



Synopsis of *The Last Hobo*

Part I: Poverty Gulch

Rosie and the pioneers

The narrator is Ted Granger, an older man looking back to his reckless youth with wiser eyes. The tale begins when his 19-year-old self and his traveling companion Pete LeBlanc are along the roadside outside of Madison, Wisconsin. There, they first meet Rosie Smith, a fellow hitchhiker. As they chat with the gorgeous stranger, they're immediately captivated by her wit and charm. They readily decide to travel with her to where a big party is about to take place. On their way there, Ted and Pete discover that Rosie is their philosophical soul-mate. Like them, she had quit her job, dropped out of society, and hit the road "to be free." Ted is extremely jealous because Rosie is giving Pete all the attention.

By afternoon, Ted, Pete, and Rosie make it to their destination, Poverty Gulch, a log cabin surrounded by several acres of land. Ted instantly idolizes their hosts Glenn and Emily Erikson, enterprising hippies who run an organic vegetable farm. The Eriksons, who wear 19th century pioneer-style clothes, live in a virtual paradise they'd created for themselves. Ted is not only enthralled by the Eriksons' example of rugged individualism, but by the natural beauty of the place. Moreover, he enjoys sharing traveling stories (and marijuana) with his new friends. His favorite story is about how he and his buddy Randal Stark had once planned to hop freight trains like hobos.

The wisdom of madness?

Ted's euphoria is short lived. His jealousy returns when he sees Pete and Rosie walking hand-and-hand after a nature walk. Self-loathing motivates Ted to retreat to a secluded place where he reads a book Rosie had highly recommended: *Ecstasy: the Forgotten Language* by Bhagwan Rajneesh. The insights in it move Ted to such a degree that he experiences what the Mormons call a "burning in your bosom," the powerful feeling one gets when a major truth is encountered. The book impresses on Ted the idea that sophisticated people abandon reason and embrace nonsense. To become wise, you must become utterly mad. Coincidentally, a real live "madman," Hooter, a derelict biker, stumbles into Ted and Pete's sleeping quarters late that night, unwashed, naked and drunk.

The next morning, Pete comments to Ted that the party is shaping up to be "another Woodstock" referring to the huge crowd. It is composed of mostly hippies. And there's live music. Ted and Pete talk with members of the band and fantasize about being rock stars themselves. While wandering off alone, Ted encounters a hipster named Blaise who has a makeshift library in his van. The young men share about each other's favorite books. For the first time, Ted hears about *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. He can't wait to read it.

"Sex, drugs, and rock & roll"

Ted tells himself to stop being a wallflower and "go for the gusto," in other words, take full advantage of what's plentiful at the Poverty Gulch bash – *sex, drugs, and rock & roll*. When he fails miserably in his scheme to lose his virginity to Blissful Finch, Ted decides to try acid (or LSD), not to escape his troubles, but to reach the "higher consciousness," just as Blaise had described. Ted knows the move is risky and irrational, but he sees himself as aptly putting into practice Bhagwan Rajneesh's "wise" teaching about

rejecting sanity and surrendering to insanity. However, after a series of tactless blunders, Ted ends up empty-handed.

After failing to “get laid” and “score acid,” Ted realizes two things about himself. First, he had been unwittingly (and unwillingly) influenced by the “old-fashioned” morality of his parents. Second, his reaction of shame and embarrassment – when he stumbles on a couple “doing it” in the trailer – proves he’s “too uptight.” Moreover, throughout the party, Ted is deeply troubled by people using drugs in front of children.

The evening ends with a high note when the rock band performs its grand finale before a jubilant crowd. Two notable individuals bask in the spotlight – Hooter and Pete LaBlanc. Hooter, Poverty Gulch’s mascot, runs up on stage and starts singing with band members. Pete wins the crowd’s favor by performing songs on an old acoustic guitar in front of the campfire.

In conclusion, Ted marvels at three uncanny facts about Poverty Gulch: First, the madman (Hooter) is “king.” Second, Pete, a “good-for-nothing” misfit back home, is actually popular. Third, in many ways, the Poverty Gulch “code” is the exact opposite of that of his parents: Poverty Gulch values self-indulgence; his parents value self-discipline.

Part II: On the Road 1979

Life imitating art

On the morning after the bash, Ted and Pete leave Poverty Gulch and continue to venture west. Though Rosie is no longer physically present, her influence will be continually felt. She’s a female version of author Jack Kerouac.

Kerouac’s *On the Road* is revisited in Part II. The narrator suggests that he and Pete – though they hadn’t read it – are unconsciously following the novel’s storyline – with them playing the parts of the book’s protagonists, Sal and Dean. Their trip is an example of “life imitating art” also in the way Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn mimicked “pirates, soldiers, and robbers.” With this idea in mind, *On the Road* serves as an interpretative lens to recount five subsequent days of Ted and Pete’s journey. The trip’s steady flow of chance encounters with people and unusual situations will frequently delight, surprise, and inspire the naive and highly impressionable Ted.

A sense of wonder

Ted and Pete leave Poverty Gulch with a hippy named Francisco driving a Jeep. Noticing a hawk gracefully gliding across the sky, the driver immediately stops his vehicle and gazes upward. The driver is completely swept away by the beauty of the wide-winged creature. Ted and Pete laugh, but Ted also takes serious note of Francisco’s moment of rapture. He covets the man’s unusual ability to relish something relatively ordinary. It mirrored something similar that Rosie had done. It illustrates Kerouac’s extraordinary sense of wonder, something Ted wishes to emulate.

Next, Francisco drops Ted and Pete off in the nearby town of Ferryville, Wisconsin where there’s a Fourth-of-July parade taking place. Ferryville’s innocence, wholesomeness and patriotism strikes Ted as out-of-touch with the times (though he admits he enjoyed the festivities). The people living there seem stuck in the 1950s. Then it dawns on him that the Poverty Gulch folks are similarly old-fashioned. It’s the cynical seventies, yet they’re still living in the quixotic sixties.

Ted and Pete then get a lift to New Albin, Iowa where they enter a tavern called the Stumble Inn for a drink of water. The warm reception they receive from the customers is totally unexpected. The older men are spellbound by the novelty of the two Detroit hitchhikers showing up. Similarly, two single attractive

young women continually ask them questions and buy them drinks. Ted is pleasantly surprised by his sudden popularity, which is powerful enough to send the jealous boyfriend into a violent rage. It dawns on Ted that he's, in a way, the "rock star" he's always wanted to be.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Ghost

When Ted and Pete arrive in St. Paul, Minnesota the following day, Ted reflects on the town's favorite son F. Scott Fitzgerald. He realizes how much he shares in common to the author's protagonist and alter-ego, Nick Carraway, in *The Great Gatsby*. Nick is a New Yorker who yearns to return to the innocence of his childhood living on St. Paul's beautiful Summit Avenue. As Ted walks along the real Summit, he bemoans the fact the Victorian mansions are in excellent condition while many of the ones along Detroit's Grand Boulevard are run-down and abandoned.

On Summit, Ted and Pete are approached by Louise Miller O'Neil, a family law attorney sitting on her porch. After a brief conversation, the gregarious widow's motherly instinct prompts her to invite the pair to spend the night in her mansion. During their stay, Ted delights in the eccentricities of their host. She's aggressive, doting and overprotective like Ted's own mother except for the all-important fact that she "knows how to party." In the midst of their impromptu Fourth-of-July celebration, the half-drunk Louise corners a beleaguered Ted in the kitchen and orders him to call his mother immediately. However, Ted's stubbornness wins out over Louise's forcefulness.

The Interstate vs. Route 66

Ted and Pete's mettle is severely tested once they leave the Twin Cities. For the next two days, they'll be forced to endure long waits, bad weather, and rude motorists on the Interstate. Ted and Pete travel it reluctantly to get to an anti-nuclear protest rally in Rapid City, South Dakota on time, but they would've preferred to take the backroads. The narrator conjures up the mythical Route 66 as the ideal backroad, a highway that's thoroughly enjoyed for its own sake. In Ted's universe (as in the Pixar movie *Cars*), the Interstate is the *anti-Route 66*, made only for speed and convenience, not for relishing. In spite of this, the duo come across interesting people – such as "Crow," an embittered white Vietnam vet who dresses like an Indian, a group of rowdy Native American youths who keep loaded rifles in their pickup, and Cedric Voss, a geologist.

As the partners' day-to-day activities are recounted, the reader learns what it's actually like hitchhike cross-country. Besides the difficulties they must endure on July 3rd and 4th, Ted laments over America's problems during the Jimmy Carter era, particularly the energy crisis. The Interstate's blandness, South Dakota's desolation, and the nation's "malaise," lead Ted to conclude that the world is coming to an end. However, during the hitchhikers' absolute worst night at a rustic rest stop where the only shelter from the rain are two outhouses, joy is unexpectedly found when trying to wake up a sleeping semi-truck driver by performing a "Vaudeville dance act" in front of his headlights.

Ted and Pete's circumstances significantly improve when they bum a ride from the kindly, upbeat Lou and Doris Czeizinger, a middle-age couple vacationing from New York. The Czeizingers drive the young men off the Interstate to explore the main backroad – the "Route 66" – where they delight in seeing the Badlands, Wall Drug, and other cool tourist attractions. The conservative Baptist couple reminds Ted of his own parents who had graciously taken him and his siblings on wonderful road trips. Even when the Czeizingers share about their personal tragedies, life's misfortunes are seen in the context of Route 66 as depicted in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* – and Bruce Springsteen's song "Badlands" – where human suffering has meaning and serves a higher purpose, however inexplicable it is to comprehend.

Part III: The Black Hills

No nukes!

Up to Rapid City, South Dakota Ted and Pete have been on the same wavelength philosophically. However, when Ted flirts with “getting political” at the anti-nuclear demonstration, their disagreement almost splits them apart.

In the summer of '79, the incident at the Three Mile Island power plant in Harrisburg, PA had sparked a flurry of anti-nuke activities all over the country. The protest rally in Rapid City reawakens Ted's desire to be part of a movement to build the perfect global community depicted in John Lennon's song “Imagine.” During the day's “teach-in,” Ted passes out literature, chants slogans, and signs mailing lists. Pete, on the other hand, remains aloof and indifferent, presuming all politics is “phony” and a waste of time.

The evening's No Nukes concert begins with speeches by activists such as comedian Dick Gregory. The dynamic performance of Bonnie Raitt and her band helps create a certain “oneness” with the audience that reminds Ted of the Catholic Mass. Jackson Browne doing “Before the Deluge” is perceived as a bittersweet swan song to the sixties generation which must face the fact that its utopian dreams won't likely come true, at least any time soon.

The Great Divide

The next day, Ted and Pete have breakfast at the activist headquarters in a rented house. When Pete notices Ted helping a female activist clean out the refrigerator, he insinuates Ted is letting others “order him around” which violates their code of “the individual.” Worse yet, he thinks Ted is being duped and used by power-hungry spin doctors. Insulted, Ted vehemently denies this, insisting he's freely choosing to assist in the noble cause. The partners almost agree to disagree and go separate ways – with Ted joining the protest march and Pete leaving Rapid City altogether. However, Ted changes his mind and stays with Pete, and the two end up seeing Mt. Rushmore together.

Part IV: The Railroad Tracks

Goin' back

At Bridgeport, Nebraska, the story's focus moves from “the road” to “the tracks,” from autos to trains. The narrator recounts the day – July 7, 1979 – that his life would come full circle when he finally becomes a “real hobo” when he illegally boards (“hops”) a moving freight train in Nebraska. The narrative toggles between flashbacks of Ted's childhood and the story's “present.”

On that fateful day, Ted rides not just one train but *two*. He and Pete encounter the first train in the morning when the engineer, Nathan Biddle, graciously gives Ted and Pete a ride in his locomotive from Bridgeport to Sidney. This prompts the awe-struck Ted to reminisce about his boyhood days when he and his best friend Mick Rhodes shared a passion for toy trains. Their obsession would eventually translate into the dangerous pastime of “playing with *real* trains” along the railroad tracks near their home. Additionally, the wooded area surrounding the tracks would become a wonderland much like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn's Cardiff Hill. There, Ted and Mick, like Mark Twain's characters, acted out their boyhood fantasies of being explorers, daredevils, and even criminals.

Unfortunately, these activities would become increasingly more unsafe, unlawful, and immoral once they reach adolescence. The brilliantly funny and rambunctious Mick entices Ted and his other friend Randal Stark to participate in his foolhardy antics which include shoplifting and burglary. The narrator suggests Mick's influence would be the impetus for Ted and Randal's far more risky pursuits in the future, most notably the first hitchhiking trip. When Mick leaves Ted's life for good, the unflappable Randal, more or

less assumes the role of chief instigator egging on Ted to do even more daring things. Their intrepid plot to stowaway on a train to New York's Long Island (which evolved into a hitchhiking trip) would supersede any audacious thing Mick had ever thought of or did.

A dream fulfilled

In the present, Nathan tells Ted and Pete about the sobering reality about trains and railroad life. After the engineer drops them off in Sidney, Nebraska, the pair proceeds to hitchhike west along Interstate 80 when an irate police officer commands them to get off the highway. With no other choice, they must travel down the all-but-deserted Lincoln Highway (U.S. 30) where the odds of getting rides are slim.

Despair turns to hope when the partners spot a slow-moving train coming down the tracks adjacent to U.S. 30. Ted and Pete run alongside of it, peel off their backpacks, and throw their belongings onto a flat car. Unfortunately, the train is going too fast for them to board it. It passes them by and disappears into the distance – with their backpacks! Ted and Pete each react differently. Ted is shocked, distraught and panicky; Pete acts cool, detached, and confident. Pete says he “knows in his heart” they’ll get their backpacks back. His admonition to “not worry and have faith” infuriates Ted because he perceives Pete as being holier-than-thou and condescending.

A short time later, another train comes by, but this time, it’s going at just the right speed for the young men to board with ease. As they travel 100 miles on the platforms of two adjacent boxcars to Cheyenne, Ted realizes he’s just achieved his life’s dream of becoming a “real hobo.”

When Ted and Pete arrive in Cheyenne, they’re arrested by two belligerent railroad detectives and taken to the central office. After they’re interrogated and scolded by the chief administrator, a mysterious “agent” is called in. Ted and Pete don’t know what to think when the agent arrives to take them away in his vehicle. Ted’s heart drops as he envisions getting tortured by the CIA. However, his worst fears are proven unwarranted when the man drives them to the exact spot where their backpacks are and releases them. Pete’s faith has been rewarded.

Book I ends in Cheyenne where Ted and Pete encounter the majestic Union Pacific Depot, a symbol of the railroad’s conquest over the Wild West.