SACHA DUMONT'S AMSTERDAM

CHAPTER 1

You step outside Central Station into a sea of bikes, an ocean of bikes - black, basic and battered. They all look the same - worn, weather-beaten, built like two-wheeled tanks salvaged from a muddy canal, sublimely functional and practically indestructible. They are ridden by businessman and hippie alike. Mothers use them to deliver their kids, bakers their bread, glaziers their glass. The old, the young, the rich, the poor - they're all alike when it comes to their big, black, dent-ridden, death-defying Amsterdam bike.

'To understand the karma of the Amsterdam bicycle,' Heinke once told me, 'you have to know a very significant moment in our past. During the war the German army confiscated Dutch bikes to use as their own. To Amsterdamers that was like stealing their babies. They said, 'You can take my drink, my bread, but not my bike!' And then, after the war, Queen Beatrix made the stupid mistake of marrying a former German officer and during the procession people lined the streets not shouting 'God save the Queen!' as you might have done in England, but 'Give us back our bloody bicycles!'

I was thinking of Heinke and our strange, convoluted past as I boarded the No. 2 Tram at the plein outside the station. I knew Amsterdam from childhood memories, stories my mother told me and those carefree days of youth when I lived here as a student. But I never really began to understand the city, its heart and essence, or, as Heinke would have said, 'its curious cablala,' until I got to know him better as an adult rather than a distant and somewhat awkward childhood friend.

I remembered standing at the very spot I boarded the tram and Heinke giving me the benefit of his special and very peculiar insights (whether I wanted them or not).

'Here, the platform where we're standing, the Stationsplein, like the station itself, is a little island built on the mighty River IJ,' he said. 'It's like the stage of an enormous amphitheatre, with the semi-circular rings of dijks defining the area for the spectators. Except it's just the opposite because the performance is not here but there. In fact, this little island, the entry-point for our glorious production, is actually more of a launching pad.'

Then he pointed his long, thin, delicate finger in the direction of the wonderland that lay before us. 'Damrak,' he said, with a trace of disgust, 'the main artery into the lungs of the town. I used to hate that street, that magnificent avenue, given over to the demons of fast food and slow death - bits of factory cow and plastic chicken and genetically altered tomato covered cardboard they call pizza. But then I came to realise that Damrak is the main street of the Universal City, that international ghetto of this global age which could be anywhere - America, Africa, Russia, Japan. It serves as a decompression chamber, a comforting respite for tourists and businessmen who want to feel secure by seeing something they can comprehend and understand and not fear, like a McDonald's hamburger sign. They feel happy and satisfied to spend their money in places like these which are no threat to them - no linguistic, aesthetic or cultural demands are made. So give them this, a peek at the Red Light District, a couple of museum queues to stand in, a quick tour of the Diamond industry, collect the taxes and send them home. That way Amsterdam has more money for social welfare programs and these sort of people don't intrude on me at the Literary Cafe or some quiet spot in the Jordaan where I wouldn't want them to go.'

The No. 2 Tram doesn't go down Damstrat. It makes a little dog-legged loop, selecting the less garish Klaverstraat Niewendijk artery to wind through town, squeezing thinly past three-abreast bicycles and thick herds of pedestrians over bridges that narrow to the point of nothingness. It is a wild ride as no one - not the tram, nor the bikes, nor the pedestrians - deign to give way even when collision is imminent.

'There is' said Heinke, explaining the peculiar Amsterdam physics which prevents serious collisions, 'a special magnetism here. Everything has the same polarity and therefore an invisible shield. Like a drug-induced force field, it protects everyone.' By then, I knew from experience not to ask him what the hell he meant.

I looked at my watch as the tram reached Leidsplein. It was mid-afternoon, a little after three o'clock. Out the window, a small crowd had gathered to see the fire eaters who might have been on the plaza outside the Pompidou Centre in Paris or Leicester Square in London or the Barcelona Ramblas. The circus acts that toured the European cities were strikingly similar, distinguished only by the unstated question - how far will he go now? Will the fire eater finally erupt into flames? Will the sword swallower be disembowelled at last?

'Look how few cars there are here,' Heinke once said proudly, as we passed this very spot several years back, 'In medieval days Leidsplein was where everybody left their horse and cart. Even then Amsterdam had a transport policy that was sensible.'

He was so proud of his city, was Heinke, though he wouldn't admit it. 'Patriotism of any form is the last resort of assholes,' he kept reminding me. 'Isn't that what the English say?'

But he was right about Amsterdam's reluctance to embrace the car. It's the only city I know where the meter maid is a cultural hero rather than an object of derision. People here actually applaud when an errant automobile is shackled like an invading monster, lifted and then towed somewhere to the outskirts to pollute some other's air rather than their own.

Hurtling over Singelgracht, the last in the series of canals that defined Heinke allegorical amphitheatre, the No. 2 Tram arches its way along the narrow Hobbemastraat which cuts diagonally into the museum quarter. Suddenly the bustle of the central city recedes. The buzz of the candy-coloured strobes and the pulsating beat of the shopping district is replaced by quiet, tree-lined avenues.

Along the avenues leading up to Museumplein mothers are picking up their children from several of the nurseries that dot the road. The sun has just come out after having spent a while swallowed by the clouds. A woman smiles. At the corners, where the road widens, people sit outdoors under the awnings of the numerous cafes and brassieres.

The tram stops at Museumplein, by a little plot of pebbly land given over to a collection of kiosks that sit like a small encampment of gypsy traders. The proprietors are standing by their rusty box-like structures. A fey young man - foreign, but not clear from where - is tending his arts curio shop. An older Turkish-looking man has placed an Ola flag into its holder above his stall hoping to attract customers for his ice cream and canned drinks. Across the street people are queued up at the diamond cutting factory for a free guided tour.

Looking out, I can see myself and Heinke sitting on the bench facing the encampment, behind which the new Van Gogh Museum, half completed, is beginning to take the shape of a nuclear power station. We are smoking hand rolled cigarettes and Heinke is beginning to blather on about art and the artist. It is a tune I have heard many times before and that day I had done a good job of filtering it out. But now, curiously, I can hear the words again:

'The Reiksmuseum is the kind of museum I detest,' he said. 'It's like a mausoleum or a graveyard- lilies gilded by the State. But if you really want to know what Amsterdam's about, then you should go to a new room recently set up that commemorates the VOC - the Dutch East India Company.'

Sometimes Heinke could be insufferable, I remembered. One didn't as much converse with him as listen. And between flashes of brilliant insight, he could be incredibly patronising.

But he was also kind and generous. And there was our special link. His parents had put my mother up at the start of the war, just before she was sent off to England. Now his daughter, Marijka, had asked for my help because Heinke was languishing in prison.

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You can email Sacha Dumont at Sacha@germinalproductions.co.uk