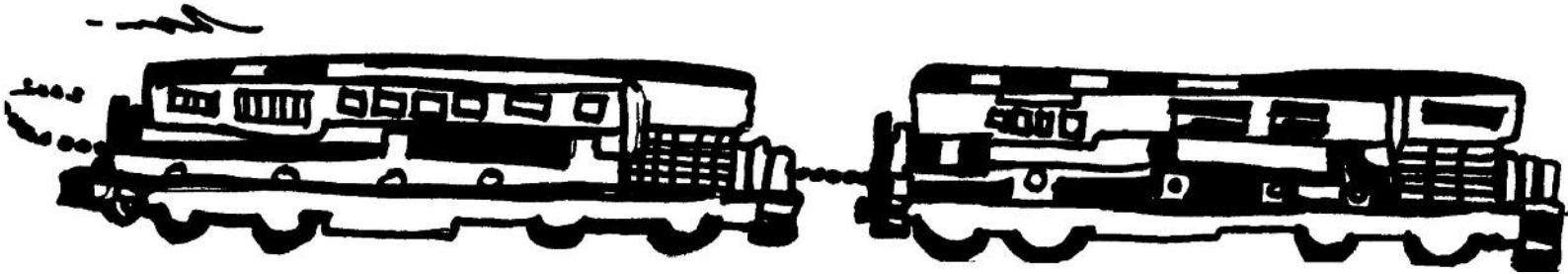


The Switchman¹

Juan José Arreola



The stranger arrived at the deserted station out of breath. His large suitcase, which nobody carried for him, had really tired him out. He mopped his face with a handkerchief, and with his hand shading his eyes, gazed at the tracks that melted away in the distance. Dejected and thoughtful, he consulted his watch: it was the exact time when the train was supposed to leave.

Somebody, come from heaven knows where, gently tapped him. When he turned around, the stranger found himself before a little old man who looked vaguely like a railroader. In his hand he was carrying a red lantern, but so small it seemed a toy. Smiling, he looked at the stranger, who anxiously asked him: "Excuse me, but has the train already left?"

"Haven't you been in this country very long?"

"I have to leave right away. I must be in T—tomorrow at the latest."

"It's plain you don't know what's going on at all. What you should do right now is go look for lodging at the inn," and he pointed to a strange, ash-colored building that looked more like a jail.

"But I don't want lodging; I want to leave on the train."

"Rent a room immediately if there are any left. In case you can get one, take it by the month. It will be cheaper for you and you will get better attention."

"Are you crazy? I must get to T—by tomorrow."

"Frankly, I ought to leave you to your fate. But just the same, I'll give you some information."

"Please—"

"This country is famous for its railroads, as you know. Up to now it's been impossible to organize them properly, but great progress has been made in publishing timetables and issuing tickets. Railroad guides include and link all the towns in the country; they sell tickets for even the smallest and most remote villages. Now all that is needed is for the trains to follow what the guides indicate and really pass by the stations. The inhabitants of this country hope this will happen; meanwhile, they accept the service's irregularities and their patriotism keeps them from showing any displeasure."

"But is there a train that goes through this city?"

"To say yes would not be accurate. As you can see, the rails exist, though they are in rather bad shape. In some towns they are simply marked on the ground by two chalk lines. Under the present conditions, no train is obliged to pass through here, but nothing keeps that from happening. I've seen lots of trains go by in my life and I've known some travelers who managed to board them. If you wait until the right moment, perhaps I myself will have the honor of helping you get on a nice comfortable coach."

"Will that train take me to T—?"

"Why do you insist that it has to be T—? You should be satisfied if you get on it. Once on the train, your life will indeed take on some direction. What difference does it make, whether it's T—or not?"

"But my ticket is all in order to go to T—. Logically, I should be taken there, don't you agree?"

"Most people would say you are right. Over at the inn you can talk to people who have



Drawings by Lydia Peña



taken precautions, acquiring huge quantities of tickets. As a general rule, people with foresight buy passage to all points of the country. There are some who have spent a real fortune on tickets—”

“I thought that to go to T— one ticket was enough. Look here—”

“The next stretch of the national railways is going to be built with the money of a single person who has just spent his immense capital on round-trip passages for a railroad track that includes extensive tunnels and bridges that the engineers haven’t even approved the plans for.”

“But is the train that goes through T— still in service?”

“Not just that one. Actually, there are a great many trains in the nation, and travelers can use them relatively often, if they take into account that it’s not a formal and definitive service. In other words, nobody expects when he gets aboard a train to be taken where he wants to go.”

“Why is that?”

“In its eagerness to serve the citizens, the railway management is forced to take desperate measures. They make trains go through impassable places. These expeditionary trains sometimes take several years on a trip and the passenger’s lives suffer important transformations. Deaths are not unusual in such cases, but the management, foreseeing everything, hitches on to those trains a car with a funeral chapel and a cemetery coach. The conductors take pride

in depositing the traveler’s body, luxuriously embalmed, on the station platform prescribed by his ticket. Occasionally

these trains are compelled to run on roadbeds where one of the rails is missing. All one side of the coaches shudders lamentably as the wheels hit the railroad ties. The

first-class passengers—another instance of the management’s foresight—

are seated on the side where there is a rail. But there

are other stretches where both rails are missing; there all the passengers suffer equally, until the train is completely wrecked.”

“Good Lord!”



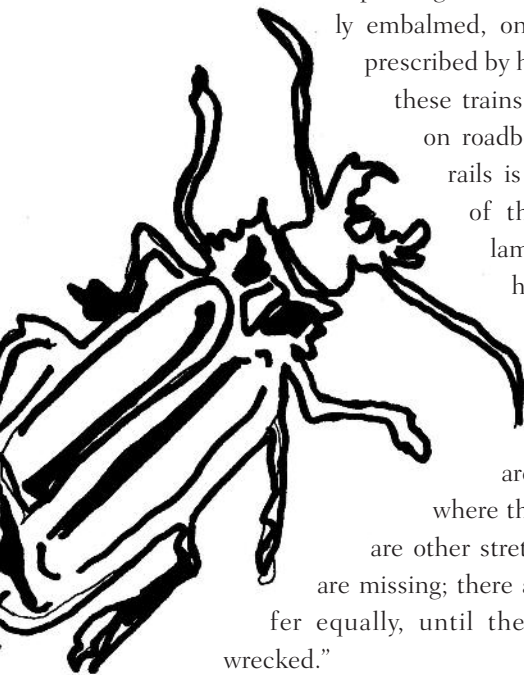
“Listen, the village of F— came into being because of one of those accidents. The train found itself in impassable terrain. Smoothed and polished by the sand, the wheels were worn away to their axles. The passengers had spent such a long time together that from the obligatory trivial conversations intimate friendships sprang up. Some of those friendships soon became idylls, and the result is F—, a progressive town filled with mischievous children playing with the rusty vestiges of the train.”

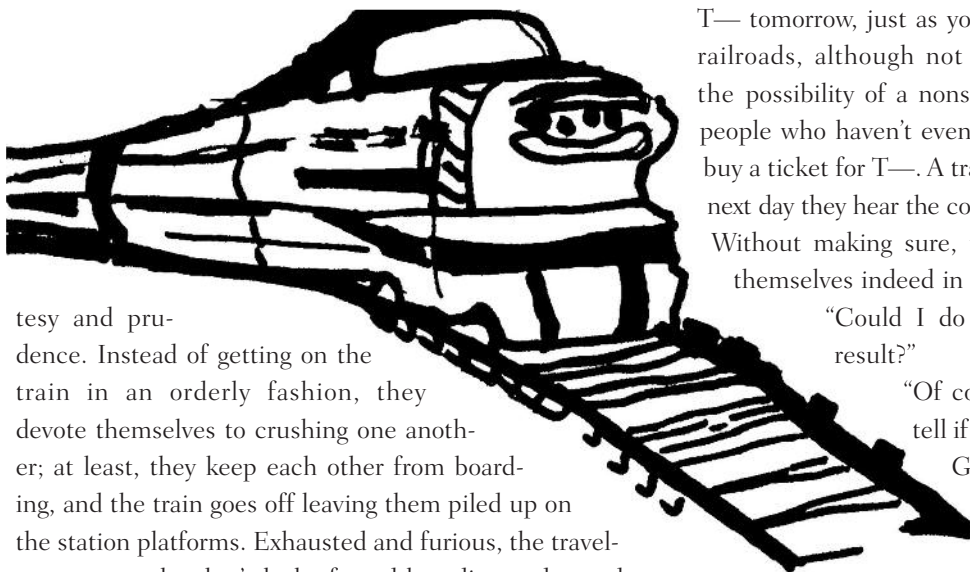
“For Heaven’s sake, I’m not one for such adventures!”

“You need to pluck up your courage; perhaps you may even become a hero. You must not think there aren’t occasions for the passengers to show their courage and capacity for sacrifice. On one occasion two hundred anonymous passengers wrote one of the most glorious pages in our railroad annals. It happened that on a trial journey the engineer noticed in time that the builders of the line had made a grave omission. A bridge that should have spanned an abyss just wasn’t there. Well now, the engineer, instead of backing up, gave the passengers a pep talk and got the necessary cooperation from them to continue forward. Under his forceful direction the train was taken apart piece by piece and carried on the passengers’ backs to the other side of the abyss, which held a further surprise: a turbulent river at its bottom. The management was so pleased with the results of this action that it definitely renounced the construction of the bridge, only going so far as to make an attractive discount in the fares of those passengers who dared to take on that additional nuisance.”

“But I’ve got to get to T— tomorrow!”

“All right! I’m glad to see you aren’t giving up your project. It’s plain that you are a man of conviction. Stay at the inn for the time being and take the first train that comes. At least try to; a thousand people will be there to get in your way. When a train comes in, the travelers, exasperated by an overly long wait, stream tumultuously out of the inn and noisily invade the station. Frequently they cause accidents with their incredible lack of cour-





tesy and prudence. Instead of getting on the train in an orderly fashion, they devote themselves to crushing one another; at least, they keep each other from boarding, and the train goes off leaving them piled up on the station platforms. Exhausted and furious, the travelers curse each other's lack of good breeding and spend a lot of time hitting and insulting each other."

"Don't the police intervene?"

"They tried to organize a police force for each station, but the trains' unpredictable arrivals made such a service useless and very expensive. Besides, the members of the force soon showed their corrupt character, only letting wealthy passengers who gave them everything they had board the trains. Then a special kind of school was established where future travelers receive lessons in etiquette and adequate training so they can spend their lives on the trains. They are taught the correct way to board a train, even though it is moving at great speed. They are also given a kind of armor so the other passengers won't crack their ribs."

"But once on the train, aren't your troubles over?"

"Relatively speaking, yes. But I recommend that you watch the stations very carefully. You might think you had arrived at T—, and it would only be an illusion. In order to regulate life on board the overcrowded coaches, the management has been obliged to take certain expedient measures. There are stations that are for appearance only: they have been built right in the jungle and they bear the name of some important city. But you just need to pay a little attention to see through the deceit. They are like stage sets, and the people on them are stuffed with sawdust. These dummies easily betray the ravages of bad weather, but sometimes they are a perfect image of reality: their faces bear the signs of an infinite weariness."

"Fortunately, T— isn't very far from here."

"But at the moment we don't have any through trains. Nevertheless, it could well happen that you might arrive at

T— tomorrow, just as you wish. The management of the railroads, although not very efficient, doesn't exclude the possibility of a nonstop journey. You know there are people who haven't even realized what is going on. They buy a ticket for T—. A train comes, they get on it, and the next day they hear the conductor announce: 'We're at T—.' Without making sure, the passengers get off and find themselves indeed in T—."

"Could I do something to bring about that result?"

"Of course you could. But it's hard to tell if it will do any good. Try it anyway.

Get on the train with the firm idea that you are going to reach T—.

Don't talk with any of the passengers. They might disillusion you with their travel tales and they might even denounce you."

"What are you saying?"

"Because of the present state of things the trains are full of spies. These spies, mostly volunteers, dedicate their lives to encouraging the company's constructive spirit. Sometimes one doesn't know what one is saying and talks just to be talking. But they immediately see all the meanings in a phrase, however simple it may be. They can twist the most innocent comment around to make it look guilty. If you were to commit the slightest imprudence you would be apprehended without further ado; you would spend the rest of your life in a prison car, if they didn't make you get off at a false station, lost out in the jungle. While you travel, have





faith, consume the smallest possible amount of food, and don't step off onto the platform until you see some familiar face at T—."

"But I don't know anybody in T—."

"In that case, take double precautions. There will be many temptations on the way, I assure you. If you look out the windows, you may fall into the trap of a mirage. The train windows are provided with ingenious devices that create all kinds of illusions in the passengers' minds. You don't have to be weak to fall for them. Certain apparatuses, operated from the engine, make you believe that the train is moving because of the noise and the movements. Nevertheless, the train stands still for whole weeks at a time while the passengers looking through the window panes see captivating landscapes pass by."

"What object is there in that?"

"The management does all this with the wholesome purpose of reducing the passengers' anxiety and, as far as possible, the sensations of moving. The hope is that one day the passengers will capitulate to fate, give themselves into the hands of an omnipotent management, and no longer care to know where they are going or where they have come from."

"And you, have you traveled a lot on trains?"

"Sir, I'm just a switchman. To tell the truth, I'm a retired switchman, and I just come here now and then to remember the good old days. I've never traveled and I have no desire to. But the travelers tell me stories. I know that the trains have created many towns besides F—, whose origin I told you about. Sometimes the crew on a train receives

mysterious orders. They invite the passengers to get off, usually on the pretext that they should admire the beauties of a certain place. They are told about grottos, falls, or famous ruins: 'Fifteen minutes to admire such and such a grotto,' the conductor amiably calls out. Once the passengers are a certain distance away, the train chugs away at full speed."

"What about the passengers?"

"They wander about disconcertedly from one spot to another for a while, but they end up by getting together and establishing a colony. These untimely stops occur in places far from civilization but with adequate resources and sufficient natural riches. Selected lots of young people, and especially an abundant number of women, are abandoned there. Wouldn't you like to end your days in a picturesque unknown spot in the company of a young girl?"

The little old fellow winked, and smiling kindly, continued to gaze roguishly at the traveler. At that moment a faint whistle was heard. The switchman jumped, all upset, and began to make ridiculous, wild signals with his lantern.

"Is it the train?" asked the stranger.

The old man recklessly broke into a run along the track. When he had gone a certain distance he turned around to shout, "You are lucky! Tomorrow you will arrive at your famous station. What did you say its name was?"

"X—!" answered the traveler.

At that moment the little old man dissolved in the clear morning. But the red speck of his lantern kept on running and leaping imprudently between the rails to meet the train.

In the distant landscape the train was noisily approaching. **MM**

NOTES

¹ This story was included in *Confabulario*, first published in 1958. The English-language version was taken from *Confabulario and Other Inventions*, George D. Schade, trans. (Austin: University of Texas, 1964), pp. 77-84.

