

Dear

First of all, let me tell you that I love you. Or I mean, like most lovers, I love *my idea* of you. I'm fond of your *potential*. You see, I'm sort of a multicultural sentimentalist. Whenever I see a white woman carrying a mocha-colored baby, or a latino guy holding hands with an Asian girl, or a Mexican football player trying really hard to speak Dutch in a post-match interview, my eyes well up with tears.

The crossing of racial or linguistic boundaries is, to me at least, one of the most moving phenomena in modern society. It's so much easier to just stay back home in the comfort zone of our own country, city or street. When you think of it, it's quite insane that people all around the world get up to face the inevitable insecurity, exhaustion and stomach flu that come with any form of travel. Any adult person who has ever tried to learn a new language, knows how humiliating an experience that is. Still we crazy humans keep going abroad, whether we do it for love, for a better life, or simply because we're curious, and during that incredibly vulnerable process we learn new things and grow more empathy. That moves me.

That's the potential I

was talking about: you took a courageous step by coming to my hometown Amsterdam. But I'm also, like most lovers, constantly disappointed in you. Because once you're here, you allow yourself to become part of a system that keeps you away from all the wonderful possibilities I just talked about. You're not really here: you're in the tourist zone. So you slip from one comfort zone into the next.

It's like the marihuana that attracts a lot of you to our city: of course it's nice to smoke a joint sometimes, but we all know that people who smoke too much weed, become super boring. And, dear tourists of Amsterdam, even when you don't smoke, you *seem* stoned all the time. Honestly, when I run into you, looking at Google Maps on your phone or silently following your tour guide, you don't even seem to be enjoying yourselves. You look like zombies. Or worse, because even flesh-eating zombies have a sense of purpose.

And you should be bored. GPS-based research by the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* showed that Amsterdam tourists all take the same routes and stray only rarely. There's hardly any exploration of, or engagement with, the non-touristy parts of the culture. It's a one-sided, pre-packaged experience.

You cling together in the Red Light District and fool yourselves into thinking this is Amsterdam. In fact, we Amsterdammers rarely go there: it's impossible to ride your bike in those narrow streets and if we want to see naked ladies, we surf the Internet like everyone else. You take selfies with your ridiculous sticks in front of the IAmsterdam-sign on the Museumplein, without stopping to wonder what that sign is even supposed to mean. I Amsterdam? I Amsterdam? What is a 'sterdam'? A very sturdy dam? Are you a dam? No. You're a person. Or is it a verb, so you could also say 'I London' or 'I St. Petersburg'? That's just dumb. And you're not, right? This isn't entirely your fault. Now that you've turned into zombies, the question is: who created the virus?

To answer that, you should know a few things. Holland has always been a teeny-tiny country. We're like the kid in your class who had developmental issues and had to take growth hormones to keep up. This kid would never win a fight. We have a saying here: "He who isn't strong, should be smart". So it's only natural that we have become a very resourceful country. For centuries we have survived, against all odds, by becoming very good at commerce and sucking up to bigger countries. We are the world champion of opportunism: we rarely take a moral standpoint and always go for peace and stability, just

to avoid getting punched in the face. We'd rather try and sell you some tulips instead.

That's why we've been so 'tolerant' for many centuries and tried to stay neutral during the two World Wars. Maybe you've seen the famous video of the Dutch colonel Thom Karremans (who was supposed to protect Srebrenica during the Balkan War), as he faced the angry Serbian commander Ratko Mladic. The leader of our armed forces mumbled from under his impressive white mustache: "I always say: 'I'm the piano player. Don't shoot the piano player!'" That could be our national motto: "Welcome to Holland, the world's piano player". We provide the music (and to get paid), but we prefer to stay in the background, and not take any responsibility.

Not only is Holland very small, it is also a swamp. Great swaths of our country are below sea level. We've drained the water very ingeniously over the centuries, and locked it behind our famous sturdy dams, but it's still plotting revenge. This adds to our opportunistic mentality. To quote our great (and not very patriotic) author W.F. Hermans: "If a group of people spends centuries living on a piece of land that actually belongs to fish, then these people will develop a philosophy deprived of anything human! A philosophy focused exclusively on self-preservation! A worldview whose only goal is to avoid feeling wet! They won't have any room for the larger problems."

So now you understand. We're surrounded by Germany, France, England, and a whole lot of water. Combine that with the general Northern European fetish for control, and you understand why everything is so neat and orderly and capitalistic here. We need to be alert for opportunities and make a lot of money to protect ourselves, because this dream that we're living could end any second.

Every traveller faces the paradox of 'tourism': you want an authentic experience, but at the same time you want some comfort. You want to hike in the jungle, but sleep in a nice hotel. Locals are willing to provide that comfort and thus create a touristic industry, which threatens to kill all authenticity by offering it as a comfortable product. The hike now takes place on a designated jungle path, with hotels along the way. On the other hand, when you decide to leave that path and just sleep in the jungle on your own, you might get eaten by some unknown creature (yes, a zombie, I was referring to zombies again).

But in Amsterdam, we've perfected the tourist industry and make a lot of money from it (most of which doesn't even go to its people or even the municipality, but to foreign companies like Airbnb), helped along by low budget airlines. This is why you're being streamlined into this very narrow view of our city (and our country!): they don't actually want you here. They just see you as customers, with the city as one big shop. They want you to walk a designated path, hand over your money, take pictures and get the hell out of here.

They want to control

