

A journey of love, courage, and other things

Cherry Wong

“Look, we’re there. We’re there!” Shaking my best friend’s arm in excitement, I pointed at an unknown word made up of an unfamiliar combination of English letters as we were waiting at the train station, fingers frozen in the chilling wind. “Yes,” she replied, in cheerful calmness, “We are now in the Netherlands.”

It was my first time to set foot in Europe and everything from the gigantic architectural structures from the Middle Ages to the sunset amazed me. When I first walked on the snow-white path of the ancient city of Utrecht, I felt like a Asian dwarf who accidentally broke into the kingdom of the European giants—and these lovely people become the best memories of my journey.

As a socially-awkward introvert who stutters when meeting strangers, the day of moving into the hostel became one of the most unforgettable moments of my trip. It was a snowy day, and I arrived at the hostel early so as to avoid starting any conversations before I settled my messy luggage and anxious heart. However, as unexpected as an exchange life could be, I bumped into two of my housemates once I unlocked the main door.

I greeted my newly acquainted English and Canadian friends with a silly grin, to which they returned a warm handshake. They shared for around ten minutes their experience of a night out in a little bar, and all I could gain from this accent-loaded conversation was “they went out drinking but forgot to bring their purse.”

Frustrated as I was, I started to doubt if I would actually be able to live with these international students. Not long after I started living with three European and one Canadian student did I fall in love with this new life. We talked whenever we cooked together in the kitchen, about everything from Greek philosophy to the meaning of life, from American politics to traditional Italian dishes. It was a very beautiful thing that one could be so closely connected to people from the other end of the world through a shared language. As a translation major, I felt that was the essence of translation—to get meaning across, stemming from the desire to connect with each another.

It felt strangely sweet to explore a new life with five guys. We went to Amsterdam together, sharing a sunny afternoon on a grassy field, covered with sprinkles from our little Dutch pancakes. We made dinners together, watching the master chef among us cook with such impressive skills that almost set the kitchen on fire. We also did movie nights together—though I never completely understood what the film was about because the subtitles were

always taken out. But what was so important about the content of the movie when you could enjoy the popcorn prepared by your Finnish friend, beer bought by your English and Canadian housemates, and impromptu jokes offered by your Italian buddy?

One night we went to the very bar that my flatmates talked about when we first met. That was the first time I went into a bar and I got pretty nervous because of the baseless stereotypes I had of the hedonistic lifestyle of bar-goers. However, once again my pigeonholed perspectives were shattered, and I came to realise that drinking alcohol was as common as having bubble tea in Hong Kong, all about loosening oneself up and hanging out with friends. It sounded like a silly awakening, but it also revealed how precious it was to be able to discover the truth with your own eyes. I would never forget how powerful that night was, the night that granted me the courage to appreciate the lifestyle of people with very different backgrounds from mine.

Apart from the people, this journey was also made irreplaceable as I buried my head in the books at a Dutch university. Utrecht University, the school that I attended, was famous for its 4-period instead of 3-semester school schedule. In each period, all lessons were cramped into 7 to 8 weeks of class and the workload was immensely heavy. Self-learning and lesson preparation were emphasised and I spent almost 4 hours a day on the piles of reading to be finished before class. It was indeed a tough task for a student like me who was not used to intensive reading, yet it was an eye-opening experience as the reading allowed us to engage in profound discussions with our fellow classmates from all around the world. My favourite class was Dutch culture, a course impossible for me to take back in Hong Kong. The instructor, Ms Besamusca, not only delicately connected Dutch history, politics, religion, geography, education, and law all under the name of culture, but also allowed us a brand-new perspective to see through present-day Dutch society and understand the deep-rooted beliefs and values of the nation. It granted me the international insights and cultural sensitivity that were rarely provided in courses that I had taken in my university years.

Apart from having a taste of being an international student, going on exchange was also about acting like a local. In the Dutch case, that meant to go everywhere on a bike—trying to save my life while cycling through the busy routes in the city thus became one of the most unforgettable memories of the journey. As a couch potato tamed by the I-have-no-time-for-sports lifestyle, riding a bike was already not an easy task for me. In the Netherlands where everybody learns to cycle at age three, I undoubtedly looked like an idiot who had not learnt how to walk at the age of 20. In order to proudly say that I was an exchange student in the Netherlands, I paid a great amount of effort trying to polish my cycling skills. I started by

walking to school and back in order to memorise the route, and that was 2 hours in total per day. Though it may sound like tiring work, I actually enjoyed it so much—every morning I was navigating through the twists and turns of the city, mesmerised by its tranquil beauty as well as vibrant liveliness. I slowly came to realise how joy could always be found in moments of hard work—it was not just the result but the process that mattered.

By the time I had to leave, I already lost count of the times when I fell off the bike and badly hurt myself—I still have a wound on my thigh, a mark of courage that I once demonstrated in the kingdom of bicycles. However, I knew deeply that everything was worth it at the moment I could finally cycle my way to school merrily like a Dutch.

Time really has wings. The five months of my exchange slipped away easily and it was soon time to say farewell to the dear nation of tulips and bicycles. Once again I was at the airport train station, overwhelmed by a feeling utterly different from the time when I first arrived. I knew I had to go home, but I no longer could tell where my home was. Looking up, I recognised the first Dutch word that I noticed on the very day I set foot in this country. It was “Tot ziens”, and it meant “Goodbye”.

Every beginning has an ending and every ending is a new beginning. Goodbye my dear Netherlands. Until next time.



A picture of me with my flatmates at Amsterdam.

About the author

Cherry Wong is a fourth year Translation major who went to Utrecht University in the Netherlands in Semester 2, 2018-19.