

A Thousand Trains Out of Here

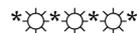
Paul Evanby

Hey: I'm both happy and proud to present a Dutch writer — a compatriot — on this (supposedly) international stage. I think it's healthy that English-language SF is increasingly (even if still somewhat slowly) opening up to non-Anglophone writers. In general, I think greater diversity is a good thing.

Atypically, Paul is not among the modern creed of speculative fiction writers who keep the day job for financial security and write for pleasure or for the soul (or both) in their spare time: no, he *quit* his job to get more writing done. Then — as he told me at the last semi-irregular meet-ups we have with Jurgen Snoeren and Floris Kleijne — his previous employer(s) kept bothering him with requests to work on several IT projects (obviously, his expertise is in demand, and I'm trying to use it for make an iPhone app. of his own story).

No rest for the wicked, as the saying goes.

A saying that is perfectly applicable to "A Thousand Trains Out of Here", where Jaouad — the main character — tries, very hard, to get at least one certain aspect of his overworked (yet fairly exciting) life in order. To use another saying: should you 'be careful what you wish for', or not?



There was always the sudden brightness in their eyes: the lighting up of their faces which was actually, Jaouad thought, a kind of hidden, inverted form of racism. Racism, and thus self-hatred. But they were never aware. How could they be? Moroccan-targeted xenophobia was simply *not done*. Not in the Netherlands: one does not, after all, bite the hand that feeds.

The blonde girl behind the counter smiled at him as he waved his hand in front of the credit reader. No careful positioning of his fingers over the sensor for him: his implants were always first-class, and registered immediately.

The girl noticed it too, of course, and her starry-eyed "Enjoy your lunch" sounded that much more breathless for it.

Jaouad grinned. "Thanks!"

He took his coffee and his bun to a small table on the edge of the canal. Alex had not arrived yet, so he sat watching the boats on the water. The Amsterdam morning was slowly warming up. Tourists and real people (Alex liked to call the tourists 'fake people') were already milling around on the more obvious spots, but this small corner café was run by a pair of ex-geohackers who had managed to keep it off the geogrid for years now, so that it could only be found by those who already knew where it was, and those who were not afraid to walk into a blind spot on their tag maps.

Which meant that Jaouad could enjoy his coffee in relative quiet: a scarce commodity in the heart of one of the Old Immunities, Amsterdam still being favourite among the districts of Edge.

He checked the time. Alex should have been here by now, but there was no sign of him. No message, no com.

Instead, Jaouad's assistant had left a *Call Me* note, the way she did when she knew he would not be in the mood for bad news. He sighed, then commed. "Okay, tell me."

"Jaouad, glad you called," Meryam, sounding professionally hurried. "It's about Orbital's last-minute change in plans, of course."

"Of course. What do they want now?"

"They want you to be present. As in, physically?"

Jaouad sucked in his cheek. "Present, where?" he asked, to buy time.

"LP."

Laâyounne Principal. The head office. They had to be joking. "I'm in Edge. Far from the madding crowd. Virtually unreachable, was the idea, remember?"

"I told them that."

Jaouad waited. She wouldn't have called just to inform him about the unrealistic expectations of a client. No matter how big the client, he would not be in Morocco this afternoon.

Meryam cleared her throat. "They're proposing a reschedule."

He blinked. "For me?"

"For the shareholders. But, yes, you're the excuse."

She would have explained to them how delaying the moment their new power transmitter went online would have wide-ranging consequences. The date and time had been set months ago. Commitments had been made, business plans had been laid – a single hour of delay would mean no end of difficulties. She would have showed them calculations to that effect, conveniently framed in mega-euros of damages and lost revenue, both direct and indirect.

Apparently none of this had changed their minds.

"God!" He muttered. "What's the new target date?"

"Thursday, twelve noon."

"Two whole days. Ridiculous."

“The official line is that they want the main Terrestrial architect present in the same room with Orbital’s head of mission control. Some sort of political statement. Zidoune seems to have convinced the board that a display of unqualified unity is the only way to make the public and the shareholders believe it was necessary to spend all that money. A few millions extra won’t matter, apparently.”

He sighed again. He and Cham Zidoune, the CEO of Laâyoune Solaire, did not see eye-to-eye on a great many things. This was exactly the kind of manoeuvring he had wanted to flee, by taking a vacation just before the big day. It should all have rolled on without him. It was out of his hands anyway, and there was nothing he could do to make it run better.

This, plus the fact that he had not seen Alex for more than a month.

“When do you expect a decision?”

“The board meeting should continue in about, oh ... fifteen minutes,” said Meryam. “Won’t be long after that.”

“Call me when you know more.”

He stared at the empty chair opposite from him. Up here, in the quaint streets and plazas of old Europe, it was hard to imagine the hectic goings-on of real life. But real life had a way of catching up with you, wherever you went.

And *where* was Alex?

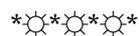
Of course he knew better than to expect his friend to be on time. Alex tended to become ... distracted. For a food programmer, his attitude towards lunch was remarkably cavalier. Jaouad had known him to miss dinner dates entirely, just because he *had* to wait for a particularly interesting strain of mealworm to roll out of the protoprinter.

But half past noon was pushing it.

He called Alex and got no reply. Then he looked up his geotrace, but Alex’s last update showed him to be at Dam Square, just ten minutes ago.

What was he doing at Dam Square?

Jaouad stood up.



By the time he set foot on the tourist-and-pigeon-covered steps surrounding the greyish stone pillar at the centre of Dam Square, Alex’s geotrace had updated to a location more than seven kilometres to the south. Jaouad swore softly. He must have taken the old underground train from Rokin Station.

Jaouad hurried down the escalator and boarded the first southbound train. In the rickety old carriage he sat down amidst a gaggle of tourists. Alex's geotrace was stationary; the image showed a corner of some anonymous skyscraper against a blue, sunny sky.

What was going on? Was it deliberate? Had Alex taken the train when he saw Jaouad's trace leaving the café?

That was unlike him. Alex's sense of humour could verge on the bizarre, like his own, but it did not usually extend to drawn-out practical jokes. He was to the point. If there was something he wanted to tell Jaouad, he would do so outright.

On the other hand, even after years of living together he was still able to surprise Jaouad with an unexpected turn of phrase, a wild plan, a unique point of view. It was one of the many reasons Jaouad had missed him, during the long weeks he'd had to spend in El Aaiún and Casablanca, overseeing the final phase of the project. Had it been up to him, he would have managed the whole thing from his home office on the Keizersgracht, the old Amsterdam canal, as he did all of his projects.

That would also have allowed him to check on the final touches being put on the ecotecture. His assistants were perfectly capable of finishing the job here in Edge, but they did not have the complete overview. And even though he knew that centralised ecotecture was supposed to be a thing of the past, he still saw himself as an artist: an artist who should be able to step back from his canvas to regard the whole painting.

But not, of course, from outside his studio.

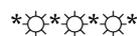
Cham Zidoune, whose executive bio was liberally sprinkled with terms such as 'visionary', 'multi-talented' and 'can-do leadership', had insisted on Jaouad being personally available to the Orbital branch of the joint-venture for the duration of the deployment phase, even though he'd had nothing to do with the design and construction of the geosynchronous power station itself. His work was all ground-based.

Antennas were needed to receive the microwave energy beamed down from the phased arrays of the orbiting solar power plant. Large antennas, covering square kilometres. Square kilometres of area which quaint, densely populated Edge City could not provide. Moreover, existing lines of communication were not to be disturbed. Jaouad Amrani was the architect whose *modular ecoconstructivism* enabled the roofs of his specially designed housing units to configure themselves into conducting elements that could autonomously join their neighbours into a single rectenna large enough for converting microwaves into electricity, while acting as relays for voice traffic and netcom. If architecture by itself was not sufficient to disguise the rectenna elements, optical cloaking technology took care of aesthetic concerns.

None of this was reason for Jaouad to be Saharaside for weeks on end, but Zidoune's 'vision' was essentially nationalistic, centred on the *États-Unis du Maroc et le Sahara Occidental*. As far as he was concerned, El Aaiún was the navel of the world, and everything that was worth doing had to be done in El Aaiún. Jaouad Amrani was just one part of that.

Even if it meant that Jaouad would not see his family. He had thought about inviting Alex over for the duration of the project, but attaining a visa for an unmarried partner was still difficult in Morocco: Rabat had had a persistent problem with juvenile delinquents from the Netherlands, mostly second generation immigrants, which it was only slowly beginning to solve. Moreover, Alex was reluctant to leave his own work unattended for too long.

Two days ago he had finally managed to return to Amsterdam, looking forward to a well-earned holiday, only to find that Alex was even more preoccupied than usual. He had blamed himself, of course, giving in to Zidoune's demands and staying away too long. And now there was a surliness between them which he had hoped to resolve by having lunch together at their favourite café.



As the train drew into South Boulevard Station, Meryam commed again. "That was quick," Jaouad said. He got off the train, walked along the platform and stopped in front of a billboard.

"Well, they pride themselves on being decision makers. I just heard the verdict."

The billboard showed a stretch of unsullied beach with an impossibly blue surf rolling in. The surf looped while the board tried to determine Jaouad's identity. When it came up against his firewall, it started running a generic ad tailored to a Dutch male of his appearance and age bracket: a small, light, lusciously designed and clearly very energy-efficient car sweeping noiselessly through an uninhabited landscape of rough natural beauty. He turned his back to it. "Which is?"

"As expected. The budget allows for three days delay, so they're on the safe side, even." Meryam paused. "I'm sorry."

Jaouad checked Alex's geotrace. He was not surprised to see it had moved even further south, and this time slightly westwards, as well. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to imagine where his friend might be headed, and failed.

He watched the tail lights of the train disappear into the tunnel, accompanied by a frightful screeching of metal against metal. When he could hear himself again, he said: "I'm not going."



He had to assume that Alex was doing all of this by train. If he'd hired a taxi or talked a friend into taking him by car, there was no telling where he might end up.

So Jaouad was following him across Edge's tightly spun web of railway lines. That web was a superposition of historic urban needs and modern ideas about fast and efficient transportation. It meant that there was a roughly horseshoe-shaped bundle of trunk lines running through Edge's Old Immunities, with its closed segment abutting the coast, while the inside of the U-shape was filled with a net of lines criss-crossing between population centres. Had he been able to guess Alex's destination,

he might have told EdgeRail to program him a shortcut. The initial stages of the project had involved lots of touring around the city, scouting for locations, and by now he knew his way around the AIs running the transport system.

As it was, he sat staring out the window at the painfully well-organised Dutch 'countryside', cursing Alex for his continued com silence, and himself for letting it get to him. If this was his friend's intention, he was succeeding admirably. Once this was over, they would have a serious talk.

Someone commed him. He saw who it was, groaned softly, and answered. "Cham."

"Jaouad. Dear boy. What's this I hear about –"

"That's no use, Cham. I'm on holiday, remember? You should try it sometime."

Cham Zidoune's sighs were expressions of world-weariness that would have put a Romantic poet to shame. "Jaouad. Is there anything, *anything* I can do to impress upon you further the importance of this occasion? Let's, let's for the moment forget about Laâyoune Solaire, shall we? This is not about short-term business interests. This is about history. I swear. *History*." His French drew out the word into something which could only have been written with an elegant, elongated Arabic ligature.

"I see," said Jaouad.

"The magnitude of this deal, it's staggering. You are ... we both are ... too young to remember the days when we were dependent on development aid from the North. But make no mistake: they were the alms for the poor, and designed to keep us that way. Did you know I was born in the same year as the States of Morocco, the year we finally unlocked our own oil wealth? Our parents used that wealth wisely, because they'd seen enough examples of African corruption, greed and mismanagement. The North wanted our oil ... oh, how they needed it! But we didn't need to sell it cheaply. We used our new wealth to develop solar. Then we closed the tap, because we, unlike the North, were aware of our responsibility toward the planet." He paused. "And now, it's payback time. Where would Europe be, where would your beloved Edge be without our investments and our technology?"

It was Zidoune's version of the Maghreb Renaissance. In his mind a set of wildly separate events and contingencies was fused into a single stream of inevitability, resulting in the emergence of Morocco as a leading energy supplier. He preferred to overlook the Persian Struggle, which set off a domino effect of popular revolutions throughout the Middle-East, leading the countries of North Africa, which saw the writing on the wall, to scramble for political reform. He never mentioned dissident elements within the Alaouite dynasty itself, foreign-educated princes who were able to modernise the monarchy from within, while keeping radical islamism at bay. Instead, he loved to go on about the spirit of unity which had led the new governments of Morocco and Algeria and the leaders of the Polisario Front to agree to a peace deal: the deal that eventually led to the formation of the dual-state system in which Morocco and Western Sahara were joined in a single national entity, finally allowing their off-shore oil and gas reserves to be exploited. And he had a way of trivialising the role of foreign investors, although he admitted that Applied Indian

Rocket Systems and Tianlong Aerospace had both been instrumental in the development of the low-cost commercial space flight without which Laâyoune Solaire's orbiting power stations would never have been cost-effective.

Jaouad had heard it all before. "I see," he said again. "But Cham, I'm just a humble architect. I really don't think I'm the one to stand next to you, looking important and symbolising history and all that. Also, you're taller than me."

"No worries, Jaouad. We only want you to nod to, shake hands with, and answer a few questions from the Danish environmental attaché."

"Danish?"

"If the Netherlands project is a success, Denmark may want to employ our technology as well. They've already contacted us. This in all confidentiality, you understand."

"But I still don't see —"

"There's a rival bid. From Egypt. Shawqi Something-or-other. Terrestrial solar collectors and heat storage in the desert sand. All proven technology, and all as sexy as last year's com pod. No vision. No synergy." He chuckled. "I swear, dear boy, when those Eurotypes see your designs, they'll beg us to take their money."

"They can talk to me whenever they want," Jaouad persisted. "My office is mapped and tagged. And my designs are published. I *still* don't see why I need to be there in person."

Another of Zidoune's sepulchral sighs. "Alright. I didn't want to tell you this until you were safely down here." He paused. "We think you're in danger."



At Leiden Station he got off the train and sat down on a bench at one end of the platform. The afternoon was beginning to get quite warm and the sun was burning mercilessly. After a while he made his way down to the adjoining park. As he descended the stairway he couldn't help but look over his shoulder to check if someone was coming after him.

Letting them know you're aware of them. How smooth, he thought. How sophisticated.

Zoudine had told him of what he thought the Egyptians were up to. They were quite desperate to win the Danish contract, and they would not hesitate to remove some key players from the competition if they thought it would improve their chances. He had also hinted quite clearly that any future cooperation between Jaouad and Laâyoune Solaire might hinge on Jaouad's presence at the meeting with the Danes.

As he wandered aimlessly under the trees of the small strip of parkland, he found that he wasn't even very worried about himself. Zoudine wanted him in El Aaiún as quickly as possible, but Jaouad kept checking up on Alex's geotrace, which was

creeping steadily further south. It wouldn't take long for him to reach the Old Immunity of Rotterdam, the European transport hub for all of Edge.

Alex had vanished without leaving a message, and it was clear now that he was unable to tell anyone where he was going, although as long as his trace updated he could be followed.

But once in Rotterdam, they could take him anywhere.



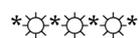
He had first met Alex van Heesteren while working as an assistant at an architectural firm in Tangier. Alex was in town for a friend's wedding, a wedding which Jaouad happened to attend as well. Halfway during the afternoon he was already thoroughly annoyed by the tall, fair-skinned European who kept turning up at the food table to deliver short and pointed analyses of the items on it; remarks apparently tailored to get under his skin, since no one else seemed to take notice.

When the tall guy finally complimented the bride on her exquisite caftan and the intricate, swirling pixelations of the animated *beberiska* designs on her hands – the latest fad to sweep the Tangier marriage industry – Jaouad turned away just a bit too soon, to avoid showing his irritation.

Only to run into him again on his way to the garden. But this time there was a shy, boyish smile on Alex's face as he half blocked Jaouad's path, a cup of mint-scented tea held out to him as an offering. "Still haven't noticed me?"

Jaouad stared at him, dumbfounded, captivated by his shocking blue eyes for so long that the shy smile changed into uncertainty and the beginnings of a "Sorry, my mistake." But then the groom brushed past, sized up the situation with surgical accuracy, and sweetly pointed out that the garden had enough dark corners for everyone: no need to block the doorway.

In later years, Tangier became a special place for both of them. Soon after they met, Jaouad relocated to Edge and started his own business, Amrani Ecotecture. But even though they both visited Tangier separately on several occasions, they never went back together. Always for perfectly valid reasons, but never willing to admit that they were both afraid to spoil the memory – which in turn allowed the place to take on even more of a mystical gloss.



Alex's trace remained stationary in the neighbourhood of Edge Grand Central.

Where were they taking him, and what were they waiting for? They must know that his geotrace was still active.

On impulse, Jaouad boarded the next train for Rotterdam. He did not know what he was going to do, but he could not just sit waiting for events to catch up with him.

As the train pulled out of the station, Meryam called. "What did you tell Zidoune?"

"I don't know," he said slowly, distracted. Then he shook his head. "Sorry. I mean, I don't know yet. I told him I'd get back to him."

"Get back to me too, okay? I'll need to have someone arrange your ticket." She paused. "Are you alright?"

"I guess." He forced himself to sound upbeat. "No worse than anyone who finds his vacation cancelled at a day's notice, I imagine."

"Tell me about it, boss. Zidoune ... sometimes you get the feeling he actually *lives* on one of his damned satellites."

Jaouad mumbled something and signed off. He was immediately commed again, by someone whose sig he didn't recognise. "Amrani speaking."

"Good afternoon, mister Amrani," a businesslike female voice said. "My name is Salihah-Nabirye Hassan. I represent Shawqi Sunflower Limited. We are a Cairo-based research firm specialising in creative solutions for energy supply, storage and delivery. I hope I'm not inconveniencing you, but I was wondering if it would be possible for us to meet on short notice." She waited.

Jaouad unclenched his jaw. "To meet? As in, physically?"

"If it suits you, of course. I am currently in Edge. We would like to discuss a ... a business proposal."



The rendezvous was at the outskirts of the Zoetermeer district. The Egyptians had chosen one of his own developments for their meeting: a residential area consisting mainly of houses with superstructures customised for microwave reception. The usual haphazard arrays of rusty solar collectors and photovoltaic panelling had been replaced by a variety of straight and curved elements in carefully selected shades, often cantilevered and sometimes crossing the street to connect with neighbouring houses. Some of the elements had small servo units built in, which imperceptibly rotated them or moved them back and forth. In a way it looked like a forest.

The place was fitting, he supposed, for what they had in mind, although he could not guess what that might be. Perhaps he was walking into a trap; but if so, Alex might already be in it. He had to find out.

A smallish woman and two men in crisp North African business suits were waiting for him. His *as-salaam'alaykum* was answered with formal courtesy, but then they got immediately to the point. One of the men opened a large suitcase and produced a contraption which looked like a tilted cylinder with three wheels at the bottom. Two smaller cylinders protruded at right angles from the top edge, and several other wiry attachments made the knee-high mechanism resemble something from a 20th-century children's book on robots.

He put the thing down on the street and positioned it so that it straddled the edge of the shadow of one of the slowly moving roof elements. Then he swiped his finger along the bottom edge, and stepped back.

The cylinder began to move. It rolled slowly along the sharp, curved edge of the shadowed area on the pavement, carefully keeping one half in the sun and the other in shadow.

“You see?” Ms. Hassan said. “Your kinetic roof sculptures. A stroke of genius to have them follow the sun.” She pointed. “That piece of pavement has been baking in the heat all day, while the shadowed area hasn’t warmed up very much since this morning. The temperature differential is enough to drive a small Stirling engine. Gamal?”

The other man tapped his com pod rapidly. The mechanism trundled to a standstill.

And the wall behind it disappeared.

Jaouad was looking at a wide green meadow, with a ditch and a group of cows in the distance. Off to the right he could see the edge of a tulip field. There was even an old, wooden windmill. “What?”

Then he noticed irregularities in his vision. He blinked, and suddenly it became obvious that the scene was projected onto the wall.

“Meet ShadeBoy. Enough energy to power a laser projection in broad daylight,” said Hassan. “Incidentally, this forms part of our RealityPlus network. The GeoHistory channel, if I’m not mistaken, Gamal?”

“Correct,” the man nodded. “Put ShadeBoy down anywhere you like, and it will turn any flat surface into a window on the past.”

The woman looked at Jaouad. “What do you think?”

He swallowed. “It’s ah ... an interesting use of the circumstances arising from the presence of kinetic ecotecture in the landscape...” he said weakly. Salihah-Nabirye Hassan blinked at him. He closed his mouth, and asked simply: “Why?”

She flashed a quick grin. “You really shouldn’t be asking that question, mister Amrani. Questions like that tend to be answered with ‘why not?’” She gestured up at the customised roofs. “Energy technologies are a dime a dozen, these days. Kites, mills, waves, satellites: the number of new schemes invented to exploit direct or indirect solar or geothermal grows every year, and the growth accelerates as old technologies generate new ones. Few of them ever get realised, of course, but that’s beside the point. Unlike the turn of the century, when people were clutching at straws for a single way out of the mess, we’re now on the fast track. We can take our pick from a multitude of possibilities, a thousand trains out of here. But Shawqi Sunflower is interested in more than the technology. We wish to give meaning to the artifacts which humanity uses to convert that energy. Your work interests us because

And then there was a message. *Main hall entrance platform 35. Red/black. Hurry!*

Quickly Jaouad made his way out of Domestic to the International terminal of Grand Central. Of course, that entrance was adjacent to platform 1, so he ran.

When he passed 30 he started looking out for a tall figure in black trousers and red shirt on the busy concourse. He found two. Neither of them were Alex.

Instead, Alex stood between the two, with a pair of suitcases behind him. Only then did Jaouad realise that his escorts were two of their friends. The left one waved at him.

He came to a halt, looking accusingly at Alex, bridging twenty metres and a day of worrying with a silent glare. People passed them on all sides.

Until Alex came walking towards him, looking him in the eye. They stood facing each other. Finally Alex asked: "Well ... how was lunch?"

"Lunch was ... interesting. If somewhat solitary. Could you perhaps find it in yourself to come up with an explanation?" Then: "You idiot." He punched Alex's shoulder hard.

Alex screwed up his face in pain. He grabbed his shoulder. "Yah. But we'll have to get on the train first." Suddenly he smiled, shyly. "And I have an important question for you. But we really need to get on that train. Let's go." He turned around and started walking.

Jaouad did not move. Their friends were still watching from a distance. "Alex," he said. "There are a thousand trains out of this place. Go *where?* And what are *they* doing here?"

Alex turned around. "They're witnesses. I've asked them to come with us. We'll need them." He pulled something out of his pocket and waved it at Jaouad, who realised it was an actual piece of paper. "Just heard back from the Qadi's Office in Tangier. They can squeeze us in tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning? We have to be in Tangier in the morning? For what, if I may ask?"

Alex walked back to him and gently took hold of his shoulders, pulling him close. Jaouad caught the faint tang of mint on his breath, mixed with — surprise! — aftershave. Alex hardly ever wore aftershave.

His friend looked him in the eye. "Remember Tangier?"

And Jaouad knew the form the important question was going to take. He knew Alex's thoughts well enough to translate them before Alex himself was able to condense them into words. It would be concise, the way everything about Alex was. Jaouad started to smile.

Of course Alex noticed. But he asked the question anyway. "Marry me?"

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[Paul Evanby](#) is a writer by day and a programmer by night. Most of his work has been published in the Netherlands only, in a wide range of Dutch magazines and anthologies. His stories have won the Paul Harland Prize for best Dutch SF on several occasions. In 1995 an English-language collection *Systems of Romance* was published to critical acclaim. In the UK and the US his work has further appeared in, for instance, *Nemonymous*, *Harrington Gay Men's Literary Quarterly* and the themed anthology *The Elastic Book of Numbers*, which won the 2006 British Fantasy Award for Best Anthology. In 2009 his first novel [De Scriptorist](#) appeared from [Mynx](#) (the Netherlands' largest publisher of fantasy and science fiction); his second is scheduled for late 2010.