

Susan Musgrave / "when we get there can I smoke?"

*A Reading Tour of Britain and France,  
with bill bissett, November, 1981*

"I don't know how they keep this train on the tracks," says bill. We pull out of London's Paddington Station. "In two weeks I will be chopping wood in the Cariboo."

I've left my life, a marriage gone to sleep with a glass of wine in its hand, "Emotional Rescue" turning soundlessly on the record player. I have no one to run back to, no place to hide. "In two hours I can smoke," says bill.

We've been travelling for days — the trains, the lonely stations. In Norwich we saw a church that had been bombed by a zeppelin; in Oxford we read to a college of gay Quakers. In London, last night, we went to a party at David Hockney's flat and bought tickets to see *Camelot* and then have dinner with Richard Burton, but didn't go.

Instead, as bill would say, we raged into Wales. In Cardiff we compare parasites, take in the Impressionists and Gwendolyn Davis's fake bronzes, including "The Kiss." We meet a Trotskyite in a wine bar, eat fortune cookies under a photo of the Grants of St. James (land grants, mostly). I get "Romance is iffy."

bill isn't convinced; he's been told Cardiff is a hotbed of vice. He finds "The Private Shop" whose windows had been whited out to keep the public from looking in, and an array of potions to make love last. Longer. It is International Rugby Day in Cardiff. "They talk on the telephone with their drawers down," we hear someone say. Romance is looking iffier.

In Coventry there is fisticuffs in the hotel at night. I dream I am too refined to eat sugar. bill always asking me, "Are you feeling festive

yet?" In Coventry I get a wake-up call: "Your cold breakfast is coming up."

We wake up in Yorkshire, too, with stone pigs stone cold at the foot of our beds. Mrs. Jackson, the landlady, says the cold is piercing. "We don't have summers," she says.

At the Church of Spiritual Healing we climb the blue staircase, kneel before the blue bear on the altar, the starfish on the altar cloth. bill gets a message from a Hindu in a green robe, through Mrs. Peel, the healer, whose people were taken in caravans from their land of red rain, long ago. Mrs. Peel says there is a question in bill's life.

I get a message on my palm, a red wound, a stigmata. bill sees it and touches it — a miracle! bill will be cured, too: no more parasites! I light a prayer paper and a little cloud goes up. "Blessings can go through walls," bill says.

In Heptonstall we go looking for Sylvia Plath's grave and find a blue suitcase, the weeds in lovely riot. The suitcase matches the blue shoes bill always wears, the ones he's worn out with so much travelling.

At first we couldn't find her, the cold was making it hard. "Maybe she did it to get warm," bill says. That could have been part of it.

At Lumb Bank, a writers' workshop, we meet Damian who's been questioned by the police because he looks like the Yorkshire Ripper, and Colin, who's written two books called *Panic* and *Asylum*, who questions bill's syntax. Later in the village there are fireworks and bill dances away over the hills, dances back with the young girls who have been awakened by shooting stars. White moths come out of the hedgerows, drawn to the light around bill's body, settling on his hair, on his face, all over his clothes.

I don't know how we keep this train on its track, with all the distractions we have to face daily. Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh, Leeds. A newspaper headline in Newcastle reads SEVEN YEARS FOR SEX BEAST and I think of Camus: "A single sentence will suffice for modern man. He fornicated and he read the papers."

Romance consistently iffy. I don't know how we keep doing it — behind the walls of hotel rooms, pubs and guest houses, B&Bs, the small smoky rooms where we read our poetry. I dream bill and I have an adobe in Arizona. "I heard some good news today," says bill. "We come this way but once."

Then over the sea by British Airways to Paris (bill asks "When we get there can I smoke?") where we read at the Canadian Embassy. We visit a bookstore that has been bombed by extremists, and laugh with a firebreather who wants me to go with him, afterwards; bill says you have to wait two years in between major relationships, so I don't leave, I stay. At the Louvre I watch bill flick a booger onto the Mona Lisa to see if it will set the alarms off. It may still be there, bill's booger, to this day.

"Is everything brilliant?" bill asks, when, on our last evening in Paris, the sirens start playing our song and the man bleeding on the sidewalk asks for a smoke, a light. "Got flame?" he says, in darkness. bill gives him his last cigarette.

And flying back to Vancouver the next day, "You are My Shining Star" coming in through our headphones, our faces messy with tears, the terrible parting yet to come. bill going back to chop wood in the Cariboo, asking "Are you feeling festive yet?", me thinking I might head down to Colombia to drink orange juice and talk about emeralds.

"Brilliant," bill says, when I tell him.