



Vincent Lakes

OFF THE RAILS

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

Off the Rails

by

Vincent Lakes

Web: <http://www.vincentlakes.com>

E-mail: vincent@vincentlakes.com

Published in March, 2015

Unauthorized distribution and any modifications of this intellectual property, in part or in entirety, are strictly prohibited by local and international copyright laws. Please, refer to official documentations and settings for more information. This literary work has been exclusively published for the internet audience. All commercial and non-commercial printing and/or reprinting requires a written consent of the author. An exception applies to printing for your own private use for increased reading comfort.

Copyright © 2015, Vincent Lakes. All rights reserved.

Off the Rails

It was an express train from Seattle, Washington to Milwaukee, Wisconsin; the tardily setting sun was slowly disappearing behind the Bitterroot Mountains, shedding some of its last golden rays upon the snow dunes, igniting them to sparkle like the British crown jewels under a well-directed spotlight. I was dozing on my uncomfortable seat, unable to completely free myself from the worries of the world. The clatter of the wheels running on the steel tracks was not much worse than crying children, forcing the mind to a state of alertness that simply cannot be shut down. Some people say it is the best kind of sleeping drug, but obviously I was not one of those people. I came close, more than a few times, but there was always something that drew me back from the edge of sleep - a sudden steeper turn in the track, or temporary reduction in speed, which signaled my brain that something out of the ordinary was going on. Of course, it was nothing, time after time just nothing. If it was not for the unbearable fear of flying, I would have never taken the damn train, but I am weak, and for this weakness I must pay. My name is Gregory Smith, and I was on my way home from another drawn and exhausting business trip, and I could not wait for the moment to lay my head on a soft pillow and fall asleep, deep and refreshing sleep instead of the restless dormancy I lapsed into every so often only to come back even more tired than before.

The MontBlanc timepiece on my wrist told me it was 7:39 pm, indicating the train was precisely on time. The decorative watch itself was, in lack of better words to describe it, a proud trophy of my success in life. I could have gone for a Rolex like so many others, but I felt the unexplainable urge to be a little different, thus the MontBlanc, and specifically the Nicolas Rieussec tribute model to make things extra fancy. It is rather ridiculous, I know, but it feels good to give in to your trivial desires every now and then. It was going to be a long night, but with a good book, some snacks and a multitude of games installed on my smartphone I was relatively confident that I would be sufficiently entertained.

The car I was sitting in was half-full with people from all walks of life. There were businessmen like me, fiddling with their laptops and tablets, vacationers and other travelers - all of them sticking strictly to themselves. I had made this same observation many times before, but it continued to amuse me. For a creature that should have had a strong social pack mentality, the human had succeeded to restrict themselves within their own territory. It was an oxymoron of nature, a twist that mocked the primordial roots of the entire species, as unnatural as the sun rising

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

from the west, and yet we felt much more comfortable when we did not have to look anybody in the eyes, or feel the assumed stare on our backs, not to mention touching. We had become shy and leery of our own kind. The joke was on all of us, for our own inventions and findings had turned us into something that simply defied the laws of nature instead of obediently following them, and nature had a known habit of pruning out branches that grew too far. Sometimes I wished I could live long enough to see what happens in the end just to chuckle to myself while watching the civilization vanish from the face of the Earth. I admit it was pretty negative thinking, but I must emphasize how long the journey from Seattle to Milwaukee really was, and very similar thoughts passed through my mind at some point every single time - it was my own twisted way to escape the dull reality.

Pressing my head lightly against the cold window, I watched as the snow-covered pine trees flashed by. The mountains were growing taller around the train; the diminishing sunlight was about to die and give way to the blue of the night. Sighing deeply, I picked a salted cashew peanut from my pocket and threw it on my tongue. Barely noticing the pleasant taste, I crunched the peanut between my teeth and swallowed it quickly before throwing in another one. This continued until I had joylessly consumed the entire bag of peanuts, thus practically wasting the dollar and something I had spent to buy it at the station.

I glanced at the end of the car where a small table was set in between seats that faced each other - the special corner for families with children. Watching the mom and the kids playing a card game made me think about my own family back in Milwaukee. Were they waiting for me? I really was not sure anymore, for I had done this same trip over and over again for years, and somehow my grip on what used to be a happy and fulfilling life had slipped. Maybe I was but a necessary evil who appears occasionally to provide a paycheck and nothing more. I was gone from home so much it almost seemed like we were living separate lives that overlapped from time to time. There was a cozy family unit that contained my lovely wife and two children, a son and daughter, and then there was me, not a father but just a provider. A faceless man who stayed away for most of the time, a man who made everybody feel awkward and uncomfortable whenever he came around, for the family unit and the provider had become completely disconnected. The feeling of relief was so apparent every time I left the house that I was not sure anymore why I bothered to come back. Responsibility perhaps? Commitment? I know for sure I was committed once, and in a way I still am, but somehow I had completely lost my way.

And as I pondered on the things that had gone wrong and all the opportunities I had missed during my miserable life, a throbbing headache began to emerge as I had no means to find answers

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

to these pointless questions. There was no simple way out of the dead end I was squirming in, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it while sitting in this clattering steel horse. It was time to do some damage control and numb the pain as well as I could; it was time to dig out the good stuff.

A pocket-sized, flat bottle of Captain Morgan lingered on my lips for a good while, allowing the golden liquid to pour freely into my gluttonous throat, burning sweetly as it ran down to my stomach from where it continued spreading warmth all over my tired body.

After a short while I had a very welcome buzz going on, which pleasantly muffled the sounds of my sensitive conscience, leaving me into a blurry state of nothingness as I stared past the mountains and stars, reaching to grasp something of interest. It did not really matter to me whether I could find something or not. The moment, and the lack of content in that moment, was the fact of importance. It left me into an empty trance, which felt better than anything I had felt since I stepped into that train. And because I was drifting in that empty moment, I almost missed it. A wisp of thick mist, that must have come from a hidden creek or a pond behind the evergreens, passed the window like a bizarre, grey ghost. It was followed by another, and then one more, until the landscape was completely veiled by a fog denser than multilayered gauze. It became difficult to see even the closest trees as they flashed by, and there was a change not only in the scenery but also the atmosphere inside the car. I realized the train was silent like the entire world had been suddenly muted, or the train itself detached from the fabric of universe and thrown into void.

The train jerked forcefully as if it suddenly hit a concrete wall, throwing me loosely against the back of the chair in front of me, and then everything turned dark. I drifted away, and for a little while everything was good and quiet.

* * *

To say that my head was hurting badly would have been the understatement of the century, for the pain was infernal, to say the least, when I finally cracked my eyes and glanced around. It was dark outside, which did not surprise me. After all, it had been late dusk at the time of whatever happened. The train was crawling onward at the speed of a snail, rolling toward what seemed to be some kind of a station, then it stopped. The lights had gone out during the incident, and the shadows inside the car melted into one dark mass. The people did not move, which made me assume the worst. What if I was the only person still alive on this wrecked piece of junk. But then I noticed

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

how upright and natural everybody looked; everything was far from what I would expect after a devastating accident. It seemed as if the people slumbered quietly on their seats, their glazed eyes staring without understanding of what was going on. I had no clue either, but I seemed to be the only one who was putting in at least some effort to find out.

Stumbling toward the door, I was hoping the lack of electricity had unlocked them, and as I found out a few seconds later, I had gotten lucky this time. The metal door swung open with one determined push, revealing a train station that was so out of place and time that I had difficulties to believe that I had enjoyed only one sip of rum. The worn, wooden main building looked like it could collapse at any second, a broken wagon that could have been thrown all the way from the 1800's stood next to the weathered plank wall. Every window of the terribly suffered building was shattered, sneering at me like angry Grim Reaper.

The station seemed to be completely empty; the wind blew grey dust across the platform, and I was able to hear an annoying hum that kept getting stronger and then weaker again, but it never vanished entirely. The silhouette of the train behind me nearly disappeared in the thickness of the fog as I approached the building. I was scared and confused, and as ridiculous as it sounded, I missed the dull indoors of the train car more than I dared to admit. There was something dreadful about this place, something unnatural. As I reached for the handle of the brutally sandblasted remains of what once had been the main door of the ancient station, I felt chills running down my spine like the ghosts of the people who had walked along the floors of this building had come to see who dared to disturb them.

"Hello, is there anybody here?" I called out as the rusty hinges announced the opening of the wrecked door.

"Why yes, I'm here," a wheezy voice answered from inside. And that was when I saw him, an old, grey man standing behind the counter where they must have sold train tickets. Wearing a once black top silk hat, round glasses and worn suit that was partially consumed by moths a long time ago, he looked at me with his foggy eyes and smiled kindly. "Come in, Mr. Smith, I've been expecting you."

I halted immediately, for everything just seemed so off and wrong. This old man had just called me by name, which did not make any sense. Why was he waiting for me? What the hell was going on?

"What do you mean by you've been expecting me? What is this place?" I snarled, annoyed and upset by the mere mystery of this whole ordeal.

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

The man picked his grey sideburns in a calm manner, waiting until I had finished presenting my questions, then he smiled again. "It's not important where you are, how you got here or how I know you. The only thing that means something is why you're here."

"Who are you?" I demanded to know, and in my panicky state, I successfully ignored his words and blindly required for more answers that I should have already known not to receive. These dizzy heights of the summit of my sanity had not what it took to comprehend all this - I was seriously afraid of losing my mind. It was like a surreal dream that I could not just wake up from.

"My name is William, sir, William Horace Smith, and I have a letter here for you." The man was still smiling, and now he was holding a sealed, stamped letter in his wrinkly hand.

"How can you tell it's for me," I questioned, trying to hold on to the remnants of my sanity before it would be all gone.

"Look, sir," the man called William urged. "It has your name on it." And indeed, with decorative, old fashioned writing, there was my name written on the envelope, no question about it.

"But there are so many Greg Smiths," I argued tenaciously. "It could be anyone!"

William glanced around and turned his gleaming eyes back at me. "Sir, do you see anyone else here who could bear the same name?" he then asked and winked in the most infuriating way, like assuming we were just playing some twisted game while both of us knew the truth.

"I can't see a damn thing," I cried desperately, attempting to break this evil spell with my own loud voice, but my efforts were in vain, and the man added to my horror by nodding knowingly.

"Precisely, sir," he confirmed and smiled yet again. I noticed thinking to myself how awfully satisfying it would have been to knock those yellow teeth out, but I restrained myself and instead took the letter from him without speaking any further. I was giving up, losing the battle if there ever really was one, but William interrupted my internal pity party.

"I don't think the train will wait much longer, sir," he said in the same friendly tone he had maintained throughout the entire encounter. "They usually don't since it's such a small station - insignificant for the company, you know," he added and winked again.

I was not sure why, but suddenly I felt a pressure, a kind of itching inside my head - an urge to make it to the train before it would depart. Without goodbyes or anything else along the lines of common courtesy, I rushed toward the train, focusing my eyes on the dark windows and the red and silver stripes on the side of the cars like they were my last beacon of hope, the shining markers in the night showing the way out of this horrid place.

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

My foot landed on a metal grid that was the first step as I began to climb to the train. I did not feel movement yet, but I refused to abandon this crazy hope that had kindled out of nowhere inside the decayed station building. Somehow the strange, old man had subtly convinced me with his words, and those words drove me forward now like the crude whips do packs of team dogs. I could not see William anymore, for the broken windows revealed nothing but shadows. I stumbled through the doors, which were still loose as a result from the power blackout, saw the people in their black slumber, retaining the same exact positions as when I had left. I felt the cold draft blowing through the car like a hundred souls trying to escape, but I still believed. I just had to make it to my own seat, had to restore the setting that had prevailed at the moment of impact.

I stumbled and fell. The family with children at the end of my car was positioned in a way where the mother's foot was partially in the aisle. In my hurry, I had failed to pay enough attention to such obstacles, but that was not the real problem as I was slowly picking myself up from the floor. No, the problem was the lady herself, who was now staring at me with wide, bulging eyes, and I saw the veins on her sclerae, resembling slithering worms that consume the dead. I would have screamed if I had any air left in my lungs to do so, but the unexpected fall had emptied them efficiently. I crawled away in panic, avoiding the black fingers reaching at me as well as I could.

"Please, sir," the horrid woman cried in the most unnaturally high-pitched voice that nearly shattered my eardrums, "take your seat or we're all going to die!"

I needed no further persuasion - I flung on my feet like a jack-in-the-box.

Barely recognizing my spot, I desperately tried to read the numbers on the seats, but then I noticed the familiar coat laying on the armrest. As soon as I sat down, and I mean literally, as soon as I sat down the train jerked, the electricity returned and the gloomy grey was replaced by the most welcome fluorescent light. The shadowy station building was still standing outside in the middle of the grey mountain scenery, but for my great relief I noticed how it was slowly sliding off the picture as the train kept accelerating, until it finally disappeared into the dark. The train was rolling faster and faster until it hit something again, or at least it felt like crushing against something very solid. Startled by the sudden impact, afraid that we might get stranded there on that creepy station, I blinked rapidly a few times, and when I opened my eyes again I saw the dimly twinkling stars in the sky. But I barely had a chance to sigh after realizing that we actually passed the mysterious obstacle before the train hit the brakes - hard. I almost got squashed against the seat in front of me again, but this time I was a little bit faster and protected myself by grabbing the back rest firmly before the impact. In the darkness of the night, I saw an old abandoned station ahead of us. The train had

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

stopped right before the platform and I was able to hear a myriad of complaints and astonishments about the sudden halt. Then I saw the train conductor rushing through the car.

"A snow avalanche ahead. It has blocked the track. Will be cleared in an hour." The conductor continued repeating those three short sentences as he went through the entire train, bringing everyone up to speed with the reason for the stop. The complaints quickly turned into appreciative prayers, for it seemed like we had missed the avalanche by ten to fifteen minutes. My MontBlanc was telling me it was 9:16 pm. The station ahead was familiar to me, for I had traveled this line over and over again for a time that seemed like ages. It was Garnet, an old mining town that had been abandoned sometime before the World War I. I instantly noticed something strange about the situation. The passing of Garnet occurred quite accurately at 9:05 pm, which indicated that the train was 11 minutes late. Last time I had checked the train was right on time, but if we would have passed Garnet on time, the chances are that everybody on that train would have been buried under the snow. I quickly glanced at the family, and especially the lady who had screamed at me, but they were happily playing together once again, completely ignoring my indifferent presence.

With shivering hands I pulled out the letter I had crammed into my pocket in a hurry and opened it. There was an old, faded photo of a familiar fellow standing in front of the brand new station inside, looking proudly at the camera with his shiny top silk hat tilted carelessly on the side and smiling that same kind smile I had seen before, which in my deeply terrified and shocked state had appeared very annoying to me. A strange sadness took over as I flipped the photo and saw the words written behind it: *"A fortune may be a gold nugget, but a golden heart makes a fortunate life - William H. Smith"*.

"I'll be damned," I muttered to myself as I suddenly realized something. "I remember that name now!" William Smith was a renown name from my grandfather's stories he always loved to share when I was a kid, stories about his father's adventures during the most lively era of gold mining in Montana. I raised my head and looked at the badly weathered station in the distance, a lonely tear burned in the corner of my eye before it rolled down on my cheek, but the realization of this instantly pulled me away from my emotional swirl. I wiped it away as fast as I could to make sure no one saw anything, and then a longing smile appeared on my lips. It surely seemed like I was just saved from the frozen masses of the avalanche by none other than my great grandfather, William Smith - the brave and cunning adventurer of the Missoula County.

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

* * *

It ended up taking a little more than one and a half hours before the track was finally cleared, but the train encountered no further delays during the rest of the trip. I arrived to Milwaukee late, but it was nothing too much out of the ordinary. The mountains are treacherous, and it was rare not to have any kind of problems along the way. This time something was different though, for I felt like my eyes had opened after a bad dream that had lasted for years. I began to pay attention to little things; I spent more time with my wife and kids, I tried my best to be open and attending, taking part in all the little chores of the day, and I think a very small step at a time, the distance between us began to shorten. The sole reason why I attempted to do all these little things was the strange wisdom I found from everything William had said. It seemed funny now, but there was no way he could have told me anything deeper, for I was being torn apart by such a storm that any complicated trains of thought would have been blatantly ignored, but the short, witty sentences got stuck in my head somehow, and once I truly heeded them, I found my life saved.

When William had called me by my name, and then pointed out the fact there was no one sharing the same name at the station, he wanted me to stand out from the grey mass and become what I used to be - a man who does not only provide for his family, but who also stays around and helps with the small issues of daily life, and I have to admit that I have seen a big change in the way my wife and kids look at me now. There is respect, but most of all, there is that genuine glimmer of love that binds families together.

Then he brought up my blindness. The mere inability to see what was going on around me. I had buried myself in work, and that was all I had left in life. I was ready to wither away and adjust to the misery that had become a persistent reality. I was unable to see how much I suffered, and the annoying wink with a slight nod were a clear answer to my unasked questions. I needed to wake up and face the worms that had ruined my conscience and poisoned my mind. In the end, it had been a purifying experience. I requested an internal transfer in the company, and it was accepted. Now I was working at the local office in Milwaukee, and I was able to go home and be with my family every single night. The only thing I regret is that I did not do it sooner, but I surely am able to appreciate all the perks of it now.

The last thing old William taught me was that the train would not wait for long. If I had refused to change anything, there was absolutely no doubt of eventually losing my family. And what was there after everything was lost? Nothing - just empty, grey desolation, very much like the

Off the Rails by Vincent Lakes

abandoned train station in the middle of the void. But I had caught the train. Granted, it had been the last call, but I made it in time. Thank you, William Smith, and may you rest in peace, for I think I have learned my lesson.