Gateway to the Continent

by Katrina Dessavre

I got to Victoria station at quarter to eleven on a Friday with nothing but a small leather bag and the vague idea of getting out of London. The timetables and train routes spread out above me like the plot lines of so many of the paperback thrillers piled up on my bedside table. I could be in Paris by late afternoon, crossing the Alps the next day, and end up in Egypt before the weekend was over.

Bing bong! *The Golden Arrow to Dover will depart from Platform 8 in 15 minutes*. A soft, disembodied voice echoed against the steel rafters and glass roof. There was still time, I thought, to decide where to go, buy the ticket, and change my mind along the way.

“There's really no one quite like Michelangelo.”

Before I could connect the voice to gray hair, sensible shoes, and a long carpet of a coat, the sickly sweet floral musk incapacitated my senses. It was almost as bad as my earliest memory of Victoria, when the air was fetid with soot, stale poison gas and gangrenous wounds.

“It's so hard to find a man who can paint ceilings properly, you know,” her companion said and parked her suitcase in front of the map of Europe.

I started to pace around the platform, glancing at my watch every so often to give me a false sense of purpose. There was still time, I thought, to reach one platform and cross over to another.

“I thought about staying in the house to keep an eye on things. You know how oblivious Gerald can be. They could carry out his whole library and he wouldn't notice. But the fumes are too much. I just hope the windows are open to let the place air out.”

While my eyes lingered over “ALL PARTS OF ITALY” under the London-Paris Express, I realized I would be following an Italian housepainter, not his Renaissance namesake.

That morning, I had thought I would be decisive, deliberate in my decision to escape. Now, the bag I was holding seemed too light for the trip. My hands began to sweat against the leather handles. I had

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forgotten to pack a toothbrush. There was still time, I thought, to go home and pack it before returning to catch the Night Ferry train to Paris. Victoria at night was far more suited to the Grand Exit, anyway: cinematic goodbyes staged in sepia shadows, the distant glow of the city as you pulled out of the station.

The two women started moving and I followed their perfumed trail to Platform 8, watching their silhouettes disappear into white haze.

Bing bong! *Ladies and gentleman, in consequence of fog, the Golden Arrow will be delayed.*

There was still time, I thought, to return to my desk before the secretary began asking questions.