

DATE

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CHAPTER ONE

It crossed his mind then how the wall lamp at the rear of the double-bed-sized cubicle the Dutch called a *cabine* should best backlight the crags of his face, and adjusted his pose accordingly. The *cabine* door was wide open. He was seated in a vaguely lotus position so his main selling point, the dick, would be revealed to utmost effect – with the help of occasional strokes – and he waited.

It was all a bit smoke and mirrors these days, though maybe it really always had been, come to think of it... Illusions. Porn poses. His mind drifted, a touch stoned. The partitions of the *cabines* were dark-stained wood; the double mattresses filling them were clad in a dull orange vinyl: it was so autumnal, soothing. The flecked beige terrazzo of the hallway floor curved up along the sides of the blocks of cubicles to form pedestals as if each *cabine* was a lotus flower: no sharp edges here. The lighting throughout the sauna was gentle – call it candlelight-flattering – without being literally dim. No, not yet; he hadn't reached the stage where the light had to be really and truly dim. No, not yet. There was still time. He still had a chance.

A stroke of his dick, the flex of hot pleasure it produced, effaced the twinge of fear that thoughts of aging caused, and he became, once again, contented.

Next thought: here he was sitting patiently prepared to seduce like one of the pink-lighted hookers in the windows of De Wallen, the renowned Amsterdam red-light district, except that, hell, he was giving it away. His face broke into a grin. "Richard, the definition of a gay sauna," had stated Pieter to him, "is a warehouse where the hookers are all unpaid volunteers." He smiled more broadly now, amused by the stoned drift of his train of thought. Dutch grass was so very good.

So he waited, waited, keeping his dick poised for action by using either memories of porn, his last suck in the steam room, or just the last interesting guy to pass by in a towel in order to keep feeding the lust necessary to keep his selling-point hard, interested and interesting. Yes, came a stoned insight out of the blue, the primary sexual organ was indeed the brain. How true, how true. No doubt whatsoever. And a truth never so obvious as it was now while he, well, waited. And waited.

On the other hand, though he was not a patient man, he didn't feel in the slightest restless now. Funny. It couldn't just be the grass, which could just as quickly veer him off into a state of panic, as it sometimes did in New York. He was content because Amsterdam and Pieter freed him of care. Everything was taken care of. Not a worry he could summon up to torment himself with.

And content was definitely the supreme goal these days. What was that oriental thing about bamboo bending in the storm? In less than a month he had gone from oak to bamboo. Bobby had depended on the stalwart oak; he'd relished being that oak for him. And it had made him a cutting-edge adman. Ruthless, some might say. He used to note with satisfaction the look of apprehension, if not outright fear, when he would saunter into any ad agency meeting, deliberately a second later than everyone else. There he would find them, busy taking their seats, chatting or arranging their folders. For an instant they would seem to freeze, so many deer in the headlights, to focus on his entrance and size up his mood. He was totally aware of where this had all come from. The stoked power needed to sustain Bobby is what had made him intimidating. Plus, and this was core, he was fucking angry. Angry at the disease.

But – he sighed mentally now as he sat waiting in the *cabine*, sighing as he so often did in general nowadays – he had ultimately failed to intimidate the true enemy: death.

Either accept it or implode in rage. Okay: he had declared defeat. He had surrendered.

When Bobby's light had flickered out as he watched, leaving a black hole in his universe, his choice had been either to be sucked in after him or turn away. Pieter had already slipped out of the room to get the cordless phone so he could call the hospice lady. What immediately followed had been, not slow-motion, but a moment out-of-time, call it shock; when he reanimated, he had turned away, literally, from Bobby on the bed. He had looked toward the window. He had then gotten up and walked to it. The night and the morning had been blustery with autumn storm. Now, he noticed in surprise, the most corny thing in the world had happened: the sun had come out.

There had been a certain relief involved in going from oak to bamboo. He gave up the fight and desensitized – somewhat. He surrendered righteously to total self-pity as his just due. He had demanded and finagled a golden parachute from the ad agency; they were glad to see one less fox out of their hen-coop.

After that he had rapidly begun to re-orient his life. Xanax had helped, of course. The panic part of being alone, thank the gods, was neutralized through the magic of chemistry.

But, only a few weeks ago, he'd been sitting with his feet up on the couch, sipping an over-oaked chardonnay, listening vaguely to the radio, when a melody so intimately familiar gripped him, carried him for a bit, then dropped him in tears. There he had sat raw, exposed, jelly-like, waiting for the voice of WQXR ("The radio station of the New York Times") to tell him the name that he couldn't remember. He had jumped up then and written it down: Mozart's *Maurerische Trauermusik*. Then he had picked up the phone and dialed Pieter, now back in Amsterdam; the wine had suddenly tasted too warm to sip any more and he'd dumped it in the sink while waiting for Pieter to pick up. The music had triggered the second decisive decision since quitting his job: leave New York for a while. Back to Mozart country, back to

Europe. It was the first of many trips and sojourns.

Wily bamboo. Haha! Able to take root anywhere and flourish like a weed.

Amsterdam was a city he had known for what – a good thirty years now? Though never as intimately as in the days since Bobby’s death. Never had wanted to, actually, until recently, he found himself musing vaguely. He had previously felt the city too laid-back, he guessed. Not enough edge to it. None of New York’s brash, razor-sharp, tongue-flicking attitude.

Now with another of those mental sighs he acknowledged present-day reality yet again: Amsterdam now felt like a haven to him. Laid-back? He deeply needed to lay back, just lay, lay back, lay back. He was conscious then of a beatific smile relaxing his mouth, his jaw. He slowly stroked his distracted dick back to attention.

Just in time: a rustle of feet in the corridor. Presentation time! He straightened up just a tad, squaring his shoulders, and readied himself for display.

Oh, false alarm! Whoa! He shut his eyes tight to blot out the passing man’s image. You might be my contemporary, just maybe, baby, but you are an eyesore, a real dick softener... Okay, this snap judgment was not very charitable. Okay: guilty? Yup, he was. Not nice of him at all, cruel even, but, hey, what was he supposed to do, self-censor? Let’s get real, man...

Oh, no! Even that snatch of mental phrase – “let’s get real, man” – was a dead giveaway of his age. So dated. Sixties. Old, old like him. Fuck! He was no better than this man.

Better? Whoa again: he was in far, far better shape than the man. Get a grip! No comparison.

He opened his eyes. The man was gone.

You silly old queen, he castigated himself. But it’s a jungle out there – and in here. Even in gentler Amsterdam. Where – *mirabile dictu* – men still found him hot. Very, very often!

Next!

Richard slouched a bit and began literally to contemplate his navel. A bit of fat had collected around it, but not enough to scream to the world: over-fifty! Not exactly scream anyway. And his skin still looked fairly fresh, he appraised. Of course: the light factor... Lighting is everything. Ah, no truer words ever said. Always was true, even at twenty, come to think of it. Yup. It had always been smoke and mirrors as far back as he could remember.

His thinking began to loop in full-circle repeat mode...

Even in those good old halcyon days of yore: the seventies when it ALL, all began. Everything. Another truism. And the meaning is? Meaning things gay as they were now, gentlemen. Sex bathhouses. Bars with darkrooms. Disco.

Disco. No, how had that crept onto his list?

Gay marriage? Oh no, that was just too Dutch for him. Too Log Cabin Republican. He relished being a sexual outlaw again. Remember that book? Who wrote it? Ah! John Rechy. Wonder what ever happened to... Oh, no matter. But it was the theme

of those days, the battle cry: to the “trucks,” to the piers, to the backrooms, to the baths! He could picture it all now, himself in jeans and white tee-shirt and mustache heading down Christopher Street for the ramshackle warehouses on the rotting piers, his nerves crackling with anticipation of the hot sex to come and the danger.

Oh, well, those days were certainly over. New York was now Zurich-on-the-Hudson, in short, a fucking bank, brokerage and law firm combined, not Sodom and Gomorrah. Just like everybody was saying. And, these days, gay men could often turn out to be Republicans. Hallelujah!

While he’d been still shell-shocked by death and in a who-cares stupor (he hadn’t bothered to vote for the first time in his life), an Ivy League frat-boy with a suspect Texas accent had gotten elected president in an unbelievable banana-republic election. And now everyone he met since arriving in Amsterdam this trip, including Pieter, took condescending pokes at the fool...

Pad, pad – he heard the pad of feet. He straightened up again.

But then the footfalls stopped. Oh, shit, another guy setting up shop in a *cabine* of his own. Competition!

Maybe he should get up and walk around himself for a while.

But, no, this position, this pose, was his best shot. He’d already done the fast-food scene in the steam room. Now it was time for something a wee bit more *intime*. Before meeting up with Pieter at the Musiektheater at quarter to eight. *Lulu*. He just loved those atonal knife slices through the sordidly romantic melodrama of that opera! Oh how he loved Alban Berg these days! Hmm. When had he started loving Berg? When he’d turned forty? Maybe. So what was that, mid-life crisis to the tune of German Expressionism or something?

He realized his dick was slouching again...

Into his mind like a cassette he shoved the steam room memory of the muscled groin of that tall young buzzcut guy, body of a basketball player, who’d granted him his cock, and now mentally he evoked the heft it had had in his throat. His dick snapped back to attention.

And then – as if by magic, as they say – a young man stood in front of him, smiling, his light blue towel tenting.

Smoothly rippled abdomen tapering into a towel tight around the hips. Towel tenting slightly. A few silky blond hairs highlighting the exciting depth of his navel. Then up to the gently defined chest, the smallish, un-tormented nipples. A light down of blond hair in all the right places. A body as if carved from ivory. And a smile in a young and handsomely angular face. A smile. For him.

Richard smiled back. He gave his dick a tempting stroke. The young guy’s smile opened letting his teeth appear ever so slightly. And his towel tented further.

With no hint of hesitation, he then stepped up and over Richard's legs and entered his *cabine*.

Richard, blinking in the white glare of the sky, glanced at his watch as he raced as best he could up the hump of the bridge over the Leidsegracht. The endless summer evening light, a week before the longest day of the year, said late afternoon, but it was fast approaching eight. And he was going to be late. Pieter hated late. Worse, this was not New York: You couldn't just hail a cab. The best way was a speed walk. He couldn't possibly get there on time in fifteen minutes. Picking up speed coming down off the slope of the bridge, all around him, almost clutching him and holding him back, was a postcard romantic image of languid afternoon light reflecting off the canal from bridge to bridge, great whispering trees bent slightly over the water, and pale sunlight dappled sparkling pools that fragmented and shifted in the light breeze. You could hear the trees; there was virtually no car traffic along the canals. In winter, he had emerged once from the sauna to find snow flakes blowing in short, fast veils, blinding, then gone, as Pieter would explain, the snowfall in a *zeeklimaat*, weather mitigated by closeness to the sea. But there was no time for enjoying that. Pedestrians, bicycles – especially bicycles – were all in his way. It was war! A race against time. He could be five minutes late at most.

Oh, you're ridiculous, he thought, beating himself about the head and shoulders. You don't really think you're ever going to see that young guy again?

Pieter stood tall and thin, graying buzz-cut on a gently balding pate, looking very Dutch in black shirt and black slacks at the foot of the broad, cleanly modern staircase that led up to orchestra level. In the distance his head shook from side to side ever so imperceptibly in admonishment as Richard lunged forward to meet him. And then a smile broke around Pieter's mouth. Back flashed the pinkly innocent face, framed by thick pixy-cut curls, of that blond Dutch boy so enamored of him during his junior-year-abroad. "Richard, well, you must have had a very, very good time."

"I'm sorry, Pieter. I'm not really that late?" Richard pleaded.

Pieter gave him a gentle nudge with his elbow. In the darkened opera hall Richard turned his head for a second and smiled back: I know. The soprano was about to launch into his favorite aria: the *Lied der Lulu*. The entire opera house felt poised on the edge of their seats in the cavernous dusk of the Musiktheater, every horseshoe-shaped tier upon tier of balconies on up to the heavens. The stage below glared in trendy neo-Expressionist angst, all sharp planes of black and white, cut by shafts of blood-red light now, pulsing when appropriate, with electric blue lasers. Ah, shuddered Richard with delight. And then the soprano, Lulu the Hooker, pivoted

her torso off one high heel and began. The hairs rose on the back of his neck. He couldn't understand the Dutch super-titles over the proscenium; he didn't need to. He knew what every anguished note and word meant. He had listened to it hundreds of times. The cry of the trapped animal. The illusion this poor whore created with her mechanical lust, the magic formula she used to control a world that was out to get her, the audience could see it had all failed, failed her bitterly, even as down below on stage she sang her claim to victory, deluded bitch. Richard's tears welled up. It always got to him, this song of Lulu, the murderess, the lost lover, the ice-cold sex doll, the miserable slut. The viciousness of the high notes cut through his brain, leaving him exposed to his own nerve-wracking emotion.

And then it was over. He felt wrung out. This was catharsis. Nothing better, except a very good orgasm. His eyes shut, he took a deep breath: which is exactly what had miraculously occurred with René. René. The name reverberated again and again in his head. Richard shot off into a romantic vertigo, then opened his eyes to the glare of the starkly lighted stage below and the explosion of the audience's rapturous applause. Goose bumps.

He felt a poke of Pieter's elbow again. He turned. They exchanged nods of satisfaction, then back to the action, the singing, the orchestra. Richard tried to concentrate on the then and now, but his mind kept drifting back to that guy, that kid really, that René. How had it happened? What in hell did René see in him? He desperately needed to know that, so he could capitalize somehow on whatever it was that had attracted René, but he didn't have a clue. That left him totally vulnerable, of course. Unarmed. Unprotected. A bit like old Lulu down there on the stage, lurching irrevocably toward catastrophe.

* * *

"I'm not really crazy about this place," confided Pieter, "but there's not much open at this hour. Amsterdam is no Paris. No tradition of post-opera *soupers* with lots of champagne and Belle Epoque cuisine." Pieter made a small punctuating flourish with his knife that coincided with a theatrical sigh of submission to this reality. Richard smiled, nodded and continued chewing at his sliver of veal medallion. Tasted fine to him, he thought, and the price was certainly right. Anyway, grand cuisine at eleven at night seemed to him like an invitation to heartburn. Those turn-of-the-century Parisians must have had cast-iron stomachs. Not to mention the fabulous propensities of their livers.

Yes, Richard thought Café de Jaren was just fine. Maybe a wee bit too brightly lit for the hour? The sun on the canal in the back had finally set and cast inky blue shadows over the open deck where hardy patrons still sat drinking as night finally took over; that would have been better than the bright saturation of artificial light tempered only by the yellow walls of the café proper. But no matter about lighting: he had switched out of cruise mode, so didn't care how he might appear to the

world. “Anyway,” Pieter continued, “are you going to tell me?” His eyebrows rose endearingly.

Oh, thank the gods for Pieter, someone who really was interested, even enthralled, at his tales of sexual bravado. For dramatic effect Richard continued chewing, then swallowed the last trace of veal, then reached for his glass of wine, took a nice sip, swallowed yet again, and began: “Well, I think it may be... it! It! That look in his eye...”

“What look? Whose eye? You know, Richard, you really do smoke too much dope. I know, I know, it’s a treat for you while you’re over here, but, you know, my dear, nobody here bothers with the stuff much anymore, at least not the people I know. Adults,” he ironized. “But, okay, yes, it makes you happy, I know, and that’s what counts. So start all over again. You’re talking about the sauna and why you were late, no?”

“Not exactly... well, yes, I suppose I was.” A quick chuckle and he was off: “I met this kid, Pieter. Just one hundred percent me. Outrageously younger than we are,” Pieter pursed his lips for a second, “than I am, I mean.” He arranged his knife and fork properly on his plate – let’s start again – then looked Pieter straight in the eye. “I don’t know how it all happened, but it was tremendous. I could even be in love.”

Pieter leaned back in his chair and stared at him for a second. “I think you think you mean it.”

“Of course I mean it,” he flared, “I always mean what I say.” Richard lowered his voice again. “I know. It sounds unbelievable.” He put on the hangdog expression he used to get sympathy from Pieter.

“Well, you have known true love before. Lightning can strike twice in the same spot.”

Richard brushed aside Pieter’s jibe, then thought and turned it around, “Well, I am getting liver spots.” A quick chuckle. “No, got liver spots.” Cruel reality that this was.

Pieter sighed and smiled: “Wasn’t it some English king that wanted to stop the tide coming in?”

“King Alfred. And wasn’t it a poet who said, ‘Rage, rage against the dying of the light...?’”

“Dylan Thomas.”

“Right.”

So, obviously it had all been said and dealt with before. But no one had found a solution. Richard took a sip of his wine while holding Pieter’s eye: “He’s got a boyfriend.”

“Don’t they all,” sighed Pieter. It was a sigh that sounded this time like boredom, rather than Pieter’s world-weariness theatrics.

Was he boring Pieter? Richard ratcheted up his voice: “In Paris. Where they live. Together.”

“Well, isn’t that an intriguing twist? I suppose you told him about your Paris

year then?" Pieter flashed a full ironic grin, finished his wine and then took out a cigarette. Richard thought of answering, but waited. Pieter lit the cig and took a long drag. "So how old is he exactly?" Ah, Pieter sounded interested again.

"You know, I have no idea."

But he did know how René had come to be in the sauna because he'd told him.

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