

The Mexican

THE ORANGES WERE NAVELS, from Redlands, California, packed in refrigerator cars, and they were four days on the Southern Pacific crossing the desert—re-icing only in Clovis—before arriving at midnight, here in Wayvoka, Oklahoma. The oranges were yellow, and would ripen somewhere in Illinois or Ohio before arriving the next week in New Jersey. Yellow, they smelled yellow, and I imagined that must be what California and Redlands were like, yellow. Places unlike Oklahoma. Places not of constant wind but occasional breeze. A nearby ocean. Vast orchards of orange trees, their limbs swaying, barely, silent. Yellow. All of it under an afternoon moon.

I stepped off the platform and onto the top of the boxcar, and in so doing I was clear from the co-op's high overhang and had a sudden view of the hot, inky night. Town was a couple of miles west, but it was invisible at this hour, in this darkness. I walked along the top of the boxcar opening cooling hatches. I could feel the day's heat rising, could feel the heat of the desert, contained in the boxcar, rising. Beyond the co-op the tracks curved toward town, and above the curve was the moon, rising. *This* moon, a

hard thing, seen clearly through the sky like a white stone in a river.

I kicked at the hatch clasps and opened them by hooking one of the prongs of the bi-dent into the hoop and pulling up. On the platform, Chicken fastened the skids that connected the platform to the train. Behind Chicken, Uncle Alton pushed 100lb blocks of ice into the chute. We'd been doing this for three months and most times it was easy. The trick was to guide the blocks onto the skid where Chicken and I—mostly Chicken because he was older and stronger—would guide them with our poles into the open spaces of the cooling hatches. If the blocks came off too slow from the chute they'd stall and we'd have to manually create momentum, but if they came too fast they risked sliding over the side of the boxcar altogether. Ice wasn't expensive, but the labor to cube, sled, and skid it was.

We stocked the first three reefer cars fine, about ten minutes per, but on the fourth the blocks began to soften, absorb grit, and move slow.

"We're just going to have to lift the sonsabitches in," said Chicken. He stepped from the platform onto the boxcar with ease. He moved gracefully on top of a train, could leap between boxcars—a thing I was too afraid to try—and he was fast. He could hop an empty flat at twenty miles per hour, and the year before he'd stolen thirty-two bases for American Legion. I stepped across the platform and got on one end of the ice block while Chicken, straddling the gap, was on the other.

"Drop this mother on my toe and I'll kick your ass," he said.

Chicken suffered chronic ingrown toenails, which Uncle Alton blamed on a lack of vitamin D, but Chicken knew was a result of his baseball cleats being a size too small.

We lifted the ice block and sat it across the open hatch. Then we guided it in where it dropped the foot or so into the ceiling's carriage. I closed the hatch with my boot and secured the clasp.

"I got my boot packed in gauze," he said.

"Go see a doctor?" asked Uncle Alton from the platform.

"Don't need a doctor. Just need to get in there and dig the sonsabitch out."

"Why haven't you then?"

We worked through the night with the soft ice, skidding when we could, but mostly having to lift the blocks in ourselves. Beyond the co-op was a cottonwood lined wash that ran parallel to the tracks. In it were thousands of frogs, and on that night I remember their sound. But later, when I tell this story, I talk about coyotes running through the wash and yipping and singing at the moon. I say the night was full of coyotes and even though it's not true I know why I say it. But know now, here, the night was full of frog song.

That summer wasn't the first summer where I'd worked for pay—I'd already spent three summers on the road with Chicken and Uncle Alton and some others on a threshing crew—but it was the first summer I got paid regularly, every two weeks, in checks. Each of which came in a long, beige envelope that bore the name of my employer in black type: Wayvoka Cooperative,

PO Box 11, Wayvoka, OK. The checks were blue and their edges were decorated in silver filigree. I had never imagined anything could feel more important than cash, not the way my father talked about it, but they did. And I kept the small paystubs in a tin box not as a way to file them away for some later official importance, but because they fit alongside some of the other things there: a chert arrowhead, several blue and yellow kestrel feathers, a Mexican coin, a page from a diary I'd stolen from a girl's desk at school.

Uncle Alton had gotten Chicken on first at the co-op and then, when the summer citrus business was peaking, convinced Mr. Abernathy to hire me. It felt good to work a summer near town, to not have to live out of a truck like we had, taking bathroom sink showers in gas stations; not having to walk all day behind a slow two-gear thresher, in godforsaken Nebraska, swallowing chaff in the heat under a white sky. When our checks came at the co-op they came in a bundle that was clipped together and hung on a pegboard outside of Abernathy's office. Every other Monday: \$98.75.

At the end of the summer I would be back in school, ninth grade, and Uncle Alton would go on to work back at my father's restaurant and motel. Chicken was three years older than I was and had already dropped out of school. At the end of that summer he'd end up—despite all the talk about going to Amarillo to play ball—working at a Texaco in Custer City over the next decade. Or rather, some town near Custer City, I've forgotten the name

of it. It had been on 66 and now it, and the Texaco, and Chicken, have long since disappeared.

Uncle Alton was a big man with enormous, quiet hands. He loved summers because he felt like he fit the kind of work that that season provided. But the rest of the year—when he ran the front desk or worked as a short order cook for my father—I think he always felt like he was doing the kind of work one does when they've failed at something else. I don't think he thought it women's work, necessarily, though he did work alongside my sisters and my mother, but it was a kind of labor I think he felt to be small and tedious and inconsequential. Changing fryer grease after a three dollar day, he said, you begin to feel like an asshole. You don't feel like that when the 10:10 SP comes blazing in, he said. Two hundred coal hoppers rolling to a stop. A moving mountain. You feel a part of something bigger, he said. Much, much bigger.

The string of reefer cars we iced that night were twenty-eight long, and on the second to last car Chicken and I pushed a block and watched it disappear through the hatch without a sound.

“Oh fuck,” said Chicken.

“What,” said Uncle Alton from the platform.

“Snag me that lantern Jess,” Chicken said to me and I hopped from the boxcar onto the platform and unhooked a lantern.

“What is it?” asked Uncle Alton.

When I handed the lantern to Chicken he knelt beside the open hatch and lowered the light in.

“What’s wrong,” said my uncle.

“No carriage. All rotted through. Block went straight through and landed on the oranges.”

Uncle Alton ran his hand through his beard and said, “Oh boy.”

“Fuck it,” said Chicken.

“No.”

“Just melt off tomorrow anyway. Nobody’ll ever know.”

“No. There is product in there that, in all likelihood, is now damaged.”

“Say it happened before it got here.”

“No, Chicken. Abernathy has forms for this. I’ll speak with Abernathy, I’ll fill out the forms tomorrow.”

“Goddam it, we were just about fucking done, too.”

I stood in the silence and watched Chicken and my uncle.

“We’re pulling that thing out,” said Uncle Alton. “Get in and unlatch the door. I’ll get tongs and we’ll skid it out.” The boxcars were locked from the outside, and we weren’t supposed to open them unless it was an emergency.

Chicken raised the lantern and handed it to me. He dangled his feet through the open hatch. Then he tried lifting himself in, but after a moment it was obvious he wouldn’t fit. He took the lantern back and lowered it through the opening.

“Fuck. I can see the sonsabitch right there. I just can’t get in.”

“Jess,” Uncle Alton said. “You try. You know how to open a boxcar from the inside?”

Uncle Alton knew I did, he’d showed me, but he was cautious and protective of me, as he always was with his brother’s son, and by asking me the question out loud he was giving me a way out if I needed it. I nodded and went over to the hatch and looked in. Chicken handed me the lantern and when I lowered it I could see, instantly, the hills of oranges five or six feet below.

“Just shimmy through and hop down,” he said, and I thought about the space—four feet—between boxcars that I’d never jumped. Four feet, so easily jumped on the ground, but which was impossible up in the air.

“I’ll toss the lantern down to you when get you get in there.”

As I lowered myself I could see the serial number on the inside of the hatch. MADE IN SHEBOYGAN, WI. I rested a moment on my forearms then lowered myself and hung by my fingertips on the lip of the hatch. Then I let go.

Inside, the boxcar was nothing but heat and darkness. The oranges were hard, but had broken my fall. I got to my knees and everywhere I could feel the day’s heat contained in the fruit.

“You alright?”

“I’m fine.”

He lowered the lantern. “Can you see if I just hold this down?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t want to drop it down there and have it go out.”

“I can see.”

In the flickering yellow lantern light the drifts of oranges cast dancing shadows on the walls.

“Can you get over to the door?”

“Yeah.”

I crawled over oranges to the bulwark and pulled myself over. There, in a small space beside the door, was a man. He sat with his knees pulled toward his chest. I inhaled so quickly I lost my voice. The man stared straight through me and stayed perfectly still. We stared at each other, then he looked up toward the hatch, and when our gaze met a second time I could see the fear in his hard face.

I tried to yell but there was no wind in me. I choked, and in trying to scream, moaned instead. Then I coughed up a mouthful of bile that ran down my lips and onto my chin. In the silence I could hear him breathing. Then the man—he was a Mexican, I was sure—got up from his crouch and walked past me to the bulwark. He crawled over it and disappeared into the oranges like a snake into a river.

“Jess, you got it?” said Chicken.

I could hear Uncle Alton shout something I couldn’t make out.

“Jess, you find the door?”

I moved toward the door, pulled the emergency handle and slid the boxcar’s door open. The light of the co-op spilled inside and I looked back and saw nothing. Uncle Alton came down the platform stairs with a length of burlap and his set of heavy ice tongs.

I stepped out of the car and walked toward him. I could feel the bile still burning my throat. The Mexican's white eyes. The way they moved *behind* the hard mask of his face. I walked toward my uncle and stopped and looked back. Plainly seen now, in the open door lit by the co-op's light, was the ice block resting on the oranges.

"I'll grab it and slide it onto the burlap. Then we'll just haul the whole thing back to the icehouse," Uncle Alton said. I watched as he stepped into the car.

Years later I'd move to Amarillo, have boys of my own that I would raise in a world very different than the one I had been a child in. I would tell them this story. Only I tell them a version where there is no ice, no oranges, no Mexican man. In it we're watering cattle cars. A string of thirteen holding Mexican steers, up from Hermosillo. The steers are colorful, I say. Very different than the ones we see in west Texas. The Mexican steers are marked blue and green and yellow, I say, like lichen on granite. And they are wild, and buck against the sides of the wooden cattle car, making it rock. Their horns are like swords and their eyes are black and their breath, god their breath, is awful. I tell them about how Chicken just avoided being crushed when they broke free from the car, how they'd kicked their way through the slat boards, and how Chicken scaled the outside of a boxcar and climbed to the top. I tell them about how I hopped from the platform onto the boxcar's roof and from there the two of us,

safe, watched as the Mexican steers ran. How they scattered into the wash, through the cottonwoods, and out onto the night plain. Running, all of them running. I tell them this story because in the West what we love most are lies. What we love are images of a stampede, of animals running; of what we think are the right stories of stealing away.