**(1) The Train**

Ann Cavitt Fisher
<https://anncavittfisher.com/2016/03/10/the-train/comment-page-3/>

Life, love, and death on a trip from Amsterdam to Paris.

The train picked up speed as it left the station in a little town not far from Amsterdam. We passed so close to a row of houses I felt I could touch them, all neat, all the same. Lace curtains hung in each window, and a dusting of the recent snow still held on the roofs.

**(2)** The sun’s rays sparkled on the window, refracting light into the cabin of the train. It was cold. I pulled my coat from the seat next to me onto my lap to stop the draft on my legs. My gothic architecture book lay open to the chapter on St. Denis. Reading in French seemed more difficult than usual, and I found myself going over the same paragraph again.

**(3)** When the cabin door opened with a jarring SNAP, I gave a rabbit-like start as a man stepped into the compartment. He heaved his bag onto the overhead rack, sat down just opposite me, and opened a newspaper, *De Telegraaf*. I observed him quietly. He was a good-looking man, not really handsome, but his face was strong and intelligent. Very fit. **(4)** I returned to St. Denis and read the same paragraph for the fourth time.

After continuing in this manner for thirty minutes or so, the man folded his paper, set it on the seat next to him, and stared out of the window. Then he turned his gaze from the window and began studying me.

“Goedemorgen,” then looking at my book, “ou peut-être, bonjour?”
(Use the THIRD pronunciation by corienb here: <http://forvo.com/word/goedemorgen/>; use Google translate for the French)

“Bonjour.”

**(5)** “D’où venez-vous?”

“La Nouvelle Orleans.”

“Ah, New Orleans. Then you are American…sorry,” he said.

I thought for a second of asking whether he was sorry that I was American, then thought better of it.

“That’s okay. I’m glad it’s not immediately obvious.”

“No, you are not obvious. You could be Dutch, but appear more French. I wasn’t sure. We don’t get many Americans in November.”

**(6)** We were rocking along at a fairly high speed. I looked out of the window for awhile, watching the passing fields, all snowy white. I thought of Martijn’s mother, snug in her old farmhouse, and smiled. I turned back to my work, but had not gone many pages when I realized the man was staring at me. I raised my head, stared back at him, and waited.

**(7)** “You are going to Paris?”

“Yes, I study there.”

“What brought you to Amsterdam?”

After a brief pause, I answered him. “I am engaged to a man who lives in Hoorn, and I came to meet his family.”

“Ah…So you will move to the Netherlands? Or will the two of you live in the United States?”

“We plan to live in the Netherlands.”

**(8)** “By the way, I am Piet Maas.”

“Sarah Stewart.” I took the hand he offered. “Good to meet you.”

I glanced down at my book, at the abbey church, then back at Piet. “What takes you to Paris? Business?”

“I am only traveling through Paris headed to Marseilles. And it is neither business nor pleasure.”

I raised an eyebrow.

**(9)** He laughed and tilted his head back against the headrest, looking up at the luggage rack. “At home, everyone thinks I have lost my mind. I had an important position at a respected bank in Amsterdam. My apartment was large — perfect location. The kind people in the city wait years to get. I’ve been dating someone for almost two years.”

**(10)** “One night I was walking home with the thousands of other people who work in the city. It was dark and it was cold. And suddenly, I thought — I am not going to live this life anymore.” Piet looked at me.

“Thea, that’s my girlfriend, gave me a lovely party a week later for my forty-second birthday. While everyone was toasting me, I announced my plans, that I was giving myself the present I had always wanted. **(11)** In three weeks I would quit my job, leave Amsterdam, and go see the world.”

“When I finished, the room was very quiet. It was my boss who finally spoke.”

“Well, Piet,” he said, “if you want to take a trip, you certainly deserve a vacation. Take extra time — have eight weeks — travel — my birthday present to you. I’ll just take that expensive watch back to the store.”

**(12)** “Everyone laughed at his little joke, but then I said, “No, you don’t understand. I am leaving, and I am not coming back. I will be handing in my resignation tomorrow. I ship out of Marseille on a cargo boat in three weeks.”

“Absolute silence. Then Thea burst into tears, and the guests all gave excuses for leaving early…”

**(13)** “All night I tried to explain how I felt to Thea, but it was no good. I know I should have told her privately. Telling her with the others was a coward’s way out. But I wanted no one trying to talk me out of it. It was poorly done, though, and I feel guilty over it.”

I turned to the window. **(14)** The passing scenery became an indistinct blur, and the hair along the back of my neck prickled.

“Tell me, you are quiet. What do you think? That I have lost my mind?”

I looked at him for a long time. “Hardly. But I am wondering why you should care what a complete stranger thinks.”

“I don’t really…but — the last weeks have been so full of logistics. **(15)** Now I am started, and I have some quiet. And there you are, across from me, watching me.”

“It’s a bad habit of mine, watching people.”

“Yes, same — for me as well. So, for the hell of it, what DO you think?”

“That I am amazed you did it. Think about it, yes… Do it though? **(16)** And hopping a tramp steamer — it sounds like a movie script — it reminds me of a story an old journalist once told me. The closest I’ll come to anything like it will be marrying Martijn and leaving the USA behind.”

Piet watched me quietly. We continued contemplating one another until I began feeling uncomfortable. Then he spoke.

“Being married in the Netherlands will not be much different than being married in the United States. **(17)** You will live in a foreign country and learn a new language, and for awhile, this will be an adventure. The newness will wear off though…and one morning, you will wake up and realize that you exchanged one mundane reality for another.”

I thought of the neat, tree lined fields outside of Amsterdam, and Martijn’s orderly approach to his work, indeed to everything he did.

**(18)** “Perhaps. I suppose I will find out. — Why don’t you tell me about the ship you are sailing with?”

He frowned, but acquiesced. So the conversation changed course and we passed several hours swapping views on various subjects. The bright sun and snow of the morning gave way to gray winter fields and an overcast afternoon.

We left Mons, Belgium, and had crossed into France when the train came slowly to a stop. **(19)** We walked several cars down to get coffee and sweet biscuits which we consumed while continuing to talk. Finally, after almost an hour, the train began to back up, all the way to Mons. There it switched to tracks that paralleled the original set, and moved at a snail’s pace towards Paris.

“Must be a problem on the track up ahead,” said Piet.

**(20)** As the train approached the spot where we had been delayed, we stood up to look for the cause. At this point the ground rose abruptly up from the two sets of tracks. It had the effect of a very wide tunnel without a top. Several pedestrian walkways crossed above it.

We had gone a little way past where our cabin had sat for an hour, when the tracks turned crimson. **(21)** The stone chips of the railway bed were soaked red. As the blood dried, it darkened, so there was a variation from brilliant red to a dull reddish-brown. Then came a leg, severed from its body. The leg wore khaki trousers. The thigh had been shredded as the train tore it from the hip. The torso followed, but it was somewhat obscured by three railroad workers and two officers discussing what was to be done with the mess. **(22)** A blue workman’s cap lay next to the tracks, shivering slightly in the breeze.

I stood staring, when suddenly I was jerked back and the window shade snapped down. I had not seen Piet moving, and I felt jolted and bewildered.

“It is not a thing to look at.”

I stared at the shade, but saw the mutilated thigh. Piet took my shoulders. “Are you alright?”

**(23)** I nodded. He pulled me to his chest, and for a moment I relaxed and hid my face against his shirt. As I came back to myself, I tried stepping back. Piet looked down at me for a moment, then let go.

“Sometimes this happens…I should have suspected. I could have prevented you from seeing that.” Then more quietly, “please forgive me.”

**(24)** “I, I’ve never — well, I mean…never. I mean, I’ve seen corpses in the dissecting room at Tulane medical school. But it wasn’t like this.”

 “It is the blood. So much blood…”

“Poor bastard,” he continued. “There are often suicides like this. Frequently in Paris someone jumps in front of the Metro. The engineer cannot stop in time. He sees it all. **(25)** And he cannot stop it. For the person who jumps, it is all over. It is for the engineer I feel sorry.”

For awhile neither of us said anything. Finally, I said, “I wonder why he did it?”

Piet watched the gray fields. “Because it was easier than going on.”

I looked at him. “But you were unhappy — you felt trapped. You didn’t jump under a train, though — “

**(26)** “Ah, well. But in the moment when he had no hope left, he couldn’t see a way forward. You are so young…maybe it is something that it takes more life to understand. You see, it is always out there; it is always a possible answer.”

I picked at a loose thread on my cuff and thought I didn’t want to hear any more of this. **(27)** The grey afternoon dimmed into twilight and the train sped on towards Paris. As it grew dark, we left the lights off in our compartment. Traffic signals and train stations in passing towns lit our room now and again. We alternately looked outside and at one another, but neither of us spoke.

We reached the edge of Paris, and the train soon pulled into the Gare du Nord. **(28)** Piet flipped on the lights, and I rose to pull down my bag.

“Let me help you with that.”

“Thanks, but I can handle it.”

He shrugged.

When we moved out of the cabin and down the passage to exit the car, Piet preceded me down the steps, then turned and took my bag from me. **(29)** I stepped down off of the train and stood in front of him as people hurried around us down the long platform. The old iron roof supports rose high over our heads, the riveted beams full of pigeons gone to roost. Loud speakers blared information concerning departures.

I looked up at Piet. “Well,” I said, “I think…”

**(30)** Piet took my arms, pulled me close and kissed me once, then after looking at me for a long time, again, even deeper and more passionately. The noise and the people disappeared, and the two of us stood alone on the concrete slab.

He pulled back and I stood looking at him, breathless.

“Don’t marry him.”

**(31)** Piet picked up his bag and walked away, disappearing into the stream of humanity.

This is a true story; only the names and other minor facts have been changed. This train from Amsterdam traveled to Paris in late November of 1985. I never saw “Piet” again…Seven months later, I called off my engagement.

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