

## A Bit of a Laugh

Martin stared into the shop window. He'd walked past it once, giving it only a quick glance and then, as his brain registered and identified the objects, retraced his steps to make sure.

A hand with painted nails, a golf ball, a bulbous mushroom; then more and more unlikely: a polar bear, a comical ghost, Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower. What would his prick look like with one of those squeezed down over it? The shop was even called the Condomerie, in a greasy back street a few yards from Dirty Nelly's Irish Pub, round the back of the Stock Exchange.

You'd have to know a slapper pretty well if you wanted to shove one of those inside her, he decided. But maybe it felt even nicer than just a plain one, so perhaps you'd be doing her a favour.

He wondered whether to go inside and buy one, or even several. But then reasoned there wasn't much chance at present that he'd need any of them. And they were probably very expensive. He dismissed the thought that one of the slags in the red light district might give him an opportunity to use the one on the extreme left: a vase with an orange flower in it. The tarts cost enough as it was, without wasting a collector's item on her.

The rain continued to fall softly onto his uncovered head.

What now? Would he go back and have another look at the prostitutes? What about a live sex show? They were advertised all over the place. The Vibrator Show was 25 euros and the Banana Show cost more at 35. Maybe bananas were expensive in Amsterdam.

No, he'd go back to Dam Square and Madame Tussauds and have a good look at Benny Hill. There he was, dead for years, and now with a job as a doorman here at the waxworks.

He stood in front of the facsimile Benny for several minutes, admiring the detail: the individual dark specks of five o'clock shadow on the comedian's chin and the instantly recognisable saucy, suggestive grin. How had they managed that? He couldn't help smiling himself. His granddad had loved Benny Hill, had collected all the DVDs, never seemed to tire of the silly antics and ribald wit.

"I thought you were dead," Martin said to the waxwork. "But you'd just moved to Amsterdam."

He wondered whether to fork out the 20 euros for admission but decided that he'd rather spend them on beer and a hearty Dutch dinner. So far he hadn't thought much of their food, though. The meat croquettes he'd eaten for lunch - bitterballs they'd called them - had been greasy and tasteless.

He trudged round the side of the building onto a busy street, where he had to move sharply out of the way of a tram that seemed to come at him from nowhere.

Beside him, in the long side-window of Madame Tussauds, Sean Connery raised a glass of whisky to him with a sardonic smirk.

Adrian had described Amsterdam as the perfect holiday city: so much to do, such beautiful buildings, people who nearly all spoke English. Canal trips, museums, cafés where you could try drugs quite legally without any worries about the police.

‘You’ll have a brilliant time, Martin,’ he’d said. ‘My cousin Joanne and her family went there for Christmas last year. They took a package and said it was fabulous. And for a single guy on his own, well . . .’

But Amsterdam in December was also cold, damp and windy, the tourists who wandered the crowded streets shrinking against the chill that their sombre anoraks and Andean wool hats failed to repel. Many also looked lonely and aimless.

Perhaps he would have been better off staying in Watford, joining Mary and Dick for their annual Christmas dinner, and Chris and Jan on Boxing Day.

What was the point of holidays, anyway? He couldn’t remember a single one that he’d really enjoyed. An old photo of himself as a child slid into his brain: taken by one of his parents, it showed his pathetic little body, all bones and sinews, in baggy, unflattering swimming shorts that emphasised his puniness. Bournemouth, it would have been. He shivered as he remembered the cold seawater evaporating from his skin.

He ought to try something for which Amsterdam was famous. He’d never smoked marijuana. They even had cakes here laced with dope, people said. But fear of loss of control ruled that out. How easy it would be to lose his balance on the edge of a canal, tumble in to be mashed up by one of the tour boats that patrolled the viscous brown water.

He had spotted a notice nailed to a tree that overlooked one of the smaller canals. Under a photo of a vicious-looking man in his mid-thirties, it said in English: ‘Missing, Roland Sivak – If anyone has seen him, please call 01628205683. Roland, please get in touch. Michael.’ Perhaps Roland lay at the bottom of a canal somewhere.

The prostitutes behind the curtained ground floor windows in the red light district had aimed beguiling smiles at him and the sight of their glossy generous flesh, their rounded breasts, raised a pleasurable sensation in his groin. But the pimps who lingered around the church square, Romanian, North African, had alarming gold teeth and threatening scowls, raising worries about what might happen if things went wrong, if the tart tried to cheat him.

He staved off a decision by going into a bar. It was called Old Wembley, and chalked on a slate outside it advertised Hooghondt Beer – !!Beer!! Making People Beautiful Since !!1942!!

A coal fire was burning in a corner and a cheerful group of people sat round it, men and women, a bit younger than him. They looked up as he came in and then returned to their raucous chat and drinks. With a flash of envy at their easy camaraderie he went to the bar and ordered a white beer.

The barman wore a steel nose pin that looked like a bead of snot if you weren’t paying attention.

‘Are you staying long in Amsterdam?’ he asked with impersonal bonhomie. His English was virtually accent-free.

‘Just a few days,’ Martin replied.

‘Your first time here?’

‘Yes. It is. I don’t know why I’ve never been before.’

The man gave a resigned shrug and reached for a bottle, opened it and poured the beer into a hexagonal glass stamped with the name Hoegaarden.

Martin took it to a table beside the window. He tossed his sodden jacket over a chair and positioned himself with a view onto the canal on one side and the dimly-lit

interior of the bar on the other. The beer tasted fresh and slightly bitter. He swirled it round in his mouth before swallowing.

More glum tourists walked past him on the other side of the plate glass. Without the window he could have reached out and touched them.

Scanning the bar he caught sight of an old-fashioned clock on the wall above the counter. Its Roman numerals told him it was four o'clock. He decided he would go back to the hotel for dinner instead of searching blindly for a restaurant. He had a book with him that he could read in his room. The latest Lee Child. Perhaps the weather would improve tomorrow. Christmas Day. He would open his present at breakfast. It felt like another book.

The group of young people around the fire were getting noisier but good luck to them. They knew how to enjoy themselves. The centre of attention was a heavily-built bearded man with a stubbly crew cut. In the heat from the fire he had stripped to a short-sleeved T-shirt, revealing impressive biceps and a tangle of multicoloured tattoos that left little of his skin blank; Martin was too far away, and the lighting too dim to see the details. The group broke into guffaws as the tattooed man finished a joke or anecdote. Why couldn't he, Martin, fascinate people like that?

He got up to order another beer. This time the barman seemed disinclined to chat.

As he returned to his table he passed the jovial bearded man now on his way to the bar, and gave him a small, appreciative smile. The man smiled back.

'We've been trying to decide if you're English. Are you?' he said. His own voice was certainly English, faintly Northern.

'What makes you think that?' Martin asked. Straight away he regretted exposing himself to contact.

'You're on your own. Probably a tourist. And I'd guess that most of the tourists here are English. It's only just over there, just across the North Sea.' He gestured expansively towards the wall between the bar and the fireplace and Martin's eyes followed the movement, captivated by the mermaid etched onto the arm, her own arms clasped around the man's swelling muscles and her tail swirling round his wrist to end with a flourish on the back of his hand.

His attention switched to the question. 'Yes. You're right. I am English.'

He headed back to his table and was scanning his sparse collection of emails for the second time when he sensed a bulky shape blocking his view of the bar to the side.

'Why don't you join us? It's Christmas. Have a bit of a laugh,' the tattooed man said. 'My name's Steve, by the way. We're all from Peterborough.'

Better than spending the next couple of hours on his own. He could just sit with them and listen to their chatter. They might buy him a drink, saving him a few more euros to spend on he didn't know what.

They were a close-knit group - four men and two girls - and it was clear that they had known each other a long time. After the introductions a continuous stream of intimate banter flowed, full of references to past adventures and outings, most involving embarrassment and a lot of alcohol.

One of the girls was very pretty. She had fair hair tied back in a bushy pony tail and sparkly blue eyes that had widened alluringly when she told him her name and repeated his. Tara. Martin. Her jeans were moulded very tight around her calves

and she wore shiny black shoes with very high heels that Martin could not imagine anyone being able to walk in.

He tried to work out whether she was attached to any of the men in the group. She was sitting far away from Steve with the tattoos and next to a skinny dark-haired man, Dave, with a gaudy red and white spotted scarf tucked into his T-shirt. But Martin picked up no lingering glances or special smiles between them.

The other girl, Jeanette, was very different. The length of her legs, stretched out in front of her, told him that she must be very tall. The colour of her hair, a deep, dull black, could not be natural, he thought. But she seemed friendly enough when she offered him a peanut from a nearly empty packet.

Apart from Steve, distinguished by both beard and tattoos, the other men, Brian, Patrick and Dave, merged into each other in Martin's brain. Although Dave was the one with the gaudy scarf.

Martin sat on the stool shoved in his direction by: was it Brian? It was a bit too near the fire and he felt the heat sinking into his right side. But he was next to Tara, who also smelled very nice, perhaps of lilac.

'Have you tried jenever yet? It's a famous Dutch drink. A kind of gin. Here. Have a sip of mine,' she said, holding out her glass, shaped like small tulip.

The clear liquid tasted like nothing he had ever drunk before. Very strong - he felt a spreading numbness behind his eyes on just the one sip - but also smooth, with a woody flavour that reminded him of his grandfather's farmyard.

'What do you think?' she said. 'You should have one.'

Martin nodded uncertainly.

Steve got to his feet. 'Let's all have another. I'll get you one, Martin.'

'How much do I owe you?' Martin asked when Steve came back with the tray of drinks.

'It's Dave's round. He had a small win on the Lottery.' Steve's laugh was dry and ironical. 'So he's bought us all another beer as well.'

Martin reached out to pick up one of the tulip glasses.

'Stop! Not like that!'

The command was jocular but loud. Steve placed his own brimming glass on the table and bent over it, sipping face-down at the liquor with an exaggerated slurping sound.

'That's how you do it. The traditional way,' he said. 'Less waste.' He picked up the glass and tossed back the remaining liquid in one.

Martin stood up and leant over the glass, trying to coordinate his senses to connect his lips with the drink. He sucked in and felt a tingle on his tongue as the liquid spread round his mouth. This was how the locals did it. He steeled himself and swallowed the rest.

'You chase it down with a beer,' Dave said, handing him one of the glasses of lager.

It was half past four when he next looked at the clock. What time had it been when he first went in? Probably two o'clock, he thought. He was aware that they had drunk several more rounds of the delicious Dutch drink - what was it called, jenever? - washed down with glasses of cold beer. He ought to be thinking of returning to the hotel, but his legs felt like concrete blocks and he could tell by the umbrellas floating past that it was still raining outside. He was enjoying the attention from his new

friends. Peterborough was not that far from Watford. Perhaps they could all stay in touch when they got back to England.

‘Tell us more about your job, Martin,’ Tara said. ‘What about your boss? Is he nice?’

‘She’s a woman, actually. We get along OK. She told me I’d be getting a pay rise when I get back in the New Year. Yes, I get along with her all right.’

‘It would be really hard not to get on with such a friendly guy as you,’ she said. ‘I bet you’ve got lots and lots of friends in Swindon.’

‘It’s Watford, actually. And, yes. I suppose I do have plenty of friends there.’ The rest of the group exchanged nods of agreement.

‘What about your girlfriend?’ Steve asked. ‘You must have a girlfriend. A bloke like you.’

His brain hurt with the effort of invention. ‘Yes. She’s called Emily. But she’s a nurse. She’s got to work over Christmas.’

‘You poor thing. It must feel really lonely being here on your own,’ Tara said.

‘But maybe there are compensations in Amsterdam for a man on his own,’ said Steve.

Martin said nothing. But the others all laughed.

‘Have you had a try, Martin? It doesn’t cost that much,’ Patrick, he thought it was Patrick, said.

He felt himself flush, although his face was already warm from the fire and the gin.

‘Oh no. I wouldn’t want to do that. I’ve seen them, though. I... Well. It’s very public, isn’t it?’

Tara’s face softened into understanding.

‘Yes. It is . . . . And it ought to be something really private, just between two people without a crowd of tourists gawping through the window.’

He gave her a grateful smile and she reached out and stroked his shoulder.

Change the subject, he thought.

‘Have you seen Benny Hill in Dam Square? I was tickled pink. My granddad always loved him. We all loved him. They’ve got him on the door at Madame Tussauds. Well... What I mean is they’ve got a waxwork of him dressed as the doorman.’

‘I know what,’ Steve said. ‘One more round here and then we’ll all go and say hello to Benny. Great lad. Fantastic Englishman.’

‘I know another bar on the other side of Rokin,’ Patrick said. ‘We can go there next. Benny’s on the way.’

Steve insisted on taking a picture on Martin’s mobile of Martin with his arm round Benny. He was finding it hard to stand without wobbling and he was sure he had blinked. But when Steve handed it back to him and he squinted at the close-up image, it was nice: Benny his own saucy self and Martin with an affectionate shy smile.

The others crowded round the comedian admiringly, patting him on the back with such enthusiasm that the real-life woman in the ticket office shouted at them to stop.

‘Come on. Over to The Rooster. They have great jenever there.’ Patrick was already on the move, crossing the broad street with little regard for the bikes and trams.

Martin looked round the square, even more bleak and depressing now it was dark. It was still raining and the thought of a warm room and some food suddenly seemed attractive. His head was gyrating.

‘I ought to be getting back to my hotel. It’s getting late. I’ve had a lovely time but I think... I... I’ll let you carry on without me now.’

‘No, no. Don’t be a spoilsport. We’re having a fab time. We’ll get some food later. There’s a great Indonesian on the Singel. Not far from here. You must try rijsttafel.’ Tara caught hold of his arm and looked up into his face. The sheen from the rain made her look younger, and vulnerable somehow. What a sweet little thing she was.

‘I suppose you’ve got stuff to do that’s a shed-load more interesting,’ Steve said with a barbed edge.

‘Well. No, actually. I suppose you’re right. There isn’t anything I need to do.’ He had nearly said ‘better to do’ but stopped just in time. What was he going to do back at the hotel, anyway? Eat a meal on his own and then go to bed with his book?

‘Yes. You’re right. Of course you’re right. What else have I got to do? Of course I’ll come with you to the pub.’

‘Good. Come on. Let’s go.’ Tara squeezed his arm as she took hold of his elbow and helped him across the street. A minute or two later he could feel the warmth of her hand right through her glove and his jacket sleeve.

‘Here we are,’ Patrick said and ducked into a doorway that Martin would not have noticed if he had been on his own.

Inside, the room had much the same feel as the previous bar: lighting low but warm, a wood fire burning at the end of the room, hundreds of glinting bottles on shelves behind the counter. The group made for the fireside, Tara still holding Martin’s arm, while Steve went to the bar to order the drinks.

‘Same all round?’ he called as the barman said hello.

They took off their coats and settled on the stools round the fire. Martin made sure that he sat beside Tara, whose face now looked flushed and bright in the glow from the burning timbers.

Martin held back from the drinking ritual until the others had sucked the top centimetre out of their tulip glasses. When he stood for his turn something had gone wrong and he could not aim his lips properly, coming in too fast, trying to correct at the last minute and knocking the glass over, spilling the liquid onto the tray. He heard the others cheer and saw Steve get up.

‘I’ll fetch you another one.’ The voice sounded far away but sympathetic.

He could not understand why his forehead hurt. He lay on his back trying to work things out, and then patted his face gently with his three middle fingers. There was some kind of soft patch there. Pain flared and he had to smother a yelp.

He was not sure where he was. He hoped that somehow he had managed to get back to the hotel but he had no memory of the journey. Gingerly he squeezed his eyes open and they were assaulted by light from the window. That hurt, too. Everything ached. His tongue felt fused to the roof of his mouth and he was desperate for water.

By turning his head very carefully he could see his own suitcase standing against the wall. So he was in his hotel room.

Now he became conscious of another source of pain. It came from his chest. It was sore and stinging there, too.

The smarting on his forehead and across his chest bothered him more than his throbbing head. He needed to know what was wrong. A hangover was quite common, he knew what that felt like even if it was horrible. But this was different and disturbing and he had to find out.

Slowly he sat up in bed, wincing with the increased pain in his head and stiffness in the rest of his body. He swung his legs round and let them down to the floor. Holding on to the headboard he pulled himself up and stood for a moment or two catching his balance.

He looked at his watch: 11 am. Only 10 am in Watford. But Christmas Day.

Reflected in the bathroom mirror his face was a disturbing sight, even without the rectangular, bloodstained white patch in the middle of his forehead. His skin looked sweaty and pale and the whites of his eyes were criss-crossed with red blood vessels. But it was the alien attachment that was most worrying. It looked like a dressing. Probably some kind of graze. I must have fallen over, he thought.

With an unsteady hand he picked at a corner of the fabric and slowly, painfully pulled it back. The skin underneath was inflamed lurid pink and looked unhealthily moist. As he brought his face nearer to the mirror he made out amid the pink a dark blue vertical stripe bisecting his forehead, above his nose. A few tiny spots of dried blood dotted the surface. He peered more closely. At the bottom the stripe broadened into a triangle. It looked like an arrow-head. It was an arrow-head. An arrow, pointing down. Without thinking he raised his eyebrows and felt a piercing twinge.

How did it get there and why was it so painful?

Now his anxiety moved to his sore and tingling chest. He took off his jacket and shirt to expose a second, larger piece of white fabric. Underneath was another angry reddened area. This also had some kind of design worked in a darker colour, more complex than the one on his forehead.

The lines slowly formed an image in his brain. A face, a human face. The features, although crudely drawn, were still very recognisable. A familiar saucy grin. Smiling at him from the mirror was the face of Benny Hill.

He lurched into the bedroom and slumped on the bed. After a while an object on the table caught his attention. He got up and crossed the room. The plump green and white tube carried the name *Bacitracin*. Underneath was a note. 'Keep klean. Use this creme,' it said. At the top of the note: ***Botticelli Tattoos***.

Now he spotted another piece of paper, not far from the first.

'Something to remember us by. Hope you like it. Happy Christmas.'

The signatures were a jumble but he could just make out Tara's name and possibly that of Patrick.