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Dear Colleague:

Janwillen van de Wetering, the distinguished Dutch writer of mystery novels, spent a year in a remote Zen community in the United States. While he hitchhiked across this country, he was struck by many things, including the casual way that young women handled trucks and large automobiles. He complimented one such young female driver (who picked him up on the road), to which she replied, "You are in America. We learn to drive these wagons when we are still kids." The remark prompted the Dutchman to reminisce.

I thought of the last days of the war. I was in Rotterdam, a fourteen-year-old boy watching a house in our street. There were SS officers in the house and they refused to surrender... Some twenty Dutch soldiers had made an attempt at taking the house. Two of them were dead, and a few wounded. The street was very quiet.

And then the Americans came. A tank rumbled past, followed by another. Their guns blazed a few times. The house fell apart. When the smoke cleared, an SS officer staggered out of the burning ruin and collapsed in the street. The boy who came out of the tank was the first American I ever saw. I jumped up and down and waved at him. He raised his tommy gun but lowered it again when he saw that I was a civilian. I was impressed. A boy, four or five years older than me but capable of driving a tank, of killing the all-powerful SS with a casual button-touch.

"You are a very advanced people," I now said to the slight girl at the wheel of this large car.

She raised an eyebrow, "You're having me on," she said. (A Glimpse of Nothingness: London, 1975, pp. 71-72).

A couple of comments. First, traditional American males are likely to read the above with a nostalgic and somewhat guilty sense of pride. By contrast, feminist readers, while they may grant courage to the American soldier, will probably also see the incident as characteristic male boastfulness: the cannon blast is just the sort of thing males like to do, hence the sorrowful story of humankind. The second comment: the lesson of World War II led us to arrogant confidence and the tragedy of Vietnam; the lesson of Vietnam leads us now to hope that talk alone will persuade aggressors to desist and even withdraw. Is this a case of Santayana turned on his head, "Those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it"? How are we to learn from history?

Best wishes,

*J. L.*