

Sam's Secret Subway (by Ute Maria Sproulle)

Sam didn't want to move to another house. And he certainly didn't want to move to another country! "Boring old England," he thought as he looked down from the plane. All he knew about England was castles, ghosts and steam trains.

His Dad said that was long ago, in something called "Victorian times". His Mom said, yes, England would be different from the United States, a bit more crowded maybe, but Sam should be ready for a new adventure. He wasn't.

So, just because his Mom had got a new job, Sam had to leave his school, his friends, his house and his room - and move halfway round the world! That was asking a lot of a eight-year old.

Sam wasn't any more impressed when they arrived in the village and he saw their house - 400 years old! It was bound to be haunted. His room was way up on the top floor; they said it had "atmosphere". Yeah, the spooky kind.

He explored the garden: lots of trees, flowers, and paths leading to more trees and flowers. His mother was getting excited about how "pretty and quaint" it all looked.

"But we'll have to do something about that lot," she said pointing to some bushes, thick and overgrown.

Sam thought they were the most interesting bit and squeezed through to have a poke around. Underneath all the branches was a circular brick structure with a metal bar perched across.

"Looks like an old well," said his Dad, peering down. "Can't even see the bottom." "Stay away from that," said his Mum.

They had moved in August and school was still a few weeks away. Sam could either read the books on England his mother had given him or ignore her order and explore the old well. He did such a good job of exploring that one day he fell in!

Down he went, further down than he had imagined possible. His Dad had been right - there was no bottom! His Mum had been right about staying away from this thing. If only he'd listened!

Just as Sam was about to burst out crying, he saw clouds of steam below and heard the "Toot, toot, toot!" of a whistle. He wanted to scream in terror but didn't.

The soft, damp air let him down gently - right in front of an old gentleman with whiskers like bushes, a conductor's uniform and a peaked cap.

"I suppose you just happened to fall in?" The gruff voice made Sam jump. He nodded, not knowing what to say.

"Well, get on then if you're coming," the old man continued.

"Where - where are we going?" asked Sam timidly.

"Wherever you want. Forwards or backwards in time. The choice is yours."

Sam thought for a very brief moment, then said, "Back. I want to go back to my house in America."

"Are you sure?" asked the conductor, studying him carefully.

"Yes, I'm sure," Sam nodded. He wanted to go home and England wasn't home.

Before he knew it, they had arrived. Had he been dreaming? Sam couldn't tell. But there he was, standing in front of his house, a house he barely recognised.

And there was a little boy at the window playing - in his room! The boy looked a bit like Sam with sandy-coloured hair and a bright smile. He was waving to Sam and beckoning him to come up.

But Sam turned away. Perhaps this hadn't been such a good idea. Maybe you can't go back to the past. Maybe he should give England another try.

The conductor and the steam train were waiting for him. "Back to England?" the conductor asked.

Sam nodded.

"Thought so," the conductor said.

The next day Sam was sitting in the garden wondering whether he should try going down the well again when he heard a thump, thump, thump against their wooden fence.

He peeked through and saw a little girl about his own age hitting a ball against the fence. Should he tell her to stop because it was annoying him or should he invite her over to play?

"Hey!" he called out. "My name's Sam. Do you want to come into my garden and play?"

The little girl came to the fence and peered at him. "Ok," she replied and came over.

She had short brown hair, a very sunny smile and said her name was Samantha. She liked playing baseball although it was an American game and nobody wanted to play with her.

"Me, too!" said Sam excitedly. "I'm American. And I like baseball. And," he added, looking just a bit sad, "I don't know anybody here to play with."

"Well, now you know me," said Samantha. She looked round the garden. "I was hoping someone would move in next door. This is such a lovely, big garden. It's a shame no one ever got to play in it. You could probably have lots of adventures here."

Sam smiled a secret little smile. "Come over to these bushes and I'll show you something."

He led Samantha to the well. "It's magical. If we jump down, there's a subway at the bottom and a steam train comes with a conductor who will take you to the past or to the future."

Samantha looked at the well, then looked at Sam. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, honestly. I've been - back to my house in America." He could see that the girl was still looking sceptical. "But I came back."

"You expect me to jump down a well? Are you crazy?" she asked, moving away.

Sam couldn't think of any other way to convince her except to say, "Well, if you don't like having adventures. Or if you're chicken." He smiled a superior smile.

Samantha frowned. "I am not chicken." She thought a moment. "Ok, I'll do it. But you'd better be right."

Sam jumped. Then Samantha, closing her eyes, jumped too. Down, down, down they fell until they hit the pocket of steam coming up towards them from the engine's funnel. The "toot, toot, toot" of the whistle welcomed them as they landed.

"Good day," said the conductor, doffing his cap. "I see you've brought a guest. Well, all aboard. Where are we off to today?"

"To the future, please," said Sam and Samantha together and then laughed. They were suddenly feeling very adventurous.

"Hmmm," said the conductor. "Alright, if you insist. But nobody really knows what the future holds. I'll drop you off further along the track and leave you to explore."

They arrived in a landscape with no trees, no animals and eerily quiet. Out of the mist arose a ruined castle and out of the front gate flowed a long, smelly beard. Or was it smelly breath? Sam and Samantha couldn't be sure but they knew they were feeling scared.

"Well, what have we here?" and an evil chuckle emerged from a tiny creature with sharp, pointy teeth and an even pointier head. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Wizzer, the evil wizard. You can call me Wiz. All my friends - and enemies - do."

"I'm Sam," said the boy, determined to be brave. "And this is Samantha."

"Are you really evil?" asked Samantha. It was best to be sure.

"Oh yes," said Wizzer. "And I have a mechanical robot who is even meaner and nastier than I am. And," he hissed, smiling wickedly, "Robotus Mechanicus doesn't like intruders."

Just then they heard a heart-stopping explosion. Out of a deep, dark cave burst a huge iron and steel contraption with nuts and bolts and eyes that pierced right through you.

Sam and Samantha felt it was time to leave. They didn't want to outstay their welcome, such as it was. As quickly as they could, they raced back to the platform where they had left the steam train. But they were being chased by a monster robot beeping at them, "You will be destroyed! You will be destroyed!"

"What's his problem?" said Samantha breathlessly as she ran to keep up with Sam. To their relief they soon heard the comforting, "Toot, toot, toot" in the tunnel and saw their conductor waving to them.

They jumped on the train but so did Robotus Mechanicus, roaring at them, angry that they were getting away. Sam and Samantha acted quickly and gathered up everything they could find: shovels, buckets, pieces of coal. While the conductor was swerving this way and that, they prodded and poked and threw, making RM angrier still. Finally, luckily, the robot monster fell off.

The conductor was smiling to himself. "Have a nice trip?" he asked.

"Go!" shouted Sam, still very frightened, before remembering his manners and adding, "Please?"

Soon they were chuffing and huffing and puffing along the subway to the entrance of the well.

"Up, you go," said the conductor. "And it might be a good idea not to go falling down any wells again. You never know what you're going to find. Or where you're going to end up. Or whether you'll like it." He nodded wisely.

Sam and Samantha agreed and rapidly ascended the burst of steam to the top of the well.

Samantha climbed out first and turned to Sam. "Well, thanks for the adventure. It was an interesting way to end the holidays. I'll be seeing you at school, I guess." She smiled and gave a wave as she entered her garden.

"Oh right, school," said Sam. And he realised that soon he would be facing his biggest adventure yet.