

Coffee & Brooklyn: Amsterdam

Contributed by Mahogany Browne

Don't let anyone ever tell you that Amsterdam's greatest assets are the Red Light District and the weed cafes. Sure, sex-a-holics and potheads are thrilled at the idea of this police-lite Disneyland, but as a womanist, mother and advocate of empowerment, I am unsure if I embody the sexual maturity necessary for such an appreciation. Also, living as a grown woman in a monogamous relationship, this might not have been the best identity for me to have when touring the land of frites and fresh cappuccinos. Still, you only live once, and after booking a gig at the Paradiso (the largest concert hall in Holland, hosting the likes of Fiddy & the Rolling Stones), I planned on walking those brick-laid roads as if my life depended on it.

The first morning I arrived by boat. This is funny if you believe that slavery can be viewed as black humor.

No matter where you are, the great thing about mass transportation and its terminals are the coffee spots that sit quietly inside. Tucked in a corner near the ticket booth; or across the platform, boarding information in plain sight -- the one in Amsterdam was no different. I would wait in the familiar confines for my host -- an act my independent streak would eventually grow comfortable with, after pacing for long amounts of time, constructing a contingency plan if I were left to fend for myself in a foreign land.

The coffee, like all coffee in Europe, was amazing. Not like the Muddy Waters shop in Brooklyn's Prospect Heights neighborhood where the store owner always had a way of making me think I was bothering her whenever I carried my clean laundry and 10-year-old daughter in for a cup of something warm before heading home. Amari would always insist on Hot Chocolate and I'd order anything caffeinated. The owner, a beautiful bald woman with warm chunky sweaters and a scowl for days, always sat at her laptop, chatting on MySpace or IHateCustomerService.com before dragging herself to the counter to complete our orders.

The first time I ordered a medium white chocolate mocha, I shuddered. It tasted like cat snot, and the only reference I have for this is the clean-up detail I grew to hate with my second pet, Kit Kat. Kit Kat had a stomach that couldn't hold water -- let alone the bowl of kibbles she swallowed for fun, rather than hunger. Needless to say, I tossed the \$3 poison into the garbage as we turned the corner, promising never to return.

Two weeks later, I stood, in the middle of Muddy Waters, with a bag of clean laundry, a child with Hot Chocolate expectations and a do-over mentality. And like Amsterdam's notorious skin trade strip, Muddy Waters disappointed me. The counter girl was just as mean and dismissive, the coffee was shit and in the pit of my stomach, I knew I shouldn't have gone back.

Just like in Amsterdam, after I drank incredible amounts of foam-filled cups of cappuccino and people-watched for hours, when I challenged myself to walk the distance of the Red Light District.

After several blocks, I buckled into tears. The women stood at the red neon-lit doors baiting attention with lingerie and coy glances. Most of them seemed as inanimate as the chairs and window sills they propped their bodies up against. And I could barely whisper an apology for I knew I would one day write about the day I saw the lifeless eyes of a sex worker with a health certificate and medical benefits, while I still had neither.

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