

'On Running Away', *The Edge of Awareness*; by John Keats, 1965

Ralph and I considered the possibility of police pursuit. We briefly debated the advisability of disguises. We decided that the wisest course was to try to postpone pursuit. To that end, we would tell our parents that we had each been invited by the other boy's family to spend the summer in Michigan. We made our secret plans, and one afternoon, shortly after high-school graduation, we uttered our little lies and headed for the railroad yards. That evening, while our families were no doubt discovering that neither owned a summer camp in Michigan, we were already far from our comfortable New Jersey suburb, rattling west across America. Our object was to get to China to join the American Volunteer in its aerial combat against the Japanese.

Two weeks later America was still rattling past, but now there was not a tree or house in sight. We slid the boxcar door wide open at dawn to see a vast prairie, pale gold in the east, dark in the west. Mountaintops shone above the shadows as they caught the first light. We were lonely, stiff from sleeping on a jittering wooden floor, cold, and tired of eating canned dog food. I have a clear memory of that morning in the morning of my life, now more than a quarter century ago. I can see in the mind's eye those empty distances, and feel again the emptiness inside me. I am certain that Ralph was as fearful as I that day, but we did not admit our misgivings to each other. That would have been as much an admission of failure as returning home.

As we sat in the open doorway, watching the day brighten and the Rockies draw slowly nearer, I reflected on the recent past. No small part of the charm of running away from home lay in the presumption that the world was full of dangers. Naturally, we were eager to encounter them. Nothing was more pleasant than to imagine returning home as bronzed soldiers of fortune, bearing interesting scars and laden with the gifts of a grateful Chinese government. En route to the wars we would, of course, slay the usual number of local dragons. We were not running away from life but into it. We were sure that what we had left behind was lifeless. Our New Jersey suburb was pudgy with Buicks and Packards; a thing of clean linen, toothbrushes, electric razors, the once-a-week sound of the maid running the vacuum cleaner, and the empty conversations of soft-bellied people who worked in offices and played bridge and went to Bermuda in the spring.

Our own view of ourselves, now that we rode boxcars and rolled our own cigarettes, was that we were tough. We wore blue denims, and soot from the coal-burning trains was ground into our denims and our skin. Our adolescent stubble always seemed to be three days old. The men we met were, for the most part, illiterates. The only woman we had seen on the trains had been a moron who was the chattel of a man who offered her to us for a dime each. One of the boys we met was a male prostitute bound for Los Angeles. Two of the men in the gondola ahead of us looked to be thieves. There was no question about it: we were seeing Life. Unfortunately, it only too closely resembled the one we had left.

I could not help thinking, as we clacked along, that we knew the two thieves at home. One was a member of the Rotary; the other, a minister's son. How was the man with the moron different from the parents who haunted summer hotels in the perpetual hope of selling their unattractive daughter into matrimony? One of our high school classmates had been established in a New York apartment by a successful businessman. The difference between that boy and the one headed for Los Angeles was that the one moved in wealthier -- I almost said better -- circles. I

have said that Ralph and I were inwardly fearful, but I should make clear that what we secretly feared was that life would prove not challenging but merely dull. In fact, we were finding it not only dull but dirty.

There were perils, but they were largely mechanical. For instance, one of our fellow passengers, an elderly nondescript, had made the mistake of dozing in the sunlight near the forward edge of a boxcar roof. When the cars banged together as the fast freight began to brake, clattering down the long hill into Cheyenne, the first sudden lurch tossed him forward, off the roof and under the wheels, instantly bisecting him. One night when Ralph and I sheltered from the rain in a sort of cave formed by overhanging boards piled on a flatcar, we narrowly escaped a similar fate when the load shifted as we rounded a curve. Stupidity, we realized, was lethal. But where were the unknown dangers with which the world was supposedly replete? Specifically, where were the toughs and murderers who, in the public mind, so thickly populated the hobo jungles and the Hoovervilles?

We met none. The well-fed burghers of our hometown, to whom the Depression was more of a nuisance than a catastrophe, regarded the scarecrows of the Hoovervilles as dubiously as a French marquis might have looked on a Parisian mob in 1790, but they were wrong. At least in the West, the hobo jungles were merely unofficial public campsites tenanted by a slowly changing population of migrants down on their luck. Feeling a need for governance, these men formed their own. Many were veterans of World War I, and in camp after camp a former sergeant was elected or appointed leader. He greeted new arrivals, assigned them huts or sleeping spaces, and explained the rules: No fighting, thieves get beat up, you keep your place clean. And remember, try to bring back something for chow. Everyone brings something for chow.

In the America of those days everyone understood everyone else's problem, because it was also his own. If a man could not find work in one town, he tried another. Having no money to spend on transportation, he thumbed rides (which those who had cars were glad to offer), or he hopped a freight (while brakemen looked the other way). The people on the road were not derelicts. The derelicts, then as now, lived in Skid Rows in our cities. All the men and boys on the road, however modest their abilities and backgrounds, were looking for work. Some were bindle stiffs, who had known nothing all their lives except stoop labor, moving forever from harvest to harvest. Others were genuine hobos -- men who could work at nearly any trade, but whose free choice it was to hold no job long. All hobos said they intended to settle down someday, but not just yet. There was still a lot of country they wanted to see first. With rare exceptions, we met none but friends. Perhaps it is true that in good times no one takes to the road but the bad, but in our bad times we met virtually none but the good.

Ralph and I had looked for jobs wherever the trains stopped on our way through the Midwest, and while we found none, there were always housewives who would put their cares aside to consider ours. They would give us make-work so that we should not seem beggars. We would wash the windows, or whitewash the henhouse, or clean the yard or the rain gutters, and while we puttered, the woman would prepare us a meal. Often as not they would give us a package of food to take to the train. In small towns everyone knew the train schedules, and sometimes we would be told, "Gracious, there is some work I do want done, but you boys won't have time for it

before the train leaves, so why don't you just sit down and I'll try to find something in the icebox."

It was disappointing to be welcomed everywhere, when it was so important to learn whether we could make our unaided way through a violent world. Of course, we heard that the railroad detectives were the sadistic enemies of the tramp. We heard that they loved nothing more than to beat a defenseless man insensible and toss his body on an outbound freight. The most famous of these detectives was one Green River Slim. Alas, we never saw a yard detective, and Green River Slim turned out to be just as imaginary, and as ubiquitous, as that other great American whose name was found chalked up on a thousand boxcars (and who would later go to war) -- Kilroy.

In retrospect it is clear to me that Ralph and I were the only people of our acquaintance on the road who were dangerous. We were looking for trouble; everyone else was looking for work. Our ambition was to kill Japanese for fun and money, and meanwhile prove to the world how tough we were. Nobody seemed to view us in just this light except, perhaps, a toothless old wreck, with breath like a vulture's, who accosted us outside a Skid Row bar in Chicago.

"Want to see how hard you can hit?" he asked us. "Gimme a quarter, I'll let you hit me. See can you knock me out."

He followed us for nearly a block, pleading, promising not to hit back, flattering us, and finally, when he saw it was of no use, cursing. Looking back on it, I think we fled from him.

Novelty, rather than true discovery, entertained us to the foothills of the Rockies. It would be years before we learned the truth of Montaigne's remark that the traveler must take himself wherever he goes. Yet I do remember that our first sight of those mountains seemed a mockery; I remember the feeling of emptiness they created inside me. In themselves they were an enormous fact, and consideration of one fact led to a consideration of others. One was that no one wanted us to do anything for him except leave town; people were glad to help us on our way.

Another was that we had nothing to offer anyone except manual labor, which was not in demand, or our money, which was. We had left home with two hundred dollars between us, all saved from the unearned money our families had allowed us. It had cost us thirty dollars to purchase blankets, denims, work shoes and sufficient dog food to carry us to South Dakota. Canned dog food recommended itself to us as the cheapest comestible to be had. It constituted a balanced diet, and was rather tasty -- at first.

The meals donated by housewives were occasional banquets, but as the train rolled farther west and the towns thinned out, dog food became our staple, and it seemed that we might have to consume another hundred and seventy dollars' worth of it if we could not immediately find a ship for China. I now suspect what caused my feeling of emptiness was a premonition that one could not live without money, but that no one could earn money save at the loss of one's freedom. The world seemed a jail.

In the high Rockies, two boys boarded our train. They were Louis Wang, a Chinese-American of Fresno, and Phillip Benoff, a Russian-American from Los Angeles. They had gone adventuring to the East Coast and now were returning to California: Phil to join the Army and Louis to join a gambling house where he would run a dice table. We told them of our plans, and they decided to come along with us instead. In that moment we became an army, and the world brightened considerably. Changed by the alchemy of a dream, the mountains' vast sterility was transformed into magnificence. We would sort the facts of life to suit ourselves. Crossing the Pacific would be no problem. Everyone knew that boys could get jobs as wipers to work a passage. Boys had been running away to sea for centuries. We had only to find a ship that needed four wipers.

Before it was over, we must have walked the docks of every port of the West Coast -- including those of minor fishing towns. "Were we members of the Union?" No. "Let's see your identification papers." We had none.

"Do you have passports?" Passports?

We went to the union offices. "Buddy, we've got 3,000 guys on the bench, and every single one of them is an Able Seaman."

Ralph and I, blue-eyed and blond, went to the Scandinavian shipping companies, saying, "Ay an Swade. Ay yust want ship home." And they laughed and said they were sorry.

We persisted until someone finally told us the truth about the American Volunteer Group. It seemed that the volunteers had been carefully selected by the United States government from its ranks of Army, Navy, and Marine Corps pilots. We went to the recruiting offices, only to be told that we would need at least two years of college credits to qualify for the aviation-cadet programs. At this point, we all went to Fresno with Louis to think things over.

College was out of the question for Louis and Phil, but Ralph and I had only to ask to go, and our parents would send us. In Fresno, I began to see the fallacy of our position: our confidence in ourselves had all along been based on the assumption that we were different from other men: not on the slightest feeling of identify with mankind. This could not be helped; we were what our first eighteen years made us. At any moment we could have walked out of the shacks of the hobo jungle to the nearest Western Union office, and hours later been dressed in decent clothes, sitting down to the best dinner in the best hotel of whatever town it was, while a hotel clerk booked reservations for us on the next Pullman headed for Newark, New Jersey. The difference between us and all others was, as Smollett would say, wholly matter-money. In the back of our minds we had always known this, and it was the source of our strength and the source of our great weakness; it made us hold something back in our relationship with others; we were never identifying with them; thus, a barrier, built of dollars, shut us off from the kindness of Midwestern housewives, and from Louis and Phil. We and the other people on the road were of different tribes.

I do not mean to say that I worked all this out in so many words at age eighteen, sitting at the bar of a tacky one-story gambling house in Fresno, watching Chinese playing fan-tan and Americans shooting craps. I simply mean that I was then dimly but uneasily aware of what I am now saying. I remember that we did wonder aloud whether going back home to college would

not be an admission of defeat, but that we rationalized our way to the view that the only path to war in the Chinese skies led through two years of college followed by an aviation-cadet program. This decided, we broke what had been a summer-long silence and wrote our first letters home.

The immediate answer was a large check, which we expected, and the utterly demoralizing news – which we had not expected – that our parents, confident that we would get over our silliness, had already entered us in college for the fall term. In those days not many colleges demanded College Entrance Examination Test scores, but all of them had vacancies and most were willing to pretend that the customer was always bright.

Our parents' casual certainty about us was infuriating. We therefore determined upon one final gesture that would restore to us something of our romantic view of ourselves as hard, tough men. Louis Wang had a motorcycle. If he would let us borrow it, we would ride it east and send it back to him. Ralph's father owned a manufacturing concern (Ralph showed Louis the company letterhead) and Ralph would have the shipping department crate the motorcycle and send it back.

Oddly enough, Louis agreed. Perhaps he was intrigued by our idea of driving across the continent without stopping except for gasoline. We all wondered if anyone had done this before; if it really could be done; if so, in how little time. So Louis showed us how to start and stop the thing, and we bought a pillow in a five-and-ten-cent store to wire onto the back fender to form a seat for the one who would not be driving. It would not take us long to learn how to drive it, Louis said. We shook hands and went blasting out of Fresno forever.

We raced furiously to Sacramento; scuttled over the mountains and into Reno with our backsides beginning to turn black and blue. We sped across the salt flats; paused for gasoline, coffee and a bottle of whiskey at a Wyoming town where all three were sold at the town's one store. Our headlights, at ninety miles an hour, suddenly illuminated white-faced Herefords wandering across an open range in Montana, and we went off the road to avoid them, shouting and scattering gravel and cattle; somehow wobbled back onto the road again and out of the herd. We gradually drew closer to what we believed were the lights of a town, shining far ahead in the clear Western distances, only to realize at last that, in our grogginess, we were creeping nearer and nearer to the tailgate of an enormous, brightly lighted trailer truck. We drank black coffee at the next gas pump; coffee laced with whiskey. We also fell asleep while rounding a curve in Iowa. I remember seeing a shower of sparks, and eventually realizing they were caused by the foot peg grinding along the pavement while the centrifugal force and an unbanked curve were keeping us alive. I shouted at Ralph to stop trying to show off, and he woke up suddenly, caught himself, and swerved back to our own side of the road.

Eighty hours after leaving Fresno we were streaking along the new Pennsylvania Turnpike at night, chased by police. They did not arrest us. They merely wanted to tell us the road was not yet open; that a thousand yards ahead was a place where the first bridge would be, when it was built. When we reached New Jersey we slept for two days, and it was some days later before the swelling left our hand and arms and the bruises faded from our buttocks.

Then, having nothing better to do, we went to college. We hated that. The boys and girls who went to college were nothing but tame kids who would unquestionably evolve into bridge players who made nonconversation. They joined fraternities, cheered at the games, did their homework, earned their grades, went to the dances and swung and swayed with Sammy Kaye; while we, in our arrogant innocence, looked derisively upon all this from an outside world. We were different. We were 6,000 miles by boxcar and motorcycle apart from them. We knew it, and they did, too. Just to be sure they knew, we always rolled our own cigarettes on campus and dressed in our own sooty denim pants.

Looking back on it now, it seems odd to say that we felt such a difference between ourselves and the collage children, particularly when I have already said that we, in a formless way, had begun to suspect that the artificial differences between one man and another are inconsequential when compared to the real similarities that unite them. Moreover, Ralph and I were now back among our own kind. Why, then, the studied insolence of the Bull Durham and the dirty Levi's?

I suppose, now, that the pose and the costume were our own way of saying to other collegians, You know nothing about it. We would sit in economics class, and the others would brightly chatter with the young doctoral student who was our instructor, and I would slump back in my chair with my hands in my pockets, angry and silent, hearing nothing of this footless patter of cyclical depressions. Instead, I would see in my mind's eye a filling station door open, and the woman in a man's coat and hat emerge, a scarf wrapped around her nose and mouth to keep out the driving dust; she would wad another protective rag around the nozzle of the hose and the opening of the gas tank to put two dollars' worth of gasoline into a wretched jalopy crowded with an empty-faced family of spindly children and bearing on its roof rug-wrapped bundles and the flat steel web of a cheap double bed, and hear the man ask whether, instead of paying with money, he could stay and work for two days.

An ad hominin approach to Economics 201A was not a certain path for success in the subject, but I cared nothing for the course and less for the grade. The feeling grew on me that no one in college, including the smug young instructors with the Phi Beta Kappa keys, knew what the devil he was talking about; that they were all playing at an intellectual game that insulted the dignity of experience.

This was not a feeling I could put into words at the time. I had only the unexpressed knowledge, sitting silent inside me, that there was no place for me then, or perhaps ever, in any world I did not make for myself. Indeed, in retrospect, this seems to have been the cardinal lesson of our summer's trip. It will be seen that Ralph and I failed to make our dream come true: that our first young research for the stuff of life proved only that we were not at home in either the suburban or the proletarian worlds. Nor were we at home in the academic world. In fact, we would never be at home in any patterned world. No one ever is. No matter how much we share with all mankind, each of us is bitterly alone. Our true distance from our neighbor begins to yawn when we at length discover the unexplored darkness within ourselves, and begin to understand that he who travels farthest and fastest into this darkness must travel alone; and that the ultimate destination of every traveler is always himself.

It was just this sense of the void within us that our trip had given us; it was our first urgent command to get to work and fill the void; our summer trip provided us with our first inkling that our claims to identity would be entirely determined by our experience of ourselves.

In this sense, I can say that some part of me, now and forever, answers to the sounds of a train whistling lonely in the night, and to the deep tones of foghorns in the mists of the Northwestern coast. Some part of me is still the boy sweating at unloading watermelons from a truck in Portland; I am still shivering atop a cattle car in the winds driving through the snow-covered high passes. There is still in whoever I am the wink of campfires and the sight of the drunken man jumping across a fire and someone hitting him with a railroad spike and him falling into the fire. I can still see the lights of San Francisco and of Alcatraz from Coit Tower, and the delicate faces of the Chinese girls that Louis found for us. I have a memory of walking the dock in the rain of Seattle, and of sleepless nights in the fumigated cots of flophouses run by the Gospel Mission; of the Western wastelands creeping past and a hawk swooping on a gopher. Most clearly, I can see the faces of hopeful men who would never know anything other than disappointment, and the burst of spray against the rocks and among the tidal pools of Monterey. I remember lying on rattling floorboards at night, wondering whether I would wind up in jail, or whether any girl would ever want to marry me, and if I would ever see my family again. I have many memories, and if I am not sure yet what all of them mean, I am nonetheless certain that whoever I am is whatever my memories have made me; that I am becoming whatever I can find out about myself.

Nagging at my mind is Churchill's remark that "without a measureless and perpetual uncertainty, the drama of human life would be destroyed." I suppose that each of us, in his own way and at this own time, ventures as far as he chooses to dare in search of himself. Amy Lowell wondered, "Christ! What are patterns for?" They are largely for the timid; for those who find them comfortable. It seems to me that an adventure must be defined as an undertaking whose end it is impossible to know.

That is why I applaud the youthful dramatis, the would-be adventurer, who breaks the pattern, who with mounting excitement writes the farewell note and slips out the window at dead of night to set off afoot for the railroad yards to board a freight bound for California. I believe I know how he feels. More important, I know that he is not running away from something so much as he is running toward something: toward life; toward himself; toward an end that cannot be known.

I wish him well. His chances of finding what he seeks are never good, but they are at least better than the chances of those who stay at home, placidly accepting the patterns they never made, or choose.