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THE POLAROID KIDD HAS A PHOTO SHOW IN NYC TODAY

By Wes Enzinna
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One day, at the magazine where I used to work, I got a call from a co-worker.

"There's, um, a man here to see you," she said.

"OK," I said, "Who is he?"

"Well..." she said. "I think he's, like, you know, a *vagrant*."

I wasn't in the office. She had called me on my cell phone.

"What?" I said. "A vagrant? What's his name?"

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It turned out the "vagrant" was Mike Brodie, aka, the Polaroid Kidd, aka, the super celebrated 27-year-old photographer who's won a barrel of awards and wowed everyone from *The New Yorker* to curators at the Louvre with his beautiful 35mm and Polaroid shots of trainhoppers and travelers. My co-worker was a proper Southern lady who seemed to think anyone with a little bit of grease on his hands was a bum, so her mistake didn't surprise me—except that Brodie had just been featured in the magazine where she and I *worked*. In fact, she'd commented to me earlier how much she liked his photos. He was passing through town and wanted to say hello. But she just thought he was some homeless kid.

The world Brodie documents, of course, is filled with scruffy wanderers, many of whom he met during the decade or so he's spent hopping trains across America. He's covered 50,000 miles—countless trips back and forth across the country—and his photos are documents of what Woody Guthrie used to call "hard travelin'," snapshots of living the high and the low life: kids eating fruit out of dumpsters; girls hanging out in country squats; broken necks; the freedom of cruising in the bed of a pickup. A tattered pair of pants in his new book, *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*, published this month by Twin Palms, tell it all: the pants sit in a bathtub, the water turned brown from accumulated filth, hundreds of miles of grease and grime leaking out into the tub; the pants float atop the water, stiff and bloated, like a corpse.

These days, Brodie lives in Oakland, and he's still making photos, but *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity* is his magnum opus, the record of his years on the road. It depicts a life that most folks will never experience or even glimpse, except in Brodie's work, and it cements his status as that real and rare thing: an authentic, unschooled genius with an amazing story to tell. The book's 60 full-color photos channel the great documentarians of Americana like Robert Frank and William Eggleston...even though when he first picked up a camera, about ten years ago, Brodie had never even *heard* of Frank or Eggleston. If you've ever dreamed of hopping a freight train, your dream probably looked a lot like a Brodie photo.

That day when Brodie showed up at my job, I never did meet him. By the time I called him back, he was already getting ready to go back on the road. But he told me a story about how, when he had his very first art show seven years ago, he hopped a freight train there. This time, he's come to New York by plane, and if you're lucky you might spot him at one of the gallery shows or book signings he's doing in New York and Los Angeles. If you're too slow, though, he'll likely be gone.