

Small Train Station

Karel Čapek

Lidové noviny, August 23, 1935

The man who regards the vastness of the world with reverential awe, and who sets out on a journey with the idea that it will be a grand adventure, travels neither carelessly, recklessly nor impulsively. To begin with, he arrives at the railroad station at least half an hour before the train leaves. Because waiting for the train is part of the trip: it is a fixed rite; it is a preparation for unknown events to come.

I am not thinking of you, you grand, noisy, bustling central station, where the traveller sits down in the restaurant, reads the newspaper, and in general occupies himself in some way other than Pure Waiting. There are small stations, too, strung along the tracks like bladdernut pods on a rosary; they stand alone like wayfarers' shrines, far from the profane commotion of the world; they are truly chapels devoted to silent rite of Waiting. Usually a road lined with straggly trees leads up to them; the longer the road, the deeper the silence; and timelessness enfolds the pilgrim who comes to the little station to wait. There are stations to which the community bearing the same name has stretched a new, dreadful, unnaturally long street, which is called Station Boulevard and which embodies all the the tedium, inhospitality and ugliness in the world; there also are small stations to which nothing leads but a long, long winding footpath between meadows, along which you wander; and when you arrive, you look at your watch and rejoice: Thank goodness, I've still got an hour; at least the train won't leave without me.

And now here you are, sunk in the depths of waiting. Two or three or four sets of rails bake in the sun; nowhere does the sun burn so whitely or nakedly as at small railroad stations. A few freight cars rust on a dead-end track; two elderly gaffers push empty, chalk-marked cars onto the next-to-last track, perhaps to make the time pass. Between the rails two hens peck at sparkling grains of sand. It is silent, with a Sunday kind of silence. Great heaven, what is there to do?

Č.S.D.

Č.S.D., Czecho-Slovak Railways, is inscribed on each freight car — Č.S.D. — Č.S.D. — you walk around the entire station and look for whatever else there is to read. STATION AGENT. — LITTER BASKET. — WAITING ROOM. — FOR MEN. — DRINKING WATER. —

That's all. Aha, there's still the depot; you walk over to it and read the notice SMOKING STRICTLY FORBIDDEN. With that, the reading possibilities are exhausted.

Look, little baskets of nasturtiums hanging here; it's curious that station agents love nasturtiums, whereas railway-crossing guards lean toward sunflowers. Railroads seem to have a mysterious effect on flower-growing; there are never so many flowers as at country railroad stations. Some kind of railroad bee is tirelessly buzzing around the flower baskets. There now, it's circled for the last time and is gone. What to do?

The station agent steps out of his office, he has a red cap and shiny trousers and hands clasped behind his back; station agents always clasp their hands behind their backs as soon as they go out on the platform; probably a requirement of the job. He stands for a while, legs apart, and scratches under his cap; because nothing happens, he briskly returns to the shade of his office.

We who are waiting shift from one foot to the other and cough discreetly, as if we were believers in church; we are neatly dressed and solemnly apprehensive. One of the elderly employees noisily drops his crowbar onto the platform; he picks it up at once, in some confusion, for everyone looks at him reproachfully, as if he had broken the law. From the depths of the office a telegram apparatus ticks mysteriously. Official silence settles down over the little station.

"Mommy," the thin voice of a small girl breaks the silence.

"Be quiet," the mother reproves her in a whisper.

"Mommy," when will the train leave?"

Be quiet, child; we have to wait for it to come. If you don't behave yourself, just like in church, the choo-choo won't come and we won't get to ride to the end of the world, see? The hens creep into the shade under the freight cars; a queer solitude, the solitude of infinity, weighs down upon the four sets of shining rails. It seems that time has stopped and will not move; it won't start up again until four-thirty. Careful, careful, we ourselves must not stir.

And all of a sudden dingdingding, dingdingding, the metallic signal from the next station up the line. Don't be surprised if we all go down on our knees and cross ourselves, as when the sanctuary bell is rung. No, we don't go down on our knees, but we do break the rigid spell of waiting; we adjust ourselves and take up our little bundles.

The station agent runs out onto the platform and positions himself so as to carelessly salute the incoming train. Another moment of fidgeting and shattered silence, and here it

comes; clanking and snorting, the train enters the station; the station agent salutes it carelessly; we who have waited with such composure push into the coach with dignified haste, scrutinized resentfully by those already seated inside; and after an inexplicable delay the little train gives a whistle and sets out into the world.

One last look at the Station of Eternal Waiting; it is empty, the station agent, head bowed, goes back into his office, not even the basket of nasturtiums stirs in the burning stillness, and look, a young woman is staring out at the train, from the second floor of the station; she is young, she is pretty and she is bored, passionately, lazily, and searingly bored by the infinite solitude of the four sets of rails. Ah, what a life for her! Good God, what an untapped novel!