

Like the Angel

I had ended up in Amsterdam, the flood-grill of Europe. Everyone washes through, some get stuck. The first few nights I spent walking the streets to take it all in, and it was a lot to absorb for a young and sheltered Edinburgh lad. Streets hummed to the tune of the busking blues-players crusted with street dust, alleyways glowed pink in the light of the sex-trade workers, and avenues dozed to the heady smell of the smoky, doped-up cafés.

I didn't associate myself with all this human scree. I was a professional, and I hadn't come to Holland in search of diamonds or drugs or even cheap thrills on the east side of the Amstel. I was a fluid dynamics engineer, had learned my trade on the North Sea pipelines and answered a call from the proudest engineering nation in the world. I wore a tie to work—at least, I did until I realised that hardly anyone in the Netherlands wore a tie to work.

I didn't think of leaving Edinburgh as an escape. I hadn't run away, I thought, I'd taken an opportunity to work overseas. There was no comparison between me and the denim-clad drifters who toured the tram-ways searching for unspent cigarettes. That's what I told myself.

But I'd been there less than six months when I woke up on a Saturday morning with the worst hangover of my life. It took me by surprise. I'd not had so many beers the night before; I hadn't mixed drinks or done anything else I could think of that would explain such pain. Only as the fog of the morning lifted did I realise that there'd not been a single evening that week when I had returned to my flat sober. And when I thought about it some more, the record stretched back; right back. I hadn't had a sober evening in months.

I didn't worry about it much, I just tried putting it straight. I would start each morning full of determination, convinced I would end the day tucked up in bed, early and sober. But then by the end of each day I was telling myself I'd stop for just the one quick drink; and all sorts of reasons made this the right thing to do.

It was never hard finding someone to drink with. We were an office-load of expats. Scottish, Irish and predominantly English with the Netherlanders in the minority. We were men away from home and we drank like troopers.

Procrastination beats good intention. It was like that right up until I caught a stomach bug; it wasn't serious but I couldn't face the bars, so after weeks of trying, I finally saw my flat in the evening.

Feeling rotten I spent hours flicking through channels of trashy Dutch TV, fried myself some eggs, went to bed late. I lay in the dark, thinking about Kathy, my sister. She was no longer answering my phone calls.

There'd been a time when Kathy had trusted me with everything. She nearly killed her stupid self once, jumping off a ledge before I knew I was supposed to catch her. In my heart she was still that little red-head; all freckles and innocence. In reality she was disowning me, and it was nobody's fault but mine. Our parents' house was left to both of us and I sold it and kept the money and... well there were lots of excuses, but Kathy had a very good reason for turning against me. I ached for a drink.

The next morning my illusion had been shattered. I wasn't Dutch; they were the ones who had the scrubbed clean faces, clear consciences and shiny complexions in the morning; they were born here. I was just like everyone else; another runaway who had ended up in the city that accepted everything. Amsterdam was one place in the world where your chosen means of escape was considered your choice alone; they'd even legalised euthanasia.

Was it that night? Or maybe the next? All I know for sure was that it was an early spring evening. There were daffodils in all the road-side verges, although with Amsterdam being so close to the North Sea, the air was still cold. We'd been drinking in an Orange Bar south of the city, myself and ten or so respectable runaways, and I had managed to make my excuses before the whole gang progressed to the clubs and bars of the city centre.

I made my lonely way to the nearest station and waited for the first train to Amsterdam Centraal. And when it came, I boarded and stood in the corridor.

A man came through the doors from the next carriage. I moved my bag and stood aside so he could pass, and pass me he did, but then he stopped, turned back, and like Columbo with a 'one last question', started talking to me.

I didn't understand a word and told him I didn't speak Dutch, so he switched language.

"You're English!"

"Scottish."

"Ah!"

He nodded, and he did that little nodding head-jig that implies they're pretty much the same. As usual, I didn't bother arguing the point. To my surprise he started explaining that he was asking for money. He was very shy about it but told me something about needing money for a hostel.

His English was poor and I didn't know what to say and he must have mistaken my hesitation for reluctance or something because before I had a chance to answer, he apologised for disturbing me and turned to leave. I called him back.

It was a pretty odd thing to do, but it also made sense. Heaven knows I have turned away enough beer-stinking beggars before, but this guy was obviously different. His clothes looked cheap, but not yet street soiled. He hadn't shaved, but

he didn't smell; there was just something genuine about him. So I asked him to explain.

He was a likeable kid, in his early twenties or so, bushy blonde hair with a twinkle in his eye but, to be honest, I'm not sure I believed the story he told. He said he was in the building trade and that a fellow who'd once been his friend had disappeared with all their wages. So here he was, out of work, far from home and penniless. It was plausible, and if it wasn't the whole truth, I was willing to believe it was close enough.

When I asked him what he needed, he told me about a hostel. It was a certain rate for a weekend. His eyes widened when he started hoping that I might cover such a cost. It was about ten Euros or something pathetic, certainly less than a round of drinks. I asked if that was all he needed and his eyes widened further. His logic also failed him.

He tried explaining that if he could stay in the Hostel a week, he could use it as an address and get social security. Or I think that's what he was trying to explain. The train was rocking back and forth, it was noisy where we were standing and his English wasn't quite up to the topic. I already knew I was going to cover whatever the cost was, but I didn't want him to think the money was his without scrutiny so I suggested we go through to the carriage and take a seat.

It didn't make much more sense the second time through, but that was hardly the point. As far as I could figure out this was an honest guy who's life had been ripped apart in some manner and who didn't know how to pull it all together. I pulled out two fifty Euro notes and handed them to him.

He took them with real hesitance.

"Are you sure?"

I pressed them on him and he went from hesitance to inquisitiveness. A truly deep frown dug into his face.

"Why do you do this?"

I told him it was because I believed him. Which was true, even if it wasn't much of an explanation. Eventually he managed a smile and a friendly smack on the arm.

"Thank you... what is your name?"

I told him my name and he thanked me again.

"You are a good man," he insisted, "a good man!"

And of course that reminded me of everything I had done to Kathy and why I had run away to Amsterdam. I found myself disagreeing with him.

"Oh I don't know..."

"What? Why do you say this?" he demanded, as though ready to take issue with anyone who disagreed with him.

It was hard to explain. We hadn't much time before we arrived at Centraal, his English wasn't so good, and it had always seemed such a complicated story.

"What your friend did to you, I sort of did to my sister. There was a house; our parents' house, which they left to both of us. She said she wasn't interested in it. Then I sold it and my girlfriend convinced me that I should keep all the money, so now my sister won't talk to me."

The guy stared at me, two parts amazement and three parts pity.

"This girlfriend...?"

"Ditched. Ex-girlfriend."

I waved her into the past to take us well beyond the language barrier.

"So why no give sister money?"

I shrugged and nodded because that was the core of the problem.

"She won't take it—it's too late. She says it isn't about the money, that I am no longer her brother."

The train's tannoy chimed into life and the train itself started its whining arrival at the station. The announcement drowned out any possible conversation and we started making ready to disembark. My beggar friend looked troubled.

"People make mistakes!" he shouted, over the rising hubbub and the passing passengers, "but that does not change who you are. And you are a good man!"

We joined the flow and were swept down the steps onto the platform. Right away it was clear we were heading different directions, so we stopped, ready to part properly.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He grinned, evidently proud of his identity.

"Mikael," he declared, "Like the angel!"

He pronounced it with that Germanic rhythm; Mick-ay-elle. I shook his hand, surprised at the hardness and size of his builder's fingers.

"Well, Mikael, like the angel, good luck!"

"Thank you. And remember! You are a good man!"

He insisted on the point, looking me firmly in the eye to make sure I understood. And so, travellers in the orange station light, we parted.

My flat was in the quiet and exclusive region of the Prinzengracht. By the time I had walked there from the station, his words had created a new resolve in me. I knew I was tired and not entirely sober, but when I got home I sat down and wrote a letter.

I couldn't tell you every word of that letter, although my sister still has it somewhere, but I remember what I wanted to say. I told her I was her brother by blood and that nothing would change that, and that we are not good or bad by the virtue of our identity, but by the virtue of our deeds. It isn't who we are, it's what we do that makes us evil or righteous. I confessed everything, expressed my regret and asked her to open up a path back. I pleaded with her really. Everyone, I argued, should be allowed a way to return home and if she would tell me where it lay, I would take it.

It was the early hours of the morning by the time I finished. I stood at the open window and gazed at the street-lamp reflections in the water below.

I guess if we are ever visited by angels, they would come the way that Mikael came to me. Not all wings and halos and Glory Hallelujah, just a chance to put things right. So I whispered to the night;

"Thank you, Mikael, like the angel."