

here.”

“No I am. So I’ll see you at the train station around 4.”

I walked out into the cold air towards the metro where the au pairs supervised children on the pink and purple merry-go-round. I looked back over my shoulder at the café. He’d finally uncrossed his arms.

We decided to go to Amsterdam at the last minute. It was so close, and the stories we heard from others who had returned were too good to be true.

Arriving at Centraal Station late on a Friday night was like getting lost in an outdoor insane asylum where the staff had been run out of town. Even the train conductors were falling down and laughing at invisible pictures on the walls. Combined with the striking modern facilities and architecture, it resembled a carnival from the distant future.

After dropping off our bags in our shockingly pretty budget hotel, we walked eagerly into the night.

“Did you see all the bikes? We should rent one,” R said.

“R, it’s not like Bermuda, you don’t just rent a bike at a corner stand. Besides the guide book says you can walk the whole city in like, half an hour.”

We were really only looking for an ATM to pay the concierge for our room, and naturally, found

ourselves in the heart of the Red Light District by accident. Out of every corner and every sex shop, guys in black clam diggers and gold chains begged us to watch the live sex shows. The streets were so small that we wound up brushing up against every tourist and Dutch alcoholic – you could get high just circling the block.

“Oh, there’s the Bulldog! The guidebook says it’s like the McDonald’s of smoke shops.” I made a mental note to never say “the guidebook says” again.

“We should try it.”

“Really? Right now?”

“Why not? That’s what we came for and I don’t really see any ATMS anyway.” R was right. The closest thing to an ATM around there was the 25 cent Rent-a-Porn machine.

The menu at the Bulldog organized cannabis by country. R chose the weakest from Thailand and I opted for the hot chocolate. The last time I smoked, I got lost in a massive panic attack, sitting at the computer for hours and searching the web for all the possible fatal diseases I might have contracted. It happened one of the first months I was with R, and I remembered looking at him before I fell asleep in my haze, feeling so lucky to have met him before I died.

Two Thai sticks and hot chocolates later, we left the wooden enclave of the Bulldog, and found ourselves on the edge of a canal lined

with houseboats. I saw a man in a dusty grey jacket smiling at me and I reached for R’s hand. But I couldn’t find him. He’d disappeared. All I saw were the broken neon lights outside the sex shows, horrifying in their unapologetic neglect for love and emotion. The city had abandoned hope for normalcy, and rejected me, with my searching and my aspirations, as a member. Everyone around me was sad and huddled in darkness, the red lights setting their faces ablaze with grief.

I ran to one of the houseboats, only to bump into the smiling man in grey. He smelled like chocolate, and I realized it was R. I hadn’t moved at all; the city itself had collapsed before my eyes while I stood motionless.

In the morning, I sat with R in a corner shop near the flower market while he puffed away—I neglected another go and read my guidebook cover to cover.

Our last trip came from a book we’d once seen around Christmas in New Jersey. A white church in Mykonos on the Greek Islands sat on its cover, overlooking the turquoise water of the Aegean. We’d sat on the floor of Barnes & Noble, bundled in our winter coats, turning every page.

Our hotel owner picked us up at the airport in an off-white van that smelled like fish. He seemed to enjoy testing out his English on us.

His name was Antonios.

“You’ve been before to Greece?”

“No, first time. It’s gorgeous.” The tiny main roads turned into even tinier white cobblestoned streets surrounded by clusters of eerily perfect block houses. I spotted a Starbucks.

“Oh you see? Yes, only a couple of months now. Not so popular. Not good coffee, I think.”

For the first time in our six-month long trip, R’s face was truly frozen in disbelief. We’d arrived at sunset, and as we crested the island’s central hill we had a clear view of the town circling the central port. R’s eyes were shining, reflecting the white of the city, and I wondered how hard I was willing to try to make his eyes light up like that.

Antonios’ Guesthouse was a group of dusty rooms, all with views of the sea. As usual, we dropped our bags without unpacking and headed down the hill. There were cats everywhere, in every sunlit alley and on every flower-filled balcony. The gypsies poked their heads out from child-sized blue doors.

“I want to live here. I want to have a house here, and spend every summer here.” R kept trying to bottle the feeling, the beauty of it. I recognized the sentiment, the struggle to articulate something, and the frustration in knowing it would never leave the tip of your tongue.

We were there for three cloud-

Love in a Strange Place

BY MOLLY FRIEDMAN

You never realize how beautiful your boyfriend is until he's on an airplane, surrounded by the ridiculously ordinary population. It made him sparkle. He seemed to melt into his seat, with his black sweater and unseasonably tan skin. Most people said we passed for brother and sister – I'd never figured out whether or not that was a good thing.

I leaned across the aisle to kiss him just as one of the British flight attendants began charging down the row, informing us of our position on the runway.

I looked at the empty seat next to R. We'd requested seats next to each other, but instead got two across the aisle. We hadn't switched, despite the empty seat.

There's nothing more cliché than an American couple spending Valentine's Day in Paris. I'd been already, like every East Coast preppy girl,

weened on Audrey Hepburn's style, elementary school French classes, and two parents so hopelessly in love that romance was the family's clumsy second language. R, on the other hand, grew up in New Jersey without even a sister to uphold Paris' myth of love and adventure.

We were both spending a semester abroad in London, and since this was our first diversion, we'd packed too much. R wound up carrying most of our luggage up and down the hills of Montmartre.

"Oh my god there is so much dog shit everywhere. I can't even see where I'm stepping."

"Yeah well maybe try walking in the street or something."

"No, all those scooter guys are speeding by everywhere."

R tried to imitate one of them, but all the bags got in his way.

"Well I don't know what to tell you. Dogs go to the bathroom, and no one has to pick it up. Would you