ON THE ROAD by Jack Kerouac. part one 1 I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Mor
iarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off. Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake Cit
y in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles. First reports of him came to me through Chad King, who'd shown me a few letters from him written in a New Mexico reform school. I was tremendously interested in the letters because they so naively and sweetly asked Chad to teach him all about Nietzsch
e and all the wonderful intellectual things that Chad knew. At one point Carlo and I talked about the letters and wondered if we would ever meet the strange Dean Moriarty. This is all far back, when Dean was not the way he is today, when he was a young jailkid shrouded in mystery. Then news came that Dea
n was out of reform school and was coming to New York for the first time; also there was talk that he had just married a girl called Marylou. One day I was hanging around the campus and Chad and Tim Gray told me Dean was staying in a cold-water pad in East Harlem, the Spanish Harlem. Dean had arrived
the night before, the first time in New York, with his beautiful little sharp chick Marylou; they got off the Greyhound bus at 50th Street and cut around the corner looking for a place to eat and went right in Hector's, and since then Hector's cafeteria has always been a big symbol of New York for Dean. They s
pent money on beautiful big glazed cakes and creampuffs. All this time Dean was telling Marylou things like this: "Now, darling, here we are in New York and although I haven't quite told you everything that I was thinking about when we crossed Missouri and especially at the point when we passed the Boon
ville reformatory which reminded me of my jail problem, it is absolutely necessary now to postpone all those leftover things concerning our personal lovethings and at once begin thinking of specific worklife plans . . ." and so on in the way that he had in those early days. I went to the cold-water flat with th
e boys, and Dean came to the door in his shorts. Marylou was jumping off the couch; Dean had dispatched the occupant of the apartment to the kitchen, probably to make coffee, while he proceeded with his love-problems, for to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life, although he had
to sweat and curse to make a living and so on. You saw that in the way he stood bobbing his head, always looking down, nodding, like a young boxer to instructions, to make you think he was listening to every word, throwing in a thousand "Yeses" and "That's rights." My first impression of Dean was of a
young Gene Autry—trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent—a sideburned hero of the snowy West. In fact he'd just been working on a ranch, Ed Wall's in Colorado, before marrying Marylou and coming East. Marylou was a pretty blonde with immense ringlets of hair like a sea of golden tr
esses; she sat there on the edge of the couch with her hands hanging in her lap and her smoky blue country eyes fixed in a wide stare because she was in an evil gray New York pad that she'd heard about back West, and waiting like a longbodied emaciated Modigliani surrealist woman in a serious room. B
ut, outside of being a sweet little girl, she was awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things. That night we all drank beer and pulled wrists and talked till dawn, and in the morning, while we sat around dumbly smoking butts from ashtrays in the gray light of a gloomy day, Dean got up nervously, paced
around, thinking, and decided the thing to do was to have Marylou make breakfast and sweep the floor. "In other words we've got to get on the ball, darling, what I'm saying, otherwise it'll be fluctuating and lack of true knowledge or crystallization of our plans." Then I went away. During the following week h
e confided in Chad King that he absolutely had to learn how to write from him; Chad said I was a writer and he should come to me for advice. Meanwhile Dean had gotten a job in a parking lot, had a fight with Marylou in their Hoboken apartment—God knows why they went there—and she was so mad and s
o down deep vindictive that she reported to the police some false trumped-up hysterical crazy charge, and Dean had to lam from Hoboken. So he had no place to live. He came right out to Paterson, New Jersey, where I was living with my aunt, and one night while I was studying there was a knock on the do
or, and there was Dean, bowing, shuffling obsequiously in the dark of the hall, and saying, "Hel-lo, you remember me—Dean Moriarty? I've come to ask you to show me how to write." "And where's Marylou?" I asked, and Dean said she'd apparently whored a few dollars together and gone back to Denver—"
the whore!" So we went out to have a few beers because we couldn't talk like we wanted to talk in front of my aunt, who sat in the living room reading her paper. She took one look at Dean and decided that he was a madman. In the bar I told Dean, "Hell, man, I know very well you didn't come to me only to w
ant to become a writer, and after all what do I really know about it except you've got to stick to it with the energy of a benny addict." And he said, "Yes, of course, I know exactly what you mean and in fact all those problems have occurred to me, but the thing that I want is the realization of those factors that
should one depend on Schopenhauer's dichotomy for any inwardly realized . . ." and so on in that way, things I understood not a bit and he himself didn't. In those days he really didn't know what he was talking about; that is to say, he was a young jailkid all hung-up on the w onderful p
ossibilities of becoming a real intellectual, and he liked to talk in the tone and using the words, but in a jumbled way, that he had heard from "real intellectuals" —although, mind you, he wasn't so naive as that in all other things, and it took, him just a few months with Carl o M arx to becom
e completely in there with all the terms and jargon. Nonetheless we understood each other on other levels of madness, and I agreed that he could stay at my house till he found a job and furthermore we agreed to go out West sometime. That was the winter of 1947. One n ig ht when Dea
n ate supper at my house—he already had, the parking-lot job in New York—he leaned over my shoulder as I typed rapidly away and said, "Come on man, those girls won't wait, make it fast." I said, "Hold on just a minute, I'll be right with you soon as I finish this chapter ," a nd it w
as one of the best chapters in the book. Then I dressed and off we flew to New York to meet some girls. As we rode in the bus in the weird phosphorescent void of the Lincoln Tunnel we leaned on each other with fingers waving and yelled and talked excitedly, and I wa s be gin nin
g to get the bug like Dean. He was simply a youth tremendously excited with life, and though he was a con-man, he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and to get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him. He was conning me and I kne w
it (for room and board and "how-to-write," etc.), and he knew I knew (this has been the basis of our relationship), but I didn't care and we got along fine—no pestering, no catering; we tiptoed around each other like heartbreaking new friends. I began to learn from him a s much as he pr
obably learned from me. As far as my work was concerned he said, "Go ahead, everything you do is great." He watched over my shoulder as I wrote stories, yelling, "Yes! That's right! Wow! Man!" and "Phew!" and wiped his face with his handkerchief. "Man, wow, the re' s so many thing
s to do, so many things to write! How to even begin to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears . . ." "That's right, man, now you're talking." And a kind of holy lightning I saw flashing from his exc itement and his
visions, which he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see the "overexcited nut." In the West he'd spent a third of his time in the poolhall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library. They'd seen him rushing eagerly down the winter stre ets, bareheade
d, carrying books to the poolhall, or climbing trees to get into the attics of buddies where he spent days reading or hiding from the law. We went to New York—I forget what the situation was, two colored girls—there were no girls there; they were supposed to meet h im in a diner and
didn't show up. We went to his parking lot where he had a few things to do—change his clothes in the shack in back and spruce up a bit in front of a cracked mirror and so on, and then we took off. And that was the night Dean met Carlo Marx. A tremendous thing ha pp ened when Dea
n met Carlo Marx. Two keen minds that they are, they took to each other at the drop of a hat. Two piercing eyes glanced into two piercing eyes—the holy con-man with the shining mind, and the sorrowful poetic con-man with the dark mind that is Carlo Marx. From th at moment on I sa
w very little of Dean, and I was a little sorry too. Their energies met head-on, I was a lout compared, I couldn't keep up with them. The whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then; it would mix up all my friends and all I had left of my family in a big dus t cloud over t
he American Night. Carlo told him of Old Bull Lee, Elmer Hassel, Jane: Lee in Texas growing weed, Hassel on Riker's Island, Jane wandering on Times Square in a benzedrine hallucination, with her baby girl in her arms and ending up in Bellevue. And Dean told Carl o of unknown
people in the West like Tommy Snark, the clubfooted poolhall rotation shark and cardplayer and queer saint. He told him of Roy Johnson, Big Ed Dunkel, his boyhood buddies, his street buddies, his innumerable girls and sex-parties and pornographic pictures, his h ero es, heroines,
adventures. They rushed down the street together, digging everything in the early way they had, which later became so much sadder and perceptive and blank. But then they danced down the streets like dingledodies, and I shambled after as I've been doing all my lif e a fter people
who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow r om an candles
exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" What did they call such young people in Goethe's Germany? Wanting dearly to learn how to write like Carlo, the first thing you know, Dean was at tacking hi
m with a great amorous soul such as only a con-man can have. "Now, Carlo, let me speak—here's what I'm saying . . ." I didn't see them for about two weeks, during which time they cemented their relationship to fiendish allday-allnight talk proportions. Then came sp ring, the
great time of traveling, and everybody in the scattered gang was getting ready to take one trip or another. I was busily at work on my novel and when I came to the halfway mark, after a trip down South with my aunt to visit my brother Rocco, I got ready to travel West f or the ve
ry first time. Dean had already left. Carlo and I saw him off at the 34th Street Greyhound station. Upstairs they had a place where you could make pictures for a quarter. Carlo took off his glasses and looked sinister. Dean made a profile shot and looked coyly around. I t ook a straig
ht picture that made me look like a thirty-year-old Italian who'd kill anybody who said anything against his mother. This picture Carlo and Dean neatly cut down the middle with a razor and saved a half each in their wallets. Dean was wearing a real Western business suit for his big
trip back to Denver; he'd finished his first fling in New York. I say fling, but he only worked like a dog in parking lots. The most fantastic parking-lot attendant in the world, he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race amo ng f ender
s, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, back swiftly into tight spot, hump, snap the car with the emergency so that you see it bounce as he flies out; then clear to the ticket shack, sprinting like a track star, hand a ticket, leap into a newly arri ved
car before the owner's half out, leap literally under him as he steps out, start the car with the door flapping, and roar off to the next available spot, arc, pop in, brake, out, run; working like that without pause eight hours a night, evening rush hours and after-theater rush h our
s, in greasy wino pants with a frayed fur-lined jacket and beat shoes that flap. Now he'd bought a new suit to go back in; blue with pencil stripes, vest and all—eleven dollars on Third Avenue, with a watch and watch chain, and a portable typewriter with which he was goin g t o s
tart writing in a Denver rooming house as soon as he got a job there. We had a farewell meal of franks and beans in a Seventh Avenue Riker's, and then Dean got on the bus that said Chicago and roared off into the night. There went our wrangler. I promised myself to go t he s a
me way when spring really bloomed and opened up the land. And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell. Yes, and it wasn't only because I was a writer and needed new experiences that I w ante d
to know Dean more, and because my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified, but because, somehow in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother; the sight of his suffering bony face wi th t h
e long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic. His dirty workclothes clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn't buy a better fit from a cus t o
m tailor but only earn it from the Natural Tailor of Natural Joy, as Dean had, in his stresses. And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighborhood and drows
y doorsteps of afternoon where boys played guitars while their older brothers worked in the mills. All my other current friends were "intellectuals"—Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk, Old Bull Lee and hi
s critical anti-everything drawl—or else they were slinking criminals like Elmer Hassel, with that hip sneer; Jane Lee the same, sprawled on the Oriental cover of her couch, sniffing at the New Yorker. But Dean's intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete,
without the tedious intellectualness. And his "criminality" was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole car
s for joy rides). Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn't care one way or the ot her,
"so long's I can get that lil ole gal with that lil sumpin down there tween her legs, boy," and "so long's we can eat, son, y'ear me? I'm hungry, I'm starving, let's eat right now!"—and off we'd rush to eat, whereof, as saith Ecclesiastes, "It is your portion under the sun." A wes tern
kinsman of the sun, Dean. Although my aunt warned me that he would get me in trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean's eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he wou ld la
ter, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds—what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything ; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me. 2 In the month of July 1947, having sa
ved about fifty dollars from old veteran benefits, I was ready to go to the West Coast. My friend Remi Boncœur had written me a letter from San Francisco, saying I should come and ship out with him on an around-the-world liner. He swore he could get me into the engine
room. I wrote back and said I'd be satisfied with any old freighter so long as I could take a few long Pacific trips and come back with enough money to support myself in my aunt's house while I finished my book. He said he had a shack in Mill City and I would have all the
time in the world to write there while we went through the rigmarole of getting the ship. He was living with a girl called Lee Ann; he said she was a marvelous cook and everything would jump. Remi was an old prep-school friend, a Frenchman brought up in Paris and a
really mad guy—I didn't know how mad at this time. So he expected me to arrive in ten days. My aunt was all in accord with my trip to the West; she said it would do me good, I'd been working so hard all winter and staying in too much; she even didn't complain when I to l
d her I'd have to hitchhike some. All she wanted was for me to come back in one piece. So, leaving my big half-manuscript sitting on top of my desk, and folding back my comfortable home sheets for the last time one morning, I left with my canvas bag in which a few fun da
mental things were packed and took off for the Pacific Ocean with the fifty dollars in my pocket. I'd been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on
the roadmap was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I'll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started. To get to 6 I had to go up to Bear Mountain. Fill ed
with dreams of what I'd do in Chicago, in Denver, and then finally in San Fran, I took the Seventh Avenue subway to the end of the line at 242nd Street, and there took a trolley into Yonkers; in downtown Yonkers I transferred to an outgoing trolley and went to the city l
imits on the east bank of the Hudson River. If you drop a rose in the Hudson River at its mysterious source in the Adiron dacks, think of all the places it journeys by as it goes out to sea forever—think of that wonderful Hudson Valley. I started hitching up the thi ng. F
ive scattered rides took me to the desired Bear Mountain Bridge, where Route 6 arched in from New England. It began to rain in torrents when I was let off there. It was mountainous. Route 6 came over the river, wound around a traffic circle, and disappeared int o the wilde
rness. Not only was there no traffic but the rain came down in buckets and I had no shelter. I had to run under some pines to take cover; this did no good; I began crying and swearing and socking myself on the head for being such a damn fool. I was forty mile s nort h of N
ew York; all the way up I'd been worried about the fact that on this, my big opening day, I was only moving north instead of the so-longed-for west. Now I was stuck on my northernmost hangup. I ran a quarter-mile to an abandoned cute English-style filling sta tion a nd sto
od under the dripping eaves. High up over my head the great hairy Bear Mountain sent down thunderclaps that put the fear of God in me. All I could see were smoky trees and dismal wilderness rising to the skies. "What the hell am I doing up here?" I cursed, I crie d for
Chicago. "Even now they're all having a big time, they're doing this, I'm not there, when will I get there!"—and so on. Finally a car stopped at the empty filling station; the man and the two women in it wanted to study a map. I stepped right up and gestured in the ra in; th
ey consulted; I looked like a maniac, of course, with my hair all wet, my shoes sopping. My shoes, damn fool that I am, were Mexican huaraches, plantlike sieves not fit for the rainy night of America and the raw road night. But the people let me in and rode m e nort
h to Newburgh, which I accepted as a better alternative than being trapped in the Bear Mountain wilderness all night. "Besides," said the man, "there's no traffic passes through 6. If you want to go to Chicago you'd do better going across the Holland Tunnel in Ne
w York and head for Pittsburgh," and I knew he was right. It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes. In Newburgh it had stop ped ra
ining. I walked down to the river, and I had to ride back to New York in a bus with a delegation of schoolteachers coming back from a weekend in the mountains—chatter-chatter blah-blah, and me swearing for all the time and the money I'd wasted, and tellin g mys elf, I
wanted to go west and here I've been all day and into the night going up and down, north and south, like something that can't get started. And I swore I'd be in Chicago tomorrow, and made sure of that, taking a bus to Chicago, spending most of my money , and didn't
give a damn, just as long as I'd be in Chicago tomorrow. 3 It was an ordinary bus trip with crying babies and hot sun, and countryfolk getting on at one Penn town after another, till we got on the plain of Ohio and really rolled, up by Ashtabula and straight acros s Ind
iana in the night. I arrived in Chi quite early in the morning, got a room in the Y, and went to bed with a very few dollars in my pocket. I dug Chicago after a good day's sleep. The wind from Lake Michigan, bop at the Loop, long walks around South Halsted and N orth
Clark, and one long walk after midnight into the jungles, where a cruising car followed me as a suspicious character. At this time, 1947, bop was going like mad all over America. The fellows at the Loop blew, but with a tired air, because bop was somewhe re be twee
n its Charlie Parker Ornithology period and another period that began with Miles Davis. And as I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how
they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing-about. And for the first time in my life, the following afternoon, I went into the West. It was a warm and beautiful day for hitchhiking. To get out of the impossible comple xitie s of
Chicago traffic I took a bus to Joliet, Illinois, went by the Joliet pen, stationed myself just outside town after a walk through its leafy rickety streets behind, and pointed my way. All the way from New York to Joliet by bus, and I had spent more than half my mo
ney. My first ride was a dynamite truck with a red flag, about thirty miles into great green Illinois, the truckdriver pointing out the place where Route 6, which we were on, intersects Route 66 before they both shoot west for incredible distances. Along abo ut t
hree in the afternoon, after an apple pie and ice cream in a roadside stand, a woman stopped for me in a little coupe. I had a twinge of hard joy as I ran after the car. But she was a middle-aged woman, actually the mother of sons my age, and wanted som ebo dy t
o help her drive to Iowa. I was all for it. Iowa! Not so far from Denver, and once I got to Denver I could relax. She drove the first few hours, at one point insisted on visiting an old church somewhere, as if we were tourists, and then I took over the wheel an d, tho ug
h I'm not much of a driver, drove clear through the rest of Illinois to Davenport, Iowa, via Rock Island. And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the r aw bo dy
of America itself because it washes it up. Rock Island—railroad tracks, shacks, small downtown section; and over the bridge to Davenport, same kind of town, all smelling of sawdust in the warm midwest sun. Here the lady had to go on to her Iowa hom etown b
y another route, and I got out. The sun was going down. I walked, after a few cold beers, to the edge of town, and it was a long walk. All the men were driving home from work, wearing railroad hats, baseball hats, all kinds of hats, just like after work in a ny tow n a
nywhere. One of them gave me a ride up the hill and left me at a lonely crossroads on the edge of the prairie. It was beautiful there. The only cars that came by were farmer-cars; they gave me suspicious looks, they clanked along, the cows were comin g hom e. N
ot a truck. A few cars zipped by. A hotrod kid came by with his scarf flying. The sun went all the way down and I was standing in the purple darkness. Now I was scared. There weren't even any lights in the Iowa countryside; in a minute nobody would be able to
see me. Luckily a man going back to Davenport gave me a lift downtown. But I was right where I started from. I went to sit in the bus station and think this over. I ate another apple pie and ice cream; that's practically all I ate all the way across the cou ntry, l k
new it was nutritious and it was delicious, of course. I decided to gamble. I took a bus in downtown Davenport, after spending a half-hour watching a waitress in the bus-station café, and rode to the city limits, but this time near the gas stations. Here the b
ig trucks roared, wham, and inside two minutes one of them cranked to a stop for me. I ran for it with my soul whoopeeing. And what a driver—a great big tough truckdriver with popping eyes and a hoarse raspy voice who just slammed and kicked at ev
erything and got his rig under way and paid hardly any attention to me. So I could rest my tired soul a little, for one of the biggest troubles hitchhiking is having to talk to innumerable people, make them feel that they didn't make a mistake picking you u p, e
ven entertain them almost, all of which is a great strain when you're going all the way and don't plan to sleep in hotels. The guy just yelled above the roar, and all I had to do was yell back, and we relaxed. And he balled that thing clear to Iowa Cit y and ye lled
me the funniest stories about how he got around the law in every town that had an unfair speed limit, saying over and over again, "Them goddam cops can't put no flies on my ass!" Just as we rolled into Iowa City he saw another truck coming behin d us, and
because he had to turn off at Iowa City he blinked his tail lights at the other guy and slowed down for me to jump out, which I did with my bag, and the other truck, acknowledging this exchange, stopped for me, and once again, in the twink of n othing, I was in
another big high cab, all set to go hundreds of miles across the night, and was I happy! And the new truckdriver was as crazy as the other and yelled just as much, and all I had to do was lean back and roll on. Now I could see Denver looming ahead of me like the Promise d Land, w
ay out there beneath the stars, across the prairie of Iowa and the plains of Nebraska, and I could see the greater vision of San Francisco beyond, like jewels in the night. He balled the jack and told stories for a couple of hours, then, at a town in Iowa where y ears later
Dean and I were stopped on suspicion in what looked like a stolen Cadillac, he slept a few hours in the seat. I slept too, and took one little walk along the lonely brick walls illuminated by one lamp, with the prairie brooding at the end o f each little stree t and the s
mell of the corn like dew in the night. He woke up with a start at dawn. Off we roared, and an hour later the smoke of Des Moines appeared ahead over the green cornfields. He had to eat his breakfast now and wanted to take it easy, s o I wen t right on i
nto Des Moines, about four miles, hitching a ride with two boys from the University of Iowa; and it was strange sitting in their brand-new comfortable car and hearing them talk of exams as we zoomed smoothly into town. Now I wante d to sle ep a whol
e day. So I went to the Y to get a room; they didn't have any, and by instinct I wandered down to the railroad tracks—and there're a lot of them in Des Moines—and wound up in a gloomy old Plains inn of a hotel by the locomotive rou ndhouse , and spen
t a long day sleeping on a big clean hard white bed with dirty remarks carved in the wall beside my pillow and the beat yellow windowshades pulled over the smoky scene of the railyards. I woke up as the sun was reddening; and tha t was th e one distin
ct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of th e hotel, an
d footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life w as a hau nte d life, the l
ife of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon. But I had to get going an d stop m oa ning, so I
picked up my bag, said so long to the old hotelkeeper sitting by his spittoon, and went to eat. I ate apple pie and ice cream—it was getting better as I got deeper into Iowa, the pie bigger, the ice cream richer. There were the most bea utif ul bevies o
f girls everywhere I looked in Des Moines that afternoon—they were coming home from high school—but I had no time now for thoughts like that and promised myself a ball in Denver. Carlo Marx was already in Denver; Dean was th ere; Chad
King and Tim Gray were there, it was their hometown; Marylou was there; and there was mention of a mighty gang including Ray Rawlins and his beautiful blond sister Babe Rawlins; two waitresses Dean knew, the Be ttencourt si ste rs; . and ev
en Roland Major, my old college writing buddy, was there. I looked forward to all of them with joy and anticipation. So I rushed past the pretty girls, and the prettiest girls in the world live in Des Moines. A guy with a kind of toolshack on wheels, a tru ck f ull of tools t
hat he drove standing up like a modern milkman, gave me a ride up the long hill, where I immediately got a ride from a farmer and his son heading out for Adel in Iowa. In this town, under a big elm tree near a gas s tation, I made the acquaintanc e of another hitch
hiker, a typical New Yorker, an Irishman who'd been driving a truck for the post office most of his work years and was now headed for a girl in Denver and a new life. I think he was running away from something in New Yor k, the law most likely.
He was a real rednose young drunk of thirty, and would have bored me ordinarily, except that my senses were sharp for any kind of human friendship. He wore a beat sweater and baggy pants and had nothing wit h him in t he w ay of a bag—jus
t a toothbrush and handkerchiefs. He said we ought to hitch together. I should have said no, because he looked pretty awful on the road. But we stuck together and got a ride with a taciturn man to Stuart, Iowa, a t own in w hic h we were really strand
ed. We stood in front of the railroad-ticket shack in Stuart, waiting for the westbound traffic till the sun went down, a good five hours, dawdling away the time, at first telling about ourselves, then he told dirty stori es, then w e ju st kicked pebbles and
made goofy noises of one kind and another. We got bored. I decided to spend a buck on beer; we went to an old saloon in Stuart and had a few. There he got as drunk as he ever d id in his Ninth A venue nig ht b ack home, and yelled j
oyously in my ear all the sordid dreams of his life. I kind of liked him; not because he was a good sort, as he later proved to be, but because he was enthusiastic about things. We got back on the road in th e darkness, and of cour
se nobody stopped and nobody came by much. That went on till three o'clock in the morning. We spent some time trying to sleep on the bench at the railroad ticket office, b ut the telegrap h clicked all ni ght and we couldn't sl
eep, and big freights were slamming around outside. We didn't know how to hop a proper chain gang; we'd never done it before; we didn't know whether they were going east or wes t or h ow to find out or what bo
xcars and flats and de-iced reefers to pick, and so on. So when the Omaha bus came through just before dawn we hopped on it and joined the sleeping passengers—I pa id for his fa re as well as mine. His n
ame was Eddie. He reminded me of my cousin-in-law from the Bronx. That was why I stuck with him. It was like having an old friend along, a smiling good-natured sort t o goof alon g w ith. We arrived at Cou
ncil Bluffs at dawn; I looked out. All winter I'd been reading of the great wagon parties that held council there before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails; and of cour se now it was only cute suburban
cottages of one damn kind and another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn. Then Omaha, and, by God, the first cowboy I saw, walking along the bleak walls of the who lesale meat war eho uses in a ten-gallon
hat and Texas boots, looked liked any beat character of the brickwall dawns of the East except for the getup. We got off the bus and walked clear up the hill, the long h ill formed over the mi llenniums by the mi
ghty Missouri, alongside of which Omaha is built, and got out to the country and stuck our thumbs out. We got a brief ride from a wealthy rancher in a ten-gallon hat, who said the va ll ey o f th e Platte was as great
as the Nile Valley of Egypt, and as he said so I saw the great trees in the distance that snaked with the riverbed and the great verdant fields around it, and almost agre ed with him. Th en as we we re standing at another
crossroads and it was starting to get cloudy another cowboy, this one six feet tall in a modest half-gallon hat, called us over and wanted to know if either one of us co uld drive. Of co urse Eddie cou ld drive, and he had a li
cense and I didn't. Cowboy had two cars with him that he was driving back to Montana. His wife was at Grand Island, and he wanted us to drive one of the cars there, where she'd ta ke ov er. A t th at p oint he was going no
rth, and that would be the limit of our ride with him. But it was a good hundred miles into Nebraska, and of course we jumped for it. Eddie drove alone, the cowboy a nd myself follo wing, and no so oner were we out of t
own than Eddie started to ball that jack ninety miles an hour out of sheer exuberance. "Damn me, what's that boy doing!" the cowboy shouted, and took off after him . It began to be li ke a race . For a minute I thought E
ddie was trying to get away with the car—and for all I know that's what he meant to do. But the cowboy stuck to him and caught up with him and tooted the horn. Ed die slowed dow n. The cowb oy tooted to stop. "Damn
boy, you're liable to get a flat going that speed. Can't you drive a little slower?" "Well, I'll be damned, was I really going ninety?" said Eddie. "I didn't realize it on thi s smoo th ro ad." "Just take it a little
easy and we'll all get to Grand Island in one piece." "Sure thing." And we resumed our journey. Eddie had calmed down and probably even got sleepy. So we drove a h undred m iles across Nebraska, followin
g the winding Platte with its verdant fields. "During the depression," said the cowboy to me, "I used to hop freights at least once a month. In those days you'd see hu nd reds of men riding a flatcar or in a boxcar, and th
ey weren't just bums, they were all kinds of men out of work and going from one place to another and some of them just wandering. It was like that all over the West. B rakemen never bothered you in those days. I don
't know about today. Nebraska I ain't got no use for. Why in the middle nineteen thirties this place wasn't nothing but a big dustcloud as far as the eye could see. You couldn't b re athe. The ground was black. I was here in those
days. They can give Nebraska back to the Indians far as I'm concerned. I hate this damn place more than any place in the world. Montana's my home now—Missoula. You come up there sometime a nd see God' s c ountry." Later in the afternoon I slept when he g
ot tired talking—he was an interesting talker. We stopped along the road for a bite to eat. The cowboy went o ff to have a spa re tire patch ed, and Eddie and I sat down in a kind of homema
de diner. I heard a great laugh, the greatest laugh in the world, and here came this rawhide oldtimer Nebr aska farmer with a bunc h of other bo ys into the diner; you could hear his raspy cries
clear across the plains, across the whole gray world of them that day. Everybody else laughed with hi m. He didn't hav e a care in the world a nd had the hugest regard for everybody. I said to
myself, Wham, listen to that man laugh. That's the West, here I am in the West. He came booming in to the diner, calli ng Maw's name, and she made the sweetest cherry pie in Nebraska,
and I had some with a mountainous scoop of ice cream on top. "Maw, rustle me up some grub afor e I have to start e atin myself raw or some da mn silly idee like that." And he threw himse
lf on a stool and went hyaw hyaw hyaw hyaw. "And throw some beans in it." It was the spirit of the West sitting righ t next to me. I wished I knew his whole raw life and what the hell he'd been
doing all these years besides laughing and yelling like that. Whooee, I told my soul, and the cowb oy came back and off we went to Gra nd Island. We got th ere in no time flat. He went to fetch his wife a
nd off to whatever fate awaited him, and Eddie and I resumed on the road. We got a ride from a c ouple of young fell ows—wranglers, teenagers, country boys in a p ut-together jalopy—and were left off som
ewhere up the line in a thin drizzle of rain. Then an old man who said nothing—and God kno ws why he picked us up—took us to Shelton. Here Eddie stood forlornly in the road in front of a s taring bun ch of short, squat Omaha Indians who ha
d nowhere to go and nothing to do. Across the road wa s th e r ailroad track and the watertank saying SHELTON. "Damn me," said Eddie with amazement, " I've b een i n thi s town before. It was years ago, during th
e war, at night, late at night when everybody was sleeping. I went out on the platform to smoke, and there we was in the middle of nowhere and black as hell, and I look up and see that name Shelton written on the watertank. Bound for the Pacific, everybody snoring, every da
mn dumb sucker, and we only stayed a few minut es, stoking up or something, and off we we nt. Damn me, this Shelton! I hat ed this p lac e ever since!" And we were stuck in Shelt
on. As in Davenport, Iowa, somehow all the cars w ere farmer-cars , and on ce i n a while a tourist car, which is worse, wi
th old men driving and their wives pointing out th e sights or p oring ove r maps, and sitting back looking at every
thing with suspicious faces. The drizzle increased and Eddie got c old; he had very little clothing. I fished a woo
l plaid shirt from my canvas bag and he put it on. He felt a li me kin d. I went to the little two-by-four post office a
nd wrote my aunt a penny postcard. We went bac k to the g e Rock Isla nd balled by. We saw the faces of Pullma
n passengers go by in a blur. The train howled o ff across nky fel low in a gallon hat stopped his car on the wro
ng side of the road and came over to us; he l ooked like over. " You boys going to get somewhere, or just goin
g?" We didn't understand his question, and it was a da I that's pitch ed a few mile down the road and I'm looking
for some old boys willing to work and make a buck for th con cess ion, y ou know, the kind you throw around dolls an
d take your luck. You boys want to work for me, you can u ca n get a bed but no food. You'll have to eat in town. We trav
el some." We thought it over. "It's a good op portunity," h t sill y and d idn't know what to say, and I for one didn't want to get
hung-up with a carnival. I was in such a bloody hurry to get fast as I can a nd I d on't think I have the time." Eddie said the same thing
, and the old man waved his hand and casually sauntered b . We laugh ed about it awh ile and speculated about what it would have been like. I
had visions of a dark and dusty night on the plains, and the faces of Nebraska families wa nderin g by, with their rosy children looking at everything with aw
e, and I know I would have felt like the devil himself rooking t atlands darkness, and, Godalmighty, the sad music of the me
bed of burlap. Eddie turned out to be a pretty absent-minded square as a box—a trailer, no doubt, but a weird, crazy Nebra
nd wearing my wool plaid shirt. Well, alackaday, I kissed the ow would I ever get to Denver? I was just about giving up and
self, that's why I always pick up a fellow." "I would too if I had a truck, with a flatboard at the back, with about six or seven b
ing cotton shirts and overalls, nothing else; both thick-wriste hed, a rider grabbed me, and I sat down. Somebody passed a
go!" yelled a kid in a baseball cap, and they gunned up the tr hang on." I looked at the company. There were two young farm
from Columbus, Ohio, high-school football players, chewing g ll slim fellow who had a sneaky look. "Where you from?" I ask
was a little dark guy who rode freight trains around the countr ned to me and said, "Where you headed?" I said Denver. "I got
ned black by the soot of railroads and the dirt of boxcars and s in worried thought. Montana Slim spoke to them occasionally
held there half-moronically. "You got any money?" he said to't you?" "Yeah, I guess you can." "I ain't beyond doing it whe
got a ride." I mulled this over; the thought of zooming all nigh d to go to Denver. I'd have to get off at Cheyenne too, and hit
me out of the cab and smiled at all of us. "Pisscall!" said one. d sat around over hamburgers and coffee while they wrapped
y at it. So on their trip to the Coast empty they picked up eve —and the only responses I got were two sunny smiles and la
arkness was falling. The drivers had a smoke; I jumped at th d them. "Oh no, we never drink, go ahead." Montana Slim an
hed us go by from false-front buildings; the main street was n the truck and roared off. It got dark quickly. We all had a s
" I cried out to Slim. "This is the beginning of the rangeland e limit. The road changed too: humpy in the middle, with so
a somersault. But they were tremendous drivers. How that led for joy. We passed the bottle. The great blazing stars ca
hese plains put me in the mind of Texas." "Are you from Tex care of him best.as I can, he's only a child." Although Gene w
he country every year, south in the winter and north in the su en a couple times. If you want to ride on to Og den I got some
What's Ogden?" I said. "It's the place where most of the boys p Hazard, William Holmes Hazard, who was hobo by choice. As a
o him, and when the hobo went off down the road the little boy ha het your mouth, that's not for the like of the Hazards." But he never
hobo. Big Slim and I spent many nights telling stories and spitting tob n Mississippi Gene's demeanor that I said, "Do you happen to have met a
"Well, that sounds like him. He came from Ruston, Louisiana." "That's right. L
s oil fields?" "East Texas is right. And now he's punching cows." And that was exactly right; and still I couldn't believe Gene could have really known Slim, whom I'd been looking for, more or less, for years. "And he used to work in tugboats in New York?" "Well now, I don't know about that." "I guess you o
nly knew him in the West." "I reckon. I ain't never been to New York." "Well, damn me, I'm amazed you know him. This is a big country. Yet I knew you must have known him." "Yessir, I know Big Slim pretty well. Always generous with his money when he's got some. Mean, tough fellow, too; I seen him flatte
n a policeman in the yards at Cheyenne, one punch." That sounded like Big Slim; he was always practicing that one punch in the air; he looked like Jack Dempsey, but a young Jack Dempsey who drank. "Damn!" I yelled into the wind, and I had another shot, and by now I was feeling pretty good. Every shot
was wiped away by the rushing wind of the open truck, wiped away of its bad effects, and the good effect sank in my stomach. "Cheyenne, here I come!" I sang. "Denver, look out for your boy." Montana Slim turned to me, pointed at my shoes, and commented, "You reckon if you put them things in the grou
nd something'll grow up?"—without cracking a smile, of course, and the other boys heard him and laughed. And they were the silliest shoes in America; I brought them along specifically because I didn't want my feet to sweat in the hot road, and except for the rain in Bear Mountain they proved to be the be
st possible shoes for my journey. So I laughed with them. And the shoes were pretty ragged by now, the bits of colored leather sticking up like pieces of a fresh pineapple and my toes showing through. Well, we had another shot and laughed. As in a dream we zoomed through small crossroads towns smac
k out of the darkness, and passed long lines of lounging harvest hands and cowboys in the night. They watched us pass in one motion of the head, and we saw them slap their thighs from the continuing dark the other side of town—we were a funny-looking