



Introduction

So the college got this villa in Provence. Many bedrooms, heated pool, middle of a vineyard, two minutes from a perfect village called Rognes. The gig was for art history and French professors. I'm an English professor, but thanks to a couple of deluded newspapers, I'm also a travel writer, so I figured I had a shot, if I could come up with a good research proposal. "Travel Writing," looked a bit thin, so I tossed in an allusion to Graham Greene, added a colon, and my project became: "Old Colonials vs. New Economies: Blurring Borders in the Post-modern Post-Nation State Euro-Transitional Era."

A week later the phone rang. It was Dean Isaacs. "Congratulations," she said.

"Thank you." I said it warily. That greeting from a dean is usually followed by something like, *We'd like you to chair the campus-wide committee and write a very long report assessing how our technological infrastructure is keeping up with the demands of higher education in the twenty-first century.* But this time it really was good news. Not only had I earned a week's stay at the villa in Provence, but my proposal so intrigued the committee that I had been awarded a Pearlstine Grant in the amount of \$1,000 to help defray research expenses.

"Hey, that's great," I said.

"You will need to submit receipts of your expenses, have a visible product by September 1, and give a Baden lecture in October."

"It will be an honor."



“What’s a visible product?” Janet asked, when I told her the good news.

“It’s whatever I write,” I replied, not at all defensively.

“You didn’t back yourself into a corner with a bunch of crap about postmodern this and postmodern that when you have no idea what you mean, did you?”

I gave her a look of innocent bewilderment.

“I thought so.” She shook her head sadly. “And what are *research* expenses?”

“I’m a travel writer. *All* my travel expenses are research.”

“Aren’t they tax deductions anyway?”

“But, but . . . it’s a Pearlstine.”

“So, basically,” she concluded, “you offered to do a bunch of extra work that you have no idea what it entails for what amounts to no money at all.”

“You don’t understand academe,” I said.

“I understand it better than you do.” She spun on her heel.

“No, you don’t,” I retorted saucily, almost loudly enough for her to hear.

She turned back. “And don’t you *dare* set me up as some kind of a snippy foil just for the sake of narrative exposition unless you say how smart I am and mention my kicky new hair cut.”

My wife Janet is really smart and has a kicky new hair cut.

Who goes to Europe for only one week? Not us. Not with a Pearlstine in my pocket. Being a student of geometry and cartography, I configured our stay as a large semi-circle with Paris, our gateway, at the center. We got a rental car at DeGaulle and drove straight north to Amsterdam. Four days later we headed east and south, inscribing an arc along national borders to the Alsace. After a couple of days studying that transnational bio-region, we saddled up our Fiat for the long day’s drive south and west to join my colleagues for a week in Provence.



Meanwhile, the English professor and some time financial wizard has figured out how to use the Pearlstine without just taking money out of one pocket and putting it in another. Travel and lodging are fully deductible expenses for a professional travel writer such as myself, but restaurants and entertainment are only 50% deductible. So my insight is to submit only F& B (food and beverage—that’s travel industry shorthand) and entertainment receipts as Pearlstine research, and save the rest for the tax man. One thing I’ve learned as a professional travel writer is to keep all of my receipts, and some of other people’s, for tax purposes.

I spread out my various receipts across my desk, arranging them chronologically. Already they had the quaint air of antique scrip. It was the millennial year, the twilight of the guild and the franc. Some receipts also put the price in Euros, in small print, a harbinger. I separated out the slips for car rental, gasoline, highway tolls, got rid of the hotel bills and all extraneous expenditures, until only an unblemished line of restaurant receipts remained. Nineteen of them. I translated them from their various currencies to a satisfying total of nine-hundred and five American dollars. This would work out nicely. Thank you, Mrs. Pearlstine.

Now about that visible product thing.

The late Mickey Mantle once said, “If I’d known I was going to live so long, I would have taken better care of myself.” That applies to me and note-taking. Specifically, to me and note-taking about dining experiences in Europe. For most of my dining experiences, the receipts are all I have to spur my memory. Therefore, my guide, my inspiration, my visible product even, must be the receipts themselves. Nineteen receipts will stand in for the nine muses in this narrative free-fall across the Continent. And anyway, this is not about restaurants. They are merely the mile markers for a journey where gastronomic recovered memories will spur epiphanic insights into post-nation states in the Euro-transitional era. Or something like that.



Eating Europe: A Meta-Nonfiction Love Story by Jon Volkmer
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Part One



1 Golden Tulip Bar: \$7.89

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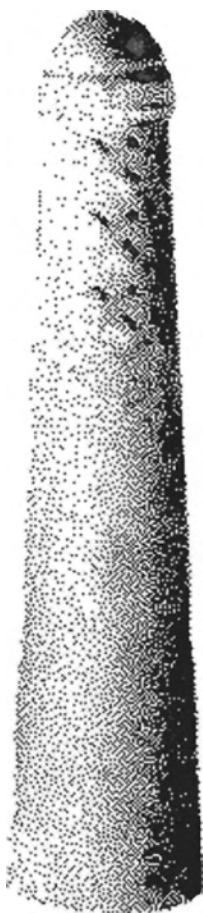
The oddity of Amsterdam is that we spent four days there and have only three receipts to show for it. The scarcity might be attributable to the overwhelming cultural and historical significance of this Great European Capital. The endless splendor of the Rijksmuseum, with all those Dutch Masters; the

Van Gogh Museum; the terrible touching beauty of the Anne Frank house. These monuments are surely reason enough for awestruck tourists to lose their appetites. And for those times when one needs a shot of quick energy, there are coffee houses located on practically every street. These are not grab-and-go Starbucks stands, but cozy dens with upholstered chairs where service is languid and customers feel welcomed, even encouraged, to lounge back and speculate on the many euphonious words of the Dutch language. *Hoogerbrugge*, for instance. Odd that I never bothered to collect a receipt from any of these

pleasant respites, nor from any of the delightful street vendors we discovered upon finishing our coffee breaks, where we stuffed our pie holes with falafel to the point of acute gastric discomfort.

Exhibit A is a receipt from the Golden Tulip Bar of the Hotel Krasnapolsky. Two beers, one pilsner, one wheat. The Krasnapolsky is one of the best places in town. I knew that because I stayed there on my only other visit to Amsterdam, twenty-five years ago. I was nineteen. I had relatives in the hotel business. The face of the Krasnapolsky looks properly out over Dam Square, but it has its butt in the red light district, and for two days so did I, walking at a feverish pace, side-long glancing at the endless cornucopia of horniopia.

On this trip, Janet and I are staying a few doors down Warmoesstraat, and a few stars down the hotel food chain, at The Winston. The Winston is an edgy “art hotel” with murals in the stairwells and where, for a few extra guilders, you get a





room with original art. As they say on the Winston website, if you're looking for tulips and windmills, this ain't the place for you. We were almost scared off by the home page, which features what looks like an enormous marital aid. Turns out to be an image of one of the vertical steel posts that keep drivers off the sidewalks. They're all over A'dam. You can buy postcards with the same visual gag. Our room, "The Dream," features a black and white mural of a man's head with a lot more smaller identical heads growing out of it, forming a tree-like spread, by an artist named Han Hoogerbrugge. We were expecting an Andy Warhol/Yoko Ono kind of crowd, but the hotel is full of 12-year-old British soccer players and their Dads and Mums. The edgiest thing about the place is the shower, which manages to direct a needle sharp spray straight in your eyes no matter where you stand in the cubicle.

I wanted to show Janet the Krasnapolsky, even if we couldn't afford to stay there. We are sitting at the curved bar, on round, suede-topped stools. Behind the bottles of the back bar, in beveled glass mirrors, we catch glimpses of our bar mates and debate whether the platinum blonde with the plunging neckline is the wife or the date of the sixtyish businessman beside her.

"That settles it," says Janet. "Did you see the way she just licked the whipped cream from the cappuccino spoon?"

"Trophy wife?" I speculate.

"Trophy for the night, more likely."

"Probably," I say, "but I bet she didn't meet him here. I think the Krasnapolsky is too posh to let hookers work the bar, even the best hookers."

"Or else he could have just plucked her out of a window."

We decide that he had hired her over the phone from the well-advertised call service owned and operated by a woman's collective that provides its diligent workers in the sex service industry with flexible hours, health care, child care, vacation pay, pension plan, and a way for guilty liberal tourists to be persuaded that the free market economy really does make everything for the best in this the best of all possible worlds,



especially for those women who made so much less money as teachers in Kiev and doctors in Gdansk, and those poor bored girls who were nothing but somebody's grandchild in Bangkok.

No surprise that hookers are on our mind here. Besides residing temporarily in the world's most famous red light district, we have come to this bar directly from Janet's Unsettling Encounter with the Prostitute. This encounter did not involve any F&B. There is no receipt. However, since it's what sent us scurrying toward the bar as rapidly as we could go, its inclusion is relevant here.

JANET'S UNSETTLING ENCOUNTER WITH THE PROSTITUTE

We are in a shop, somewhere in or near the red light district. The shop is up half a flight of stairs from street level, and borders a narrow pedestrian alley. I don't remember what kind of shop it was, probably a boutique that sold art works, ceramics perhaps, that we were thinking of buying as gifts for our art-loving friends back home. Certainly not one of those shops where walls of video boxes display every kink and fetish, where racks of dog-eared glossy magazines face walls of sex toys shrink-wrapped onto cardboard backing, where more elaborate, expensive, hard-to-figure-out implements are locked behind glass cases, and where a curtained door in the back leads to private booths where who-knows-what occurs. We have no idea what those are like. And definitely not a "Smart Shop," where legal organic and synthetic mood-altering substances are packaged and displayed with an eye to style that would make Pottery Barn jealous, and intense young men with small round glasses and pierced nostrils dispense information on dosage and effects with a precision that would make a pharmacist proud. Likewise, we have no clue what they are like.

Anyway, in our pursuit of pretty gift ceramics, Janet and I drift to different parts of the shop. As she glances through a



large side window, Janet's eyes briefly meet those of a woman looking up at her from another large window on the other side of the alleyway. In the split second that it takes for Janet to avert her eyes, she thinks, *This woman must be one of the prostitutes we've heard and read so much about, who make of themselves window displays in order to sell their services, for surely this would explain why she stands there in her underwear.* And in the same nanosecond she thinks again, *It is not right that I should avert my eyes as if she is too shameful to be looked upon. She is a human being, she is my sister, and I will salute her humanity with a friendly smile.*

But Janet finds that the woman has taken the initiative in intercultural communication by making an unmistakable international gesture. The woman's hand is extended toward Janet, knuckles outward, with all digits curled except the central one, which is vertical and bobbing slightly. My wife's first impulse is to flee. But she stops herself, thinking, *Wait one goddamn minute here.* And so Janet does not flee, but instead looks the woman in the eye and gives her the international gesture of *What in the hell did I do to you?* The woman seems to soften then, just a little. The woman's next unmistakable international gesture is to tap her own forehead hard with her index finger: *Think!*

Janet's reply, delivered from the safety of the Krasnapolsky bar, is "Well, if you don't want to be looked at, don't stand in a display window in your underwear." But Janet is one of those people who cannot stand to have anyone think ill of her for any reason, and the encounter leaves her somewhat shaken. She keeps replaying the scene. Janet wonders if perhaps the woman saw me pass by a moment earlier, and was angry with her for interfering with a potential customer.

I don't think that was it. I have read that for all the Famous Dutch Tolerance, prostitution still carries a strong social stigma. When the woman understood that Janet's smile was not condescending, and that Janet was capable of being hurt by a rude gesture, a humanizing moment ensued. That second gesture—*Think!*—was a kind of outreach, a bridge of



solidarity, one woman explaining to another, “I know this is degrading. I do this for them. You don’t get to smile at me like this.”

And in that, I find both pathos and dignity.