

Diamond Girl

by [Lawrence Winkler](#) (October 2024)



View of the City of Antwerp (Jan Wildens, 1596-1618)

No pressure, no diamonds. —Thomas Carlyle

It wasn't my first visit to Antwerp. That had been a quarter century earlier.

Antwerp had some of the best beer in the world. And Jeff and I were driving there in search of the Holy Grail, a Trappist brew called ID. We hurried to the Mecca of Belgian beer establishments, Kulminator, an old café storefront, with bright yellow blinds. Inside, we asked for ID, and a smile came over the ancient visage behind the counter. Last one. Two Jews sat in a darkened temple, sipping liquid

light. 'And in the sky. The larks, still bravely singing, fly.' And that was the other Hebrew Antwerp icon. Diamonds. It turned out that ID wasn't just a Trappist beer. It was, and is, a US state. Turns out, that one of the cheapest places to buy a diamond is Idaho, and that, for her fiftieth birthday, and because she had never worn one, I had a carat stone shipped to Antwerp, in advance of our visit. But she's not here yet and doesn't arrive until the next book. –Lawrence Winkler, Between the Cartwheels

This isn't the next book, although it may be the last.

Robyn's 50th birthday bash was an evening affair with a collection of close friends, a clown, and a cake. And two air tickets to Antwerp.

'Why Antwerp?' She asked.

'That's where your diamond lives.' I said. 'But it hasn't arrived yet.' She asked where it was.

'Boise.' I replied. 'Idaho.'

'Why Boise?' I explained how I found a diamond jeweller who could source a perfect stone, with the complicated condition of sending it to Belgium for us to collect. He tried to explain why, but I never understood.

'Besides.' He said. 'There's no romance in Idaho.'

Our collection of close friends, and even the clown, asked why it took me 18 years to buy her a diamond.

'It took her that long to get used to the idea.' I said. 'Diamonds are forever.'

So it was that my half-century-old soulmate and I found ourselves under the neo-Gothic dome of Antwerpen-Centraal, one

of the most beautiful train stations in the world. We emerged from its mirrored and marbled interior into a cold October dawn. The feeble sunrise on the horizon struggled to backlight our jetlagged random ramble along the tramlines and narrow cobblestoned *straats* to Grote Markt Plaza and the Hotel Rubens. *Diamonds are found only in the dark places of the earth; truths are found only in the depths of thought.*

The drowsy clerk behind the reception desk stirred enough to show us to an unoccupied room on the third floor, memorable for two Antwerpian accoutrements. The first was a view of the 400-foot-high Mechlin lace stone spire and gargantuan golden timepieces of the Gothic Cathedral. The other was a print of Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, like an exotic Scarlet Johanssen glowing with an inner radiance against the dark background, gazing dumbfounded at our early arrival. But we weren't here for pearls.

Before all else, we needed to catch up on sleep. The Girl on the wall never took her eyes off our rousing. We awoke revived, and ravenous.

Back through the Grote Markt, Robyn pointed to a fountain surmounted by a strange statue.

'That's the giant Antigoon.' I said. 'Folklore says he lived near the Scheldt River. He extracted a toll from passing boatmen, severed the hand of anyone who did not pay, and threw it in the river. A young hero named Silvius Brabo killed the giant, cut off one of his hands, and flung it into the river. The name Antwerpen is from the Dutch word *handwerpen*. *Hand-throwing*. One of the city's products is shortbread with almonds or chocolate known as *Antwerpse Handjes*. *Antwerp Hands*.' But we weren't here for biscuits.

On the plaza, we found the door to a local restaurant called Elfde Gebob. Inside, on a table opposite two elderly lesbian women sporting brushcuts and dogs and diamonds, we ordered a

Flemish *daube* beef stew for me and mussels and *frites* for Robyn, along with two magnificent 'little bowl' *bollekes* of Westmalle Trappist beer. It tasted like coming home. Dessert was ice cream on the freezing October night, sourced from the 'Keep in Touch' *nacht winkel* shop around the corner from our hotel.

We had arrived at the beginning of a weekend, which left us two days to fill before Robyn could meet the reps of the company that had cut and held her stone. *Infinity Diamonds*.

Saturday morning, we walked the Meir shopping street and amused ourselves with the names and outsized cartoonish characters and window displays along the Leystraat. We passed the 'Just a Shoe' shoe store, Ronald McDonald and Marge Simpson, pastry parodies, a enormous Best Vrits cone of fried potatoes, exaggerated comics of restaurant chefs, and the only thick-skinned butter chicken trademark registered in Belgium. *Enig in Belgie ... diksmuidse boterkuiken gedeponeerd merk*.

Elegant carriages drawn by Clydesdales clip-clopped past the 26-storey Boerentoren Farmers' Tower, the oldest skyscraper in Europe. Built in 1932, a schmaltzy bizarre banner draped its façade. *Aanvaardt mij neemy staan begint mij dag zo ... Zo nacht uw pracht van voor af aan oh kijkt dan houdt van mij bezwijkt hout u niet in. Accept me, take my stand, my day begins like this... So night your splendor from the beginning, oh look then you love me, I will not give you away.*

We ate lunch and drank *bollekes* of De Koninck at one of the outside tables of Den Engel, the oldest bar in Antwerp, constructed of stone and smoke.

In the afternoon Robyn and I posed in front of Antwerp's ornate guild houses, packed cheek by jowl around the marketplace. We climbed *Bloedberg* Blood Mountain and around the city's oldest guildhall, the *Vleeshuis* Butcher's Meat House to the Het Steen medieval rock fortress on the Scheld

River. Richard Wagner set his opera Lohengrin. His protagonist knight materialized on the river on a barge pulled by a swan. At the entrance bridge to the castle was a statue of the giant trickster Lange Wapper who terrorized the city's inhabitants during the Dark Ages.

In the evening, we had dinner at the Sir Anthony Van Dijk restaurant. The chef-owner ensured we consumed enough truffles and foie gras and a bottle of Chateau Constantin to significantly alter our waistlines and his bottom line. It was better than my first Antwerp culinary experience twenty-two years earlier.

'In a small café near the Cathedral, I asked for a menu.

'*Ve haf Schotel of Mosselen.*' He said. 'Schotel or Mussels.' I couldn't face another bowl of mussels. And I just finally needed to know.

'What the hell is Schotel?' I asked, choking on what it did to the back of my throat.

'You know.' He said. 'It's a plate.'

'A plate of what?' I pursued.

'You know. A plate.' He said.

'But a plate of what?' I was almost hysterical.

'It's Dagschotel. In French, it's called 'Plat du jour.' In English, you call it 'Plate of the Day.'" He said it like he couldn't believe he was speaking to someone so stupid. I felt the key in the door, the lifting of tension, and the wave of relief.

'What's the Schotel today?' I asked.

'Paardenvlees tartare.' He said.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Raw horsemeat.' He said.

I had the mussels.'

Sunday was for art and culture. Nearby our hotel, Robyn and I stopped to admire a statue of Madonna her child in one arm and a sceptre in the other one, both wearing a crown in drapes. Perched on and projected from halfway up the corner of an old building, Mary trampled a dragon slithering around a star-dotted globe.

Across the Grote Markt, the Gothic Cathedral of Our Lady was never completed because of how long the name of the church took to pronounce in Flemish. *Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal*.

It was the tallest building in the city. The largest bell in the tower required 16 bell ringers. From its beginning in 1352, the church was a continuous cycle of Catholic construction and Protestant destruction. In 1566, at the beginning of the Eighty Years' War, the iconoclasm was nasty. *The Blessed Sacrament of the altar ... they trod under their feet and (horrible it is to say!) shed their stinking piss upon it ... these false brethren burned and rent not only all kind of Church books, but, moreover, destroyed whole libraries of books of all sciences and tongues, yea the Holy Scriptures and the ancient fathers, and tore in pieces the maps and charts of the descriptions of countries.*

Yet it was still remarkable for a solid oak altarpiece and several significant works by the homeboy painter Peter Paul Rubens. Of these, the Elevation of the Cross triptych was the most evocative embodiment of the dark disembodiment of their saviour and his suffering.

We visited the house where Rembrandt lived between 1639 and 1658. We paid the full privileged price to gain entry, unqualified as we were to take advantage of the €2.5 admission

fee afforded to those who were unable to afford more. *CJP (Cultural Passport for Young People) ... Student card Holders ... Groups from 15 People ... +3 Pass Holders ... Unemployed ... People on Special Allowance ... Widow(ers), Handicapped, Pensioners, Orphans ... OKV (Openbaar Kunstbezit Vlanderen) ... Museum Card Holders ... Inhabitants of Antwerp In Case of Inhibitions With Price Increase ...* The price to use the toilet was €0.30. I'm not sure if anyone got a discount.

It was still a better deal than Rembrandt had. At the age of 33, he had paid 13,000 guilders, an exorbitant price for an elegant two-storey dwelling with a classic Dutch triangular stepped gable. When he could no longer afford the installments nor his neighbour's bill for shoring up their common foundations when they began a severe subsidence into the marshy soil, the painter declared bankruptcy. His wife and three of his children died here. Such a shame.

Monday arrived as a welcome call to action. Robyn and I trekked across town to the *Diamont* diamond district to find her stone. Also known as the *Diamantkwartier* and dubbed the Square Mile, the largest diamond district in the world turns over about 85% of the world's rough diamonds, worth 54 billion dollars. Half return to Antwerp for the cutting and polishing of 234 million carats in 380 workshops that serve 1,500 companies and 3,500 brokers, merchants, and diamond cutters, part of a total workforce of 30,000 people.

The neighborhood consists of Jewish, Jain Indian, Maronite Christian Lebanese and Armenian dealers, known as *diamantaires*. More than 80% of Antwerp's Jewish population works in the diamond trade; Yiddish is the main language of the four trading exchanges or bourses—the Diamond Club of Antwerp, the Beurs voor Diamanthandel, the Antwerpsche Diamantkring, and the Vrije Diamanthandel.

Orthodox Jews, salted and peppered in formal medieval dress—white beards and black coats and broad-brimmed hats and

long sideburn curls— hurried with solemn purpose, some looking quite ridiculous on bicycles. They reminded me of the old Holocaust joke about the Waffen SS officer who stopped an elderly Hassidic peddler pedaller.

‘Who is to blame for all the troubles of the world.’ He asked.

‘The bicycles.’ Said the old Jew.

‘Why the bicycles?’ The Nazi queried.

‘Why the Jews?’ Came the response.

The Germans murdered two-thirds of the Jewish population of Antwerp in the death camps of the Reich. After the war, the Belgian *burgemeesters* invited the survivors back to resume the diamond trade. Today, about 15,000 Jews, many of them Hasidic, live in the city.

The first thing I sensed was the subtleness and strength of the surrounding security. Everyone and everything were guarded and monitored. Stainless steel bollards fell in synchrony from the main promenade through the diamond houses to allow permitted vehicles their timed deliveries and collections, reemerging as fast to prevent any unwanted incursions. It was mesmerizing. Mentor Worldwide Security Services displayed an armed mannikin outside its entrance. *Transport worldwide ... Vault Services—Safes ... Entrance Control ... Custom Broker ... Surveillance ... Intervention ... Insurance ... Guarding...*

None of this was for decoration. The year before our visit, thieves had stolen loose diamonds, gold, silver, and other types of jewelry valued at more than \$100 million in the Antwerp diamond heist, also known as the ‘heist of the century.’

The vault that housed the diamonds was two floors below the main floor, protected by several security mechanisms,

including a lock with 100 million possible combinations, infrared heat detectors, a seismic sensor, Doppler radar, and a magnetic field. The building itself had a private security force.

The robbery required eighteen months of preparation. Its mastermind, Leonardo Notarbartolo posed as an Italian diamond merchant and rented a furnished office next to the safe deposit box in the vault beneath the target building. He hid a small camera above the vault door invisible when the ceiling lights were on. It recorded the combination the guards used to open the door and send its data to a sensor and hard drive hidden inside a watertight chamber in an ordinary-looking, functional red fire extinguisher in a nearby storage room.

The day before the robbery, Notarbartolo sprayed women's hair spray on the thermal-motion sensors inside the vault. The next night, his professional five-man Italian 'La Scuola di Torino' team, wearing plastic gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints, picked the lock to an abandoned adjoining office building that shared a private garden that wasn't under video surveillance. They climbed a ladder to access the garden's balcony, placed a homemade polyester shield to block their thermal signatures, disabled the alarms on the balcony's windows, covered the antechamber security cameras with black plastic bags, and turned on the lights.

The group used a custom-made aluminum plate with heavy-duty double-sided tape to unscrew the two bolts of the vault's magnetic lock simultaneously to maintain their magnetic field, pivot them out of the way and tape them to the antechamber wall. They already had a duplicate of the foot-long key that opened the vault, after they turned off the lights to avoid tripping the light sensors inside. One of the men pushed aside a ceiling panel to short-circuit the inbound and outbound sensors. He used Styrofoam boxes to blind heat detectors and masking tape to block light transducers.

Using a hand-cranked drill to break the locks on each of the security boxes, the thieves emptied the contents of 123 safe deposit boxes into duffel bags. It took them an hour to retrace their steps and escape.

The police caught Notobartolo when a local hunter reported finding rubbish containing envelopes from the Antwerp Diamond Centre on his property. They found a receipt for a salami sandwich he had purchased from a nearby grocery store. They identified the mastermind from the shop's security footage and the DNA in sandwich crusts near the crime scene. Though police made arrests, and the perpetrators served time, but few of the stolen diamonds were recovered.

It was into this recent disquieting breach of stronghold impregnability that Robyn and I came looking for our carbon-based crystalline curiosity. There were questions.

But we had the right answers. And so it was that Infinity Diamonds on Venusstratt admitted my lovely bride and me into their inner sanctum, seeking a special stone, late of Boise, Idaho. Paul Slegers, the managing director, welcomed us with a tour of his state-of-the-art workshop, complete with computers with laser marking windows for cleaving chemical bonds, and rows of diamond polishers touching their stones onto what could have been my old Dual turntable, except for the more valuable dust their 'scaifs' produced.

Paul introduced us to Anneke, a cherubic young woman with auburn-dyed short punk hair, a goitre, and a pearl earring. She reminded me of other eccentric Belgians I had encountered on my previous foray into Flanders fields.

'A gender-challenged Mohican with transdermal metal and subdermal ink sat across from me at breakfast, stealing my appetite. In my attempt to escape, on the outskirts of Antwerp, I discovered that hitchhiking out of Belgium wasn't bad because the locals wouldn't pick you up; it was bad

because they had no idea where the exit was. My Styrofoam sign first caught a steamfitter and his family, who drove me to the only road not going to Holland. An hour and twenty kilometres later, a couple rescued me from the rain, but not the direction. The Belgian army officer, who dropped me in the centre of a horrendous traffic circle, convinced me how lucky the Germans had been, to have transportation.'

Anneke informed us that the object of our desire was not quite ready.

'You can pick it up tomorrow.' She said.

'Diamonds only seem forever.' I mused.

We thanked Paul and Anneke and, having worked up an appetite from all the anticipation, left to find a place for lunch. With so many members of the Tribe of Judah in the vicinity, I suggested we try a local kosher restaurant. Robyn asked if I had a place in mind.

'Hoffy's.' I said.

'Hoffy's?' Robyn asked.

'Couple of blocks away.' I said. 'On Lange Kievitstraat.'

The food behind the glass display cases at Hoffy's looked appetizing, even scrumptious. There was veal schnitzel and spinach and stuffed eggplant and smoked salmon and fish balls and chicken breasts and gefilte fish and carrots with raisins and buckwheat *kasha* and smoked fish mousse and frittata and green beans. I asked the salt and pepper Haredi with the apron behind the counter how to order. He pointed to a scale next to the till.

'It's by weight?' Robyn asked.

'Per hundred grams.' He said. There were no prices on display in the cabinets, so we filled our plates with what we fancied

for lunch. Our Hasidic host kachinged the cash register, and a number in scientific notation flashed on his screen.

'Jesus Christ.' I murmured.

'Also a Jew.' He said.

Robyn and I ate in silence, chewing every delicious mouthful like it was the Last Supper. If I hadn't already paid for the diamond, it well might have been. I asked Robyn how her lunch could have been any better.

'They might have put stainless steel bollards at the front door.' She said.

We were at the front door of Infinity next morning. Paul and Anneke met us with smiles, a small velvet case, and a Certificate of Authenticity—*Round brilliant, Venus cut-quality, 1.09 carat, colour E, clarity SI1, diameter 6.68-6.69, depth 4.08 mm, depth percentage 61%, table diameter 51%, crown height 15.2%, crown angle 34.4 degrees, pavilion depth 42.9%, pavilion angle 40.9 degrees, girdle faceted 0.7-1.2%, culet pointed*. And then Robyn opened the vessel of Venus, and the room filled with awe. The stone sparkled brilliant, even under the fluorescent lighting of the office.

'We say 'Mazel Tov.' Said Anneke.

'So do we.' I agreed.

'You'll need this declaration form for your diamond to leave the country.' Paul handed me the form and winked. 'What you do to re-enter your own country is up to you.' I winked back.

'And now I show you the real Antwerp.' Anneke smiled and put on her coat.

She took us to elegant chocolate shops and a tearoom with palms and chandeliers and Oud Arsenal, a congenial bruin café with an orangey-brown exterior. We floated through the

entrance door between two large wooden framed windows. *Sinds 1924 ... Volks Estraminet.*

The immaculate interior consisted of a small single room furnished with the cozy decor of grandma's house in a wonderful atmosphere of warm orange light. American music from the middle of the previous century played in the background.

Above the weathered tiled floor framed portraits of ancestors and pigeons mingled with old metal beer signs on the antique yellowing flowered wallpaper, vintage brewery advertisements from a bygone era. A blackboard of more contemporary special offers sat high up one wall, and an antique bicycle hung above a wood-burning potbelly stove complete with two cats curled up for a nap.

The black marble bar to the left boasted four taps—Stella Artois, a De Koninck, Rodenbach, Westmalle, and Bier va de Maand. Local patrons peppered the seven red fading Formica-topped wooden tables, as yellow and old as the bar itself.

We slipped into a cozy booth. A menu of more than thirty lambic beers dropped into our laps.

Anneke ordered three bollekes of draft Rodenbach with a bowl of tiny, brined shrimp.

'The bar opened in 1832,' She said. 'It's been in the same family since 1924.'

We moved on to a lunch of waffles topped with powdered sugar and then to another establishment to drink small glasses of Jenever gin without using our hands. Their bar cat was asleep in an open bureau drawer.

Anneke wished us a bon voyage and faded from our lives like the timeless tiles and wallpaper of our journey.

Robyn and I celebrated our new carbon credit with another brown meal at a restaurant with a Flemish sense of humour.

Dinner choices: Take it, Leave it. Be nice or go away.

On our last day in Antwerp, we opened a bank account at the BNP Paribas Fortis branch on the Meir. The only reason the manager allowed this indulgence is because he thought we were coming back to live in Belgium as permanent residents. I didn't know we would be coming back.

Robyn and I boarded our flight home past a sign at the boarding gate. *High there! enjoy your overpriced flight. Next time, fly Virgin Express.* We entered Canada with a new gemstone taped on the inside of Robyn's brassiere. A local jeweller set it in a gold band the same autumn.

A dozen years later, on our way to Sicily, we detoured to Antwerp to close our account with BNP Paribas Fortis. The bank had written to us about new money laundering regulations that forced us to liquidate what little we had left in Belgium. The chopping of hands had continued.

There had been changes in the intervening period.

The cigarette smoke that provided so much of the atmosphere was gone from the bars. We spent a day at the Museum aan de Stroom and ate beef stew and mussels and drank Orval with Billie the pug at Billie's Bier Kafétaria. *Wish you were beer.*

And time would continue to take its toll. The following year diamond thief Leonardo Notarbartolo got out of prison and seven later, a climate activist glued his head to the glass protecting The Girl with the Pearl Earring. Another protestor covered his head in tomato soup. The painting and our memories remained unharmed.

And that is all—all beautiful and unceasing like Robyn's diamond, first carbon, then light. *Diamond girl... You sure do, you sure do... You sure do shine.*

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Lawrence Winkler is a retired physician, traveler, and natural philosopher. His métier has morphed from medicine to manuscript. He lives with Robyn on Vancouver Island and in New Zealand, tending to their gardens, vineyards, and dreams.

His writings have previously been published in *The Montreal Review*. Some of his other work can be found online at lawrencewinkler.com.

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