

But maybe that's not the end. Maybe before the credits roll, we see this same man getting out of bed in the middle of the night, walking past his sister's room, and continuing downstairs into the kitchen. A switch is thrown, and we notice, in the far corner of the room, a large standing birdcage covered with a tablecloth. He approaches it carefully and removes the cloth, waking a blue-fronted Amazon parrot, its eyes glowing red in the sudden light. Through everything that's gone before this moment, we understand that the man has something important to say. From his own mouth the words are meaningless, and so he pulls up a chair. The clock reads three A.M., then four, then five, as he sits before the brilliant bird, repeating slowly and clearly the words "Forgive me. Forgive me. Forgive me."

## Six to Eight Black Men

I'VE NEVER BEEN MUCH for guidebooks, so when trying to get my bearings in some strange American city, I normally start by asking the cabdriver or hotel clerk some silly question regarding the latest census figures. I say "silly" because I don't really *care* how many people live in Olympia, Washington, or Columbus, Ohio. They're nice-enough places, but the numbers mean nothing to me. My second question might have to do with the average annual rainfall, which, again, doesn't tell me anything about the people who have chosen to call this place home.

What really interests me are the local gun laws. Can I carry a concealed weapon and, if so, under what circumstances? What's the waiting period for a tommy gun? Could I buy a Glock 17 if I were recently divorced or fired from my

job? I've learned from experience that it's best to lead into this subject as delicately as possible, especially if you and the local citizen are alone and enclosed in a relatively small area. Bide your time, though, and you can walk away with some excellent stories. I've learned, for example, that the blind can legally hunt in both Texas and Michigan. In Texas they must be accompanied by a sighted companion, but I heard that in Michigan they're allowed to go it alone, which raises the question: How do they find whatever it is they just shot? In addition to that, how do they get it home? Are the Michigan blind allowed to drive as well? I ask about guns not because I want one of my own but because the answers vary so widely from state to state. In a country that's become increasingly homogeneous, I'm reassured by these last charming touches of regionalism.

Firearms aren't really an issue in Europe, so when traveling abroad, my first question usually relates to barnyard animals. "What do your roosters say?" is a good icebreaker, as every country has its own unique interpretation. In Germany, where dogs bark "vow vow" and both the frog and the duck say "quack," the rooster greets the dawn with a hearty "kik-a-riki." Greek roosters crow "kiri-a-kee," and in France they scream "coco-rico," which sounds like one of those horrible premixed cocktails with a pirate on the label. When told that an American rooster says "cock-a-doodle-doo," my hosts look at me with disbelief and pity.

"When do you open your Christmas presents?" is another good conversation starter, as I think it explains a lot

about national character. People who traditionally open gifts on Christmas Eve seem a bit more pious and family-oriented than those who wait until Christmas morning. They go to Mass, open presents, eat a late meal, return to church the following morning, and devote the rest of the day to eating another big meal. Gifts are generally reserved for children, and the parents tend not to go overboard. It's nothing I'd want for myself, but I suppose it's fine for those who prefer food and family to things of real value.

In France and Germany gifts are exchanged on Christmas Eve, while in the Netherlands the children open their presents on December 5, in celebration of St. Nicholas Day. It sounded sort of quaint until I spoke to a man named Oscar, who filled me in on a few of the details as we walked from my hotel to the Amsterdam train station.

Unlike the jolly, obese American Santa, Saint Nicholas is painfully thin and dresses not unlike the pope, topping his robes with a tall hat resembling an embroidered tea cozy. The outfit, I was told, is a carryover from his former career, when he served as the bishop of Turkey.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but could you repeat that?"

One doesn't want to be too much of a cultural chauvinist, but this seemed completely wrong to me. For starters, Santa didn't *used to do* anything. He's not retired and, more important, he has nothing to do with Turkey. It's too dangerous there, and the people wouldn't appreciate him. When asked how he got from Turkey to the North Pole, Oscar told me with complete conviction that Saint Nicholas currently

resides in Spain, which again is simply not true. Though he could probably live wherever he wanted, Santa chose the North Pole specifically because it is harsh and isolated. No one can spy on him, and he doesn't have to worry about people coming to the door. Anyone can come to the door in Spain, and in that outfit he'd most certainly be recognized. On top of that, aside from a few pleasantries, Santa doesn't speak Spanish. "Hello. How are you? Can I get you some candy?" Fine. He knows enough to get by, but he's not fluent and he certainly doesn't eat tapas.

While our Santa flies in on a sled, the Dutch version arrives by boat and then transfers to a white horse. The event is televised, and great crowds gather at the waterfront to greet him. I'm not sure if there's a set date, but he generally docks in late November and spends a few weeks hanging out and asking people what they want.

"Is it just him alone?" I asked. "Or does he come with some backup?"

Oscar's English was close to perfect, but he seemed thrown by a term normally reserved for police reinforcement.

"Helpers," I said. "Does he have any elves?"

Maybe I'm overly sensitive, but I couldn't help but feel personally insulted when Oscar denounced the very idea as grotesque and unrealistic. "Elves," he said. "They are just so silly."

The words *silly* and *unrealistic* were redefined when I learned that Saint Nicholas travels with what was consistently described as "six to eight black men." I asked several Dutch people to narrow it down, but none of them could

give me an exact number. It was always "six to eight," which seems strange, seeing as they've had hundreds of years to get an accurate head count.

The six to eight black men were characterized as personal slaves until the mid-1950s, when the political climate changed and it was decided that instead of being slaves they were just good friends. I think history has proved that something usually comes *between* slavery and friendship, a period of time marked not by cookies and quiet hours beside the fire but by bloodshed and mutual hostility. They have such violence in the Netherlands, but rather than duking it out amongst themselves, Santa and his former slaves decided to take it out on the public. In the early years if a child was naughty, Saint Nicholas and the six to eight black men would beat him with what Oscar described as "the small branch of a tree."

"A switch?"

"Yes," he said. "That's it. They'd kick him and beat him with a switch. Then if the youngster was really bad, they'd put him in a sack and take him back to Spain."

"Saint Nicholas would kick you?"

"Well, not anymore," Oscar said. "Now he just *pretends* to kick you."

He considered this to be progressive, but in a way I think it's almost more perverse than the original punishment. "I'm going to hurt you but not really." How many times have we fallen for that line? The fake slap invariably makes contact, adding the elements of shock and betrayal to what had previously been plain old-fashioned fear. What kind of a Santa

spends his time pretending to kick people before stuffing them into a canvas sack? Then, of course, you've got the six to eight former slaves who could potentially go off at any moment. This, I think, is the greatest difference between us and the Dutch. While a certain segment of our population might be perfectly happy with the arrangement, if you told the average white American that six to eight nameless black men would be sneaking into his house in the middle of the night, he would barricade the doors and arm himself with whatever he could get his hands on.

"Six to eight, did you say?"

In the years before central heating, Dutch children would leave their shoes by the fireplace, the promise being that unless they planned to beat you, kick you, or stuff you into a sack, Saint Nicholas and the six to eight black men would fill your clogs with presents. Aside from the threats of violence and kidnapping, it's not much different than hanging your stockings from the mantel. Now that so few people actually have a working fireplace, Dutch children are instructed to leave their shoes beside the radiator, furnace, or space heater. Saint Nicholas and the six to eight black men arrive on horses, which jump from the yard onto the roof. At this point I guess they either jump back down and use the door or stay put and vaporize through the pipes and electrical cords. Oscar wasn't too clear about the particulars, but really, who can blame him? We have the same problem with our Santa. He's supposed to use the chimney, but if you don't have one, he still manages to get in. It's best not to think about it too hard.

While eight flying reindeer are a hard pill to swallow, our Christmas story remains relatively dull. Santa lives with his wife in a remote polar village and spends one night a year traveling around the world. If you're bad, he leaves you coal. If you're good and live in America, he'll give you just about anything you want. We tell our children to be good and send them off to bed, where they lie awake, anticipating their great bounty. A Dutch parent has a decidedly hairier story to relate, telling his children, "Listen, you might want to pack a few of your things together before going to bed. The former bishop of Turkey will be coming tonight along with six to eight black men. They might put some candy in your shoes, they might stuff you into a sack and take you to Spain, or they might just pretend to kick you. We don't know for sure, but we want you to be prepared."

This is the reward for living in the Netherlands. As a child you get to hear this story, and as an adult you get to turn around and repeat it. As an added bonus, the government has thrown in legalized drugs and prostitution — so what's *not* to love about being Dutch?

Oscar finished his story just as we arrived at the station. He was an amiable guy — very good company — but when he offered to wait until my train arrived I begged off, claiming I had some calls to make. Sitting alone in the vast, vibrant terminal, surrounded by thousands of polite, seemingly interesting Dutch people, I couldn't help but feel second-rate. Yes, the Netherlands was a small country, but it had six to eight black men and a really good bedtime story. Being a

fairly competitive person, I felt jealous, then bitter. I was edging toward hostile when I remembered the blind hunter tramping off alone into the Michigan forest. He may bag a deer, or he may happily shoot a camper in the stomach. He may find his way back to the car, or he may wander around for a week or two before stumbling through your back door. We don't know for sure, but in pinning that license to his chest, he inspires the sort of narrative that ultimately makes me proud to be an American.

## Rooster at the Hitchin' Post

THE NIGHT THE ROOSTER WAS BORN, my father slipped into my bedroom to personally deliver the news. I was eleven years old and barely awake, yet still I recognized this as a supreme masculine moment: the patriarch informing his firstborn son that another player was joining the team. Looking around my room, at the vase of cattails arranged just so beside the potpourri bowl, he should have realized it was not his team I was playing for. Not even a girl would have decouped her own electrical sockets, but finding it too painful to consider, my father played through, going so far as to offer a plastic-wrapped cigar, the band reading IT'S A BOY. He'd gotten one for each of us. Mine was made of chewing gum, and his was the real thing.

"I hope you're not going to smoke that in here," I said.