

# Leaving Amsterdam

May 1985

In two days, I would pack all the belongings I could carry and return to the United States with my husband and two children. Instead of the excitement and sense of adventure we brought to Amsterdam ten months before, we were carrying back the heavy weight of failure. We had sacrificed everything in order to make the move—our house, our belongings, most of our savings—and now we had nothing left. I was no longer sure who I was or where to call home.

I exited the doors of Youth With a Mission's city headquarters for the last time and crossed the street to wait for the tram that would take me to Amsterdam's Central Station. From there, I would catch the ferry to return to our apartment in North Amsterdam. As I waited, I gazed across the street at the mission and the row of tall brick buildings it sat next to. Cars and trucks and bicyclists jockeyed for space in a chaotic rush-hour dance accompanied by the beeping of horns, the dinging of bicycle bells, and friendly people shouting to one another. Women carried home bags stuffed with bread and bright bouquets of flowers for their dinner tables. I inhaled the smells of steel and diesel, familiar and comforting after nearly a year of living and working in the city. Whiffs of cigarette smoke from passersby mixed with the moist, slightly salty air of the nearby canal. I never thought I could love a city this much.

It was the last time I would hear the chaotic city sounds, the bicycle bells, the clanging of the trams. It was the last time I would see these people in this place on earth. The thought made my head swim.

I looked again at the buildings across the street. It was hard for me to comprehend how Youth With a Mission had been the center of my hopes and dreams less than a year ago. We had come in answer to an internal call to serve God with our music, but everything had fallen apart. Mixed emotions—anger, fear, confusion, and disappointment—roiled inside me like crabs thrown into boiling water. What had I done wrong that I should be punished like this? Why had God abandoned me?

That's when I saw Floyd McClung, the charismatic leader of Amsterdam's mission, on the opposite corner. When the light changed, he stepped confidently off the sidewalk and strode across the street. Tall and blond and well built, handsome in his suit and white shirt, he would have looked at home in any boardroom.

With a sick, empty longing, I watched him come toward me. For four of those ten months I had worked for this man in the name of God. I had answered phones and typed letters, organized transportation and hotel rooms for foreign religious dignitaries. I had learned to use the telex machine and communicated with mission offices all over the world. I had worked as one of his secretaries in a small, wood-paneled office, where he had walked past me and into his office each day as though I were invisible.

I watched as the man who had held complete power over my life and that of my husband and children for the last 312 days, who had barely spoken directly to me, advance. I expected him to pass by me, where I would remain unseen and invisible as I had always been. Instead, he stopped in front of me, a sympathetic smile plastered on his face.

"We will miss you," he said, his voice warm and smooth. His expression had changed to one of concern and compassion, but his cool eyes looked past me, as if I were already gone and he was seeing my future. I looked up at him, willing his eyes to meet mine, willing him to see my brokenness, but his eyes remained distant. I

wondered what was going through his mind. Did he feel ashamed or conflicted? Was that why he would not meet my eyes? Or was I simply not important enough to look at? Did he care at all about me or my family?

Without warning, he stooped and kissed me lightly, briefly brushing my cheek with his lips. Then he straightened and resumed walking like a man who knows his place in the world.

Stunned, I raised my hand to my cheek. His kiss burned as though he had placed a hot ember against my skin instead of his lips. It was, I thought, eerily like the kiss of Judas, a kiss from the man who had taken away my dreams and delivered me into the hands of pain and loss.

The ghost of his lips on my cheek opened a sudden abyss of grief, and I felt my knees give. The world swayed and dropped away, everything around me going soft and gray. The traffic noise receded into a fog as my vision telescoped into grainy static. I managed to remain standing by steadying myself against the pole of a street lamp and was surprised to realize, when I moved my hand away from my face, that it was wet with tears.

How had I come to this?

# Twirling

Whenever I contemplate this part of my life, I inevitably go back in time to what I think of as my first spiritual experience. It was only a moment in the life of a child, but that experience influenced everything that came after.

*I am eight years old, out on the lawn in our front yard twirling in circles. The spreading California oak that sits in the front corner of our lot keeps me company as I spin around. How I love that tree! I love its low climbing limbs, the roughness of its bark, and the way it hides me from the view of others—particularly my brothers. How I can climb above the earth and perch like a squirrel or a bird and sit for what seems like hours, my feet dangling from its branches. I feel safe and secret in its arms. Even being near this tree feels good to me. So here I am, under its considerable branches, twirling and twirling, my favorite plaid skirt ballooning and whirling and dancing around me.*

*I spread my arms out wide and tilt my head back as I spin, my skin soaking up the late afternoon sun. I inhale the familiar scent of dry grass that wafts from the nearby hills. I do not close my eyes, but watch the clouds and tree limbs and blue sky whirl above me. I spin in one direction and then stop, breathless, just short of being too dizzy to stand. Then I spin in the opposite direction. Each time I begin to spin, I glance*

*down. I am pleased by the fullness of my skirt, the way it spreads out until it is nearly a perfect circle with me at its center. And how, when I have stopped, it continues to spin until it wraps itself tight around my body before falling loose again. The object of my spinning is not to get dizzy or fall down, but to submerge myself in the joy of dance, for that's what it is; at this age, I am always dancing. I take ballet and tap lessons, practice my stiff little plies and point my toes as I brush my teeth, perform chaîné turns down the length of the living room. I dance soft-shoe for my parents, who clap their hands and tell me I'm beautiful. Most of all, I spin. I love to spin.*

*Now I pause, and in the midst of my pause I am flooded with deep quiet and a sense of something much, much larger than myself. The sensation fills me and the air around me. My body is light, no longer bound to the earth, but floating. The air is of me and I am of it and of the sky and the grass and my beloved oak tree all at once. And yet, somehow, my feet are also firmly planted on the ground. I am still me.*

*Surprised, my breath caught in my throat, saturated in this flood of feeling, I am aware of being part of something huge, something expansive and unseen. I am both more aware of myself and of the world around me, and yet I do not feel separate from it; it includes me. A new and unfamiliar sense of self-awareness, overflowing into and through it all, vibrates every cell in my body.*

*I have no name for what I am experiencing. I do not yet call it God or the Universe. I do not yet call it Presence. Our family has no religion, does not go to church, and I have no real frame of reference for what is happening.*

*I walk off the lawn a little dizzy and awed, in wonder about what I am feeling. But, as happens to children, something else soon captures my interest and I put the experience aside for a*

*while.*

Many years later, the memory of this moment is still so clear I can feel the pure joy of the movement, of being in total control of my body, of the sun and air against my skin. I wonder if this is precisely what Sufi dancers strive for with all their twirling.

Looking back, I realize there had to be some religious influences in my life from friends, school, or the blue-collar, middle class culture we lived in. But none of that played a part in my understanding of the sudden awareness I experienced that day on the lawn, which convinced me there was something larger in the world than myself, something that I belonged to and that belonged to me, and I wanted more of it.

My mother used to say I was a born “true believer,” a term coined by Eric Hoffer<sup>1</sup> to categorize followers—those ready and willing to surrender their locus of control to someone outside themselves and prone to fanaticism. I always rejected her assessment of me, taking it as insult. But maybe she was right. Maybe there was always a part of me that felt a misfit, a part that pined for a sense of belonging I couldn’t find at home or school.

I mark this day, when I was eight years old and spinning on a patch of lawn, as the beginning of my spiritual quest, though it was never a conscious quest until I was much older.

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<sup>1</sup> The True Believer: Thoughts On The Nature Of Mass Movements is a 1951 social psychology book by Eric Hoffer, in which he discusses the psychological causes of fanaticism.