



“What am I doing? Why am I going to Amsterdam? I should be going to the airport! I must be crazy!” screamed Marieke at the confused man she had caused to bump into her by abruptly changing directions away from the waiting train.

“Pardon, Mademoiselle.” He grabbed her arm to keep her from falling and then trotted off gently shaking his head.

Marieke headed for the down escalator as the loud announcement, first in French, then German, which she ignored, and finally English, “Track three. The approaching train is the Thalys Speed Train to Amsterdam, departing at 3:07. First class in Section A and B. Second class C and D. Restaurant car is mid-train. All passengers must have reservations.”

As she hurried to escape, the platform conductor in his red hat grabbed her by the arm, shaking her back into reality. “Miss, this is your train you asked me about. You only have two minutes to get on board. Here, I will help you.” He grabbed her suitcase and raced to the coach marked 120. Marieke ran after him.

“But...I have decided not to go,” she said to the now empty platform. She ran to him fully intending to grab her suitcase, but it was inside. She held out her hand for it, and he pushed her up into the car. The door slammed shut. He blew the whistle, and the train jerked forward, forcing her to grasp the nearest hand bar to keep from falling.

Marieke started laughing. “Destiny has to be a step ahead of me! O.K. Decision made. Let’s make the most of it!”

She fell into her seat as the train curved to go through the first tunnel, rattling the windows enough to chatter her teeth. Not crowded at this time of day, the train’s first class compartment had only one other person in it, absorbed with his newspaper, not aware she existed. As the train went through the Belgian countryside, she stifled her loud sigh in time to make it a cough and go unnoticed. She questioned her reflection in the window again. *Why this sudden great desire to go somewhere alone?*

*Why Amsterdam?*

The glare caught the straight, chin-length, blond hair, but the face was not there. Smiling she realized not even her reflection wanted to be seen. A shiver ran down her spine. Wanting to sense a feeling of relief and excitement at the prospect of waking or eating or talking or doing what and when she wanted, she was aware only of an urgent drive, stronger than with her work at the World Tower Bank.

Marieke stretched her long, slender legs out as far as she could, sliding them under the facing train seat, like a baby bird stretching its wings for its first flight. She had not done this since childhood. Her relaxing muscles melted her stress away, leaving all the bickering behind her.

Belgium's long conference had extended into late night sessions, early morning planning breakfasts and drawn out lunches. Everyone had battled to make his or her idea or theory the main one to be understood and launched, but now escape! Marieke knew she should not have this time free. The faxes had flooded the slim space under her hotel room door until it no longer opened smoothly, when she found a moment to seek solace.

Each fax had been from a different person in Washington. Each fax had told her of a new project now waiting on her desk. No, she did not have this time free, but was stealing it and had made sure no one knew where she was going...to Amsterdam, but did not know why; only compelled to go.

Rounding a curve caused the sun to reflect her sparkling, crystal blue eyes looking at her. *Are they squinting or smiling? Mom always said my eyes smile when I am happy on the inside.* The thought broke her reflection's whole face into a real smile, framing full rounded lips and pushing her cheeks into perfect balls, each accented with a deep dimple. Her smooth skin had a healthy glow although the tan from summer had begun to fade. She laid her head back against the seat, closed her eyes allowing a happiness to flow through her body.

Slowly her mind went back to the one thing, which had interrupted her feeling of freedom momentarily. Mike's "urgent" phone call causing a bellman at the Brussels's hotel to run to the taxi taking her to the train station and convince her to take the call.

"Hello, this is Marieke Whitteker."

"Hi, honey, when are you coming home? I thought you would be home yesterday, and I told Brad we would join them for a weekend at the Little Inn of Washington on Saturday," his voice trailed off waiting for her to respond.

Today was Thursday. The quick thought had raced through her head to go directly to the airport instead of the train station, board today's flight, take Friday to catch up and go with Mike on Saturday.

"Oh, Mike, I'm sorry but something has come up. I have to go out of Brussels

and won't be able to catch a flight until next Tuesday or Wednesday.

"I'm really sorry, darling, why don't you go without me? You could all play golf, and the dinners at the Inn are so incredible."

"No, of course not. I'm not going without you. Why do you have to work so damn hard, anyway? You are a slave to that department. You need some time off."

"You couldn't be more right and I am going to do something about it," she quickly answered, thinking of her luggage waiting outside. "I have to run now, Mike, you caught me at a very bad time. I'll call you next week to let you know my exact flight schedule. I love you and miss you. I'll be home soon," hurrying, to stop him from asking her where she was going. "Bye for now, call you soon," and hung up, something she had never done before. *Mike must have held the phone out staring at it, cussing like he had just missed the putt to win the hole.*

"Well, you must really want these few days," Marieke had said to herself, but realized she had spoken the words out loud when the bellman said, "Excuse me?"

"Thank you for watching my things," she said and handed him a hand full of Belgian francs as he helped her into the taxi. Waiting until the door was shut, she then told the driver to go to the train station. She had quickly planned this reprieve and realized by taking the train, no one would be able to find her, to call or fax.

Upon arrival in Amsterdam she realized she had no hotel room reserved. She pulled her luggage following the signs to a taxi, telling the driver to take her to the hotel on Dam Square. He said something, perhaps the name of the hotel now and speeded off as if in the Grand Prix. Driving to the hotel, she leaned the right way at all the turns, sensing them ahead. Even her body recognized the location immediately. Quickly they arrived at Dam Square. She knew why he was so irritated; the short drive meant a low fare. She looked at the unknown name, acknowledging this must be what he said before, the Grand Krasnapolsky. She also realized she had no Dutch money.

"Will you take American money or can you wait for me to change money inside the hotel?" she asked slowly but nicely.

"Twenty American," he said flatly.

Another cold thought hit her, *what if the hotel is full?* "Can you wait a moment to see for sure if they have my reservation?"

"Ya," was more like a grunt. *I wonder how much more he's going to charge.*

As she entered the hotel, nothing looked familiar. She asked the bellman to please watch the taxi and her luggage until she could check in, not trusting the taxi driver completely.

The small mustached reception clerk was very nice, but said, "I am sorry, but there are no rooms available." After he saw the look on her face and heard her "but this is where I used to stay with my parents...", he told her, "Please wait while I speak

to the reservation manager in case there has been a cancellation.” He disappeared through a door behind the desk.

“You are in luck,” he returned smiling. “There has been one cancellation, and it is now for you, Mademoiselle.” She returned a sweet smile. *If he could purr, I’m sure he would have.*

“Wonderful. Now, I need help with the taxi driver. He is not too happy with me. Can you please arrange to pay him with a good tip, but the correct amount for bringing me from the train station and waiting? I have no Dutch money and need to exchange some here.”

With a great flair, he pushed the bell, and another bellman came from behind a desk. They spoke in Dutch, harsh to her ears, and the bellman hurried away with some Dutch bills the clerk had given him, while Marieke signed the check-in register. After the half hour procedure of checking-in, exchanging money, making sure both the bellmen and the clerk were duly tipped and taxi amount repaid, she was taken to her room and given instructions of how to find CNN on the television. Then Marieke was alone in a great room overlooking Dam Square.

“I’m back,” she stated to the walls. The memories flooded in piling on top of each other. She had to shake her head to take them one by one. She watched from the window at the flow of people, streetcars, tour buses, trucks, and cars racing by, but the scene was blurred by the memory of sitting there with her mother watching the occasional car or pedestrian. What a change there had been, but perhaps it was because now the weather was still warm as the tourist season was beginning to ebb. At that time, it had been winter.

Across Dam Square stood the outline of the New Church of St. Catherine’s and the Royal Palace next to it. She remembered her mother telling her the history of these two buildings. The New Church was where all the royalty had been enthroned, which always conjured up many fanciful scenes in her young imagination of the queens being crowned there. She remembered the difference in the paintings in the Rijksmuseum showing how the Royal Palace stood where once the Old Town Hall had been before it burned down 300 years ago. She and her mother passed these two buildings every day of their stay here, and in their many visits to the various museums had seen paintings of the events, which had happened in these two famous buildings.

“That visit was twenty-two years ago because now I am thirty-one.” She talked again to the room as she unpacked telling how she had loved the trip, doing and seeing many wonderful things not found in Texas, where the Whitteker family had lived then. She had actually gone into an old, working windmill, grinding the grain, not like the new, modern slim-line ones with only the propeller-type “sails” on a pole she had seen today from the train window. Clean lines, but no nice base to accom-

moderate an old charming house or mill. "I loved the pair of wooden shoes, which a man had made just my size from a block of wood, but when I tried them on in the hotel, both Mom and Dad had said they made too much noise. We also went to a cheese factory and saw all the cows living in the barn for the winter, yet everything in the barn was spotlessly clean. One of the most amazing memories I have of Holland are the shining, clean windows to show off the starched lace curtains." She went to finger the starched curtains. "What wonderful, warm, fuzzy thoughts."

The hot shower relaxed her. Brushing and drying her hair, she thought, *I'm glad it's shorter now. Ever since Junior High it's been long, but when this job came along, I knew I needed a more sophisticated look with a European flair.* She pulled the shoulder length hair slightly under as the dryer hummed.

She still used the same mannerism by running her whole cupped hand from forehead back to top of head to push the hair out of her face when she had leaned over or turned suddenly. Mike had said it was that movement and her distinct blue eyes, which had attracted him four years ago when as the last passenger to board, she hurriedly came down the plane's aisle and stopped at his row. She frowned, looked at her boarding pass, looked at his seat number, back at her boarding pass and finally directly at him.

As she opened her mouth to speak, he asked, "Is this your seat? I thought the door had closed so I moved over to the aisle." He had gathered up his book and moved over to the middle seat. Quickly she put her briefcase under the seat in front and settled into the aisle seat, flicking her hair back with her free hand as she straightened up.

"When you did that," he told her later, "I knew I had fallen beyond recovery."

"Taxi drivers in this city should have to take a test in English on which airport is in which direction!" she had spouted completely disgusted and out of breath.

"Did you end up at JFK?" he voiced, too hastily.

"Almost," she had answered, "but I caught him when we passed an area I knew was en route to Kennedy."

That first conversation started their long relationship. It had been easy to keep the conversation going and find out all the answers each wanted to know about the other such as if traveled to New York often, if lived in Washington, D.C. and even both in Georgetown, but worked in offices downtown. They had both slyly searched the other's hand for a wedding ring, thus each thought the other may be available. They had talked the entire flight, and only after landing at Ronald Reagan National did Mike finally ask, "Maybe we could have lunch someday soon?"

"That would be nice," she added and smiled, calling attention to her full lips.

As they waited to deplane, they quickly exchanged business cards. He had looked at the card and rolled his brown eyes in a gesture of pleasant surprise, "International

Finance Coordinator of Accounts, quite impressive, Ms. Whitteker.” He had told her later that he had been glad he had already suggested the luncheon date before he saw her card, so she knew it was she and not her position interesting him.

Mike had waited only two days and then called her. “Remember me? The guy who stole your seat on the airplane?”

She immediately conjured his face onto the paper in front of her; “Now how could I forget such a dashing thief?” she teased knowing his dark eyes must be smiling.

“I decided to call before you forgot who I was. How about lunch tomorrow?”

“Sorry, I can’t. I have a lunch meeting, but I can the next day if that’s OK,” she quickly added.

“Great! What time is best for your schedule? Wait, don’t answer. How about from ten until two? A nice, long lunch?”

She laughed. “Dreamer! I am lucky if I can be gone an hour.”

“I’ll take it as a starter,” he said. “Just tell me the place and time and I’m there.”

“If my office building is convenient for you, then I could meet you in the lobby at eleven-thirty so we can beat some of the crowd. My afternoon meeting doesn’t start until one o’clock. Is that OK with you?” she was penciling in his dark hair, eyes and long eyelashes as she spoke.

“Can’t wait. See you in two days at 11:30. Bye now,” he ended quickly for fear she may find another meeting to interfere.

“Bye, thanks for calling.” She put the receiver back on the phone and realized he had impressed her from his deep voice to the dimple in his chin. She remembered his deeply tanned face. His long, thick eyelashes made it difficult to see if his dark eyes were brown or almost black, but they twinkled with mischief, which caused her memory not to be able to sketch his nose or mouth. One thing she knew, he was very handsome. His athletic build had not gone unnoticed either. She had opened her purse and found his card, Michael Boynton, Windsor Capital Investment, Account Advisor. He had been so easy to talk to and definitely must be a salesman, probably a very good one.

For the next year and a half, they had both acted with restraint in moving too fast with their relationship. Her busy schedule did not leave a lot of extra time for him, and his travel to a Northeast clientele limited his Washington stays. Gradually it became the natural thing to find precious time to spend together while accepting the other’s work schedule as a way of life. They decided to move to a new apartment together and spent a month of weekend days searching for just the right place with enough “space” for both to have room to work alone and respect the other’s work habits. They thought it was meant to be and neither considered it any differently for the next two years. Their new friends were couples with mutual interests, replacing old friends who might be incompatible with the other.

It was an easy relationship, but neither had pushed for more commitment. As she thought about this, her lips formed the question, "Why?"

"Enough," Marieke told her memories, "Enough for tonight." She smiled as she went to bed, realizing she had not even eaten, but felt full from all her memories. "Tomorrow will be a special day, my special day just for me." She went to sleep knowing where her first visit would be, but only after a big Dutch breakfast.

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"The Dutch really know how to serve a breakfast," exclaimed the lady ahead of her in the buffet line.

"They certainly do," Marieke commented as she looked at the amount of different items on the counters. There were kippers prepared in every way to an abundance of meats, piles of cheeses, hot and cold cereals, many kinds of yogurt, eggs any style, mushrooms, and breads of all shapes and sizes. She was so hungry and even embarrassed herself with the amount of food already on her plate. Sitting at a quiet table by the window, she could watch the people passing by, many scurrying to arrive at work on time.

*How lucky, she thought, Friday, and I'm not the one trying to finish everything, which has piled up all week. She always hated to leave things undone at the end of a week, knowing it would just make too many things to start the next week, and then she shuddered as she thought of all the things piling up for her now. No her thoughts continued, this is my precious time, and I will not have any more thoughts like that.*

As she finished her second cup of rich, dark coffee, she planned the start of her day, deciding to let the rest take care of itself as she slowly went along. The concierge gave her various options to reach the Rijksmuseum, the first place on her list. He had marked many streetcar numbers on a city map, circling the hotel's and the museum's locations.

"Our many streets ringing the city can be very confusing, and we don't want to lose you. Put this in your purse. Show it to anyone walking or a taxi driver to help you return later." Then he gave her a card with hotel information in English and Dutch and wished her a good day.

She walked outside into the sunshine. Instantly, she decided to save her feet for the museum and joined the local people taking the streetcar. She did not remember having ever taken a streetcar in Amsterdam with her mother; during their stay, they always had a driver who drove them everywhere.

As she walked to the entrance of the museum from the streetcar stop, she remembered driving through the tunnel under the huge museum, but now it was blocked. "Progress," she thought, "is not always the most romantic thing."

Before entering a room inside, she sat down on a bench to study the museum

map, which was inside the guidebook she purchased with her entrance ticket. She knew she was searching for something in particular and had felt it from the moment she decided to come to Amsterdam. Now she was on a mission, hurrying through all the pages of the pictures looking for one certain one. When it did not show up in the first cursory flip through the book, she slowly looked a second time, but to no avail. A panic feeling started to emerge. She calmed herself, thinking, *Of course, the picture I have seen so often in my dreams and thoughts is not a well-known painting and won't be featured in the museum book.* She closed her eyes trying to remember something about the room where it had been. Every time she had visited the museum, which was many, mostly with just her mother, but once or twice her mother had convinced her father to join them, she had always had them take her to see this one painting again and again.

She pictured it now. It was of moderate size, about three by four feet, and the outstanding color was blue. The beautiful young woman's ornately embroidered, long, satin dress was the same color of her eyes, the blue of a mountain sky in mid afternoon, the color of the deep ice of a glacier, the color of the crayon, which was the shortest in Marieke's crayon box when she was little, her favorite color. The figure sat on a velvet settee. Her one hand folded on top of the other, but in a way to lovingly hold the spray of flowers as lightly as they demanded. The blonde hair had been pulled back with a blue satin bow to match the gown, but still small wisps of curls ringed her face. The skin of her face and neck right down to the low cut dress was so white as though sun had never touched it. The one thing, which had intrigued Marieke, then and now, was the face. It was as though the delicate features were hiding a secret, and the woman did not know whether to smile or frown. If only the artist had made up his mind, then the viewer would be able to finish looking at it satisfactorily. It was that question of happy or not, frightened or not, bored or not, which kept the viewer searching over and over for a conclusion. At least that certainly had kept Marieke coming back and had brought her back once again.

Marieke's thoughts were confused as to which room the painting may have been housed. *Too many years ago.* She decided to start systematically and mark off room after room as she continued her treasure hunt. Her progress was slow as she studied each picture and became intrigued by some to the point of sitting on one of the viewing seats to study the detail or compare two paintings of the same artist. She was enjoying each room and, at times, even forgetting about 'her' painting. No wonder her mother brought her here so much. She would call her mother tonight and tell her the joy she felt following the museum's maze as they had done so often before.

Her stomach told her it was lunchtime, so asked one of the guards the way to the tearoom. While she ate one of the famous open Dutch sandwiches, she looked at the museum map again and realized she had not made a dent in the museum's rooms.

The Rembrandt rooms had taken too much time, and even if she walked quickly through the rest of the rooms, it would be closing time before she was through. *What if the painting was in the last room, and I have no time to look at it as the bell is ringing to close the museum? I'll just have to ask someone, even though I am hesitant to try to describe any painting to someone else, much less one I haven't seen in twenty years except in my thoughts and dreams.*

The description she attempted had no effect on the guard at all, and Marieke almost decided to ask where the way to the administration office. Then a faint glint of recognition waved over the guard's face as he pointed on her map to a room about four away from where she had stopped to break for lunch.

"Try here," he said pointing to the map. "When I worked in that area, I seem to remember a painting like your description."

She thanked him and hurried in the direction of the room. Entering the room, she gave a circular glance around, but did not see anything familiar. There were other portraits of pretty ladies, some in blue, some in red, some in mixed colors, but not 'hers.' Her heart sank as she quickly moved to the next room in case the guard, or more likely, she had mixed up the room on the map. Nothing she remembered was in the next room, so she returned to the room he had sent her. Starting slowly around the room, she looked carefully into the faces of each of the portraits hoping one would be recognizable. She was so busy looking from face to face that she almost missed the sign on the blank wall where a painting had been. Written in Dutch made it impossible to read; she made a mental note of the number.

Disappointment dampened her enthusiasm. She made her way back to the entrance and the information desk. She questioned the lady about the painting, which corresponded to the number on the wall. The lady opened a large catalogue book to the number and read the notation there, then looked up at Marieke and described in English the painting of the lady in blue holding flowers was taken for renovation by request of the donor, and there was no notice of when it will return.

Marieke thanked her, turned and left with a mixture of anger and frustration, murmuring, "Why now, just my luck, damn." She walked down the steps and dodged the tour buses parked there, crossed the street and the bridge. She knew if she kept going in that direction, eventually she would reach the hotel or somewhere near it.