

The Man Who Cried I Am

[1]

AMSTERDAM

IT WAS A LATE AFTERNOON in the middle of May and Max Reddick was sitting in an outdoor cafe on the Leidseplein toying with a Pernod. The factories and shops were closing and traffic streamed from Leidse Straat onto the Plein. There were many bicycle riders. Through eyes that had been half glazed over for several days with alcohol, Librium and morphine, Max looked appreciatively at the female cyclists. The men were so average. He quickly dismissed them. The girls were something else again, big-legged and big-buttocked. (Very much like African women, Max thought.) They peddled past, their chins held high, their knees promising for fractions of seconds only, a flash of white above the stock-ingtops and then, the view imminent, the knees rushed up and obscured all view. Once in a while Max would see a girl peddling saucily, not caring if her knees blocked out the sights above or not. Max would think: Go, baby!

The cafe was empty. That was a good sign. It meant that the people Max used to know in Amsterdam, the painters, writers and sculptors, the composers and song-and-dance men who were the year-round Black Peters for the Dutch, the jazzmen, were working well. They would be out later and drink Genever or beer until they became high, wanted to talk about their work or go make love. Maybe they would go up to the Kring, if they were members or honored guests, and play four-ball billiards while eating fresh herring. It was time for the fresh herring, the green herring.

Max glanced at the sky. God! he thought. It was like a clear high-noon sky in New York. No night would appear here until nine, but daybreak would come galloping up at close to three in the morning. He finished his Pernod and twisted to find the waiter, raising his hand at the same time. He felt something

squish as he moved, and the meaning of the feeling caught at his voice. "Ober," he said, then more loudly, "Ober." The waiter, clad in a red jacket, black tie and black pants looked up with a smile. This was a new face, a new American. A little older than many others, and a sick look about him at that! Painter, writer, sculptor, jazz musician, dancer . . . ?

"Pernod," Max said. The waiter nodded and retreated to the bar. Max felt a sharp, gouging pain and he gripped his glass tightly. Water came to his eyes and he felt sweat pop out on his forehead. "Goddamn," he whispered. When the pain subsided, he rose and went to the men's room inside the cafe.

When he came out he noticed that the fresh Pernod was already on his table and he said "Dank U" to the waiter. That phrase he remembered, as he remembered others in French, German, Spanish, Italian, but he could barely put a sentence together in them. He sat down again, glancing at his watch. Where was she?

She had told him in their exchange of polite letters that she had returned to the gallery. If that was so, she should be passing the cafe at any moment, passing with that long, springy stride, so strange because she was small and not thin, passing with her hair billowing back over her shoulder. He had seen her pass many, many times. Before. Before, when he had sat deep inside the cafe watching, and would only call to her when she was almost out of sight. "Lost your cool then, man," he now whispered to himself. "You ba-lew it!" He always thought of the canals when he thought of her. Now they would be reflecting with aching clarity the marvelous painter's sky. The barges and boats would be on the way in, and soon the ducks and swans would be tucking their necks in to sleep. He had to sleep soon, too; it might prolong his life. A few days more.

Ah yes, he thought, you Dutch motherfuckers. I've returned. "A Dutch man o' warre that sold us twenty negars," John Rolfe wrote. Well, you-all, I bring myself. Free! Three hundred and forty-five years after Jamestown. Now . . . how's that for the circle come full?

by John A. Williams

HE DID NOT REALLY CARE about the Dutch except that she was Dutch. She was thirty-five now, fourteen years younger than he. Would she still be as blond? (How he had hated that robust blondness at first after the malnourished black of Africa. The blondness had been so much like that of the Swedish blondes, jazz freaks who lived on jazz concerts, who saw the black musicians in their staged cool postures; but how he had been attracted to it as well!) Did he love her still—billowing blond hair; sturdy swimmer's legs; long, sinewy stride on such a small body and all? (And all? What was all? A memory. Nineteen years old.) He supposed he did love her, transposed, a bit bleached out, in a clinical way, the way you'd discuss it in an analyst's office. *Anal*, he thought, *list*. Shit list. Man, am I on that! But he did want to tell her he was sorry; tell her why it hadn't worked. He was glad he was still on his feet and able to move about. If he had stayed in the hospital in New York, it would have happened, his dying, and somehow she would have learned about it. No. Stand on two feet and tell her you had her mixed up with someone who happened nineteen years ago.

Where *is* she? He would hate to go to her house, but he would if he had to. Maybe he shouldn't have come. Maybe he should have gone right back out to Orly and returned to the hospital in New York. Comfort at least. But he *was* here and he hadn't been any drunker than usual when he decided to come by train. There were only three places to go after Harry Ames dropped dead, another section of Paris, New York or Amsterdam. Hell, he planned to go to Amsterdam anyway. Who was he shucking, himself, *now*? It really hurt to think of old Harry going like that. He should have been drunk and stroking and grinding and talking trash in some broad's ear. He always said he wanted to go like that.

Then he thought he saw her and he came half out of his chair, but it was someone else. He sat down slowly. How would it go anyway? She would be walking with that stride that made her seem even smaller, it was so long. He would call out. She would stop, for his voice would be the most familiar of all voices. Unbelievably she would come near the table. He would not rise, merely sit there and motion to a chair with a smile on his face. (Haw! Haw! Surprise, surprise!) He would have a drink in his hand, perhaps even the one he was holding.

The stride was not the same: he fitted it into the one he remembered watching in Holland, Spain, France, Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, Manhattan, East Hampton, Vermont, Mexico . . . There was something sad about her stride now. The heels of her shoes still rapped sharply on the pavement and the face, that small face with the cheekbones riding high along the sides, was still ready for the smile, the bright, lyrical "*Daaag!*" And that wise body, curving with motion. Her hair was darker, yes, like gold left too long in the open.

"Margrit! [Lillian!] Margrit! [Lillian!] Margrit! [Lillian!]" he shouted, coming out of his chair like a shot, the pain grabbing deeply at his rectum, and he was halfway across the street, all the while fighting the urge to grab himself, tear himself inside out.

And she stopped. Her mouth sprang open. Her dark blue eyes went bulging. With the deepest part of the eye he saw her start impulsively toward him, but she caught herself and stood waving as a leaf in some slight, capricious wind. He stopped too, out of pain and uncertainty; he had blown his lines again.

But when he stopped she moved forward. On she came, the bright face ready to brighten even more, the stride now full, hell-rapping, confident. He stood waving, surprised at his own lack of cool, aghast at the waterfall of love he had thought dammed.

"Mox, Mox, it *is* you?" she said.

That goddamn broad A, he thought, but he said, "Yes." His arms trembled at his sides. Should he open them and put them around her? Should he simply stand and wait, then wilt when she placed hers around him? Signals. As she approached, her right hand darted out before her, thumb extended ludicrously in the air. Resigned, he took it, shook it gently and placed his left hand over hers. He led her to the table. "Please sit." It pained him to look at her figure. She wore a blue sweater which no matter how loose it might have been, would have shown her breasts to tender and exciting advantage; they were always so white and fragile, so vulnerable. Her hips were fuller now. Time does do its work. And her swimmer's legs, big-calved and just short of being too heavily ankled, still made him itch to stroke them from top to—

He looked into Margrit's clear blue eyes. He moved his hand up her arm. Quite suddenly his eyes grew wet with remembering and even as he turned his head to fake a cough, he knew that the Pernod had helped to bring the tears on. "Whiskey," Max said to the waiter, who was watching them. Give her something quick, Max thought, before she starts remembering and runs away. Remembers the bad things.

But she was remembering some things already. She looked at him directly, head on, unblinking, without fear or remorse or pity—without, goddamn it, he thought, *anything*. But hell, he had never been able to decipher her looks, not once except when she cried. God, make me sober—no drunker. ". . . and another Pernod," he called, fingering with surprise the half-full glass already in his hand. He took a deep breath and fought down a rising pain. "How are you?" he said.

"Okay, Mox. You? Hi."

"Fine. Okay. Hi yourself."

"When did you come?"

"Today. About three hours ago."

"Are you well?"

"I—never better." He patted her hand.

"You look sick." She smiled her thanks at the waiter who placed the drinks before them.

"No. Just tired. Took the train from Paris."

"Paris? Harry died, didn't he? It was in *De Arbeiderspers* and *Het Parool* and some other papers. Were you there?"

Max smiled. The Europeans. The goddamn Europeans with their Black Peters and Black Madonnas and blackface celebrations. Five hundred years of guilt transposed into something like vague concern for anyone with a black skin. But Harry was loved more in Europe—and hated too—but not more than back home. There was some kind of balance here that the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the "Skibbidum Times" could never have when it came to Harry Ames. He spoke: "I was just a bit too late. We were to have drinks that day—"

"Oh, Mox, it must have been awful for you."

He felt angry. "Hell, it was all right! Harry was my friend, like a brother. But he had to go. We all have to go. He went quick. Didn't hurt at all. I'm all right. You know me."

Margrit bent her head and studied her Scotch. It was a very

band. Max listened to her voice as it came to him from the other room, now rising, now falling; now pleading, now sad; now promising, now resigned. Max stared out at the canal—the waters were now black. In the sky, gray cloud tumbled over gray cloud, and small trees bent before the rising wind, and flapped their leaves. The long conversation with her husband had ended; now Max heard Michelle talking to the French Embassy. The tone of her voice was different; it was that tone all Europeans use to address those beneath their social level. The tone was not haughty as much as it was sure of itself, sure that the message it conveyed would be followed to the letter.

It was nearly time to go. Max knew fear now. It reached down and dulled the razor-sharp pain that sliced through his lower body. Maybe, even at this moment, he thought in sudden, desperate fright, someone had invented the serum, the pill, the thing that would make cancer obsolete. Now it would do him no good. He took a deep breath. It was done and nobody had invented or discovered anything. *It is done.*

Even so Max snapped shut the lock on the case. It was empty, but he would still take it with him. Let the emptiness, when they discovered it, speak for itself. He wanted to see the expression on their faces. In a minute, as soon as Michelle finished her call, he would kiss her on the cheek and leave the house. He would plod through the courtyard, open the gate he had entered so innocently a few hours earlier, and step into the street. What would be there? Who would be there? If there were nothing and no one, he would get into the little German car, fascism on wheels, now so indispensable to too many people in too many places. You bought a VW and you made peace. It was no good saying you thought long and hard about it first. Once you laid down your money and drove away, the pact to forget the past was made. In the car he would pull out the Llama and put it in his pocket; it would make him feel better.

ALFONSE EDWARDS HAD WAKED that morning feeling unusually dull and heavy. He took a cold shower, dressed except for a jacket, then stood looking at the canal, waiting for his breakfast to come up. The night before he had signed for it for seven. In a few moments he heard footsteps thumping over the carpeted steps. He moved to his door and opened it. The boy, bearing his tray, smiled. "Good morning, Mr. Edwards."

"Good morning. How is the weather?"

"The sun is out and it is very fresh."

"Fine," Edwards said. "Just the way I like it."

"Yes, sir."

As he was eating, Edwards' eyes went once more to the plaque on the wall that gave a brief history of his hotel on the Heeren-Gracht. The building had been constructed only a dozen years after the first Dutch slave ship sailed into James-town. And here he was—three hundred forty-five years later—and on the side of the descendants of the doers of that deed, trying to undo it. Or trying to prevent the inevitable reaction to that deed which had been the background for so many others. He ripped a piece of brown bread in half and placed half a slice of Gouda on it, then poured his coffee.

But this was the day. Last night he had had Michelle followed from Paris to Leiden and watched her leave the train. Going to her secret home, where Ames had spent so much time with her.

Then he went on to Amsterdam; it would be easy to pick up Reddick there, and Edwards' Amsterdam contact could help him with the completion of this assignment. He wished he knew exactly what he was to get, after he first—

It had been a long assignment. Africa and then Europe. In Europe there had been the constant suspicion, for every Negro new to a European city was said to be connected with Central. To allay that suspicion there had been the trips, the women, the writing, the fights, talking the jargon. But today that would be over. There would be another assignment after a bit of Rest and Recuperation, perhaps in Frankfurt, before he took on a new one. The new assignment would be another of what the people back home called dirty, filthy jobs. But those jobs protected America in ways Americans were too childish to realize. However, they did expect someone to protect them. From all terrors. The phone rang and Edwards felt a momentary tightening across his lean stomach. He picked it up and snapped off a quiet "Hello." Then he listened. "I'll be downstairs in ten minutes," he said, and he hung up. He put his jacket on. He did not know what to expect from Max Reddick, but the mission was crystal clear. From a corner of his suitcase Edwards lifted a stainless steel object three inches long. It was in a clear plastic container. The object was a high-pressure syringe and when the handle was pushed, a powerful, high-speed jet of *Rauwolfia serpentina* came forth, penetrating both clothes and skin, and attacked the central nervous system at once, depressing it until death came. The usual autopsy report was death by heart attack. Edwards made sure the plastic container was tight before placing it in his pocket. One agent had killed himself by carrying the syringe without its case.

Edwards walked quietly downstairs, and gaining the street, walked across it and looked at the canal. The city was just coming awake; ducks were floating around in search of food. He wondered just how many ducks had been killed during the night by the canal rats. He saw the car coming, a small black VW, and moved to the edge of the road. When it stopped he went around and got in, noticing that Roger was wearing dark glasses.

"Morning," Edwards said.

"Morning." Roger drove off. "He just got up. He's rented a car, a VW. Light gray."

They drove to the Leidseplein and parked. Now the other people would retreat to the consulate and wait. Reddick was theirs; State was bypassing.

"It's going to be a nice day," Roger said.

"Yes, the weather's been surprisingly good for a change."

Bicyclists went by in waves. More trams rolled by, and cars.

"There he is," Roger said.

"Let's go. Don't lose him."

They followed Max's car out Overtoom.

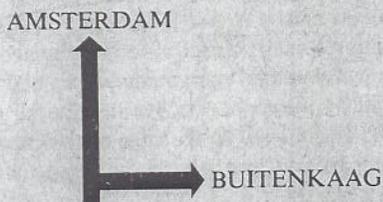
MAX PAUSED A LONG MOMENT before pulling the cord that opened the gate. He glanced behind him at the house; Michelle was at a window, watching. A white spot. He couldn't even tell now the color of her hair. He thought, s'long, Red. He pulled the cord and the gate swung open. He stepped into the street, pulling the door closed after him and leaning back against it automatically, to make sure it was firmly locked. He looked up and down. The street was quiet, almost empty. He scuttled across the walk, heart pounding, and hurriedly unlocked the car door. Inside,

he relocked it and, flinching from the pain of the sudden sitting, groaned. His fingers were groping under the seat for the Llama. Where was it? Stiff, eager fingers ploughed into car-floor dirt; his heart threatened to tear through his rib cage. Where—? But now his fingers touched heavy metal with hard, precise lines, and he pulled the gun out, breathing with relief. He pulled the clip halfway out. Still loaded. A small gun, but that's what everyone got killed with in New York. Twenty-two's. A .25 would hurt only a little bit more. He put the gun in his pocket, checked the doors again and placed the case on the other seat. He started down the street and sped quickly through the city, so occupied with watching behind him that he squirted through two red lights. When he gained the main road he shifted into fourth. Better, he thought. That's better. With the coming of the gray clouds the temperature had dropped slightly and the wind had come up. He felt it tearing at the car. He drove rapidly. A big, black Mercedes rushed up behind him, blinked its lights and then howled past. Max noticed the black-on-white plates. The big "D" to one side.

Max was steering with one hand, and with the other wiping away the saliva that had formed upon his lips. Now, waves of nausea tugged at his stomach. He felt blood flowing lightly, but steadily and more than pain, he felt embarrassment. Like a broad, he thought. He opened his mouth and sucked in great gulps of air.

Europa 10 through western Holland is a narrow, well-tended four-lane highway. It flows over flat land except where there are long but gentle inclines which soon slant back down to sea level or below and continue on.

Max drove up one of those long gentle inclines and saw a sign:



The turnoff to Buitenkagg was at the crest of the incline. Max could see grass and a grove of small elm trees. He made a sudden decision to pull off the road and rest. Change the cotton. Take a pill. He snapped over the wheel and careened off Europa 10. Braking gently as he rushed downhill, he pulled up on the grass between the trees. Overhead and to his right, a lone car rushed toward Amsterdam under the deepening gray skies. Max shut off the ignition and silence, except for the wind, fell upon him.

He opened the door and reached for his pills and cotton. As he put his feet on the ground, he wished he were someplace where he could give himself another shot and lay down. At that moment there was for him no luxury like that of laying down. A gust of wind coughed across the fields and the trees leaned and their leaves flapped in frenzy and Max heard an alien noise brought, it seemed, by the wind itself; and he whirled, dropping the pills and cotton, and tugged frantically at his pocket where the gun was, pushing against the car door which was pressed against him by the wind. Before the black VW had stopped, Max recognized Roger and Edwards, and thought without surprise, Of course! Disarmingly he put toward them that face which had attracted the hurt and wounded all his life, the face for the Sheas, the Harrys. That face as they

flowed toward him, their car engine still running. Max could almost count their steps. Gripping his gun he thought, this is the final irony. The coming of age, Negro set at Negro in the name of God and Country. Or was it the ultimate trap?

"Roger!" he cried out in fury and the wind burst over them in a mighty gust and Max, aiming the gun at Roger now, noticing their surprise (the face he had put on helped, intangibly, yet mightily); heard Roger shout, "Max man! Hold it! We just want to talk to you, man!" but fired at him low, once, twice, and saw him fold and start down, caught his shocked voice saying "Damn, man!" Soft, awful sound, his body hitting the ground while Edwards as if lifted by the wind came at him, smoothly, dark, long, uncoiling, and Max threw up his free hand to ward off the bright flash of silver which nevertheless grazed him, and in that same windblown, overcrowded second Max cleared his gun to fire at Edwards, aiming high this time, to shoot him right in the mouth, to stop up that mouth for good; but suddenly Edwards flying past him now, silver glittering in his hand, Roger in his final bounce upon the ground, the wind began to shriek in Max's ears and the running car engine became an army of snare drummers and Max felt the world closing in on him fast, pounding and squeezing him as he tumbled forward now, puzzled and frustrated and fearful, screaming, "Maggie! Maggie!"

Roger was pulling himself toward the car whimpering, "That fucker, trying to be a hero, a motherfucking hero. He was shooting for my balls!"

Edwards quickly pulled Max's body into his car and bent him over the steering wheel. He opened the briefcase. It was empty. Then with swift, practiced fingers he went over Max's body. Practiced fingers probe the rectum, separate the testicles, feel the penis for hidden objects. Edwards did not find microfilm; he found the wad of blood and pus-filled cotton; he found the morphine. Now he understood the syringe and needle. Without hesitation, he attached the needle to the syringe, then withdrew the morphine. He pushed up Max's sleeve and hit the big vein in his arm. Like the old days with the Narcotics Department he thought, still moving swiftly. Jazz musicians in Europe dying of overdoses administered by agents tired of chasing them. Better than heart attacks. There were getting to be too many people found dead of "heart attacks."

Edwards closed Max's car door and returned to his own car, kicking dirt over the trail of Roger's blood.

"C'mon," Roger called. "Hurry up, man. I'm hit bad."

"Where?" Edwards asked.

"I don't know. Near my balls. Did he get my balls? Look."

Roger removed his hands. Edwards looked. "Did he?"

"I can't tell. Let's get going anyway."

Within a minute they were back on the northbound lane to Amsterdam. Angrily Edwards considered the papers. He'd have to stop and call and get Roger into other hands. Then he'd have to get back to Leiden. The woman. Goddamn it, he thought, and it might not even end there.

The preceding excerpts are from the novel The Man Who Cried I Am, to be published by Little, Brown on October 25, 1967. Copyright ©1967 by John A. Williams. Mr. Williams' previous novels are The Angry Ones, Night Song, and Sissie. He is also the author of This is My Country Too, a nonfiction account of his travels across the U.S.
