

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen



Steam

novella

Actually, in writing these stories, I proceed like a painter: in front of me is a white canvas that I want to fill with color.

That blank canvas here is a man with an extremely limited existence that takes place between his mother's house and the museum track. Unexpected things happen, he does unexpected things, bringing light into his twilight zone. His cocoon begins to fray and he starts to bulge out irresistibly. His feelings reach out; to the machine and to the girl.

A kind of reset and play,
bestowed by the gods or fate,
or simply by his own desire.

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A young man is a volunteer assistant conductor
on a museum train, practicing for the stoker/
auxiliary machinist exam.
And yes, then a girl joins him.
It shakes him up so much that he has to come out
of his cocoon.
The awakening is not without controversy.
Eventually the love between him and the machine
brings him into real life.

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boekcoop@gmail.com

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‘Take your raincoat, there may be some rain this afternoon,’ his mother said handing him his lunch box. ‘Eat your apple and don’t forget to drink.’

‘Yes ma, no ma,’ the man said obediently and left the parental home with the raincoat over his arm. It had belonged to his father and was actually a little too roomy.

The sun was shining and on the bike he began to sweat. He stopped, took off his sweater and stowed it in the pannier, on top of the raincoat and lunch box. A mile away, he was still hot and zipped the legs of his zip-off pants.

It was a long bike ride to the emplacement, but as always, he covered the distance half in a trance. He could cycle for hours, looking around a bit, dreaming; his legs never tired. If someone asked him what he dreamed of when he was on the road like this, he wouldn’t be able to say. He never had any memories of it. That he dreamed he was not even aware of. Once at the psychiatrist’s office he had come to the conclusion that when he was cycling, he actually was a kind of sleeping passenger of his body, that propelled the bicycle and was constantly alert to fellow road users, turns, traffic lights and other dangers.

At the yard, he used the pass he was extremely proud of to get through the gate. He locked the bike in the bike shed and walked to the canteen. That was actually an old waiting room for machinists and stokers,

now equipped with a sink and a coffee machine for the dozens of volunteers, of which he was one. Over coffee with lots of milk (real milk), he had his first sandwich, with peanut butter.

He was the first of the train conductors and deputy conductors who would do the trip with tourists this afternoon. The driver and stoker would be in the depot getting the locomotive up to steam. They were a very different kind of volunteers: almost all of them former were railroad men.

After the sandwich, he went to the locker room and put on the old-fashioned conductor's uniform. The breast pocket displayed his name and position: 'deputy conductor.' A cap and ticket clippers completed the outfit. He did have a whistle, whose cord hung from his breast pocket in a pretty bow, but whistling was a privilege of the chief conductor, who had his own little room in the front carriage. The tender, which formed one unit with the locomotive, had no passageway to the firing plate: it had been a locomotive for freight trains. They communicated by cell phones.

He was scheduled in the third carriage, where he only had to worry about the ups and downs of the passengers. He knew all the sights of the ride by heart, as well as all the data, historical and technical, of the locomotive and of the carriages.

Meanwhile, in the cafeteria, two colleagues had arrived who, over cups of coffee, were commenting on

the latest copy of the British magazine 'Steam.'

The man had read it at home, but had no judgments. He had taken it all in and that was it. That much news was not happening in the field of steam engines, locomobiles, steamrollers, steamships and steam trains. Most articles mentioned one restoration after another. A new steam engine rarely appeared.

He was not interested in the 'steamy' discussion between the two fanatics and searched his way to the depot. For there his great passion was heating up.

'Hey Arnold, where were you! We were expecting you earlier!' shouted the chief machinist from the cabin. 'If you want you can still do the oil round, but be careful not to stain your uniform.'

Arnold glowed with pride. He had recently been entrusted with the oil round, where he had to refill all the oil reservoirs. If he forgot one, a bearing could get hot along the way, and if they didn't spot it in time, the locomotive would come to a halt somewhere on the track, with or without damage.

The job was entrusted to him. He knew the machine with all its systems and subsystems by heart. The technical people were aware not to disturb him with news, jokes and gags, because then he would get distracted.

Back with the oilcan, he reported that the reservoir at the rear driven wheel on the left side had been nearly empty. He had to refill the oilcan; that much

went in. The chief machinist made a note and acknowledged: 'Indeed there is some space in the bearing; the oil consumption may be higher than normal. Maybe it needs a new bronze bearing bushing.'

He looked at his watch and then at the clock in the cabin.

'We're going to hitch up in ten minutes, Arnold. We have plenty of pressure, water and coal. Go get your carriage ready.'

Arnold retrieved one of the vacuum cleaners and a power reel from a loft and went to vacuum his carriage. Dust and ash were never far away in a yard with steam trains. Finally, he fetched a bucket of suds, swept all the seats and cleaned the windows. Meanwhile, the locomotive had been shunted in front of the carriages. He quickly went to watch the hitching, which he found something magical, because the carriages were then also connected to compressed air for the brakes and to the locomotive's DC power grid for the lights. The whole train came to life when the carriages were connected to the steaming heart.

After checking all systems, the locomotive pulled the carriages at walking speed to the platform, where the passengers – many of them children – were waiting. Amid loud squawking, snickering and high-pitched voices asking for everything, the passengers streamed into the carriages.

That was the moment for catering to parade along

the platform, loudly recommending coffee, tea, lemonade, sandwiches, chocolate, ice cream and candy. As usual, the kids in the carriages turned to chaos as everyone crowded in front of the opened windows.

Arnold had gotten used to it, but he still kept some distance. Every time he was struck by how undisciplined people were. He sighed as he saw the first litter whirling to the ground; quack, there goes the first ball of ice cream, followed, of course, by cries from the child who dropped it.

The locomotive whistled and the journey began. Now his great talent came to the fore: over the intercom he recounted the past and present of the things they were staggering past at a moderate gait. It became quiet in the carriage; the tourists listened enthralled. His monotonous voice could also be heard in the other carriages.

For himself, it was an almost automatic process: he was actually reciting his ordered memory. Even synchronization with the speed of the train was automatic: if what he was talking about did not loom up exactly at a certain point in his speech, he waited a moment. If it loomed earlier he started speaking faster. Sometimes he added new facts and trivia he found in old newspapers and magazines on the Internet. The story got longer and longer and the recitation got faster with shorter pauses. He had once asked if they could slow down, but the machinist was as punctual

to the timetable as Arnold was to his full explication.

After two intermediate stops, they reached the terminus. They rode out the last kilometers on the steam pressure present: no more coals were thrown on the fire and the stinking smoke was gone for a while. The smell of hot steam, hot oil and hot iron prevailed; the smell he loved most. A little coal smoke was fine, but not when there were those thick black clouds being blown out, like when the train was pulling up.

Tourists swarmed out, most making a donation in the bucket because they had so appreciated his explanations. Making out the cash at the end was often his triumph.

Arnold cleaned up the carriage. It did not occur to him to chat with the others. He had noticed to his dismay along the way that a landmark tree had disappeared. He would not rest until he knew what had happened to it; he knew whom to call about it at the municipality tomorrow. In such cases, his attitude was apt and fearless. He didn't like unannounced changes, especially when it came to the museum railroad.

Only when he finished did he find time for a cup of coffee and the rest of his sandwiches. His colleagues were sitting on the platform in the sun, talking, laughing and drinking beer. He had another preferred spot: the locomotive firing plate. He knew every pipe, valve, gauge, lever, check valve, gauge glass and instruction.

The fire was tanked up and steam pressure remained constant now that the compressor and generator did not have to be supplied.

To be sure, he checked the oil reservoir of the worn bearing and refilled it.

The machinist saw him doing it from the platform and was pleased. That was the right attitude for a railroad man. That reminded him that he was not so satisfied with the stoker, who was also second engineer. The young guy was strong as a bear, there was nothing wrong with building up his fire, but as a machinist he did not trust him. The old boss thought he was too airy, which could lead to sloppiness. But then again, it was the son of their biggest sponsor who had given the foundation this locomotive, from Germany. Actually the machine was too heavy for this little railroad line and almost too big for the little stations. A much lighter locomotive had run here before, one without a tender, but the few that still existed were cherished by the foundations that managed them. Moreover, this was a locomotive for freight trains with small driven wheels. They couldn't run it fast; that would destroy the track in the long run.

Unaware of the master's misgivings, Arnold ate his bread.

There was no turntable, so they had to shunt the locomotive to the rear of the train for the return trip, where it would pull the train backwards.

During the return trip, Arnold did not hold a palaver, but answered passengers' questions in front of the public address system microphone. This he usually did with great pleasure. Many questions came from children, with whom his mental personality had more in common than with adults. Gradually, there weren't many questions he didn't know the answer to – usually looked up on the Internet. He had an iron memory and could remember almost all past questions with their answers.

Arrival at the emplacement from which they had departed went without incident.

The empty train was driven to a siding, the locomotive uncoupled and was stored in the depot.

Arnold would rather have been there than have to clean the carriage, but that was how his job description was. They may be a purely volunteer foundation, but the structure and hierarchy of the railroad was the essence of the club. The masters – they had several machinists – were the bosses, the chief conductors were in charge of the train being pulled and the passengers being transported. Professional railroad people, although retired, formed this basic structure.

The carriage was clean, vacuumed and Arnold, meanwhile, was exhausted. Other volunteers tomorrow would do washing the exterior and windows, prior to the daily drive.

He was studying for the stoker's exam and had to

shovel coal and build a fire under the watchful eye of the stoker and machinist. They did that at the coal bunkers, where more or less coal dust didn't matter. The building up of the coal pile, with throws through a fake fire mouth, was to the master's satisfaction. Arnold, however, was broken. He had strong legs from cycling, but had little strength in his arms, back and abdomen. It was slowly getting better with the exercises he did at home and the cleaning work in the carriage, but he knew he would not be able to sustain a whole ride of firing yet. However, it was the only way to make it to stoker/auxiliary machinist. He had long since memorized the instructional films on signals, shunts, maintenance, operation and the like. He had passed the theoretical exam for auxiliary machinist last year with flying colors.

The chief had a hard head: Arnold was skinny, had a chicken chest, narrow shoulders and thin arms; he considered it unlikely that the boy would ever pass the practical exam. He had already recommended bodybuilding to him once, but Arnold had recoiled from the atmosphere at the gym at a first trial class. The pitying glances the sweaty studs had cast on his lean stature had made him realize once again that it was better to confine himself to his seclusion.

He avoided the clammy shower at the locker room and swapped the now black dusted overall for his civilian clothes; he preferred to shower at home.

Besides, he would get sweaty from the bike ride anyway, since he had to fight a strong headwind.

He had called home that he was coming later because of the stoker exam; at the time he got there, his mother was waiting for him to heat up his dinner while he showered.

They watched television together and went to sleep early.

One day, as he had been reassigned for the ride in the afternoon, he decided to go early to help with preparations. Since he had become a conductor on a carriage, he had not shown up in the mornings. For a long time, that had been too much.

This was new to him; the regular physical work and bike rides to and from the emplacement had improved his condition that much that he reckoned he could do for the first time both morning and afternoon.

He reported to the surprised coordinator.

‘I have people enough to wash the carriages, Arnold. Maybe the master could use help.’

He reported to the depot in his overall.

Around the locomotive a few men were busy.

‘Ah, Arnold, have you come to give us a hand?’ cried one. ‘The master wants to replace the bearing bush that is consuming so much oil. It is really bad now.’

As simple as it sounded, that was quite a job. The