

1 • Getting to France

*Wide awake on a sleeping train
I watch the full moon following.
Winter scenes of magic beauty
Make my young heart overflow.
Every signal is clear tonight.
No stopping me where I'm going.*

*A ship on a restless ocean,
invisible in a moonless world.
An icy wind freezes to the bone
and whistles eerily in the wires.
My mind is clear tonight.
No stopping me where I'm going.*

*In the dark between the days
an empty frozen world is mine.
In blindness that is love I travel
for only moving stills the longing
My beloved waits tonight.
No stopping me where I'm going.*

This journey starts on a wet day in mid-October in the mid-1980's, when I bought a return ticket to Cannes at Eindhoven railway station. I had moved to Eindhoven in the South-East Netherlands the previous year, the city being the home of the well-known electronics company where I found my first job as a young engineer. Working in their Medical Systems division suited my sense of idealism: it seemed so much better to work on scanners for hospitals than to work in some other place making high-tech weapons for killing people. At first I really thought that I had found my place, but soon after I arrived there the changes began.

It was called "Quality Assurance". Even though it seemed harmless enough at first, this was the beginning of a whole new order. I had always considered quality to be something intangible, almost spiritual; and that was before I had even read "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance"!

Of course there always had been strict quality control in the company; especially important when making medical equipment. This was something else though.

My employers now told me that quality was defined as meeting a pre-set target exactly; not less and not more. It involved a system of monitoring and tracing everything and everyone, so that decisions could be taken by looking at labels instead of applying knowledge and experience to a situation. When applied to machines and products, I thought this was almost the exact opposite of quality. When applied to human beings, it seemed not unlike replacing sound judgement by prejudice.

One of the doctrines of Quality Assurance is that you exorcise the devil of the “unforeseen” by creating a totally audited and controlled organization that runs like a perfect machine. The machine was of course not perfect at all. The illusion of “quality” was achieved only at the cost of stress, frustration, and a massive waste of time and money. This was strange because the whole objective of Q.A. was to save the company money. In spite of this, there was still a seductive logic to it and I forced myself to believe that it was for the best.

Apart from my travels it had been an uninspiring summer that year. My daily, half-hour bicycle ride to work seemed to be always under dark clouds with showers of rain. My lodgings in Eindhoven were rubbish and it proved hard to find anything else. I was also a stranger trying to settle into new surroundings.

On the bright side, I enjoyed my new-found independence and my monthly income far exceeded my modest expenses. This allowed me to indulge in my passion for travel. I spent the days of my annual leave exploring the weird and wonderful garden of diversity that is Europe.

My wanderings around Europe were partly an escape and partly a search, although I did not know what I was searching for.

During the winter I took French evening classes. I liked France and I wanted speak the language properly. It was also an attempt to escape the loneliness of my crummy bed-sit. I never made any new friends there, but it motivated me enough to plan another trip to France.

Cannes looked attractive on the pictures I had seen of it. I also liked the idea of some sunshine on the Mediterranean coast.

The international ticket office at Eindhoven railway station was reassuringly old-order. This is how a ticket to Cannes was done before qual-

ity assurance and before computers:

Because the journey went through several countries, the route-kilometers and the cost had to be determined for each country. The ticket clerk was a middle-aged woman with too much make-up. She sat behind a large, wooden desk full of foreign timetable books and stacks of forms. She already knew the kilometers and costs from Eindhoven to the Belgian border, and also for the transits through Belgium and Luxemburg. The only part she had to look up in the huge French Railways routing guide was the section from the Luxemburg-French border to Cannes. After this, she quickly added it all together, wrote out the ticket by hand, and validated it with a rubber stamp. The whole procedure took less than five minutes, including a couchette reservation on the overnight train from Luxemburg City to Cannes.

A couchette is a bunk in a compartment of six. Couchettes are a pretty basic kind of overnight accommodation, but they are clever: outside the hours of sleeping, the two lower bunks become bench-seats opposite each other, seating six in total. The middle and upper bunks fold against the wall, partly serving as back rests. Male and female passengers travel mixed together in the same compartment. Continental morality has no problem with this. We just pretend that couchettes are not really for sleeping. They are like seats, but then flat and horizontal. The Germans call this kind of accommodation "Liegewagen" or "lying-down" coach. The logic is: if you can spend an overnight journey upright in a seat in a mixed company of strangers, then there is no reason why you cannot do the same in a more comfortable, horizontal position. Etiquette dictates that you stay sufficiently clothed to avoid upsetting or arousing your travel companions when you retire to your bunk. A rough, thin blanket and an almost-as-thin pillow are provided by the attendant. In this way you could once travel to the remotest ends of Europe, sometimes spending two consecutive nights on the same train, in quite a tolerable standard of comfort.

I remember with great nostalgia those summer nights on the move through sleeping Europe; windows wide open, curtains raging in the slipstream. What better way to travel than lying down, listening to the sounds of trains in the night: the steady clickety-clack of the wheels, the "ding-ding-ding" of a level crossing, the conductors' whistles and echoing voices in passed-through stations, the screeching and rattling of wagons being shunted in sidings, the rumbling of a steel bridge over some dark river. At full speed on the main line, there was the sudden bang!-shudder-

shudder-shudder of another train passing in the opposite direction; curtains sucked right out of the window. At home you would never sleep a wink with all that going on, but in a night train these were the sounds that said "Everything's O.K." and they soon made you drift into a sound sleep.

Until you got to Strasbourg that is. Some time in the early hours of the morning, the loudest public-address system in all of Europe would suddenly tear-up your sweet dreams with: "This is Strasbourg! This is Strasbourg!" repeated in three languages. Once all doubt had been dispelled as to where in the world you might be, there followed a long list of train and platform information, also repeated in every language of course. I sometimes wondered if there were really that many trains leaving Strasbourg at around 2:30 in the morning. Perhaps the station staff made them up out of spite for having to work night-shift. The voice was still bleating when a fully woken-up overnight train would pull out of there about 15 minutes later. If you could get back to sleep after Strasbourg, you were indeed a seasoned traveller.

In a modern overnight train you might be able to sleep right through Strasbourg. Full sound-proofing and air-conditioning are now fitted as standard, and the windows can no longer be opened. The trouble is, before you can sleep right through Strasbourg, you actually have to get to sleep first. Conditioned air is no substitute for fresh air for a good night's sleep. And then there is the silence. It may seem odd, but on a train you get to sleep much better when you can feel and hear that you are moving. Take away the sounds, and you are cocooned in uncertainty. Some overnight trains are now so smooth that you cannot even tell whether you are moving or not. Paranoia takes over: your senses tell you that you are going nowhere. What if you find in the morning that you are exactly where you left? The way today's railways are being run, that is a distinct possibility. Even then, if only the silence was complete, you might eventually relax and get some sleep. But the silence is not complete. With the friendly whooshing and click-clacking sounds of the train blotted-out, you are left with all the little, irritating noises that you normally cannot hear. There is the snoring of a fellow passenger, the high-pitched chirp of some dodgy electrical circuit, and then that loose bit of panelling in a place where you cannot get at it, taunting you all night :

"eek.....eek...eek.....eekeek.....eek..."

Anyway, you get the idea. Besides, it is possible that there is nothing wrong with today's overnight trains. Perhaps I have just become a complaining insomniac through age and through the stresses of modern life.

So I had bought my ticket to Cannes. Thanks to flexible working time, I could work extra hours in the evenings during the week and then finish early on Friday.

My “Intercity” left Eindhoven at 13:00 for the one-hour journey to Maastricht. It was hauled by a dark-blue Netherlands Railways 1200 series electric engine. Don’t worry; I am not going to spoil this story by getting technical about trains, but this one is special. A huge 1200 with its powerful, angular features was the engine I was lifted onto by its driver at the age of about 3 or 4. That was on platform 4 of Amsterdam Central Station. My mother had taken me to the station to watch the trains, and before I knew I was in the driver’s seat. The windows were far too high to see out of. I vaguely remember the grey console with instrument dials and shiny, black levers.

Twenty-odd years later, it may have been the same engine, even the same driver that took me on that first leg of my journey to Cannes. The yellow and blue coaches were brand new and very comfortable with semi-reclined seats. There were very few other passengers on the train; none of them near enough to observe or to engage with in conversation. I gazed out the window without really seeing. The song playing in my head was by Mike Oldfield; the one about never getting to France, which seemed a bit odd in the light of the journey that I had just begun. Mike Oldfield’s album “Discovery” was my first ever CD. The company I worked for had just invented the Compact Disc, and I had bought the world’s first production-model CD player at a bargain price in their personnel shop when it was obsolete a year later. Someday it will be a museum piece.

At Maastricht I had just five minutes to board the little yellow diesel train that shuttled back and forth across the Dutch-Belgian border to Liège.

Liège was a strange place. The line into Guillemins station ran high on an embankment. From there you looked down into the front rooms of the old, brick houses where semi-naked women lay bathing in the abundant glow of red light. I came from Amsterdam which is famous for its red-light district, but it struck me that Liège made a far greater spectacle of displaying the wares, even if the wares themselves were a bit old and wrinkly. After passing Liège’s shopping mall of earthly delights at a very, very slow pace, the train entered the station.

Not much to be said about Liège-Guillemins. Its highlight was my connecting train to Luxemburg. The train was made-up of three dark

green, antiquated Belgian coaches and a diesel engine of the “Nohab” type. It was in Luxemburg Railways dark-red, with the creamy-yellow “speed whiskers” and side-stripes. The sight of it would make today’s train spotters just about mess their pants with excitement. Back then it was just an everyday kind of train for a not too important line in the Ardennes Region.

I have not mentioned scenery so far because there wasn’t any, unless you call Dutch flatness in murky weather scenery.

South of Liège the Ardennes begin. The Ardennes are a range of hills that stretches from the east of Belgium, through Luxemburg into Germany where it joins up with the Eiffel mountains.

It was 15:30, two and a half hours after I left Eindhoven, and here I was, meandering at a leisurely pace through secluded green valleys between forested hills. It was at this point that my first travel companion on the journey spoke to me. He had joined the train at Liège and taken the seat opposite me, even though the rest of the carriage was empty. Small, thin, dark-haired, wearing a dark-grey business suit, he had nodded to me by way of greeting before putting his briefcase in the luggage rack overhead. His tie was the only part of his attire that was not grey. It was a dull green that was almost grey. His face was thin and grooved, and he had a thin, black moustache with downward-pointing tips.

“Vous allez Luxemburg?” he asked. Here was the first opportunity to practice my French, and it proved not that easy at all. I managed to tell him where I had come from and where I was going, and that I worked for Philips. He told me he worked for Interpol as a railway detective. I thought he might as easily be a fantasist or a con-man of some kind. After all, if he really was a detective, why would he be telling me this? I liked the idea though: travelling to lots of interesting places in the course of duty while helping to rid Europe’s rail system of crime.

He said he was on his way home to Basel in Switzerland. That meant he would also catch an overnight train at Luxemburg City, but his would leave a few hours after mine.

The train made a few stops in dusty, flaked-looking towns. All of them looked deserted under the gloomy sky. We crossed the invisible border into the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg. When the train stopped at Clervaux, the sun appeared. Suddenly the trees that covered the hills all around were aglow with the colors of autumn. After the economic decay of the Belgian Ardennes, Clervaux looked prosperous yet unpretentious

with its tidy, grey and white houses and flower boxes in the windows.

The monastery was visible high on the hill on the west side of the valley. This is where I had stayed on my first night in Luxemburg the previous autumn, and where I had fallen in love with the serene beauty of that ancient place in the moonlit forest. The guest quarters of the monastery were bare, stone cells; much the same as the cells that the monks themselves live in. The furniture consisted of a small writing table, a chair, and a hard bed made of solid timbers.

Looking at those same forested hills from the train window a year later, I remembered how I had walked from the Clervaux monastery, through the valleys and over the hills, to the town of Echternach.

There is a network of excellent footpaths all over Luxemburg. Some of these paths have been used for over a thousand years, by pilgrims on their way from the Low Countries to places of pilgrimage as far away as Spain. My two-day walk to Echternach gave me a taste of a bygone era when almost all travelling was done on foot.

Sometimes the path was a medieval, hollow road under a forest canopy like a cathedral. Sometimes it clung narrowly to the side of a steep hill, brushed with morning sunlight in the swirling mist. Sometimes it followed the banks of a meandering river with the greenest of pastures on either side. Then again it went high on a hill plateau through fields with grazing cattle and small clusters of farms. At one point it was a maze of ravines and chasms deep in the ancient rock. At all times it was beautiful.

On the first day I followed more or less the north-south main artery of the country, parallel to the railway line, and then stayed overnight in a youth hostel. The second day I headed east over the hills. When I heard the Abbey bells of Echternach in the failing light at the end of that day, I felt relieved that I was almost there. My legs were aching, unaccustomed as I was to travelling on foot. I was tired, but I also felt disappointed that the journey was nearly over.

Echternach is a tidy, friendly town along a river that is the border with Germany. It has a main street full of shops and hotels that fill up with visitors in the summer.

One of the hotels provided me with an evening meal and a comfortable room.

The main attraction of Echternach is the Abbey. This was once a great centre of learning in medieval Europe. Using the same, ancient roads that I had just walked, saints like Bonifacius and Willibrord set out to bring Christianity to pagan tribes like the Frisians, in the far north of

what is now the Netherlands. Bonifacius, the legend goes, was killed near Dokkum around 750 A.D. while trying to fend off the blows of his Frisian assailants with his Bible.

It seems to me that Christianity won in the end because these guys had two things: they carried a message that had real power to touch the hearts of people and to move their society one step up the ladder of civilization. Secondly, they had the guts to carry that message through without fear, *whatever it would take*. I did not feel particularly Christian myself and I certainly did not lead a religious life, but I still admired the courage of those people.

Somehow it all seemed to belong to a romantic past that was rapidly blotted out by every new, technological invention. This modern era places reason over religion; reason being seen as the making of self-centred decisions on the basis on information that can be measured and quantified by some physical means.

The train pulled out of Clervaux and gathered speed with a sustained growling of its engine. My detective friend had closed his eyes. Perhaps he had heard enough of my painful French. Looking out the window, I recognized some of the places where I had walked the year before. Sometimes it was just a fleeting glimpse; that hidden valley between two tunnels that looked familiar and yet a different world. From behind the rust-streaked glass I imagined the scents of the moss and the leaves, the coolness of the forest air, and the sound of the river in its bed of shiny pebbles.

Many years later, long after that walk and long after my train journey to the Côte d'Azur, I tried to retrace some of my steps to Echternach. New, expensive houses had been built all around the old villages, but the countryside was still beautiful. The main difference was that I had to walk much further before it was peaceful. I could still hear the birds singing, but too often there was a car or a motorbike in the distance, and planes kept passing overhead.

Far more people were using the paths. The medieval, hollow road had been given picnic tables and litter bins. Perhaps I had changed within myself as years went by, but even though I walked on the same paths I felt like I was watching a view from a train rather than being part of it.

It seems that transport has become man's noisiest pursuit. But apart from shattering the peace of beautiful places, our travel habits have a much wider impact. Pollution from excessive travel by car and by air-

craft, so it seems, will dramatically change the Earth. Some say it will be like a different planet, where the sun shines differently through a different atmosphere on an alien, degraded environment. Whatever the future, trains are good because they carry you with just one-fifth of the energy that a car or a plane would have used.

But back to Luxemburg in the mid 1980's. I must have nodded off into a dream. When I woke up, the train was already slowing down in the outskirts of Luxemburg City. As soon as it had stopped, I quickly left the train, put my bag into a left-luggage locker, and walked out through the station forecourt. Then I crossed the road and headed into the main shopping street that runs between the station and the bridge over what I call "The ravine". One of the shops was exactly what I was looking for: an ironmongers. The shopkeeper was just about to lock up, but he let me in. Four nuts and four screws I needed, size 5 mm, and eight large washers to match.

A minute later I was back on the street with my purchase which only cost a couple of francs. The Luxemburg franc had the same value as the Belgian franc. You could use Belgian francs in Luxemburg, or guilders or Deutschmarks for that matter, but Luxemburg francs were not accepted in Belgium. French Francs were different altogether and could only be used in France. If you travel around a bit, then a single, world currency cannot come soon enough!

I found a small restaurant in a side street, and enjoyed a tasty meal of sausage and mashed potato with a glass of local wine. The menu was in four languages and all four were spoken, including Dutch. Among themselves, most people in Luxemburg speak a kind of German that is called "Letzburgerisch".

It had gone dark by the time I came out of the restaurant. Back at the station I still had half an hour before my train was due to leave, but it was already being shunted alongside the platform. It was a long train made up of four or five French Railways seated coaches in two-tone grey/white with orange doors, then a similar number of green couchette coaches, including the one I was booked on. Finally there were, for the rich upper-crust, two dark blue sleeping cars of "Compagnie Internationale des Wagons Lits". They stood out from the rest because their roofs were considerably higher.

The train's destination board said it would take the westerly route via Neufchateau, thus bypassing noisy Strasbourg.

I retrieved my bag from the locker and sat down on one of the bench-seats outside on the platform. It was a small, brown, hold-all type bag that I had bought in Eindhoven's main department store the previous week. This was the first time I used it, and it had broken before I even reached the station. The handles had been fixed to the bag with stupid split-pins that were never designed to take any strain. Inevitably the handles began to detach themselves, transforming the bag from an easy-to-carry item of luggage into a right nuisance. In the end, the only way to carry it was under my arm from where it constantly tried to escape, due to being rounded and made of slippery plastic.

Seated on the bench at Luxemburg station, I placed the bag on the ground with my foot on it, and jerked both handles clean off the bag. It took even less effort than I anticipated, and my action must have looked very odd if anyone was watching. Next, I carefully pulled out the sharp and twisted split-pins from the handles and threw them into the rubbish bin beside the bench. The fixing holes needed to be bigger, so I enlarged them with the blade of my Swiss Army knife. Using the nuts, screws, and washers that I had bought earlier, I fixed the handles back onto the bag. By luck, the nuts fitted neatly into a gap between the planks that made up the bench on which I sat. I tightened the screws with the screwdriver bit of the Swiss Army knife. Only then I noticed the tiny, gold label on the side of the bag that read : "Made in Taiwan, Quality Control O.K." Removing that label from the bag was much harder than pulling off the handles. I had to scrape it off with the knife before I could flick the shreds of it into the bin. The repair lasted for the next 20 years, and for the rest the bag was actually O.K.

The train was ready and I found my coach somewhere in the middle. The couchette compartment was still in seated mode with the upper bunks folded away. Inside, a middle-aged couple was busy arguing in Italian while trying to stow an impossible amount of luggage under the seats. I decided to stay in the corridor and wait for peace. When it went quiet, I looked in. Most of the bags and cases were still on the seats and on the floor. They both smiled at me. The argument cannot have been that bad; it was probably just Mediterranean temperament. He had short, grey, combed-back hair. His face was well-tanned with a designer nose like a statue I once saw of Julius Caesar. He wore a red and white checked shirt with rolled-up sleeves and brown trousers, and fine Italian shoes of polished brown leather. Her face had long lost its youth, but she had friendly, brown-greenish eyes. Her hair was white in a curly perm. She looked

about twice his size in her white-dotted purple dress, under which she wore a pair of practical white leather sandals. They quickly cleared some space for me to sit down, which I did, making myself small while they continued with sorting out their luggage. As the time of departure came, it looked like it was just going to be the three of us in the compartment.

There is something dramatic about the departure of a long-distance train: the hurried slamming of doors, farewell kisses and people waving, and then the last, long whistle. Eleven-hundred kilometers lie ahead. The engine is one of those French beauties, a CC6500 for the connoisseurs, in red and silver, with forward-raked cab windows and a side-profile like an Olympic runner.

The overhead wire carries 25,000 volts of tamed lightning. The driver in his cab shifts a lever. Silent electromagnetic forces begin to fight the inertia of hundreds of tons of train. The engine's hunger for power sends ripples through the electricity grid. Somewhere in France, hundreds of miles away, a nuclear reactor automatically pulls the rods a few millimeters further out of its core, adjusting the knife-edge balance of criticality. More heat; more steam to the turbines; more power to the grid. A small amount of plutonium is newly created by nuclear alchemy; the ingredient perhaps for human suffering beyond imagination, or to be safely sealed away air- and-water-tight, successfully guarded for the next hundred-thousand or so years?

Standing in the corridor by the open window and watching the lights of Luxemburg City go by, I was only dimly aware of any environmental impact I was making. The overnight train was just a time-saving, economic way to travel before there were low-cost flights. The conductor arrived to inspect the tickets, followed by two officers of the French border police: "Votre passeports s'il vous plait!" This was the only "proper" border that I crossed on the journey. Border controls between The Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxemburg were minimal thanks to the Benelux Treaty.

Having already travelled to less-privileged parts of the world, I was aware what it meant to belong to a rich country in the capitalist part of the world. It meant you could have a passport and you could travel; no questions asked as long as you had the money. Most people in the world were not free to travel, and some countries were in reality just prisons and forced-labour camps the size of countries.