

DAY TRIPPER

By Tamaso Lonsdale

Old Sam was a bit of a rogue. Good-natured, cheerful, kindly, he wouldn't hurt a fly but he liked his little lurks and perks and, considering the state of his finances and his advanced age, he felt he was entitled to them. He happily accepted a mug of soup and slice of bread from the local soup kitchen, he appreciated the neighbour's son mowing his grass now and again, and he liked the way his daughter popped in once a week to tidy up a bit and bring him a steak and kidney pie or a few biscuits she'd baked. But, most of all, he liked his occasional sneaky jaunt to the city.

The city train came through his town late at night. It was rarely crowded and Sam would board it and wait until everyone else had taken their seats before selecting one for himself handy to the toilet. Not that he had any trouble in that department, mind you, but simply that it was convenient to slip into the toilet when he saw the guard coming through the door to check the tickets. It was just a matter of staying in there until the man had gone on to the next carriage. Soon after that the lights would go out and he could return to his seat and settle down to sleep.

Compared to the other early morning travellers, rousing from their uncomfortable night speeding through the darkness and grumbling to each other about the impossibility of sleeping on a train, Sam looked radiant.

Yet why? Old, small and weak-looking, Sam's hair was unkempt, his beard straggly, his hands gnarled and less than clean and he wore a weird assortment of clothes which could well have been filched from an ancient scarecrow. Yet his eyes glowed, the corners of his mouth turned upwards and his wrinkles bespoke a life-time of smiling.

The bored plump matron sitting next to him tried to engage him in conversation, not because she was interested in him but simply that there was nothing else to do. Sam merely smiled and replied in brief non-committal monosyllables which did nothing to lessen the lady's boredom but made her wonder if perhaps the old fellow was a bit dotty. However, when she opened her little snack

that her daughter had packed, she offered him a sandwich. He took it cheerfully and smiled his thanks. She glowed with self-appraisal at having been kind to the poor man.

At last, sandstone ranges, paddocks, rivers and eucalypts gave way to suburban houses, factories, traffic, shopping complexes and finally high-rise apartments and city sky-scrapers.

Passengers began bestirring themselves, tidying clothing, putting on shoes, gathering possessions together and generally making ready for the end of their long journey. Sam, however, simply sat unperturbed, his face crinkled in a secret smile and his hands resting lightly in his lap. The plump matron heaved a sigh and said how good it would be to get off the train. The old man just smiled but whether or not in agreement she could not tell.

As the train pulled into the station people hustled and bustled their way through the carriage, lugging their heavy bags and apologising to each other as suitcases bumped against shins and everyone tried to decide whose turn it was to go through the door. Sam waited until they'd all gone and then slowly made his way over to one of the platform seats where he settled himself comfortably, full-length, for a short nap, or so it seemed.

No one paid him any attention in the excitement of the arriving passengers meeting friends and relatives, little children hugging their nanas, wives dutifully greeting husbands while lovers ecstatically embraced after long separation. The platform quickly emptied of the general public, leaving only the railway staff moving trolleys around, chatting with the driver and guard, and checking through the carriages to see no-one was left on board prior to the train being run into the depot for cleaning. A young station-assistant sweeping the platform knew that he should rouse this old guy and move him on but decided to let him sleep a while as he reminded him of his grandfather who had recently died.

When the ticket gate was unattended Sam got up and wandered through to spend half an hour at the newsagent thumbing through magazines and reading the headlines of the city papers. Coffee aroma from the nearby cafeteria tempted him and he fumbled in his pockets, only coming up with

enough small change for three bananas. He ate one and stowed the other two away in a commodious pocket of his shabby old jacket.

Leaving the busy hurly-burly of the rail terminal he emerged into the brilliant sunlight of a street packed with hurrying people and teeming with traffic. He let himself be carried along in the stream, stopping here and there to gaze at shop window displays, pat a stray dog or listen to a newsboy yelling the latest headlines. At a kerbside stall his eyes roved around the stacks of fresh fruit and vegetables. He fancied an apple and picked one out hoping he could slip it into his pocket when the stall-holder wasn't looking but that gentleman had seen old codgers like Sam before.

'Don't handle the fruit if you're not going to buy, mate,' he grunted and Sam put the apple back and walked on.

A double-decker bus pulled up and, after checking that the conductor was upstairs, Sam climbed aboard and travelled a few stops, alighting before he was asked for his fare.

Crossing over the road he detoured into the park where huge trees shed welcome shade for those with time enough to enjoy it. A little girl was throwing crusts of bread for the pigeons, seagulls and sparrows that squabbled for each piece as it landed on the grass. Sam smiled at her and she smiled back shyly but her mother called her and kept her close until he had passed.

A rose-bed, resplendent in the spring flush of colour and gently wafting perfume on the breeze, tempted him to wander over and slowly traverse the garden, savouring each bush, bending his head to catch the fragrance of this one and reaching out his hand to move another into focus, voicing little expressions of delight at the exquisite depth of colour of one or the delicate shaded tones of another. A bed of spring bulbs next took his eye and he knelt on the grass to enjoy the perfection of the daffodils, anemones, iris and freesias and listen to the hum of the bees as they visited each flower in turn and flew off, their legs laden with pollen.

Diamonds sparkled as the sun's rays caught the streams of water arcing from mouths of stone fish and turtles in the fountain. Sound of the splashing water carried him back to childhood when he had swum naked under a waterfall in a bush pool.

Contrary to the notice forbidding ball games, a man and a little boy were kicking a soccer ball around and it dribbled across the grass towards Sam who neatly sent it back to the boy. The father called his thanks and waved, inviting Sam to join the game. He played with them for a few minutes before heading off to the shade of a giant fig tree.

A girl was sitting on a seat there. At least, in the distance, Sam thought she was a girl as her slender form was clothed in a long red skirt, patterned with huge flowers, and a white t-shirt. Well, it had been white once. Upon coming closer he could see that she was no girl. In fact she was nearer his own age and he was no boy, that was for sure. Her deep blue eyes, the greyish-white wisps of hair haloing her head, the rouged cheeks and red lips gave her a clownish appearance which appealed to Sam's sense of fun.

She smiled at him. 'Beautiful day!'

'Lovely!'

'Have a seat!' She patted the seat beside her and Sam wandered over and sat down.

'Like a drink?' She rummaged in a shabby overnight bag and brought out a bottle of cheap red wine.

'Thanks! Don't mind if I do!' Sam took a couple of swigs and passed the bottle back. He leaned back on the seat and stretched out his legs. 'Ahh! This is the life!'

'Sure is!'

'Live round 'ere?'

The woman shrugged. 'Round 'n' about.' She jerked her thumb at the overnight bag. 'Home's in there. Where'd you live?'

'Up north.'

'Hungry?' She reached into her bag again and brought out a loaf of bread and slab of cheese. Breaking off a hunk, she plonked it on a slice of bread, folded it over and passed it Sam.

'Gosh! Thanks!'

‘What’s ya name?’

‘Sam. What’s yours?’

‘They call me Dolly.’

‘Suits ya.’

There seemed nothing more to say so they munched their bread and cheese and had a couple more swigs of the wine. Sam felt around in his pockets.

‘Av a banana?’ He passed one over to her. She nodded her thanks with a smile, her eyes bright.

‘Down ’ere long?’

‘Just fer th’ day.’

‘Oh?’ Her face fell.

‘Gotta get the train back soon.’

They sat in silence again. The sun passed its zenith and the shadows of the trees lengthened. Time to be heading back to the railway station. Sam stood up.

‘Nice talkin’ to ya, Dolly! Thanks fer the lunch. See ya!’

Dolly smiled sadly and raised her hand in a salute. ‘See ya, Sam.

He walked off slowly but with head erect and a smile ever ready for those whose eyes he met, although few returned it. This was the city.

His train was waiting at the platform and he went on board. The young station-assistant noticed him and felt relieved that, after all, the old man was a legitimate traveller and thereby entitled to a little nap on the station seat.

This being mid-week off-season Sam was able to choose an empty double seat that would enable him to stretch out and sleep through the night. Once again he managed to avoid the guard.

While the train hurtled along past paddocks and creeks, bushland and cliffs, with a glimpse here and there of the ocean, Sam watched the glorious panorama of the setting sun changing through myriad shades of red, pink, purple and gold. As other passengers made their way to the buffet car, to return with little boxes of sandwiches, pies, sausage rolls and styrene-lidded cups of tea, Sam thought of the banana he’d given away. Ah well! She’d given him a sandwich.

Settling down for the long journey through the night he wondered about Dolly, spending her days sitting on a park bench, carrying her few possessions around in a bag and sleeping ...where? In the morning, stepping on to the platform of his home-town, Sam headed straight for the toilet until the bustle had subsided and the Station Master had gone back to his office. Ten minutes later he was back home. He made a cup of tea, toasted a couple of slices of stale bread and sat on his verandah to watch the honeyeaters swinging on the scarlet bottlebrush flowers.

He was still there a couple of hours later, dozing off, chin on chest, when his daughter popped in for her weekly visit. She shook her head sadly as she saw him in the old rocking chair but she smiled brightly and put on her best cheerio voice.

‘Still sitting there, Dad? Why don't you get up and go for a walk? Get out and meet some people. Make some friends.’

Sam laughed. ‘But I've just been on a trip to the city,’ he said. ‘And had lunch with a beautiful lady.’

His daughter smiled, humouring him. Poor old darling, she thought, his mind's gone.

Bio

Tamaso has been writing most of her life. She was first published at the age of nine in the Sunbeams children's section of the Sydney Sun and also read her stories on 2GB and 2SM radio stations' children's programs. She is the author of nine teenage novelettes for 'reluctant readers', four books on Australian birds, several published short stories and poems and has self-published one book Skye's the Limit, a story about a young girl's fight to save a rainforest. She has recently completed the third novel in trilogy form. The first book, Brothers? Uncles! Sister? Aunt! was published in 2002. The second book The Missus was published in 2010 and the third Beyond Darkness in 2012. Also in 2012, a book of short stories Out of My Mind was published. Tamaso has lived in Nimbin northern NSW for twenty years, during which time she has been a volunteer worker at Nimbin News Magazine and presented a Writers' Program on NIM-FM. Community radio. She now edits the literary magazine Beyond the Rainbow.