

First Time

Sandrine was my guide. She was Belgian and she'd been to Amsterdam many times before, visiting with fun-seeking teenaged friends in search of inexpensive thrills, just as California college students make cross-border journeys to Nevada for debauched weekends of gambling and drinking. Sandrine spoke Dutch. She smoked pot and ate space cakes. She knew all the stuff I didn't—like where to get it, how to ingest it, and what would happen once I did. One thing she stressed was that we had to be fortified with snacks *before* getting high. This, she said solemnly, was perhaps the most important lesson she could teach me: Have your fries and pizza, shwarma and cheeseburgers, and Pringles and Coke on hand prior to lighting up, because once the intoxication commences, it will be too late.

"Be prepared," she said, smiling mischievously, utterly unaware that the Boy Scouts of America endorsed her viewpoint, if not its application.

Having played sports my whole life, with stints on the

high-school wrestling team, in the college intramural basketball league, and as a marathon runner later in life, I didn't eat these kinds of greasy salty sugary fatty foods. I was fit. I'd never smoked cigarettes. At the Lee Strasberg Institute acting school, where I frittered away much of my undergraduate years, when the script for a workshop scene called for me to take a drag on a prop cigarette, my instructor laughed. "Don't ever learn how to smoke," she advised me. "It's the funniest thing I've ever seen." I never did. And I avoided junk food, too. It gave me stomachaches and diarrhea.

"Maybe we can we get a salad?" I wondered.

Sandrine puckered her lips and exhaled while shaking her head, one of those peculiarly French gestures of mild disgust. "No, we can't. When you get high, you want *frites* and pizza. And Fritos."

"Why?"

"Because! They taste so good!" She thought for a moment. "We should get beer and chocolates, too."

We changed our dog Ella's scarf. She was wearing a generic red bandana around her white neck. Sandrine felt a psychedelic purple tie-dyed cravat seemed more in the spirit of our impending adventure. We transformed our greyhound-Lab mix into something you might see loitering beside the general-admission lawn of an outdoor Grateful Dead concert.

Our hotel on the Singel Canal was near most of Amsterdam's peculiar attractions: fetid waterways, window displays for prostitutes, cafés that served marijuana, fast-food fry shops. We three—the two ladies and I—walked down one flight of stairs to the lobby and into the summer night, in search of provisions. Sandrine reminded Ella to refrain from eating scraps off the street, since given the neighborhood, they could be laced with drugs. "Ella can't get high," Sandrine announced. "She has to supervise her daddy."

I wasn't scared, or even nervous. I was skeptical. Really,

what was all the fuss about? I had once drunk too much whisky on a golf trip to Scotland and after feeling a little light-headed, I promptly fell asleep. True, I hadn't gotten *drunk* drunk—or snorted cocaine, or dropped acid, or taken Ecstasy, or diet pills, or Quaaludes, or even Tylenol with codeine. And though I never smoked tobacco, I did chew it once in high school, during baseball practice (and vomited behind the bleachers). I'd climbed 15,000-foot mountains, hiked through Balinese rainforests, and swum across a pretty wide Minnesota lake. These were the things that got me high. *Naturally* high, man! On the cusp of 40 years old, I surmised I was somehow immune to all that stuff people inhaled or ingested. It didn't interest me; it didn't affect me. But, I told myself, it's better to try and fail than never to have tried at all.

Besides, I was in Amsterdam.

Next door to a couple of window displays containing Eastern European prostitutes projecting ennui more potent than an American suburban teenager sulking at the mall, we found a Middle Eastern place that sold falafel, hummus, and pita sandwiches filled with cured lamb rotating on a skewer. We bought a couple of these, and fries, and some Coke. Walking out with a big oily bag, I figured we were done, that the business of losing my marijuana virginity could commence. "*Mais, non!*" Sandrine corrected me. We were just beginning. With Ella happily tramping beside us, blithely ignoring the whores on display in favor of the pungent aromas of the stone streets, we visited in succession a pizza place, a burger joint, and the Dutch equivalent of a Kwikie Mart, manned by a family of Indians who sold us beer and more soda (and some candy) and cast disapproving glances at our dog. There seemed to me to be enough food and drink for five people. Sandrine, however, was concerned. "Well, it might be enough," she reckoned. "Maybe we should get some chips, too." She dashed back inside and emerged with two canisters of Pringles, which

she held aloft like tennis trophies. "OK. We're ready," she declared.

We walked back to our hotel, where the front desk clerk, a woman in her 30s, smiled at us knowingly.

"Can she tell what we're doing?" I asked Sandrine in the stairwell.

She shrugged. "I don't think this is the first time someone got high in a hotel in Amsterdam."

Inside our room, Sandrine arranged our snacks across the dresser top. I didn't realize yet how vital it would be to keep a visual inventory of all the things we could eat. The buffet on display was overwhelming, a bountiful harvest of triglycerides and hydrogenated oils that I feared would stain the furniture with a sweaty puddle of fryer grease. "This is good," she approved. "Excellent, in fact."

I played along. "Great."

"OK," she said, unbuttoning her blouse. "First we take off all our clothes. You must be comfortable."

I complied. When I began to fondle her breasts, Sandrine gently brushed away my hands. "Later. Later," she said. "It will be better."

I trusted her. She was experienced.

Ella, who was already naked save for her freaky scarf, was invited to join us on the bed. Her fur felt good against my bare thigh. "Ella, we're getting stoned," I told her. She panted noncommittally.

"It's important that you feel very relaxed and safe," Sandrine said. "No worries. Yes?"

"I feel good," I said, eyeing Sandrine's feminine charms.

"You are surrounded by people who love you."

I looked toward Ella. She was falling asleep on the mattress. No worries.

"So now we have our cake!" Sandrine pulled the squishy brown square from the crisp white paper bag. It looked like any

other piece of chocolate cake, with a bit of frosting across the top, and some sprinkles. But it smelled different, less sweet, not so chocolatey. Slightly medicinal. "Maybe we should eat half and see what happens," Sandrine suggested. "It might take some time before you feel it."

"OK," I said, still convinced that nothing would, in fact, happen. "Just tell me how much."

She broke off a small piece and fed it to me. It tasted pretty good, just like chocolate cake.

I tried to be especially alert to changes in my body, in my eyesight. Nothing happened. "Nothing's happening," I reported.

Sandrine chewed and swallowed her piece. "Mmm. It might take some time." She looked at her watch. "If nothing happens in an hour, we can eat more. In the meantime ..." She reached behind her into another bag and extracted a joint, neatly wrapped like a factory-produced Marlboro. "If you do it this way, it will happen quickly. Right away."

She knew I was opposed to smoking.

"I'll smoke it and blow the smoke for you," Sandrine suggested.

"Let's just wait to see if the cake does anything," I proposed.

She shook her head. "No." Then she lit the joint, took a deep drag, and motioned for me to lean in closer, for a kiss. When I did, she blew the smoke between my lips, and I had a coughing fit.

Sandrine giggled and took another hit. I waved away her invitation. I told her absolutely nothing was happening to me. I began to lecture her that, as I suspected, drugs didn't affect me as they did other more susceptible types. They had minds and bodies less pure than mine, this glorious temple of manly idealism untainted by outside agents that might compromise the delicate balance I had struck between sensual pleasure and

rational cogence, the unusual ethos I employed to guide me through life without succumbing to the noxious pollutants my peers seemed to enjoy without reflection or consideration, as though things one could ingest might produce a greater degree of enlightenment than, say, a book, or a symphony, a Beethoven symphony which, when you thought about it, was, in its own way, a perfect expression of what being “high” really and truly meant, for if one accepted that artistic creations are in fact the finest expression of all that is good, or even great, about humanity, well, then it followed that—

“Oh my god!” Sandrine exclaimed, laughing. “You’re stoned!”

I snorted derisively. “No. I’m not.”

She was laughing harder now, covering her mouth and pointing at me. “Yes. You are!”

“No, I don’t think so,” I assured her. “But you are, I think.” I’d never seen Sandrine laugh like this, at nothing.

She said, “OK.” And then she collapsed in hysterics.

“What was I saying?” I wondered out loud. “Oh yes. Beethoven. Or, wait, maybe I should start at the beginning. Wait. What was the beginning?” I couldn’t remember the subject of my monologue. “Do you remember what I was saying?” I began to laugh. “I mean it was just, like, ten seconds ago, right?” For some reason, this struck me as the funniest thing I’d ever uttered in all my days on this planet. I laughed more. When I expected my laughter to stop, it got stronger. I couldn’t make it end. I was having an uncontrollable laughing attack.

So was Sandrine.

“I think something is definitely happening,” I reported. Sandrine roared. I roared. This was officially the funniest thing I had ever heard.

I laughed so hard I had trouble breathing. Tears ran down my cheeks. Anything I tried to say came out as a screech or a

hoot or a preposterous falsetto—which was also the funniest thing I'd ever heard.

The fact that I was naked on the bed with my dog was the funniest situation I'd ever been in. Ella grooming her front paws with her tongue was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. And I knew that the pizza on the dresser was going to be the funniest thing I'd ever tasted.

My laughing fit went on for some time. Even when I lay my head back on the pillow and stared at the white ceiling, everything was unfathomably funny. That I couldn't say why was funnier still.

Sandrine rose and grabbed some provisions. We ate half of what we'd bought and I didn't remember eating any of it. That was pretty funny, too.

"I don't think we need to eat the rest of the cake," Sandrine said, giggling.

"Oh, no," I agreed, beside myself with the colossal humor of this notion, which had me gasping for breath between bites of shwarma and gulps of Coke.

At some point we ate the rest of the cake. We ate all the other stuff, too.

Sandrine looked at me portentously. "I think we didn't get enough," she said. Then she began to babble in French, which I found hilarious.

"You are very red," she said, pointing at my tear-stained face.

"I believe you," I said. This cracked us up.

"Thank you, but we have a problem," Sandrine said, frowning, then smiling, then frowning again, then smiling, which was something my little brother used to do when he was a child—and that may have been the funniest coincidence I'd ever witnessed.

She explained as best she could that we needed to make a supplementary expedition to acquire additional provisions. I

couldn't imagine mustering the Herculean strength it would take ever to leave our bed. "I don't think ... that's ... possible," I managed to blurt out between laughs and gasps for breath.

Sandrine found this tremendously amusing.

Even though I'd been reduced to a giggling idiot, splayed naked on a bed, incapable of executing the most mundane tasks, I still wondered if I was indeed stoned. "Is this what it's like?" I asked. "Because this is pretty freaky."

We repeated the word "freaky" together, exploring the hundred different ways you could say it.

At some point, we got dressed, collected our money, put on Ella's collar and leash, and stumbled to the stairs, ready to relieve Amsterdam of its entire inventory of snack food. I tried mightily not to have a laughing fit as we passed the front-desk clerk on our way out. She looked at me impassively, but I felt compelled to explain to her that we were just going out for a few minutes to grab something from the store, and that we wouldn't be gone long and so maybe it would be best not to drop the key with her, since we'd just be asking for it back when we returned. The lady smiled solicitously, but didn't reply. I continued in this vein for some time, until Sandrine dragged me away.

"Do you think she knows I'm stoned?"

"Absolutely."

"Really? Maybe I shouldn't have talked to her like that, for so long."

Sandrine asked, "What did you say to her?"

I repeated the whole monologue as we walked along the Singel Canal.

Sandrine hooted. "You only think you said that. In fact, you simply said like two words. The rest you're imagining."

"No way!"

"Yes!"

"Oh my god! I am so stoned!" I never thought I would

utter the phrase, and the fact that I did was even funnier than all the funny things that came before.

We came to the falafel shop, where Sandrine suggested it might be best if I waited outside and let her order, because, she felt, I wasn't capable at the moment of conducting a business transaction. I didn't disagree.

While Sandrine bought more crunchy salty greasy delicious comestibles, I peered through the window, celebrating each time something went across the counter from the fry chef to Sandrine. It was like a football game. I was cheering on my team—the one that was getting me more stuff to eat. When Sandrine came through the door, I attempted to high-five her, but her hands were full. “All right! Way to go!” I shouted.

“Yes, this is very important,” Sandrine said soberly.

“I think the girl behind the counter was looking at me,” I declared. “Do you think she thinks I'm stoned?”

“Definitely. She was laughing at you.”

“Do you think she's stoned, too?”

“Maybe.”

I had the impulse to run inside the fry shop and ask the girl behind the counter if she too was stoned. And if she wasn't, I wanted to encourage her to try some space cake. I felt that the whole world ought to be as happy and carefree as I, that if we could all just mellow out and enjoy our falafel, everything else on our crazy dysfunctional planet would take care of itself. Unfortunately, I couldn't find the words at the time to explain my thoughts to Sandrine, so I just waved (probably way too enthusiastically) at the girl through the window. She gave a little wave in return and I felt all was right with the universe.

As we approached our hotel, Sandrine suggested I not talk with the front-desk clerk. This was exceedingly difficult, as I had about 49 different things I wanted to share with her about our little field trip. I kept my eyes down and focused on Ella, who seemed oblivious to all the happiness around her.