MISSISSIPPI DRIFT

River vagrants in the age of Wal-Mart

By Matthew Power

For several years, beginning when I was six or seven, I played a hobo for Halloween. It was easy enough to put together. Oversize boots, a moth-eaten tweed jacket, and my dad's busted felt hunting hat, which smelled of deer lure; finish it up with a beard scuffed on with a charcoal briquette, a handkerchief bindle tied to a hockey stick, an old empty bottle. I imagined a hobo's life would be a fine thing. I would sleep in haystacks and do exactly what I wanted all the time.

Since then, I've had occasional fantasies of dropping out, and have even made some brief furtive bids at secession: a stint as a squatter in a crumbling South Bronx building, a stolen ride through Canada on a freight train. A handful of times I got myself arrested, the charges ranging from trespassing to disorderly conduct to minor drug possession. But I wasn't a very good criminal, or nomad, and invariably I would return to the comforting banalities of ordinary life. I never disliked civilization intensely enough to endure the hardships of abandoning it, but periodically I would tire of routine, of feeling "cramped up and sivilized," as Huck Finn put it, and I would light out for another diversion in the Territory.

It was on one such outing, a hitchhike up the West Coast in the summer of 1999, that I met Matt Bullard in a palm-fringed city park in Arcata, California. A dumpster-diving, train-hopping, animal-rights-crusading anarchist and tramp, with little money and less of a home, Matt was almost exactly my age, and from that first time we talked I admired his raconteurial zest and scammer's panache. He considered shoplifting a political act and dumpstering a civil right. As we sat on a park bench in the sunshine, Matt reached into his backpack and pulled out what he called a "magic dollar," an ordinary bill save for its twelve-inch tail of cellophane packing tape. He would dip it into a vending machine, select the cheapest item available, collect his purchase and change, and pull his dollar back out by the tail. An unguarded machine could be relieved of all its coins and every last one of its snacks in the space of an hour. It was a very impressive trick.

Matt was convinced that there was something deeply wrong with most Americans: they were bored and unfulfilled, their freedom relinquished for the security of a steady paycheck and a ninety-minute commute, their imagination anesthetized by TV addiction and celebrity worship. He had decided to organize his life against this fate. He utterly refused to serve; he lived exactly as he desired. Matt's was the kind of amoral genius that I had always longed to possess. He not only had quit society altogether but was gaming it for all it was worth, like some dirtbag P. T. Barnum. I, meanwhile, would soon be returning to a temp job in a Manhattan cubicle. Matt couldn't understand why I needed to go back, and I couldn't really myself, but I went back anyway, tugged by the gravity of expectations. In the ensuing years, I got occasional emails documenting Matt's drift, describing days on grain cars passing through Minnesota blizzards, nights in palm-thatched squats on Hawaiian islands: dispatches from a realm of total freedom beyond the frontiers of ordinary life.

Two summers ago, Matt sent an invitation that I could not ignore. He was in Minneapolis, building a homemade raft, and had put out a call for a crew of "boat punks" to help him pilot the vessel the entire length of the Mississippi River, all the way to New Orleans. They would dig through the trash for sustenance. They would commune with the national mythos. They would be twenty-first-century incarnations of the river rats, hoboes, and drifters of the Mississippi's history, the sort who in Mark Twain's time would have met

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their ends tarred, feathered, and run out of town on a rail. Catfish rose in my mind; ripples expanded outward and scattered any doubts. I wrote back straightaway and asked to join up.

I met Matt on a scorching July afternoon and followed him through leafy, upper-middle-class residential streets toward Minneapolis's West River Park. The industrious hum of weed-whackers and leaf-blowers filled the air, and helmeted children tricycled along a path, their watchful parents casting a suspicious eye at us. But through a small hole in the

foliage by the edge of the bike path, we instantly stepped out of the middle-American idyll, scrambling down a narrow path through the tangled undergrowth, through cleared patches in the woods littered with malt-liquor cans and fast-food wrappers, hobo camps with the musty wild smell of an animal's den. I clutched at the roots of saplings to keep from tumbling down the slope. The sounds of civilization receded to white noise. We stumbled out of the trees onto a sandy spit, and I suddenly saw the river before me, narrow and amber-colored, flowing silently south, lined on both banks with forested bluffs.

Matt's raft was moored to the bank next to a storm sewer outflow pipe. My first impression was of the Unabomber's cabin set afloat. A brief description of the vessel: ten feet in the beam, twenty-four feet stem to stern, its decks had been laid down over three rows of fifty-five-gallon drums, twenty-three in all. "I got them from a dumpster behind a chemical plant," Matt told me. "Some of them still had stuff sloshing around inside." The barrels had been framed out with lumber, mostly 2x4s swiped from construction sites, and a deck of marine plywood set on top. On this platform Matt had built a cabin, about ten by fourteen feet, leaving a small motor deck aft and a front porch fore. The porch connected to the cabin through a pair of French doors, and a screen door exited the rear. The cleats, railroad spikes welded to diamond plate, were "punk as fuck," said Matt, admiring his amateur blacksmithing. On the roof was bolted a large solar panel of larcenous provenance, as well as a small sleeping quarters and a worn-out armchair from which the boat could be steered. A wheel salvaged from a sunken houseboat was connected by an ingenious series of pulleys and wires to the outboard motor on the back deck, a thirty-three-horsepower, two-stroke Johnson, which was showroom-new during the Johnson Administration. It was one of the few purchased items on the boat, bought by me as a gesture of my commitment to the mission. Several workbenches lined the cabin, and there was a galley with a propane stove, a chest of drawers, and a rusty high school gym locker for storage. Matt had brought everything he had scrounged that could possibly be of use: old fishing anchors, tied-up lengths of rope, lawn furniture, a folding card table. Three bicycles. Several five-gallon gas tanks. A stereo speaker system with subwoofers made of paint cans, hooked up to a motorcycle battery. A collection of practice heads from the dumpster of a beauty college. In keeping with the rustic theme, the boat's front had a porch swing made of shipping pallets and a pair of plastic pink flamingos, "liberated from some lawn," screwed to its posts.

Matt's six-foot-two frame had bulked up since I'd last seen him, and his hair had grown into a waist-length mullet of dreadlocks hanging behind a battered black baseball cap. He wore a goatee, and his round face squeezed his eyes to mischievous slits when he smiled. He had added to his tattoo collection to form a sort of identity-politics résumé: NOT REALLY VEGAN ANYMORE advertised an amended dietary philosophy on his wrist; a piece on the back of his hand showed crossed railroad spikes and the free-associative motto WANDERLUST ADVENTURE TRAMP; on his left bicep was a black-masked figure standing behind a dog, above the phrase ANIMAL LIBERATION.

Matt hadn't held a steady job since

Illustrations by Stan Fellows

a brief stint at Kinko's in the late Nineties. One time in court, he said, a judge had admonished him: "You can't be homeless the rest of your life. You have to work." He laughed as he recalled this. "I fucking hate work," he said. "If I could see some result from it, besides money, maybe I'd do it. I went into the welfare office to apply for food stamps, and they took one look at me and said, 'Clearly, you're unemployable.'" He saw no shame in this, and he looked at food stamps as a way of getting back the taxes he paid when he was at Kinko's. From the hundreds of hours he had put into the boat, it was evident that what he hated was not doing work per se but rather trading his time for money. Matt had been working on the boat for over a year and had spent almost nothing on it. What wasn't donated or dumpstered was procured by extralegal means. "Half this boat is stolen," he chuckled, with unmistakable pride in his handiwork and resourcefulness.

The neo-hobo lifestyle, such as it was, often blurred the boundary between ingenuity and criminality. On the legal side, there were the old standbys: "spanging" (bumming spare change), "flying signs" (asking for money with a cardboard sign), and the governmental largesse of food stamps. Matt was also a big proponent of pharmaceutical studies, which gave out nice lump-sum payments as well as free food. In one study, he said, he had taken the largest dose of ibuprofen ever administered to a human being. In that instance, the result of being a human lab rat was only diarrhea, though he hadn't landed a new study in a while. "I had plans to buy a house with drug studies," he said wistfully. The only semi-legitimate work Matt was willing to pursue was seasonal farm labor, particularly the sugar-beet harvest in North Dakota, which has become something of an annual pilgrimage for the punk traveler community. From three weeks of driving forklifts or sorting beets on a conveyor belt, enough money could be earned to fund months of travel.

On the illegal side of gainful unemployment, there were many techniques of varying complexity. The digital revolution in retailing had led to gift-card cloning (copying the magnetic strip on an unused gift card, returning it to the store display, and then waiting until it is activated) and bar-code swapping (either printing up low-price bar codes on stickers or switching them from one item to another). Various lower-tech shoplifting methods could be employed anywhere, from the primitive "wahoo" (wherein the shoplifter walks into a convenience store, takes a case of beer, screams *Wahoo!* and runs out the door) to "left-handing" (paying for an item with your right hand while walking through the checkout with another item in your left) and "kangarooing" (the more theatrical use of a dummy arm and a pair of overalls with a large hidden pouch). One of the most lucrative scams was called "taking a flight" and involved having an accomplice steal one's luggage from an airport baggage carousel, which, with enough persistent calls to customer service, could result in a $3,000 payday from the airline. Matt and his friends saw stealing as a form of revolt, a means of surviving while they chipped away at the monstrous walls of the capitalist fortress.

For Matt, the river trip was to be a sort of last great adventure before he left the United States for good. As long as he stayed, he felt the ultimate unfreedom of jail lurking around every corner. For years he was heavily involved with the animal-liberation movement and logged weeks of jail time in three different states for protests at animal-testing facilities. He claims to be on a domestic-terrorist watch list. "When I get my I.D. run by the cops, it comes up 'Suspected member of Animal Liberation Front. Do not arrest.'" A recent homecoming for Matt in LAX resulted in a five-hour interview with Homeland Security. He related all these stories with thinly veiled pride, the way a parent might describe a child's performance in a Little League game.

After the river journey, he was moving to Berlin, a squatter's paradise he had visited once and found far more livable than anywhere in the United States. "I hate America," he said, without the menace of a McVeigh or a Zarqawi but nevertheless with feeling. I asked what he would do with the raft once we reached New Orleans and he left for Germany. "Only one thing to do," he said. "Torch it. I'm gonna give this motherfucker a Viking burial."

To inaugurate the voyage, Matt had planned a launch party a mile downstream, at a beach on the river's edge. With a few more arrivals, our

little crew swelled to five: me and Matt, plus Cody Dornbusch, a compact, bearded twenty-four-year-old from South Dakota; Chris Broderdorp, a twenty-one-year-old bicyclist and master dumpster-diver from Minneapolis, rail-thin with a half-shaved mop of curls and a high-pitched laugh; and Kristina Brown, a fetching, levelheaded twenty-five-year-old from Seattle, who among them had the most schooling and seemed most to be playacting at the pirate life. I was the only crew member without a pierced septum. The general mood among my boatmates was upbeat: the overflowing dumpsters of Middle America would be more than enough to sustain our bodies, and adventure would nourish our spirits. Matt fired up the ancient engine, and in a haze of blue exhaust smoke we chugged slowly out into the current, which had the color and foaminess of Coca-Cola, and headed downstream, hidden from the city by the limestone bluffs. The abandoned mills around the Falls of Saint Anthony—the falls that had brought the city here—had been converted into million-dollar condominiums. The Minneapolis–St. Paul metroplex, tidy and forward-looking, seemed to have turned its back on the river that birthed it.

The party, advertised among the local punk scene through word of mouth and printed flyers, commenced at sundown. The raft was hung with Christmas lights, and a driftwood bonfire blazed on the sand. Kids drank 40s of malt liquor and climbed over and over again onto the roof of the raft, jumping, diving, and cannonballing in various states of undress into the muddy brown river water. The night was humid and sultry, tinged with menace, and a thick darkness pressed down upon the river. Amid all the wild shouting and splashing, the dirt-smudged faces lit up by flames and colored Christmas lights, it seemed as though the raft had run aground on some cargo cult's island, the natives working themselves into a frenzy as they decided whether to worship us or eat us or escort us to the edge of the volcano at spearpoint. Someone stumbled into me in the dark, dripping, and grabbed me by the shirt, smelling of sweat and booze and the river, his voice slurred. "Hey! You're the writer. From New York." I reluctantly confirmed this. "Well, your fuckin' story better be about *solutions*." (He dragged out the word for emphasis.) "Otherwise it's bullshit. Solutions!" His grip tightened. He attempted to fix his gaze to mine and failed. He shouted "Solutions!" once more for good measure before shambling away and jumping into the river again.

In the morning, with the ashes of the bonfire still smoldering and a half-dozen half-dressed casualties of the bacchanal sprawled on the beach, we pulled the lines in and pushed the raft's barrels off the sand bar, drifting out and spinning like a compass needle until the boat nosed at long last into the flow of the river. With the Lyndon Johnson (the nickname I had given the forty-year-old engine) at half-throttle, the raft meandered with the current, the green wall of trees slipping by at walking pace. The five-gallon gas tank was draining disturbingly fast. I sat on the front-porch swing, rereading a dog-eared newspaper. Chris idly strummed a guitar as Cody and Kristina sat up top with Matt, who was steering from the captain's chair. "You know, you're going to be reading that fucking July 16th *New York Times* for the next month," Cody told me, sticking his head over the edge. I put the paper down. A Hmong family fished from a railroad embankment, waving excitedly as we passed, perhaps remembering the long-tail boats of their far-off Mekong. Eagles wheeled and dove into the river, which unscrolled before us as we rounded each bend. It was high summer, blue skies and sunny, about as auspicious as one could hope for the start of a two-thousand-mile journey. We had hung up ragged pirate flags, and now they fluttered behind us in the breeze, the grinning skulls wearing a look of bemused delight.

Our first obstacle was Lock and Dam #1. To maintain a navigable channel on the upper Mississippi, which would otherwise be too low in the summer for commercial traffic, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a system of twenty-nine locks and dams between Minneapolis and St. Louis. These serve as a stairway for ships to survive the Mississippi's 420-foot drop during its 673-mile journey to St. Louis; below that, the river (joined by the Missouri and then the Ohio) is sufficiently deep not to require locks, and there the Corps built levees instead. This engineering work has altered the natural flow of the Mississippi, allowing millions of acres of former flood plains and wetlands to be converted into intensively cultivated industrial farmland, which in turn sends fertilizer- and pollutant-rich runoff from thirty-one states coursing back into the channel and downstream. Floods are held back by levees, and the resulting pressure, like that of a thumb pressed over the nozzle of a hose, erodes 15,000 acres of wetlands a year from the Delta, creating an oxygen-starved "dead zone" the size of New Jersey each summer in the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi is one of the most managed, and mismanaged, river systems in the world.

The upper river may be restrained by dams, but it is not without its hazards, both natural and man-made. I flipped through our photocopied set of charts of the upper river, on the cover of which there was a hand-drawn picture of a squarish boat, seen from above as it travels in a circle, about to plow over a stick figure flailing in the water. Underneath was written: CIRCLE OF DEATH.[1] Each page of the charts covered ten miles of river, and each enumerated a frightening array of obstacles. "Wing dams," long jetties of rocks that jut out into the river to direct flow toward the channel, lurked just inches below the surface, waiting to tear our barrels from under us. "Stump fields," the remnants of clear-cut forest lands that had been drowned by the river, appeared as cross-hatched forbidden zones that would strand us in an enormous watery graveyard. But of the many things we had been warned about, barges were by far the most dangerous. Seventy-five million tons of wheat, soybeans, fertilizer, coal—the

[1] *Matt explained this rather gruesome nautical term: when a speedboat operator stands up and catches the throttle, he can be tossed overboard, yanking the tiller to one side. The unmanned boat, at full throttle, will then trace a wide circle and return to the same spot where its pilot was sent overboard, running him down and causing death by hideous propeller wounds. Although the two-mile-an-hour cruising speed of our vessel made such a scenario unlikely, the crew decided to christen our raft the SS* Circle of Death.

bulk produce of mining and industrial agriculture—are shipped by barge along the upper river every year. A standard fifteen-barge tow, three hundred yards in length, can carry the freight equivalent of 870 semi trucks. They are as large as a high-rise building laid on its side, and about as easy to steer. A tow plying the river under full steam can take as long as a mile and a half to slide to a stop, plowing over anything in its path. The Lyndon Johnson sputtering out in the navigation channel while a tow bore down on us was not something I wished to contemplate.

As if reading my thoughts, just yards from the mouth of the lock chamber, the motor coughed a few times and then quit. We spun in place, and Matt flew down the ladder from the top deck to try to get the engine started. "Shit, shit, shit!" he yelled. "I forgot to mix the oil in with the gas!" The old two-stroke lubricated itself with an oil-gas mix, and we had very nearly blown the engine by running straight gas through it. Matt popped open a bottle of oil and sloshed it into the gas, measuring by eye. The rest of the crew scrambled for our canoe paddles, hacking at the water futilely to try to guide the raft into the lock. Matt barked orders that no one heeded, and the general response of the crew (myself included) to our first emergency was unrestrained panic. Finally, after loud cursing and many wheezing turns of the starter, the engine roared to life, leaving an oily rainbow on the water and a cloud of blue smoke in its wake.

"That's fucking great," said Matt. "Dead fish and dead Iraqis."

The lock loomed ahead of us, and we slid into its chamber, cutting the engine and bumping up against the concrete retaining wall. A lock worker walked along the wall to us and threw down ropes to keep the raft in place. I had hoped he'd be excited at our arrival, or at least amused, but he had the world-weary countenance of a man who had seen all things that float, and our jerry-built vessel of scrap lumber and barrels was insufficient to impress him. I asked him what other strange things had passed through his lock. A guy came through rowing a raft of lashed-together logs just last year, he said. I realized that we were just the latest in a long line of fools, and not even the most hard-core.

Behind us, the door to the chamber swung silently shut, and like a rubber duck in a draining bathtub we began sliding down along the algae-slick wall as millions of gallons of water drained into the next stage of the river. Within a few minutes we had dropped thirty feet, and the top of the chamber glowed distantly as if we were at the bottom of a well. With the majesty of great cathedral doors swinging open, a crack appeared between the gates of the lock, and the murky green waters of the chamber joined the still waters of the lower river, glinting in the sunlight. Matt whooped, to no one in particular. New Orleans, here we come.

The first night, still in St. Paul, we pulled up to a hobo jungle, a firepit-pocked stand of trees below a rusting railroad bridge where in the past both Matt and Cody had waited to catch freight trains. The jungle sits on land that floods out yearly. Wrack and trash were scattered about; it looked like the desolate set of a horror movie. Chris rode his bike off to search dumpsters, and the rest of us carried the gas cans ashore to fill them up. Having covered barely ten miles in about the time it would take to walk that distance, we had already used up an enormous amount of gas. While the Lyndon Johnson got slightly better mileage than, say, an Abrams tank, it was nowhere near as fuel-efficient as a Hummer. This appalling carbon footprint aside, at three dollars a gallon our meager gas budget would be eaten up before we got out of the Twin Cities. My back-of-the-envelope calculation suggested that it would take somewhere near $5,000 worth of gas to make it the whole length of the river. Matt, however, felt no guilt about this use of fossil fuels. "I figure since I never use gas the rest of the year, it all balances out. We'll make it. We're gonna bust our asses, get some work somewhere, do some scams, look for a Wal-Mart."

Wal-Mart was frequently invoked by Matt as a source of almost limitless material bounty, a natural resource as rich as the midwestern prairies its parking lots had buried. Enormous and ubiquitous, the megastores offered almost everything we needed to survive. Aside from outright theft (the most straightforward procurement strategy), there were the wonders of Wal-Mart dumpsters, overflowing with inventory that was slightly damaged or barely past its expiration date. There were also a wide variety of "return scams" as elaborate as anything the Duke and the Dauphin could have pulled over on the rubes. "Receipt diving" involved plucking a crumpled receipt from an ashtray by the exit, entering the store, selecting the same object off the shelves, and promptly returning it, receipt in hand, for store credit. Another ruse involved finding goods in the trash (a bag of chips, perhaps), to which a PAID sticker had been affixed. This sticker was removed and placed on a small, expensive object, which was then returned for store credit; and since many of the larger Wal-

Marts in the Midwest had their own gas stations, a half-eaten bag of chips could thereby be converted into a large supply of free gasoline. Or so my crewmates told me. We paid retail for our new load of gas, hauling the heavy jericans a mile through the woods to where the raft was moored. I was beginning to realize that there was a considerable amount of heavy lifting involved in dropping out.

Chris returned with a garbage bag full of cold pepperoni pizza slices, a new staple of our shipboard diet, removed from under the heat lamps of a convenience store and discarded only hours before. We all dug in to the congealing bounty. Chris's dumpstering was a good supplement to our ship's stores, which were stacked against a wall in stolen milk crates, a depressing harvest from community food banks: government-commodity-labeled cans of cheese soup, string beans, creamed corn; bags of generic Froot Loops, some Kool-Aid powder to fend off scurvy. The crew's dietary ethos was what is commonly referred to as "freeganism," wherein foodstuffs that are about to be thrown away are rescued from the waste stream and thereby ethically cleansed. An estimated $75 billion worth of food is thrown out yearly in America, and it doesn't take a great leap of logic to connect the desire to live sustainably with the almost limitless supply of free food that overflows the nation's dumpsters. Thus the opportunivore can forage either overtly or covertly, by asking up front or diving out back.

"We're going to dumpster everything we can," Matt told me. "Plus food shelves, donations, and you should apply for food stamps the first chance you get downriver." I'll eat out of the trash as happily as the next guy, I told him, but I didn't feel right applying for food stamps; this set Matt off on a series of gibes about my "so-called journalistic ethics." Matt was happy enough to sustain himself on the detritus of a world he saw as careening toward self-destruction, and equally happy to scam a government he despised. "I'm glad everyone's so wasteful," he told me. "It supports my lifestyle."

In the middle of a watery expanse of grain elevators and moored barges

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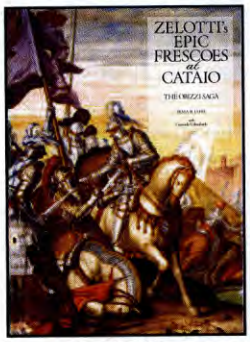

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to the south of St. Paul, our engine emitted a tubercular hack and died again. There was a stiff headwind, and the ungainly raft acted as a sail, dragging us against the current and back upriver. We paddled and poled ourselves to shore and tied up just before the skies opened up with a thunderstorm, and we huddled inside the cabin, soaked, as the robot voice on the weather radio warned of dime-size hail carpet bombing the Twin Cities. Matt stomped around the boat, dripping and furious, yelling at the disorder in the galley and the general uselessness of the crew. Most orders were monosyllabic, the commonest being "Move!" Rain hissed on the plywood roof of the cabin, thunder rattled the windows, lightning tore the air. The flashes burned photonegatives of the landscape onto my vision. The river had removed its bucolic mask to show a darker, wilder aspect.

The mood was grim. Cody stared off into the distance every time he heard a train whistle in the nearby yard, freights being his preferred mode of transport. We spent two nights tied up along the rocky, wave-swept shoreline, the roof leaking in half a dozen places, with every pot in the galley set out to catch the water. The cabin became increasingly claustrophobic, smelling of sweat and mildew and cigarette smoke and rotting produce. I waded ashore and walked through a shuttered suburb in the pouring rain to buy spark plugs. In the hardware store I overheard the two tellers discussing a care package to be sent to their coworker, now a roof gunner in Iraq. Would the pudding separate in the heat? Would applesauce be better? Our drifting life felt mean and meaningless in comparison. I walked back down to the river in the rain. We changed the fouled plugs and limped on again under bleak gray skies.

Matt had arrived at a magic solution to the fuel dilemma, a way to absolve ourselves of complicity in the Iraq war and reduce the *Circle of Death*'s carbon footprint. We were going to drift to New Orleans, taking advantage of the gravitational pull of a quarter-mile drop over the 2,000 miles of river. I pointed out the folly of this. There were twenty-eight dams still in front of us, slowing the river down. A breath of headwind would hold the raft in place as if we had dropped anchor. He dismissed my doubts with a sneer. Matt was even harder on Chris, upbraiding the young biker for his lackadaisical work ethic and enormous appetite. As a dumpster-diver, Chris had proven to be overeager, and our galley was perpetually full of overripe fruit and moldering doughnuts. And he was always eating, even during crises: he would have been grazing the buffet on the sinking *Titanic*. Matt barked orders at him constantly and generally considered him to be an oogle.[2]

Twain, writing in *Life on the Mississippi* of his days as a cub pilot, describes a certain Pilot Brown: a "horse-faced, ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-hunting, mote-magnifying tyrant." In a section unsubtly headed "I Want to Kill Brown," Twain deals with his hatred of his superior by lying in his bunk and imagining dispatching the tyrant "not in old, stale, commonplace ways, but in new and picturesque ones,—ways that were sometimes surprising for freshness of design and ghastliness of situation and environment." At night, swarmed by mosquitoes on the beached raft, I entertained some of the same fantasies that sustained a young Sam Clemens, feeling the fellowship of oppression through all the years that had passed down the river. There is a long record of psychotic sea captains in literature, and Matt, by historic standards, was somewhat less formidable than Bligh, or Queeg, or Ahab. He was a bit hard to take seriously, even when he launched into a tirade. But he was still profoundly unpleasant to live with and sail under on a ten-by-twenty-four-foot floating platform. I became increasingly of the opinion that Matt resembled a romantic anarcho-buccaneer less than a narcissistic sociopath. Perhaps he had traveled alone too often, depending on no one but himself, to be a leader of others. And this, I had come to realize, was what a functioning crew—even of anarchists—demanded.

We passed at long last beyond the Twin Cities, below the flaring stacks of an oil refinery that looked like a postapocalyptic fortress, a column of orange flame swaying in the night sky. Matt cut the engine and drifted whenever the wind allowed, and our pace slowed to a crawl. We averaged a handful of miles a day. A drop of water from the Mississippi's source at Lake Itasca will flow down along the river's length to the Gulf of Mexico in ninety days. In 2002, an overweight and lanolin-slathered Slovenian named Martin Strel swam the entire length in just over two months. It would have taken us at least nine months at the rate we were drifting. I made a game of watching dog walkers on the shore outpace us. Bloated catfish floated past belly-up, bound to reach New Orleans long before we would. Hundreds of spiderwebs garlanded the raft; they draped across the curved necks of the lawn flamingos and between the spokes of the ship's wheel. I spent hours on the front-porch swing, chain-smoking like a mental patient at the dayroom window. I learned quickly not to bring up the glacial pace of our progress toward the Gulf.

"This is my boat, and my trip, and nobody is going to tell me what to do," Matt snapped. "If it takes two years, it takes two years. I won't be rushed." The paradox of Matt's position had become clear to all but him: by building a raft to escape the strictures of society, he had made himself a property owner, and subject to the same impulses of possessiveness and control as any suburban homeowner with a mortgage and a hedge trimmer. He was as much a slave to civilization as the locked and dammed river on which we drifted, and far less likely to break loose.

Meanwhile, a shipboard romance had blossomed between Matt and Kristina. None of us talked about it, though it was hard not to notice, as every movement of their accouplements in the captain's quarters was telegraphed through the entire raft in minute detail. Although Matt showed her more deference than he extended to anyone else, he still condescended to her, barked orders at her, got jealous over phantoms. She told me she was having fun and wanted to stay on the river as long as she could stand to be with him. I pointed out that it wasn't a particularly healthy way to have a relationship, and she laughed. "It's kind

[2] *A poser; a street rat without street smarts; the lowest caste in the nominally non-hierarchical gutterpunk social hierarchy.*

of ironic that he's so big on animal liberation and can't stand people," she said. "It's because animals can't contradict him."

As if to augur my own psychological dissolution, the raft itself was falling apart. The heavy oak transom to which the 200-pound engine had been bolted was pulling out from the raft's wooden frame. A little more torque from the engine and it would rip itself right off, sinking to the bottom of the channel like an anvil. Thrown up against the shore by wakes, we tied up to a tree outside the town of Hastings, Minnesota, where Matt told us we would need to stay for several days to fix the broken frame. He ordered me to find a Wal-Mart and return with a little electric trolling motor, which could help steer the drifting raft or pull it out of the way of a tow. I walked up through Hastings, down the main street of curio shops and antiques stores, past the end of the town sidewalks, and out along the highway.

One can bemoan the death of the American downtown at the hands of exurban big-box stores, but to truly understand the phenomenon, try reaching one without a car. It was a triple-digit day, the heat shimmering up from the softened blacktop, the breeze hot as a hair dryer. I tried to hitchhike, sticking my thumb out as I stumbled backward down the road. Cars flew by, their drivers craning to look or studiously avoiding eye contact. I wasn't a very appealing passenger: I hadn't showered or shaved in the week since we'd left Minneapolis, and had worn the same clothes throughout. I had a permanent "dirt tan," a thick layer of grime that no amount of swimming in the river could fully remove. My black T-shirt had been torn by brambles and faded by the sun, and a camouflage trucker's hat covered my matted hair as I trudged for miles along the grassy shoulder. Shame eroded; I didn't mind if I was seen peering into dumpsters behind convenience stores, looking for cardboard to make a hitchhiking sign. But still no one stopped.

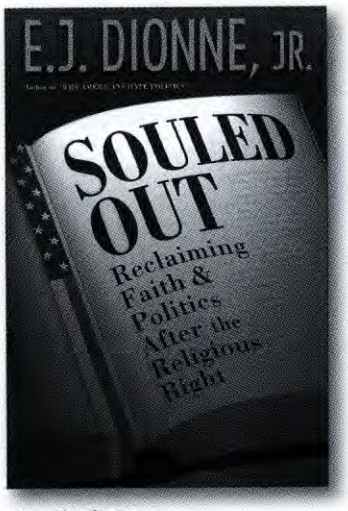
After walking for almost an hour, I reached the edge of a wide sea of blacktop, and walked across to the vast shed of a building that wavered on its edge like a mirage. Enormous doors slid open, and arctic air engulfed me, pulling me into the glorious air-conditioned acreage of the largest Wal-Mart I had ever seen. I pushed a cart through the aisles, picking out a trolling motor and a deep-cycle marine battery to run it. No one paid me much mind, not the too-young couples arguing in Housewares, not the carbuncular stock boys tallying inventory on the vast shelves. As I rolled up to the counter, the checkout girl offered some scripted pleasantries, asked if I had a club card. She rang up the trolling motor, a large oblong box sticking out of the cart, but didn't notice the $70 battery lying under it.

All I had to do was keep smiling and push the cart straight out the door, across the parking lot, back to the river, and the battery would be mine. Who would miss it—my seventy dollars, from Wal-Mart's billions? Matt would have walked out proudly, or bluffed his way out if confronted by security. He would certainly have called me a coward for passing up the chance. I told the girl about the battery, and she rang it up, and I struggled back across the sea of asphalt in the blazing sun.

When I returned to the raft, which was tied up amid bleached driftwood and plastic flotsam on the shoreline, I found Matt waist-deep in the water, rebuilding the transom, and Cody, drunk on malt liquor, busying himself by stuffing his gear into his backpack. I asked him where he was going.

"I don't really feel like going half a mile an hour along the river with people I don't really get along with. I'd rather go fast as hell on the train. Go work the beet harvest, make four grand, and go to India with my girlfriend." On the far side of the raft, Matt said nothing, only scowled and hammered on the boat. "Matt's a fascist," he whispered to me. "If I stay on the boat, I won't be able to be his friend anymore." The raft, which for Huck and Jim supplied the only space where they could be friends, had wrought quite the opposite effect on our crew.

With no goodbyes, Cody threw his skateboard and pack to the shore and jumped after them, walking off in the direction of the railroad trestle that spanned the river downstream. Half an hour later, a pair of Burlington Northern engines pulling a mixed string of grainers and box-



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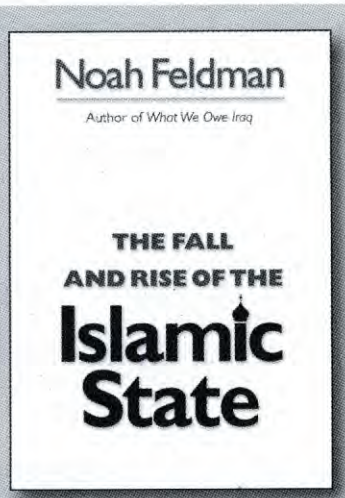

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cars rattled over the bridge, bound for Minneapolis, and I wondered, with envy, whether Cody had clambered aboard.

Day after day I studied the charts and traced our snail's progress. Each marked buoy passed like a minute hand making its way across the face of a schoolroom clock. The time, the date, all the measures of normal life were stripped of meaning. But just when boredom threatened to overwhelm the senses, the river would offer up some bit of unimpeachable beauty. Bald eagles circled overhead and landed in snags to watch us with wide yellow eyes. Deer startled from the shore, crashed into the understory, white tails flashing. Opalescent sunsets silhouetted herons at dusk. The great birds paced their own glassy reflections before pulling up like brushstrokes to stand in the shallows of the far shore.

Late one night we motored along a stretch of the dark river and pulled up at Latsch Island, a houseboat community in Winona, Minnesota. Several hundred young anarchists from around the country had train-hopped and hitchhiked there to attend the annual event known as the CrimethInc Convergence. CrimethInc is more a mindset than an actual organization, but its stated credo is essentially anticapitalist and antiauthoritarian, serving as a catchall for a host of other social and political viewpoints, from post-left anarchism to situationism to violent insurrection against the state. A large group gathered on the darkened beach when we arrived, and cheered the raft, strung with Christmas lights, as we beached it at full throttle.

I wandered around the encampment the next day. Grimy and feral-looking, the CrimethInc kids squatted in small groups around a clearing. The campsite was overgrown with poison ivy, and many legs were covered with weeping red blisters. It was the first time in weeks I hadn't felt self-conscious about being filthy, but now I felt self-conscious about not being punk enough, and I worried I was being eyed with suspicion. Almost none of the kids were older than twenty-five, as if there were a sell-by date on radical social philosophy, a legal age limit after which one must surrender lofty ideals and shave off all dreadlocks. CrimethInc's core function is the creation of propaganda, mainly in the form of books and zines, and they held a swap of such anarcho-classics as *Days of War, Nights of Love*; *Evasion*; and *Fighting for Our Lives*. One of my favorite free pamphlets was "Wasted Indeed: Anarchy & Alcohol," a searing indictment of the revolution-sapping properties of the demon drink, which offered potent slogans: "Sedition not Sedation!" "No cocktail but the molotov cocktail!" "Let us brew nothing but trouble!"

The CrimethInc kids were in the middle of several days of self-organized workshops, seminars, and discussions ranging from the mutualist banking theories of the nineteenth-century anarchist philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, to an introductory practicum on lock-picking, to a class on making one's own menstrual pads. One well-attended discussion was on consent ("Not the absence of no, but the presence of yes!"), and it seemed to underscore the CrimethInc goal of reevaluating the rules and customs of society and creating new ones. Consent was central to the idea of functioning anarchism, which they believed to be the purest and most direct form of democracy. Everyone ate as a group, and a huge cauldron of dumpster-dived gruel bubbled over a campfire, tended by a grubby-handed group of chefs dicing potatoes and onions on a piece of cardboard on the ground. Huck may have been right that a "barrel of odds and ends" where the "juice kind of swaps around" makes for better victuals, but it occurred to me that the revolution may well get dysentery.

Anarchism has not made much of a mark on American politics since 1901, when Leon Czolgosz assassinated President McKinley; but neither has it entirely vanished, and running through the American ideal of the rugged individualist is a deep vein of sympathy for the dream of unmediated liberty. What would happen, I had often wondered, if their anarchist revolution ever got its chance? If everyone just up and quit, and did exactly as he or she pleased in an orgy of liberated desire? Who would keep the lights on? Who would make the ciprofloxacin or, for that matter, the calamine lotion? What kind of world would the sun rise on after that victory?

But the revolution hadn't happened, and it probably never would. The kids were naive fantasists, but I could see their basic point: there was a huge amount wrong with America and the world, from impending environmental collapse to widespread sectarian warfare to a real lack of social justice and equality. CrimethInc's adherents had come together there because they wanted to live their lives as some sort of solution. They saw "the revolution" not as a final product but as an ongoing process; they wanted not just to destroy the capitalist system but to create something livable in its place. I didn't want to smash the state, but I realized that in my adulthood I had faced those same dispiriting questions: How should we live in a world so full of waste and destruction and suffering? What *were* the "solutions" that the inebriated oracle insisted I find, that first dark night on the riverbank? I didn't know if I had ever been one of these kids or if I had just been playacting, wishing I were an idealist and acting as if it were so. There were solutions, I felt sure. But they were not to be found there, adrift, disconnected from the world.

We floated ever southward, through rolling farmland and beneath chalky bluffs, past tiny towns clinging to the riverbank, the raft bobbing like a cork in the wakes of tow barges and jet skis. We were averaging about seven miles of drifting a day, and there were still more than 1,600 miles of river between us and the Gulf. Sometimes I'd look up from a book after twenty minutes to see we hadn't moved. Matt became more aggressive and bossy as the days passed, exploding over tiny things: an open dish-soap cap, a pot of leftovers uncovered, an empty matchbook not thrown out. A week after Cody left, Chris had unloaded his bicycle from the top deck and in a single afternoon pedaled back the mere fifty miles we had come from Minneapolis; and with both of them gone, the brunt of the abuse fell on me. We got into an argument about money one night, as I had financed pretty much every purchase of un-dumpsterable or otherwise freely procurable necessity for the past sever-

al weeks. Matt had seventeen dollars to his name and wanted money to tide him over until he took a break from the river and went to the beet harvest. I told him I didn't want to be his banker, and that he was clearly resourceful enough to figure things out just fine.

After that, Matt refused to talk to me at all. He and Kristina spent their days playing cards and dominoes, and I either took shifts at the steering wheel or sat on the porch, trying to read. We drifted in a heavy silence for two days, passing Victory, Wisconsin, and at last making it out of Minnesota and into Iowa, the river unraveling before us into a swampy waste of braided channels and black backwaters, widening out at times into half-submerged fields of rotting stumps.

We tied up for a night at a dock above the Black Hawk Bridge, and the tires of tractor-trailers moaned on its steel grating, ghostlike as they flew over the river. I walked up the hill above the river to use a pay phone at a smoky bar, the regulars hunched over their stools like heartbroken gargoyles. When I came outside I saw Matt and Kristina surrounded by local police next to a convenience-store dumpster, framed in a circle of streetlight. They had been fishing out some food, and the manager had called the cops on them. But after checking their I.D.'s, the police let them go. Matt walked back to the boat, and Kristina and I went for a drink at the bar before returning to the same dumpster, filling a bag with cold cheeseburgers and pizza slices. The petty authoritarianism of the police had been confounded, but it didn't feel like much of a victory. Staring out at the neat lamplit lawns of Lansing, Iowa, I felt weary of being a stranger. I told Kristina I had to leave.

As much as I had wanted to see the raft down the entire river, as much as I had wanted the strength to quit everything and live on river time, to see Hannibal and Cairo and Memphis and New Madrid, I couldn't do it. I woke up at sunrise, packed my bag, and sat on the dock in the dawn glow. Matt and Kristina were asleep inside his quarters. Mist rose off the river, which wound south past dark banks hung with wisps of fog. I heard Matt stir; he squinted and grimaced as he stepped out onto the porch and saw me sitting on my pack on the dock. We seemed to understand each other.

Kristina undid the lines from the cleats, and Matt pushed away from the dock. With a wave they motored out into the middle of the channel and then cut the engine, catching the current and drifting along to wherever the river would bear them. I sat watching for what seemed like hours before the *Circle of Death* rounded a far bend and vanished. I shouldered my pack, walked up to the bridge, and began hitchhiking east toward home, borne along by kindly strangers. Waiting for a lift at sunset, I found myself on a stretch of blacktop rolling to the horizon through a landscape of wheat fields and grain silos. Swarms of grasshoppers flitted around me, flashing golden in the fading light, leaping out of the fields at the highway's edge. Alone in the middle of the country, far from home but heading there, I felt more free than I had since leaving Minneapolis, since I'd first set eyes on the Mississippi. But the ground still seemed to rock below my feet, as though a ghost of the river rolled beneath me.

Kristina sent me occasional updates, but soon she left the raft herself and went off traveling on her own. Two months later I got an email from Matt. With astonishing persistence, he had made it all the way to St. Louis, through the entire lock-and-dam system, nearly seven hundred miles down to the wild reaches of the lower river, where the current, freed at last from its restraints, flowed unhindered to the Gulf. Drifting through St. Louis, the raft had been hemmed in between a moored barge and a pair of tugboats. A third tug had pulled through, creating a huge bow wash that sent water rushing sidelong into the cabin. Inundated, the *Circle of Death* had keeled over and sunk, almost immediately, to the bottom of the Mississippi. Matt, barefoot in only shorts and a T-shirt, had narrowly escaped drowning by swimming to the barge and climbing out. All his clothing, his journals, photographs, identification—everything but his life had been lost, and he found himself in a place he had often been: broke and homeless, coming ashore in a strange city. The river, of course, continued on without him. ■

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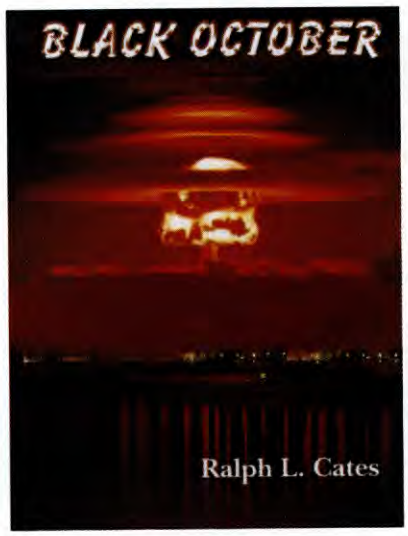

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