



We're sitting around in the equipment shack smoking Dufaux's homegrown and playing cards. The gang and I are celebrating the fact that we got all the outgoing trains lined up for the evening by mid-shift. Two feet away from us on Track 1 train 32 is arriving from Central Station. It rumbles past us on its way to the west end. The flimsy shack fills with the roar of the locomotive and the clang of the engine bell. The few windows that offer us a view of the yard rattle in their frames and reflect the brightness of the train's headlights.

In the small shack there is the card table, a sink and a counter stacked with flags, flares, torpedoes and CTC radios to equip out-going locomotives with. Our wet cotton gloves hanging on the steam pipe release the odour of must. On an empty forty-five gallon drum rests the card table Dufaux salvaged from a piece of

the scrapped dining car. There's a single forty-watt bulb hanging over it.

There are four of us playing cards but the shack is crammed full with onlookers. These are principally boys and old men who work as engine cleaners, sweepers and general shit-shovellers in the shop. We're playing Carotte, a Québécois adaption of the two games, Poker and Hearts. Marcel to my right deals. I pick up my cards and call my suit: Clubs. 'Ti Bateau sitting to my left plays an all-powerful heart. I'm pretty sure he has clubs.

"Tu n'as pas une trefle, 'Ti Bateau?" I ask him. The little boat realizes that he has made an oversight. He plays his club, withdrawing the heart. He's upset because we all know that he has one of the lowest hearts in the deck. My partner Marc-André plays a low club thinking that I'll play the Ace. I had been hoping

that he had it. Unfortunately Marcel has the Ace and wins the hand. I'm analyzing how this error of judgement could've arrived when I hear the static voice of the shop foreman calling my name from the radio that's dangling off my belt by the side of my thigh.

"Carla Nemiroff. Nemiroff, come in please."

The shop foreman's name is Andy Bridgeman. He's from Ontario and speaks very little french. He has an abominable Canuck accent when he attempts to speak french. His commands are usually preceded by the words "Il est nécessaire de . . ." The guys in my gang on the east end ridicule him, anonymously mimicking him over their radios.

I slowly extinguish my cigarette and remove the speaker from where it's clipped onto my radio antenna.

"Yes, what is it?" I ask.

His voice annoys me. I know he's going to tell me to do something completely unnecessary. I have ten bucks at stake in this game and I had anticipated having the next couple of hours free to play.

"Train thirty-two's ready to bring into the shop on Track three," he replies.

The idiot. What's he talking about? It's half an hour away from supper and there's no way a mechanic's gonna start an inspection on 32 until eight o'clock. Doesn't he think I know that 32's ready to bring in? Didn't I hear it clanging down the track ten minutes ago?

"Okay Boss." I say into the speaker to appease him. Then I turn the radio off.

At least we have radios. That's the beauty of being on the yard gang. We run the yard and we hardly ever have to talk to anyone face to face after the line-up's been figured out at the beginning of shift. In the yard the radios enable us to navigate moves through clouds of steam, pass blind curves on the tracks when moving multi-engine trains, and to consult with the west end gang. The east end gang has another use for the radios: to call secret meetings in code. Meetings in engines where whiskey, beer and hashish is consumed on a nightly basis.

Ti Bateau is dealing the next hand. I have a full house: Four Aces and a King. I figure I may as well quit now and collect. I turn my place in the game over to one of the cheerleaders and take off to do my move on track 3 before supper.

I step out of the shack. It's April. The sky is a translucent grey with hot streaks of brilliant rose and charcoal clouds. Billows of steam emerge from the enormous engines. They growl like so many blue, yellow and red dragons sleeping. I have to walk about a quarter mile to find my hosteler, Ignace. He is the locomotive driver and I am the signal person who rides the ladder on the side of the engine and turns switches. I call Ignace a couple of times on the radio but he doesn't answer. He's not in the pipe-fitters' shack at the west end, so I know he must be crashed out in the cab of train 32, waiting to do the move.

I find Ignace asleep at the controls with his eyes closed and his mouth open. He looks like he could be snoring, but with the racket of the running engine beside us it's impossible to tell.

"Ta femme tu laisse pas dormir la nuit?!" I yell, trying to rouse him.

He doesn't move. Must have tied one on last night, I think.

"Wake up!" I holler.

"You don't have to scream, Chérie," he says.

Ignace sets up the engine controls and I climb down to go open the couplings at the back of the engines. We have to couple up his engine with another one and take them both in on track three. I pull up the iron lever that's supposed to release the coupling to an open position. I'm pulling the lever and trying to dislodge the

center of the coupling with my free hand but it won't budge. I look underneath and, sure enough, the locking pin has been inserted so I have to crawl around and try to tug it out. It can be so quick and simple but, like now, it can get stuck. I'm under there for quite a while, hitting at the thing until it finally gives. Then I have to stretch out over the tracks on my belly to retrieve my hard hat from where it got knocked off under the engine. My hosteler inquires into the radio if everything is all right.

"Hostie de casque," I mumble at him.

"Quoi?"

"Une seconde, Ignace."

I'm about to give him the a-okay to back up and couple when I realize that the couplings of the two locomotives are not aligned. The coupling on Ignace's engine has moved all the way to the outer edge of its axis. The thing weighs a good one hundred and fifty pounds but should swing freely when given a forceful push. This one doesn't move. I'm kung-fu kicking it and hurling my body against it.

"Ignace," I say into my radio. "The coupling's stuck. Back up and give your engine a good crack in the rear end against the engine behind you. That oughta loosen it up." I confirm my command by making circular motions in the air with my right arm. This is a back up signal. My arm stops moving and then drops abruptly to my side, signalling slow and stop. Then my arm goes up and down as if I'm pointing from sky to earth repeatedly. This means go forward. He stops. I check the coupling and it means go forward. He stops. I check the coupling and it has become dislodged from the stuck position. I line them up, then clap my hands together over my head signalling Ignace to couple up. He backs up and couples noiselessly. He's priceless. We work so well together, he doesn't even need signals. He can move a seven locomotive train around the yards with his eyes closed, he knows his distances that well. I always use hand signals, though, as a precautionary measure. I know that all the bosses are waiting for me to fuck up.

They're still burning up over the big deal I made last fall when they refused to let me do this job. They'll always be burning up. They'll never be able to deal with the fact that a girl works in their yard.

When my seniority number came up to try for a yard job, I went straight to the general foreman to put in my application. He smiled indulgently and gently pushed the application back toward me across his desk.

"You're quite a spunky girl," he told me. "Aren't you satisfied with the job you have? You know, as a cleaner you make more than most girls your age. Don't you think that this yard work is a bit over your head?"

"What do you mean?" I wanted to know.

"It's rough out there in the winter. You can't turn a frozen switch. You can't open a coupling by yourself. You can't jump on and off a moving locomotive, now can you?" He smiled at the thought of me attempting the work.

"If a switch gets frozen even a strong man can't turn it alone," I argued.

"Can you lift three hundred pounds over your head?"

I couldn't see what relevance this had to the job. "Can you?" I asked, taking in his puny physique. He chose to change the subject.

"It's just that this is a man's job. What happens when you get your period? That's five days a month you don't work."

"I haven't missed a day yet. Cleaning's a hard, dirty job, too. You've never seen me complain. There's no reason why I

shouldn't be able to do work in the yard."

"The boys on the line-up gang are a rough bunch. You don't want to work with them."

"I can handle them, Mr. Messier."

"You might get married and quit the job," He said reasonably.

"I'm not getting married, and if I ever do, it wouldn't be a reason for me to quit. Anyway, the turnover rate here has always been high. How do you know that the men won't quit?"

"I'm sorry Carla. I can't give you this job. Why don't you bid for office work down at Central station? There's a future for you in that." He was speaking in a condescending, paternal way – as if giving me some valuable advice that I would thank him for in years to come.

"Listen Messier," I said, sounding as tough as possible, "You don't give me this job and I file a grievance with my union tomorrow morning."

Messier laughed. "Very well," he said, pushing my application back to me with finality.

He got up to go to dinner and I saw him disappear into the foremen's lounge. He habitually dines there with the other foremen and my union representative, Vladimir Zeldoff, who's been a company stool pigeon for twenty-three years. Zeldoff wasn't any help in terms of battling the company on this particular point. Neither, I soon discovered, were any other officials in my union. When I called the regional head of my union, he laughed at me. The boys in the yard were keeping their mouths shut. Usually when a worker in the yard is treated unfairly by the company (and the union in my case), the other workers will back him up. But because I'm a woman, they wouldn't help. I realized that I would have to take care of this situation by myself: the bond between all men is stronger than worker solidarity.

It was a Women's action group who helped me to call the press and file a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission. When federally-appointed lawyers started their investigation Messier, trembling with impotent fury, signed a paper agreeing to put me on training in order to avoid litigation. But he held off on the training for an extra month, hoping to start me on the wrong track, shall we say, with the arrival of winter. The boys who were supposed to be training me on line-up gave me such a hard time I don't know how I survived.

There were exceptions, though, like Mr. Sanders who enjoyed the opportunity to discuss books with someone literate in English. I still go up the ladder to the engineers' lockerroom to drink tea with him every so often. And Ignace, who was the only one willing to work with me when we had that huge snowstorm on Boxing Day. And even tough-as-iron Dufaux always offers me a sip of brandy and a long oratory on how to tell the boss to go to hell. I think he admires my fight. We're kindred spirits in that respect.

I climb up the ladder of the second locomotive and enter the cab. I go to the controls and release the independent brake valve with a switch of the lever. I point my flashlight at the pressure gauge and watch as the air in the brake system descends from 45 pounds' pressure to zero. Then I give two short tugs on the whistle to indicate 'go ahead' to Ignace in the front engine. I descend the ladder as we move along the track toward the switch.

I enjoy working the west end at this time of day because the sunsets in Point St. Charles are always so beautiful. Ignace has pushed the throttle up to the fifth or sixth notch and we're really flying along. I can see a panorama of the Montreal skyline as we travel. The sky is an uproar of fluorescent orange. The wind that is

always brought on by motion is sweeping my upturned face. The exhilaration is always intense for me at such moments. It's like time is standing still.

Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing wasting my youth in this filthy place. Every day I get on a bus, go to the metro, travel two stops, get off, climb a flight of stairs, go up an escalator and climb on the 61 bus. The bus lurches past the boutiques downtown that clothe office workers to the district that houses factory workers and welfare recipients. I get off two stops after the Wellington tunnel and start my mile-long walk to the shop. At the shop I don dirty jeans and steel-toed Kodiaks, about four sizes too big, of course, as are my work gloves since they don't make such garments in "ladies" sizes. At work, trivial conversations: always the same, boring topics. Their wives, their cars, their homes. Their sexual exploits with topless dancers and their incredible fishing stories. Great, big, beer-bellied men who yell and joke like school boys. Who throw their hard-hats on the floor defiantly at dinner time. Who eat single-slice Kraft cheese between margareened slices of Weston bread and drink Coke or Pepsi. Then they belch out scents of chewed-up cheese and continue on to their pre-packaged cup-cakes.

I am hanging onto the bottom rung of the ladder giving Ignace a slow signal with my now illuminated flashlight. As my end of the train passes the switch by the side of the track, I jump off onto the ground. I wave the flashlight back and forth horizontally signalling 'stop.' The locomotives halt. They tremble in all their powerful, synchronized, mechanical glory as I cross over the track to turn the switch. As I step back onto my ladder I notice that the moon is a full, orange globe in the sky.

"Go slow, Ignace," I say into my radio as we embark upon track 3/4. "The dwarf switch for track three's no good. We'll have to stop."

I give him the slow signal and then a stop. He stops on the dime. I go to the dwarf switch and straddle its handle, crouching with my legs. I pull the handle toward my chest. Then I move off the switch and push the handle down on the other side. The handle won't go down to its limit. It refuses to lock into its slot. I look at the points of the tracks and they aren't lined up one way or the other. I try again a few times. Then I remember what the old man on day shift, Morisette taught me. I poise my steel-encased toe above the strategic spot and give the switch a swift boot. The switch clicks into place. We're lined up for track three now. The last leg of our journey through the yard before reaching the shop. I hear the supper break whistle blow. I'm hungry enough for two hamburger steaks and a whole slew of greasy fries with ketchup.

"Let's go, highball!" I shout into the radio.

Sometimes I am convinced that I am completely insane. Then, in moments of self-confidence, I know that I am one of the few enlightened and that all those who reject me for my lifestyle are suffering from their own ignorance. They are a vast society of media consumers and propaganda perpetuators. They are all slaves chained to their archetypal stereotypes.

"There are only two places a woman belongs," dirge some of the old, bitter men in the yard. I don't have to tell you what two rooms of the house they are referring to. My friends say I'm wasting my energy, working here.

"You'll die of black lung disease," my mother prophesies.

"You've proved that you're a good proletarian, Carla. Now come on back to the real world," my ex-lover advises. His teasing tone is trying to hide the rejection in his voice. My love, where are you now when I need your understanding?

Why am I all alone? Where is all the strength going to come

from? Life is just eat, sleep and work. I dream locomotives. The shrill alarm of a steam engine going off when it's out of water screeches through my nightmares. I writhe through innumerable moves and wake up shaking. The clanging of engine bells rips my brain apart and overrides the buzzing of my alarm clock. And here they want to know why I punch in late all the time.

I give Ignace a slow-stop as we approach the shop. The massive door opens. That means that there's someone inside pressing the button. It's the west end foreman, Tremblay, waiting for us to bring the engines onto the shop track. I step off the locomotive and go inside. Ignace waits, idling right outside the shop door.

"Okay for track three?" I ask Tremblay. I wait for my orders. I don't want to give them an excuse to condemn me. I know they're waiting for me to fuck up.

"Okay for track three, Carla," mumbles the boss, his eyes on my tits. He stares at them frankly. I look around the shop to make sure there's no obstruction on the track, so I can bring my engines in safely. There is another locomotive parked on track three with two mechanics and an electrician working under it on one of the traction motors.

"There's two guys welding over there," I say to Tremblay. He looks about stupidly, so I take the situation into my own hands. I talk with the workers and they agree to get out of the way while I bring in the 32. It's time to wash up and have supper anyway. I check the wheels of the train to make sure that heavy-duty chains have been laid on the tracks behind them. The air brake system is off and if the chains are not there to stop the wheels, any impact would send the engine rolling.

Tremblay never takes his eyes off my chest as I turn to leave the shop. I stand outside the shop door and talk with Ignace through the radio.

"Okay for track three, Ignace. There's a dead engine at the other end of the track. We'll park about four feet in front of it."

"We don't have to go so close."

"Yes, we do. We're bringing in twenty-five at eight o'clock on the same track and there won't be any room for it if we don't crowd them together."

I step inside the shop door and give him a back-up signal with my flashlight. "Go slow, Ignace."

The two locomotives, with engine bell clanging and steam spewing from the rear steam pipes, back slowly through the shop door. I walk beside the track, giving Ignace constant verbal instruction through the radio. It's a delicate situation. We have to stop on the dime.

"You have an engine length to go, Ignace."

He backs up. First notch, thirty pounds' brake pressure.

"Ten feet, go slowly." Forty pounds brake pressure, six more feet to go.

Suddenly Tremblay screams: "Hey Carla!"

I look up, sure that he's warning me of danger. I peer through the steam that's emerging from the front engine and strain against the noise of the engine bell to hear him.

"When you get fucked," he yells, "do you like it rough?"

It takes infinitely long to understand and when I turn back to my work I realize that Ignace is right on top of the dead engine.

"Stop!" I shout helplessly into my radio.

As I flail my flashlight in a frenzied horizontal sweep, train 32 and the dead engine collide.

EPILOGUE

I worked for the Canadian National Railroad from 3 December 1978 to 1

December 1980. In October 1979 I filed two complaints with the Canadian Human Rights Commission: one against CNR and one against my Union, the Canadian Brotherhood of Rail and Transport Workers.

The complaints against CN were as follows:

- *I had been failed in a truck driving test on a bid as a truck driver, although I had driven the truck perfectly.*
- *After having been promised a position as a machinist apprentice and having passed all the exams, the Company neglected to hire me on as an apprentice although they did hire several men from the outside for this job.*
- *Being denied training as a helper hosteler by the foremen at the Diesel Electric Shop, although my seniority number was up for that training.*
- *Non-existence of a lockerroom, shower and sink for women in the Diesel Electric Shop, although these facilities existed for the men.*

The complaint against the Union was as follows:

- *Failure to act upon a verbal grievance made by me against the company for the above reasons, and failing to explain to me the procedure for filing a written grievance.*

I filed these complaints with the Commission at the same time as about twenty other women who had grievances against the CNR based on sexual discrimination. (It is important to note that the Commission acts a lot faster when several complaints against a company are filed at the same time). Also in 1979 a separate group of seven women filed a complaint against CN's unfair hiring policy towards women in blue collar jobs. By Christmas 1979 a Canadian Human Rights Commission tribunal had ruled in the women's favour: By early 1981 the seven women were working as apprentice machinists and electricians in Montreal shops. They also won two years' salary compensation for the time that they lost in litigation.

As for my case, the general foreman agreed to provide me with Helper Hosteler training and to build a women's lockerroom. The General Foreman called me at home as soon as he found out that the Commission's lawyers had begun an investigation. The Union representative at my shop also took immediate action and filed a grievance for me against the company. After I had obtained the General Foreman's signed guarantee, I dropped the charges that I had laid against CN and the Union.

In June 1979 Action Travail des Femmes (ATF) of Montreal filed a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission against Canadian National Railroad. They were charged with sexual discrimination against women in hiring practices. ATF proposed that an Affirmative Action program be instituted at CN.

It took two years for the Canadian Human Rights Commission to act on the Action Travail des Femmes charge. ATF's pressure finally made them act. An investigation was begun and a Human Rights Tribunal was called. Among ATF's witnesses were women who had been denied employment by CN; women who had gained employment there but who were subsequently laid off; expert historians, sociologists and psychologists.

In August 1984 the Tribunal ruled in ATF's favour. At the time (and it hasn't got much better), less than 1% of the CNR blue collar work force in the Saint Lawrence Region were women. The Affirmative Action Program that CN was ordered to institute had a mandate to hire 25% women until 13% of CNR's blue collar work force in the St. Lawrence Region were women.

CN appealed the Tribunal's ruling to the Federal Court of Appeals. In

July 1985 the Court of Appeals ruled that the Canadian Human Rights Commission does not have the mandate to impose hiring quotas on Corporations.

Action Travail des Femmes is now appealing to the Supreme Court of Canada. If the Supreme Court decides to accept the case, its final decision will have a huge impact on thousands of Canadian women; if ATF wins

and the Supreme Court dismisses the Federal Court of Appeals ruling, women and minorities who are victims of discrimination will be able to call Human Rights Tribunals across Canada. If ATF loses at the Supreme Court, it means that Canadian Human Rights laws are ineffective. Lobbying at Parliament will be the next step in the long struggle for access to Blue Collar jobs for women.



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