

'Of princesses and immigration problems'

The relationship between a Bolivian girl and a Dutch Boy under the strict immigration laws of the Netherlands

Ward Kint

In the eastern tropical region of Bolivia, where my girlfriend is from, a story that is passed on from generation to generation tells of the beautiful indigenous princess, Anahí, who falls in love with the Spanish conqueror Don Felipe. They get married and Don Felipe receives a natural grotto covered with two coloured gems as a wedding dowry, the natural possession of the tribe's chief. After a time, Don Felipe must return to the Old World, but the indigenous people will not let their beautiful princess go with him. Princess Anahí then mysteriously disappears when she hides in the beautiful grotto.

Nowadays, I think a lot about this story. I have the love of my own Bolivian princess, but in my case it is not that her people won't let her go, but that my people will not let her in. This is strange, because they let another South American princess into the Netherlands without any trouble, and she has not only taken seat on the throne, but she has conquered the hearts of my people. I am talking of princess Maxima from Argentina, our future and very beloved queen.

I used to think of my country as fairly progressive and tolerant towards others. Over the last couple of years my view has changed and I now can clearly see the negative attitude towards people from non-western cultures in my country. The so-called Christian liberal government we have had for the last couple of years has taken drastic measures to keep out as many non-western people as possible, not hesitating even to discriminate. I have fallen in love with a girl from Bolivia in South America, but we have enormous trouble fulfilling our dream of having a normal relationship and forming a family. Even though she has done everything she can to integrate into our Dutch society, the government still tries to keep her out. Let me tell you what happened...



Ward Kint was born on 11-7-1978 in Heernskerkerk, the Netherlands and has lived in Amsterdam for ten years and spent one year in Latin America (in Argentina and Brazil). He has studied theology, religion and philosophy, Spanish, Dutch at the Free University in Amsterdam, interreligious spirituality (cum laude) and immigration law at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. He has worked as a high school teacher of religion and philosophy and as an educator in the ecumenical movement, lecturing about topics of religion and spirituality for different audiences (parishes, seminaries, etc.). He is Roman Catholic, contributes to Roman Catholic youth gatherings and is a member of the board of the diaconal institute Migrante in Amsterdam.

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A Migrant in South America

This story actually starts with my own experience as a migrant. When I was studying theology and sciences of religion in Amsterdam in the late nineties, I became increasingly aware of the marginalisation of non-western thinking. One of my professors opened my eyes to liberation theology and to other strands of theology in the world. As his assistant, I helped to organise the international department of our faculty. My personal awareness of the spiritual crisis of the West, rooted in the failure to overcome the post modern situation of luxury and relativism, was enhanced when I met students and professors from the third world in the programme 'Bridging the gaps'. In a way, this was my own crisis as well.

Finally, after a major spiritual experience, I decided to put my studies and my own culture aside to go on a quest for detachment and self-knowledge. I followed my younger brother's example to join a community of the world wide movement of youth for a united world in Argentina. I lived with others from all over the Latin American continent. This stay was very beneficial for me, and I learned to look at life through the eyes of my friends.

In general, I was very welcome in Argentina and I was treated with respect. I discovered that this continent is truly beautiful, both in terms of its nature and population. I always had enough to eat and a roof over my head to sleep. I had several jobs (in a kitchen, working outside, etc.) without any problems and I also had the opportunity to travel to visit friends who were living all across the continent.

In Buenos Aires, my two best friends were actually living on opposite ends of the social strata; one was very poor and the other very rich. They helped each other out when they could and I was able to stay with them both. During my stay in an enormous penthouse, my friend took me to the balcony and pointed out the apartment of Maxima Zorreguieta, our future princess and queen in the Netherlands. She had just started a relationship with our crown prince, Willem Alexander of Orange, so I was surprised to see my friend knew all about this, as the news of their relationship had only just begun to dominate the media in the Netherlands. I continued my trip through Latin America, not knowing what

would happen with Maxima and what a role model she would later become for all immigrants in the Netherlands.

But, of course, I also didn't know that I would struggle with the migration laws for my girlfriend and that my government would confront me with many more difficulties than for Maxima (even considering the ban of Maxima's father at her wedding because of his ministry under dictator Jorge Videla). I did not know that one day Maxima and my girlfriend would greet each other face to face in my hometown, making apparent the differing treatment of immigrants.

Justicia si, venganza no

Latin America was deeply rooted in me; so when I got back to Europe after all work and travelling was done, I decided I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the Hispanic language and culture, as well as keep my newly found faith alive by visiting and participating in services held for Spanish speaking migrants in Amsterdam. I volunteered to work at the diaconal institute of the church, a pastoral centre run by an old priest with fire in his eyes and passion in his hands. I remember the first evening; I went up to him and said: I received so much from the people there and I offer myself to do something for Latin American immigrants who are here. He grabbed me tightly by the arm, shocking me by his strength, and said: "let's go then."

It was just a few days after the attacks of 9/11, and he had made a leaflet saying: 'justicia si, venganza no', which means: justice yes, retaliation no. From the early evening until the late hours we visited bars, restaurants, centres, and even prostitutes. I was amazed at all the locations we found Latin Americans people in Amsterdam and how they all greeted us warmly and with great hospitality. Forty year earlier, the first guest workers from Spain had been invited to the Netherlands and had asked the priest for pastoral assistance, and he had met these people through his work since this time.

Working in the centre with the Latin Americans was a good

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learning praxis for me as I continued my studies in theology and sciences of religion. I made many new friends who told me about their harsh experiences of living as immigrants in the Netherlands. Quite a few of them did not have any legal documents, making them illegal. I realised that I had not worried about that at all during my stay in Latin America, and I was never charged a fine or seen as a problem. These people usually came to Holland, hoping for better luck in their lives, sometimes leaving behind their kids to find a job to provide for them, and often work as a house cleaners, painters, or in jobs in which it is difficult to find a Dutch person willing to do. They were not political refugees, but had escaped from countries where the political and social economic realities were often too difficult for them to make a proper living. I didn't see them as 'illegals', they were my friends, inviting me to dinners in their houses and to their parties.

I taught them the Dutch language and culture at the church centre and my classes were always full. The students were very motivated, even if they weren't accustomed to studying in the way we are accustomed to doing in the West. While teaching, in 2002, I met a woman, who had migrated from Bolivia and whom I would later date.

Shifting Realities

Meanwhile, the social and political climate in the Netherlands was rapidly changing. Social unrest and dissatisfaction with the integration and behaviour of immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants, in the Netherlands was turned into political support for an unknown politician with a lot of charisma named Pim Fortuyn. He had been active as a professor and had written about the so-called mess that the previous social liberal governments had turned Holland into. He made strong claims that were dividing the Netherlands—for example saying that Muslims were backward and retarded—and turning the political landscape into something unheard

of. Elections were approaching quickly, and every week his newly founded party rose higher in the polls. About a week before the elections, his party and the party of the Christian democrats were equal in the polls, destroying the social and liberal parties. And then, Pim Fortuyn was murdered, shot at point blank range early in the morning of May 6th as he was leaving a radio building after giving an interview. Riots broke out in the streets. This was something we had not seen in the Netherlands for centuries.

Elections continued, with the absurd situation of a great percentage of the people voting for a dead man. In the end, the Christian democrats won, so they could deliver the prime minister. But he had to govern with a new party of people with no political experience at all, a party without a leader. This quickly ended and new elections brought the liberals back into power, in coalition with the Christian democrats who became even more powerful. The rise of the right wing politicians imitating Pim Fortuyn in their own way was phenomenal.

The so-called liberal minister of immigration and integration gave new meaning to the word conservative by quickly changing all kinds of immigration laws. Within a few years, our borders were practically shut.

To Begin Together

Meanwhile, I began to help my Bolivian girlfriend find a job, but it was very difficult without the right documents and because her spoken Dutch was quite poor. She eventually found work as a house cleaner and I hesitatingly asked her to move in with her boss so I could concentrate and finish my studies. This was a blow to her, since she needed my support very much, especially as she did not have anyone else in the Netherlands.

As soon as I finished my studies, we



got back together. I also found a job as an educator in the ecumenical movement. Soon, I discovered that many new laws had been passed, making it theoretically possible but virtually impossible to legalise my girlfriend's papers.

Dutch politics were now leaning heavily right wing conservative; notably, our minister of immigration and integration was very popular for taking strong stands. She received great support from the majority of the people who were fed up with young guys from Morocco making their lives miserable on the street by robbing or threatening and actually hurting them. The situation became even worse when Theo van Gogh was shot and killed in Amsterdam on the 2nd November 2004. I prayed the assassin was not a Muslim, because then the tensions would be further increased.

Theo van Gogh had been a film maker and opinion leader who, in the tradition of his famous ancestor Vincent, could be quite radical. He was notorious for his critiques on religion, and he had made a rather critical film together with the right wing politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former refugee from Somalia, connecting nudity with Islam and violence against women with Quran verses—highly explosive ingredients for a film called *Submission*. He had just finished a movie about the murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn, implying a dirty scheme of security agencies and crooked politicians. My girlfriend saw some Theo's friends delivering comments on TV, and she recognised them as owners of the houses she was cleaning. I worried that the tensions between immigrants and the Dutch people would rise even higher than they already were, and that we probably would have to pay dearly for the death of Theo van Gogh, killed by a young man who was perverted by ideas from Islamic extremism.

New laws were passed making it not only obligatory to follow heavy integration courses for immigrants, trying to force Dutch values on them, but also making it obligatory to pass difficult exams, requiring them to pay for it themselves. The problem was that no one really knew what Dutch cultural values were. Few of the people I met came further than "eeeh...Dutch language". Symbolic of this was that Pim Fortuyn was chosen as the most popular Dutch person in the entire 400 year history of our country, even defeating the founder of the Netherlands, prince William of Orange. In a nationally broadcast integration quiz, everybody flunked the exam: everybody! Not one person in the studio did not fail the test. How is somebody from abroad to pass this exam, when the indigenous Dutch people don't even know their own history?

Despite this, my girl friend loved Holland and she soaked up all of

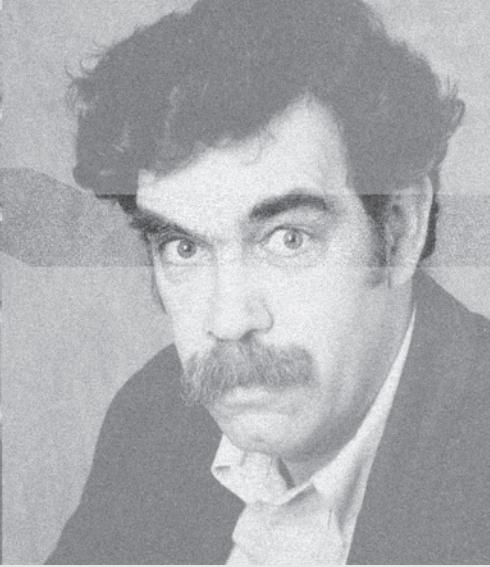
the culture she could. took me to a lot of places hadn't been before because was too lazy or maybe simply because I wasn't interested. I came to look at my country through the eyes of my girlfriend, and I discovered new things.

Trying to Look Forward

I wanted to plan a future for us, but in order to do that, it was necessary for her to have legal status. I began serious research into how I could help her to get into a good position and I studied teaching Dutch as a second language to professionalise my abilities as a teacher. I discovered even stricter laws were about to be implemented and I began studying immigration law. I discovered that my salary wasn't sufficient; I needed to make about 2300 euros a month. This was a lot for me as I was only beginning my career in a non-commercial sector. Even when I had two jobs and earned the required sum of money, it wasn't good enough as I needed contracts for more than a year. While I had already acquired a long term contract for my job in the ecumenical movement, it was necessary that I have long term contracts for all my jobs. So I looked for another part time

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job with a long term contract with which I would make sufficient money to legalise the status of my girlfriend. I finally found this as the coordinator of a parish for Spanish speaking persons in Rotterdam.

Another issue was that, according to Roman Catholic Church law, until I am married I am not allowed to live together with my partner. The law, however, was demanding that I should live together with my girlfriend. Now I could marry her, but then it would be discovered she didn't have the right status and she would be sent away. This would go against our views that our wedding is supposed to be a joyous occasion, a culmination of festivity, and we could not be truly happy if we knew something might happen that would force us to live separately. Through the internet, I came into contact with a large community of people who were struggling with the same strict immigration laws. Now these laws, that were implemented to prevent more immigration, were mainly hitting Dutch people who were in relationships with foreign people, especially from outside of the European Union. Our community grew by almost a thousand people each month, and some of them had the opportunity to leave the Netherlands and live together with their partners in Belgium, Germany or Spain, where the immigration laws are much easier. I tried this as well, but couldn't find a job elsewhere. Things were very difficult, especially for ex-

patriots who started families abroad and for women, since they have a harder time dividing their attention between their children and their work, and they earn less.

All in all, I thought it was absurd that somebody who finished his academic studies cum laude couldn't find a suitable job. I had to disregard other jobs because I couldn't live up to the criteria and fulfil the demands that the laws were imposing on me if I was to have a serious future with my Bolivian girlfriend.

She, in the meantime, was doing all she could to improve her Dutch and was working full time as a house cleaner. With the money she earned, she paid her share of the household costs, but she would also send a big amount of money to Bolivia each month. The latest and strictest immigration law was soon to be passed, taking the Netherlands to a new low level and position in comparison to other countries and making sure that immigration dropped by almost 90%, turning the Netherlands into the only western country with an emigration rate that is higher than the immigration rate. According to this new law, newcomers—a word specially invented in Dutch—had to integrate into Dutch society before coming to the Netherlands. Yes, that's right, before coming to the Netherlands they are supposed to know a great





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deal about the Netherlands, its culture and history, and especially its language, which they are examined in too. But not every one. If you are from a so-called western country, like the United States, Japan or South Korea, this exam is not necessary, but for those from, let's say, Congo, China, or Uruguay, you'd better go and find your Dutch teacher. Because, even though you are obligated to take this exam if you want to live with your Dutch partner in the Netherlands, you have to make sure you figure it out all by yourself.

Now in our situation, where I was bound to find a job that met the criteria, this meant that, if we would want to be together, we would actually have to separate and she would have to go back to Bolivia to take the exam. It made me think about my preparations before flying off to South America; I did not know anything about the countries I was going to, other than the stereotypical things. I could barely introduce myself and say that I was hungry or tired when I arrived in Argentina. It was unfair to implement this law supposedly to facilitate integration but really to stop immigration.

However, there was no escape for us if we wanted to be together in the Netherlands. Our visit to Bolivia made it clear that we had no future amidst its poverty,

or at least it would be a very rough one and we didn't want our children to grow up there. During my visit I discovered where the money my girlfriend was sending went; she was taking care of six family members. She did not want her nephews and nieces to grow up in the same circumstances she did.

Stepping Ahead

A few weeks ago, I found the job with which I met the criteria. My girlfriend won't be given Dutch nationality in a day, as they did to our princess Maxima, who, thanks to the Dutch she has mastered under the guidance of distinguished professors, has reached the most popular place of the entire Dutch royal house. For us it will take years. But the first, and biggest hurdle, is taken. Today my girlfriend received a positive exam result from the Dutch embassy and we can finally begin the process of legalisation. Sometime, we will visit her home again, and see what has become of her nephews and nieces. But I hope that they won't give us as much trouble as my government has given us...