



2017

Hope

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Recommended Citation

Sibia, Kylee J. (2017) "Hope," *HUMBUG*: Vol. 2017: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/humbug/vol2017/iss1/8>

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Hope

Everybody's trying to get Somewhere Else. Some of us are just better at it than others. People call me a hobo because I don't have a home; I just ride the rails, my only friend a great big steam engine and its constant motion. They pity me, because they think that my existence is miserable and filthy: nothing more than an endless trek to survive. They are wrong. Riding the rails is dangerous, terrifying, and often demoralizing: that only heightens the thrill. Every day is an adventure of the sort you would normally only find in storybooks, equal parts exhilarating and exhausting. I spend every single day doing the thing everyone else is too scared to do.

I'm going Somewhere Else.

* * *

I was eight years old when my father bought me my first train. It was beautiful, meticulously carved and painted a shiny crimson. We didn't have enough money for tracks, but the train was enough. Besides, without tracks to constrain it, the train could go anywhere.

Of course, that train is nothing like the real thing. Trains are not dainty or beautiful; they are enormous and powerful creatures coated in thick, gray layers of ash and soot. Treat them with respect and fear them above all else, or die, because a train will kill you in a heartbeat if you're not careful. Even now, as I hear the wheels chugging valiantly and the whistle trilling sweetly, I can still feel the cunning that lies beneath this train's exterior. I can still feel it longing to crush someone who didn't run fast enough beneath its wheels.

I am riding with a group of haggard men today. They are the living dead, their only purpose to find their next meal. Since the market crashed, most everyone looks like that. Not that I'm much better. I'm covered in soot from head to toe, the clothes that were once white now a filthy brown. My ribs jut out of my stomach. My hair is long and shaggy, my fingernails caked with dirt. It is 1937 now. I have been a hobo since 1932. I am seventeen years old.

The men are all quiet except for a smaller boy who won't shut up. He's even dirtier than me, with his raggedy clothes hanging off his body and his hair tucked beneath a stained old farmer's cap. His high voice has permeated the train cabin since we all got on in Chicago. He rambles, "Of course, I'll be meeting up with my dad in Cheyenne. Have you seen him? Big, brown bushy beard? Blue eyes?" He doesn't wait for an answer but keeps jabbering.

I stop paying attention to the boy when one of the men comes over to the corner where I've been slouching with a dusty bottle in his hand. "Hey kid, you want some? I won't tell your mamma." He cackles, already drunk. I shake my head, but for some reason the man is persistent, shoving the bottle in my face, snorting as he says, "Did ya hear me? I said—"

"He doesn't want any." I stare over the man's shoulder as the small boy stands up. The drunken man turns slowly, his expression dangerous.

"Now I know you didn't just say that to me." His voice is low and scraggly. I will the boy not to respond.

The boy raises his head and looks the man in the eye as he says, "He doesn't have to drink if he doesn't want to. Leave him alone." With that the drunken man throws his bottle to the side and punches the small boy right in the stomach. He goes down hard, the skin on his elbows breaking and streaking the dirty floor with blood. The drunken man advances on the boy, who has curled into a small, moaning ball, but I step in front of him, cursing myself.

I stare up at the man and say firmly, "He's already down, and anyhow, we're getting off." I drag the boy from the ground and shout in his ear, "We're jumping, so you're going to have to hold onto me real tight!" He must still be lucid enough to hear because his limbs unfold and wrap around me. I hold him tightly and throw myself into the night just as the train begins to slow, and then we are flying through the air unencumbered by drunken men or dusty bottles, utterly free.

* * *

I am beginning to regret saving the boy. Especially since, as it turns out, he is not actually a boy.

Her cap flew off when we hit the ground, both of us rolling against the impact in the practiced form of experienced hobos. She looked about fourteen, with hair so yellow it glowed in the moonlight. I still took off, but the incessant girl followed me and is refusing to stop.

"I mean, you did save me, all I'm trying to do is thank you. If you'd stop walking so fast I'd be able to say it to your face. Hey, why don't you ride the train with me to Cheyenne? We—"

I clap my hand over the girl's mouth and drag her into the shadows of a nearby train car just as a bull trudges past. Bulls patrol the rail yards to prevent unwanted hobos from hitching a ride. That's why you can't get on a train until it's already moving. I wait for the sound of the bull's footsteps to fade and then toss my head to the right, indicating that the girl should follow me down the alleyway between trains. We weave through the cars until I hear the noise that calls to me, reverberating through every fiber of my being: the sound of a train starting.

"Get on," I tell the girl bluntly, still halfway wondering why I'm bothering to help her.

"Oh, no thanks, I've got to find a train going to Cheyenne to meet up with my dad—"

"HEY! You are not authorized to be on this land!" I don't hear the rest of the words the bull is screaming at us because I'm sprinting alongside the train, dragging the idiot girl with me. I swing her into the car, and the train is really going fast now, but I'm faster; I'm flying across the ground. I'm one leap away from losing my hold on earthly reality completely, but instead I crash into the car and skid to a halt in front of something even scarier than a train: an angry girl.

She doesn't speak to me but fumes in a corner, which is just fine, never mind that I saved her miserable life. Anyhow, by morning I'll be on another train in another place with another person. For now I sit in front of the open car doors, watching the shapes of the night blur together as the whole world is forced into constant motion. Nothing stands still, or begs for food or jobs or money, or sits helplessly. Everything is moving; everything is doing something.

"You shouldn't sit so close to the edge, you know." Even as the girl tells me this she collapses beside me. We are silent for a while, but eventually I can't contain my curiosity.

"How does a girl end up on the rails? And why on earth wouldn't she cut her hair off?"

She smiles slightly as she answers, "I never could bear to chop it off. I should've, after my dad got laid off and took me on the rails, but I always worried what my mom would say if I completely looked like a boy. It's the only luxury I allow myself."

I glance at her hair before I respond. "Your dad. How'd you two get separated?"

Her face closes as she answers, and she doesn't look at me. "I fell asleep when we were on a train with a ton of people, and when I woke up I couldn't find him. I mean, it was really stupid of me to fall asleep on a train, but I'm sure he just got a little drunk and forgot to wake me. He's probably worried sick, but he always said he would try to find a job in Cheyenne, so I'm headed there to meet him. And then everything will be fine."

I don't comment on this monologue, though I can clearly hear the desperation in the girl's voice as she tries to convince herself she believes the words she speaks. It's no wonder she talks so much; the alternative would be being stuck with thoughts of her deadbeat dad. And who am I to crush a dream? At least this crazy girl still has hope. It's more than I can say for the rest of us.

She waits a while before speaking again. "What about you? Where are you going?"

I smile slightly when I respond, "I'm going Somewhere Else."

"Well obviously, but where?"

"That's the whole point, isn't it? I can go anywhere. Do anything. Be anyone."

She snorts incredulously. "So you're telling me you spend your life on the rails – nearly starving to death every other night, always running from someone – for no reason at all?"

"I don't need a reason."

"Hmph." She gets up and starts rummaging around in some of the crates. "Hey! They're carrying books!" I turn around and see her holding up a ratty old paperback that most people these days would use for kindling but is almost better than food for someone like me. I jump up and dig through the crate with her until I find the manuscript I'm looking for. I sigh happily as I flip through the pages, sliding to the floor with the book clutched to my chest.

The girl cranes her neck to see the cover. "*A Tale of Two Cities*, huh? Interesting."

I'm in a better mood now; I grin at her and ask, "Why's it interesting?"

"It just seems like a drifter like you wouldn't be interested in reading about Sydney Carton saving the day."

I laugh delightedly. "I saved you, didn't I? I saved the girl."

She shakes her head, but she's smiling. "I just pegged you for more of a dime store thriller type, that's all. But you must be smarter than you look if you're reading Dickens."

I ignore her and scoot back to the car's threshold. I don't understand why she's so surprised; everyone likes *A Tale of Two Cities*. And yes, I do read it mostly for Sydney Carton, but who wouldn't admire someone like that, someone whose life had so grand a purpose? The guy was damn lucky, in my opinion.

The girl sits back down beside me, but she doesn't have a book. She watches me for a moment and then pulls something out of her pocket. It's a penny, slightly rusty but with a copper sheen that glints as it catches the light. She holds it up in her thumb and finger as she says, "My dad gave this to me when I was a little girl, told me to save it to buy something special. He didn't have anything else to give me; he felt terrible. But I didn't care."

I still don't. Because one day, spending this penny is going to feel so damn good. It'll be the start of a new life, where people are happy again, and no one's poor anymore." She smiles at me sadly. "You probably think that's ridiculous. But I don't think it's wrong to want to go somewhere, or to have hope that things are going to get better. That's all you can really do, right? Keep fighting until one day you don't have to fight anymore, because things will have changed, without you even realizing it." I stare at her as she turns away. She watches the night as she tells me, "I hope you get where you're going."

* * *

The sun's rising, and there's a rail yard in sight, but the train isn't slowing down. We must just be passing through. But the crazy girl is getting off to chase a dream in Cheyenne.

For once I wish the train would stop moving. We are too close to the rail yard.

"Hey." I startle as the girl walks up to me and takes my hand. I close my eyes as she whispers in my ear, "I'm spending it on you." And then she is gone, gone like everyone and everything else always is.

I watch light flood the landscape as the train chugs on, unchanging and unyielding. There is something cool in my hand. I open my fist and see a penny there, small and round and shining with brilliant golden light. I look at that penny and I look at the sky, and I feel something blossoming in my chest, something precious and unbreakable that makes me want to feel, and dream. Something that makes me want to go Somewhere.