

Freight train going so fast

Fran booted up his tablet and Googled for the song that kept coming back to him; the Peter, Paul and Mary version. He had forgotten that the inimitable Joan Baez had also recorded it. The second surprise was seeing that it was written back in 1905 by someone called Elizabeth Cotten. To add to his discoveries, he read that Joan Baez's mother came from Edinburgh.

The song brought back many memories of childhood, living in Lanarkshire next to the busy railway line used by long goods trains that rumbled past in the middle of the night. Despite all the lorries on the roads, the bulky cars and flat-bed wagons behind the powerful locomotives still carried the 'stuff', as he used to call it, past a house he no longer lived in.

On this holiday in France, he arrived in the evening at Carcassonne on a *TER* train from Toulouse. He stepped down from the carriage just seconds before a dusty, thrusting freight train, full of fruit and vegetables from Spain, thundered through the station. *Freight train, freight train going so fast*, he sang to himself. Up till then, he'd never considered who wrote the words; that's was why he'd determined to find out.

He had booked a room - with *Wi-Fi* - at the *l'Hôtel du Soleil le Terminus*, the splendid *Beaux Arts* establishment near the *Canal du Midi*. It retained its aesthetic opulence from the early 1900s despite the little restaurant along the pavement outside. So many French towns have an *Hôtel le Terminus* but this one was special.

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He checked in at the high desk in the soaring atrium, so large that the huge scattered sofas seemed quite insignificant. He remembered the grand staircase, palace-like corridors and sturdy bedroom doors from his last visit and was delighted that his room had a view of the *Square André Chénier*. Was the poet 'square' too? *This is a treat, he murmured. Expensive, but what the hell. I won't be here forever.*

It was no prediction; it was a promise. A commitment. Fran, Francis Xavier MacMorran from birth, had run, as he liked to put it, his course. He had not even questioned the consultant who, supported by evidence of Fran's out-of-control malignant tumour, signed his death warrant.

"I can't guarantee you more than a few weeks." He said and paused, waiting for Fran's reaction. There was none. "And no, it's inoperable. Or, at least, it's operable but the result would be fatal. I wouldn't even contemplate it."

Fran remained apparently unmoved. "In which case, I'd better take that holiday in France I was planning. Thanks for being honest. It's just one more on my long list of 'nearlies'."

Hugh Summerville, the consultant, looked at him, his expression querying what Fran had said.

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“I’ve nearly made old age,” he explained. “I’m one of Scotland’s nearly men. The guys who get their fingertips on the mountain top before slipping down. Like William Wallace, Bonnie Prince Charlie ...” He dropped his head briefly before looking at Hugh.

“Where do you want me to start?” He got no reaction. “I nearly got a good degree, I nearly got a top job, I nearly made a success of my marriage - and of my children. I nearly got my novel published, nearly fell in love again, nearly learnt to speak French fluently.”

Hugh smiled and spoke quietly. “In that case, why don’t you start on the last one and enjoy your holiday at the same time. It’s nearly time for your singular achievement - the ultimate conclusion.”

“No hint of compassion there.” said Fran. “Thanks. I’ll park the self-pity and get on a plane to Paris. I really want see the re-vamped Picasso Museum and the brilliant Citroën showroom. It was nearly open when I last visited.”

And so he tidied his house, made sure his papers were as much in order as he could be bothered and left a key with the neighbours, telling them if anything happened to call his lawyer, Bernie Cowan, who would know what to do. He explained nothing - although he nearly did.

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Paris was a blur of trying to do too much in too little time. He revisited the Rodin museum with its magnificent *Burghers of Calais* and the *Thinker*. He wandered down the *Champs Élysées* to see Manuelle Gautrand's electrifying showroom with its equally exhilarating concept Citroëns. At a matching, breathtaking cost, he lingered outside over a lunch of scrambled egg with smoked salmon, two glasses of wine and a double espresso. *I won't do this again in a hurry*, he smiled. *In fact, I won't do it again.*

He nearly slept, alone in a first-class four-berth sleeper, all the way to Toulouse where he re-visited the towering mediaeval Basilique St Sernin. He was an atheist with a perverse affection for this great brick Romanesque monument with its battered stone pillars inside. It had offered him inspiration (divine intervention?) when trying to compose a eulogy for a dead friend whose funeral was two hours away. "Norman was a great cathedral of a man," were his opening words and there was nearly a round of applause in the crematorium.

That was his funeral, Fran quipped. *There's no one to say that of me. Maybe: Fran was nearly a great achiever.*

A memorable evening meal followed by a glass or two of Calva (even this far south) put paid to further introspection. *Carpe diem*, or in this case, *noctem*. He'd have liked to seize something a little more corporeal but there were no candidates so he slept the sleep of the virtuous under an expensive duvet.

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And so on to Carcassonne, a place where he felt ‘comfortable’. On his first visit one summer, he had emerged from Ryanair’s conditioned air into a cauldron of sweltering humidity; this really was being on holiday. He enjoyed exploring the *Cité*, a kind of fairy-tale reconstruction on a Disneyland scale and now over-run by sweaty visitors. He quite liked the tortuous board game it spawned but never even nearly defeated his grandchildren.

He spent happy hours walking the streets of the old town, laid out in ‘a grid with variations’, admiring its flashes of Art Deco and exploring the *Librairie Breithaupt* with its maze of books, elegant stationery, dazzling art materials, stylish gifts and more. When Fran had left after his first visit, he was disoriented until he realised he had entered from *Rue Courtejaire* and left by the doorway on *Rue de Verdun*.

That night he made up his mind. He was as relaxed as he had felt in years, he was in a place that he cared about but where nobody cared about him. It was time for the last hurrah. He spent the next evening at *La Gare* and in slightly-halting French chatted to one of the platform staff about freight trains.

“Tout les soirs, Monsieur. En provenance d’Espagne, en direction de Paris.”

“C’est vrai?” Fran nodded in, he hoped, a knowing fashion.

“Oui, et toujours à l’heure. C’est une nouvelle entreprise.”

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Always on time, Fran noted. Any railway company would do, he wasn't fussy.

The next afternoon, he took *Lou Gabaret*, the trip boat on its *Croisière Nature*, westwards on the *Canal du Midi*. The spring weather was glorious and on the way back they stopped at *l'Épanchoir de Foucaud*, the spillway whose waters irrigate the pleasing botanical garden that straddles it. He savoured several glasses of local wine to wash down several pieces of rich patisserie.

He sat in the sunshine until the girl shut up shop. "I'm getting a lift from friend; that's why I didn't go back on the boat," he explained.

"D'accord, et bon soir," she called cheerily as she closed the shutters. *What next time, Francis Xavier?*

He made his way to the nearby road, then to the railway bridge and climbed the fence up to the track. There was nobody within sight.

He knew the line had been singled some distance to the west, so he turned and, with the setting sun on his back, walked eastwards along the track. He could conceal himself in bushes until *le grand train de marchandises* approached. He was nearly looking forward to seeing it; except that he wouldn't see it.

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When his watch told him the train was passing through Carcassonne, he knelt on a sleeper between the rails, facing the way the train would be travelling. He was happy now. *The party's over*, he sang, fondly remembering Peggy Lee. *It's time to call it a day.*

The rails beside him began singing as the pounding of steel on steel started to reach him. He waited, daring not to look back, and waited, and waited. The noise became increasingly fearsome but he wasn't afraid. He stood up, slowly folded his arms, smiled and shouted "Vive la morte!"

He was still standing up as the train hammered on into the night. *How could I forget? Bloody French trains run on the left*, he cursed.

The nearly man had nearly done it. Again.