

Good Brown Boots

by [Hope Burwell](#)

I'm sitting in a coffee shop in Amsterdam that I've chosen purely for its name, "Global Chillage." It made me laugh out loud the first time I saw it—that must have been November 2000—and I went in then, as I have on five or six occasions since, chuckling. It's nearly empty this Monday afternoon, January 6, 2003. The last of the New Year's crowds emptied themselves onto trains yesterday, and the Dutch are cleaning up after a New Year's Eve that lasted a week—fueled partly by a hotel and hostel industry that refused, over the holiday, to rent rooms for fewer than four nights.

I'm grateful for the quiet, for a temporary lack of smoke in the air, for the serenity of this funky little cave. Up early enough to watch the residents go to work and to see the flower stalls between Vijzelstraat and Leidesstraat unveil a rainbow of tulip buds through a gently falling snow, I've spent six hours walking the city. The Rijks Museum was nearly empty, blessedly quiet. I spent half a morning looking at their four Vermeers, studying the blues and the yellows, awed by a painter's ability to use light so it makes me hear the trickle and splash of milk poured from pitcher to basin.



The barmaid in Global Chillage is smiling sweetly as she prepares for the regular after-work crowd. The tabletops get a hot soapy scrub, the CDs at the sound corner are alphabetized; behind the bar, she washes oranges and places them near the juice squeezer, fills a fridge with bottles of water and energy drinks, tops-off the coffee bean canisters, and fills a hundred cubbyholes with two-gram zip-lock packets of marijuana and hashish. I watch her stand back, survey her work with a sigh that moves her shoulders, and smile. "Yes," she says to no one really, "that's better." She fills a sink with hot soapy water, disappears in a squat behind the bar, and, rising, dumps an armload of bonges into the suds. She mumbles a question in Dutch, disappears down a well-hidden staircase, and returns with half a dozen bottlebrushes in various shapes and sizes.

The ache in my left hip claims my attention then. Deep in the socket, like the bones have been grinding against each other for the whole ten or 12 miles I've walked today. My sacroiliac is askew from too much time in airplanes, and I squirm trying to get comfortable, trying to make my muscles relax. The only other customer is a young bald man with a braid at the nape of his neck and an open journal on his table. He watches me, then purposefully catches my eye and nudges an empty stool toward my feet. I smile my thanks and stretch my legs.

He studies my boots, so I do, too. I love these boots the way I used to love pets, brush them with the care I once gave a jersey cow, a golden retriever, a long line of basset hounds. I rub ointments into their scuffs and gouges, and I thank them after a good day's work the way I used to thank an Australian shepherd for helping with livestock chores.

Wet from snow, my boots gleam dark brown in the late afternoon light, and my feet are dry and warm. An old recording of William Carlos Williams plays rhythmically in my head, when I think so much depends on good brown boots glistening with river water beside the wide fire.

The first time I was alone in a foreign country, I stepped off a curb and looked up, seconds later, into a ring of deep brown faces framed by jet black hair. “Loov, loov, ya alright, loov?” they asked in impossible accents. For a few seconds, I hadn’t a clue where I was, though I knew there was nothing permanently wrong with my body, supine on a cobblestone street. I stood up gingerly in a ring of men wearing what looked like the most comfortable street pajamas and it came back to me suddenly: Bradford, West Yorkshire—50 percent Pakistani.

The small men explained in rapid Yorkshire accents that I’d looked the wrong direction while checking for traffic. “You American, loov?” I had stepped in front of a car, coming slowly, thank god, out of a stop. The bumper hit me right in back of the knees, and I fell.

They asked over and over if I was all right, and I assured them I was. The driver offered to take me to the hospital, but I declined. “No, no, it’s okay. I’m okay. Really.” I left them worrying fretfully in the street and walked back to my flat concentrating on what hurt and how much.

I knew I’d been unconscious, but I didn’t have any idea for how long, and I wondered if I should worry about that. But a doctor would only say, “You have a mild concussion and will have a dull headache for a while. If you become abnormally sleepy or nauseous, come back.” I’d been in England for a week and had been abnormally sleepy every day of it. I just couldn’t get used to darkness until 9:15 in the morning and again by 3:30 in the afternoon, when the rosy sulfur streetlights sputtered on again.

“So,” I considered, soaking my bruised knee and hip in a hot tub and sipping wine, “It’s your 41st birthday and you’ve been hit by a car and knocked out, and you can’t keep yourself awake. You may go to sleep tonight and not wake up.”

“Hmmm,” I thought. “Well, okay. It’s been a well-lived life I didn’t really expect to get old. So, okay.” And, I also thought, “If I wake up tomorrow, I’m going to spend every one of the birthdays of my 40s in a foreign country. By 50, it’s going to be a widely, deeply lived life.”

But I hadn’t bought those boots yet. Then I spent my 42nd birthday back in Iowa with a broken ankle, the casualty of trying to navigate my icy back porch, bags in hand, on my way to go help clean up after Hurricane Mitch. I’d prefer to forget my 43rd birthday entirely. And then a friend suggested, “Let’s do part of the Appalachian Trail,” and these boots have been with me ever since. Tomorrow I’ll be 46 and on a train crossing Holland and northern Germany. In Berlin, a friend will be preparing a delicious celebration. And I will be wearing these boots.

There are cracks in both boot heels now. The left is more worn, testifying to the slight imbalance in my stride which manifests in this ache in my hip. Like an alarm clock, it lets me know I’ve been walking at least six hours and that it’s time to head for a place where I can be still through the evening.



I noticed the crack in the left heel four months ago and see that it’s doubled in length since that glorious week traversing the hills of the English Lake District. Since then, I’ve put at least 600 miles of Iowa on these boots and, more recently, about 40 miles of Berlin’s street, 130 of northern Tunisia’s, and another 40 along Amsterdam’s canals and twisting

alleyways.

Is there another 800 miles in them, I wonder, studying the new crack in the right heel. Groaning softly, I cross my ankles to study the leather. Scuffed, but supple. In a couple of days, back in Iowa, I'll carry my boots into the kitchen and open the cabinet that holds boot brushes, mink oil, and hope.

I don't understand people who can afford to buy good walking boots, but don't. I don't understand people who drive when they could walk. I don't understand people who believe they are well-traveled, although they've only flown, ridden trains, hired taxis, and crisscrossed cities underground. How can you know that Amsterdam still heaves with the sea unless your ankles have recorded buckling brick sidewalks? How do you comprehend tundra if you've never trod ground that feels like a good, firm mattress? How can you really appreciate the heat of the Kalahari before you've felt it penetrate an inch and a half of technology's best solewear?

"Covered a lot of ground in those boots?" the young man across the way asks, revealing an accent as open as the Outback.

"Yeah," I nod, "a lot."

"How much?" He chews the end of his pencil and smiles.

I look at my boots. The creases are filled with Tunisian sand. A week ago, they were tromping through the red dust at El Jem. I picked up a piece of the crumbling wall there, pocketing a coral fossil from the stone of a Roman coliseum built in 230 A.D. That remnant is in my pocket now, leaving a few more grains of rosy sand each day.



The young man looks expectant, and I am surprised I cannot answer his question. I can't say out loud, "When I'm home, they walk at least 1,300 miles of Iowa a year. Six miles at a time, five days a week. They've walked pieces of the Appalachian Trail, the Superior Lake Trail, the New Mexico high country, the Scottish Highlands, Ireland's west coast and its north one, Hadrian's Wall, German woods riddled with Celtic settlements, Rome and Carthage, Dubrovnik and the coastlines of Adriatic islands, radioactive villages in Belarus, Costa Rican rainforests, black sand beaches of the Caribbean, and terracotta roads in South Africa, where the starlight is so bright it illuminates your path through the bush. They've been back and forth across Prague a dozen times and across Amsterdam a hundred times; they've walked through gorgeous cemeteries in ancient Czech villages and across miles and miles of rural Holland when the tulip fields are in bloom."

How do I say that out loud to a perfect stranger?

"Seven thousand miles in, ummmm, 17 countries, I think."

He raises his eyebrows and checks me out again. What does he see in a middle-aged woman admiring her boots as if they were a Vermeer painting?

"It'll suck when they wear out."

Oh, to have learned that before my hips began to rust.

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