



**Matt Bondurant**

Matt Bondurant's latest novel *The Night Swimmer* was featured in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Outside Magazine*, and *The Daily Beast*. His second novel *The Wettest County in the World* is an international bestseller, a *New York Times Editor's Pick* and was made into the feature film *Lawless* starring Shia Labeouf, Tom Hardy, and Jessica Chastain. Matt is also the author of the international bestselling novel *The Third Translation* and sometimes writes food and adventure travel articles. He currently lives in Oxford, Mississippi.



BEDTIME STORY BY MGALLERY

# Follow Me

by Matt Bondurant

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# Follow Me

## Elise finally succumbed to exhaustion

just as the plane was circling Schiphol Airport. She was flying from New York to Amsterdam to visit an aging uncle. Elise had never left the U.S. before, had never met this uncle, never knew he existed.

"Your mother's brother requested you meet him in Amsterdam," her father said. "Sigmund was always a strange bird, but he said it was urgent."

It would be a short trip as she was about to enter law school, following her father's footsteps at Columbia. Elise had no interest in law; as an English major she spent her college years reading 19th century novels. But law school was the first step toward fulfilling her father's vision of having Elise join him at his law firm in Manhattan. "Consider this a quick holiday before you get serious about your future," her father told her.

Elise's mother passed away when she was young and as a consequence she never knew much about that branch of her family. They were not a family that was close with relatives, there were no visits or holiday gatherings. Most holidays her father's assistant delivered a smoked ham which they ate off paper plates sitting on the couch. Elise dimly remembered the dinners her mother used to prepare, the heaven of smells, stacks of plates in the sink, the way that she wore long rubber gloves and sang Edith Piaf tunes as she washed. Her mother was a writer of romance novels and a dynamic woman prone to taking risks. She once walked the circumference of Manhattan in a single day. She burst into the apartment late that night, her face ruddy with air and excitement, carrying Elise to bed with stories of lonely beaches, rusted tankers, and boys diving off a ruined pier.

Her uncle Sigmund arranged for a car to deliver her to her hotel, an elegant place in a row of stately canal houses near the city center, just down the street from the Royal Palace. The lobby of the INK Hotel Amsterdam was quiet and modern with one wall covered in large letters fashioned like type from a printing press. In her room Elise found an old typewriter on a desk and a large, curious map of the city on the wall. She unpacked her bags and decided to explore the hotel.

Downstairs she found a bright atrium with a small elm tree surrounded by benches and a cozy café, empty save for a lone bartender reading a book.

Walking down a dark hallway she came to a strange door, unlike the sleek furnishings of the rest of the hotel. It was wooden with heavy iron fittings, rusted with age. Elise touched the door and it swung open, revealing stairs. It was a basement room filled with large printing presses, the type used to produce newspapers, and stacks of old papers, boxes of type, and other tools and materials. She wandered about, looking at headlines, picking up a dusty piece of metal type. In the corner she found an ancient file cabinet, covered in dust. There was a strangely shaped keyhole on the cabinet door. She tried the handle: locked.

The next morning Elise met Sigmund for breakfast at the hotel. He was a large man with big ears and a white beard. They greeted each other formally at first, but she quickly warmed to him. He had a strange accent, having lived in various places around the world for the last forty years. "This very building was one of your mother's favorites," he said.

"Was she here on vacation?" Elise asked.

"Not exactly," Sigmund said. She told him about her discovery in the basement and he explained how the hotel was once the home of *De Tijd*, a renowned Dutch newspaper. Elise thought him nice and interesting but she didn't understand what this trip was about. *Why did you bring me here?*

The hotel provided them with bikes and a picnic lunch and Elise followed Sigmund as he whizzed around the canals. They ate on a patch of green space overlooking the water by the Maritime Museum. The clouds gathered in the afternoon and a light rain began to fall as they biked back to the hotel. Sigmund then asked Elise to write a story about her mother. "Use the typewriter in your room" he said. Elise had never written about her mother before. She had never written a story before, either. But she agreed and as the rain fell that afternoon Elise sat at the typewriter and pecked away, writing about one of the few complete memories she has of her mother, when she watched her swim out to an island in a lake in NY on a chilly October day on a dare.

She delivered the story to Sigmund at dinner at the Pressroom Restaurant in the hotel. He read it as Elise scarfed down her risotto made with roasted beetroot. Writing the story left her famished, and at her uncle's encouragement she ordered the crème brûlée with ice cream for dessert. When Sigmund finished reading and looked up at her, his eyes were brimming with tears. "What's the matter?" Elise asked. "I want you to look carefully at the map in your room," he said. "Your mother left something for you." Astonished, Elise left her crème brûlée on the table and went up to her room. She searched the map and found a handwritten circle marking a place on the square in front of the Royal Palace and the words: *follow me*. Elise looked out the window at the falling rain, the lights of the city coming on. She grabbed her raincoat.

She biked through the rain to the Dam Square, arriving just as the crowds of tourists were emptying out. She walked the area that was marked, scanning the ground. She

didn't know what she was looking for. *Is Sigmund playing some kind of game with me?* Then she saw a curious cobblestone that was not like the others. It was lighter in color, and bore a faded mark, like the type of a printing press. The letter "E." She knelt down and pried the stone up with her fingers. Underneath was a small, flat metal box. Inside was a curiously shaped key.

Elise biked back to the hotel and went directly to the basement. The key fit the old cabinet. Inside she found folders arranged by names listed on the tabs. She flipped through a few, then paused. Her mother's name was on a tab. It was articles that her mother wrote as a young reporter at *De Tijd*. There were articles filed from London, Sydney, Vancouver and other places. At the end of the file was a series of columns about exploring and adventure but mostly about her dreams for her daughter, how she hoped she would travel and love stories. There were a few pictures of her mother in front of the *De Tijd* building and one of her sitting at a desk with a typewriter, the very typewriter that was in Elise's room. And scrawled on the white border underneath the picture, in her mother's handwriting: *Where stories are yet to be written...*

Elise read the articles through the night, spreading out the pictures on her desk. Her flight back to New York was in the morning and as the sun rose she packed her suitcase. On her phone she saw that her father had left several messages.

She was packed with her coat on when her room service breakfast arrived. On the tray with a selection of croissants and fresh carrot juice Elise found an envelope. Inside there was a note: *She still has so much to tell you. In six weeks meet me in Istanbul. Sigmund.* Underneath this was the name of a bank with an account number and login. Elise located the bank on her laptop and accessed the account. It was in her name. The balance was several hundred thousand euros. Elise stood in the room for a few minutes, listening to the sounds of the city waking up around her. She looked at her mother's typewriter, loaded with fresh paper.

Elise hung up her coat, unpacked her suitcase, and sat at the typewriter. Her phone was ringing again but she didn't notice. She was thinking of her mother, diving into that cold lake, her body rippling through the dark water. As she swam into the mist she paused, looking back, and raising one pale hand, beckoning to Elise standing on the shore. *Follow me.*

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