

STEVE ZYTVELD

*GRAVES AND TRAINS*

(from a novel in progress)

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“Just where,” my mother barked from the kitchen table, cradling the Ministry of Agriculture-issued cookbook in her wry fingers, “do you think you’re going with those?”

The cellar door grinned ajar behind me. I looked down as my hands opened at her voice. Six egg-sized pieces of coal, freshly plucked from our bin downstairs, clunked to the floor.

“Gerry and me,” I bent down to pick up the coal, “are making a snowman.”

“Leave those.” She got up, allowing the cookbook to fall closed onto the tabletop.

“Here.” Having crossed the kitchen, she opened a door under the counter and reached into the shy steel bucket of onions there.

Then I remembered: Saint Nicholas didn’t bring coal for mischievous children. No, coal could keep you warm, and it kept well. Onions, on the other hand... well, I would find a couple of those, along with socks and dictionaries, in the wooden shoes my parents directed me to leave by the fireplace every Christmas Eve.

One by one, they dropped into my mittened hands from my mother’s, all six mouldering orbs.

“There you go.” She brushed her hands off on her apron before finding the pockets. “Now, go build your snowman!”

I nodded at her. I think I said, “Thanks, Mama.”

Outside, I ran across my yard to Gerry’s.

“You got ’em?” He was hefting the snowman’s head atop its body.

“Yeah,” I held forward the perverted onions.

He eyed them a moment, then grinned, “They’ll do, Arthur;” then, as he took them, “they’ll do indeed.”

Two smaller ones for eyes, the biggest one for the nose, then the last three became the buttons.

“There ya go,” he was brushing his mitts off against each other as he admired our work. “Our parson.”

I put my hands into my coat pockets. “Our what?”

Gerry turned and looked down – at ten, he was a year older – at me, “Our parson.”

“Yes, our parson. Now what?”

“Well, he has to do some ...” he paused, then smiled, “priestly work.”

“Like what?”

“Well ... he could marry somebody.”

“Your priests,” I remembered Reverend Fieldside, my own minister from St. Stephen’s Anglican Church, who had been widowed a number of years ago, “don’t get married.”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean,” Gerry was suddenly jumping from foot to foot, “he can make two people married.”

“Like who? We’re two men, remember, Gerry?”

“True,” he regarded the snow-parson suspiciously.

Then his face lit up – “We can give him hips and boobies, and he’ll be a snow-lady!”

“And?” I waved my arms.

“And I will marry the two of you!”

“No,” I folded my arms. “I’m not going to marry a snow-lady!”

“Well, of course you’re not.” He folded his arms and began stroking his narrow chin to think.

“We could,” I ventured, having watched him puzzle for some moments, “build a snow-lady this snowman can marry.”

“Yes,” he laughed, “we can do that. And I’ll marry them! That’s perfect!”

“Yes,” I nodded. Then, “Wait a minute – what’ll I do then?”

“Well, you can ...” he began tapping his chin. “Well, you can be ... the best man! Or the bride’s father!”

“No, I worked hard and I’m not going to let you do all the good stuff.”

“No, of course not.” Again, Gerry folded his arms to think. Then: “I’ll be the priest, and then you can have a turn marrying them... as mayor! Mayors frequently make people married.”

“Do they, now?”

“Yes, of course. They do all sorts of things like that.”

“I’m not sure, Gerry. I think you’re making that one up.” I put my hands on my hips, shaking my head. “Besides, how can I make them married when you have already? People can’t get married twice – they don’t have to if it’s done right the first time.”

“Well, then, you can marry them, and then I’ll do it, to make sure it’s all holy and stuff.”

“But that’s not fair to me as mayor – I probably did it right the first time.” I let out a breath, then said, “And I’m not sure I even want to be mayor! I haven’t even agreed yet! Why can’t I be the priest and you be mayor?”

Gerry sighed, “Okay, okay, you can be the priest.”

“But you’re better at it!”

Gerry began to walk away in the knee-deep snow, then stopped. He slowly turned, beaming.

“Wait! Parsons marry people, but they bury people too!”

“What do you mean?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Well, like when my Auntie Martha died!” He sounded relieved this dreadful mishap could serve some higher purpose.

“Father Frank got her married to Uncle John last year. But when she got run over by that truck at Christmas, Father Frank also did her funeral. She was supposed to have a baby.” He suddenly looked a little perplexed. “Anyways, priests also do funerals.”

“You may be right,” I nodded, thinking of the hearses I sometimes saw in front St. Stephen’s. “So, what do we do?”

"I suppose," Gerry walked up to the snowman and patted him on a frosty shoulder, "he'll do a funeral with us instead of a wedding."

I had only seen weddings, and only in the movies. I had no idea what happened at a funeral – who, if anyone, said "I do"?

"Sure," was all I could say.

Gerry began stamping down the snow in front of the snow-parson. Saying nothing, I watched him until he had made a foot-deep rectangle in the snow that he could lie down in. He then reposed in this space he had made for his own corpse, folding his hands together across his chest, like Bela Legosi, and closed his eyes.

"So," I shrugged with a strange new desperation, "what do I do?"

Gerry opened an eye at me. "You mourn me. You cry and wail and hold your face because you miss me a lot."

"But, where've you gone?"

"Back to God and the angels because I've done God's will."

"Then why am I so sad?" The whole soul/body thing had never made much sense to me in Sunday School and still didn't – it is, of course, something I'm still sorting out now, nearly a half-century later.

"Because it's going to be so long for you before we can be together again, and you will have to go through so much before it does happen."

This actually made a great deal of sense to me. I put my face into my mittened hands and made loud sobbing sounds. "Oh, Gerry," I made to weep, "I miss you so much. So very much. You were my best friend in the whole, entire world. Why must I live without you? Why does God do such things to us?"

"No, Arthur," Gerry sat up a little in his icy tomb. "You must live your life and you must live it well, as God demands. You must live your life out with grace and the faith that we will be together again, even if it means waiting a lifetime."

"Oh, Gerry," I stage-sobbed again, a little more mindful, "I miss you so much. You were too young to die ... too young. I know that we will meet again in the Great Hereafter where God is caring for you."

Gerry was struggling to keep from smiling in his little grave – he was nodding, beaming.

Then he leapt up and put his arms around my shoulders. "Oh, Arthur!" he shouted out with joyful tears, "That was perfect! And ... and ..." he stretched out his arms at the snowman, "the parson gave the greatest homily! He reminded us of Christ's resurrection, and the promise He holds out to us to join Him at the Throne of God!"

He caught his breath. "You mourn very well."

Then his hands dropped, dancing down towards the powdery tomb awaiting me.

"It's your turn now, Arthur."

I looked into the grave. My feet didn't move.

"Hey you boys!"

My father stood on the street in his woolen plaid coat and lined cap. "What are you two up to?" He looked bemused and concerned at the same time.

I shuffled back, not looking down. "We're just playing, Papa."

Gerry stepped forward. "We're playing Church, Mr. Vander Graal."

My father glanced over his shoulder; somewhere in the middle distance we could hear the straining of an aged and approaching motor. He then turned back to Gerry. "With a snowman?" He began wading through the snow towards us.

“There’s only me and Arthur,” Gerry chirped again, “and we need more people. Want to join us?”

The idea made me want to fall into the grave and close it over me. But then the suggestion probably didn’t seem so absurd to Gerry, whose father seemed broken down by years of managing the Massey farm equipment lot out on Iron Mars Road, while my own seemed to be so nimble and good-natured even after years of working at the dairy.

My father put his hands on his hips as he gazed down into our snowy sarcophagus, then up at our snow-parson; its spindly arms seemed to reach out in benediction. “It’s too nice a day for a funeral,” he said as he looked up at the clear blue sky, the breeze tugging at his eyebrows.

Gerry shrugged, still smiling, “We could – ”

“Hey! Perry!”

My father turned quickly at the voice from back out on the road.

Errol Baines stood at the snow-bank. Behind him the Baines Dairy truck idled, the door hanging open; I could make out the umbral form inside of a man I knew only as Turcotte, hunched over the wheel and anxious to get going.

“Perry, something’s happened in town. At the railway tracks.” Mr. Baines made a hurry-up gesture, “C’mon.”

My father gave the snowman an almost rueful glance, then huffed his way through the snow to the waiting van.

Gerry and I looked at each other, then started after him.

My father was sliding in beside Turcotte; climbing in after him, Mr. Baines turned to us and held up a hand. “You boys better stay here.”

He heaved the door shut. The van rattled off.

We watched after it.

Gerry turned back to the snowman. “Maybe we should have a baptism.”

I saw the van turn onto Union Street. “Come on, Gerry.” I started after it.

“What?” He turned to see me run off, his arms hanging at his sides.

“Let’s go,” I shouted over my shoulder. “See what’s going on.”

“But, Mr. Baines ... your father ...”

Seeing I didn’t stop or slow, he took up after me.

With Gerry trailing a dozen or so yards behind, I ran partway up the hill on Colborne, then onto Union, keeping a steady jog into Appleton’s business section.

We passed Therien’s Hardware and Paynter’s Dispensary and the Odeon; groups of two or more were gathered on the sidewalk, looking up ahead and muttering amongst themselves. We passed the Clarion office, where more people were huddled together, some wide-eyed and covering their mouths.

There was a larger crowd, maybe more than fifty, clustered on the train station platform, a police car dark and waiting in the parking lot.

The afternoon train itself had ground to a halt a hundred yards or so short of the platform. A conductor and the station’s porter were helping passengers and their luggage off the train and through the snow to warmth and safety. Another conductor, tears in his eyes, was barking obvious orders at anyone who would ignore him. The train’s engineer leaned against his machine, his face in his hands.

Up ahead, we saw the Baines Dairy van at the level crossing, surrounded by other work-trucks, a couple police cars, a fire engine, and an ambulance. Reverend Fieldside’s Plymouth was just pulling up.

The men there had taken off their caps and hats in spite of the cold, trying hard to say nothing to one another.

One I recognized from the foundry was sobbing at the sky. "For the love of God, the poor creature was only five years old – if that."

We didn't have to push through any crowd to reach the tracks. The men stood in close circles for shelter against the wind and what they'd just seen.

At the crossing, I looked up the line whence the train had come. There were more groups of men, many of them in grim uniforms.

"He didn't stand a chance," a fireman wailed in a gagging voice, "he got caught under the wheels and burst like a tick."

Maybe a hundred yards along there was a grey wool blanket, placed carefully over a small, solemn pile. Around it on the snow was a spray of blood and viscera. A stray mitten lay nearby.

Richard King, the proprietor of the town's paper, the Clarion, had sat down hard on the ice-encrusted clinkers beside the rails, blood smearing shiny streaks into his black overcoat.

"Oh God ... Oh God ... Oh God ..." He stared ahead blankly. "My poor wife ... Oh God ..."

Ten yards or so beyond him stood his son Arthur. I walked to him.

"Arthur," Gerry gasped, "No ..." I couldn't tell whether he was calling me back by name or voicing shock that my unlikely friend Arthur King was in the midst of this calamity.

I walked on.

There was something dark blue lying in the snow – a book. I picked it up as I walked past, knowing what it was without having to read it. A Field Guide to the Birds by Roger Tory Peterson. I handed it to him.

"Thank you, Arthur," he said as he took it and held it to his chest. "My brother ... William ... got hit by the train. I think he's dead."

I glanced over at the blanket. Blood was soaking through.

"We were looking for birds. We saw a cardinal, then we saw a finch, then ... then he fell forward." He managed a smile before his narrow shoulders sank. "The train ..."

Gerry had gone over to the form so mysteriously alone and hidden under the blanket. Almost without hesitation, he pulled back a corner of this coarse veil; crossing himself, he laid a hand there somewhere, muttering words I couldn't understand.

"Arthur!" My father broke from one of the clusters of men, flushing red with grief, anger, and fear. "Arthur, what are you doing here?"

Gerry was stepping back from the blanket.

"Oh, Arthur ..." his shouts were almost sobs as he crouched and hugged me to him. "Please, Arthur, you shouldn't have come here."

He clumsily reached out for Gerry's hand, pulling him close as well.

"Let's go home."