



www.visionsofthecity.com

COMING OF THE PARIS METRO

Penny Howson

*Begun in 1898, Line 1 of the Paris Metro opened in 1900 as part of France's Exposition Universelle. Running between Porte Maillot and Porte de Vincennes it connected the various sites of the World Fair. This original line followed a route under what was known as the 'monument axis' from the Concorde up to Etoile and, eventually, as far as La Defense, when, in November 1936, Porte Maillot station was rebuilt in order to allow a further extension to the west. In this passage from her delightful memoirs, *The Pope, My Brother and I*, Penny Howson tells how the coming of the Metro affected life inside her home.*

We did not go to sleep and something did happen though I had nothing to do with it. Before Jean-Paul could leave my bed a big black something hit us with a terrible crash. Flattened to the mattress, we lay there too stunned to be frightened at first. My head hurt. We were in complete darkness. We were buried alive under something heavy.

I shrieked and Jean-Paul took his cue and joined me. Chairs scraped below on the terrace, a door slammed, there was a pounding of feet on the stairs and excited voices burst into the room. "What on earth? What was that noise? I can't see the children. Turn on the light, somebody."

Then exclamations of surprise. "Mon Dieu, how did it happen?" Then Mother's voice: "Stop! Stop that yelling. It's all right. We'll help you!"

Jean-Paul and I were still flat on our backs with something musty pressing down on our nostrils. We changed from shrieks to gulping sobs.

"Here, Miss Monday. Don't stand there like the Rock of Gibraltar," Maman's voice commanded. "Help me lift this off." Then, to us, "All right, I think you're all right."

Tozy, my sixteen-year-old sister, yelled over the balcony in a voice quivering with excitement, "Papa, Papa, call an ambulance. I can't see any blood yet, but they

must have a concussion at least. That big picture of yours fell on them!" Then Maman and Miss Monday lifted the black weight that pinned us like two moths to the bed.

We sat up, pale but unhurt, except for a bump on Jean-Paul's forehead and a cut on my lower lip. Maman pressed a cool washcloth to Jean-Paul's face and scrutinized my cut. "It's all right, nothing at all really. You were lucky. Tozy, will you stop being Sarah Bernhardt? You are going to be the one hurt, hanging over the balcony."

Tozy stepped away from the window. "For once I thought something really interesting had happened, and not one drop of blood. You," she said to me accusingly, "never do anything right."

Maman called down to Papa in a sobering voice. "Don't worry, Paul, they're not hurt, just scared."

Papa replied, "Oh, that's good, that's good, but tell me the worst. Did their heads pierce the canvas? I'm coming up to see for myself and I'll bring some port; best thing for scares and shocks of all kinds. In the meantime, you women, don't touch that picture."

Papa brought the wine on a tray in a crystal decanter with one large glass and two silver egg cups and handed the whole thing to Miss Monday who looked disapproving; strong tea was her remedy for anything.

"Sir," she said as if she had swallowed an umbrella, "this painting is hardly suitable for a nursery; I told you so, if you recall."

"Yes, Paul, if you'll recall I also told you so," Maman chimed in. "It's much too big for the room and your wire must have been too thin."

"Not suitable, nonsense, since when has a genuine, if unsigned, Fragonard not been suitable anywhere? Just wish I had room to hang it in my study. Look at that beautiful translucent flesh, that thigh."

I agreed with Papa and so did Jean-Paul. It was a nice painting and it told a story. The huge eight-by-ten-foot canvas depicted a fat, pink and pretty lady as she sat on a mossy bank testing with her feet the temperature of what appeared to be a

river on a pond. The folds of an old damask bedspread made her barely decent. With one hand she cupped her small breast, with the other high above her head she held a bunch of grapes. She was not alone by her pool and you could tell she knew it by the pleased smile at the corner of her mouth. Behind her, in a clump of marsh reeds, she had sensed the presence of the creature with the pointed ears and horns, who seemed ready to pounce on her. Jean-Paul and I often imagined what would happen when he did. "He's after those grapes," Jean-Paul deduced. Somehow I thought the satyr might want the old bedspread.

Papa had been inspecting his picture closely, and satisfied it was unharmed, pulled the painting away from the wall. "The wire didn't break," he said, "I don't know what could have done it." Then he clapped a hand to his forehead. "Nom de Dieu! Les vaches! that's it. It's that damn metro train. I knew it." He lit a cigarette from the stub he already held, took a long quivering breath and exhaled a billowing cloud of smoke that completely hid his face and shoulder from view. Then, looking like Zeus on Olympus, he began to pace the floor with hands clasped behind his back.

Some weeks before, the subway had been extended from the Arc de Triomphe to the gate of La Defense, all along the wide Avenue de Neuilly that ran at the back of our house. This had been hailed as progress by all members of the family. Mother and my sister loved it. Just think, now one could get to the Printemps, their favorite department store, in ten minutes. The maids loved it-they could go to the cinema on their afternoon off and be back before dark; and we children loved it because the underpass had a fascinatingly repulsive stench and an echo that bounced three times. But Papa didn't love it at all. He said it would ruin our Bois de Boulogne and he added he had no intention of ever using it.

The trains brought crowds to the park just as Papa feared.

Every warm Sunday since its opening, the invading hordes ascended the stairs, blinking in the sudden light, armed with a grim determination to have a good time and sword-thin loaves of bread, sausages and wine bottles in fish-net shopping bags.

The men stripped down to their undershirts, the women rolled down their cotton stockings, the children used the bushes for informal pissotieres, and everybody set up house-keeping for the day. They played soccer, ate, drank wine, then snored spread-eagled in the grass with handkerchiefs over their faces. They enjoyed them-

selves hugely and left greasy papers and empty bottles in their wake to prove it.

Now, as Papa faced the silent and gathered household, his eyes were glazed with concentration while he paced to and fro, hands behind his back. Papa was composing a letter. "Your Honor," he roared, "Non, just plain Monsieur le Maire: Three times I have written your office and have yet to get an answer. Tonight your confounded metro nearly killed my two children and hurled a most valuable painting to the ground. Paragraph," he said, pirouetting on the heel of his thin-soled English shoe. "The time for words is past to defend my rights to the barricades. . . ."

I really did not listen but I relaxed and enjoyed the rest of the show. Such an outburst was not unusual and as long as Papa ranted and raved, there was nothing to worry about; however, when he simmered with well-contained rage—those were the times when I quaked with fear. A perfect example of this had taken place the day the first metro ran under our house.

We were finishing lunch when a deep rumble was heard, something like an approaching ocean breaker, which became louder and quickly ebbed away. We all sat there motionless, then turned around when the crystal chandelier in the drawing room tinkled and sang like a pretty Chinese wind chime.

Father rolled his napkin into its silver ring (something he had never, never done before) stubbed out his cigarette and announced between clenched teeth, "I'm going to the cellar to wait for the next train."

Under the pretext of homework I excused myself, ran out and caught up with Papa going down the cellar stairs. Down I went into the very bowels of the earth, with Orpheus leading the way and only the faint glow of the furnace fire shining through two evil slitty eyes in the boiler door to light a path. To get to the wine cellars, you had to walk right through that furnace room into the very mouth of Hell. I would not have gone down there alone even for the best game of hide-and-seek, and I held on to Papa's coat for the rest of the way through a maze of corridors until we reached a big wooden door. From his key chain Papa took the smallest key and turned it easily in the well-oiled delicate lock. The door opened with a rich muted sound, like a bank vault. A 25-watt bulb hung from the high vaulted ceiling, barely lighting the great square room with its racks upon racks of wine bottles. It was an ideal cellar with a constant temperature of 55 degrees, and one of the reasons Papa had bought the house. It was a tranquil and orderly place, with labels and sections for each wine, so that Papa didn't really need any light but

knew where each precious bottle was and never trusted anyone but himself to fetch une grande bouteille.

Now Papa walked slowly around the big room, his feet crunching on the fine gravel that covered the floor. Twice he struck a match to light a particularly dark corner and peered at the rows of prone, dusty bottles, with the loving intentness of a mother checking on her slumbering brood. I followed close behind him, reading the labels as I went. "Batard Montrachet," "Chateau Saint Julien," "Clos St. Denis," "La Chapelle," "Saint Emilion," "Nuits St. George." All of a sudden it struck me what an active part the clergy took in the wine industry, and I was even more impressed when I read "Chateauneuf-du Pape." Mon Dieu!

Even the Pope was busy squeezing grapes. The church had practically cornered the market and I was ready to ask Papa about this cartel when he held up a bottle for me to admire. "Clos Vougeot, such a fine wine they give the vineyards military honors whenever troops happen to march by. Did you know that?" He put the bottle down and took up another one. "1923, a great year for most wines, especially burgundy; here is a great Clos Vougeot. You were born in a great wine year you know; you should be proud." He looked at me over the rim of his tortoiseshell glasses to see if I were proud. I smiled coquettishly. I was proud, proud and happy too, because Papa was never vague about my birthday as he often was with his other offspring. I was the second daughter when he had hoped for a son but I had redeemed myself in his eyes by being born in such a great year.

"These bottles should be about ready when you reach fifteen," he said, "and if I can get you a good man, when you are nineteen or twenty, we will drink this Clos Vougeot Blanc at your wedding and it will be an occasion you'll never forget."

Just as he finished talking we heard a faint rumble. The metro train was approaching. Strangely enough, the noise seemed less down here in the depth of the cellar, but as it faded away the steel racks that cradled the wine began to hum and vibrate like so many tuning forks.

Papa stood staring straight ahead, holding tight to one of the wine racks as if it were a subway strap. He stood perfectly still and didn't say a word for what seemed to me a long, long while. Then he did speak. He called the Lord's name in vain - three times-in crescendo. I put my index fingers in my ears since I wasn't supposed to hear such sinful swearing. Swearing seemed to relieve him greatly and bring him out of his trance. He took a fine linen handkerchief out of his breast pocket and wiped his forehead and his hands. "Well, ma cocotte, it's only a matter of time

for your Clos Vougeot. It is doomed and so are all the finest heavy wines in my cellar. Every time that damn metro rumbles by, it decants one more liter. We won't drink any Clos Vougeot for your wedding unless we marry you off in the next year or so." He put his handkerchief back in his pocket and walked to the door.

Papa was so calm in the face of this tragedy, I was dumb-founded. He disappeared into his study and that was all I saw of him that day.

From that time on, Papa tried to save his best bottles before they turned sour, sharing them with his friends. It wasn't really fun for him; you should not hurry to drink wine. It was hard on Maman organizing so many dinner parties, and sheer hell for the cook who had to concoct menus with dozens of dishes to set off the wines.

*Penny Howson was born in Paris in 1923, living there until 1939 when she travelled for a week to the USA and ended up not returning to France for ten years. In 1953 after six years in Rio de Janeiro, now married with two children, she settled in New York and began studying at The New School under Kay Boyle. Her book, *The Pope, My Brother and I*, published in 1964, was partly the result of those workshops. Penny currently lives in Portugal where she is working on a book about the country from 1963 through the April 25th Revolution of 1974.*

