

The Soup You're Served

by Foster Trecost

Some folks rode because they were trying to get somewhere, we rode because we had nowhere to go. And it didn't matter what we passed, everything looked better from a boxcar.

Hopping on was the easy part, I could do that with my eyes closed. But jumping off was a crap shoot. Not too much worried him, but jumping off worried him plenty. He had a checklist: Only jump off at night, and never in the rail yard; make sure you're not crossing a bridge. We trusted him and no one moved until he said so.

Once we got to our feet, we had to figure out where we were. After we got a fix on that, we figured out where we wanted to go. We'd lay low for a few hours, then do it all again.

He taught me other things, too. If we passed a crop field dotted with pickers, I could probably get on with them. And if I was careful I could stuff my pockets with dinner. Just don't get greedy. They know the pickers leave with a little extra, but the ones who leave with too much extra don't get to come back.

One night he shared something I'll never forget. He said hopping trains don't get you out the pot, it just gets you to the other side. But whatever soup you're swimming in, you'll still be swimming in it. Only way out's the end of the line.

I asked where that was and he said I'd know when I got there, but he wasn't in a hurry because the end of the line meant the end of him. The line was all he had. It was all any of us had.

We'd ride together a month or two, then he'd disappear. Years might pass before I saw him again, not that I was looking, but I guess I was. One day I came across this youngster, green as grass, so I shared a few things: Only jump off at night, and never in the rail yard; make sure you're not crossing a bridge. I told him he could earn cash picking crops, and maybe a meal or two. Just don't get greedy.

A few hours later I was going through my checklist and thought about my friend. I hadn't seen him in ages. Maybe he reached the

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end of the line, and maybe he managed to climb out the pot. I'd like to think it was the latter. Either way, I reckoned I'd never see him again.

Then it occurred to me I saw him every day.

