

# **GREY AREA**

*caffeeshop*



*de heer Sijse*



The background of the logo is split vertically. The left side shows a light grey street map. The right side features a close-up of coffee foam with blue and grey bubbles. The text 'GREY AREA' is in a bold, black, outlined font at the top. Below it, 'coffee shop' is written in a white cursive font. At the bottom right, the slogan 'No beer slice' is written in a white cursive font.

**GREY AREA**

*coffee shop*

*No beer slice*



Grey Area Coffeeshop

de heer Slice

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Visit Grey Area in The Netherlands:

Grey Area

Oude Leliestraat 2

1015 AW

Amsterdam, NL

[greyarea.nl](http://greyarea.nl)







**Grey Area Coffeeshop**

a postmodern memoir



for jon and bucket







*A long time ago in a coffeeshop far, far away ...*

*During the endless War on Drugs and in the waning years of the Twentieth century, three expatriate Americans founded Grey Area Coffeeshop in Amsterdam, capital of The Netherlands in the European Union. It was a time before the sprawling tentacles of the Internet encircled the globe, before the advent of cellphones, and before the decriminalization of cannabis in the United States. Kurt was dead, The Juice was on trial, and Han shot first.*

*Before Grey Area Coffeeshop became known as the CBGB of Weed and the greatest cannabis emporium in the world, it was the site of a harrowing clash of cultures where elements of the underworld vied with the rule of law in a daunting struggle to survive. And sell hempseed muffins.*

*It was the best of times. Het was de slechtste tijd ooit.*

*xxx,*

*de heer Slice*

*1 november 2021*





## Een

zondag 20 november 1994

*"Ay, in the very temple of Delight*

*Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine"*

- John Keats

"The time is now seven o'clock, Greenwich Mean Time," the voice announced in a distinct and deliberate British cadence. The regal sounds of an inspired anthem followed the pronouncement, trumpets crossing swords with a wave of interference that shot static through the irregular reception in the small canal house.

In Amsterdam, the bells of the Noorderkerk and the Westerkerk tolled, chiming and clapping across the sinuous canals and cobbled streets of the drowsy Dutch port. The misty morning clouds were speckled with forlorn gulls screeching and rock doves wheeling and soaring in the heaving currents and gusts whistling down the channels of the city. A lone tourist boat, silvery and white as herring, slipped through the dark waters of the Singel Canal coursing by P.C. Hoofthuis at the Universiteit Van Amsterdam. The craft's silent wake rose and lapped listlessly against the weathered and algae-coated arches of the Torenluis bridge as the ghostly vessel drifted slowly under and along on its accustomed route.

Across the wide stone bridge lay Oude Leliestraat, a narrow street paving the way to the second of the great northern canals, the Herengracht. Dutch homes and businesses lined "Old Lilystreet," as it rendered in translation, like ancient gingerbread houses with sugary white hoist-beams jutting out over the street. Within the hazy and



slight confines of Oude Leliestraat Twee, I sat cross-legged on a stool behind the bar of the Grey Area Coffeeshop. The BBC broadcast sputtered and hissed inside the small, mirrored shop, as if the signal was actually marshaling its way across the length of the English Channel, wavering in the ocean swells.

Bicycles careened past outside the broad, glass windows trimmed with blue and grey that fronted the coffeeshop, early morning riders sailing by in pairs or lone cyclists singing aloud and ringing tiny bells to herald their coming. A small cat, as grey as the dawn, watched the rock doves gathering at the end of Oude Leliestraat through the open mail slot at the bottom of the shop door. Each passing bicycle would send both dove and cat in frenzied retreat to the respective skies or stairs, each and all returning moments later with furtive steps and quick, darting eyes.

The breaking morning streaked its pale fingers along the neighboring houses, seeping into cracked-stone facades and splintering into a spectrum of light as it spilled through the numerous windows and glass-fronted *winkels* along the quiet street. Sunlight bounced along the cloudy mirrors which lined the interior of Grey Area and, from my vantage point at the back of the shop, I could see up and down the street of the sleeping city, distorted images reflecting through the looking-glass panels.

Though the unusually mild November morning had driven dawn's lingering mists from the canals, very few of the city's inhabitants had ventured out into the cobbled ways. A lone cyclist pedaled by outside the shop, whistling a haughty but unrecognizable melody as they vanished over a bridge and along the Herengracht.

I stretched languidly and turned on the stool to pour a cup of the hempseed-blend coffee I was brewing. The cloistered shop was rich with the aroma of beans, earthy and

promising. I dropped two sugarcubes, delicate white dice with crumbling corners, one at a time into the dark brew and placed the cup on the countertop separating the bar from the shop floor. Several small droplets streamed along the bluish-grey bartop, following the beveled edge to pool on a stack of yellowing copies of *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker* resting upon the struggling radio receiver hidden under the counter.

I traced my trembling fingers across my forehead and through my dark, unkempt hair. My head ached with the persistent effects of homemade pills and triple-fermented Belgian ale still coursing through my diluted bloodstream. I had a fleeting memory of a bicycle crash the night before but couldn't determine whether I had been the victim or spectator. I turned to my right and to the dumb waiter at the end of the counter, lifted its grey door and retrieved a plastic currency tray and an herb mill from within. The tray, originally intended to arrange coins and bills as a cash register, was arrayed with a more-valuable treasure - small, prescription-sized plastic bags stuffed with fragrant herbs, corresponding labels indicating the strain and variety of the source plant. Calculating a sativa was the required remedy, I selected one bag marked "haze" in black letters from a row of similarly marked packages and emptied the entire contents into the herb mill. The mill's chamber housed a wheel with metal spokes which, when rotated manually, would spin through the sieve positioned at the base of the chamber. After several quick revolutions, the stringy buds were transformed into a manageable pile of finely-shaved plant materials and potent, glistening crystals.

I took a single sheaf from a container beside the dumb waiter where several-dozen loose rolling papers were arranged like slender, white flowers. After tearing the thin paper in half lengthwise and filling it with powdery, verdant wiet, I inserted a twisted paper filter and shaped the cigarette into the traditional Dutch cone. Placing the joint

on the bartop, I hopped from the stool and opened the door to the small refrigerator built into the counter alongside retail appliances and shelving extending from the rear wall. The interior was filled with cans of *cassis*, *melk*, *appel sap*, bottles of cola, and a stack of individually-wrapped spacecakes sealed with an adhesive Grey Area emblem.

"*Hallo, was is dit?*" I said wittingly. Taking one of the cakes, I closed the silver door of the refrigerator and returned to my perch on the stool to inspect the tart-sized pastry. The cake was infused with a cannabis-butter mixed into a fruit-based jelly which crowned the top of the cake. I broke the plastic seal and nibbled at the laced cake absently while the cat, having once again recovered from her fright, slipped down the staircase from the kitchen above and crept between the legs of the stool.

"*Goedemorgen, Bucket,*" I whispered to the charcoal-grey cat, who stared back with wide yellow eyes and tilted her head to the side. I reached down to stroke her tail but in typical, coy fashion, she skittered away, bounding from the raised platform behind the bar to the shop floor beyond.

The white-tiled floor of the shop was muddied with the traces of footprints and tire tracks from the bicycles stowed inside the previous night. Three battered cycles were propped between a trio of small blue-grey tables and a dozen tarnished metal chairs rested upside-down on the table tops. A large bowl filled with hempseed muffins was centered on the table closest to the broad windows, a captivating display of tasty cakes to lure prospective customers. Bucket appeared again before the mailslot, emerging from the tangle of tires and metal, and sniffed at the breeze slipping in through the small crack.



I lit the cone with a black lighter emblazoned with the Grey Area deep-space logo and inhaled weakly. Wisps of blueish smoke spun in circles in the air as the cone-shaped joint shook slightly in my trembling hands. The opening strains of Sibelius' *Finlandia* waxed and waned in the static of the receiver while wandering vapors danced to the haunting strings echoing in the small coffeeshop.

Geis, a Dutch merchant who owned a shop further down Oude Leliestraat, passed by the front windows with a load of crates. His white hair played about his high forehead and the spectacles upon his nose bounced with each step. I watched his reflection in the mirrors as he walked down the quiet street and disappeared into his shop to warm his bread ovens and stock the shelves. I gazed back down the cobbled sidewalk lined intermittently with short, tapering posts embossed in black with **XXX**, a treble symbolic of the city of Amsterdam.

Something rustled in the basement beneath me and I surmised that an inebriated Victor had sought sanctuary in the subterranean depths of the canal house after the previous night's revelries. Down the spiraling staircase, past the dual water-closets, and behind a green wooden door, Victor would be dreaming on a bed of blankets and ragged sheets, breathing heavily from intoxicants and sweating out pharmaceutical poisons. I could hear him rustling in discomfort in the cold, damp cellar, still dressed in yesterday's clothes.

One floor above him, I stared into the mirror behind the sink kitty-cornered to the dumb waiter. My skin appeared sallow and creased in the dim light, while the dark circles under my eyes were like funereal coins on the faces of the dead. I considered Victor, crashed out in his nest of blankets. He was a close friend but an unpredictable and capricious business partner. He was incorrigible and charming at once, with an

alarming affinity for delinquency and dodginess. He was a bit deranged, having suffered countless concussions in the hockey rink, and his murky and mysterious past was best left unplumbed. His remarkable tales of escapade and adventure were a perennial source of entertainment, evoking disbelief and wary admiration from the tourists who chanced upon Grey Area. He would pull his coarse, silvering hair about his thick neck and twist it about his fingers while weaving enchanting and thoroughly implausible tales for the credulous, naive, and incapacitated hempsters spaced out on Grey Area specialty strains. He would have easily been at home in a traveling medicine show or in a ghost-town tavern after the Gold Rush.

In a sudden burst, Bucket whisked by and up the stairs, ears pulled tight to her bristling neck. I turned to the store front to see a tall Turkish man with dark hair and a sun-bleached and weathered jacket standing before the broad glass windows. He raised his hands above his head and leaned into the upper window, his breath steaming against the thin glass.

He had been here before. That same wild smile barely contained by his sharp cheekbones. His fingers streaked along the upper window, smearing dust and grease in sad designs. He rapped on the glass with his knuckles, eyeing the hempseed muffins brimming in the bowl behind the glass. Then he turned away and was gone.

“Victor ...” I coughed.

Something turned in its grave in the cellar below.

“Remember that guy I told you about? The one in the shop last week?”

“What?” A voice choked out in confusion.

I looked out on the brightening street and, to my amazement, the Turk in the worn jacket appeared again, bending his tall form to the sidewalk opposite the shop and scrabbling with his hands in a flowerless pit of soil rung with dull red bricks.

“The one that wouldn’t leave, the one that wouldn’t ...”

The baleful form rose again, dirt spilling between his fingers to the cobblestoned walk and onto the street as he approached the windows of Grey Area menacingly.

“I think he’s ...”

The right arm raised, brick in hand, dirt tumbling down the bleached jacket.

“... about to ...”

“What?!” Victor croaked from below.

“... break the ...”

The hand came down and sent the brick straight through the upper window of the coffeeshop. The meters-long window splintered and crashed into the room sending glass in fragmentary showers onto the tables, chairs, and cycles within the shop. Silvery shards and slivers fell from the wooden frame as both hands reached through the broken window, into the shop, and for the glass-covered bowl of muffins.