

POSTCARDS

from

NO MAN'S LAND

WINNER OF THE
CARNEGIE MEDAL



CHAMBERS
AIDAN

POSTCARD

Amsterdam is an old city
occupied by the young.

Sarah Todd



Not knowing his way around, he set off back the way he had come. But changed his mind about picking up a tram to the railway station, not yet ready to return to Haarlem, and kept on walking along the canal, the Prinsengracht, still too jangled by what he had just seen to notice where he was and too preoccupied to wonder where he was going.

Ten minutes or so later, he came to when a tram clanged across his path. Suddenly, he wanted to be in a crowd, wanted to feel the push and press of people, wanted noise and bustle and distraction, wanted to be taken out of himself—the past twenty-four hours had been a ruffle—wanted something to drink, wanted to sit and drink it at a touristy on-street table while watching the goings-on of passers-by. And, though he could not admit it to himself at the time, wanted an adventure.

His skin prickled and he shivered, not knowing why, for though the day was overcast with a threat of rain, the mid-September temperature was mild, and he was sweating slightly in his anorak, which he wished he hadn't worn, but its ample pockets were useful for carrying money and addresses, phrase book, street map, and such stuff as he needed or might pick up on a day out on his own in a foreign country.

Choosing to turn right across the bridge over the canal, he soon found himself in a bulge of open space, dominated by the bulky frontage of a theater, into which many streets and tramways flowed.

Leidseplein. To one side of the theater, facing in to the rest of the *plein* like an auditorium facing a stage, was a mini-square crammed with tables served by waiters who fluttered in and out of canopied cafés like birds from nesting boxes.

He chose a table on the edge nearest the theater, three rows in, and sat and waited.

And waited. But no one came. What should he do? You're the bloody customer, their job to serve you, don't be such a wimp, assert yourself. His father talking. Shyness, his strangulating shyness, kept him quiet. So he did nothing, but didn't mind, there being plenty to look at. Accompanied by incidental music from a trio in the middle of the *plein*, two butch boys about his own age, one white on fiddle, one African black on tin whistle, and a plump girl, eye-catching centerpiece, squatting on an upturned wastebasket, going rampant with a pair of bongos, long blonde hair flying, eyes closed, tanned arms deliciously bare, rapping hands a blur, roly-poly breasts alive in tight black tank top, white Lycra'd heavy-duty thighs gripping the little battered drums he suddenly envisioned as the willing cheeks of someone's bum. His own perhaps. Hello, where did that come from? Never a hint before, not of himself anyway.

He shifted in his seat and smiled secretly. The pleasure of self-discovery.

I wait for a waiter, but no waiter waits for me, he ditted under his breath to the rhythm of the bongos. Until a slim leather-clad arm intruded a languid finger across his view. A girl's face smiling down at him, questioning, more stunning than she of the cheeky drums. Cotoning on that she was indicating the unoccupied seat beside him, he scrunched up to allow her to squeeze deliciously by, trailing the tantalizing smell of worn leather and warm jeans.

She sat, easing her proportionately long legs (for she was not tall) under the cramped little table, where they grazed his on the way to arranging themselves. More, more, his inner voice pleaded. Ruffled black short-cut hair gave her a boyish look; pale complexion without makeup; loose black leather half jacket over white T-shirt; trim black jeans.

She smiled a thank-you. "British?"

"English."

"I understand. I like it that I'm Dutch."

He shrugged an excuse for his pedantic affliction that some (his father and his sister Penelope aka Poppy) denounced as the tic of a literal-minded bore, and added, "Just meant I'm not Welsh or Irish or Scottish."

"And I'm glad I'm not Frisian or Flemish. Not that I'm against them, only . . ." A glance at the table. "Served yet?"

"No."

She looked behind them, this way, that. Raised a lazy long-fingered hand, the sensuousness of which to a hand fancier like him was enough to induce sexual trauma. Her ease daunted his shaky confidence but notched up his desire. There was also something puzzling about her, a difference from the usual he couldn't quite locate.

"On holidays?" she asked, *holidays* sounding like *holidaysh*. Impediment or something imported from her Dutch? Whichever, he liked it.

"Sort of," he lied, not wanting to go into the whole complicated story.

"Okay to talk?"

There was a deep note in her voice that added enticement.

"Sure. Fine."

A waiter arrived to whom she spoke Dutch.

Then the waiter to him: "*Meneer?*"

"Just a cola, thanks."

"Not a beer?" she said. "Try a good Dutch beer."

He avoided it usually, but when in Rome. "Okay, a beer."

"Trappist?" he thought the waiter said, but supposed that couldn't be right.

She nodded and off the waiter went.

Suddenly, he felt like a nerd sitting there beside her, coddled in his anorak, so stood up, took it off, draped it over the back of his chair. And now his leg nudged hers as he settled himself again. Dare he? Would she? Picking up girls wasn't his style. Not for want of wanting

JACOB TODD IS ABOUT TO
DISCOVER HIMSELF.

Jacob's plan is to go to Amsterdam to honor his grandfather who died during World War II. He expects to go, set flowers on his grandfather's tombstone, and explore the city. But nothing goes as planned. Jacob isn't prepared for love—or to face questions about his sexuality. Most of all, he isn't prepared to hear what Geertrui, the woman who nursed his grandfather during the war, has to say about their relationship. Geertrui had always been known as Jacob's grandfather's kind and generous nurse. But it seems that in the midst of terrible danger, Geertrui and Jacob's grandfather's time together blossomed into something more than a girl caring for a wounded soldier. And like Jacob, Geertrui was not prepared. Geertrui and Jacob lived worlds apart, but their voices blend together to tell one story—a story that transcends time and place and war.



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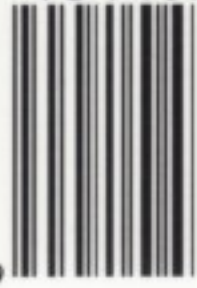
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