

This Train Is Bound For Paoli: A Multiple Choice Essay

by Roz Warren

Train 664 leaves Thirtieth Street Station bound for New York City at 10:55. Concurrently, Train 663 leaves the station, headed for Harrisburg.

Both trains are, confusingly, called The Keystone.

If Mark and I have tickets for Train 664 because we plan to celebrate his 58th birthday with a day of Manhattan museum-going, but somehow end up on Train 663 instead, how many miles do we travel in the wrong direction before we realize that we've made a terrible mistake?

Or, to put it another way, how fast does my pulse begin to race and how high does Mark's blood pressure spike when, as the train picks up speed and we settle into our seats, anticipating a glorious day in the Big Apple, the conductor comes on over the loudspeaker to welcome us aboard the train to Harrisburg?

Bonus question: How loud do I scream upon hearing this announcement? (Keep in mind that we're in the quiet car.)

Train 664, the Keystone, heads in one direction. Train 663, also The Keystone, heads in the opposite direction.

What could possibly go wrong?

When we first arrived at the station, we'd checked the Information Board to see what platform Train 664 would leave from. It said Platform 7. Of course, Mark, wasn't wearing his glasses. And I've got cataracts. So who knows what it really said? It could have told us that Train 664 was the Hogwarts Express, now boarding from Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. Or that Train 664 was the Peace Train and Cat Stevens would be our conductor.

The world can be an uncertain place when viewed with middle-aged eyes.

At Platform 7, we asked the Amtrak employee checking tickets, "This is Train 664, right?" Nodding, he glanced at our tickets, then ushered us onto the wrong train.

If your entire job consists of making sure nobody boards a train who doesn't belong on that train, and you let a couple with tickets for one train get on another one instead, can we safely assume that you are:

- 1) an underachiever
- 2) suffering from sudden onset dyslexia
- 3) just another Boomer with cataracts. The dude was my age, and if his eyes were anything like mine, there's no way he could actually read the itty bitty numbers printed on our tickets.

So there we were, intending to spend the day in New York but speeding toward Harrisburg instead.

"Happy birthday," I said to Mark. "I hope this isn't an omen."

When the conductor appeared to take our tickets, we didn't shout at him because:

- 1) We were in the quiet car.
- 2) Our being on the wrong train wasn't his fault.
- 3) Shouting at people is no way to celebrate a birthday.

He told us we could get off at Paoli and grab the next train heading back toward Manhattan. And that's what we did. We had an hour to kill in Paoli, so we checked out a nearby Japanese restaurant. And the food was terrific.

We ended up getting to Manhattan hours later than we'd planned, but we still had a great day, because:

- 1) It was Mark's birthday.
- 2) We have each other and we have our health, so what do we have to complain about?
- 3) We're 58.

And we'd concluded, after feasting on sushi, then boarding the train from Paoli to Manhattan, that if you're on the wrong train, it's better to be 58 than 28.

If you get on the wrong train at 28 it can change your life.

Maybe Mr. Right is on Train 664, but you board Train 663 and fall for Mr. Wrong. Or perhaps some aspect of your Train 664 journey would have inspired you to quit your job or change your career or move to Cincinnati. So much of your life is ahead of you when you're 28 that a lot can turn on each choice you make.

But by 58, you are who you are. Board the wrong train and it may delay your trip, but it probably won't change your destiny.

Although you could discover a really good place for sushi.

Thankfully, Mark and I don't get angry and blame each other when things go wrong. Instead, we can appreciate just how ridiculous it is to be stuck on a train that's going in the wrong direction.

Especially on your birthday.

We get along so well that it's likely we'll still be together when it comes time to celebrate Mark's 59th birthday.

Will we:

- 1) Triple check our tickets before boarding the train to Manhattan.
- 2) Boarding, ask the conductor "Is this train going to New York?"
"Really?" "Are you sure?"
- 3) Before the train starts to move, ask everyone around us if they're planning to enjoy a day in Harrisburg.

On the other hand, maybe we'll just go to Paoli for Japanese food.

