

A black and white photograph of a campfire. Several logs are stacked in a teepee shape, with bright, intense flames rising from the center. The fire is set on a bed of rocks or stones. The background is dark, suggesting a night scene in a wooded area. The overall mood is warm and atmospheric.

FICTION

# THE JUNCTION

*David Means*

As he heaves down through the weeds with a plate in his hand and a smear of jelly on his lips we watch him and stay silent, stay calm, and listen now to that high Middle Western bitterness in his voice as he talks about the pie cherries and the wonderfully flaky crust and the way he found it steaming on the sill, waiting for him as he'd expected. Our bellies are roaring. Not a full meal in days. Just a can of beans yesterday—while we wait out the next train, the Chicago-Detroit most likely, tomorrow around ten. He talks about how the man of the house was inside listening to a radio show, clearly visible through the front parlor window, with a shotgun at his side, the shadow of it poking up alongside his chair. Same son of a bitch who chased me out of there a while back, he explains. Then he pauses for a minute and we fear—I feel this in the way the other fellows hunch lower, bringing their heels up to the fire—he'll circle all the way back to the beginning of his story again, starting with how he left this camp, a couple of years back, and hiked several miles to a street, lined with old maples, that on first impression seemed very much like the one he'd grown up on, although he wasn't sure because years of drifting on the road had worn the details from his memory, so many miles behind him in the

form of bad drink and that mind-numbing case of lockjaw he claims he had in Pittsburgh. (The antitoxin, he explained, had been administered just in time, saving him from the worst of it. A kind flophouse doctor named Williams had tended to his wound, cleaning it out and wrapping it nicely, giving him a bottle of muscle pills.) He hiked into town—that first time—to stumble upon a house that held a resemblance to whatever was left in his memory: a farmhouse with weatherworn clapboard. A side garden with rosebushes and, back beyond a fence, a vegetable patch with pole beans. Not just the same house—he explained—

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but the same sweet smell emanating from the garden, where far back beyond a few willow trees a brook ran, burbling and so on and so forth. He went on too long about the brook and one of the men (who, exactly, I can't recall) said, I wish you still had that case of lockjaw. (That was the night he was christened "Lockjaw Kid.") He had stood out in the road and absorbed the scene and felt an overwhelming sense that he was home; a sense so powerful it held him fast and—in his words—made him fearful that he'd find it too much to his liking if he went up to beg a meal. So he went back down to the camp with an empty belly and decided to leave well enough alone until, months later, coming through these parts again after a stint of work in Chicago (Lockjaw couched his life story in the idea of employment, using it as a tool to get his point across, whereas the rest of us had long ago given up talking of labor in any form, unless it was to say something along the lines of: Worked myself so hard I'll never work again; or, I'd work if I could find a suitable form of employment that didn't involve work), he decided to hike the six miles into town to take another look, not sure what he was searching for because by that time the initial visit—he said last time he told the story—had become only a vague memory, burned away by drink and travel; the aforesaid confession itself attesting to a hole in his story about having worked in Chicago and giving away the fact that he had, more likely, hung on and headed all the way out to the coast for the winter, whiling his time in the warmth, plucking the proverbial fruit directly from the trees and so

on and so forth. We didn't give a shit. That part of his story had simply given us a chance to give him a hard time, saying, You were out in California if you were anywhere, you dumb shit. Not anywhere near Chicago looking for work. You couldn't handle Chicago winters. Only work you would've found in Chicago would've been meat work. You couldn't handle meat work. You're not strong enough to lug meat. Meat would do you in, and so on and so forth. Whatever the case, he said, shrugging us off, going on to explain how he hiked the six miles up to town again and came to the strangely familiar house: smell of the brook. (You smelled the brook the first time you went up poking around, you dumb moron, Lefty said. And he said, Let me qualify and say not just the smell but the exact way it came from—well, how shall I put this? The smell of clear, clean brook water—potable as all hell—filtered through wild myrtle and jimsonweed and the like came to me from a precise point in my past, some exact place, so to speak.) He stood outside the house again, gathering his courage for a knock at the back door, preparing a story for the lady who would appear, most likely in an apron, looking down with wary eyes at one more vagrant coming through to beg a meal. I had a whopper ready, he said, and then he paused to let us ponder our own boilerplate beg-tales of woe. Haven't eaten in a week & will work for food was the basic boilerplate, with maybe the following flourish: I suffered cancer of the blood (bone, liver, stomach, take your pick) and survived and have been looking for orchard work (blueberry, apple) but it's the off-season so I'm hungry, ma'am. That sort of thing. Of course his version included lockjaw. Hello, ma'am, I'm sorry to bother you but I'm looking for a meal & some work. (Again, always the meal & work formula. That was the covenant that had to be sealed because most surely the man of the house would show up, expecting as much.) He moved his mouth strangely and tightened his jaw. I suffered from a case of lockjaw back in Pittsburgh, he told the lady. I lost my mill job on account of it, he added. Then he drove home the particulars—he assured us—not only going into Pittsburgh itself (all that heavy industry), but also saying he had worked at Homestead, pouring hot steel, and then even deeper (maybe this was later, at the table with the entire family, he added quickly, sensing our disbelief) to explain that once a blast furnace was cooked up, it ran for months and you couldn't stop to think because the work was so hard and relentless, pouring ladles and so on and so

forth. Then he gave her one or two genuine tears, because if Lockjaw had one talent it was the ability to cry on command. (He would say: I'm going to cry for you, boys, and then, one at a time, thick tears would dangle on the edges of his eyelids, hang there, and roll slowly down his cheeks. Ofttimes he'd just come back to the fire, sit, rub his hands together, and start the tears. You'll rust up tight, Lockjaw, one of the men would inevitably say.) In any case, the lady of the house—she was young, with a breadbasket face, all cheekbones and delicate eyes—looked down at him (he stayed two steps down; another technique: always look as short and stubby and nonthreatening as possible) and saw the tears and beckoned him with a gentle wave of her hand, bringing him into the kitchen, which was warm with the smell of baking bread. (Jesus, our stomachs twitched when he told this part. To think of it. The warmth of the stove and the smell of the baking! We were chewing stones! That's how hungry we were. Bark & weeds.) So there he was in the kitchen, watching the lady as she opened the stove and leaned over to poke a toothpick into a cake, pulling it out and holding it up, looking at it the way you'd examine a gemstone while all the time keeping an eye on him, nodding softly as he described—again—the way it felt to lose what you thought of as permanent employment after learning all the ropes, becoming one of the best steel pourers—not sure what the lingo was, but making it up nicely—able to pour from a ladle to a dipper to a thimble. (He'd gotten those terms from his old man. They were called thimbles, much to the amusement of the outside world. His father had done millwork in Pittsburgh. Came home stinking of taconite. He spoke of his father the way we all spoke of our old men, casually, zeroing in as much as possible on particular faults—hard drinking, a heavy hand. The old man hit like a heavyweight, quick and hard, his fist out of the blue. The old man had one up on Dempsey. You'd turn around to a fist in your face. A big ham-fisted old brute bastard. Worked like a mule and came home to the bottle. That sort of thing.) In any case, he popped a few more tears for the lady and accepted her offer of a cup of tea. At this point, he stared at the campfire and licked his lips and said, I knew the place, you see. The kitchen had a familiar feel, what with the same rooster clock over the stove that I remembered as a boy. Then he tapered off into silence again and we knew he was digging for details. Any case, no matter, he said. At that point I was busy laying out my story, pleading my case. (We under-

stood that if he had let up talking he might have opened up a place for speculation on the part of the home owner. The lady of the house might—if you stopped talking, or said something off the mark—turn away and begin thinking in a general way about hoboes: the scum of the world, leaving behind civility not because of some personal anguish but rather out of a desire—*wanderlust* would be the word that came to her mind—to let one minute simply vanish behind another. You had to spin out a yarn and keep spinning until the food was in your belly and you were out the door. The story had to be just right and had to begin at your point of origin, building honestly out of a few facts of your life, maybe not the place of birth exactly but somewhere you knew so well you could draw details in a persuasive, natural way. You drew *not* from your own down-and-out-of-luck story, because your own down-and-out-of-luck story would only sound sad-sack and tawdry, but rather from an amalgamation of other tales you'd heard: a girlfriend who'd gone sour, a bad turn of luck in the grain market, a gambling debt to a Chicago bootlegger. Then you had to weave your needs into your story carefully, placing them in the proper perspective to the bad luck so that it would seem frank & honest & clean-hearted. Too much of one thing—the desire to eat a certain dish, say, goulash, or a hankering for a specific vegetable, say, lima beans—and your words would sound tainted and you'd be reduced to what you really were: a man with no exact destination trying to dupe a woman into thinking you had some kind of forward vision. A man with no plans whatsoever trying as best he could—at that particular moment—to sound like a man who knew, at least to some degree, where he might be heading in relation to his point of origin. To speak with too much honesty would be to expose a frank, scary nakedness that would send the lady of the house off—using some lame excuse to leave the room—to phone the sheriff. To earn her trust, you sat there in the kitchen and went at it and struck the right balance, turning as a last resort to the facts of railroad life, naming a particular junction, the way an interlocking mechanism worked, or how to read

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semaphores, for example, before swinging back wide to the general nature of your suffering.) We knew all of the above and even knew, too, that when he described, a moment later, the strange all-knowing sensation he got sitting in that kitchen, he was telling us the truth, because each of us had at one point or another seen some resemblance of home in the structure of a house, or a water silo, or a water-pump handle, or the smell of juniper bushes in combination with brook water, or the way plaster flaked, up near the ceiling, from the lathe. Even men reared in orphanages had wandered upon a particular part of their past. All of us had stood on some lonely street—nothing but summer-afternoon chaff in the air, the crickets murmuring drily off in the brush—and stared at the windows of a house to see a little boy staring back, parting the curtain with his tiny fingers.

You sit down to the table, set with the good silver, the warmth of domestic life all around, maybe a kid—most likely wide-eyed, expecting a story of adventure, looking you up and down without judgment, maybe even admiration, while you dig in and speak through the food, telling a few stories to keep the conversation on an even keel. You talk about train junctions, being as specific as possible, making mention of the big one in Hammond, Indiana, the interlocking rods stretching delicately from the tower to the switches. Then you use that location to spin the boilerplate story about the sick old coot who somehow traveled from Pittsburgh or Denver (take your pick), making a long journey, only to find himself stumbling and falling across one of the control rods, bending it down, saving the day, because the distracted and lonely switchman up in the tower had put his hand on the wrong lever (one of those stiff Armstrong levers) only to find it jammed up somehow—ice-froze, most likely, because the story was usually set at dawn, midwinter—and then had sent a runner kid out to inspect the rod, and when the runner kid was out the switchman went to the board and spotted his error, and the runner kid (you slow down and key in on this point) found the half-dead hobo lying across the rod. You shift to the runner's point of view. You explain how during the kid's year on the job he had found a dozen or more such souls in the wee hours of dawn: young boys curled fetal in the weeds; old hoboos, gaunt and stately, staring up at the sky; men quivering from head to toe while their lips uttered inane statements to some unseen partner.

You shake your head and mention God's will, fate, Providence, luck, as the idea settles across the table—hopefully, if you have spun the yarn correctly—that hoboos do indeed serve a function in God's universe. (Not believing it one whit yourself.) If the point isn't taken, you backtrack again to the fact that if the switchman had pulled the lever, two trains would've collided at top speed coming in, each one, along the lovely, well-maintained—graded with sparkling clean ballast to keep the weeds down—straightaway, baked up good and hot for the final approach, eager, wanting in that strange way to go as fast as possible before the inevitable slowdown (noting here that nothing bothers an engineer more than having to brake down for a switch array, hating the clumsy, awkward way the train rattles from one track to another.) To spice it up, if the point still hasn't been taken, you fill them in on crash lore, the hotbox burnouts—overheated wheel-journal accidents of yore; crown-sheet failures—a *svhooooosh* of superheated steam producing massive disembowelments, mounds and mounds of superheater tubes bursting out of the belly of enormous engines, spilling out like so much spaghetti. All of those unbelievable catastrophic betrayals of industrial structure that result in absurd scenes: one locomotive resting atop another, rocking gently while the rescue workers, standing to the side, strike a pose for the postcard photographer. You go on to explain the different attitudes: engineers who dread head-ons, staring mutely out into the darkness while the brakeman grabs his flagging kit—fuses, track torpedoes—and runs ahead to protect the stalled train.

At the dining room table with the entire family, Lockjaw turned to the boilerplate story, personalizing it by adding that he had been given medical care in Pittsburgh (an injection of antitoxin by a kindly charity doctor; the wound cleaned out and bandaged; a bottle of muscle pills to boot) and had found himself wandering off before the cure set in, only to collapse several hundred miles away on the rods at the State Line junction. He gave all the details—about the rods, the way the tower worked—and kept the tone even and believable until the entire table was wide-eyed for a moment, with the exception of the man of the house, who, it turned out, had done a stint as a brakeman on the Nickleplate, worked his way up to conductor, and then used his earnings to put himself through the University of Chicago Law School. The man of the house began asking questions, casually at first, not in a lawyerly voice

but in a fatherly tone, one after another, each one more specific, until he did have a lawyerly tone that said, unspoken: Once you've eaten, you pack yourself up and ship out of town before I call the sheriff on you. Go back to your wanderlust and stop taking advantage of hardworking folks. Right then, Lockjaw thought he was safe and sound. Dinner & the boot. Cast off with a full belly, as simple as that. But the lawyerly voice continued. Lockjaw went into this in great detail, spelling out how it had shifted from leisurely cross-examination questions—you sure you fell across a rod hard enough to bend it? you sure now you saved the day exactly as you're saying, son?—to tighter, more exact questions: Where'd you say you're from? What kind of work did you say you did in Pittsburgh? Did you say you poured from a ladle into a thimble, or from a ladle into a scoop? You said interlocking mechanism? You sure those things aren't fail-safe? You said an eastbound and a westbound approach on the same line? (At this point, most of the men around the fire knew how the story would turn. They understood the way in which such questions pushed a man into a corner. Each answer nudged against the last. Each answer depended on a casualness, an ease and quickness of response, that began to give way to a tension in the air until the man of the house felt his suspicions confirmed when the answers came between bites, because you'd be eating in haste now, making sure your belly was full up as fast as possible, chewing and turning to the lady and, as a last ditch, making mention of a beloved mother who cooked food almost, but not quite, nearly, but not exactly, as good. These are the best biscuits I've ever had, and that's factoring in the fact that I'm so hungry. Even if I wasn't this hungry, I'd find these the best biscuits I've had in my entire life.)

When Lockjaw told this part of the story, the men by the fire nodded with appreciation because he was spinning it all out nicely, building it up, playing it out as much as he could, heading toward the inevitable chase off. One way or another the man of the house would cast him off his property. He'd stiffen and adjust his shirt collar, clearing his throat, taking his time, finding the proper primness. A stance had to be found in which casting off the hobo would appear—to the lady of the house—to be not an act of unkindness but one of justice. Otherwise he'd have an evening of bitterness. When the man turned to God, as expected, after the cross-examination about work, employment,

and the train incident, Lockjaw felt his full belly pushing against his shirt—a man could eat only so much on such a hungry gut—and had the cup to his mouth when the question was broached, in general terms, about his relationship to Christ. Have you taken Christ? the man said, holding his hands down beside his plate. Have you taken Christ as your Holy Savior and Redeemer? (I knew it. Fuck, I knew it, the men around the fire muttered. Could've set a clock to know that was coming. Can't go nowhere without being asked that one.) At that point, the man of the house listened keenly, not so much to the answer—because he'd never expect to get anything but a yes from a hobo wanting grub—but to the quickness of the response, the pace with which Lockjaw said, Yes, sir, I took Christ back in Hammond, Indiana, without pausing one minute to consider the width and breadth of his beloved Lord, as would a normal God-fearing soul, saved by Christ but still unable to believe his good grace and luck. (Gotta pause and make like you're thinking it out, Lefty muttered. Gotta let them see you think. If they don't see you thinking, you ain't thinking.) Lockjaw had given his answer just a fraction of a second too quickly, and in doing so had given his host a chance to recognize—in that lack of space between the question posed and the answer given—the flimsiness of his belief. Here Lockjaw petered off a bit, lost track of his train of thought, and slugged good and hard from the bottle in his hand, lifting it high, tossing his head back and then popping the bottle neck from his lips and shaking his head hard while looking off into the trees as if he'd find out there, in the dark weeds, a man in white robes with a kind face and a bearded chin and arms raised in blessing. Fuck, he said. All the man of the house saw was a goddamn hungry tramp trying to scare up some grub. We faced off while his wife prattled away about the weather, or some sort of thing, giving her husband a look that said: Be nice, don't throw him out until he's had a slice of my pie. But the man of the house ignored her and kept his eyes on mine until he could see right into them, Lockjaw said, pausing to stare harder into the woods and to give us time enough to consider—as we warmed our feet—that it was all part of the boilerplate: the man of the house's

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gaze would be long & sad & deep & lonely & full of the anguish of his position in the world, upstanding & fine & good & dandy & dusted off, no matter what he did for a living, farming or ranching or foreclosing on farms, doctoring or lawyering—no matter how much dust he had on him during his work he'd be clean & spiffy with a starched collar & watch chain & cuff links & lean, smooth, small fingers no good for anything, really, except sorting through papers, or pulling a trigger when the time came. A little dainty trigger finger itching to use an old Winchester tucked upstairs under the bed, hazy with lint but with a bullet in the chamber ready for such a moment: cocky young hobo comes in to beg a meal and wins over the little wife, only to sit at the table with utter disrespect, offering up cockamamy stories that make the son go wide-eyed and turn the heart.

As Lockjaw described the stare-down with the man of the house, his voice became softer, and he said, The man of the house excused himself for a moment. He begged my pardon and went clomping up the stairs, and I told the lady I probably should be going but she told me about her pie, said she wanted me to have a bite of it before I left, and I told her maybe I'd have to pass on the pie, and we went together to the kitchen, he said while we leaned in intently and listened to him, because the story had taken a turn we hadn't expected. For the sake of decorum, most of us would've stayed in the house until the gun appeared. Most of us would've stuck it out and held our own as long as we could, sensing how far we might push it for the chance to hear the lady give the man of the house a piece of her mind, saying, Honey, you're being hard on the poor boy. He doesn't mean any harm. Put that gun away. Even if his story was a bit far-fetched, he's just hungry, and so on and so forth, while the cold, steely eyes of the man of the house bore the kind of furtive, secretive message that could be passed only between a wandering man—a man of the road—and a man nailed to the cross of his domestic life.

Months ago, when he first told the story, Lockjaw explained that he'd gone off into the kitchen with the lady (while overhead the man of the house clomped, dragging the gun out from under the bed), who gave a delightful turn, letting her hair, golden and shiny and freshly washed, sway around her head, leaning down lightly to expose her

delicate, fine neck, and then leaning a bit more so that her skirt pressed against the table while she cut him a slice of pie. Right then I felt it and knew it and was sure of it, he said. I was sure that she was my mother and had somehow forgotten me, or lost whatever she had of her ability to recognize me. I know it sounds strange, he added, pausing to look at us, going from one man to the next, waiting for one of us to make a snide remark. The rooster clock in the kitchen and the layout and the fact that the street was exactly like the one I grew up on and the way the pump handle outside the kitchen window was off balance; not to mention the willows out back, and beyond them that smell of the creek I mentioned, and the way the barn had been converted to serve as a garage for the car, and the fact that around the time I took to the road my mother was readying to have another son, and that boy would've been close to the right age by my calculation—give or take—to be the one she wanted. I would've asked her to confirm my premonition if the old man hadn't come down and chased me clean out of there before I could even have a bite.

Whatever the case, Lockjaw fooled himself into believing his own story, one way or another, and across the fire that night he dared us to put up some bit of sense in the form of a question, just one, but none of us had it in him to do so, because we were too hungry. (At least I think this is why we let him simply close his story down. He shut it down and began to weep, crying in a sniffy, real sort of way, gasping for breath, cinching his face up tight into his open palms, rubbing them up into his grief again and again. He was faking it, Hank said later. He was pulling out his usual trump card. He had me up until that point. Then his story fell apart.) None of us said a word as night closed over us and the fire went dead and we slept as much as we could, waking to stare up into the cold, flinty sky, pondering the meal he had eaten—the green beans waxy and steaming, the mashed potatoes dripping fresh butter, and of course the pork, thick with juice, waiting to be cut into and lifted to the mouth of our dreams. Then the train came the next day and we went off into another round of wander—west through Gary, through the yards, holding on, not getting off, sticking together for the most part, heading to the coast for the winter and then east again until we found ourselves at the same junction a year later, the same trees and double switch and cross-tracks where the line came down out of Michigan and linked up

with the Chicago track, and once again, as if for the first time, Lockjaw said he recognized the place and then, slowly, bit by bit, he remembered the last visit and said he was going back, heading up through the verge with his thumbs hooked in his pockets, turning once to say he'd try to bring us back a bit of pie. By golly, she said she'd put the pie on the sill for me, he said. She told me anytime I wanted to come back, she'd have it waiting for me. If you remember what I told you, I was running out the door with the gun behind me when she called it out to me, he added, turning one last time before he disappeared from sight. (Forgot all about that foolishness, Hank said. Guess he's home again, Lefty said. And we all had a big, overripe belly laugh at the kid's expense, going on for a few minutes with the gibes, because in Lincoln and in Carson and Mill City and from one shitting crop town to the next he had come back from whatever meal he had scrounged up with the same kind of feeling. He seemed to have an instinct for finding a lady willing to give in to his stories.) By the time he came back the jokes were dead and our hunger was acute. Like I said before, he has the pie on his face and a plate in his hand and he's already talking, speaking through the crumbs and directly to our hunger, starting in on it again, and when he comes to the smell of the brook, we interrupt only to make sure he doesn't go back over the story from the beginning again, sparking him with occasional barbs, holding back the snide comments but in doing so knowing—in that heart of hearts—that we'll make up for our kindness by leaving him behind tomorrow morning, letting him sleep the sleep of the pie, just a snoring mound up in the weeds. ●

three poems by DAVID WAGONER

## A Footnote to the History of the New York Central Railroad

Grand Central bustled at one end of it  
and Chicago's Union Station roared at the other,  
all its miles the result of chairmen of boards  
and barons and superintendents and stockholders  
determined to keep the original Colonies  
connected to the Heartland and down the graded  
slope to division managers, to subordinate  
section managers and section bosses  
and their section gangs responsible for the tracks,  
for keeping them straight and steady and well tamped  
with gravel around and under the crossties  
weatherproofed with creosote. There the tie plates,  
held in place by spikes, gripped at the rails  
and held them down for miles and miles and miles  
while freight and passengers rumbled over them.

A fifteen-year-old boy, with an imaginary  
Social Security card and loud instructions  
and daily demonstrations, for two long weeks  
for a few long yards in a switchyard west of Gary,  
with a spike maul whose head was exactly the same  
size as the head of a spike, kept trying to hit one  
square on the head and didn't and couldn't and quit.