

Sample translation

***Retour Palermo* by Philip Snijder
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Translated by David McKay

For additional information on Philip Snijder and other Dutch writers, please also visit:
- The fiction pages at the foundation website: www.nlpvf.nl/fc/

Quindici

Cheek to cheek, mine against the nun's, for the past fifteen minutes at least. The corners of our mouths were half an inch apart, or less, since I was doing my best to press the side of my face into perfect symmetry with hers. My chin against her chin, the whole expanse of our cheeks, and above them my right temple against her starched white cap. I had tucked my long, greasy hair behind my ear to get even closer to her. Each time I blinked, I imagined that my lashes were setting hers in motion as they brushed her closed eyelids, tickling her almost imperceptibly, and that these feather-light caresses were causing the twitching of her nose and upper lip. Several times now I had extended my tongue and flicked it over her half-open mouth, leaving a slimy trail in the cloudy patch on the glass of the compartment window between us. By sitting on my backpack, laid on its side in the corridor of the night train, I could bring my face to exactly the same height as the face of the nun, who had fallen into a deep sleep against the window by the sliding door of her compartment. Probably to avoid being rude after we had commiserated earlier, and to give me a view of Ingrid asleep against her shoulder, she had not closed the curtain next to her, which would doubtless have made a more comfortable pillow.

This allowed me, on the other side of the glass, to indulge in one of the many lurid flights of fancy - brought on by heat, fatigue, and lack of sleep - that had been coming over me during this last leg of our journey. Suddenly convinced that the smell in the corridor was my fault, I had spent at least an hour anxiously checking my breath in the palm of my sweaty hand, each sniff both confirming and refuting my theory. This had followed a long, heart-pounding stretch of monitoring the knees and feet of the men on the bench opposite Ingrid. I was sure none of them were sleeping as deeply as they pretended, that they all were stealthily slumping and shifting their way towards carnal contact with her legs. Most recently, my invalid brain had ordered me to engineer a forbidden moment of intimacy with the nun, to have a look beneath her heavy skirts, to cup her breasts in my hands, to kiss her passionately on the mouth - right now, with all these dozens of sleeping or half-sleeping bodies around us. What had come of it was this molestation under glass, of which only one party had been aware. I lifted my head from the window and turned away, aware that my cheek was still conspicuously flat. It took several seconds to return to its usual shape.

We had met the nun the evening before this long night. Neither of us had ever seen a nun close up – we don't have nuns in Amsterdam. When she stepped into the corridor of the train, with her thick habit, stiffly starched cap, and incongruously young and cheerful face, we took one shocked glance and didn't dare look again, the way you'd studiously avoid staring at a midget or a face with a port-wine stain. She was on her way to the toilet, picking her way through the bodies and assorted luggage heaped in the narrow gangway. As she passed, she glanced at us with tenderness and curiosity. What she saw was a young couple, undoubtedly German, balanced uncomfortably on their backpacks, hardly more than children, both with long, unkempt blond hair (the girl, whose vivacious, naive beauty shone through in spite of everything, had hair of an almost luminous white), their skin even more pale than usual from the fatigue of the long journey without seats, filthy and sweaty, eyes full of suffering, clearly at the limits of their endurance. When she returned, it was obvious she had been thinking about us. She spoke a few words to the fat woman whose family was also stuck in the corridor for the night – the husband and two children already asleep, sprawled over their cardboard boxes and roped-up suitcases. The woman, who had insisted earlier in the evening that we share in the copious meal she had managed to serve her family, cast a heartfelt look of pity in our direction and answered the nun in a loud, harsh voice. Even before, when she'd urged us to go ahead and eat, I had noticed the aggressive edge in her voice, its penetrating drone, bore no relation at all to her kind words, which were incomprehensible to us but easy enough to interpret. The woman had not even finished her reply when the nun came over to us, ran her hand over Ingrid's hair, and shook her head compassionately. She stood in front of us and tapped her chest.

'Concetta!'

As she smiled and pointed at Ingrid questioningly, we realized that this was her name. With blushes and awkward smiles, we told her ours. She nodded with a look of enthusiastic comprehension but clearly saw no point in even trying to grasp such exotic sounds. Since we had obviously reached the limits of verbal communication, she took Ingrid by the arm and motioned to us to follow her. In her compartment, where all the seats were taken, she needed only a few words of entreaty to clear a space next to her for Ingrid. My instructions were to sit by the window in the corridor. As she looked me in the eyes reassuringly, her index finger traced rapid horizontal circles in front of her face: you can rest later.

In the window opposite me, brightly lit village stations flashed past as we screeched onwards at full speed. In the gleaming reflection I kept seeing my own aching head with its stringy hair, the corridor, and the compartments beyond it.

The father on top of his suitcases rolled over with a groan, revealing the arm with his wristwatch: four-fifteen. Aside from a three-hour layover at the station in Rome, we had now been confined to a train for more than thirty-five hours.

At Central Station in Amsterdam, where we'd bought our tickets at the counter earlier in the week ('Two round trips to Palermo...'), we'd been delighted to find an empty compartment. Look, a cosy little room just for us! The trip to Sicily would be a breeze. We'd made ourselves at home, placing our food and clothing on the empty seats to discourage passers-by from joining us. Never before had we seen a train like this, with long corridors stretching past closed compartments, let alone travelled in one. We even discovered we could lock the door from the inside and draw the curtains to turn the compartment into a private sleeper. We lifted the armrests and lay down to test the quality of the cushions, finding them satisfactory. When the train started moving, we still had the compartment all too ourselves. I opened a can of beer; Ingrid munched her crisps. We took off our shoes and put up our feet, all set for the trip to Rome.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled into the station in Utrecht, where to our surprise the train came to a halt. From the corridor we could see the platform, crammed with heavily-laden travellers on the lookout for the right carriage, pointing and shouting. A few minutes later, our compartment was packed with boisterous newcomers and their luggage, and we were out in the corridor with our backpacks. We gaped in disbelief at a holder on the compartment window containing eight strips of paper: eight reservations from Utrecht to Rome.

So began our days and nights without regular seating. We had to make do with the flimsy folding chairs in the corridor, but mostly we sat on our backpacks so that we could hold hands and lean on each other. When the train arrived in Frankfurt after midnight, the suffocating flood of noisy, shabby southern Italian families – their food, their boxes, their old suitcases – sent us half-sobbing into one of the toilets for refuge. With occasional interruptions when other passengers were in dire need, we stayed in that damp, smelly room until the morning, slumped against our backpacks or seated on the bowl.

Straining under the weight of our packs, we had spent a few hours wandering aimlessly in the hot, blinding chaos of Rome's Termini Station, pursued by hundreds of shamelessly inquisitive, penetrating gazes. Several times we were approached by clutches of raucous young men, who would glance at Ingrid, exchange a grin, and come after us elbowing each other and shouting, *Deutsch?* We moved on quickly, afraid of being robbed or raped. When we spotted the train to Palermo in the seething mass of travellers on the platform, it became clear that our hopes of greater comfort during the second half of our journey had been in vain.

Now the mother of the family next to me had fallen asleep too. She had lost control of her short, squat body, which was rattled this way and that on her narrow folding chair. Every time she slid halfway to the floor, she managed to hoist herself upright again without waking. Her skirt had crept up above her knees, exposing the quivering white rolls of fat on her thighs.

When I turned back to the reflection on the window in front of me, I was in for a shock. I tried to focus my eyes by squeezing them shut and opening them wide again. The images I had seen so clearly in the window in the electric light of the corridor – the compartment behind me full of sleeping heads, slivers of the compartments to the left and right, myself and the sleeping family in the gangway, underneath the long, overstuffed luggage rack – now seemed pale ghosts amid countless other pale ghosts, a poorly tuned television displaying several channels at once. Suddenly the reflection was mobbed with people. Everything on the train around me seemed to be, not doubled, but at least quadrupled. My eyes shot back and forth between the real world of our carriage and the house of mirrors in the window. Each time I looked, I was startled by a new back, a stray head, an unfamiliar suitcase, until, astonished at how long my confusion had lasted, I realized that another, equally crowded train had pulled alongside ours and was moving forward at exactly the same speed. And as soon as I turned around, I understood that I had also seen the reflection of a third train full of slouched and dormant bodies on the far side of the nun and Ingrid's compartment, a train that was also in lockstep with our own.

I waited attentively for the moment when the two trains flanking ours would veer away onto other tracks, but it never came. We remained side by side, hurtling onward in tight formation, carriage to carriage, window to window, without any one train shifting even an inch relative to the others. Gone was the nocturnal landscape, the lights of houses and stations, even when I squinted and tried to peer through the other trains. The only way I could tell we were still moving was by feel. The changing sounds of the train and the backward pull in my body told me we must be slowing down. All around me, and on the train next to ours, more and more people were opening their eyes, awoken by the same sensations. Contorted faces were pulled back into shape with a grimace, aching backs stretched, and teeth scraped over coated tongues. With a piercing, synchronized screech, the three trains simultaneously came to a halt.

For a few seconds, everything fell silent, and then it all burst into motion again, and everywhere I looked, there were people gesticulating and calling out to each other. Something was about to happen; everyone was getting ready for action. At least, that's what I thought I saw in the newly expectant faces and focused activity of

the Italians. The people in the compartment behind me were putting on their shoes and buckling their belts. Ingrid had stood up. Still half asleep, she peered quizzically at the nun with eyes that refused to open all the way. As she pointed toward the ground, I could see her lips moving: 'Palermo?'

The nun shook her head, laughing, and then turned around and opened the door of the compartment. She took Ingrid's arm and led her into the corridor. As soon as she had both of us in front of her, she began to speak in a loud, emphatic voice. She was obviously trying to explain something to us; that much was clear from the whirlwind of eloquent gestures that made her habit flutter. Only one of these made any sense to us: the tapping of her index finger on the spot where she would have worn a watch. Apparently time was crucial to her narrative. 'Capito?' she asked after every few sentences, nodding vigorously, eyes full of hope. In the face of such enthusiasm, we didn't dare confess our utter bewilderment. Slowly, hesitantly, we nodded back.

Meanwhile, our fellow travellers had formed a semicircle around us, frequently interrupting the nun with long howls of outrage ('Ma noooooo!!!') and trying to hijack her explanation. They clamoured for our attention, constantly tapping me, and never Ingrid. From all directions, hands were reaching out for my arms, chest, and back, and I kept trying to meet the eyes of all the people who wanted to talk to us. But no sooner had I found one face than I would feel the poke of another impatient finger and have to turn away. In growing confusion, I swivelled my head back and forth between the agitated Italians, so eager to help that they were shouting over each other. No one had the chance to say more than two sentences before others began waving their arms and noisily interrupting, sure they knew better, or at least that *they* would succeed in communicating with us. Just as I'd decided to break free of the crowd, however ungrateful it might seem, we were all thrown off balance as the train lurched back into motion.

The group disintegrated. Some returned to their seats and others, with no more luggage than a pack of cigarettes, started queuing up by the swinging door to the vestibule. They gestured to us with friendly faces, inviting us to join them. Peering past them, I could see that the vestibule was now tightly packed with other waiting passengers, who had likewise left behind their boxes and suitcases. The train next to us remained still as we shuddered forward at a snail's pace, to the shrill, unbroken grinding of the wheels against the rails.

'But where are we?'

Ingrid's worried eyes darted back and forth between me and the nun. In response, the nun laid her hands on our shoulders and pushed us gently but insistently toward the queue. We were still creeping by the windows of the train next

to us, and despite our slow progress, the shuddering seemed to be getting more and more violent. Amid the screeching and the grinding, I could now even hear a kind of echo.

I pointed to our backpacks, pantomimed putting them on, and raised my eyebrows. Again, she shook her head no, with a smile on her face and a look of reassurance. She pointed first at herself, and then at our bags: she would keep an eye on them, so that we could do what just about everyone else was preparing to do, which evidently involved getting off the train. Again, the nun tapped the top of her wrist, extending and retracting the fingers of her right hand three times, right in front of our faces. Now I understood the word she'd repeated earlier with so much emphasis, though I hadn't recognized it in all the noise. It was a word that I remembered from the phrasebook I'd opened as soon as we pulled out of Amsterdam, in hopes of spending the rest of the trip studying it: How to Say It in Italian. I had done the numbers up to twenty before we reached Utrecht.

'*Quindici!* Fifteen minutes, Ing! We're stopping some place where we can go out on the platform for fifteen minutes, get some fresh air, and stretch our legs! Oh Christ, does that sound good!'

'Shouldn't we bring the really important things with us? Everything's in our backpacks: the passports, the travellers' cheques -'

'We'll stay close to the carriage. Anyway, we can trust a nun.'

I smiled at our benefactor, panting and fanning myself to show how much we longed to get some air. The look in her eyes made it clear how delighted she was that we'd finally understood her. Her nodding grew more vigorous than ever, and with a broad smile, she waved us over to the queue.

There we were greeted by cheerful, excited voices. A path was cleared for us, so that we could stand closer to the carriage doors. From all sides, hands were patting us on the back and jabbing their fingers promisingly at what awaited us beyond the walls of the train. I tried to see whether we were already entering a station, but we were standing in part of the corridor between the last window and the carriage doors. The crowd of jostling heads made it impossible to make out the slightest detail of the world outside the windows behind us. We were still creeping along with occasional jolts. Through all the noise of the passengers, I sometimes thought I could hear tinny voices. After one last violent shudder, a source of great mirth for our fellow travellers, the train stood still. The din of voices had by this time grown so loud that there was no way Ingrid and I could hear each other talk.

In the crush of bodies and the collective surge towards the doors, we were separated. Through a tangle of arms, shoulders, and heads, Ingrid tried to keep her eyes on mine. From what I could see of her face, she was making a valiant but

unsuccessful effort to take comfort in the cheerful excitement of all the people around her. I caught half a strained smile, a glimmer of uncertainty in one eye.

Then came a loud click and a hiss of air. Like children at the entrance to a playground, the Italians around us started cheering when someone pushed open the heavy door. What came into view was not a platform, but the side of another stopped train, not much more than three feet away from ours. The people at the front of the line scrambled out onto the steps and lowered themselves into the narrow space between the trains, ending up so far down that all I could see were their heads and shoulders. Cheerfully calling out to their travelling companions to join them, they hurried off to the right and, one by one, disappeared.

When I arrived at the door myself – lifted and carried more by the crowd than by any choice of mine – I saw that Ingrid was already standing below, fighting the current of passengers surging forward as they streamed out of our carriage and others to the left.

‘Come on, then!’

She was definitely looking anxious now. I quickly hopped off the bottom step, and we grabbed each other’s hands. In the crush of the throng pressing past us, we had no time to look around. We were in everybody’s way and couldn’t possibly stay where we were any longer. When a young man in a military uniform who’d been sleeping in Ingrid’s compartment jumped off the train and beckoned us with a smile, we surrendered to the collective flow and followed him.

Staying close to the soldier’s broad back, we made our way down the narrow path between the trains, the people behind us constantly treading on our heels. There was no hint of fresh air. In this immeasurably long, thin caravan of people, whose shouting and chattering seemed to be echoed and amplified, it was even hotter and stuffier than on the train. Ingrid kept pulling her clinging T-shirt loose from her chest and back, opening her mouth wide to take in as much air as possible. Our hair, soaking wet, stuck to our foreheads. As we hurried onward, I tried to look down into the half-darkness below our knees. If I could see what kind of surface it was – asphalt, tile, bare earth – maybe I could figure out what part of the station we were in. But in front of my feet and behind them, all I could see were other feet in motion. There was no way I could slow down to take a proper look. As soon as I slackened my pace, I could feel the people behind me pushing forward impatiently. And if I’d turned to look above us – where, on leaving the train, I thought I’d seen a dark vault with here and there a lamp – I would certainly have stumbled.

We noticed an instant too late that the soldier had stopped short and both bumped into him. Smiling, he turned around and pointed at the stream of travellers in front of him, who had veered off to the left and were trying, with difficulty, to

squeeze through an opening between two uncoupled carriages. It seemed as if the joint effort to overcome this obstacle was only adding to their enjoyment, as they all helped each other crawl between the buffers and dangling cables without soiling their summer clothes. When we too had made it through, we found ourselves in front of a third train. I could feel Ingrid's questioning eyes seeking mine but did not return her gaze. With my bearing and facial expression, I tried to communicate full confidence in the outcome of our expedition. Trotting along behind the others, we followed the third train some distance to the right, until we reached another opening between two carriages. Again, we took a left, until a moment later we came to a stop.

Craning my neck, I could see over our guide's shoulder and the heads in front of us that the crowd was vanishing through a door in a high, gleaming wall parallel to the last train.

'Here we are.'

I wanted to make it sound as if so far everything had gone entirely according to plan.

'Here we are? What's that supposed to mean? As if you know where we are or where we're going! This is driving me insane! We're going back, do you hear me?'

But with the advancing horde behind us, there was no turning back. The soldier glanced our way, his smile even broader than before, and inclined his head toward the door where the people were thronging. Right in front of our faces, he wiggled his middle and index fingers up and down in an alternating motion, slowly raising his entire hand through the air.

'Looks like we'll have to climb some stairs, Ing.'

'Where the heck is the stupid platform? You said we would stay close to our train!'

Now that we were a little closer, I could see that the door did, in fact, open onto a harshly lit stairwell, and the travellers were rushing up the stairs. We too started climbing, to the sound of countless feet pounding on metal steps above us and reverberating voices that now actually seemed to be cheering excitedly. The little we could see through all the bodies of the narrow, smooth-walled tube that enclosed us told me nothing about where we were or where we might be headed, though I could see that after two flights there was some kind of landing where some people were splitting off and disappearing through a door. Since the doorway was filled with an uninterrupted flow of bodies, there was no way of seeing what lay beyond it, except for a few bright lights. The soldier turned around, shook his head no, and pointed enthusiastically at the stairs that led onward. We hardly had time to exchange glances as we followed him and the many others, higher and higher. Everyone seemed to be moving a little faster now.

The second landing had another door like the first, but this one stayed closed and no one tried to open it. More stairs followed. Ingrid tugged hard on my hand, trying to resist the mob that was pushing us forward, to stand firm in the midst of the migration that was sweeping us along like pebbles in a river.

‘I’m done stretching my legs, all right? I want to get back on the fucking train!’

But from behind us, her protests were smothered by friendly hands on our shoulders, intent both on protecting these young, vulnerable foreigners from being knocked over and on encouraging them to hurry along. So up the stairs we went.

We reached the third landing, apparently the top one: there were no more stairs to climb. Packs of people were pushing their way through the door, which was in the same corner as on the lower levels. For the first time since leaving the train, I felt cool air on my face. The soldier ahead of us detached himself from the crowd around the doorway and stepped to one side. After a mock ceremonious bow, he made a polite gesture of invitation. Still hand in hand – me in front, Ingrid behind – we followed the others over the raised threshold.

The next moment we were standing in a howling wind that almost blew us over. The people in front of us fanned out, giving us an unobstructed view: a white railing and beyond it a deep blue night sky thronged with thousands of stars. Without a word, we walked to the railing and looked over it. Far below, waves were crashing and white crests rolling away. The blast of air was so strong that we had to keep a tight grip on the railing. Now that the noise of the other passengers was no longer drowning out all other sounds, we could also hear a heavy rhythmic pounding beneath our feet. Our eyes met. Ingrid’s face was convulsed with surprise, as if in severe pain.

‘You mean we’re on a boat . . . ?’

‘A moving boat, Ing. Feels like it’s moving pretty fast, too.’

‘Jesus! But what happened to our train, then? Everything we own was on that train. We didn’t bring anything with us . . . Oh God, we’ve lost everything!’

She clapped her hand to her mouth as tears came rolling down her cheeks. A moment later she was crying, her chest and shoulders heaving as she wept. I tried to put my arm around her, but she pushed it away.

‘You and your fresh air. “Let’s go stretch our legs, Ing!” What are we supposed to do now? What are we supposed to do now?’ She was shouting, her voice rising and falling with each sob.

‘I think the train must be passing over a bridge, or through a tunnel, and then we’ll . . . All those other people got off too, didn’t they . . . ?’

Mainly to subdue my own panic, I wanted to point out the passengers around us, who were smoking and enjoying the night air, quite unconcerned. But instead,

when I looked around, I saw a familiar sight: a half-circle of Italians had formed around us, looking on in concern as we panicked. They seemed to be conferring about something. A short man in a sweat-soaked shirt moved his hand in circles over his fat belly and, with an inquisitive frown, nodded in Ingrid's direction.

'They think you're seasick.'

It was only then that I noticed the boat was pitching heavily. Ingrid wiped off her cheeks and, facing the onlookers, shook her head no.

'Try to ask them where the train went.'

With the wind blowing my hair into my face like a leper's hood, I made the gestures of putting on a backpack for the second time in ten minutes. With my hands at my chest, clutching imaginary straps, I took a few laborious steps, exaggerating the weight. Then I mimed taking it off and setting it down. Pushing my hair out of my face, I tried to imitate the sound of a moving train (chugga-chugga-chugga!), loud enough to be heard over the roar of the wind and the ship's engine. To finish off, I spread my arms theatrically: where is it?

My audience let out a collective *Ah!* of relief and comprehension, followed by hearty laughter. As if on command, everyone in sight started pointing insistently at the deck below them. Some men even dropped into a crouch. From all sides, we were bombarded with cries for attention and an excited hubbub of competing explanations.

'Why are they all pointing to the ship now?' Ingrid turned her solemn gaze on the laughing Italians. 'Train! *Not ship!* Train!'

While our earlier attempts to communicate in English had got us nothing but shy looks and shaking heads, this one met with enthusiasm from all sides. The many fingers pointing at the deck went up and down faster and more emphatically than ever. One word kept emerging from the general uproar.

'Treno! Treno! Treno!'

'Jesus, Ing, I think our train is crossing over with us, right underneath us, here on the boat -'

'That's ridiculous! Didn't you see how long and heavy the train was? The boat would sink in no time! Oh, face it, we've lost everything!'

Before I could respond, the short, fat man who'd asked whether Ingrid was seasick broke away from the clutch of onlookers and came right up to us. He began to fire off an explanation that was apparently a matter of life or death, judging by the emphasis he placed on each word. While doing this, he repeatedly pointed to his watch and then to the door of the stairway behind us.

'Treno?' I asked.

'*Treno! Treno!*'

I now saw that the long deck on which we were standing had not just one entrance, but many, with doorways at roughly thirty-foot intervals from which circles of harsh light were emanating. Each doorway was surrounded by passengers pushing their way in. This included the door through which we had entered, where masses of people were now streaming into the stairwell. The fat man pointed at his watch again and gestured to us to come along. Then, elbowing his way through the tight-packed bodies, he disappeared from view.

I took Ingrid's hand. 'Come on, we'll follow them.'

We joined the group of people still waiting by the door, who were quick to make room for us. They shouted out excitedly to the people ahead of them, who also stepped aside. This went on until the crowd became too compact for anyone else to make way. With our noses against the backs in front of us, we stepped into the stairwell. We were wedged in, just as we had been fifteen minutes earlier, by noisy, impatient Italian bodies that dragged us along with them, now in the opposite direction.

Despite the mad rush, there were so many of us that we moved slowly down the first flight of stairs. Ingrid and I tried to keep hold of each other's hands as our arms were stretched further and further. All the exuberant yelling and laughter around us made oral communication impossible.

After the second flight of stairs we reached the first landing. To my surprise, the door was wide open, though I was certain it had been closed on the way up. A fairly large portion of the crowd was pushing through it while the others continued down the stairs. There was a slight jam at the point where these two groups split, and we had to stop for a moment. This gave me a chance to peer through the forest of heads and see what was on the other side of the doorway.

'I see a train, Ing! It's our train! I told you so!'

My voice cracked, but didn't reach her. As I tried to extricate myself from the main current and join the smaller one headed for the door, I was able to pull Ingrid along with me.

'Our train's out there! I saw it myself!'

When she looked me in the face, I could see how distressed and exhausted she was.

'But we were much further down just now. Where are all those other people going?'

I tapped on a randomly chosen back. From beneath a full head of dark curls, a woman's face turned to beam at us. I pointed at the doorway where she was headed.

'Treno?'

Her curls bobbed wildly as she nodded. 'Treno, treno!'

Others were listening in on this exchange with amusement. Then I pointed at the people who were continuing down the stairs and gave the young woman a questioning look. The curls bobbed up and down again.

‘Treno!’

Once again, I was poked and tapped from all sides for attention. Around us, several people were gesturing energetically with both hands, one index finger pointed at the open door, the other at the stairs below. This gesturing went on for about fifteen seconds, during which the chaos of explanations coalesced and intensified until it seemed to consist of just one word, resounding through the stairwell in a great chorus:

‘Treno!’ ‘Treno!’ ‘Treno!’

I saw that Ingrid could barely hold back her tears. I had to agree with her that on the way up we had climbed more flights of stairs than the two already behind us.

‘I guess they mean there are two trains on the boat, one here and one below us. Our train must be further down. I think we’d better hurry. Our fifteen minutes must be almost up.’

I pulled her back into the downward current, which had thinned out by this time. We were probably among the last passengers to return to the train. There was more room now, and people were moving faster, some of them running and pushing past the others. The camaraderie of a moment ago had evaporated completely. Everyone seemed intent on getting back to the trains as quickly as possible. I could tell from Ingrid’s limp, twitching hand that she was crying.

We arrived at the next landing. Here too, travellers were passing through an open door. But not all of them: a small group was tearing even further down the stairs in frantic haste. I looked through the door and saw carriage after carriage, not one behind the other, but next to each other, it seemed.

‘This is where we came from, right? Or was it further down? Do you remember, Ing...?’

I tried to sound casual and mildly amused, as if our own absent-mindedness had landed us in a humorous predicament, but I could hear the panic in my own voice. Ingrid’s tears were still flowing. Her head swayed back and forth in bitter denial of any hope of rescue, as she kept muttering the same, almost inaudible words, ‘We’ve lost everything... We’ve lost everything...’

Driven by an urge to do something, anything, I pulled her down the stairs after me. There was no one to block our way now. All of a sudden, we seemed to be the last two people left on the stairs. When we reached the next landing, we charged through the open door and straight into the buffers of two adjacent carriages. Where I thought

there had been an opening fifteen minutes earlier, the carriages were now coupled. The connection between the two was covered with a large hood of heavy pleated rubber. With Ingrid in tow like a piece of luggage, I started down the narrow pathway between the train and the side of the ship. I called out and waved to the people in the windows above us, but nobody could see us. We were too far down and too close to the train. I was banging my left fist against the green body of the vehicle as we ran, but the faint sound was swallowed up by the deep roar filling the entire rail yard. I tried to tell myself that the throbbing engine noise above our heads was coming from the boat itself, but it was clearly a different sound, a very familiar one, and the echo made it seem to be coming from many directions.

‘Oh Christ, they’ve already started the locomotive!’

Since there didn’t seem to be an opening anywhere, we had to run all the way to the end of the final carriage. By turning sideways, we could squeeze through the tiny gap between the back of the train and the side of the ship. From behind the carriage, we stepped into a wider space just in front of the entrance ramp, which was in the upright position. And here, looking from left to right, I realized we had to abandon all hope of ever finding our carriage and luggage on our own.

Next to the train on which I had been pounding were two others just like it. All three were so long that their front ends were out of sight.

‘The whole fucking boat is full of trains!’ Ingrid shouted. ‘Upstairs, downstairs, next to each other . . . trains everywhere! It’s crazy! What the hell are we supposed to do now?’

‘Run to the front and keep them from pulling out! We’ll get out in front of them and make them stop!’

I took her hand again and dragged her down the path between the first and the second train. There was a little more room here, enough for the people in the windows on both sides to see us going by. As we stumbled over fixtures sticking out of the metal floor, I kept looking up, trying to make eye contact. Through every window we passed, I saw silent-film actors rehearsing the same reaction of utter surprise and shock. I hoped that the desperate looks on our faces would prompt someone to alert the train crew, so that they wouldn’t go off without us.

We were nearing the locomotives, which were running at full power and ready to lurch into motion any second. In the open space in front of them, I saw men at work here and there, turning dials and signalling to engineers through their narrow windows. As we stepped out from between the two trains, one of the men saw us. His squinted eyes and the violent motion of his jaws made it clear he was shouting at the top of his voice, but no sound reached us through the noise of the trains. Bringing together his fingers and thumb, he raised and lowered his right hand in long,

dramatic arcs in front of his chest, asking what in God's name we were doing on the tracks, right in front of three roaring locomotives that could surge forward at any moment and crush us to death. Ingrid was staring, open-mouthed, at a point directly in front of us. Whirling around, I saw that the huge exit ramp was slowly descending and would soon be fully horizontal. Like a cinema screen, the vast rectangular opening revealed the Sicilian landscape in the glow of dawn: dark ranges of hills, scattered lights, and tracks with cables above them dwindling into the distance.

'They're pulling out! We've lost everything!'

Somebody shook my arm. Behind us, sweat pouring down his face, was the soldier from the nun's compartment. Grinning away the panic in his eyes, he made the same questioning gesture with his fingertips pressed together and beckoned us to come with him, quickly. Stumbling over the bumps in the floor and over each other, we ran after him, down the path between the third train and the side of the ship. After about fifty feet, he pulled us through a door and back into the stairwell. He flew up the stairs and we followed, gasping for air. Two flights up, we stepped through another door and found ourselves on a different deck, standing in front of the outermost train. Though I tried to dismiss it as an illusion brought on by exhaustion, in fact there was no denying that the train was already, very slowly, moving. We raced to the end of the last carriage, clambered after the soldier onto a path between two trains, ran on, blindly following, and before we knew it, were being lifted from the deck and through an open door that slammed shut behind us. Italians swarmed around us, loudly admonishing us in tones of concern and relief. From all sides the now-familiar finger gesture rained down on us like some kind of exorcism.

Our soldier cleared a way through the commotion, pulling us after him into the corridor. There, hands clasped to her mouth, was the nun, with our backpacks next to her. Letting out cries of sympathy, she gathered our shivering, dripping forms into her arms. From the rumble beneath our feet and the jolts that threatened to knock us over, I concluded – nose pressed against the nun's rough habit – that we were rolling down the ramp, leaving the ferry behind, and arriving on the island of our destination.