from Revolutionaries, *a novel by José Skinner.*

In this episode, Liberato Peña is about to go on a nighttime "reconnaissance mission" to verify the existence of the "white trains" that are said to transport nuclear warheads for final assembly at the Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas. His companion is his high school friend Caleb Hotchkiss, a preacher's kid with serious ideas about revolution. They find the train . . . but not the cargo that they expect.

The place is the Texas Panhandle; the year, 1986.

White Train, Brown Train

I wondered how I was going to get out of the house without my parents hearing. Always before they went to bed they turned off the swamp cooler and our tiny dwelling became silent and you could hear everything through the thin walls. This night a savage wind blew in from the west with gusts so strong that I feared that instead of masking the sounds of my leaving the house it would keep my parents awake and alert. Like a fool—and just to prove my ineptitude at recon—I hadn't discovered, until that very night, that the screen to my bedroom window was glued to the frame with paint. I could hardly chisel it free then, with my parents in bed in the next room. So I would have to leave on my mission through the front door. The back door was out of the question. Morcilla would yap, and the screen door back there would bang in the wind as soon as I left. If my parents weren't awake already, those things would surely rouse them.

I pushed the front door against the wind, and the wind, as if it were part of our conspiracy, recruited by Caleb to make sure I got out of the house undetected, yielded for a moment until I had the door cracked open, then hooked a gust around it, yanked me out, and gently shut it behind me.

Morcilla gave a tentative bark, then another, inquisitive; I knew she had her nose in the air, testing the wracked atmosphere, and no doubt among the thousand scents she detected was

my nervous sweat as I stood by the side of the highway, alert for Caleb. (No wonder "coyotes" and their human cargo didn't stand a chance against canines at border checkpoints.) The wind carried whiffs of vented gas and feedlot stench—the smell of money, people around here used to say, before oil and beef prices plunged. Now it was just stink. I was about to go round to the back to reassure her when I spotted the headlights of his Ford, bouncing along on the truck's bad shocks, one of its headlights dimmer and more yellow than the other. Funny, I thought, trying to edge the fear out of my mind with silly musings, how when a man gets old he gets stiffer but when a truck gets old it gets bouncier…

"Hop on in, bro," Caleb said, reaching to open the door from the inside. He wore cammo pants and an olive-green t-shirt.

We bounced along, buffeted by the wind. Car alarms sounded in the distance, triggered by the gusts, and among them, the brawnier bray of a building alarm. It was well past tornado season, but you never knew: freaks weren't so freakish any more. With weather as apocalyptic as ours, it was no wonder that most people in these parts looked on nuclear warfare as just one more variant of doom. We had all the rest: tornadoes, grapefruit-sized hail, sandstorms, dust bowls, locusts, droughts, prairie fires… Nuclear firestorm? Bring it on! For most people here it would be nothing but the welcome hellfire preceding the Rapture…

"You don't need a weatherman to tell you how the wind blows," he said.

"Really," I agreed, wondering what he meant.

"You know where it's from, don't you?"

"The wind? It's from the west, no?" Was he high on something? Had he broken our vows of revolutionary asceticism?

"I mean the saying. It's from a Dylan song. The Weathermen picked up on it. The

Weathermen, aka Weather Underground. A radical anti-war group in the sixties. They set bombs."

"How come they set bombs if they were anti-war?"

"Man, Liberato. They were anti-*imperialist* war, anti-*Vietnam* war. Not anti-*war* war."

He turned onto a narrow FM road, and then another. His lights picked out a weathered sign in front of a failed emu ranch. "Emus," the sign read, "For Meat and Oil." Beneath the letters a crude painting of an ugly, ostrich-like bird.

"You wouldn't think folks as conservative as these ranchers would invest in something as crazy as a friggin ostrich," Caleb said. "Though I guess you *would* call it conservative in a way. As in stuck in a rut. The bottom falls out of the meat and oil markets, so what do they invest in? A bird for meat and oil! Your conservatives have a hard time changing course."

At a table at my parents' café where a group of white ranchers invariably sat, I'd recently heard a certain tiny, jug-eared yeoman insist, in a Donald Duckish voice, "I have complete confidence in the bird!"

I said, "That's why they call them conservatives, I guess."

"Speaking of beef," he said, "you know how to finish off that industry for good?"

"How?"

"Hoof and mouth disease. Spreads like wildfire. One little test tube of the virus'd would wipe out all the cattle. Could."

"Man." As if feedlots didn't stink already, I imagined them heaped with dead cows.

"Man is right. You could get behind that, couldn't you? A descendant of comancheros? Your dad's always talking about how the Anglo wiped out the buffalo, which was what the Comanches relied on. No buffalo, no Comanches, and no comancheros. Then the Anglos brought

in beef cattle. A fitting revenge for you would be to wipe out the white man's livestock."

Finally we neared the railroad tracks. Caleb stopped the truck behind a clump of mesquites and reached behind the seat.

"I put together this tape of train corridos. From the albums your dad lent me."

He slid the cassette into his boom box and we listened to a singer with a nasal voice entone ballads about revolutionaries over a 4-4 beat. They were blowing up tracks and derailing trains, boarding trains to the battlefront, saying goodbye to their girlfriends at train stations, shooting at the federales from trains or, conversely, shooting at trains full of federales. Trains were a big deal in the Mexican Revolution.

"Shoulda brought us a coupla beers," I said, feeling suddenly macho by association. "Or tequila." I had never pilfered liquor from my father before, but now that I was a revolutionary, it seemed a good kind of transgression.

"And dull our senses? We're ascetics, and this is a *mission,* man."

We waited. And we waited. My brain fuzzed. The wind died down, and the nearly full moon brightened, painting the landscape in platinum. Not a peep of train. I nodded off and awoke with a jerk. I wondered if someone at that Hiroshima rally hadn't been pulling his leg about this so-called nuke train. *I* had never heard of it, anyway. Caleb, wide awake, was talking about the warheads inside the white boxcars, lined up like eggs. An evil albino snake, full of death-eggs.

"Maybe tonight's not the night," he said finally. "I'm sure they vary the routine, for security reasons. Or maybe I got the wrong tracks. Shit. Let's take a look."

He started the engine and we drove up to the tracks. They rested on a berm of sharp gray ballast and were at about three feet's elevation from the ground, the highest point for many miles

around. Then he drove onto them, the engine straining in first gear as the front wheels struggled over the rail. An odor of creosote rose from the ties and into our open windows.

"When we figure out when it comes, we'll steal one of those Tom's Snacks trucks, or maybe rent a U-Haul, and fill it with bags of ammonium nitrate fertilizer soaked in kerosene," he said. "And we'll park it, right like this on the tracks. Ammonium nitrate, that's what fried Texas City back in 1947. A whole shipload of it exploded in the port. The recipe's right there in the *Anarchist's Cookbook.*"

Estaba loco, the dude was crazy! I recalled the footage we were shown in history class of nuclear explosions . "Brighter than a thousand suns," and all that. One of those would evaporate everybody in Llano, Angus, Amarillo even. It would ignite the oil wells, the natural gas underground, the helium deposits. The feedlots with their thousands of methane-burping cows, the ammonium nitrate tanks lined up at the sides of fields. Our whole volatile landscape would blow to Kingdom Come.

"I know what you're thinking," he said. "Don't worry, those warheads aren't armed yet. They can't explode. That's why they're taking them to Pantex, to put the triggers in."

"But wouldn't radiation leak?" The disaster at Chernobyl nuclear plant had happened the year before, and scientists were still tracking the spread of the radiation all over Europe.

"The missiles are supposed to be well-sealed, but point well taken. We're not out to cause a catastrophe. Wouldn't that be a little self-defeating? We're just trying to get some media attention on this thing."

"And what about the train driver? The engineer or whatever? He'd get killed for sure."

"O.K., O.K. Yeah, even the Weathermen bombings didn't incur loss of life. O.K., so forget the ammonium nitrate. But maybe we could derail the sucker."

He jumped out of the truck to inspect the tracks, and I followed. He bent down and scrutinized the ties, pulled at the spikes.

"*The Little Black Book of Sabotage* tells you how to mess up these up for a derailment."

"Derailment," I said. "That's pretty heavy."

"What's the matter, dude? How bad could a derailing be on land this flat? They say the nuke train goes real slow. The engineer'll know how to handle it. Nobody'll get hurt."

I felt faint vibrations on the rail. It was a sensation I knew well from my coin-mashing days. "Something's coming," I said.

Three bright lights appeared on the northern horizon, two aligned like car headlights and an even brighter one above them, like the eye of a Cyclops. This was no sleek, white, nuke-toting train but a regular old freight train, tall and nasty.

We rushed back to the truck. Caleb threw it into reverse, but the front wheels wouldn't make it over the rail, and the rear spun uselessly in the ballast.

"Go forward!" I cried, watching the lights of the locomotive grow brighter. The tires kept spinning, but the truck stayed uselessly stuck.

"Push!" Caleb said, and we leaped out of the cab. As we ran to the front I saw what was wrong: the front tire on the passenger side, having run over some thorny plant, had gone completely flat. We strained against the truck, but our feet kept slipping on the ballast and we couldn't get the wheels over the tracks, which now hummed with the energy of the oncoming train.

The locomotive let out an ungodly blare, the sound itself enough to blow us off the tracks. We dove into the scrub. We watched as the cowcatcher caught the pickup in its belly, like a bull goring a picador's old horse at a bullfight. The truck, tilted on its side, shrieked hideously

as the train shoved it along the tracks. Sparks spurted from the rails in showers of orange and gold as the train pushed its victim along. By the time it came to a stop, we couldn't see whether the truck had been cast aside or sat in a mangled heap in front of the locomotive. Caleb gaped, his long jaw hanging.

There was complete, weird silence for a moment. Then suddenly we heard a banging from the boxcar in front of us.

"What's that?" Caleb said.

"There's people in there."

We heard muted shouts amid the pounding. "Abran! Por favor, abran!"

The boxcar's metal doors were fastened on the outside by a steel bar. We drew it.

The first man stepped out of the boxcar like a zombie, into emptiness. A volley of fetid air and a dozen more men followed him, some tumbling to the ground like the first, others jumping. One by one, they stumbled into the bush.

I came face to face with the last one to get out. He looked familiar.

"Nacho!"

He stared at me with glazed and bloodshot eyes, and very formally shook my hand.

"¿Qué haces aquí?" I cried, though it was obvious that he was coming back to the restaurant after his summer hiatus, ready to replace me in the kitchen when I returned to school. The purple stains on his hands, from the disinfectants they used in the packing sheds where he'd been working, luminesced in the moonlight.

One of the men gave a sharp whistle. The others emerged from the bush and approached us, warily.

The man grabbed the front of my T-shirt. "Agua," he said. Breath fetid as the inside of

the boxcar.

We heard shouts from the head of the train as the crew examined the wreckage. Footsteps crunched on the ballast—someone approaching.

We melted into the mesquite. At a safe distance from the train, Nacho stopped and studied the lights on the horizon. Without a word, he set off toward a cluster of yellowish ones. The rest of us fell in behind him.

We got to the emu ranch. The big birds looked like blobs in the moonlight, their tiny heads tucked into their bodies, but soon enough they detected us and began to strut and honk. One of the men with us gave a piercing whistle, and they abruptly shut up and backed away. The men threw themselves at their water trough. They drank the nasty water until bloated, and then we sneaked off the emu ranch and followed Nachito, whose determined silence gave him the voice of authority.

The sun was wobbling on the horizon by the time we got to the café. My parents, already there, hadn't begun to worry yet, because it was not unusual for me, in that tormented summer, to get up at dawn, go into the scrub for a good scream or whacking off or both, and, finding myself then closer to the café than home, just proceed straight to work. My parents no longer asked me where I'd gone; they no longer questioned my strange teenage ways. That morning, seeing me arrive with Caleb and eleven exhausted, starving men, they didn't ask any questions either, at least not at first. They ushered the men into booths and plied them with beef broth and honey-sweetened limeade.

Nachito, permanently shy from the mercury his parents had sprinkled him with when he was a baby, was a man of few words, but the story was basically this: a coyote, smuggler of illegal aliens, had sealed them all in the boxcar in Laredo, promising someone would let them out

when they got to Amarillo, but the train had traveled slowly and the boxcar had heated up terrifically and they had run out of air.

My father pulled Caleb and me into a back booth. “So you guys are driving around in the middle of the night and you hear a bunch of screaming from a boxcar and you let these guys out.”

We nodded.

“So what were you doing out there?”

“Just chilling,” I said. “Too hot to sleep.”

“What happened to your truck? Why didn’t you drive them here instead of walk that whole way?”

“Sort of broke down,” Caleb said.

“Can you fix it? Need to borrow some tools?”

“Might need a tow.”

My father drummed the fingers of both hands on the booth’s black naugahyde seat and regarded us with narrowed eyes.

“Well, let me drive you home, Caleb. Your people are going to be wondering where you are.”