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The Burial

LAUREN SMITH

*I*t fell, in slow motion, fast and heavy, with a clumsy, uneven splash into the dirty water. It ripped my jacket from where it had caught when I lifted it to flip it over the railing. The sun caught glimpses of it before it was entirely engulfed by the dark liquid, the ripples disturbing the perfect reflections of the buildings and sky and me. I felt no great loss, only an urgency to get rid of the thing, as if burying it would offer some sort of closure; perhaps it would bury this guilt (but not guilt, exactly) that I was feeling. No, not guilt, but a restlessness that pricked my mind everyday, a minor annoyance. And that annoyance was finally gone; I had tipped it over the railing and the water had swallowed it up.

There are quiet places here. No matter what the tourists think, Amsterdam is more than just a hot spot for “legal” drugs and prostitution. There’s much more to life here than making a quick stop into a dark, sweetsmoke-filled coffee shop or an even quicker stop among the red lights while window-shopping. Of course, this city has its share of pollution and drug problems, its own dark underbelly. But then, so does every large city. But life here is just like life anywhere else, for the most part.

A person can feel quite safe here, even at night—or maybe that “safe” feeling is just a case of naïveté. Oh sure, you hear all the rumors (many true, I’m sure) of rapes and pickpockets, but you don’t hear of drive-by shootings and of the local mini-mart being held up by a guy with a gun. Hell, once I had to ask my friend Lee (an *echt nederlander*) if the police even carry guns. They do.

I felt safe that night (or maybe I just refused to feel afraid), wandering around the city at four in the morning. Not by choice, okay? But of circumstances out of my control; actually, I might have been able to control them if I hadn’t been such an idiot, and hadn’t left my bike key on the shelf at home. That little brain-fart is what actually set off that night’s events.

Earlier that evening I had met some friends at a small café on the corner of a street downtown. This wasn’t a Coffeeshop where you perhaps buy a cup

of coffee and a brownie a la carte (if you know what I mean). No, this was a normal café where the drug of choice was alcohol, an old building where people met to have a few drinks and talk and laugh. It was the kind of place the Dutch would call gezellig; the atmosphere was cozy, and on a chilly winter night, the lights glowing from the inside would look mighty inviting to any passerby.

All was good. We had our table back in the corner and everyone had a drink of choice. Cigarettes were lit and glowing, the smoke floating about our heads. The topic of conversation had turned to swearing in Dutch. Somehow, swearing seems much more fun in another language. You feel as if you've really gotten away with something, and back home, where no one understands it, they just smile and say "Oh, that sounds so neat! What's it mean," to which you reply "flower" or "have a nice day" or something like that.

Anyway, our Dutch friends, Lee and Anouk, were helping Claire, Nick, Robbie, and I fine-tune our Dutch cuss-words. We were having a riot of a time, and I'm sure the alcohol was making our endeavors that much more amusing. Simple things amuse simple minds, to use an old cliché. I guess it's true, because we were amused as hell.

We intellectual Americans had just expanded our vocabularies to include klootzak and trut, when I glanced down at my watch and decided it was time to head home.

"Hey, guys, it's almost three. I think I'll start back now."

After a bit more talking and one more drink, (since "now" always seems to mean "in a little while") everyone else started gathering up jackets and purses, gulping down the last swigs of beer. We headed outside, the air fresh and cool after the smoky air of the café. People's keys jangled as they found the one for their bikes. I, however, had decided to walk down along the canal before starting the trek home.

"Aren't you coming Norma?" asked Claire.

"Nah. Not yet anyway. I'm just going to take a walk. You know, enjoy the night air."

"But you're the one who wanted to leave. Besides, that's not such a good idea."

"Yeah, not so much," chimed in Nick in that under-your-skin sarcastic way he has of talking sometimes.

"Guys, I'll be fine. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Fine. Okay, see you sometime tomorrow."

"Yeah. Hey, don't run into anyone on your way home," I said, laughing as Jake struggled to get on his bike. He barely missed running into one of the knee-high poles lining the street as he swerved away, followed by the others.

After everyone had gone, I wandered over to one of the benches along the canal outside the café. Yeah, I know it probably wasn't the brightest thing in the world to do: a woman by herself on the streets of Amsterdam at (by now) three-thirty in the morning. But I was drawn by the stillness. Usually

the streets were filled with people on bikes, ringing their bells at pedestrians as warnings to get out of the way, the grunts and groans and clangs of buses and trams making their repetitive trips through the city. But now it was quiet. It was well into spring, and the air was cool, but not cold, and I could even catch a whiff, every now and then, of the blossoms filling the trees; let me tell you, that occasional whiff was a welcome smell over the ever-present odor of dog-shit. If there's one complaint I have about that city, it's that people let their dogs pop a squat anywhere, and it's liable to end up on the bottom of your shoe. I once dog sat for a friend in a Pennsylvania suburb and thought it was ridiculous and disgusting that I had to pick up after the otherwise lovable lab, a plastic shopping bag covering my hand, on our daily walks. Now I see why it's not such a bad idea.

After awhile, though, the quiet started to get to me. You know how every little sound is magnified when you're alone, even if it's all in your head? I kept imagining that I heard someone sneaking up behind me, some crazy axe murderer, or some guy with a baseball bat (actually, in this country, people are more likely to be bludgeoned to death by a soccer ball. . . but I digress). So I got up, fished around in my bag for my key before remembering that I didn't have it with me, shrugged my shoulders and headed back to the bike rack. There were still a few bikes locked up in front of the café, but I had to look twice, because mine was not among them.

Shit. Some bastard had stolen my bike. And why shouldn't he have? Who can resist an unlocked, free bicycle? And now what was I supposed to do? I was angry at whoever had taken off with my means of transportation, but even angrier with myself for having forgotten my key and stupidly thinking no one would take my bike. "You're such an idiot!" I said to no one because everyone else had gone home on their bikes. I thought of how stupid I had been to stay behind before making sure my bike was still there. That, and it was just plain stupid to stay behind by myself in the first place.

So I started walking. What else was there to do? The trams weren't running anymore and I'd have to wait another hour for a night bus. I groaned, thinking of how long of a walk it was from downtown to where I lived. By now it was nearly four in the morning, I was tired, I smelled like stale cigarettes, and I was just getting angrier by the minute, not to mention there was a knot of panic forming right behind my eyes.

"Okay, calm down. I should try to enjoy this walk, right? I mean, the weather is good, it's warm enough. Stop being so uptight and just enjoy the moment."

That was easier said than done, but once I started walking, the self-pity I had plunged myself into slowly started to drip off. I mean, this was an adventure, sort of, and it's something I could at least tell my friends for a good story. And, oh, would they laugh. I could just picture it.

Twenty minutes into my early morning stroll, a few deserted blocks after

Leidseplein, the square where the more trendy and happening bars and restaurants were, I noticed a guy standing off to my left against the bus stop. My pulse quickened a bit at the sight of him: his clothes were pretty worn and he wore an old stocking cap that had seen better days. I looked away, picked up my pace a little, and continued on my way. No big deal. He was probably just waiting for the next bus. "Happy waiting," I thought. But I guess I hadn't looked away fast enough because he called out to me.

"Warrom ben je lopen? He'? Hep je geen fiets?"

I tried to ignore him, but he kept talking.

"Ben je verloren? Ik kan je helpen."

"Sorry, don't speak Dutch," I said, hoping this would send him on his way. But like most Dutch people, he knew English.

"Oh, you are American. Dat is good. I can speak a little English."

Idiot, I thought to myself, though not for the last time. You know that the entire Dutch population can speak English. Why didn't you pay attention in Spanish class? Come on, please make this guy leave me alone.

"Where are you walking so late in the night? Wouldn't it be better if you had an bike?"

Now he sort of had my attention. I would love to have a bike right now; it would cut my forty-five minute walk to a fifteen minute ride. I turned to look at him and saw he was balancing an old bike with one hand, absent-mindedly wheeling it back and forth. He started walking toward me and stopped under a streetlight. I noticed the circles under his eyes and that his cheeks were gray and sunken in, his cheekbones looking as if they might tear through the taut skin. I also noticed a small, hopeful, almost ravenous glimmer in his eyes. This guy was a junkie, no doubt about it, and he had probably stolen the bike (much as someone had stolen mine) which he'd sell to me for a pretty low price. But should I buy the bike? My feet were already tired, and I hated to think of the money I would have to spend to buy a bike in a shop. But at the same time, I knew he'd just use what little money I could give him and get a fix, a hit of heroin to shoot up his arm and relieve that hungry look in his eyes.

"Mmm, no thanks. Gotta go." I know it seems as if I was trying to play Hero: "Hey, look at me, pat me on the back, I just saved someone's life." But it wasn't like that; believe me, I'm no Hero. He'd surely find the money somewhere else. Besides, who knows what any kind of prolonged conversation with this guy would lead to? I turned, hoping to be on my merry way. But he just wasn't going to give up so easily.

"Okay, bitch." His voice had grown cold and its chill deadened any noise that might have been around. All I could hear was my own breathing and him staring, piercing me, with his gaze. Now it was just him and me, standing on black nothing; the buildings and the stillness of the early morning, even the streetlights, had suddenly zoomed out, as if I was looking at them through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. It was as if someone had pushed me

underwater and all I could hear was water rushing by. "Fucking American, don't even know how to ride de bike, anyway."

His voice was rising, turning into a high-pitched frenzy. I could hear the spittle gathering at the corners of his mouth, could see his enraged eyes popping from their sockets, though I didn't turn to look at him. I ducked my head down, eyes to the ground, and started walking, trying to block everything out except getting home. I could feel my cheeks burning, like they do when I'm embarrassed. Only this time it was fear that brought the heat, pricking the skin underneath my jacket collar and underneath my arms. I had opened myself up to a possible dangerous situation, and now my heart was racing and it pumped the sound of rushing blood into my ears.

"Walk away! I need de money, but you just walk away!" He was screaming now, his voice bouncing off the buildings, echoing through the empty street. I shoved my hands in my pockets and swallowed hard; then I heard his footsteps, quick behind me, the bike rattling along beside him. I jumped, just like I used to do when playing hide and seek in the basement when his hand grabbed the back of my jacket, jerking me around. Shit shit shit shit shit! No this can't be happening. Oh God, please let me go home. I could feel the panic rising in my throat, constricting it, spreading from my eyes and into my shaking hands, which were gripped into sweaty fists inside my jacket pockets.

Both his hands gripped my shoulder, squeezing hard, and the bike crashed to the ground. I couldn't move, and I was choking, trying to hold back frightened sobs as his fingernails seemed to puncture the light nylon material and dig into my skin.

"Please buy dis bike," he whispered, his face close to my ear. The sudden rage in his voice had diminished, and it was now hoarse and desperate. I could smell his breath, warm and stinking of too many missed meals, like an empty milk container. I glanced at him and noticed tears of desperation streaming down his face. His nose was running, the stream flowing down over his lips, but he didn't seem to notice. I can honestly say I felt pity for him, and it's not something I'm proud of. Pity is not the same as sympathy. Pity makes you set yourself above someone, and deep down inside you're glad you're not that person.

"Okay," I whispered. It was barely a whisper, and my whole body was tense... talk about invasion of personal space. "But I only have twenty guilders, I swear."

His grip loosened and he stepped away, relief (and could it be regret?) etching over the ravenous look of his face. "Dat is good." He picked up the bike that had fallen to the ground in his panic, but instead of handing it to me right away, I saw him hesitate. He kept looking from the bike to me, as if deciding whether or not I was worthy to take it. He must have decided I was, because finally he handed me the bike. It was old, rusty and dented, the fenders loose and wobbly, but it would get me home.

"Here's your money," I said, avoiding his eyes.

He grabbed it from my hand, stuffed it into his pocket, and hurried away. I watched him go, his arms hanging at his sides, his head down, and couldn't believe I had just paid for the fix I thought he was rushing away to get. I had no idea what else I could have done, though. I pushed any thoughts of what he could have done to me out of my head, got on my bike, and pedaled like mad. Any peacefulness I had felt earlier was gone. The bike rattled and clanged through the dark, empty streets, and when I finally did arrive at my door, I was sweating and out of breath, glad to be home.

* * * * *

Who could say whatever became of that junkie? So animal-like in his "self-preservation", so human in his craving. There must be a name out there that fits that hollow-cheeked man, a name that would put something human back in those empty, ravenous eyes. But he doesn't have a name, just a crumpled twenty-guilder note and a fresh dose to fill his veins.

That night's incident has passed, and now, in the daylight, cushioned by weeks, it has faded in my mind. The lamp in the corner of the room is no longer the evil bogeyman it had been in the dark. There's nothing I can do about what happened, and I can get on with everyday business. And the bike works fine. I'm going to get rid of it, though. It doesn't haunt me, bringing back unpleasant memories, it doesn't talk to me in my dreams; it's nothing that weird or mysterious. I just don't want to hold on to it anymore. In a way, that bike was bought with blood money. I'm not trying to come across as over dramatic or heavily traumatized. All I know is I can't hold onto it any longer.

The canal seems as good a place as any to bury the bike, to let it go. I'll just casually drop it over the side, watch as it collides with the water, as it sinks beneath the glittery surface. And I won't give it a second thought.