

Death, Westbound

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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It was nearly dark when the westbound freight pulled out of the yards, and two 'boes, hurrying from behind a long line of empties, scrambled into one of the open doors of a boxcar about halfway between the caboose and the locomotive.

There were two more men in the car when they crawled in after their bundles. One of these was sitting at one side of the door where he could see without being seen, a precaution against any shack that might drift along or be standing beside the track. Joe had had experience with shacks, and much worse, with railroad dicks, he knew their kind. Sometimes the shacks were pretty good guys, but a railroad dick is always a louse.

The other occupant of the car lay in the shadow apparently sleeping.

The newcomers, two hard-faced young fellows carrying bundles, looked around.

Joe's curiosity got the better of him. „Westbound, fellas?“

„Yeah—you?“

„Uhuh. L.A., if we can make it.“

„We?“

„Yeah, me an' the kid over there.“

„Chee, I never even see 'em. S'matter, 's he asleep?“

„Naw, he's sick I guess, we been on this train t'ree nights now, an' he's been sick all the while. I don't know what's the matter. He coughs a lot, maybe he's a lunger.“

„Chee, that's kinda tough, ain't it? Sick as a goddam drag when the bulls is all gettin' tough.“

„The Santy Fe is the toughest line of 'em all, 'member hearin' 'bout Yermo Red?“

„Aw hell, Yermo was on the U.P. I made it thru there once on the bum with a coupla Polacks, he was plenty tough, that guy.“

„Naw, he just t'ought he was tough, them guys is mostly yellow when there is a showdown.“

Joe walked over to look at the kid. The boy's face was damp with perspiration and he looked bad. One of the others, a flat-nosed young fellow with heavy shoulders, walked over.

„Cheesus, he looks bad, don't he? 'At kid should aughta have a doctor!“

„Yeah.“

The other young fellow walked over. „S'matter, Heavy? Is he bad off?“ Then seeing the kid's face, he murmured: „Gawah!“

All three returned to a spot near the door. A heavy silence had descended upon the group. Joe rolled a cigarette and complied in silence to the others dumb request for the makin's.

Heavy looked glumly out at the night. „Cheesus, that's a helluva place to get sick in! Wonder if he'll croak?“

The slight youngster with the pale face who answered to the name of Slim, grunted: „Naw, he'll pul t'ru, a guy that has to live like this is too tough to die like anybody else.“

Heavy looked at Joe and with a jerk of his head toward the kid: „Known him long?“

„Two weeks I guess. He had a coupla bucks and split 'em with me when I was bad off. He's a good kid. We been hunting jobs ever since, but this depression finished the work, seems like they ain't nothing left to do anymore.“

„Wait'll we get a new president, what's Hoover care for us laborin' stiffs?“

Slim snorted derisively: „The next one won't be a bit better. One way or the other we get it in the neck!“

Heavy moved into a corner of the car and carefully arranging a roll of newspapers to form a place to lie, he lay down and drew his coat over his head to sleep. A few minutes later his snores gave ample proof of his success.

Slim jerked his head toward the sleeper: „Will he bother the kid, d'ye think?“

Joe shook his head: „Naw, the kid's out of his head, I guess he's about all in. When this train stops I'll try and find somebody to give him some dope or somethin'.“

They lapsed into silence broken only by the steady pound and rattle of the swiftly moving freight train and the snores of the sleeper. At intervals the kid would move and talk indistinctly for a minute or so and then once more fall into silence. Outside the car the night was quite moonlit and they could see the fields

flickering by in monotonous rotation. The countless cracks in the old car made it cold and dismal. Slim dosed off against the door, knees drawn up to his chin. Joe sat silent watching the fields outside and thinking.

It had been over a year since he had worked more than a few hours at a time, over a year of living in boxcars, cheap flophouses and any dump he could find to crawl into. But after all, what had it been before? Just a round of jobs, a few months and then a long drunk, or maybe a short one, if he got himself rolled in some bawdy house. The kid here, he'd been the only pal he'd ever had that played square, an' now he was sicker'n hell. Life didn't mean much to a guy when he was just a workin' stiff. Sure, he'd boozed a lot, but what th' hell? Didn't he have a right to have a little fun? Well, maybe it wasn't fun, but at least a guy wasn't thinkin' about the next shift or how much ore he had to get out. Joe dozed off, but came to with a start as a red light flashed by and the freight began to slow for a station.

Slim and Heavy both woke up with the awareness that a hobo acquires when travelling.

„What kind of a burg is this we're comin' into, Joe? Looks like a damned jerk-water!“

„Yeah—I know the place. Just a water tank and a general store. Better keep outa sight, from now on, there's a bad bull in this next town if I remember right!“

The long drag slowly pulled to a bumping, groaning stop, and Slim, watching his chance when the shack was at the other end, dropped off.

Up ahead they could hear the shouts of the train crew as they worked about the engine, and once a shack went by, his lantern bobbing along beside the train. He just casually flashed it into the door as he passed, and as all three were out of sight, they were passed unnoticed.

A whistle up forward, more groaning and bumping and jarring, and the train slowly gathered momentum.

Heavy's forehead wrinkled anxiously: „Wonder what's become o' Slim? He should've made it by now!“

And a minute later, as the train gathered speed in the shadow of several oil tanks, he did make it, swinging into the car with a dark object in his hand.

„Whatcha got Slim?“ Heavy leaned forward curiously.

„Aw, pull in your neck, Hefty, I just grabbed the kid a cuppa java an' a orange at that lunch counter!“

„But Cheesus, Slim, you only had a nickel!“

„Sure, I got the guy to gimme a cuppa java for the nickel and I swiped the orange when the lunch-counter girl wasn't lookin'. If he wants his cup back he'll have to pick it up in the next town!“

Joe rolled the kid over on his back and slowly raised him to a sitting position: „Here, kid, it's a cuppa coffee, try an' get it down, it'll do you good.“

The kid tried to drink, but ended in a coughing spell that left flecks of blood on his lips. Joe laid him back on the floor and returned to the others near the door.

Slim looked helplessly at the orange: „Cheesus, guess he couldn't tackle this, he seems pretty far gone.“ He raised his hand as if to throw the orange away and then on second thought shoved it into his coat pocket.

Once more the train bumped along, the moon had gone down now and the night was black outside the door. Heavy was once more asleep, and Slim, chin resting on his knees, was dozing off. Joe still sat looking out into the night, his face grimy from cinders and dust, his beard graying in spots. At last he too dozed off into a half-sleep.

The freight was slowing for the next town when a swiftly bobbing flashlight awakened them. Joe was the first to comprehend.

„Cheesus, Guys, we're sunk, it's that railroad dick!“

Heavy cursed and jumped for the door to swing out when a harsh voice broke in: „Alright, Bo, stay where y'are or I'll shoot yer guts out! Come on, you, all of ya! Get 'em up in the air!“

„Alright, pile out on the ground an' less look you guys over. Keep 'em up, now!“ The railroad dick's voice was harsh and his face ugly in the half-light. His companion, a weasel-faced fellow, glided up and started frisking them with the question: „Got anythin' on ya bigger'n a forty-five?“

Slim spoke agrievedly: „Aw why don't you guys leave us alone? We're just huntin' a place to work. What would we doin' packin' rods!“

The big fellow stepped forward beligerently: „Shut up, Bum, I'll do the talkin' an' you'll answer when yer spoken to, get me?“

Slim said nothing. The weasel-faced man pulled their personal effects from their pockets smirking over the few odds and ends a man carries about. A couple of jackknives, a piece of soiled string, a dirty handkerchief or two, a pocketbook containing a pair of poll tax receipts, a card for a hod-carriers union two years old, a few letters. The weasel-faced man read the letters with an occasional glance at Slim's angry face. Finally from one of them he extracted a picture of a girl which he held out for the big man to see with an insulting remark.

Slim's eyes swiftly calculated the distance, he jumped and struck viciously, his fist striking the weasel-face on the point of the chin, knocking him flat, the big man sidestepped and struck with the gun barrel felling Slim to the ground. Then stepping toward Heavy and Joe he snapped: „Got tough, did he? Well, suppose you guys try it, I killed a couple of guys fer tryin' to get tough with me!“

Joe's tired voice spoke slowly: „Uh-uh, I heard 'bout that, both of 'em unarmed. You said they got tough, some people said they had thirty bucks on 'em.“

„What was that?“ The big man whirled toward Joe. „What d'you say?“

„Me? I didn't say nothin', just clearin' my throat.“

„Well, ya better be careful, get me? Or I'll slam you like I did him!“ He waved his hand toward Slim's fallen figure.

He called to Weasel-face: „Look in that damned car, maybe they left some junk in there worth lookin' over!“

„Okay, Boss!“

Weasel-face scrambled into the car. Then: „Hey, Boss, here's another bum in here sleepin'!“

„D'hell there is! Well, roll the bastard out an' less look him over.“

Voice from the car: „Come on, you, crawl outa that! Hey, what's the matter? Get up or I'll boot the hell outa ya!“

A moment later, Weasel-face dragged the kid to the door and dumped him out to the ground.

„Here he is, Boss, playin‘ sleepy on us!“

The Boss walked up determinedly and kicked the kid forcibly in the ribs, Joe’s shout halted him, a frown on his face.

„Hey, Skipper, watch yerself, the kid’s sick, he’s got the consumption or somethin‘!“

„He won’t play sick with me; I’ll boot his head off: get up, d’ye hear?“ He grabbed the kid by the shoulder and jerked him to his feet where the kid hung in a slump. For a moment the Boss gazed into his face, his own growing white: „God! The son-of-a-bitch is dead!“ He dropped the kid and turned around.

In the moment of detachment following his discovery, unable to help the kid, the remaining two, supporting the now conscious Slim, had slipped off into the surrounding darkness leaving the two dicks behind, and the crumpled form of the kid lying beside the freight, which slowly moving was once more westbound.

