



*There are several ways to arrive in Brugge:
Plane. Bus. Train. Drunk.*

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BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BRUGGE

City Centre

Brugge is a little-big city and therefore full of contradictions. You can safely navigate its medieval streets and buy Belgian chocolate right from the source—in fact, from any dozens of sources. Every third store is a source, but no one gives free samples. At least, not to a guy still wearing his backpack and walking from the train station to save on bus fare. You'll have that money marked for other attractions: Belgian beer, silk crocheted knickknacks, and tours of World War I battle sites you feel guilty into visiting since World War II sites get all the crowds and somebody really should honor the original. If you don't have the first, you reason, you never get the sequel—a point you'll argue on the train with a girl whose backpack has a maple leaf sewn to it. When she starts to out-reason you, you tell her you think she's not really Canadian, just some grad student from Syracuse who thinks socialism works but wouldn't dare say it around the dinner table back home. (Deep down, you know she really is Canadian, but now that you're certain you do not have a chance with her—because she is smarter and because you are American—you hit her with her worst fear, being mistaken for an American).

Despite everything you read in the guide book, all you really want to do is see a windmill and eat a Belgian waffle. That is your secret. Your hidden, clichéd, closeted secret. You are certain no one will understand such primordial motivation, so you tell anyone who asks you're interested in Flemish history and culture even though you would have spelled Flemish with a *Ph* six months ago, before your

ex-girlfriend gave you the guide book. Before she was your ex-girlfriend. Back when the trip was for two, was only supposed to be a week, and only supposed to go as far as visiting a mutual friend studying at Oxford.

Getting There

There are several ways to arrive in Brugge: Plane. Bus. Train. Drunk. You arrive via train from Paris, seventy-two hours removed from London, two weeks removed from L.A., and two months removed from your girlfriend.

You sleep sporadically on the train from Paris to Brussels, too tired to drink from having drunk too much to sleep. By the time you arrive in Brugge, you feel disheveled, especially after the conversation with the Canadian girl. You study a city map at the station and begin walking to your intended accommodation, only stopping once to admire a windmill made of chocolate, then walking away quickly before anyone notices such a thing could catch your eye.

Where to Stay

Though you are twenty-six, you choose a youth hostel on a nice, white-washed street of uniform buildings neither old nor new. Your bottom bunk sits amongst three other bunk beds: eight people in the room, six of them Scotsmen. (And by Scotsmen you also mean Scotswomen—four young men and two young women.) The seventh person in the room, your brand new upper bunk-mate, is the Canadian girl who you think hates you, but it's actually worse: she ignores you.

You are fine with this. It's not messy this way.

The Scotsmen do not sleep the first night. They sit out in the small garden attached to the room, speaking English in a way you do not understand, laughing in sudden crashes that come and go like a tide. At first, you lie beneath the Canadian girl and feel the five or six years you have on all of them. Then, one of the Scotsmen sneaks

back into the room, pulling his backpack out from beneath the bunk across from yours. He sees your open eyes in the dark and whispers, "Did we wake ye?"

You are not certain what to say. "Here," he says and the light, comfortable weight of a wine bottle nests in the blanket atop your chest.

You wrap your fingers around the bottle. It is smooth and cool and pulls you up, out of the bunk. The Scotsman hands you two more bottles as you stand and whispers, "Carry those."

Though it is dark, you can see well enough to know you are nearly eye-level with the Canadian girl in her top bunk, and it looks as if maybe her eyes are open, staring at you. Or maybe not. Just as you lean in closer, the Scotsman stands up. "Let's go."

Out in the garden, you discover that the first bottle of wine is *your* bottle of wine. No glasses necessary. The Scots tell you all about Brugge. They've been here two days, seen and done it all, and now have to kill one more day before the tour they're part of sends a bus and takes them to Paris. One of them tells you of battle sites, poppy fields, and windmills just outside of town.

The Scotsmen glow red in the face with wine; their legs glow white from a summer under the merciful Scottish sun. The two Scotswomen speak quietly to each other, laugh at your jokes, but do not speak directly to you. You tell tales of Los Angeles, carefully editing your ex-girlfriend out of every story even if they're not as good that way.

In the grainy light of sunrise, you slip back to your bunk. The Scots remain outside, still talking, still laughing. The Canadian girl rolls onto her side. Curls of brown hair trickle down her cheeks, half her face emerging from tiny folds of pillow, and clearly you see one open, green eye.

You feel connected to her. You shared a train. You share a bunk. "Would you like to kiss?" you say.

She shuts her eye wrinkly tight and rolls away from you.

You take refuge beneath, staring up at her form—convex in the mattress—hoping sleep will soon take you, hoping she will be gone when you wake up.

What to See

In the even light of late morning, your room appears cramped with dirty clothes and backpacks peeking out from under bunks, leaning against and over bedposts, and partially blocking every route to the door. The Scots are still asleep when the Canadian girl steps into the room. Her hair is wet and she is dressed for the day: long, brown pants with zippers everywhere, even in places that have nothing to do with body parts; a gray T-shirt, the word *Roots* across her chest, the first *o* and the *t* curving out slightly. You suddenly realize this means you are staring, but it does not matter now, so you keep staring.

She does not look at you when she says, “If you’re going to stay another day, you better go tell them.”

You nod and feel around under your bunk for sandals.

The Canadian girl grabs her daypack and jacket and opens the door again. “You missed the free breakfast,” she says.

“Yeah?” you say, the remnants of wine sour on your mind. “Maybe tomorrow.”

She looks at you as though you have insulted her cooking. “Maybe,” she says and lets the closing door follow her out.

Getting Around

Because of the gray haze and misty air, the bicycle rental shop is empty when you arrive. The quiet man behind the counter opens a map. With a pen, he circles where in the grid of Brugge you are. It is a maze of canals and curving roads; three, four, and five-way stops; street names that change arbitrarily, sometimes reappearing a few intersections later.

The shop bell rings as a young man in shorts and a windbreaker steps into the store. He busies himself looking over and past you at the terms of rental posted on the wall behind the counter.

You tap the map and in a quiet voice, so it does not sound like a whisper, discreetly say, "Windmills?"

The clerk draws a line through the town, out to a canal, alongside it for a few inches, and then draws a crude windmill on the map and circles it. "Forty-five minutes," he says. "Thirty, if you ride hard."

"Are you going to make that ride?" you hear another voice say. It is the young man in the shorts and windbreaker. He is standing beside you, staring at the windmill.

"I think so." You fold the map quickly, the way you did at eighteen when you first bought a dirty magazine and the clerk asked if you were sure that was the one you wanted.

The young man looks outside. "I've been waiting to see if it would clear up," he says. "This is my only day here."

"It's not so bad," the clerk says and you know there's no getting out of this now; you have a companion for the day.

Of course, you were supposed to have a companion every day. Even after the breakup, you thought it might be exotic strangers who knew lots of secrets about the world. Or exotic women who were worldly and knowing.

Clark is shorter than you and this makes you feel somewhat better, like you could take him in a fight, though you can see, even through his windbreaker, that his chest is more developed – not in that hulking, compensatory way, but proportional to his body.

You'd have guessed Clark is from the Northeast before he spoke, before you noticed his *Colgate Lacrosse* t-shirt. His blue windbreaker brings out the slight, blue stripe on his gray hiking boots. His lean, athletic legs disappear into cargo shorts that are too short to be stylish, too long to be completely out of fashion. His mussy hair is not like the mussy hair of the Scotsmen; it is sandy, both blonde and brown, possibly highlighted, and mussed rather precisely.

Outside, you discover Clark's *Colgate Lacrosse* t-shirt is actually a gift from a friend. "I play, but at Holy Cross," he says. "We have some funny t-shirts that say 'Holy Crosse!'"

You nod and smile but the laugh does not come.

"I should have one," he says and stares at the bikes. "I don't know why I don't. I guess because it was a fundraiser and it didn't make sense to buy a t-shirt from yourself."

"Did you buy one for your friend at Colgate?"

"I should have," Clark says and shakes his head. "I can't believe I didn't."

Sights Outside Brugge

The white-washed buildings of residential Brugge give way quickly to open spaces, more trees and wider roads running along the edge of town. A pedestrian bridge funnels you onto a trail running alongside the canal from the map. Clark rides in front of you with smooth, long strokes, the bike surging ever forward, the back tire fanning water out behind and misting your face even more than the air. You try not to think of the World War I memorials you could be visiting, all those gravestones waiting for just a moment of your time; try to reason that it's best to visit them on a clear day when you can really take it all in; and try not to feel guilty.

Later, through the gunmetal gray of the horizon, a windmill emerges slowly, like a pencil sketch, the lines growing more distinct as you push on. When you are nearly upon it, you realize it is on the opposite side of the canal and you must ride past it, hoping for a footbridge.

It takes maybe ten more minutes to arrive at the bridge. The windmill has slipped back into the gray and there is a sign for a town just a few kilometers farther.

"You hungry?" Clark says. "We can ride on to that town to see what they've got, then hit the windmill on the way back."

Clark does not look directly at you as he says this. You are older and more experienced than Clark, and you suddenly see yourself in a quiet café, a plate of something in front of you, and neither you nor Clark speaking. But you're hungry. You missed breakfast because the Canadian girl did not have the decency to wake you. Lunch was not part of the plan, however. Windmills. That was it. But it would be nice to eat with a person and not your guidebook for once. That was how it was supposed to be.

"Yeah," you say. "Let's grab something."

Where to Eat

Many of the restaurants have A-frame signs on the sidewalk out front, daily specials chalked in a rainbow of colors, boldly announcing what you are thinking: Belgian Waffles. It's as if the locals are saying, "It's okay; we know why you're here."

Clark stops his bicycle out front of a hotel cafe and laughs at the sign. "I hadn't even thought of that." His look is little kid mischief – playing ball in the house, spying on the neighbor through the fence. "Should we get a waffle? We are in Belgium."

The cold air and lack of sun make it feel like morning has lasted all day. This is the excuse you use to say *Yes* to Clark and go inside.

The waffles come with almost anything so they can be breakfast, lunch, dinner, or dessert. You both order the waffles with a side of ham and a beer. That makes it seem more like lunch, a more casual meal.

Your wet hair drips in soft taps on the table. "You're soaked," Clark says. "How come I'm not?"

"I think it's from your back tire," you say.

After the waitress takes your order to the kitchen, the café is empty. Clark leans over to the next table and grabs the neatly folded cloth napkin nearest him, leaving the silverware behind. "Here," he says and tosses the napkin so it hits you gently in the chest. "Hurry, before she catches us."

You smile and dry off, tossing the wet cloth beneath the table just before the waitress returns with the waffles and beer. This is a union you wouldn't dare think of back home, much less ask for, yet it seems to work. The waffle is sweet, even without syrup, and would quickly dull your taste buds if the salty ham were not there to shock them back to life. The beer smoothes everything over, makes everything agreeable, and you soon find yourself over an empty plate describing your rent-controlled apartment in Santa Monica.

"So you live five minutes from the beach," Clark says, "and you never go?"

"Yeah," you say to yourself. "Why don't I go?"

Clark leans forward, elbows on the table. "I know why. Because you can't always see how good you've got it. At least, not while it's right in front of you."

"That's a cliché."

Clark picks up his beer. "Of course it is. Because it's so true." When you do not immediately respond, he takes a swig from the nearly empty bottle and sets it on the table with a pop.

Rare Sights

You must ride hard to the windmill. The rain has picked up, the drops now stinging your face. When you look up to see how far down the path the windmill is, a raindrop thumps your right eye like a flick from a finger. Your contact lens lifts and slides to a corner of your eye, blurring half your world. To stay focused, you close that eye and stare only as far as Clark's back tire until you reach the windmill.

It feels warm inside, and you do not care that the windmill is nothing more than a grindstone for grains. Deep down you knew that; you think maybe you learned it in the third grade. Yet, from a distance, the windmill seemed so majestic.

You are drying and warming, silently following Clark through the short, self-guided walking tour until he stops just before the exit

and says, "Is something wrong with your eye?"

"My contact."

"Oh," he steps closer. "I hate that."

You nod even though you've only had the contacts a few months, the last good thing your ex-girlfriend got you to do.

"Want me to see if I can get it?" Clark says, now looking into your eyes one at a time.

You look him over with the good eye.

"I had a roommate," he says. "I've done this before."

Clark tells you to close the good eye. Through the bad one you see his blurry face, not far from yours. His hands, warm despite how wet you both still are, lightly rest upon your cheek and forehead while his fingers, firm like a good mother's, spread open your eye. "Look up. Now down. Left." You feel a scratch with each change in direction. "There it is; don't move." Briefly, Clark's fingers fill your vision. It does not sting or poke. There is a moment of pressure, and then your eye feels washed over, as though someone has draped a silk sheet across it.

You blink a few times before Clark comes into focus, staring into your eye, concerned. "Did that get it?"

"I think so," you say, studying Clark's eyes, brown with chips of black and green. You blink twice. "Yeah, it's good. Thanks."

Off the Beaten Path

You get back to town just after three. With the hostel still closed for cleaning, Clark points up the lifeless street to a pub. "Maybe we should kill some time and grab another beer."

The televisions are all tuned to a World Cup soccer match, the way they have been everywhere you've been since arriving in Europe. Though the pub looks empty and Belgium is not in the match, the bartender takes little notice of you, pouring two pints and taking your money with little more than a glance from the television.

The beer and gradual rhythm of soccer tire you. You could fall asleep if the front of the pub, a series of glass-paned French doors, were not wide open to the street, forcing you to dry slowly in a damp breeze.

Clark says little. You say even less, the occasional *Yep* to his occasional *Nice play*.

On the way back from the toilette at halftime, you notice the pub has a loft. You tell Clark it's probably warmer up there, so you each grab another pint and Clark follows you up the stairs.

The loft has a long counter along the railing, empty chairs neatly lined up against it, a row of booths against the back wall, and an aisle between. Three booths in, you see sneakers sticking out, four pairs, two pair to each side of the booth. A few steps further you see two couples lying down in the booth and intertwined, their heads perking up to stare as you walk by. They are kids, maybe thirteen or fourteen, making out in a bar in the middle of the afternoon.

As you make your way to the far end and sit in a chair along the railing, you wonder if Clark thinks you knew the loft is a make-out spot. He sits down next to you. The teenagers are no longer visible, except for their feet. "Should we go back down?" you whisper.

Clark is grinning and whispers. "It's probably okay. They'll forget about us in a minute."

You shake your head. "They look like seventh-graders."

Clark nods and sips his beer, keeping his eyes on you. "I grew up in the wrong country," he says, no longer whispering.

You laugh, notice how Clark's eyes do not yet wrinkle when he smiles, and let your voice go back to normal as well. "Me too."

"How's the eye?"

"Good," you say as his hand finds your cheek. You open your eye wider, turn your head a little to show him, but Clark softly directs your face back square with his.

You tilt your head, breaking contact with Clark's hand, and look past him to the booth with the kids.

"They don't care," he says. "We're in Brugge. Who do we know in Brugge?"

He leans in closer and you close your eyes, feel his lips on yours, taste the beer on his breath. His face does not scratch you the way you may have thought. When his tongue flicks the roof of your mouth, searching, you realize your tongue is drawn down and back, a hollow mouth.

"I'm sorry," you say in retreat.

Clark's eyes look sleepy and intent. "It's okay."

"No," you say. "It's not." You look over at the booth, then down to the bartender, still focused on the television. You whisper: "I'm not gay."

Clark's eyes never leave you. "Back home, neither am I." He smiles and sips his beer.

You follow his lead and sip your beer, the bubbles tingling your mouth with cleansing alcohol. "I'm not gay," you whisper. "Anywhere."

"Okay," Clark says, the smile wiped from his mouth, his eyes open and understanding. "Nothing has to happen."

"Exactly," you say. "Nothing did happen."

Clark nods and turns his head to the television. You do the same, try to pretend it's just you and a buddy watching a game of soccer, but you don't even understand the rules, and you don't have a buddy who's ever tried to kiss you. A buddy, you keep turning over in your mind, whom you *let* kiss you.

"I better go," you say.

Clark allows you to stand, to slip away or storm off, whichever you need to do.

"I'm sorry," you say again, and this gets Clark to look up at you.

He says you don't need to keep apologizing, that you've done nothing wrong, and for the first time all day, he calls you by your name, the first time you've heard anyone besides a customs official say it in weeks, and it does not sound right. This is not who you are.

So you slide past him, between his chair and the booth, and walk with purpose down the stairs and out the door. A calm, controlled getaway.

Getting Away

You head directly to the room for your backpack and passport. The Scots are already there, preparing for a last, big night in Brugge: dinner, wine, dancing. They suggest you put on something dry and come along. When you hedge, they insist.

Over dinner, you share the details of your day, admit you ate waffles and saw a windmill, but you share these details as though you spent the day alone.

Much wine and many beers later, you find yourself in a club, dancing with one of the Scotswomen. She's telling you how much she loves your accent, how boring Scotsmen are, how exciting it must be to live in Los Angeles. Her voice blends with the music; her head nods every time you ask if she wants to keep dancing.

When you walk her back to the table, the other Scots take little notice of you both. "I'll be right back," you say and glance toward the toilette.

She grabs your arm. "We can go back to the room if you want. My friends will be here for hours."

You understand her completely. It is not late, just after nine, and the room will probably be empty. "Give me one second," you say.

You blend into the crowd on the way to the toilette then double-back, walking around to the other side of the club, avoiding the light of the dance floor, allowing the pulse of the music to push you out the front doors.

The quiet of fresh air explodes around you as if you've broken through the surface of the water. You walk the streets of Brugge, the whitewash still glowing from the late-setting sun, the sky scribbling purple atop orange. On the way back to the hostel, you try not to think, try to make yourself notice details in darkened shop windows,

count how many cars are American-made and how many of those you've actually seen back home, where, long after you're asleep, your ex-girlfriend will be out clubbing with the friend who stopped being nice to you when her boyfriend dumped her.

The lobby of the hostel is dark, everyone out or in for the night. Everyone except a single figure slumped in a chair. The Canadian girl. She looks asleep as you crouch in front of her. "Hey," you nudge her awake. "Are you sleeping out here?"

Her head rolls to life. "Hey," she says, her eyes closing as she speaks. "What've you been up to?"

The alcohol reaches you with the words. "Same thing as you."

"Mmm," she says, her mouth dropping slightly open after she's said it.

"Hey," you nudge her again. "You don't want to sleep out here."

She opens her eyes. "Are you afraid someone will get me?"

"I don't know. I guess."

She holds her arms forward without looking at you. "Then, get me."

You reach forward and she slides into your arms sideways, wraps her arms around your neck and leans her head on your shoulder as you cradle her to the room. "I hate you," she says.

"I know."

The room is dark and empty, and she blindly reaches for the light switch.

"Don't," you say. "I don't want them."

You step over to the top bunk and let her go. She spreads out over the blanket, then grabs for your shirt. You catch her hand, lace your fingers through hers, and push her back, softly, onto the bed. "Ask me," you say.

"Ask you what?"

"If I want to kiss."

Her head raises, eyes opening and catching just a little light. "Do you want to kiss?" she whispers.

“Not until after,” you say, climbing onto the bunk, feeling your way past all the zippers that don’t matter, to the only one that does. “I want to do something for you first.”

She watches you slip off her pants, watches as you lower your head before her, and breathes, “Yes.”

You find yourself slipping into the rhythm you had with your ex-girlfriend, but the Canadian girl does not respond in the same ways. You don’t know if she is too drunk or if you are a bad lover, but when she finally tugs at your shoulders you know she has given up on you.

She says it’s okay, that she appreciates the effort, and she proves this to you by returning the favor, though her mouth is too soft, too hollow, and you’ve had too much to drink. In the end, she crawls back up to you and uses her hand. “Like that,” she keeps checking and re-checking, her breath stale with alcohol. And when, finally, it is time, you begin kissing her until the warmth spreads across her hand and she sighs in your mouth, breaks off the kiss and whispers, “There you go.”

After, you slip back to your bunk and see her form relax into sleep above you. Hours later, when the Scots return, you close your eyes and feign sleep. You hear one Scotswoman tell the other, “See, he just came back and passed out.”

When they have all settled into their bunks, settled into the open-mouthed sleep of the drunk, you stuff everything you can feel in the darkness into your pack. You carry your sandals, knowing bare feet are quieter, and slip out the door.

In the morning, the Scots will wonder where you are and if you’ve gone. The Canadian girl will realize that she never caught your name, that she only knows you as the ugly American. She may wonder who exactly you are, and as you sit aboard the first train to Amsterdam, promising yourself nothing but battlefields and museums from now on, you try not to wonder this too. ■