

BOOK EXCEPRT:

Call Me Stan

K.R. Wilson

The following is excerpted from K. R. Wilson’s novel *Call Me Stan: A Tragedy in Three Millennia* (Guernica Editions 2021), in which the narrator, Stan, a self-described immortal under investigation for a horrific crime, takes his interrogator on a wry, anachronistic tour through 3200 years of Western history. In this part of the story Stan is a 19th century Zurich businesswoman named Constanze Staheli, who has been persuaded to join the chorus of a production of Richard Wagner’s opera *The Flying Dutchman* under the direction of Wagner himself.

The Aktientheater became my refuge from the tedious aspects of the cloth business, which was why at the end of the week, after a meeting with Wesendonck about a rise in the price of indigo dye, I stopped by. I was amazed at the progress on the set. The canvas sheet across the back now raged with dark thunderclouds. A high cliff, bright white plaster still wet on a wooden framework, filled almost a third of the stage to the right. Wagner was standing at its base, scowling at a wooden cylinder on a waist-high frame: two eighteen-inch disks connected by horizontal slats draped with a canvas panel. The wood smelled freshly cut. A sturdy crank stuck out from one end.

“Paddlewheel for a very small boat?”

Wagner looked up, startled. Then he smiled.

“Fraulein Staheli.” His eyes met mine and held them. “I had to ask Baumgartner your name, since you wouldn’t oblige me.” His gaze was intense. Experiencing it this directly was very different from seeing it from a distance. It took effort not to look away.

“You were giving the orchestra a lesson. My name wasn’t pertinent. Did they learn anything?”

“Their energy improved a bit. Time will tell.”

In all my time in Zurich I’d never felt so seen. I looked down at the wooden structure. “I assume from your scowl there’s some defect in this ... whatever this is?” When I looked back up the gaze was still there, but amused. I felt a tingle in my nethers.

“No, no.” He shook his head. “The device is exactly right. The problem is that due to our tight orchestral budget I don’t have anyone to operate it.”

“Orchestral budget? This is an instrument of some kind?”

“My apologies. How would you know?” He took the crank with both hands and started to turn it. As the speed of the cylinder grew it made a sound like a strong wind. “This is our wind machine.” He had to raise his voice to be heard. “The friction of the slats against the canvas generates the sound. The pitch shifts with the speed.” He cranked faster, and the pitch rose. He eased off, and it subsided. “With a bit of finesse, it can create a convincing storm effect.” He stopped turning but left his hands resting on the crank. “The machine itself is fine.”

“You just don’t have anyone to ... to play it?”

“We didn’t use one in Dresden. And I didn’t budget for its operator here, because I didn’t expect to have it. It was a surprise from the theatre’s carpenters.”

“When do you need it?”

“During the storm scenes.”

“Not the women’s choruses?”

“No. Why?”

“Because that means I’m not busy when you need it.” I faced him across the crank, put my hands next to his, and pulled. The friction of wood against canvas made it resist at first. Then it started to turn, and the wind sound rose. Wagner, too, resisted at first. Then he joined in. The sound began to fill the room. We settled into a rhythm, rising and falling, taking our cues from the movements of each other’s hands, and soon we had a raging tempest echoing across the empty seats. I sang the storm motif from the overture—*pum pummm pumm, pum pum, pum pummmmm*—and Wagner laughed. His eyes were bright. “You have strong arms for a woman!” he shouted.

“You have strong arms for a composer!” I shouted back, and he laughed again.

We let the machine slow and stop, and again there was silence. I lifted my hands from the crank. They were sweating. I brushed them discreetly on my skirts. “Now you have your storm player, Herr Wagner.”

He frowned. “But you’re a woman. Wouldn’t that be a bit unseemly?”

I looked into his eyes. “Perhaps *I* am a bit unseemly.”

This time he was the one who looked away.

My first rehearsal with the orchestra was two days before we opened. We skipped the Overture and went straight to the storm scene with its chorus of sailors.

Wagner had decided I'd operate the machine from the wings, so I could see him on the podium, but the audience would be spared the spectacle of a woman in a puffy dress turning a big crank. He lifted his baton. A rocking motif—contrabasses and tubas alternating with bassoons—represented the swell of the ocean, while the wind swirled in *tremolo* quavers in the upper strings. Plus me.

Wagner cued me with a nod four bars in, once the ocean-swell figure had established itself. I turned the crank slowly at first, easing into the mix. The wind and the swells rose and grew, building to a sustained diminished chord across the entire orchestra, which then resolved and dropped away, the waves subsiding to a sextuplet figure in the strings. Here was where the wind effect surged again, rising above the orchestra to a howl. Or was supposed to.

I missed my cue.

I'd only ever seen Wagner conduct from the audience. I knew he didn't just set and maintain the tempo: he whirled and swooped and jabbed and cajoled, withdrawing to near motionlessness during soft passages, bouncing jauntily when there were dance-like rhythms, and shaking a quivering fist during climactic *fortissimi*. It'd always seemed a bit comical to me, but *chacun a son geste*. He wasn't from these parts.

That was the view from behind. Until today, I hadn't been on the receiving end.

I'd never seen a man so completely in control. At the helm of this orchestra his intensity, so palpable in conversation, was magnified beyond all expectation. They were with him, all of them, this mixed band of professionals and amateurs, right *there*, at the tip of his baton, galvanized by the force of his conviction and the authority of his stare. On this side of the baton his aggrandizing talk about unifying the arts felt like a basic truth, simply *there* before us in his perfect mastery of the elements of his creation. He might have been Prospero conjuring an actual storm within the proscenium, he was so at one with the sights and the sounds, even the *smells* of the set, the timber and pitch and sweat, like the smells of an actual ship. The sweep of an arm and the rocking motif *was* the ocean; a trickle of descending fingertips and the patterings of the violins *were* the whirl of wind and rain around a creaking mast.

All in twenty seconds, in under a dozen bars.

I was transfixed. My heart pounded. My arms tingled.

My cue passed unnoticed. And our revels ended.

His arms froze mid stroke. He turned with a savage glare. The orchestra lurched to a ragged halt. The hall was electric with silence.

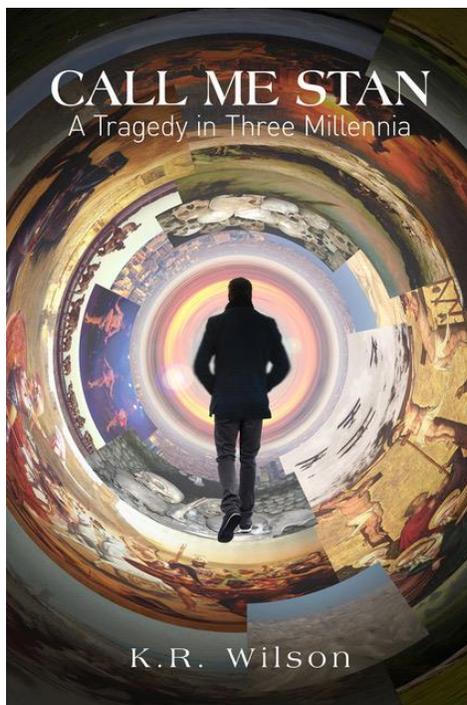
“Was your cue unclear?” His voice was low but intense, his eyes blade sharp.

He was magnificent.

“No, *mein Herr*. My fault entirely. It won’t happen again.”

And it didn’t. Spot on, every time.¹

K. R. Wilson’s novel Call Me Stan: A Tragedy in Three Millennia (Guernica Editions)—in which a self-described immortal takes a police interrogator on a wry, anachronistic tour of 3200 years of Western history—was longlisted for the 2022 Leacock Medal for Literary Humour.



<https://www.guernicaeditions.com/title/9781771835985>

¹ *Call Me Stan*, K.R. Wilson, Guernica Editions, 2021. Pp. 329-334.