

Sketch

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Article 2

Amused

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“Platform five...platform four...threeee,” Via puckered her lips trying to keep her dangling cigarette from falling out of her mouth as she hurried through the train station. “Two. Dammit!” She let her two bags fall from her shoulders and dropped the heavy suitcase from her cramped hand. She took one last drag from her cigarette, although she could hardly breathe anyway, and threw it on the tracks. She situated herself, pulling her skirt up around her tiny waist and tucking her bothersome curls of hair behind her ears. She stuffed her book into the clench of her armpit so she could grab her bags and sprint to the next platform. “One,” she said with relief as she approached her train. “It always has to be the farthest away, doesn’t it?”

Via struggled to lift her suitcase high enough to the lady who was helping her load her luggage onto the train. Usually, she had the knack for being able to tell where a person was from, but it was hard to tell with this lady. She had Italian features – dark hair, olive skin, *great* eyes – but seemed a bit too comfortable to be in a Munich train station. She had to be German.

“Danke schoen,” Via decided, following her last piece of luggage up the steps.

“Bitte,” the lady said with an appreciative smile as she disappeared down the narrow aisle of windows and sliding glass doors.

The train car smelled of lavatory, cigarettes, and sweat. It was a smell that Via strangely missed. Excited, she inhaled the thick fragrance, knowing to stop breathing exactly when the point of enjoyment overlapped the point of disgust. She fought with her suitcase, which was now stuck in the tight hall between the windows and the sectioned-off seating compartments. A finger pulled the mustard yellow curtain of one of the compartments so that Via could only see an eye peeking at her. She ignored the curious passenger and tugged at her suitcase, quietly trying to keep from drawing too much attention.

The yellow curtain slid open along with the glass door to the compartment.

“May I help you?” A tall, handsome man in a business suit took the handle of the suitcase, brushing his clammy hand over Via’s. “You speak English, I assume.”

“Yes, thank you, sir.” She followed him and her suitcase into the room. Billows of smoke formed paisley patterns against the six, caramel-colored leather seats. Via waited for the man to sit down before she decided which of the three seats on her side she would choose. She was hoping she could sit by the window, but would only do so if he chose a different spot across from her. She really wanted to stretch her legs out, maybe even plop them on the seat in front of her

if he didn't mind. He chose the middle seat.

"You American girls always have so many bags," the man said with a conceited British tone.

"Yes, I suppose we do." Via wasn't sure what to think about his comment, or if it was even worth thinking about at all, for that matter. She placed her book on the windowsill so she could lift her two bags onto the luggage rack above her seat. She stood on the tips of her toes and stretched her arms to reach the rack, revealing a small portion of her lower back as her shirt lifted with her arms.

"Where are you going, if you don't mind me asking?" The man noticed the bare skin that was showing, but quickly looked to the window, almost embarrassed for even seeing it.

"Salzburg." Via sat down next to the window and put her book in her lap. The train started moving out of the station. "You?"

"Budapest."

Via wondered what sort of business an Englishman had in Budapest.

"Have you ever heard of King Ludwig?" she asked, rather amused with her unconventional query.

"No, no I haven't." The man didn't know whether to be embarrassed or not. "Should I know him?"

Via unwrapped a small bread roll from a square of cellophane and ripped it in half, brushing the fallen crumbs from her lap.

"He used to be the King of Bavaria," she said as she bit into the bread and jerked the tough remains from her mouth. "He was mad. Absolutely *obsessed* with swans," Via stuffed the leftover piece in her mouth and continued to mumble with her cheeks full of food. "They were everywhere – painted on his china, sewn into pillows, carved into his furniture."

"Hmm," the man nodded his head as if he was interested, but didn't understand where the girl's story was headed.

Via could see that the man was puzzled. "He was quite eccentric. Did you know that he used to eat dinner with statues?" Via laughed, and her attention moved to the scenery outside the window. "He started inviting the busts of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette to dinner instead of inviting his friends. It's really quite sad, actually." She looked to see the man's reaction, took the cigarette that he was offering her, and bent forward for him to light it. "Thank you. Anyhow, he was declared insane and drowned in a lake with his doctor three days later. Poor guy."

"So does anyone know *how* they drowned?" The man asked, suddenly engrossed in the topic.

"Nope. Could have been suicide, maybe murder. Nobody knows." Via tilted her head back as far as she could and blew a stream of smoke straight up

in the air, as if she was pleased with her story. She gave the man a big smile, and began to read her book.

“Ah, *Bonjour Tristesse*. You speak French?” The man didn’t want Via to stop talking. She was quite interesting. Strange, yet beautiful with her thin lips, excited green eyes, and wild spirals of hair crawling down the sides of her skinny arms. She had to be at least ten years younger than him.

“Un peu,” Via flirted with a French accent, flashing him with her seducing eyes. She flicked the ashes of her cigarette into the tray next to the window. “I’m taking a class at school. Maybe I’ll get a minor. Have you read this book?”

“No, I’ve only heard of it. Quite controversial in its day, wasn’t it?”

“I suppose it might have been. It was written by an eighteen year old, you know.”

“Ah,” the man tried to think of something else interesting to talk about. If he didn’t, she would go back to reading. “What are you using there as your bookmarker?”

“Oh, it’s just a picture of a boy back at school. See...” She handed him the tattered photograph. It was obvious that she had looked at it many times, and perhaps even rubbed the face of the boy since the details of his visage were faded.

The man looked disappointed. “This your boyfriend?”

“Yep.”

“Do you love him?” the man seemed awkward asking such a straightforward question. It wasn’t his nature to stray from textbook conversation, but he figured the girl would find it normal, if not amusing.

“Oh, no. Well, I don’t think so.” Via paused and thought for a moment. “Do you think that it’s possible to love a person without having seen their handwriting?” She jammed her cigarette into the ashtray and accepted another light from the man.

“Well, hmm. You mean you wish he would write you sweet, sappy letters?”

The Border Police slid the compartment door open and asked for Via’s passport. She handed her passport to one man, and her ticket to the other.

“No, no, no. That would be awfully nice, but I mean just seeing how they write their name, or even the word ‘plum’ or something. Anything, really.”

The men gave her passport and ticket back, nudging each other and laughing under their breath.

“Well sure. I think it’s possible.” The man realized how boring his life really was. He had never had the chance to ponder such a question. He had surely never been in such a conversation before, nor had he ever been in love.

Via sprang her legs onto the seat in front of her, letting her short skirt hang off the edge of her seat. “I don’t think it’s possible,” she shook her head.

“Definitely not possible.”

The man felt nervous with the girl’s legs and feet in the seat next to him. She began to read again. After she had been reading for quite some time, he stared at her soft limbs and cute, knobby knees. He wanted to touch them, but was sickened by his temptation. Via could see the attention he was giving to her legs, so she subtly pulled her skirt revealing enough of her thighs to make him uncomfortable. She giggled when he shuddered.

“Pardon me for never asking, but what is your name anyways?” He tried to seem rather cool about being caught.

“Via for short. It’s ridiculous, really,” she rolled her eyes. “My parents named me after Vienna – they used to teach there. Now they live in Salzburg.”

“Oh, I see. You’re visiting them for the summer then?”

“Unfortunately. They think I’m crazy,” Via rolled her eyes. “Just like King Ludwig, I guess. ‘You need to stop talking to yourself, Via. It’s weird!’” Via whined as she contorted her face into an eerie pose and impersonated the shrill of her mother’s librarian-like voice.

“Haha. Well, I don’t think you’re crazy.” The man enjoyed her strange company, but Salzburg was just a few minutes away.

“I need to get my things ready.” Via got up and started gathering her two bags from the luggage rack.

“Would you like some help?”

“No, I’ll be fine, thank you.”

“I really enjoyed our chat, Via.” The man, sad to see her leave, was confused by her sudden skittishness.

“Me too. Have a nice stay in Budapest,” Via was now annoyed and a bit jittery. She started laughing so much that she had to sit down again. She reached to the middle seat in front of her and tugged her suitcase onto the floor, catching the photograph of the boy that had fallen from the seat as well.

“There are plenty of normal people in this world to talk to, Via. Why do you insist on making them up instead?” Via’s face was distorted as she tugged her way out of the compartment, amused.