

From a Trolley Stop in Amsterdam

by Geoffrey Fox

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In a doorstool on a Sarphatistraat, beyond the curve of the Prinsengracht and two short blocks from the Amstel, a young man bellows. There are few strollers to startle on this quiet street at a little past seven on a Saturday evening. Only a couple of middle aged tourists, standing at the trolley stop across the way, jerk their heads up from a map and stare. The May sun is still high and the air is warm — luckily, because the young man crouching in the doorway has torn off half his clothes.

He bellows again, hoarse invective filled with harsh gutturals. His dark, handsome face contorts, his thick black hair waves up and down behind his head, his brown eyes glisten, his dark burnished shoulders tremble, his broad hairless chest heaves, his fists clench and punch the air with each anguished, angry burst.

The tourist at the trolley stop studies the scene. Before the dark young man stands a tall, pale blonde woman, pink and white, stiff and still. She is as young as he, no more than twenty-three. She holds a white shirt, folded against her breast. He pauses and lowers his dark head, panting, and she softly, softly speaks. But she has barely begun when he reacts with another violent spasm, roaring and kicking off his shoes across the sidewalk toward her. Then, without rising, and shouting all the while, he wriggles furiously out of his dark slacks and hurls them at her. The menace in his voice and gesture is oddly contradicted by his cringing posture and the softness of his missile.

The young woman catches the slacks and, efficiently and deliberately, folds them with the shirt, then stoops to gather his shoes and balance them on the pile. She stands again before him, her face and ears redder now, her head cocked as she looks at him steadily. She tries again to speak, but at the fifth word, he howls again and renews his attack on what remains of his clothing, clutching the leg of his gray cotton shorts and ripping it at the thigh. Quickly she turns her face away. Shoes, slacks and shirt cradled against her breast, she turns west.

She walks deliberately but unhurriedly, planting each foot firmly, one after the other. A solid, purposeful, Calvinist walk, the man at the trolley stop thinks, the walk of her forefathers. Her walk, the tourist surmises, says that she is tired of apologizing, to her boyfriend or anyone else, for being what she is.

The handsome, dark young man crouching on the stoop, he guesses, is not Dutch. Or at least, his parents or grandparents came from some other part of the world. Parmaribo, maybe, in Surinam? Indonesia, Curaçao, or one of the other former Dutch colonies? But why has he torn off his clothes and raged? And why does he still sit there, coiled, as she stalks down the street? It doesn't make sense without a story. The tourist can only imagine the story.

She is going home, he thinks, perhaps to a single small room in the working-class area called the Jordaan, a room which up to now she has been sharing with him. Her boyfriend, the Surinamese let's say he is, may come back, or he may not, he always has but this time she can't be sure. If he does she will have his clothes for him. Perhaps she helped him choose those clothes, and perhaps she even paid for them, gladly, because he

did not have any money and because his smooth dark skin looked so good in the soft white shirt wide-open at the collar.

Left, right, left, right, she must be listening to her solid Dutch feet on a solid Dutch street, her body stiff and proud. The observer can no longer see her face, but he imagines tears welling in her eyes. She must be thinking that, if this time he does not come home, well, with any luck she still has the greater part of her life before her. A Dutch boy, she may be thinking, would not have behaved like this, with such transparent theatricality. But Dutch boys are so much duller—perhaps it was for his very theatricality that she had fallen for the dark young man.

Back on the stoop, the young man's shoulders relax a little but he remains crouched a moment more, until she has reached the end of the block without looking back. Only then he uncoils, slowly, and stands erect. Barefoot and wearing nothing but his torn gray shorts, he turns and marches in the opposite direction, his brows bunched tight in a painful frown.

He appears confused, but he must also be relieved that at last it's over. He has cut the cord, with his dramatic screaming and stripping. He must see himself as a dusky colonial with no money and a haphazard education and only his dreams to bank on, out of place in this old city where time is money and money is all, and where even the local hedonists, their blue eyes spacy from cannabis and heroin that his friends supplied, their limp blond hair ragged across pale, pulsing foreheads, try to keep a count of the hours they waste, the grams they consume, the frequency of their blurry highs.

The dark lad provoked the whole thing, the tourist decides. A virtuoso performance, and although he's got what he must have wanted — she has gone, after all, quietly and without reproach — he must be disappointed that there is no one to applaud. No one, that is, but a foreign couple at the trolley stop, who do not applaud, and who the young man appears not even to have noticed. A slight breeze makes him, the young protagonist of this drama, shiver— he probably had not foreseen that he would strip, he must have been driven to it when nothing else, none of his other rhetorical resources, seemed to work.

The tourist imagines that, wherever the lad is from, it is a culture that prizes subtleties to a far greater extent than the culture here in Holland. Perhaps the Dutch girl had not understood or had not acknowledged his gestures, ironic little jokes, escalating to sarcasm. His was a culture based on defense of pride, hers on persistence. So he was forced — what else could he do? — to fall back on his most extreme device, to throw a tantrum. Perhaps he had once seen such an act from an old wild man back home. Or in a movie. Or simply remembered from his own childhood.

But on this sunny Saturday evening on Sarphastistraat, he must have come to doubt his ability to be the kind of man that she deserved. So he did the only honorable thing. He threw a tantrum, he screamed and yelled, he forced his lover finally to give up on him, because he was no good. He was not what she deserved. Let her find some solid Dutch boy with a regular job, or at least a future. Let her kids be blond, let her suffer no more because of him. Maybe, some years hence, if his life goes better so that he is not too ashamed, he might visit her, or maybe just stop at the garden gate and watch the kids who might have been his. Or maybe he is thinking of something else entirely. The observer is just trying to make a coherent narrative, and the trolley is taking a long time to arrive.

Where will he go, this half-naked barefoot man? At the bank of the Amstel he turns north, toward the center of the city, and out of sight. The tourist imagines that a bicyclist shouts at him from behind and he reflexively jumps out of the bike path and one bare foot squishes into a pile of dog shit. Another bicyclist and some strollers look at him and

shrug — this is Amsterdam, after all, where girls exhibit themselves in their underwear in streetside windows and hashish is served in streetside cafés, and a nearly-naked man hopping on one foot and cursing and laughing hysterically is not especially remarkable. The tourist looks at his wife, lost in her own thoughts. And here at last is the trolley.