

How do homeless kids survive in a big city?

# Stray Kids



Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

Novel

Tramps.

How can it come to this with anyone anyway?

Usually it originates with bad luck. When there is no one to help you and you panic, bad luck stacks bad luck and you lose everything. Addicts, old people who can no longer keep up with the times, single people who are evicted because of debts. There are also children among them.

Isolated fringe figures, of whom we sometimes catch a glimpse in a corner of the eye. Because invisibility is a survival strategy.

Sometimes something happens to them that allows them to recover. By accident they are able to regain a place in society.

The players in this narrative are four vagrant children, a lapsed college student, a very young heroin hooker and some old people. The accident is a gigantic derailment that takes place over their heads and beyond their experience.

The cards are reshuffled for a while. Emil manages to start a new game with them. With the children, three old eccentrics and Ann-Lilly, whom he rescued and.... no, you better read that.

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*Stray Kids*

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Translation and lay-out by the author

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## Prologue

Far inland, at a container transshipment yard, men greeted each other at the start of the night shift. The evening shift carried over bills of loading and other paperwork; and a small difficulty.

The foreman of the incoming night shift was not happy with it. The difficulty concerned the daily night train to the container port. Although it was ready for departure, the lead locomotive, an electric more than 40 years old, was malfunctioning. The auxiliary locomotive, a diesel, had not enough power to pull the long and heavy train alone. There was no spare loc; at least, no electric one. There was, however, a diesel in the yard, fully fueled and roadworthy.

Consultations were held. Waiting until another electric locomotive was brought in would mean that the container train would have to run during the day, between passenger traffic. And the route was already so heavily loaded.

Reluctantly (a diesel locomotive was not as comfortable as an electric one), the machinist agreed to drive the train this time with the ready diesel locomotive.

First he shunted the broken locomotive out of the way with it and then attached. After checking the brakes and connections to the second locomotive, he left immediately.

Under heavy roar and the emission of black clouds of soot, the long-lined train left the emplacement for its journey through the sleeping country. All signals were green.

## Derailment

Emil came to a point of consciousness where signals from outside began to penetrate. Heavy, rhythmic thumps resonated unbearably loud in his skull. With some delay, their meaning reached his by alcohol and weed virtually knocked out brain. It had been a train, running at walking pace over the tunnel behind him. An old little tunnel that, just like that, in the middle of the Ringway, was yawning into the black wall of the railroad embankment as he stumbled along the road.

He could not think about this for long, as his acute physical situation demanded his full attention. The unpleasant sensations were extremely intrusive. He lay in the rain and was freezing cold, except for his back, which felt swelteringly warm. He was lying with his nose in something that stank beyond belief, he was pinned on bumpy stones by something pressing him down, and his head ached terribly. It aroused a craving for the painkiller, which he used almost as voraciously as the drink that gave him the headache.

To do so, he had to stand up first. Like this he could not reach his pocket. He gathered his will to bring arms and legs under him.

To his dismay, that did not work.

Surprised, he realized there was not something, but someone lying on top of him; someone not heavy. Not large, either, no bigger than a child.

Before he could have seen what was on his back, roaring diesel locomotives raced across the second section of the tunnel. Far too fast, he noted, startled. It was a long train; the roaring and banging kept continuing.

He managed to work himself half upright and sat on his knees for a moment, resting in the open space between the tunnel halves.

The noise suddenly increased. From the left came terrifying sounds, as if big things made of iron were crashing down. He could see nothing, but the ear-piercing bangs and the screeching sound of iron on iron told him that a gigantic derailment was taking place over there. The thumps, crunching



and banging were rapidly approaching, he could hear spraying gravel rattling against hollow iron objects.

He realized with razor-sharp clarity that the last wagons, which were still approaching, collided with the derailed ones in front of them and the tail of the derailed train was still before the tunnel! In the next few seconds, wagons could tumble into the open space between the tunnels. On him!

It dawned on his survival instinct that he was in mortal danger. An electrifying fear shot through his blood and gave him giant strength. With a swing, he stood up. In a reflex, he clamped the limp body on his back, taking the dangling arms in front of his chest in a firm grip.

At that moment, contrasting with the illuminated rain sky, he saw tilting tank cars coming toward him.

A snarl as of an attacking animal squeezed out of his throat and he shot into the safety of the dark tunnel mouth. The ground shook beneath his feet as the wagons crashed to the stones where he had been standing a moment ago, under the screech of twisting steel; fountains of sparks illuminated the tunnel far ahead of him. Distress had sharpened his senses: above the noise and echoes of his running feet, he heard hisses of escaping gas. Gas, poison; images of a cruel death, shrinking in a scorching fire storm, gave his rubber legs just that bit of strength that allowed him to stumble, with the light burden of the child on his back, to the end of the little tunnel.

Outside, his footsteps sounded loud in the sudden silence. It seemed like the only sound on earth. The hissing could not be heard here, but the gas could overtake him in a bellowing explosion! Panting, he plodded on, down the dark street, seeking shelter. To his left was a closed row of unlit houses. To his right, between the street and the railroad tracks, dark sheds. The only illumination came from floodlights on the emplacement. How far did he have to go to be safe?

He gasped in air in whooping breaths, stitches in his side paralysed his legs. His heart pounded as if it wanted to jump out of his chest. Meekly, he dropped to his knees in front of a house where a light had just come on. On his hands and knees, he lowered his head between his arms. Too

exhausted to move, he saw a band of light grow across the irregular pebbles of the sidewalk. He heard a woman suck in her breath as the glow reached his stature.

‘What’s happened? Are you sick?’

‘A train has derailed.’ It was difficult for him to pronounce the words precisely; his mouth felt slack. ‘A freight train. Was riding way too fast.’ He sighed and muttered: ‘Almost got under it.’

No response came. Too lame to raise his head, he saw only two pale feet with varicose veins in very worn, plaid slippers.

‘Who is that, on your back?’ the voice asked. Concerned: ‘She doesn’t look good. Did she faint? Hey, she’s bleeding!’

Emil reflected in amazement that he himself didn’t even know who was hanging off his back; a girl apparently. How did a child get on his back? At the same time, he registered that the woman no longer spoke dialect when she had heard his somewhat affected speech.

‘I don’t know,’ he muttered. ‘Help me out, she falls off when I get up.’

At the same time, he staggered to his feet so that the woman had to.

Groaning, he stretched his long body. Surprised, he looked at what the old woman was holding. With obvious distaste, she held up a scraggly girl under her arms. She hung like a limp doll between the trembling hands.

Blood was running down her legs!

The woman reached the girl out to him so he had to take her. She didn’t weigh much.

‘That doesn’t look good. I’d better call a doctor,’ he muttered, grabbing at his cell phone with a free hand. ‘Do you know her?’

The woman shook her head in an indignant gesture.

‘Well I’ll be damned, broken,’ he grumbled. The device was soaking wet and the window was cracked. ‘Could you call a doctor?’

The woman shook her head.

‘No phone? The neighbors maybe?’ Where on earth had he ended up?

Sirens were heard in the distance. With a jolt, the memory of the train disaster returned. Just a few minutes ago he was in mortal danger and now

he had already forgotten? Were they even out of danger? He forced down a rising nausea.

‘Madam! Something is leaking from a derailed wagon in the tunnel. I don’t know if it’s dangerous, we need to get out of here and call the fire department.’

Somehow he managed to convey his anxiety to the woman.

‘I’ll get Willie,’ she said gruffly. ‘He worked at the railways.’

She locked her house and shuffled across the street, where she banged on a derelict door. Apparently it was the custom to announce her arrival in this way, for she opened the door with a key from the bunch in her hand and walked into the dark building without waiting.

Left alone with the unconscious girl in his arms, Emil looked around anxiously to see if he could find a better hiding place. If that tank exploded they could expect a jet of fire from the tunnel that was nothing like hell.

Wearily, he lifted her up and stumbled further into the street.

He came out onto a quay paved with rough-hewn stones, where between rusty rails water gleamed in the light shining from across the river. Why was it so dark here? There was no streetlight burning anywhere. The black wickerwork of quay cranes that stood out against the cloudy sky lit from below, were reminiscent of spider legs; of a dead giant spider lying on its back. The echoing sirens made a racket in the still night. Far away across the mirrored waters of the river, Emil saw blue flashing lights on the bridge.

Behind a concrete fence, he lowered himself exhausted onto a pile of half-decayed wood. He held the girl in front of him.

I have to do something about her, because I don’t want her to bleed to death, was the only sensible thing he could think of.

Startled by his own thought, he briefly touched her neck to see if she was not already dead. Relieved, he felt warmth and a faint heartbeat.

We really do need a doctor, was the next conclusion. It took effort to penetrate his consciousness. It was as if the alcohol was floating in strands through his brain, dissolving whole chunks out of his consciousness.

We can’t go through that little tunnel anymore. An ambulance has to get

here by another route, was his next logical conclusion. He shifted his weight and tried to find an easier position. Everything hurt him. Rotten that his cell phone was broken. Maybe she had one.

It became clear on closer inspection that she could not have had a cell phone tucked away anywhere under her thin dress, nor in the jacket she was wearing over it. She had nothing at all in the pockets of her jacket.

He decided to go back. More people would have woken up in the street by now. Surely someone would have a phone? He still hadn't heard an explosion or seen a fire. Maybe that hissing wasn't so dangerous at all.

Wearily, he staggered back the way he came with the girl in his arms.

A few lights had come on in the street. Apparently other residents had finally woken up. In the glow that fell through the open door at the old woman's house stood two dark figures, apparently in busy conversation. They appeared to be the resident and an old man with a coat over his pyjamas, talking about something he did not understand. They spoke an urban dialect that he understood poorly.

'Can someone call a doctor or an ambulance, please?' he asked hoarsely. The two figures turned around startled and looked at him hostilely.

'Do any of you have a phone?' he asked, with an undertone of growing desperation in his voice. 'This child is hurt and needs a doctor.'

'She's bleeding to death!' he yelled when the two did not respond.

'Willie is dead,' the old woman with the plaid slippers said tonelessly. 'The emplacement is full of wagons and containers.'

'Who the hell are you?' the old man asked aggressively.

'Now listen!' begged Emil. 'I almost crashed under that derailed train and fled here because it started leaking gas. This child is injured and needs a doctor. Isn't there anyone here with a phone?'

The old man stared at him angrily. When he saw blood dripping from the girl's legs, he slapped his hand in front of his mouth, startled. 'She...she's bleeding,' he stammered.

'That's what I'm saying! Then can someone take us to the hospital? Or call a cab?' Emil was at his wit's end.

The old man shook his gray head.

‘The way through the tunnel is the only access. If you can’t get through there, you can only get out over the water.’

‘Surely there’s a telephone around here somewhere?’ insisted Emil. The scope of the old man’s remark had not quite dawned on him.

The gray head shook again in denial.

‘They cut the cables with that new road,’ he added as he saw Emil’s incomprehension growing. ‘There was no one left who needed a phone anyway.’

‘No one with a phone?’ Emil could hardly fathom it.

With a mental effort, he shifted his aim.

‘Then is there someone with first aid? She needs first aid as soon as possible.’

For a moment he stood helplessly with her in his arms. He knew she would die in a short time if the bleeding were not stopped. He looked at the little white mug. No, he would not let that happen. It was a new feeling, that decisiveness. Presumably he was experiencing it because it was not him self, but a helpless young girl.

‘Then if we can’t get help from outside, will you help me keep her from dying?’ His voice had dropped an octave. ‘Do you have a bed for her somewhere? A warm jar? Bandages?’

The old man looked at him suspiciously and nodded almost imperceptibly. With a jerk of his head, he signalled that he should walk with him.

Emil followed him relieved into an alley, into an unlit room. The old man set his storm lantern on a chest. The yellow flame illuminated a cluttered, dusty warehouse full of furniture and household goods so old they could be called antiques. Emil’s curious mind noted everything in one circular glance, which finally lingered on a cot near an upstairs staircase.

‘There is no electric light here,’ the man apologized. He put a burlap sack on the mattress. ‘Put her down here for as long as you can. I’ll make a hot jar and get bandages. I must have another first aid kit.’

Relieved, Emil laid the light burden on the bed. Now what? He would have to remove her wet clothes and investigate how to stop the bleeding between

her legs. Awkwardness against such intimate contact kept him from taking immediate action.

At that moment an old woman came in, a different one from the one he had seen in the street. The short and rather bulky little person looked at the scene and shuffled in, sighing.

‘Let me have a look,’ she grumbled in a sappy dialect. ‘That’s no good a boy helping a girl, not a man who’s not a doctor. Turn around, lad, I’ll help the kid.’

Emil understood little of it, but understood that he was no longer needed. Relieved that the responsibility was taken from him, he fled outside. Not feeling well, he tried to vomit in a corner, but his empty stomach cramped burning, offering no relief. He longed for a bed, but not his own; that consisted of a clammy mattress in a cold and stuffy little room. Besides, he couldn’t even go back: the leaking tank cars blocked the only way out.

## Cut off

He wandered around the dark street, looking for someone to help him. Lights were burning above the workshop where one dead Willie was supposed to live. Maybe the other woman was busy there. He decided to ask her for a place to sleep; he'd rather not go back to that warehouse while that old woman was busy with the girl.

Swaying, he stumbled up the narrow staircase.

'Who's there?' snarled a now familiar voice from above.

'It's me,' Emil replied sluggishly. 'The boy with the girl on his back; she's in bed in that old man's storage and she's being taken care of by um... another lady. I wanted to ask if I might sleep here somewhere. Through the tunnel I can't go back and...'

On the landing, the woman with the plaid slippers stood watching.

'Willie is dead,' she said aggressively.

'Yes, you said that just awhile ago, so what happened?' he managed to express as a somewhat meagre show of sympathy.

'His heart.'

'How so ... his heart?'

'The accident, it has become too much for him. Just look.'

The woman stepped aside so Emil could see into the dimly lit room. By the open window lay a figure in striped pyjamas.

'That's Willie?'

'Was,' the woman said mournfully. She looked old and tired, with a hard look on her face.

'Had a weak heart, always had.'

Apparently she had accepted Emil as an acquaintance; at least she talked to him as if they had known each other for years. She spoke to him no dialect.

'If you just help me put him on his bed you can get a room at my place. It's a lodging after all.' She smiled briefly and meekly.

Emil's heart leapt up; he was immediately willing to do anything for her.

The old man on the ground weighed very little. He cringed to handle the corpse.

'He's only just dead isn't he?' he asked as they stretched him out on the bed and pulled the covers neatly taut over him. 'I mean, he's not stiff yet.'

The woman nodded dumbly. She stood with folded hands looking at the frail remains of a man she had seen daily all her life.

'I never actually knew him,' she muttered.

Emil had gone to the window and looked out.

'Jeez,' he whispered. 'What havoc!'

In the reddish light of a few remaining floodlight pylons lay a long row of crisscrossed, pushed up, overturned and into each other crashed wagons, dozens of loose, twisted containers, car wrecks from a pair of upright pushed car carriers. Rails had been shoved up into bundles, curled up with sleepers and all.

Not far from the window, he saw the backsides of the downed tankers sticking up out of a dark crevice between the many tracks. Dangerous: if there was an explosion this whole house would be blown away, he estimated in his fearful imagination.

The dark sky lit up in a chaotic flicker of blue flashing lights; no sound could be heard other than sirens in the distance. Unreal; the disaster had happened less than half an hour ago. Emil felt as if he had aged years since he had been thrown out of a car on the Ringway, stupidly drunk and dumb-founded (he could still remember that). Whose car was it anyway...?

'Come,' the old woman said and tugged on his sleeve. 'We can't do anything more here and we'd better go to sleep.'

She turned off the bare bulb on the ceiling with a pull switch and closed the door behind her.

'Willie's the only one with power,' she declared absently. 'Tapped from the railways.'

Trudging after her, Emil marvelled once again at this remote neighborhood. The only one with electricity? Tapped from the railways? Indeed, the



street was not lit anywhere else. The floodlights on the emplacement shone on the facades across the street, everything else was dark. Something wasn't fitting. He was too tired to think clearly; besides, he felt a heavy hangover coming on.

The woman preceded him through an old-fashioned door with rattling panes, screened on the inside by a heavy, musty-smelling curtain attached to a semicircular brass tube.

Inside, it was surprisingly bright. On a curved, hard-stone counter, a bright gasoline lamp was sizzling. In a worn armchair near the left window lay a black cat. By the right window was a square table with a rug on it and two straight chairs pushed underneath. The room was crisp and smelled of floor wax instead of stale beer and cigar smoke, which is what you would expect.

The woman gestured for Emil to follow her. In her wake, he stumbled up a wide staircase with worn steps. On a spacious landing, with brown doors on each side, a candle burned on a narrow table under a weathered mirror. The woman grabbed the candlestick, opened the last door and went ahead of him.

'You can use this room for now. No one has slept in it for the last twenty-five years, but the bed is always made and vermin have never been there.'

She walked to the bed, a broad one with black iron bars and brass knobs, and flapped on the pale yellow blankets. An overwhelming smell of mothballs spread through the room.

'There is no light, I leave this candle with you. I have more. Matches are next to it. Water is not there, I'll bring you a bottle later. If you want to wash: across the hall is the bathroom, there are buckets of water. The water supply has been shut off since they built the Ringway.'

She walked out of the room without waiting for an answer; before closing the door she turned around for a moment: 'Since the Ringway, supposedly no people live here anymore.'

Emil had barely heard it. Warily, he pulled off the muddied raincoat. His sweater was wet in the front and reeked sourly of vomit. He was just beginning to lash at his pants when the door opened ajar; a hand set a bottle down

around the corner.

In vain, he searched his pockets for the strip of painkillers, but his pockets were empty, including those of his raincoat. Keys, wallet, pills, money; all gone. Only his broken cell phone was still there. Stupidly, he stared at the thing. Shit, he must have been robbed while he was passed out. Not by that chick, who was even worse off than he was. Must have been definitely hobos or junkies. Well, nothing was to be done about it.

He grabbed the water bottle, sat down against the pillow, wrapped a blanket around him and quenched his worst thirst. He squirmed in the sagging bed until he was snug and tried to forget his nausea. He was still far too tense for sleep.

## Central Station (1)

It was quiet on the traffic control; a computer fan buzzed, the air conditioning hummed. On the large board glowed red, yellow and green lights; everything was at rest. The controller was staring ahead a bit. On a white clock, the big hand jumped every minute when the red second hand at the top stopped for a moment. Right at the time that had been fixed for years, he stretched and the phone rang. He put on the headset with the microphone, hummed yes, and listened to the chief shunter calling from the yard.

He took a quick glance at the board, which, by the way, he knew by heart. He spent a moment setting the correct shunts and signals; when the computer gave the green light, he let the command go out. In the yard lit by bright floodlights, electric motors whirred, shunts clanked into a new position and the corresponding signals changed color.

He repeated instructions to the shunters, disconnected and stood at the window to watch. From the traverse that spanned the tracks, he had a panoramic view of the eastern emplacement.

Outside, a group of men in yellow reflective vests spread out across the sidings. Lights flickered on in some of the dead trains and pantographs moved upward. Soon the first train slowly made its way across the yard, crossing several through tracks.

In the western emplacement, no movement could yet be detected. The monitors showed only brightly lit, shiny rails.

A signal sounded, a light at the edge of the large wallboard jumped from green to red.

‘There you will have the fourteen eighty-six,’ the traffic controller remarked.

His assistant looked up from his book. He studied the wallboard intently; he was not very familiar with it yet.

Lights changed from green to red where shunting trains passed signals.