

## Le Train

*G.Simenon*

May 27 - July 3, 2020

Marcel Féron is a young man living in the French town of Fumay on the Belgian border. He is married to Jeanne, who is pregnant, and they have already a daughter Sophie who is four years old. He supports himself and his family by selling and repairing radios. One morning he hears on the radio that Belgium has been invaded by German forces, he decides that he and his family need to escape, and they join a stream of refugees descending on the local station and being whisked off, not as a regular paying passengers, but as a human mass to be transported. Men generally become separated from women and children, and Marcel ends up in a cattle car, along with older men and a few stray women, while his wife and child ends up in a first class car. Later on the train will split and the car that housed his family will be taken on a separate train and as a consequence he will lose touch with his family. The train follows no schedule, the invading German forces have reached France and everything is in a disarray with long stops and a circuitous path, as the train he is traveling with has no fixed itinerary but is relegated to lowest priority and is directed along available tracks. Once it is attacked by German planes and a few casualties ensue, in particular the mechanic of the train is killed.

The situation is unreal, more like a dream than anything else, divorced both from his path and his future. He finds himself in limbo and experiences a strange detachment from everything that is connected to his life, including his family, whose fate almost appears to him a matter of if not total indifference but one which he can dismiss with serenity.

There is a young woman in a black skirt whom he finds strangely attractive. He befriends her, helps her out, giving her water and other small things. They exchange names, hers turns out to be Anna. As he later learns she is Czech of Jewish ancestry. They do not talk much with each other but they bond naturally, and soon she seduces him. The atmosphere in the wagon is not devoid of erotic tension, a large fat woman carries on openly an affair with a horse dealer, their intercourse loud and visible to anyone willing to watch and listen. The train eventually reaches its final destination - La Rochelle - and Marcel sees the sea for the first time in his life. They become settled in a refuge camp newly erected and Marcel becomes somewhat of a handy-man. They carry on their affair and they make love all the time seeking out new places for their illicit activities. For the first time in his life he finds that he can engage in the sexual act without any shame. But it is all a dream, their relation has no past and definitely not a future, it is doomed from the start, taking place not in reality but in a dream, an interlude. This of course makes it so pure. It is like fantasy unsullied by the invasive vicissitudes of quotidian life. He professes to her that he loves her, she dismisses his protestations as stupidities.

But Marcel realizes that he has a duty to find out the whereabouts of his wife and daughter, and finally he learns that his wife is to be found at the maternity ward in the town of Bressuire. He has to go there, and Anna offers to accompany him. Their separation is going to be inevitable, the dream has to be woken up from, his duty is to reconnect to

his real life, that which is part of his destiny. She stays with him, almost to the very end. Reluctant to let go.

- *Adieu !*

- *Soit heureux Marcel*

They part, he walks to the entrance, and as he is about to enter, she runs up to him and whispers

*J'ai été heureuse avec toi,*

The last chapter is a retrospection. He reunited with his family, his wife having given birth to a son. Later on another girl will be born. They continue the life they had led after the armistice, in fact they can resume from where they so hurriedly left. Nothing has been disturbed in their home, the neighbor has taken care of their poultry. True it appears dutiful and not very exciting, but of course it is part of reality, not a dream with no consequences. The narrator Marcel discloses that he later on met Anna in Fumay briefly. She was attached to a British parachuter (something that must have pricked him and provoked his jealousy) and they both sought an asylum, a place to hide from the German authorities. Marcel declines to help them, putting up as an excuse that he is under surveillance. Anna accepts it and disappears. A month later he learns from an announcement posted at the *mairie* that she and some others have been executed for espionage.

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