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Women in the Windows

Emily Hunt

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In Amsterdam, the buildings look like gingerbread houses that someone has stretched tall and thin, then crammed together, sticky-fingered. Chunky stairs inside are stacked as though they have been cut by a drunk, indifferent to geometry and eager to spiral his way to the roof, hatchet in hand. Across from a house on Reijnier Vinkeleskade, tulip patches run parallel to a muddy canal. I toddled around the rain-soaked grass there at the age of two, throwing crumbs at the ducks, pointing at them and yelling, "Duck!"

I was about ten the first time I saw a prostitute perched in a window. In my memory, she sits upright in a polished Victorian chair. A lace-trimmed, silk negligee cascades from collarbone to mid-calf, only hinting at the valuables underneath. Lids low, she gazes at the street as if waiting for Ingres to park himself on the cobblestones and pull burnt umber and alizarin crimson oils from his coat pocket. The late afternoon paints her gold, sprinkles flecks of light on the pearls that drip from the lobes of her pretty little ears.

At twenty, I found myself back in the Red Light District. Captivated by women standing in the purple glow of windows trimmed in black lights, I wondered whether my parents had hypnotized me over lunch ten years earlier in an attempt to edit freshly stored memories. These were not the Dutch ladies I expected to find peering out of windows. Shifting their weight between four-inch heels and stroking their stomachs swan-wristed, the girls were like Greek sculptures in *contrapposto*, only trashy. They tapped on the glass with acrylic nails, fingered the strings of their glow-in-the-dark thongs, and blew kisses at pot-bellied, drooling tourists. These men paced the streets in groups, like kids in an amusement park, giddy for their next ride. I felt like I had fallen into some twisted trick-or-treating game, where sex was candy with a price tag. One American, standing at the threshold of a C-cupped quickie, spat out a proposition:

*Heyy thera little lady, how bout a suck and a fuck!? Two for the price of one, eh?
I can do anything you want. Lashes, and submission glazed with sex and*

honey.

I hated her, and I thought she looked powerful in the purple light. I wanted to sit her down and ask her questions, to penetrate her watery vacancy. If I had dared walk up to her and touch her forehead, I would have sent ripples circling out, out, out, and up to the fingernail moon.