

VIII

The Shock

26. *Singel Straat*

It was a cold morning in September 1983. The streets of Amsterdam were packed with activities. The trams ruled the streets with their distinctive ringing noise alerting pedestrians to stay away, while other trams made even louder sounds when making turns as the friction between the rails and the wheels produced a terrifyingly shrill noise. Thousands of people ran back and forth, like an aggressive ant colony racing against time, riding their bicycles in an orderly fashion on both sides of the streets, while others walked on foot. The city buses, taxis, and cars all competed for the narrow streets and precious real estate.

Blending with the crowd, Tommy and I were walking on foot, crossing multiple canals to a destination only known to Tommy. As we approached a street called Single Straat, Tommy said, "We have come to a point where I can no longer walk next to you." He showed me the office from a distance and said, "Just walk in there and tell them you came from Eritrea and explain the rest of your story." The only redaction he reminded me to make was what had happened on the last day as I could not expose his name or the name of the smuggler and his description. "By the way, the age thing is up to you," he added, referring to a few administrative options he had told me about the night before. I could choose to be 23 years old or I could tell them my real age, which was 18 years old. "That is all discretionary information that may be adjusted to suit your short-term or long-term needs," he said. In my case, I agreed to the redaction of the last day's story, but I chose to be honest about everything else, including my age.

We hugged and said goodbye to each other and he disappeared into the crowd. With no money in my pockets and no ID of any kind, I picked up my blue luggage and made my way across the canal to get to the office located at Single Straat. I rang the bell and the door opened. In the office, there were several immigrants, two of whom were Eritrean girls. I was instructed to take a seat and wait until I was called. *Verenigde VluchtingenWerk Nederland* (VVN), loosely translated as United Refugee Support in the Netherlands, was an organization that helped refugees apply for asylum, find a home, and supported them as they settled in the Netherlands.

I filled out a form and my application was processed. After an hour or two, the two Eritrean girls and I were given a reference letter and told to walk to an address nearby. We easily found the address. It was a lodging place where we would stay temporarily. We had no idea what all this meant, but clearly, the induction process worked like a well-oiled machine. Just like the smugglers in Sudan, the VVN created miracles by navigating the complex system, finding lodging, and assigning us a volunteer who guided us through the process of establishing ourselves as refugees. A major difference was that, unlike the smugglers, we never paid for the service that VVN provided.

The lodging area must have been run by a religious institution. Similar to a hostel, it offered many bunk beds in one room. They served us food daily and taught us prayers, which was optional. On the second day, realizing that I was not dressed for the weather, the VVN referred me to a store where I could pick up a jacket to keep me warm. The store was a second-hand store where used outfits were sold, but I don't remember paying. I selected a few jackets that I thought were fashionable and was ready to roam the streets of Amsterdam. During the day, wearing my warm new jacket, I explored the city on foot. I felt like a tourist, not a refugee. Amsterdam was a city full of character and there was no shortage of things that challenged our African attitude and mentality.

After a few days, it was time to say goodbye to my two new friends. The VVN found a home for them in the town of Hilversum.

I was told to move to another location in the heart of the city, called De Wallen, the famous Red Light District in Amsterdam. While my Eritrean friends were upgraded from a hostel to a home of their own in Hilversum, the Hollywood of the Netherlands, my accommodation went down drastically in comfort and dignity.

The place I was told to stay at opened its doors at 9 p.m. and closed at 9 a.m. It served as a night shelter only. The people who stayed in the shelter were not the average Europeans I had expected to see. Many were people who had lost everything they had. They would beg for money during the day and come to this shelter to sleep at night. Like them, I practically had nothing in life, and as such, I was categorized as a homeless person. The difference was that my dreams and aspirations seemed very different than those of the average homeless person staying in the place.

Every night before we went to bed, they served us soup to keep us warm. I sat alone and enjoyed my soup. In the morning, we were served breakfast, and by nine o'clock we were sent off to roam the streets of De Wallen.

As shocked as I was regarding the degradation of the comfort level and the fact that I was staying in a homeless shelter, roaming the Red Light District in Amsterdam by far was the most shocking experience. For me, considering my strict upbringing in a culture where women's sexuality is extremely respected, the women behind the glasses could easily have been mannequins without any moral or cultural value whatsoever. How could they pose in front of everyone, almost naked, and dare to ask men to have sex with them? In my mind, this was insane!. There was no way I could reconcile what I saw in the red light district with anything resembling normalcy to my standards.

What shocked me the most was that there were buses full of Asian tourists, primarily elderly men, who were dropped off at the entrance of the Red Light District to admire the prostitution business. They were standing at every shop and scanning the

different sex toys and pornography displayed in public. I have no words to describe how insane this felt to me at that time.

Touring my way from one sub-district to another, I realized the place was segregated somewhat geographically and ethnically. There were East Europeans and Caucasians on one side, Latinas on the other, and African women surrounded the oldest church in Amsterdam, Oude Kerk. This is the only place I have ever seen where religion and prostitution face each other. The church was surrounded by window brothels, bars, cannabis shops, and pretty much anything that offends Christians. There was even a sex museum! I had no idea of what it displayed since I wasn't able to afford the entrance fee. The multitude of experiences I was subjected to in such a short time was an overdose in culture shock.

After a few days of staying in the district, I started to acclimate and get the hang of the district's concept and appeal. My 18-year-old hormones were activated, overpowering the sense of dignity and respect I had carried with me from a different continent. I started to think just like the young men walking down the Red Light District streets, fantasizing about beautiful girls. Fantasizing alone would, however, not cut it in the Red Light District – you had to pony up some cash to make your fantasy come true. Good or bad, there was no cash I could use in the Red Light District. Tommy had taken whatever money I had. Despite my young age and the desires that were invoked to partake in the red light business, I was as incapable as the elderly Asian men touring the district.

Back at my lodging place, I was experiencing another culture shock. After every homeless person was in bed, most of them would start loudly farting left and right. In my culture, farting in public is a “NO-NO”. It is considered very disrespectful of your environment. In my lonely thoughts, I was trying to make sense of why these men would fart in public. There was nothing I could do other than be shocked and occasionally giggle silently at some of the sounds generated. I stayed there for two weeks in isolation and with no one to talk to, processing what I was experiencing to my fullest capacity.