

Grunts at the Crossing

SOMETHING WAS afoot in downriver Detroit. The railroad crossing in Delray had settled so much, it badly needed repair. The crossing was on Dearborn Street next to the Fisher Freeway ramps where traffic for the Ford plant was heavy. Ford executives could be spotted, chauffeured in their new Lincolns and Cadillacs.

The railroad, Conrail, subcontracted a local company to fix the problem. The work crew showed up at seven a.m., and you could already tell that it was going to be another oppressively hot day. They blocked off the first lane on Dearborn, leaving the other lanes open for traffic to squeeze through. Cars backed up immediately. Motorists had some choice words. “Why ya doin’ this on a Friday?” “Who owns this line? The C&O? I’m filin’ a complaint!”

The crew didn’t know who owned the line and didn’t care. Their job was to level the track. They had to breathe foul air from the plants and black smoke from trucks. They had to shout over the constant rumble from the expressway and semis. It would be an all-day job, one lane at a time, in an open-air oven with irate drivers. One thing about a railroad crossing, there was never, ever any shade. Their only defenses against the heat were their jugs of water and the shadows of their trucks.

And so they hopped right to work. The foreman sighted along the rails to identify spots that needed leveling. The other four crew members shoveled crushed rock under the rails and then used sledge hammers to pound in the rock. The repetitive clash of metal against rock was a constant, piercing auditory assault. The rock had to be

tamped solid under the rails. Drivers thought it would make the road smoother. “This crossing’s been bad a long time. Mighty glad you’re fixing it.”

“No problem,” said the foreman with a little twitch of his nose. What he didn’t say was, “We’re leveling for the track, not the road. When we’re done, the street will be worse than it is now.”

By ten a.m., the sun-bake was well underway and traffic lined up out of sight. They’d finished two lanes, not close to half done. The foreman would sight and level, give tamping directions to the crew, a little more rock, a little less, repeat, repeat, repeat. Waiting for the foreman drove the crew rabid. A lot of the time, they looked like they were just sniffing the air. Drivers were incensed. “Whatcha standin’ round fer? Get ta work!”

By noon, the sun beat down and a wind had come up, a parching wind that blew dust. They broke for lunch in the shadow of their truck. Their water, what was left of it, was warm.

“Hey, look,” one of the crew said, peering down the rails.

“A rabbit!”

“Where?”

“There, on the track!”

“What’s it doing here?”

“A rabbit around here, it’s nothing but ashfault!” [sic]

“That can’t be any ordinary rabbit.”

“What do you mean? Of course it’s an ordinary rabbit,” scoffed the foreman.

“Look at the size of it. The teeth. The claws.”

“They can leap. I wouldn’t cross it.”

“Don’t get close. It might be sick.”

“They make noises when they’re going to attack.”

“Noises?”

“Hissing, grunting, I don’t know.”

“You twats, it’s a rabbit. It’s a harmless little bunny that one of these limos is going to run over.”

By late afternoon they were on the last lane. Their water was depleted, as were they. They were all mute with exhaustion and darker than when they’d started. They smelled, and their clothes clung like smooth wet fur.

In the procession of traffic, a shiny air-conditioned Lincoln eased over the tracks. Its tinted rear window slid down. Cool air gushed out. A clean shaven man in a dapper jacket, crisp white shirt and red tie grinned out at the crew.

“How ya doin’?” His eyes were cold shards that glinted and cut. “Enjoying the day?” he drawled to the foreman.

They locked eyes and the foreman straightened up on his haunches.

“Bite me,” he grunted.

#