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Extracts from

***A Treatise on Shelling Beans* by Wiesław Myśliwski**

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

Pp. 104-107 The narrator talks about his youth, when he worked as an electrician, installing electricity in the remote countryside. His fellow workers all drank, and in this extract he describes a night in the shared dormitory when, unusually, they did not.

In one of the villages five of us once lodged together. They were all old, I was the only young one, and there was a foreman, a master craftsman living with us. We even used to call him the foreman behind his back – go to the foreman, ask the foreman, get the foreman to advise you. He was the only one we called the foreman. But perhaps you don't know how people usually talk about the foreman behind his back? Anyway, no one ever says "foreman".

He was a man of few words, never let himself get drawn into any conversation, even when they were drinking. He liked a drop of vodka, why shouldn't he? But you had to haul the words out of him, like out of the deepest well. And they were never words that really told you anything. Maybe they said something to him, but not to others – it was always "yes", "no", "who knows", "maybe", "that'll need some thought". Never the whole thing.

Then one evening for some reason or other they didn't drink. We came home from work late, someone asked, "Has anyone got anything?", but no one had, and no one felt like going out to buy anything. Oh, well then, let's go to bed, they said. So we lay down, put out the light, it all went quiet, and I started to nod off. Suddenly someone let out a deep sigh, and another one turned over, shifting the entire weight of his body onto his other side. And

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at once they all started turning over, stretching and fidgeting. The beds were all worn out, so the slightest movement made them creak.

And that foreman had the bed under the window, and after lights-out he always smoked one last cigarette. He also smoked whenever he woke up in the night – he had to smoke two or three cigarettes to get back to sleep. Only vodka sent him off at once, though it did depend how much he drank. A lot all at once did the trick. Just a little, and he suffered even worse. Oh, but that time he kept on and on smoking. There was a geranium in the window next to him, and he used to flick his ash and stub out his cigarettes in it. In the morning he always gathered up the dog-ends, and you could tell how he'd slept from the number of dog-ends. And not just how he'd slept – it was a measure of more than just his insomnia. But what did we care, we electricians? To us dog-ends were just dog-ends. What's more, you could always smell the smoke in the morning, so we'd sniff the air and say oh, the foreman had a bit of a smoke in the night all right. So that time too he lit up, and someone asked him: "Can't you sleep? Me neither." And at once they all said they couldn't either.

"That's what happens when you don't have a drink before bed," said one of them, and another cursed. Another one mentioned a place where they make stronger hooch than anywhere else.

And so they started talking. Meanwhile the foreman smoked another cigarette. Every time he flicked the ash into the geranium, it lit up. And every time he took a drag, his face lit up too. You could see he was lying there with his eyes open. But he probably wasn't listening to their conversation, because he never said a word. As the youngest, I had no part in it, I just listened. Anyway, what could I have said when they were wondering for instance what each of them would do if he found out his wife was being unfaithful? They were all married, but I hadn't even started thinking about it yet. We didn't know if the foreman was married. He never talked about it. Well, as you know, start thinking about your wife cheating on you, and you won't sleep a wink all night. And next day at work everything flies from your hands.

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But each one of them knew what he would do – this one would kill her, that one would throw her out, that one would do something else. Then they started wondering if an old man can still do it, and when does a man start to be old, as far as that’s concerned. You know what I mean. And if he can’t do it any more, what keeps him alive? And is it still worth living? To which one of them said God makes the rules about life, and man doesn’t even have the right to question if it’s worth living or not. And so they moved on to God. After a war like that one, should a man go on believing in God or not? One of them reckoned he should, because it wasn’t God who started the war, but people. Another said that may be so, but if He wanted to He could stop people. And another one said we say a man fires the gun, but the Lord God carries the bullets, so He could control the war, so there were less casualties, less suffering and death. And they began to tell stories about various incidents they’d witnessed or heard about. And one of them got really upset, because his brother had been shot, and asked straight out if there is a God at all. Then he started asking us, bed after bed, what we thought. Is there a God? I pretended to be asleep. Finally he asked the foreman: “What do you think, Foreman? Does God exist?”

The foreman stubbed out his cigarette in the geranium pot and lit another. I think it was his fourth since we’d gone to bed. And the whole time he hadn’t said a word, as if he weren’t listening at all. We waited on tenterhooks to hear what he would say, as if it depended on him whether or not God existed. Until the one who’d asked him the question, asked him again: “Well, Foreman, what do you think? Is there a God or not?”

“Who?” he replied at last.

“God.”

He didn’t answer straightaway, but once he’d put out his cigarette he said: “Why ask me? Why ask them? It’s not something you vote about. Ask yourself. All I can tell you is where I was, he wasn’t there.”

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And he lit another cigarette. The room fell silent, no one dared ask any more questions. And no one said another word after that. After a while they started falling asleep – here there was a whistling noise, over there some loud breathing. I wondered if the foreman was asleep, because I couldn't hear anything from his bed. But he didn't light another cigarette either.

I couldn't get to sleep. My head was full of thoughts from that conversation, because for me everything they'd been talking about seemed beyond the limits of my imagination. And what bothered me most of all was what the foreman had said - where he'd been, God wasn't there.

And the next day I went up to him to ask for his advice, because the fuse kept blowing every time I switched on a three-phase current. And I asked him: "So where were you, Foreman?"

He looked at me suspiciously.

"Somewhere I hope you'll never be." Then he grunted: "Get back to work. You know what you have to do now."

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Pp. 139-148 At school, the narrator was part of a pupils' rebellion which started when the power was turned off, interrupting the film they were watching at a tense moment in the story, when Johnny is trying to choose a hat, but gets nothing but disapproval from Mary. Here, prompted by the mysterious visitor to finish the story, he describes how the pupils' revolt almost got out of hand.

What rebellion? Oh yes, I never finished telling you. Well, they switched off the power and the film stopped. Maybe if it hadn't happened at that particular moment, maybe if it hadn't have been for that hat. And that Mary woman. Remember what caused the Trojan war? Exactly. First there was a great roar of disappointment when the room went dark. And just when it felt as if the darkness was about to explode, luckily one of the teachers who were watching the film with us, shouted: "Keep calm! Let's go and check – it's sure to be just a fuse."

And one after another they scampered out of the day-room. They must have been sure that if they all went to check, it would definitely turn out to be a fuse. And we'd be all the more likely to stay calm. And indeed, for such a packed room, you could say we did keep calm. Anyway, they must have been furious too, when it happened at a moment like that. Otherwise not all of them would have left the room. So they told us to be quiet until they came back. Some of us calmed each other down. Some told others off – be quiet over there! Pipe down! And we waited hopefully for the moment when one of the teachers would appear in the doorway and shout triumphantly: "It was a fuse, boys! Just as we guessed! It'll be fixed right away!"

But time went by, and no one appeared. Perhaps if the projectionist hadn't suddenly spoken up, the mood would have just defused itself in the waiting. We might have made a bit of noise, perhaps we might have started singing, but in that silence, in the darkness it rang out like the voice of doom: "The hell it's a fuse. Does it take that long to fix a fuse? I'm

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winding back the tape. Every time I've shown a film somewhere and they've switched off the power, they've never switched it on again.”

And then it felt as if the day-room would fly apart if the silence didn't erupt. There were whistles, shouts, howling and stamping. First to get it in the neck was the innocent projectionist, as if those words of his were the spark that ignited the silence. The boys sitting at the back of the day-room rushed at him, threw him to the floor, battered and kicked him. They smashed the projector, unwound the tapes from their boxes and got tangled up in them like streamers. Someone got out some matches and started setting fire to the tapes to make some light. Make some light! Luckily we put it out in time. He was going to set himself on fire. Can you imagine what would have happened? Then all the glass in the windows went. They used whatever came to hand, or really whatever they came across in the darkness to smash them – chairs, benches, instruments. I tried to protect the instruments. I begged, I shouted and tore them from their hands, saying: “Leave the instruments alone! Leave them alone! What have they done to you?!”

Some of them came to their senses, but others just seemed to find relief in the instruments. They smashed them, broke them and threw them out of the windows. They even tried to throw out the piano, but luckily it wouldn't fit in the window. But instead one of them jumped up on it in his rage and started stamping on the keyboard.

I was at the other end of the day-room, when suddenly I heard the clatter of the keys being stamped on. I squeezed through and grabbed the fellow by the legs. He grabbed me round the neck and started to choke me. I couldn't breathe, but I pulled him off the piano onto the floor. As we had nothing to fight with, because he was holding onto me and I onto him, we started biting each other, so hard we made each other bleed. And he had the makings of a pianist – the music teacher had told him that more than once before.

Most of the instruments that were thrown outside, did survive somehow, in a better or worse state. Few of the rest emerged intact. Luckily they didn't find every single one in

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the dark, and were all the more incapable since rage makes it harder to see. If you had seen the most badly damaged ones in the light of day afterwards, your heart would have bled. But no teacher showed up, although it was their fault that rebellion got so heated.

You've never taken part in a rebellion? Not even at school? You've never rebelled at all? What against? Are there so few reasons? There are plenty, from early childhood onwards – the fact that they force food on us when we don't feel like eating. And as the years go by you could just have rebellion after rebellion. Against school, because who really wants to go to school? I'm not thinking of our school – that's a separate issue. And against life in general, for being the way it is and not different. Against the world, for being the way it shouldn't be. Against God, for being, but not being there. Never even rebelled against yourself?

Anyway, a rebellion doesn't have to have a cause. I'm not sure any rebellion really breaks out for the reason we ascribe to it. Not to mention the sort of rebellions we stage but regret afterwards, when it's too late and there's no going back to what we had before. Anyway, man's not a hard-set creature, there's always something stirring inside him, seething away, and even if he hasn't got an excuse he'll rebel. He himself is the eternal excuse. He'll keep on rebelling until the world comes to an end. And as far as I can see the world is in for plenty more rebellions.

So maybe our teachers did a wise thing then, leaving us on our own. Because in the end we'd have to cool down by ourselves, as it wasn't a fuse and there was no hope of switching on the lights for us straightaway. Except, as so often happens at an unexpected moment, chance kicks in. So too on this occasion the screen suddenly fell off the wall. You're thinking, so what? But at a moment like that the slightest thing can take on great force. Perhaps it was badly hung up, or maybe it fell off because of all the screaming, shouting, and smashing, because the hut was pretty well shaking. They rushed at that screen and started trampling on it, as if it were to blame for the lights. And then one of the boys picked it up off the floor and shouted: "Boys, let's make a rope! Let's hang someone!"

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And they all joined in the chorus: “A rope! A rope! Let’s hang someone!”

As he explained it afterwards, his intention was a good one – he wanted them to stop destroying the instruments, because what were we supposed to learn to play on? They would have destroyed the lot. But hanging someone – they weren’t really going to hang anyone, because apart from us there was no one left in the whole school by then. But they started ripping the screen into strips, and wondering who to hang. There were various candidates – from among the teachers, you understand, who else? In this sort of case the teachers are always the best choice – those ones of ours in particular. However, the boys couldn’t agree which one it should be. And as they argued they wove the rope, in the dark, to boot, so they wove it any old how. A rope like a plait, and not very tight. Anyway, that screen wasn’t really suitable for a rope. It was made of cotton, like a sheet or a duvet cover. Only hemp will do for a rope like that. Then you can be sure it won’t break.

When they took down Uncle Jan, they failed to cut the rope with a kitchen knife because it was a thick one made of hemp. They sawed away at it for ages, until my father got an axe and cut my uncle down, branch and all.

Then one of them started crowing: “The commander, boys, let’s hang the commander!”

And the whole day-room started yelling: “Hurrah! The commander! The commander!”

As if only the commander were good enough for that revolt. Anyway, he seemed the most appropriate choice. And above all he seemed by his very person to make it all right to cross another barrier. The rebellion, which was looking likely to turn into a fist fight any moment, flared up again.

“Hey, let’s get the commander! Let’s hang the so-and-so!”

Then someone started chanting: “The butchers have been bleeding us dry for too long now!”

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Well, as you must realise, the day-room wasn't enough for that big a rebellion. We spilled out of the door and windows into the yard, whether for or against hanging the commander and whatever. We swarmed over to the teachers' hut, where the commander had his office, and started chanting: "Commander! Commander! Come on out of there!"

No, the commander didn't live on the school grounds. He used to come in each day, but at that time of night he wasn't there any more. Of course we knew that. But the rebellion had made us so blind we didn't know. So no one came out. The building was completely silent and dark, not so much as a gleam in a single window, nothing, as if none of the teachers were there. They'd probably made off, the whole lot of them, when the film broke down. Or else they were sitting in there very quietly.

We hammered on the doors and walls, then finally smashed all the windows. And found nothing – not a soul in there. Someone suggested setting fire to the hut, because there must be someone in there. There were always at least three teachers on duty. And someone else said we should set fire to all the huts, even the ones we lived in. Set the whole school alight. If we're going to have a fire, let's have a real fire. Oh, and over there, on the hill, let's go up there and watch it burn. And that was it. That was how Nero burned down Rome. I didn't know what Rome was, and I didn't know who Nero was, but at school there were a few fellows of the kind who knew this and that. Then we'll run away. Bye bye, so-and-so school!

At that Rome idea someone immediately came forward saying he knew where there were some cans of paraffin, so he'd run and fetch them. To which another fellow said it'd be better to hang someone. They had the rope made from the screen, and it was all because of the film, wasn't it? We've made it, what else for? And we started tumbling across the yard, battering all the huts, knocking out all the windows, in the hope of luring someone out, summoning someone up, because we couldn't just be left to ourselves with this rebellion. Our fury had reached its peak, and here was a huge disappointment, because there was no

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one there. Some of them started calling for us to go back to the day-room for the projectionist – maybe he'd have come round by now.

Then we heard someone coming. As if falling heavily on his feet, and slowly, step by step. The yard was covered with gravel, so the gravel crunched all the more audibly. Even when he stopped for a moment, the gravel went on crunching under his feet as he stood there, as if he were swaying on the spot. Can you guess who it was? Yes, it was him, the music teacher. Who else could it have been? Only a drunk could be so oblivious to danger. We knew it was him from a long way off. We stood and waited. Oh yes, he was drunk all right, he was well gone. He was just taking his final step, looming out of the darkness, when suddenly he began to sway. One of the boys jumped up and supported him, or I'm sure he'd have fallen.

"Thank you, thank you," he mumbled. But only after the next step did he seem to become aware of us. "Why aren't you asleep yet, boys?" he asked, surprised, or maybe not. "Don't go by my example. I hardly sleep at all these days."

"It's a rebellion!" someone shouted.

"A rebellion?" He hiccupped so hard it made him sway. "It's a good thing you're rebelling. I used to rebel too, once. And you can see how I ended up. But maybe it'll work out better for you. Well, let me past. Somehow my bed is calling me today."

"A real rebellion!" someone shouted right in his ear.

"We've smashed all the windows! Now we're going to burn the school down! We're going to set fire to all the huts!" they shouted one after another all around his shaky head, gradually closing in on him.

"I believe you," he gibbered. "I can believe just about anything these days, boys. Now let me through. Time for bed."

Then from the depths of the crowd someone shouted, God knows who, because no one would admit it afterwards: "Let's hang him! He's drunk, he won't even feel it!"

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Someone else had qualms about it, but then another one let rip: “A rebellion’s a rebellion! It’s all the same who we hang! No one’s better or worse! Put the noose round his neck!”

He was so drunk he could hardly keep upright, but suddenly he sobered up and said: “Why, boys? Why?”

“We have to. It’s a rebellion,” said someone, his voice cracking as they tied the noose round his neck.

Well, what do you say? He was the only one we liked. Of all the teachers, the only one. Regardless of whether we wanted to learn to play an instrument or not. But as that was the majority, in fact all of us liked him. Maybe we didn’t really know the rules of rebellion, and it was just fury that made us explode. He on the other hand must have known, because he behaved as if it was all a joke.

“All right, then, hang me, boys, if you must. Just let me have a drink first.” And he took out a bottle, from this pocket here. “It’d be a pity to leave a single drop.” But it must have been empty, because there was a hollow sound as he took a swig. “Well, at least I’ll die the way an artist should. At the hands of his closest friends. And a good thing too.” Then he tested the noose around his neck, as they’d already tied it on him. “And this rope won’t break, will it, boys? It’s a bit makeshift. I wouldn’t want to go back now.”

They started leading him along by that rope, looking for somewhere to hang him. But there were no beams sticking out, not a single tree in the vicinity. Where, oh where, they wondered. And he started getting impatient. “Well, boys? I’m ready.”

And then one of them jumped up in front of the others and tripped him over. He fell, his hat came off his head, and the bottle he’d been holding rolled away somewhere.

“My bottle! My bottle!” he wheezed. “Don’t break it!” And then calmly, as if regretfully even, as he tried to get up, he said: “It’s too soon, boys. I’m not hanging yet.”

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And what do you think? The same boys who'd tied that noose round his neck rushed forward to pick him up, while others went looking for his bottle in the darkness. Someone put his hat back on his head, someone else brushed him off. They thrashed and kicked the one who'd tripped him up. Then the whole gang of us led him off towards the hut where he lived.

"Pity, boys," he said, as he bid us goodnight. "I'd have it all over with by now. Find that bottle for me tomorrow, will you? Now go to sleep, go to sleep."

And that was the end of the rebellion. No, they never ran that film for us again. Who'd have wanted to watch it now? As usual, next day they switched the power back on. There were no meetings, reports or speeches. They just made us clean up. They told us to pick up the instruments we'd thrown out of the window. They suspended lessons, suspended classes in the workshops and going out to work. We got our breakfast, lunch and dinner as before, no reduced portions. The glaziers came round at once too, and began to replace the windows, in the day-room first of all. Then they estimated the damage for the insurance, and so it turned out our rebellion was insured against. You wouldn't have been able to tell from the teachers that any such rebellion had ever happened. They even became milder. In any case, none of them raised his voice, none of them even frowned. The commander started bowing back to us, which surprised us very much, because before then he'd only nodded slightly, if at all, when someone bowed to him. Or most often ignored us completely. Maybe if he didn't like something about somebody, he was quite capable of smashing them in the gob – in sight of everybody too.

But what we found most astonishing was the music teacher. And not because he went about sober. Except that he was completely different sober, you might even say he wasn't his usual self at all. Grown old and pensive, he didn't show his face much. No, we never found that bottle, even though we searched the entire yard for it next day just as he'd asked. And that was the strangest thing – it had vanished into thin air. I can understand it

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getting lost in the grass, or in the bushes, but the whole yard was gravelled over. Apart from huts and gravel there was nothing else there. We even wanted to buy him one like it, because it was no ordinary bottle – flat bottles like that one are in common use nowadays, but in those days everything was in round ones. I don't know where he got it. I think he tried looking for it too, because he sometimes came out of a morning and strolled about the yard.

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Pp. 348-354 The narrator is returning home on a crowded train after an expedition to buy a hat, which has taken an immense effort to acquire. He tries to keep it in sight on the rack opposite, but a pushy passenger moves it to the rack above his head where he cannot see it, then squeezes himself between two other passengers and falls asleep.

But to get back to that journey, because I never finished telling you – the train was moving, I was in the train, and the hat was lying on the rack opposite, so I had it in sight. It wasn't there any more, you say? Yes, of course, he'd moved it to the rack on my side. The train stopped at another station, no one got in, someone just glanced into our compartment, saw that it was packed and slammed the door shut, so that fellow's eyes opened. He raised his head from the backrest, looked at us all to see if the same people were still there, and at his luggage, to check it was there, leaned towards the window and said: "Oh, so we're here already."

So you might have thought he wasn't feeling sleepy any more. However, almost as soon as the train had moved off, his eyelids began to droop again, though he still seemed undecided whether to sleep or not. And once the train had picked up speed and started to rock, his head flopped against the backrest as if of its own accord, and his mouth fell open, and out of it a noise began to emerge that was nothing more or less than the rumble of a vehicle, still far off in the distance, trundling across frozen ground on wheels of iron.

At some point his head slid off the backrest onto his neighbour's shoulder. Although the neighbour went on supporting his head without complaint, when the train hit a junction and the whole compartment shook, he shifted it from the man's shoulder to that of the woman sitting on his right, without waking up at all. The woman hosted him just as meekly on her shoulder. Rocking like a cradle, the train must have sent him into such a deep sleep that his head slid from her shoulder onto her breast. Her breasts were almost as large as two of his heads. They weren't just large, they looked self-reliant, as if independent of the rest of

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her. There are women like that, who seem to have been made merely to carry their own breasts. You might even have thought her breasts were rocking the train, especially every time it hit a junction. So what would have happened if he'd gone on snoozing on those breasts? However, the woman took a deep breath, drawing as much air into her lungs as she could, then breathed out, breathed in and out again, surely thinking that the rise and fall of her breasts would be enough to wake his head up too. But he was clearly very fast asleep, so as if suddenly startled, she blurted out: "Sir, what are you doing?"

He must have heard her. He did not actually open his eyes, and his mouth remained gaping, but by force of sleep alone he shifted his head from her breast to the backrest. And that was when it started – not straightaway; at first it was if he had stopped breathing. His eyes were still shut, but his mouth fell even wider open, though there was not a murmur from it. You'd think he had died, nothing less. The people in the compartment began to look at him, and at each other, but each one was afraid to say anything. Finally in a half whisper, maybe wanting to see off their own anxiety, someone did venture to say: "Anyone who sleeps like that must have more than a single night's sleep to catch up on."

So then a second one dared to add: "He was in the partisans, you heard what he said. Not the place for sleeping in, as we all know."

And in the wake of that remark someone else was even bolder and said: "His hat was holed by machine-gun fire. He must have been brave."

To her misfortune, the woman whose breasts he had tried to snooze on spoke up too. "My husband sleeps like that too whenever he gets drunk."

Someone took offence at that and replied: "But this man is sober, you can see that. He's just sleeping, sleeping after nights on end, maybe years without proper sleep."

The compartment fell silent, as if everyone had been struck dumb. For a long time all we could hear was the train, and that fellow's snoring, getting louder and louder. A station went by, then another, and only then, evidently wanting to wipe away the trace of the last

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conversation, did someone say: “He must be so worn out it’s no surprise he sleeps like the dead wherever he lays his head.”

“Who isn’t worn out these days, sir?” someone all but barked. “Who isn’t worn out?! No one’s life’s for free. Oh, those three sacks are mine, but I haven’t got the strength I used to have.”

Someone swore: “Worn out, damn him!”

And they began to argue who was the more worn out.

“I offer you my own example...” said someone, settling down to tell a long tale, when suddenly the sleeping fellow’s throat began to gurgle. Luckily the train shuddered as it hit a junction, and cut short his gurgling. But not for long. Once it had recovered its rocking rhythm, a great sigh emerged from the fellow’s mouth, as if from the depths of his soul. After that he settled his head even more firmly against the backrest and began not exactly to whistle, or pant, but you could hear a distant hissing sound in it, growing with almost every breath, getting faster and faster, nearer and nearer, louder and louder. So the train too, which had only dragged along until now, seemed to pick up speed with his every breath. And after a dozen such breaths it felt as if it were racing, rushing, as if it had even ceased to knock against the rail joints, and was all but leaping over the junctions, as if we were heading straight for a cataract, over which we’d soon go tumbling into an abyss.

I was so crushed by fear I had a pain in my chest. Believe me, never before or since have I ever heard such snoring.

The rumbling cataract we were fast approaching was splitting my head and crushing my chest, my legs began to jump and I was in no state to control them. I felt as if that snoring of his was making something emerge from me too, as if from the very depths of my being. And maybe everyone in the compartment felt the same, because no one dared give him the slightest nudge, or at least say, “Sir, please don’t snore!”

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I glued myself to the window, as if it might just bring me some salvation. And fortunately, after only a short dose of this torment, the train pulled into my station. Without waiting for it to stop, I pushed the door open and jumped out while it was still moving.

“Hey! What’s the hurry?!” the train dispatcher, who was standing nearby on the platform, upbraided me. “You’ll break your arms and legs and the railway will have to answer for it! Perhaps you haven’t got a ticket? Come here and show me your ticket!”

I went up to him, still jittery from that fellow’s snoring, and reached into my pocket, but there was no ticket there.

“Well, didn’t I say?” The train dispatcher was almost in triumph. “Hasn’t got a ticket so he’s trying to jump off before the station.”

I started searching my other pockets; meanwhile he gave the signal for the train to depart, so once I’d finally found the ticket, the train was already picking up pace.

“I’ve got it,” I said. “Here you are.”

“Now let’s see if it’s valid.” And he started waving at someone in the departing train.

Mindlessly, I gazed at his waving hand, and saw someone waving back at him out of the train window, and then suddenly my heart stopped. My hat had gone off in the train without me. Christ Almighty! The last carriage was just passing us, so I rushed after it as fast as my legs could carry me. I had just got hold of the handrail on the very last door, when it was yanked out of my hand by the accelerating train. But I went on running, carried along not so much by my legs as by despair because my hat was in there. I managed to catch up with last carriage again, and reached out my arm in an effort to grab the handrail – I thought I’d just got hold of it, I only had to bounce off the platform and jump onto the step, but the train gave a hard jerk and I was thrown backwards. But I still went on running, until the last carriage had gone further and further into the distance.

I was out of breath and my legs were buckling under me, but without stopping I ran towards the train dispatcher, who was still standing on the platform. Perhaps he’d been held

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back by curiosity, wondering if I'd succeed in jumping onto the train. But he must have known I wouldn't manage it, because he gave me a fierce reception: "So you had a ticket this far, but wanted to go further without one, eh?"

"No, my hat's there," I gasped.

"What sort of hat?"

"A brown felt one. Please stop the train!"

"Stop the train? You're crazy!" And he turned away, heading for the station building. I blocked his path.

"Please stop it."

"It's gone!" He pulled his cap lower and tried to push me away.

I latched onto his uniform and began to shake him, until that red company cap made his face go red.

"Stop it! Stop it!" I shouted into his face.

"Let me go!" he roared, trying to tear himself free. But I had grabbed hold of his uniform with talons of steel, and shook him again, until the cap went crooked on his head. "Let me go, hell and damnation! What is this, an assault? Hey!" he cried out to a railwayman who was walking along with a long-handled hammer, tapping at the rails. "Call the boys! A loony's latched onto me!"

But before the man had clambered onto the platform, several other railwaymen came running out of the station building.

"Don't let him go! Hold onto him!" they shouted.

"It's him that's holding onto me!" the furious train dispatcher shouted back. "The bloody pest's got a real grip on me!" he called to the men running up, as if his pride were wounded. "He's got an iron grip!"

One of the railwaymen grabbed my hands, trying to tear me off the train dispatcher's uniform. But in vain – it was as if I were holding him with talons, not hands.

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“He’s bloody strong for such a little squit.”

At that point the one with the long-handled hammer for tapping the rails said: “I’ll give him a whack and he’ll let go at once. Shall I?” He had already raised the hammer.

“Wait,” barked the train dispatcher, still furious. “He’ll let go. He’ll come to his senses and let go. He left his hat behind.”

“Where did he leave it?” asked one of the railwaymen.

“On the train,” said the dispatcher. “He wanted me to stop the train.”

They all snorted with laughter, and my hands dropped from his uniform of their own accord.

“Stopping the train is like stopping the world,” said one of them, ceasing to laugh.

“It couldn’t have stopped by then,” added the railwayman with the hammer, stretching his neck out to stare after the disappearing train. “It was already past the level crossing attendant’s hut.”

And they all burst out laughing again. Their laughter echoed round the entire platform, and I even felt as if it were ringing away high in the air above me.

“And where’s this chap’s head got to?”

“Maybe he left his head behind too?”

And they laughed, as if nothing funny ever happened on the railway, just catastrophe.

But one of them seemed to feel sorry for me, and said: “Perhaps we should call? Tell the conductor to go through the carriages?”

To which the dispatcher, straightening his mussed-up uniform, replied: “And how’s he supposed to squeeze through? They’re not even checking the tickets.”