

Romantics

A Story by William Page

At dawn the stunted trees at the back of the house filled with crows. Their cawing woke Ian. It was still before six, but he knew he wouldn't be able to fall asleep again. His face was flushed from the heat. He sat up and then stood with bare feet on the rough wooden floor. The window was only half open, but when he tried to push it further up, it jammed. Outside the crows floated over the roofs and perched in the branches of the trees and on the telephone wires that ran lazily over the tops of the narrow houses. Amsterdam. He was in Amsterdam again.

He went back to the bed and lay down. Vivian had told him that the hot weather was unusual for Holland, especially in September. The heat wasn't even that bad, but the humidity was nearly a hundred percent, and that made him feel like he needed to take a cold shower every couple of hours. He wondered if he could climb down the narrow wooden staircase to the bathroom and shower without waking the friend that had been kind enough to put him up for the night. Vivian had offered her place, but she had quickly added that there was no spare room and, of course, there was the baby, who had lately been given to crying at night. He would have never stayed with her anyway. They met, after he had gotten settled, at a café. As usual, she was late. When she finally arrived, she didn't want to stay because she had the baby and her bicycle. He smiled at the image of her pushing the bicycle with the baby in the harness.

"Of course, it's just perfect that you've come," she said, wheeling the bike around to avoid a car. "Peter's being absolutely dreadful. I'm sure you'll be able to pacify him. You're so understanding when it comes to these things."

"These things? You're leaving him and taking his baby to England."

"Well, it's my baby too. And he can hardly take care of her with the job and all."

"I guess he has a right to object."

"You're not going to take his side are you?"

"Are we drawing up sides?"

"You know what I mean. Besides I thought you were my friend. Since when were you so chummy with Peter? The two of you can't have had more than three conversations." She stopped wheeling the bike suddenly and peered down the crowded street. "Oh dear," she said, feigning concern, "you don't mind if we go through the red light district, do you? I think there's an underground station somewhere around here."

He didn't mind.

They walked on. The streets were crowded. Other people on bicycles pedaled passed them, and the pedestrians on the sidewalk walked, elbow to elbow, in both directions on both sides of the street. At an intersection two cars stopped suddenly because there wasn't space enough for them to pass; the drivers honked at each other. The baby seemed perfectly content to watch the world pass by from her harness. She wore nothing but a diaper. Her chest was bare and her little legs hung above the front wheel of the bike. Ian wondered if she would grow up to be a beauty like her mother. Probably. Though he wasn't sure. Beauty was sometimes capricious. The

most beautiful girl he had ever met was the daughter of a lanky farm laborer with a pock-marked face and a shrewish, overweight Mexican woman.

In the first house they passed a woman stood in the doorway wearing a brassiere, panties, and stockings, all black. She looked bored. In the next house a woman wearing a red negligee sat in the chair that was set up in the window. Her hair was black and long, and her mouth had a delicate downturn and her eyes looked inward.

Vivian was distracted by the thought of a Metro station. She wheeled the bike carelessly, forcing the people coming toward them to move out of her way. Her hair was short, which was new to Ian. She had always worn it at her shoulders before. Her height and long limbs made her look unmistakably British to him. But, as he looked around him, the sidewalk was crowded with tall, thin Dutch women. It occurred to him that if the portraits at the Rijksmuseum were any indication, the people of Amsterdam had been very different in Rembrandt's time.

"I'm afraid we're lost," Vivian said. "I thought for sure there was an underground around here somewhere. We'll have to go back and up to the central station. You don't mind do you?"

They turned around and pushed their way through the crowds, back past the prostitutes, and then over a bridge. The water in the canal was brown and stagnant. A refined, well-dressed woman stopped to make way for them and smiled at him as they passed. She had reddish hair and green eyes.

When they reached a less crowded street, Vivian said, "You mustn't encourage Peter." He walked beside her long confident strides. The sidewalk was wide and the houses were tall and narrow.

"Encourage him to do what?" he asked.

"To hate me, of course. You don't still hate me, do you?"

"I don't remember ever hating you."

"I think you did, for a while. I always manage to bring out the worst in men. I can turn a perfectly civil gentleman into a monster in six months." She laughed at her own remarks, a kind of gulping, hesitant titter.

He was interested. "Was I a monster?"

"You were the best. I admit that. But there were a few weeks where I was certain that you were ready to hit me."

"I think that's unfair. I was never violent."

She laughed again. "Do you remember what that bloody awful psychiatrist told me? That I brought out your dark side because I was afraid of mine."

"And now you've managed to turn Peter into a monster?"

"He's not beating me or anything. He just doesn't understand. He sulks and thinks he's to blame, and I hate that."

"What do you want him to understand?"

"Oh everything. But mainly that I can't go on living this way."

"With so little money?"

"Well, that's part of it. There's baby now. You'll see."

At the station she took the baby from the harness and carried her down the steps while he pushed the bicycle down the iron rut to the side of the stairs. He thought it was too bad she had cut her hair. Her short hair accented the sharpness of her features, and that, he thought, only emphasized the strange, brittleness of her beauty. What he had loved about her was her strange combination of hardness and vulnerability.

Lying on the bed half asleep, it occurred to him that other birds, when they flock together, create an effect of community, but that congregated crows never fail to give him a sense of isolation. He sighed, sat up, and then stood and walked to door and opened it. The house was quiet. He decided to creep down the narrow stairs and shower.

The cold water refreshed him. After he dressed, he made his way to the kitchen and heated water for tea. The kitchen was in back of the house, as was the guestroom. He stood by the window watching the light grow brighter over the tops of houses. The crows were gone, and some swallows had replaced them. They chirped happily and hurried from tree to tree.

Though he liked Amsterdam, he was glad to be going. He would have never come if it weren't for Vivian's letters. At first she attempted to be literary, commenting on the books she managed to read, but when the problems began, she dropped all her pretensions and wrote to him about her troubles with Peter. Why wouldn't he make love to her after they argued? When Ian had been her lover, they had terrible rows, but it never affected their love-making. It was very like Vivian not to take feelings seriously. She loved the drama of a good argument, and then the apologies and forgiveness afterward. It was all good sport, if you could manage to keep your head and not believe it. But Peter took it personally and that perplexed her.

Vivian and Peter's apartment was in the outskirts of Amsterdam. The neighborhood had the feeling of being poor, but respectable. The houses were tall and narrow and rundown. Some children happily played a game with a ball and a stick in the street, but the adults they passed seemed worn out by their lives. Vivian put the bike in a rack on the sidewalk and locked the back wheel to the frame. At the door, with the baby in her arms, she said, "You have to promise not be shocked."

"By Peter?"

"Well that too. But I meant the flat. It's pretty awful."

"It can't be worse than the one I had in Rio."

"I don't know anything about that," she said. "In London you would have been desperate."

She rang the bell. Peter opened the door from the top of the stairs by pulling on a long wire that released the lock. The hallway had been defaced with graffiti, about half of it in English. After climbing the steps, he shook hands with Peter. Vivian carried the baby inside, and the two men followed her into a sitting room. At the back of the sitting room there were French doors that led to a balcony, which overlooked a courtyard. There was a table and three chairs on the balcony, and it was set for dinner. Below, in the courtyard, the grass was sparse and uncut, and there was a great deal of laundry hanging out to dry. Two lines had been stretched the length of the yard, and they were both sagging with wet clothes and sheets.

Peter looked hot and uncomfortable. He was wearing a black shirt, which was open in the front, and jeans. His height was above the medium, even for a Dutchman, but he wasn't exactly thin, as so many of his countrymen were. He was handsome, uncommonly so, and had blue eyes and blond hair. His eyes had a surprisingly intent gaze and were sunk deep in their sockets, and his skin was pale.

He was preparing the dinner, and so the two men strayed into the kitchen, where he sautéed some meatballs he had prepared earlier. After the meatballs were fried, he carefully poured a sauce from another pan over them. Then he switched off the flames and crossed his arms over his chest. "Vivian seems to think that you'll be able to console me."

Ian laughed. "Do you need consoling?"

"I don't understand how she can be so flippant about the whole thing."

"But Vivian wouldn't be Vivian if she wasn't flippant, and we wouldn't like her in the way we do. It's part of her attractiveness."

He stared at the floor in front of him. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "But I don't see why I wouldn't like her more if she changed a few of her most irritating traits."

"I guess she thinks the same about you."

"I guess she would."

"Tell me what's happened."

He seemed to think about this for a moment, but in the end he just said, "There are limits."

"To love?"

"Yes, even that."

"Then all the poets were wrong."

"They didn't have Vivian to test their ideals."

Ian sat on a stool against the wall that faced a window behind where Peter stood. From where he sat he could see the sun over the tops of the houses at the far end of the courtyard. The heat and the shabbiness of the flat made him feel oddly comfortable. "Seriously," he said, "what good can come from condemning her?"

Peter waved his arms. "I don't understand how you two can still be friends."

"Why?"

"Because she left you."

"That's one way of looking at it. From another point of view she allowed me go on to other experiences."

"But that doesn't excuse her. She left you."

"And now she's about to leave you."

"Yes, and she thinks I should be more like you. More accepting. I think you spoiled her or you didn't really love her in the first place or you stopped loving her. If you would have loved her at the time, you wouldn't have just let her go. That's what I think. And I don't see why I shouldn't fight to keep her."

"Nobody's saying you shouldn't fight. Are they?"

"Vivian is. She thinks I should accept her plan of taking my daughter out of the country. But I won't. We're a family. And I have a responsibility to fight to keep my family together."

Ian didn't want to argue with Peter. He was relieved when Vivian was heard coming from the back room. Peter composed himself and waited until she appeared at the open door. She leaned lazily against the door frame, peered into the room at the men, and said, "So how are you two getting on?"

Ian smiled and laughed, but Peter stared at her and bit his lip.

He went back up the narrow staircase to the room where he had slept and lifted his two suitcases up onto the bed. There wasn't much to pack; he had only unpacked a shirt and a pair of trousers, and he wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been so humid. The morning mist had been burnt off, and the sun shone brightly through the windows. He had hardly noticed the room the night before. It was dark by the time he returned from Vivian's apartment. The walls in the room were covered with wood paneling. In the corner opposite the bed there was an enormous desk. He wondered how they had gotten it into the room. It was far too big to fit down the staircase or through the door. He guessed that it somehow came apart.

After his bags were zipped and strapped, he went downstairs, telephoned a taxi, and arranged to have it come around to take him to the airport. Then he carried his bags down to the

front room and set them near the door. His friend had told him not to expect to see him in the morning, so he sat by himself and read. He had an hour before the taxi would arrive, but he was tired and only read for about ten minutes. He wanted lie down and have a nap, but he didn't think that was a good idea, so he went up to kitchen and made himself another cup of tea. While he sat in the kitchen and drank the tea, he remembered the scene after dinner at Vivian's apartment.

"I think we can skip the usual pleasantries," Vivian said, "about the heat and what we've all been doing. It's never very interesting anyway. I think we're all mature enough to talk about what's happened. Peter tried to kill himself two days ago, and I don't seem to be able to communicate to him that he's taking everything far too seriously."

Peter blushed and said with irony, "That was subtle."

"Well, I can't exactly have you rushing out in front of moving trains every day."

"I was out of the way in plenty of time."

"The conductor had to blow the horn and slam on the brakes."

"He didn't even slow down."

"I was mortified."

"Yes imagine: I could have been run over, and then you'd have been oh so embarrassed."

The tomato sauce had left an oily red stain on the plates, but no one was looking at the empty plates and no one seemed to care about clearing the table. Vivian sat with her arms folded across her chest, and Peter was red-faced but triumphant after his last remark. They had just finished eating and were sitting outside on the balcony. The darkness had crept over the sky, and below, in the courtyard, a woman was taking sheets off the line, folding them, and placing them in a basket that was held by a young girl. The air had a moist, earthy smell.

It was Vivian who finally interrupted the silence: "Do say something, Ian."

"I don't know what I can say. I don't know anything about this."

"What's to know? We were standing on the platform in a station outside of the city when Peter suddenly jumped down onto the lines, dashed across two sets of tracks, and plucked a handful of daisies that were growing in the path of an approaching train."

"They were buttercups, not daisies," Peter said.

"As if that matters. They weren't even nice—all dusty and wilted. Then, with everybody watching, he presents me with these awful flowers on one knee as if he were a hero in a soapy romantic novel."

"Two years ago you would have been very delighted."

"I would not have been delighted. Ian, I ask you, would I have been delighted?"

He waited for a moment. In the courtyard below some dirty looking sparrows perched on the clotheslines. They chirped and flew back and forth from the line to a clump of sad-looking trees and shrubs. Finally he said, "Yes, I think you would have been delighted."

The two men watched her, expecting a response, but before she had a chance to say anything the baby, who was in a crib in the front room began to cry. She stood. "There's baby, I'd better go."

Peter divided what was left of the wine between the three glasses. Then the two men talked about the heat and about what Ian had been doing since they last saw each other. He was particularly interested in knowing about the woman Ian had brought to his wedding. Ian described her life. Peter was surprised that at the time Ian had only known her for a few months, and that now she was married to someone else.

"Did you love her?"

"Yes, she's a lovely woman. I write to her occasionally."

"But how can you stand it, I mean that she's married to someone else?"

"He's a friend of mine as well."

"It would drive me crazy."

"What?"

"To see her with another man."

"That. Well, it was difficult the first few times. But then I understood that she was happy. And in the end that was enough. And besides our relationship was never like your love for Vivian. Neither of us believed that the other was the only person who could make us happy."

"I want one woman who is special to me."

"I thought I wanted that at one time as well."

"I want one woman."

"Vivian."

"Yes."

"And if you can't have her?"

"I may convince her yet."

He knew Vivian, and he didn't believe Peter wouldn't convince her, but he didn't say so. After a few minutes Vivian returned, holding the child in her arms. She carried her to Peter and said in a little voice: "Daddy will hold you now," and then gave her to her father. Then she sat in her chair and drank the wine from her glass. She seemed tired and looked older than Ian had ever remembered seeing her, yet she also seemed more relaxed. Her large, thin hands lay in her lap without energy and her head leaned forward a little like a flower drooping on its stem. The dress she wore stuck to her skin because of the heat.

"I'm afraid we must have bored you to death with all this," she said. "I meant to show you some books, but I can't remember much of what I thought about them. I don't believe I've read anything good for ages. You must recommend something."

"I'll think about it," he said, knowing he probably wouldn't talk to her anytime soon.

There didn't seem to be anything more to say. The three of them sat in silence and for a moment they were no longer husband and wife and old lover. They were just three people and a child who were glad to have a moment to be together. The baby seemed content; she sat on Peter's lap and made ahing noises that sounded to Ian like something between an utterance and a laugh. The child's joy made Peter smile.

Vivian didn't smile; she seemed preoccupied. Eventually she stood and said to Ian, "I'll walk you to the station."

Ian stood and thanked Peter for dinner. Then he followed Vivian into the apartment. She collected her keys, and they went down the stairs to door that led to the street.

On the street they found they had nothing more to say to each other. They walked in silence. The night was balmy and the sky seemed cavernous in the yellow street light. Outside the Metro station he took her hand and kissed her cheek. She seemed embarrassed. "I don't know why I'm so tired," she said. "I never felt this way before."

"You'll feel better in the morning."

"Yes, of course, you're right. You're always right." She laughed, "I think that's what I hated most about you. You have an unfailing knack for saying the obvious, which I always manage to miss."

"I hope I wasn't too unbearable."

"No more than me, surely."

"When will you go to England?"

"In a couple weeks. Mother is preparing the house for baby."

“Don’t be too hard him. He’s very young.”

“No younger than I am.”

“Not in age maybe.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. I guess that’s what attracted me to him in the first place. He’s so idealistic, and I wanted to feel that kind of innocence again. I miss being young. It wasn’t so long ago.”

“No. It wasn’t.”

She sighed. “We thought we could have it all.”

“We did. At least for a while.”

“Where are you going this time?”

“Rome.”

“Don’t you miss having a home?”

“Sometimes.” He smiled. “I better go before I say something obvious.”

“Yes, you better. Write to me. And write mother a line or two. She misses you.”

He had made his way down the stairs without looking back, though he felt her eyes watching him.

At the airport the driver waited while Ian found a trolley; then he helped him take his luggage from the trunk. Ian gave him the last of his Dutch money. The terminal was crowded and so he had to wait in line. The receptionist at the check-in counter was a tall, strong-boned woman with dark hair. She lifted the other passenger’s bags from the scale to the conveyer with an ease that pleased him. Though her face was what a less sympathetic man or woman would call plain, she had a simplicity that he found attractive. When his turn came in the line, she spoke to him in a slow but resolute English. “Good morning, I hope your stay in the Netherlands was pleasant.”

“Very revealing,” he said.

Her face showed that she didn’t understand, but her inability to hide her incomprehension only made him like her better. With a reassuring smile, he handed her his ticket and then lifted his bags up to the scale.