

She Read

By Dave Hansen

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I just turned 18 and have stumbled into Amsterdam's red light district and I don't know what to do. I'm not here for sex. I came to see Van Gogh and Rembrandt and maybe a windmill. Now, there are women in windows — full-length, department store-like windows. I can see breasts and darkness. Most are wearing lingerie of some sort, but a few are in uniforms: the police deal, the macho thing. There are hats and ropes and masks and devices — whatever you want. Window shopping. I don't like it. The whole place seems low and dangerous. It's dark and red and smelly, almost like the surrounding rivers. I'm a little scared. I want to flee down some side street and get back to the main part of town but it's not set up that way. You have to walk straight, or so it seems.

And so I walk, looking only out of the corners of my eyes, wondering why they do it. Is it just for the money? My family never really talked to me about this stuff. I only saw it on TV, and that ain't much. About the only sexual thing I ever saw that I wasn't supposed to was when I was about 7 and walked in on my mom and dad. He was on top of her. They weren't moving or anything but he had his underwear down near his ankles. I thought it looked kind of funny — you know, awkward. I remember thinking how she seemed bored, just lying there, almost as if she were imagining something on the ceiling.

So it's hard for me to imagine that the women here like it. My mom and dad did it for love. At least that's what they said, "making love." But these women aren't in love, so I guess they must like to do it. But then that goes against what everyone says: Women have had a rough time because of men and they turn desperate. I don't know. Somehow, I think there's more to it than I can possibly know. I feel ignorant. Indeed, sometimes I feel like I'm not part of this reality, that I've been sheltered, cut off, imprisoned in some suburban, cul-de-sac of the soul. I feel deprived. I want to feel something real. Fuck art. I'm glad I didn't go to the museums.

Suddenly I see her. She's young and cute and — she doesn't belong. What's wrong with her? She looks normal. She's lying on a sofa, reclined and reading, but I can't tell what. God, she's reading! She's not supposed to be doing that; she's supposed to be acting nasty or something. I'm standing dumbstruck in the middle of the lane, so I walk over to a nearby alley to watch her. I feel like a peeping Tom. I can't believe she's there. Maybe she just sits in the window to attract customers and then has other women do the business. She looks so clean and unconcerned. Uh-oh, she just lifted one of her legs and put it on the back of the sofa. Her gown has slipped down her leg near the center of her — I have to go. I can't do this anymore. It's wrong; it has to be.

I walk away quickly and realize there is a warm wetness down there.

My hands are cold. What am I doing? This is sick.

The end of the street is nearing and the women are only on the street corners now. It's not as dark. I feel relieved that I'm out of there.

I catch a cab and head back to my hotel. The room is small and cold. I get in bed and think about the prostitutes. I think about the few women I've been with: my high school sweetheart, the one-night stand, the older woman who picked me up. But I don't think I've ever really been in love. I doubt any young American man can be. We don't know what it is. Somehow, I think prostitutes know.

That woman in the window, she was pretty. I wonder what she was like. I bet she was good. The sheets are warm now and they feel soft. I reach down and start to rub my penis. I wonder what she was like. Man, was she nice or what? God, she was beautiful. I bet if I got to know her she would like me.

I am rubbing faster now and she was fucking nice.

She was beautiful.

Suddenly, everything is wet and warm and beautiful and God, what have I done?

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