is a long time. I had a sister in that town, and a brother, but I had seen all I came to see. I turned around and walked back to the tracks. There was a west-bound due out of there at night. I nailed it."

He finishes. We do not say anything. We just sit here and stare into the fire. There are a lot of things will put a guy on the fritz. One minute you are sitting on top of the world, and the next you are sitting around a jungle fire telling about it. The rest of these guys could tell their stories too, if they wanted to. They have stories to tell. But they do not say anything. Some stiff's do not tell their stories. They walk up and down the garbage heaps at night with the look on their face.

We hear the sound of voices over at the other side of the tracks. They are coming our way. We raise our heads. More frozen stiff's hunting a warm fire, we think. But there is no such luck for us. Four men are hot-footing it over the tracks. They swing blackjacks in their hands. From their hips swing gats in holsters. It is the bulls. By God, a man can't even crawl into a filthy garbage heap for the bulls.

"Line up, you lousy bums," the leader says.

He swings his blackjack high. He is aching for a chance to bring it down on some stiff's head.

We line up. There are twenty of us. We are twenty, and they are four, but what can we do? We kill one of these bastards, and we stretch. They kill one of us, and they get a raise in pay. A stiff hasn't got a chance. They know a stiff hasn't got a chance.

"Hold up your hands," this leader snaps.

We hold up our hands, and they go through our pockets. They do not find anything. It makes them sore.

"I have a good notion to knock every one of you sons of bitches in the head and leave you for the rats," this guy says. "You are nothin' but a bunch of sewer rats, anyway."

He glances around the jungle. He sees our suppers that cook on the fires. He walks from one fire to the other and kicks everything over on the ground. I want to pull this bastard's guts out with my bare hands. We are twenty hungry stiff's in a jungle. We had to work hard to get that grub. A stiff always has to work hard to rustle up his grub. It is almost ready to eat, and he kicks it over on the ground.

"Get out on the highway before we sap you up," this guy says.

"You are a bastard," says this guy with the wife and kid, "a no-good bastard."

This bull walks up to this stiff and brings his blackjack down on the top of his head. It makes a thudding sound when it lands. He topples to the ground. The blood spurts from the cut in his head. He gets to his feet and staggers around the fire. This woman with the kid starts to cry. We close in towards these bulls. We fumble on the ground for sticks and rocks.

"Let's hang the sons of bitches," says this old stiff, "let's skin the bastards alive."

These bulls see that we mean business. They go for their gats in their holsters. They cover us.

"I will bore the first bastard that lays a hand on me," this leader says.

We stop crowding in. What can we do when they have us covered with these gats? There is nothing we can do.

"Hit it down the pike as fast as you can go, and don't come back," says this bull.

We head down the road. It is the cold night for us with our blistered feet and our empty bellies.

Five miles down this road there is a water tank. Sometimes the drags stop there for water. If we are lucky, we can nail a drag out of there tonight. We walk. We have covered a mile when the man and the woman with the kid drop out. It is a rough walk over the ties in the night, and they are tired and hungry. They flop down on the side of the road to sleep. We go on. We can hear the baby strangling for breath behind us. We can hear the woman slap it on the back.

We stumble over the ties. It is too dark to see them. We get over to the side of the tracks and walk. The burrs come up through the soles of my shoes, but I go on. I cannot stop. If I stop, I will not be able to get started again. My feet will swell. I trudge on, and when I take a step it drives the sharp points of the burrs far into my feet. I straighten my pack over my back and limp. I look at the stars in the sky above, and I see no comfort there. I think of that poor bastard lying back there in the weeds with his wife and kid.

"Oh, God," I say, "if there is a God, why should these things be?"

We hobble for hours with our heavy packs before we reach the tank. We flop to the ground beneath it. We pull off our soleless shoes and rest our blistered feet. We lie here like men that are dead, and look at the sky overhead. We talk back and forth through the night. We talk and we do not care whether anyone is listening or not. We do not care. We have to talk. That is the only way we can get our thoughts out of our minds. This hunchback tells his troubles to the stiff in the ragged red sweater. This guy in the red sweater does not care about the troubles of this hunchback, but he sees in his troubles some of his own. So he listens. This hunchback is not talking for himself. He talks for all of us. Our troubles are the same.

"For three years," says this old stiff, "I have laid in the cold and the dark like this. Is this goin' to last forever? Ain't things never goin' to be different? How long is a guy supposed to put up with this?"

"You'll croak in a jungle, and I'll croak in a jungle," this hunchback says. "Times'll never get any better. They will get worse. I got a paper in my pocket." He taps the newspaper in his pocket. "There is an editorial in this paper. It says this depression is good for people's health. It says people eat too much, anyway. It says this depression is gettin' people back to God. Says it will teach them the true values of life."

"The bastards," says this stiff gnawing on the green baloney butt, "the lousy bastards. I can just see the guy that wrote that editorial. I can see his wife and kids, too. They set at their tables. A flunky in a uniform stands back of their chairs to hand them what they want at the table. They ride around all day in their Rolls-Royces. Will you ever see that guy in a soupline? You will not. But the bastard will write this tripe for people to read. True values of life, by God! If this guy wants to get back to God so much, why don't he swap his Rolls-Royce for a rusty tin bucket and get in line? The bastard."

"He says you can live on nothin' but wheat," this hunchback says. "He says this depression is nothin' to get excited about. People will not starve. There is plenty of wheat. If a guy says he is hungry, give him a bushel of wheat."

"Where is the wheat?" this old stiff says. "When I come through Kansas, they was burnin' the goddam stuff in the stoves because it was cheaper than coal. Out here they stand in line for hours for a stale loaf of bread. Where

is the wheat, is what I want to know."

"Try and get it," this stiff says, "just try and get it. They will throw you in so fast your head will swim."

Far away we hear this drag whistle in the night. It is a lonesome and dreary moan. We put on our shoes and go out to the tracks and wait. We lie down on the tracks and place our ears to the rails. We can hear the purr that rumbles through them. We look at each other and shake our heads. Too fast. If she does not stop for water at this tank, she is too hot to catch on the fly. A stiff just can't nail this one on the fly. We are oldtimers. We know by the sing in the rails when a drag is too hot. We go back to our bindles and sit down. If she does not stop, there will be another drag tomorrow. What is a day to us, or a month or a year? We are not going any place.

We see her belch round the bend. She is not going to stop here, that is sure.

"She is coming round the bend," this kid yells. "Ain't you stiffs goin' to nail her?"

We shake our heads. Too fast. We know. We can tell by the puff, and the sparks that fly from her stacks.

He hits it over to the tracks and waits. Is this damn punk going to try to nail this one? If he does, he is crazy. But what the hell? All punks are crazy. They make it harder for us old ones. This drag whistles. She is batting plenty. The engine and a dozen cars pass us before we know it. She can't waste any time slowing up for a bunch of stiffs. This kid stands there by the tracks and watches her whiz by. He is making up his mind whether to nail it or not. He is a damn fool to even think about nailing this one. I have seen too many guys with stumps for legs to even think about nailing this one. I can still walk. That is something.

I sit here on my bindle and watch him. He is only a shadow by the tracks. The cars whiz by. He runs along beside her. He makes a dive for this step, the rear step. What is this damn fool diving for the rear step for? Don't he know enough to nail the front end of a car? She swings him high, and in between the cars. He loses his grip. He smashes against the couplings. He screams. He is under. Oh, Jesus Christ, he is under! He is under those wheels. We run over. He lies there beside the tracks. He is cut to ribbons. Where his right arm and leg were, there are only two red gashes. The blood spurts out of the stumps. It oozes to the ground and makes a pool in the cinders.

We drag him over to the side. He is through. I can see that he is through. His eyes are half shut. They are dopey-looking. There is a grin on his face. It is a foolish, sheepish grin. No stiff likes to have a drag throw him. It hurts a stiff's pride to have a drag throw him. It hurts this kid's pride, too, so he has a sheepish grin on his face, and him with his two stumps oozing blood to the cinders.

I lean over him.

"Want a cigarette, buddy?" I say.

"Hello, there," he says. "Sure, I want a cigarette."

I put it between his teeth and light it.

"My arm feels funny," he says. "Kind of numb and tingly. That old drag was balling the jack. I must have bumped it pretty hard."

"You got a rough bump," I say, "but you will be all right in a minute. She was a hot one, all right."

"She was plenty hot, all right," he says. "I thought I was a goner when I slipped."

He does not know he is hurt. He cannot see his two stumps that are oozing blood on the cinders. I lean over so

he cannot see. What is the use to let him know? He will be gone in a minute. There is nothing we can do. His troubles will soon be over.

I watch him. I am sick all over. I am watching a kid die. It is hard enough to watch anybody die. I even hate to watch an old stiff die, even when I know he is better off dead. But a kid is different. You kind of expect a kid to live instead of die.

There is no color in his face now. All the color is on the ground mixed with the cinders. He closes his eyes. The cigarette drops out of his mouth. He quivers. Just a quiver like he is cold. That is all. He is gone. I unfold a newspaper and cover up his face.

We sit there in the dark and look at each other.

**1935**

---