

LOLLY-LEGS

LEMMY WHEEN lived mostly in two places, the railway station, and the wharf, and nearly every day he could be seen going from one place to the other, sometimes walking slowly with his head down and his hands clasped behind his back; other times with his head out like a duck and his hands flapping, racing against the train while all the little boys on the street cried out, "Go it Lemmy! Go it Lemmy!" Yet no matter how hard Lemmy went it the train always won. But why should he race the train? Why should he do anything? What did he think about? No one really knew for Lemmy could not speak. He made strange noises that were not speech, only a kind of singing cry. He was not all there, folks said, his mouth was made funny, he could hear all right, and at times he knew what you said to him, but he wasn't all there, and that was why he lived on a pension already, a boy of twenty-five who would never come out as anything, only hang around the railway station watching the train and picking up the empty bottles; or on the wharf lording it like an admiral whenever the dirty orange and black wheat boats were docked in.

LEMMY'S third place to live was his Aunt Cora's house, two-storied, with venetian blinds. Lemmy's bed was there and his toy ships and trains in his bedroom. And every morning his plain, wholesome breakfast, at midday his lunch, and evening his dinner. And there was Aunt Cora, fading and restless, her hair covered with a bright flowery scarf to hide the curling pins. "For people will look over the gate, Lemmy, and see me and think I'm an old hag who curls her hair. And I'm not, am I?"

Lemmy wouldn't answer, of course. Sometimes he would smile as if he understood, a big wide grin that his deformed mouth changed to a sneer one moment later. His mouth would not keep still, but twitched in a continual torment of near-speech.

And Aunt Cora would continue her favourite topic of Aunt Cora. "Let the people look over the gate. I've a home of my own, two-storied. I've a radio of my own, carpets, all paid for. I've a wicker rocking chair, too, and although wicker rocking chairs are out of date they're nice to rock in. And I've given shelter to a homeless child. Lemmy, people keep talking about your going on the station and the wharf all the time, be a good boy and stay with your toy trains and boats at home."

And Lemmy would listen with his fingers pressed against his lips and his eyes staring in a vacant way. Then he would laugh and give a wailing kind of cry like the cry a swamphen makes out of the mist in the early morning; and then he would be off down to the station for the train.

"THE train will depart in two minutes' time. All seated, please!" It is no use to grab a black shining monster and hold on to it. The people kiss and wave and climb in and the train is gone. Then begins Lemmy's real work. A moment ago the train had blocked sight of the sea. Now in the foreground there is a glittering blue and green strip

A Short Story by JANET FRAME

of sea like light on a screen. And the seagulls have come to play at being people. They swoop noisy and querulous to the platform where the broken and sodden bits of fruit cake lie half sunken in muddy yellow saucer lakes of tea. They pick eagerly at odd floating peninsulas of crust attached to a mainland of ham or egg sandwich. Lemmy's as busy as the gulls. He grabs the necks of lemonade and ginger ale bottles and rushes to the refreshment room for threepence a bottle. He gathers the cups for the waitress, who gives him in return a plate of left-over sandwiches. Lemmy's as busy as a clock and then suddenly everything's over and there's nothing to be on the station for and the seagulls fly back to the beach. The keeper of the sandwiches seems tired and irritable. She slops up wet tea from one of the clean tablecloths and tells Lemmy Wheen to clear off in the name of heaven and stop being a nuisance. She signals with her hands. Lemmy understands but cannot speak his understanding. He sets out for the wharf. There is no train to race, so he wanders along blinking at the sun and the cars and the few people. He's like a ship that has called at a port to load cargo and finding the wrong cargo or the port closed must journey elsewhere, perhaps miles and miles, to a new place, the wharf and the sea. But all things are journeys, some that never finish, like Lemmy's beginning to speak and saying no words.

It was the not speaking that worried Aunt Cora so much that she resolved one day to do something about it. The not speaking and the wandering around the station and the wharf, why, anything could happen to the boy. After all, she thought, he'll just go on and on, and I'll just go on and on and never have a real life of my own. It's time I had a life of my own. With her home and radio and carpets Aunt Cora had gained practice in ease of possession. Now she had an unshakable though perhaps unwarrantable faith in an easy life of her own, nothing to pay, either, no weekly instalments and forms to sign. Each night now Aunt Cora would look across the table at Lemmy and wonder. Lemmy was so much like his father, Captain Lemmy, who had been drowned at sea. His father was always journeying somewhere back and forth; no wonder the poor lad was fond of trains and boats. But he wasn't right in the head, the poor lad. There's a place for those folk, thought Aunt Cora. They're nice places. He'll learn to be useful and weave and do woodwork. Some of them make baskets. And I certainly must have a life of my own.

So Aunt Cora made arrangements for everything, and one day when Lemmy came from the railway station to home, a port of call before going on to the wharf, he found a tasty lunch on the table. There was a big bun like a wheel snowed under with coconut right in the middle of the table between him and Aunt Cora. With the coconut bun and the teapot and speech separating them Aunt Cora told Lemmy about the new place where he would be going. Why had she worried? Lemmy grinned and



"A boy of 25 who would never come out as anything"

made his peculiar bird-like cry, then he reached for a segment of the monstrous circular bun and stuffed it in his mouth. And then calm as noon he ambled to the bedroom while Aunt Cora showed him the new suitcase she had bought for him. She lifted the lid from the deep red emptiness. Sometimes when Lemmy was younger she used to cook something nice and show it to him cooking. She would lift the lid of the saucepan. Lemmy would lick his lips and peep in on something, there was always something there. But the suitcase held nothing and smelt of nothing and there was Aunt Cora standing with her hand on the lid and smoothing proudly and possessively over the soft leather that held nothing to be tasted or taken hold of or looked at. Lemmy turned and picked up the black beret one of the wharfies had given him and Aunt Cora knew he was going to the wharf. How could she stop him? He could look after himself in the traffic or he seemed to be able to, but it was all a terrible tie. But tomorrow by the third bus, no, the eleven-thirty would be better.

Aunt Cora went to the wardrobe and prepared to pack Lemmy's clothes. Everything was ready, really. Let the poor boy have a last look around the wharf.

WHEN Lemmy arrived at the wharf he always hurried first to the edge to look at the sea and the waves that elbowed each other in their continual journeying. The sea departed always, not just in two or three minutes' time. It came in always beating against the kauri piles and then later, quiet and remorseful, licking the deep cracks that gaped like wounds in the side of the aged kauri logs. And then it would break on the rocks at the other side of the wharf, and although the rocks stood up jagged and fierce the salt water did not tear or bleed but stayed whole and shining.

Who knew what Lemmy Wheen thought or dreamed as he watched the

sea? He was standing there staring this afternoon when the wharfies passed. There was the captain of the boat, too, in gold braid. "Hy-ya, Lemmy," the wharfies cried, "Hy-ya, Lemmy."

Lemmy's bird cry broke from him and the captain turned to look. He called one of the wharfies over and questioned him. They stood beside Lemmy and Lemmy listened. Who knows what he heard or understood?

"By jove, that's Lemmy Wheen's son. I sailed with Lemmy Wheen. You couldn't beat Captain Wheen. We used to call him Lolly-Legs. I heard somewhere about his son."

The wharfie turned to get on with his work but the captain continued talking. The wharfie lit a cigarette. After all, on a day like this, and there's always overtime.

"Yes, we called him Lolly-Legs." The captain's voice rolled from side to side as if it were on board ship and trying to keep balance. "He broke his leg once and while it was still in plaster he used to get around with a piece of red stuff tied around it. He looked like one of the peppermint walking sticks you buy."

He fished in his pocket and held up a peppermint stick. "I always have one somewhere. Sticky, but it's a quirk o' mine to remember Lemmy. If ever a man was a born sailor it was Captain Wheen. Lolly-Legs. But I'd better be off. Don't you believe it, but the cook gets better pay than I do."

The captain strolled away and the wharfie stubbed out his cigarette and made for the cranes and tarpaulin-covered trucks. Lemmy still looked at the sea. The sky was blue and the water shimmered. There would be dogfish down in the water, little apologies for sharks, and then later at teatime the red cod when the fishing boats snuffed and chugged home around the breakwater. And then the one winking eye of the harbour light would shine.

Lemmy didn't stay to help around that day. He picked up a handful of wheat and stuffed it in his pocket, then dawdled along past the boat, across the railway line. He was going home. There was a wooden ship in his bedroom. He would sail in it. He would sail in it on every sea in the world.

He passed the shop at the corner and looked in the window. There was a fly sitting on a piece of cardboard and beside the cardboard was a peppermint stick red and white, the sort that the Captain had held up to show the wharfie. Lemmy went into the shop and pointed to the stick in the showcase.

The shopgirl put down her knitting and came over. She stared at Lemmy.

"Well?"

Lemmy still pointed to the peppermint stick. Then he put on the counter the threepence he had been given for a bottle. He didn't ever go shopping, but he knew the little silver money that could be put down on the counter in exchange for things. The shopgirl shook her head. "It's not enough. They've gone up," she said abruptly. "Anything else you fancy?"

Lemmy let out his strange cry, his mouth twitched and he left the shop and walked slowly up the street. The wheat kept dropping from his pocket until there was a thin gold trail behind him, like the trail of crumbs the story character left so as to find the way back. But in the story the birds flew down and ate the crumbs and there was no way back.

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 15, 1954.