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DUTCH TREATMENTS

BY D.E. FREDD

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“Nothing against Gretchen, but what the hell do we need a translator for?”

“Because none of us speaks Dutch, French, Italian or German.”

“She can do that?”

“Her German's a bit shaky, but she always understates her ability.”

I am the one pushing for Gretchen Batchelder to be part of our team. We are at the Sunset Grill on Brighton Ave. in Boston (one hundred beers on tap, over three hundred bottled brews). The discussion involves the expansion of our Megaprobe market to The Netherlands, Belgium and possibly Germany, the biggest move yet for DRG Associates. I am the “D.” Ron Suskind is the “R.” He and I are research and development, the think tank if you will, of circuitry analysis devices that have drawn raves from several quarters. It relates to TDR impedance testing for such things as IC packaging, backplanes and drive control development, not that you care. We've sold to Lucent and Cisco Systems in the states and now have a chance to go international. Greg Hansen handles the business end and sales, but we each do a bit of everything. We met way back at Cornell and get along well on both a company and personal level. Now that we are on the verge of going big time, there is a minor split in the group. Ron is the penny pincher. If he had his way we'd kayak to Amsterdam, subsist on Pringles and sleep in a park. I'm for acting as if we had been in the business world for decades. That doesn't mean flying first class or staying at five star hotels, but it does mean buying decent clothes and adding Gretchen for a touch of global savoir faire to the presentation.

“You know, if you just want a chick along to impress people, we could do better in the looks department.” Years back Greg dated one of Gretchen's sorority sisters. The breakup went badly. He suspects that she harbors some negative opinions he'd rather the world not know about.

I can tell from Ron's body language that he's also against me. “It's not her face, which I admit is attractive, but she has the strangest build. She's very feminine and petite up top, nice breasts and narrow waist, but then all pelvic hell breaks loose from there on down. I've heard of childbearing hips, but she's like a C-130 cargo plane; spread those legs and tanks roll out.”

Greg places another nail in my coffin. “She brilliant, has a great personality, but they used to call her the Eiffel Tower.” He looks at me. “You know, very narrow high up but a huge base, like the pyramids in Egypt.” He uses his fingers as a visual aid to help me comprehend what a pyramid looks like.

“I appreciate the architectural and military references, but this is not a Miss America

contest. We've got to show Europe that we belong in their league. She speaks all the languages. She's lived overseas, knows the culture and is smart enough to pick up Megaprobe's functional and technical specifications. Do you think Bush would rush into something this big without bringing language and cultural advisors on board?" They both stare at me. "Okay, forget the Bush analogy."

Ron puts both elbows on the table, using his thumbnail to peel the label from his Magic Hat pale ale; next to can crushing it's a barroom behavior I've always hated. "Tell us the truth; you have the 'hots' for her, right?"

I sit back. "She's a friend." I pause for emphasis. "We've never dated. There are a few phone calls each month just to see how she's making out, and I relay news on how our business is going. I haven't mentioned this job to her." A lie on my part as Gretchen was financially stressed a few months ago, and I tried to cheer her up. "She just finished translating a Dutch mystery author into English and French so she's got time. DRG comes first; you guys know that."

"Okay, say we do bring her to the Netherlands; let's see what the damage will be." Ron turns over his place mat, makes three columns and labels them in his illegible scrawl. "First off, there's the plane fare to and from. Then there are meals, and let's not forget the room arrangements. As it now stands we only need one, but with her along, unless she agrees to share, which I doubt because it would be highly inconvenient for all concerned, we have to spring for a whole other room for just one person. Unless you want to bunk with her?"

He looks at me and cocks his head. I don't react. He can see I'm getting pissed yet he forges on. "So the extra ticket is a thousand. Another room and meals for a day is a conservative four hundred times ten days—all told we are looking at five grand."

Greg chimes in, carrying more coals to my already burning Newcastle, "We'd have to pay her also!"

Ron quickly adds Greg's evidence to a column, draws a bottom line with emphasis and closes in for the kill. "Okay, two hundred a day would be another two thousand, so we're talking seven thousand for a wide ass woman to make us look and sound like we're not three beer-guzzling Brobdingnags from Cornell."

"I resent the Cornell reference." Seeing things are not going my way, I try a bit of humor before making one last pitch. "All I'm saying is that, if we get the Netherlands contracts and can make a decent impression on the Belgium steel company, which is in Flanders, a Dutch-speaking province, seven thousand will be a pittance. And what about tech support? How much good will can we engender by providing help in their native language?"

"Doesn't that imply you want her with us full time?"

"We can make her a part-time consultant working from her apartment if she pans out."

"Okay, suppose I agree the idea makes some sense. What about the guy thing?"

Ron gets puzzled look from Greg. "What 'guy' thing?"

Ron stretches back and signals our server to bring another round. "We work well together; we've always been like the Three Musketeers. If we think it, we say it. We yell and scream at each other during the day and then get drunk together at night. Remember when I was nuts about Allison from Bank of America; remember how it screwed up our beer Fridays when I brought her along? Bringing anybody into our tight little circle can destroy the chemistry."

"Operation Gretchen" was debated for another two hours. Iraq was invaded with less discussion. Ron used up three placemats and two napkins for more numerical evidence. Finally Greg, ignoring the statistics and close to being totally wasted, came around to my way of thinking so the final vote was two to one. I thanked both of them,

slapped Ron on the shoulder to show there were no hard feelings and picked up the tab, not that he gave a shit.

Gretchen graduated from Ithaca College. She was one of those “design-your-own-major” types, where she combined languages, art and music. Like the rest of us she was in her early thirties. She had done graduate work in Florence and at the Sorbonne. Beside Italy she’d lived for a short time in Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris. When I told her the good news she was reluctant, thinking she’d be a “fourth wheel,” and asked if I was certain Ron and Greg were really up for bringing her on board. I mentioned Ron’s financial concerns. She joked about having tap water with her meals and staying in her room if we went pub crawling. She also mentioned, rather wistfully, that, when she was a struggling grad student in Amsterdam, she had always wanted to see the Concertgebouw Orchestra and had never been able to afford it. That might be her one guilty pleasure the week we were there. But Ron needn’t worry; she’d pay for it herself.

A few days later we gathered at the Sunset to iron out the details. She blew Ron and Greg away by parroting some Megaprobe tech specs I had given her, almost sounding as if she knew what the hell she was talking about. Then she imparted some other info.

“If we’re out in a café with customers, don’t think you’re buttering them up by ordering the local Amstel. To them it’s pedestrian, like Budweiser is to us; the same with Heineken. They revere imports. I’ll make a list of Belgian and German beers to ask for. Pretend to act disappointed if the place doesn’t have it.”

After that tip and several others, Ron and Greg text messaged me later that night to reluctantly agree that she might be worth the extra bucks.

On the KLM flight from Logan, I was selected to sit next to her with Ron and Greg directly behind us. She rocked our stereotypical male world by not having twelve suitcases; indeed, everything she needed was in her carry-on and a tote bag. Her CD collection leaned heavily towards the classical. I saw something by Verdi, a Requiem of sorts. The rest of us had DVDs and games on our laptops.

When she went to sleep I had a chance to observe. The more you studied her face, the more attractive it became. When you looked closely, her features were almost classical. She had a quick wit, knew what looked good on her and what makeup would enhance her eyes and mouth. She was like a book with a dumb title and dull cover but, once you picked it up and read the first chapter, you were happily surprised. Yet lurking below the surface, like a giant iceberg, wedged into an Economy class seat was that enormous butt.

Gretchen took charge when we landed. We’d take a public train; it was quicker, direct and, if we played our cards right, we might not have to pay. When the conductor came through, we’d just move to another car. The ride was so short they never got around to punching all the tickets. At the hotel things went okay in English, but then her Dutch took over, and she managed to get the three of us a room large enough to have a cot for me while she took a small single on the top floor. It was seventy-five Euros less her way. That first night we hopped on a streetcar, again without paying, which took us to a distant restaurant specializing in Rijsttafel. We had the best tasting, inexpensive meal of our lives, bar none. At evening’s end Ron and Greg toasted Gretchen and made her an honorary DRG company member, a tee shirt emblazoned with our logo commemorating the event.

Ziekenhuis Vandaag is a large medical equipment company headquartered in Rotterdam. Our Megaprobe testing apparatus could work wonders for their quality

control. The debate over renting a car versus getting a van and driver began at breakfast. A car was the best option, but no one wanted to risk driving. Gretchen had no problem navigating the way to Rotterdam but refused to get behind the wheel. The horns of the dilemma were broken when she suggested taking a train (unfortunately we'd have to buy tickets) and then a taxi to Ziekenhuis headquarters. We arrived in plenty of time for the ten o'clock meeting. Ron ran the PowerPoint presentation. Greg handed out brochures, and I did the talking. They asked questions, and we handled them as cleanly as the best of major league infielders. After two hours, the three men on the board conferred among themselves in Dutch and then announced that they had some minor details to go over but suggested we'd take a short break for lunch.

Down in the company cafeteria and out of viewing distance, there were high fives all around. Ron, Greg and I felt it went very well. Gretchen was more reserved. As lunch finished up, Ron and Greg went off to the men's room while Gretchen and I dabbled at our ham and cheese plates, standard Dutch lunch fare. To make conversation I asked, "So what did they say in their native tongue before we went to break? Any inside info on whether we got the deal?"

"It was sort of man talk."

"Soccer stuff? Where to get a quick beer?"

"If you really want to know, they were speculating as to my role in the company and which of you I might be fucking. Mr. DeVere had the opinion that, with my *groot* ass, I could easily accommodate all of you."

"Oh God, Gretchen. I didn't realize. Why didn't you say something?"

"What am I going to do, jump up, scream bloody murder at the sexist remark and queer the contract of a lifetime? I'd have to swim home. Plus, it's not like I've never looked in the mirror in thirty-one years. I've heard all the remarks, some far more creative, since middle school. Even while we were going through security in Terminal 'E,' you and Ron were behind me making with the wisecracks."

I didn't remember that happening, but it wasn't past Ron, king of the quipsters, to do something like that. I could see she was hurt, simply moving food around her plate to avoid eye contact. "Okay, here's what we can do. Write out some sentences like 'Where do we go next?' or 'What's our itinerary this afternoon?' Teach me how to pronounce them. When we go back in, I'll ask you in Dutch and you ad lib a long answer."

There were tears in her eyes. "It will only embarrass them and possibly kill the deal."

"Yeah, it might, but it's worth it to see the look on those faces, especially the horseshoe-shaped hair guy who has to smoke every twenty minutes."

We reconvened at 13:30. A few points were ironed out. Greg presented our standard contract. We shook hands as a show of good faith. They still had to run some numbers, but we had a superior product at a more than reasonable price. I turned to Gretchen and spoke my pre-arranged piece without resorting to the cue card. She held up her clipboard officiously and rattled off a bunch of stuff in Dutch, replete with facial expressions and hand gestures to emphasize her points. All the while I kept my eyes on the directors behind their solid oak table. Dropped jaws and reddened faces were worth the price of admission.

When we got back to the Rotterdam train station, Ron said,

"What was all that Dutch lingo at the end?"

"I wanted to send a message."

“Which was?”

“We’ll know in a few days.”

We got back to the Hotel Estherea on the Singel a little after four. We ordered drinks from the bar and sat outside watching the canal dinner boat traffic meander past. Gretchen and I were subdued. The pros and cons of the meeting were gone over, what we could do better to make the next presentation go more smoothly. Greg’s cell beeped and we immediately fell silent. I expected the worst. He spoke for a minute then handed the phone to Gretchen.

“They want to talk to you.”

The rest of the conversation was in Dutch, a more guttural and spittle-inducing language than its German cousin. We watched Gretchen’s face for a clue to our fate, but, irritated, she waved us off, grabbed a pen and yellow pad and moved well away. Five minutes later she was back and plopped herself down.

“Which do you want first—the good news or the better news?”

After that we were all ears. Ziekenhuis had doubled their order and recommended us to Phillips Semiconductor who would be faxing a proposal for several units. Happiness hell broke out. There was a movement to chuck Greg into the canal the way winning rowers do with the coxswain. Ron balanced precariously on the railing and toasted us one and all, ending with a four musketeers reference, something not lost on Greg and me. We went into the hotel and had dinner. We tried to think of something celebratory we could do as a unit, but each trial balloon had a flaw in it from someone’s perspective. Ron and Greg were pushing for the Red Light District. I was curious myself and Gretchen, with a wave of her hand, gave it a “boys will be boys” dismissal; she’d be fine browsing the quaint shops in the area. I excused myself, went to the front desk and spoke to the concierge. When I got back Gretchen was alone at the table.

“Porthos and Aramis went upstairs to polish their swords for the Red Light place. Not that they have a clue what to wear to a whore house. I’m so exhausted. Jet lag has hit. I’m going to up to my garret, shower and turn in.”

I handed her an envelope. “That’s a damn shame because I was thinking . . .”

“Oh my god, the Concertgebouw! How did you do it?” She sprang from her chair and came at me full speed with a breathe-crunching squeeze rather than a hug.

“I don’t know what’s playing or who’s conducting, but it will kill a few hours.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go get genital herpes or gonorrhoea?”

“As much as I love antibiotics. . .”

We took a long stroll up Leidseplein to the concert hall. There is a large grassy area in front. We bought a disposable camera, and I took pictures of her posing seriously then hamming it up in front of the concert hall. To her good fortune and my dumb luck Bernard Haitink, her idol, was guest conducting. I really didn’t mind the music. There was a Beethoven Overture, a Sibelius Tone Poem and Dvorak’s Symphony from the New World; each had plenty of melody, soft and loud parts. Every once in a while I’d look over, and she was wiping away tears.

“Music does that to me sometimes. It also happened once in Florence at the Uffizi gallery when I saw an altarpiece by Cimabue. Just ignore me.”

After the concert we chatted on the trek back. We decided the Netherlands work was ahead of schedule, and DRG could move on to Belgium tomorrow if we could schedule it. The client was the Victor Buyck Steel Company located in Eeclo in Flanders, a Dutch speaking area lending itself to her linguistic expertise. We could stay in Bruges, which Gretchen declared to be a delightful step back into the 16th Century.

Some blocks from the hotel she suggested that we try a “smoking” coffee shop where we could sample some local “skunk” or hash. It might be something to counter the sagas of sin Greg and Ron would surely report. I was game but afraid of initiating an asthma attack which often happens when I’m around too much smoke. We settled for a pub and drank a round of *oude jenever* with beer chasers before we both began to lose the jet lag battle.

In front of the hotel she stopped me. “I want to thank you for one of the best evenings of my life, to say nothing of a very exciting day. I know it was you who lobbied for me, but I’m happy that Greg and Ron respect me.” She gave me a real hug this time. I bent down and kissed her.

“Was that supposed to mean something?”

“I don’t know.”

“When do you think you’ll ‘know?’”

Her tiny room was on the fourth floor, the door barely clearing the bed as we entered. The eaves angled in so severely there was only an eight foot space where you could stand upright. For a few minutes we made clumsy jokes about the size of the place, and what Greg and Ron might say if they had to stay in it for a week. Then she came to the side of the bed and kissed me.

“I want to freshen up in the bathroom. Don’t fall asleep on me.”

I sat on the bed, slowly got undressed, and then went to the window to check out the peaceful canal view. When I heard the water shut off, I slipped into bed and pulled the sheet up to my stomach. The bathroom door opened and she stood naked in the doorway. The light was behind her. She was sensual in profile. She glided towards the bed then halted.

“Maybe I should enhance the mood by tossing a scarf over the lamp, add some atmosphere?”

“That would be great.”

She turned and bent over to rummage through her carry on bag. And there it was—the Moby Dick of all derrières, the dark side of the moon revealed at last. The size was imposing enough; I mean there is something aesthetically pleasing about looking at the Arctic tundra, a desert wasteland or even an atomic bomb-induced, mushroom-shaped cloud. What I hadn’t counted on was the cellulite. Like a smallpox epidemic it had begun to ravage the vast, naked whiteness with small craters, even invading the backs of her thighs with darkish spots like those on overripe pears. She found a kerchief, held it up, and then did a pirouette with an accompanying “ta-da” for my approval. I nodded that it was fine. She draped it over the lamp. Immediately the room took on a soft, rosy glow, and the reflected lights from the canal created a Christmas tree effect on the ceiling. She stepped back from the lampshade as if she had just sculpted a masterpiece, flashed an enticing smile and held her palms up questioningly as a gesture for me to render my opinion of her handiwork. She was beautiful again.

“Beautiful,” I said.

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