Notes from the Third Bunk Car

Malvern K. Iles*
Notes from the
Third Bunk Car
by Malvern K. Iles
Physics, Junior

Start of miscellaneous note comments on conditions as observed on Burlington Northern Railroad, 3rd bunk car—100 steel gang.

October 18, Wednesday, Wyoming, III.

General description of surroundings: currently one drunk (Judy) is trying to get another drunk enough so that he can masturbate him with a creosote covered glove. (Creosote is a very caustic chemical used to coat railroad ties.) This is not typical—for weekdays—but for weekends. The second drunk (Old Mac) has been fired and hasn’t gotten out of his bunk in two days. He’s stayed soused the whole time. He’s got to urinate eventually; I hope he gets up to do that.

Gandy-dancers are steel gang workers. The men who lay the rail. The pioneers who conquered the Old West—a notoriously motly bunch of alcoholics, ex-cons, bums and losers of all sorts. One of the men in the second bunk car escaped from prison in California and is wanted for murder in both California and Montana. Most of the men work under assumed names and false social security numbers. My forms say I’m married, divorced twice and have three kids at the age of eighteen. This is so I have less taxes deducted from my paycheck. The money is good if you don’t gamble, drink or whore it away. I’ve watched some of these gandies blow five hundred in a three-day drunk.

I’m sitting in a bunk in an old box car on a remote siding six miles from the nearest town. This is a gandy-camp: five bunk cars, commissary car, generator car, kitchen car, two dining cars, office car and the foreman’s bunk car. The first bunk car is the best, quite clean. The
second is a jungle. Number three is the second best. Conditions get worse from here back, ending in the fifth bunk car—snake pit, where the lights never turn off in a never ending marathon poker-craps-football-beer-dope-whiskey-wine orgy.

This writing is often interrupted; I just spent a half hour listening to an old gandy explain the great deal he got on a fishing pole he bought in a hardware store in Morrison(!?!), Ill.

Penny just brought in a small mongrel puppy. Someone asked if it was sanitary to keep the puppy in the car. Bull shit; most of the gandy’s aren’t housebroken. I question the effect of the car on the puppy. The level of sanity has been decreasing in direct proportion to the flow of Vodka and beer.

Thursday 19, 6-7 a.m.
Breakfast is at 5:30 a.m.
Roll out of bed at 5:00 a.m.

Early morning—Judy and Mac are still yelling (still shit-assed drunk). Mac is still in bed. Yesterday morning it snowed. The crew was laid off because the machinery wouldn’t move on the snow-covered tracks. So... all the crew went to town and brought back enough booze to last a week. No snow today, but it’s clear, cold, nineteen degrees, and windy. Frozen fingers to add to general hand problems (mashed thumb, sprained third finger joint)—this place is becoming a new snake pit. Going to lay track through town today.

Now evening. Froze in the morning; sweated in the afternoon. Set spikes today. Really messed up my right wrist. My hand followed the eight pound sledge with a strange cracking noise. The puppy is messing all over the car, but Penny is cleaning right up after him.

ZAP—WEEKEND—

The job has moved to Aurora, Ill. Let me explain about Wyoming. AMTRACK subsidizes the railroad. A certain amount of track must be laid in each section every year to enable the road to receive funds. We laid track
from the middle of one farmer's field 16 miles through Wyoming (which is a town so small I hung out at the laundromat) to the middle of another farmer's field. We replaced the track along a spur line that served a coal mine that only shipped a train load every night. We put in main line track. Nowhere to nowhere—it was so pointless.

The camp moved to Galesburg, and then to Aurora. I went back to Stoneking House and did VW things. The generators are not hooked up; there are no lights. The weekend was very rough on the train—fights, general hostilities. A gandy got his throat slit downtown. He was an old timer, but new on the gang.

Walked through a round house—INSANE! God damn those engines are big! The aura of the place was magical; understand old Ayn R . now. Grease, steam, brick, steel, oil, raw naked slumbering power. An engine was being taken apart; several axles and wheels sat on one of the tracks. It was so massive I and my friend the timekeeper could not roll it. We could not even make it rock.

At Aurora laundromat Monday.

I started on a tie drill today. It is a cumbersome, noisy and weird machine that makes me more money than assistant foreman or laborer did. I am now a "machine operator." We sat all day in the yards waiting for the machines to be set up and adjusted. We laid about 60 feet of rail in an 11-hour day. I am behind the second compressor and have to wear cotton in my ears.

Night

It is now night. I am dry cleaning a jacket and sweater. Just found a great ice cream place and gorged myself. Going to try to pick up one of the counter girls. She's very nice, but awfully small town. Train derailed about 15 feet from the dining cars during dinner. The engineer was drunk. He got the ass end of the train on one set of tracks and the engine on another. No one knows how he did it. I and many other gandys would have been dead if he'd been moving 30 mph instead of 10 mph. As of four hours later, they still hadn't gotten it back on the track.
On this job one quietly reminisces about past girls—kind of a nostalgic savoring of the past. I imagine the shock of meeting a friendly young female would probably render me totally impotent. Anyway, the desire for sex is the warm cuddly type. Anything better than my cold sleeping bag every night.

The railroad is totally mismanaged. There are much better men among the crew than the foremen. The section hands, who are not subjected to to intense job pressures we are, are total idiots! I'm not kidding. Only the inertia of the system and the effort of a few individuals keep the whole thing going. The stupidity, redundancy and feather bedding here is so extreme that ambition and competence are truly something to be regarded as different and a threat to the "railroad way of life." It is a total suck system. No need for competence if you have seniority. The system and machines are incredible! But the men who fill it now are shadows I could break with one hand. The gandys are much more real people. Their fight for survival makes much more intense (though not healthy) individuals out of them. Fantastic with an obstacle in front of them, but easy times they can't handle. The immediate physical challenge must hit them in the face. Very much the man of the last chapter of Hoffer's "Ordeal of Change." The man of "Stars my Destination":

Gully foyle is my name,
    Terra is my nation,
Deep space is my dwelling place,
    and Death's my destination.

Where the man is challenged so as to become a monster and seize his power. The last line becomes "The Star's My Destination." These men do not know their power; to quote Gully Foyle:

You have millions—you spend pennies!
    You walk when you could run!
Live! God damn you! Live!
    Put the power of life and death
Back into the hands of those who
do the living and dying!
The Next Day

Warm and rainy, another train derailed. At the laundromat again, speculating on privacy in a crowd. This place is the best I've found for writing. There are many people about, yet I have complete privacy. No one will bother me writing here because of some strange laundromat etiquette, somewhat the same in any public situation. I speculate some extremes of grossosity could be openly performed in a laundromat, as long as it looked as though you were minding your own business and the deed was of a nonpolitical nature.

This is quite the rip off joint—30c for a washer! Constantly entertaining thoughts of working the South Pacific. Particularly a cargo ship to Australia or New Zealand. I want to do that now; am not particularly interested in school. Talked to several gandys today who had been to Australia. Said very positive things about the country and the people down under.

Getting extra hour over-time again. This time it's sharpening bits; used up six drills today. Very high gandy turnover now. The old timers have made their rockers ($1,650 so they can draw R. R. unemployment all winter). The new ones don't stick out the weather and the foreman politics.

The railroad gets gandys by putting up signs along Madison Avenue, Chicago, and other big city skid rows, saying "Men wanted." They pick up all the prospects on an old school bus, bring them here and have them buy something at the commissary so that they'll have to work at least a day. The quality of such a worker is low. Even more so now that the experienced gandys are leaving. It seems as if we order 50 men, get 15, and have 19 quit.

Note: Good dinner tonight. Must be full moon; am quite horny. Need a dime for the dryer and had to break a five to ones and one of the ones to quarters and change it. Oh well. Everything changes, and nothing changes. The same old story.