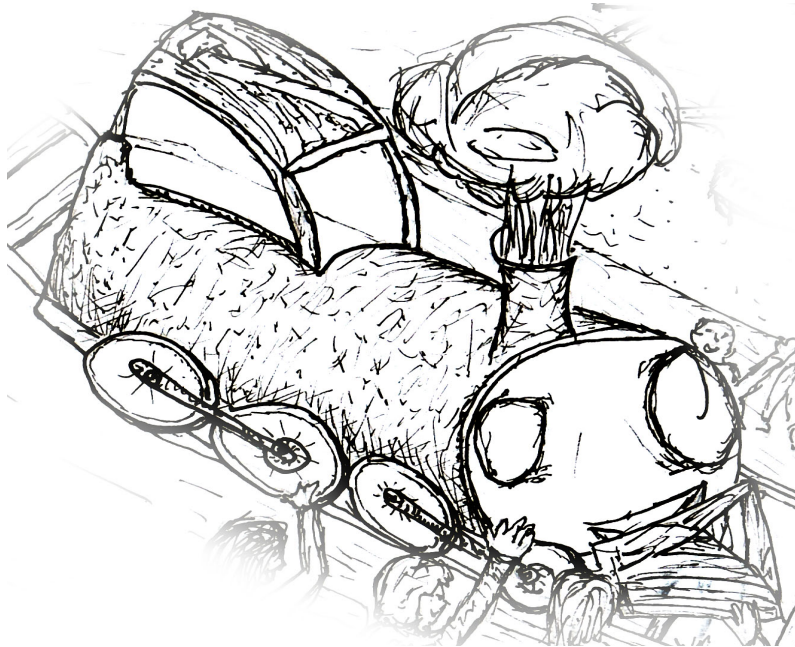


# The Little Engine That Thought He Could, But Couldn't

An Almost True Story



Story and Pictures by Glenn Simonelli

The Little Engine That Thought He Could, But Couldn't,  
An almost true story.

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*Most of the characters depicted in this story are fictional. Any similarity of living persons is purely coincidental. Except for Billie. He's real, but I've changed his name to protect him from internet trolls.*

## Part I

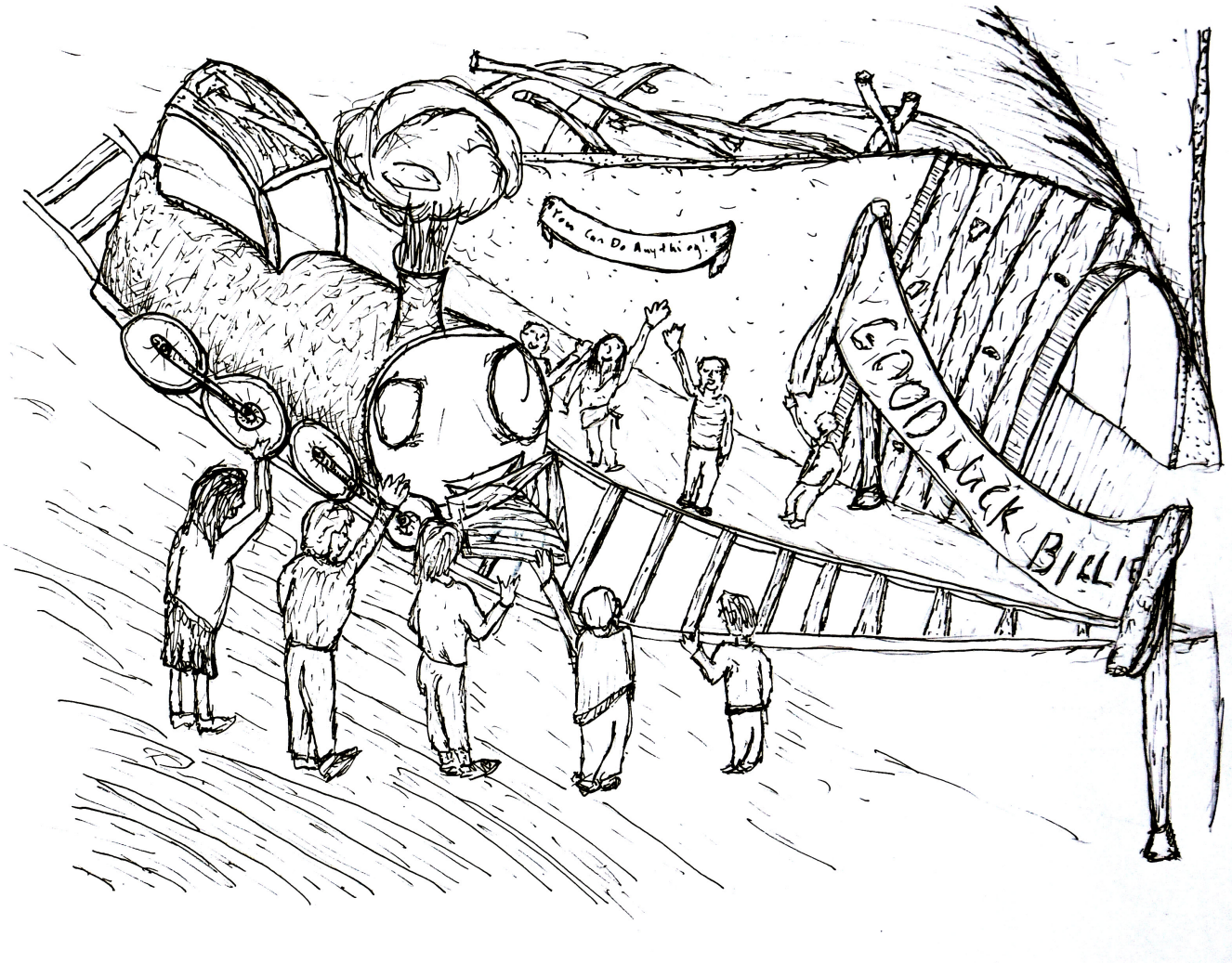
It was such a happy factory. The workers all knew that they were building the best steam engines in the whole world. And engine BLL69B, which everyone called Billy, was their best engine ever. It was sleek, and powerful, and beautiful. Everyone cheered when Billy was guided onto the track and started

his engine.

“You’re the best engine ever, Billy!” said the manager of the factory. “You can do anything. You will surely make us all proud.”

“Wow,” thought Billy, “I must be really special. I can do anything!”

Everyone waved at Billy as he started slowly chugging



out of the factory. "Good-by, everyone," he called. "Thank you for making me into such a fine engine. I promise I'll make you all proud of me."

As Billy started cruising along the railroad track, a locomotive sped past him, pulling ten cars full of passengers, at 80 miles an hour.

"I could do that," thought Billy.

He looked across the river and saw a freight train pulling a line of boxcars a mile long up over a mountain.

"I could do that," thought Billy.

When he pulled into the train station, he noticed a crowd of people watching a young man playing panpipes. Billy thought the panpipes sounded beautiful, so he sat there on the tracks and listened. "I could do that," he thought.

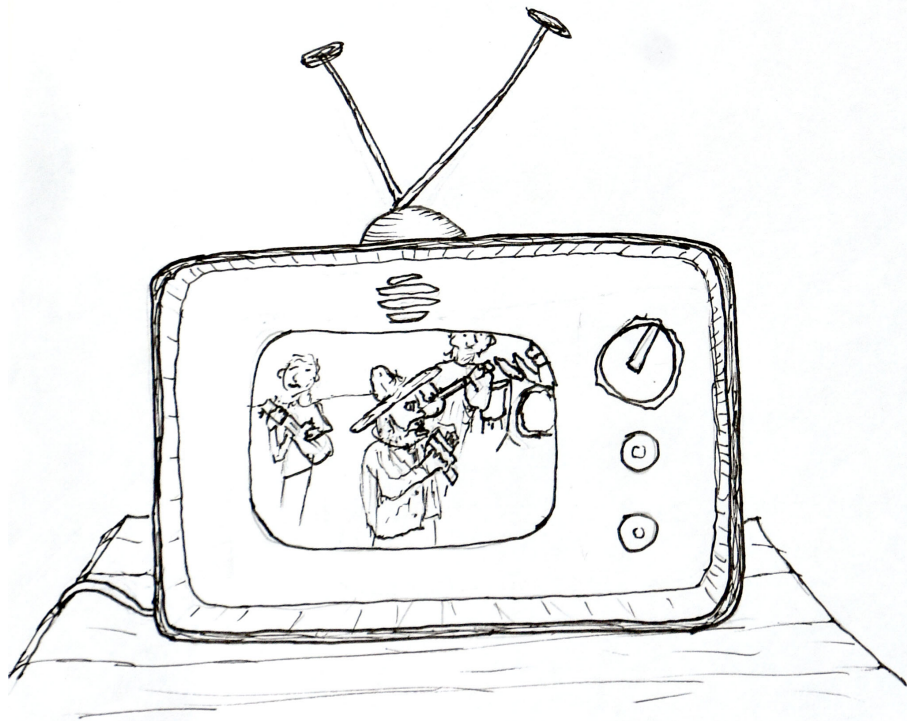
After 22 minutes, the young man finished. Many of the people listening gave him money, and the young man was very





grateful. Billy was amazed that people would give someone money for playing panpipes, and he decided right then that he would learn how to play the panpipes, too. But first, he had to load up a herd of cattle and bring it to Amarillo.

After dropping off the cattle, Billy had to take some steel pipes to West Virginia, and then a load of coal to Chicago, and then a group of travelers to Portland. Before long, Billy had forgotten all about playing panpipes. Each day Billy had to haul a load of something somewhere. Some loads were smelly, some were noisy, some were very heavy, and some were even dangerous, but Billy didn't mind because he knew that he could do anything.



One day, however, as Billy rested near a train station, he saw the young man—now no longer quite so young—playing panpipes on television. “He’s good,” thought Billy, “but I’ll bet I could be even better if I practiced. I could be on T.V., too.”

The panpipe player kept growing more and more famous. Billy would often hear him talked about admiringly by the other train engines. “He’s

okay,” Billy would say, “but I think he’s overrated. He’s not as good as Luther Allison.” (Billy had never actually heard Luther Allison play music, but he’d read his name once in a music magazine, so he assumed that Luther Allison must be pretty good.)

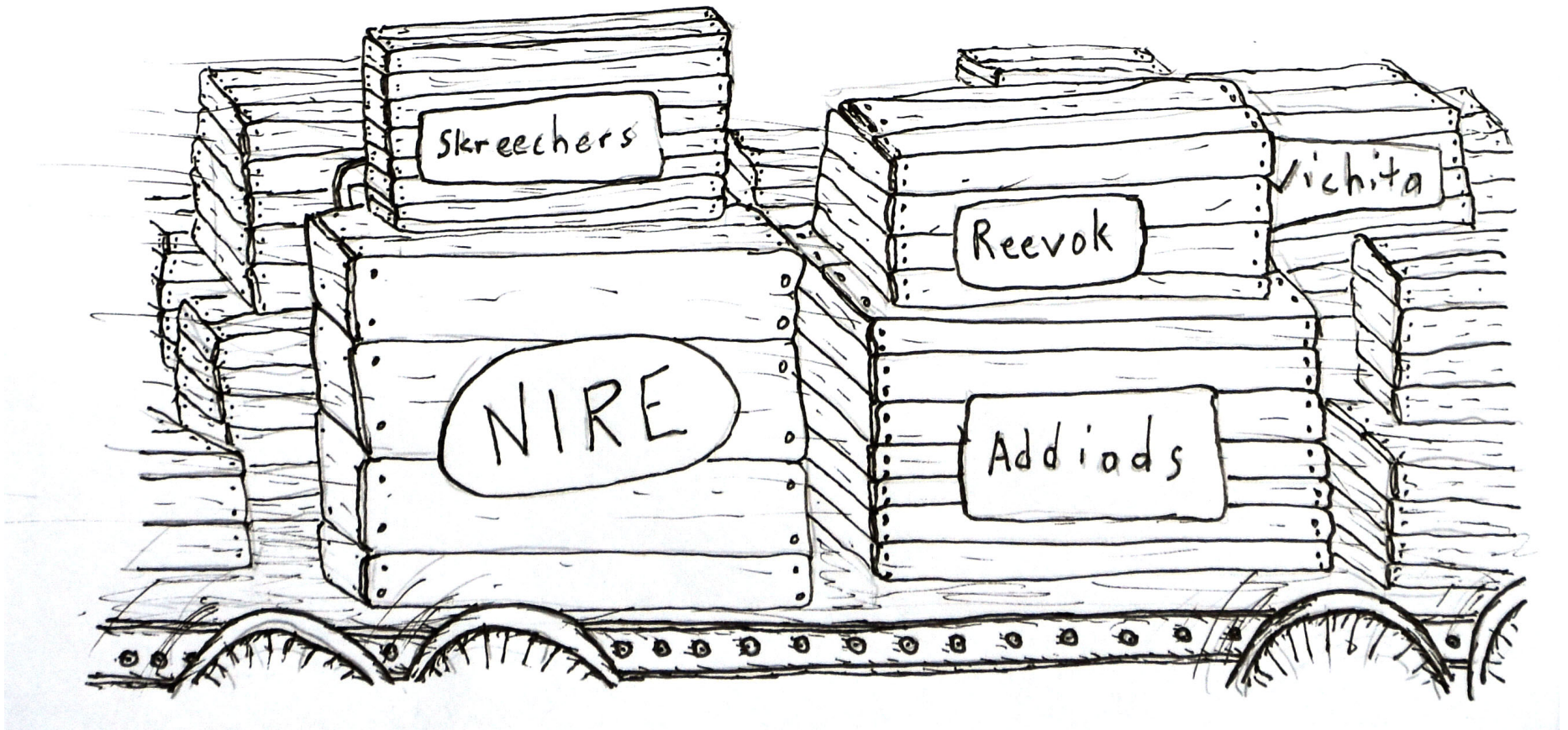
One time, Billy even heard the panpipe player playing on a Simon and Garfunkel song. “Humph,” he thought. “That’s a pretty run-of-the-mill panpipe solo. And it’s not even a particularly good Simon and Garfunkel song. If I had time to practice, I could be a lot better than that. Then I could play with famous rock musicians, maybe even with Al Di Meola. (Billy had never heard any music by Al Di Meola, but someone once told Billy that Al Di Meola played jazz, and Billy knew that all jazz musicians were really good.)

By the time that the panpipe player won his first Grammy award, for Best New Age Album, Billy was convinced that he had missed his true calling. Surely, he could play the panpipes better than anyone if only he had time to practice. Billy was sad that he was always so busy hauling lumber or refrigerators that he never had the chance to learn to play the panpipes while that other guy—who was by now getting quite old—received all the fame and glory that really should have gone to Billy. “What’s the point



of being able to do anything if you're too busy to do what you really want?" he thought.

But then Billy had to take 700 crates of tennis shoes to Wichita, and then some logs to Chattanooga, and Billy soon overcame his petty jealousy.



## Part II

One day, as Billy was getting ready to take a load of oranges to Poughkeepsie, the manager of the train depot told him that he didn't have to work that day. "You've worked long and hard for us for many years, Billy," he said. "You've earned a rest. We're retiring you."

Billy was taken to some tracks behind the train depot where he was left, surrounded by other retired train engines, some of whom had been there for many years. Everyone welcomed Billy and asked him about the different loads that he had pulled and the different places he had seen. "This is great," he thought. "I finally have some time to relax." Twenty minutes later he thought, "Now what do I do?"

Just then a strong wind blew up, and many plastic bags and papers started flying through the yard. The front page of a newspaper was blown across Billy's windshield, and he could read the headline: the panpipe player had just died of liver failure.





An old diesel engine pulled up alongside Billy. “So, Billy,” he asked, “now that you’re retired, what’re you going to do with yourself?”

Billy immediately knew the answer. “I’m going to learn how to play the panpipes!” he said.

“Don’t be silly, Billy. You can’t play panpipes. You’re a train engine.”

“You’re wrong,” he answered. “I can do anything!”

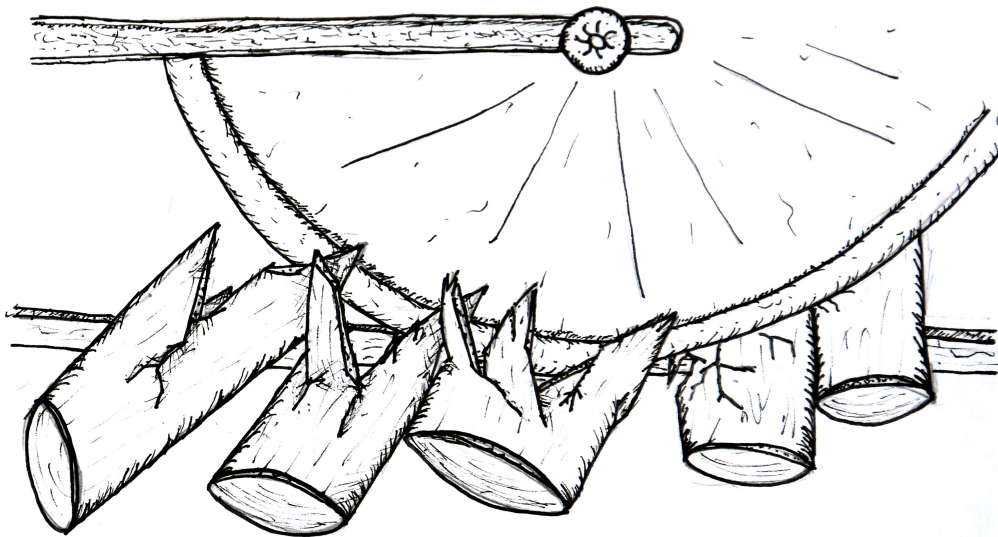
With the help of a nearby electrical train with a computerized guidance system, Billy was able to find a reasonably priced set of panpipes on Amazon. He asked the electric train to order them for him, and then waited impatiently for them to arrive. After four days, a mail car pulled into the retirement yard. The mail carrier came out of the car and walked up to Billy with a package. “You order some panpipes?” she asked.

Billy was so excited he could barely speak. “Oh yes, th-th-those are for me. Can you open the package for me, please? Oh, thank you ever so much. Oh, look at them! They’re so beautiful! Oh, oh, do let me have them, please.”

The carrier looked around, but she didn't see any way of handing the panpipes to Billy because he didn't have any hands. Finally, she laid them down on the track in front of him and walked back to the mail car, somewhat confused and embarrassed.

Billy looked down at the panpipes just as the old diesel engine pulled up alongside him. "So, are you going to play us a tune?" he asked sarcastically. All the other engines in the retirement yard started laughing at Billy.

At that moment, Billy realized that he would never be able to play the panpipes because he didn't have any way of holding them or blowing into them. The other engines started calling out to Billy, teasing him for being so foolish. Some of their comments were hurtful and even a little vulgar.



Billy was humiliated. He had to get away from the taunting, so he drove over the panpipes, smashing them into pieces, and onto a vacant track on the far side of the yard. For the first time in his life, Billy realized that what the factory manager had told him all those

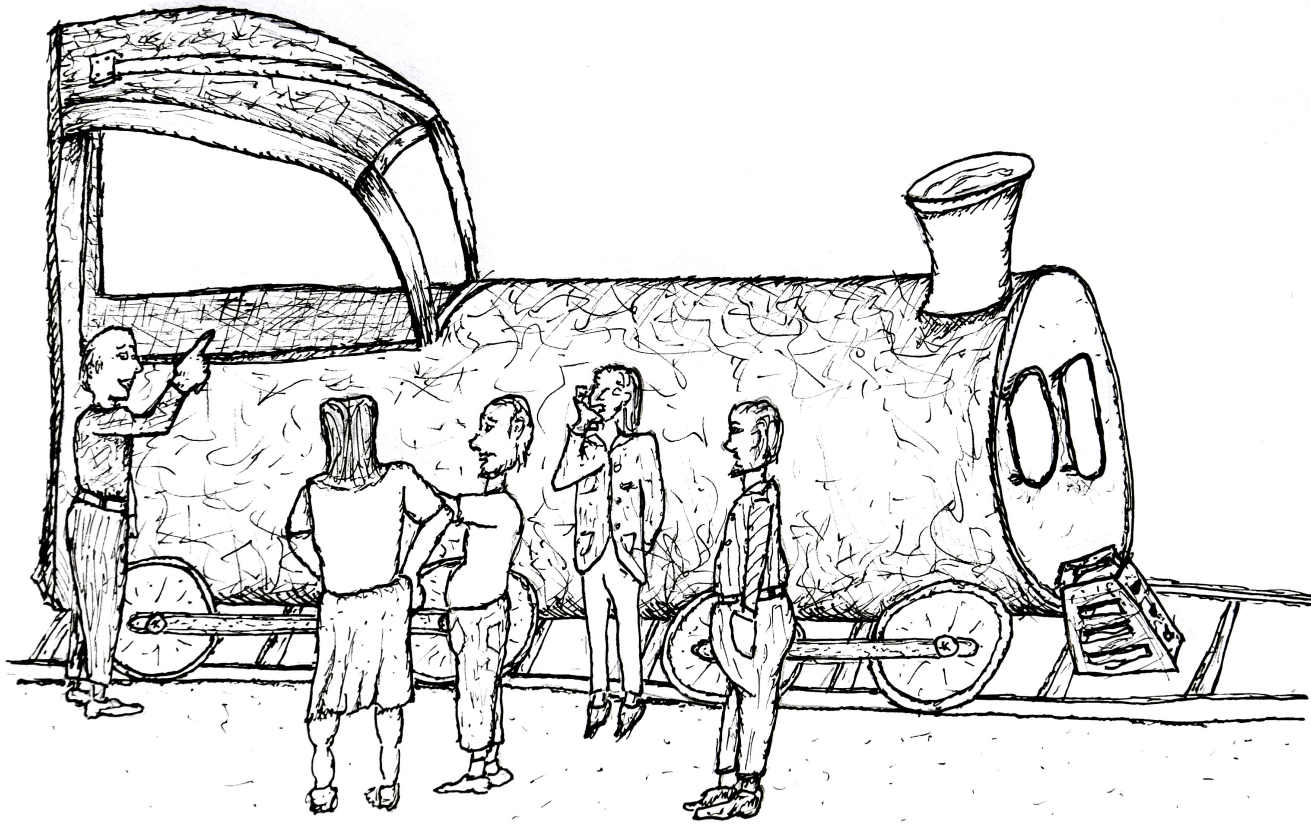
years ago was simply not true: he couldn't do "anything." He couldn't play basketball; he couldn't tap dance; he couldn't even play the panpipes.

Billy was too ashamed to socialize with the other engines, so he just sat by himself, miserable, in the far side of the yard. Years went by. Billy grew rusted and depressed. He spent most of his time figuring out new ways to feel sorry for himself. The rest of the time he slept or just sat around and waited for time to pass.

### **Part III**

One day, many years later, the mayor of a nearby town decided to do something really special to celebrate the 167<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the town's founding. The town was first settled by workers who built the railroad 167 years ago, and the mayor wanted to have an old steam engine ride through the town as part of the celebration.

The mayor went to the engine retirement yard with the members of the town board. By chance, one of the town board members used to work on the railroad as an engineer, and he knew exactly which engine they should use: Billy. But when they saw Billy, the mayor and several of the board members were dubious. Billy hadn't moved two feet since he had first slunked off to that spot all those years ago. By now he was covered with rust and looked like he might be falling apart.



“He seems pretty decrepit,” said the mayor.

Billy sighed and looked away.

The mayor continued, “I don’t see how this old heap can possibly pull all the floats and railroad cars full of people for us.”

“Are you kidding me?” replied the engineer. “They don’t build engines like this anymore. This old guy can easily handle it.”

“Really?” thought Billy.

“Are you sure?” asked Shirley, a board member and part-time real estate manager.



“Absolutely. I used to drive this engine all over the country. Why, this engine can do anything!”

“Wow,” thought Billy, “I must be really special after all. I can do anything!”

“Okay,” said the mayor, “if you say so, we’ll give it a try.”

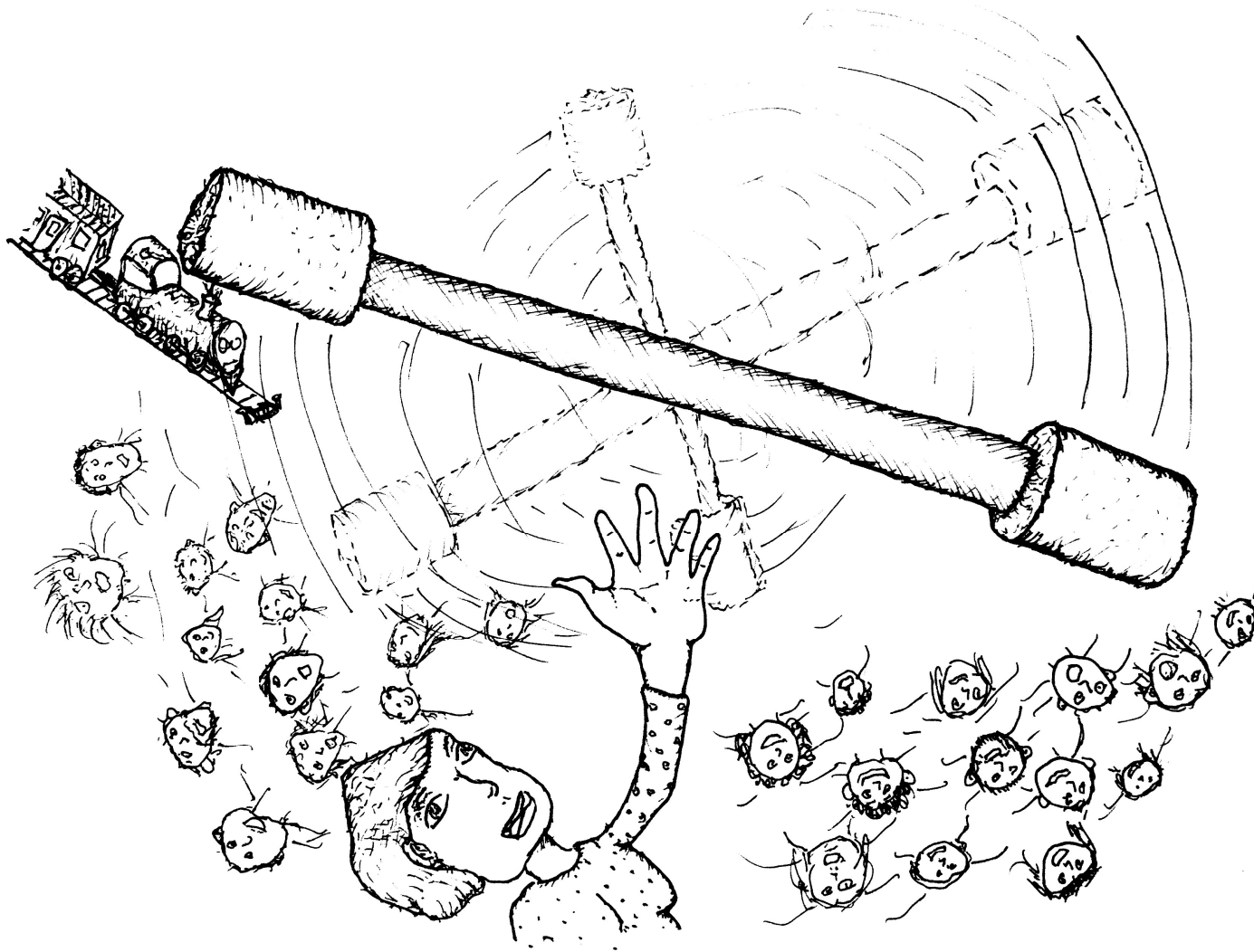
“Oh, thank you,” thought Billy. “I promise I’ll make you all proud of me!”

And so, Billy was cleaned up and repainted, oiled and greased, and given a few new valves and flanges. The day of the celebration, Billy looked and felt like a new engine.

Despite his age, Billy was glad to be working again. Everyone cheered as he chugged into town, pulling seven flatcars with different floats and rockabilly and salsa bands, along with eight extra passenger cars filled with happy people.

Billy ambled into the center of town in front of the grandstand. Coming down the road between the tracks and the grandstand, a marching band was playing a reggae-style version of “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Leading the marching band was a young woman twirling a baton. She twirled the baton

between her legs and around the back of her neck. When she threw the baton high into the air, caught it, threw it up again, spun around while it was in the air, and then caught it, still twirling, a second time, everyone clapped and cheered.



“Wow,” thought Billy, “I could do that . . .”