

Sojourner in a Foreign Land
A Memoir

by
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Font in this book: Garamond.

This is the story of my first forty years, of my experience as an immigrant and the life-long impact of childhood trauma, lack of parenting, and sexual abuse on a human soul. It is like a fairy tale although fairy tales most often end with the prince marrying the princess and inheriting half the kingdom. I did not have that luck although I did experience success. Although the meaning of sojourn refers to a temporary condition, it reflects my experience in America as an immigrant, as well as in my life. I am still on a visit as a sojourner. This journey is but a temporary experience, and my soul will always belong to Copenhagen, Denmark.

Out of respect for family and friends, some places and most names have been changed.

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Copenhagen

When February ends, the grip of winter loosens a little. The snow, which a month earlier had blanketed our city in pure white, turns into wet blackened slush, and the harsh and cruel wind, surprises with gusts of mild ocean air. A hint of spring fills the air for a moment, but the rain which follows the snow is not gentle. It soaks one through and through and pricks one's eyes. Driven by the wind, the rain falls over the city and howls through the narrow winding streets which are like the veins in our bodies. The streets branch out from the center, the parliament building on Slotsholmen, to the suburbs of Valby or Charlottenlund, where they thin out and disappear into the countryside. I know all those veins, those tributaries of life which flow like the grid of life in my own body. My heart is shaped by the rich culture and the liberal diversity of Copenhagen, Denmark. Whenever I need the strength and the sustenance of my roots, I think of this place with great love.

The city came into existence in the year 1150 A.D. Copenhagen was formed much like the gold-rush towns of the American West. In our case, it wasn't gold which fueled the growth, but the sudden arrival of billions of fish streaming down from the North Sea through the narrows of Oeresund and into the Baltic waters. When word got out that the fishermen were scooping the fish out of the water by the barrels with their bare hands, the small community expanded with the speed of light. This miracle of abundance was

immediately used by the church to prove that the new religion, Christianity, was the reason for the sudden wealth.

There is a Danish saying: Absalon built the castle and the port. Absalon was the bishop of Roskilde, a nearby town. He went to Copenhagen on a mission from God, encouraged by blessings from Rome to seize the moment for the Catholic church. He preached a sermon where he made it clear that the fish were sent to them as a sign from God above, because he belted out, “It happened a thousand years to the date of the Birth of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ.” And the crowd shouted Amen.” The King was moved to give him the run of the city.

After the sermon, he proposed that a massive stone tower be built to protect his outpost. From there, he could shoot giant rocks at any passing pirate ships which threatened his power. “That’s exactly how it happened,” my dad later told me.

“You take a lot of fish, a bunch of drunk sailors and a corrupt bishop, then you throw in some politics, and you have a new city.” He was right, that’s how Copenhagen came into existence.

When the month of March rolls around, the miserable weather continues. Rain falls from steel gray skies for days on end. The city is soaked, the city rats run around from house to house because the basements are flooded. It was not an unusual sight in my childhood to see those homeless rats on the move when it rained like that. As beautiful as Copenhagen can be in the

summertime, winter can be horrible, cold, and ugly. For six long months, people only go outside to work or get groceries. Yet, they seem to take it in stride and with good Scandinavian humor. As one Danish writer, Storm Petersen put it:

“Everyone complains about the weather, but no one lifts a finger to change it!”

In the streetcars, which rumble on their shiny tracks through the city, people are packed like the old sardines in their barrels, exchanging seasonal diseases. There's the common cold, the flu, chicken pox, measles, and winter depression. To avoid that germ cocktail of public transportation, those who can walk to work do, even in the rain - not only to avoid getting sick but because they don't have to fight for their life getting on and off the street cars. In America, people show some civility, they line up to use public transportation, but in cold and rainy Scandinavia it's "everyone for themselves." The streetcar gets boarded like the battle of Hastings, and people fight to get out as if they were trapped on the Titanic and don't want to drown with the rest. Little old ladies get pushed to the side, children get trampled; it's an ugly sight, but we can't help it. It must be something in our genes from the time when we were Vikings, and our pastime was to plunder, rape and burn down churches.

The evening this story starts was one of those typical Marc days with too much rain. My mom, dad, and sister are at my grandparent's apartment on Saturday night. My dad sits with his father at the dining room table drinking Scotch, smoking cigars and arguing politics.

Again and again, grandpa hammers his fist into the table to underscore his point.

“But don’t you understand it, son, the goddamned Social Democrats have once again screwed us over and added another tax on the country!”

My dad doesn’t agree, and they carry on with increasingly loud voices.

“Stop it, for God’s sake,” Rigmor, grandpa’s wife yells at him. The men laugh and walk into the kitchen where grandpa opens the refrigerator. They haul package upon package of cold cuts and sausages out onto the kitchen table and start to cut the meat in thick slices which they put on dark rye bread and eat as the political discussion continues. My dad’s half-brother, who is a much younger high school student, joins them and starts to tell them about his latest physics experiment. Despite his young age, he is interested in everything which has to do with math or chemistry.

“This is the idea, Dad,” he says, as he turns to grandpa who downs a glass of schnapps with the pickled herring. “I’m going to see how much I weigh on the scale and then drink three liters of water and then see if I weigh the same amount as the water itself, do you get it, Dad?”

He excitedly starts filling up empty milk bottles from the faucet. The men laugh and encourage him to go on. My pregnant mother leans back on the pillows and sighs as she holds my sleeping sister in her arms. Then her cramps set in, hard and unforgiving. She tells the men to please stop their craziness and starts walking up and down the hall. My dad slurs, “You - you cannot

have that baby before tomorrow, so just plain forget about it. Tonight, we celebrate Dad's birthday which is tomorrow, so there is no way you are going to give us a baby tonight."

The men turn on the small black and white television on the corner. My grandfather has mounted a plastic screen in front of the TV which is supposed to enlarge the picture. However, it only works if you are sitting right in front of it and while everyone tells him it is a terrible idea, he doesn't care. He turns the large V-formed antenna on top of the box to capture the signal.

Rigmor, a good sturdy woman from the countryside, is getting worried about my mother. She calls a taxi, helps my mother get dressed, picks my sister up and tells the men gathered around the television: "Now just let us women take care of this while you men solve all our political problems."

It is close to midnight; they wait for a long time in the apartment building hallway for the taxi to arrive. The men have assured them they will join them later at the hospital.

"It's OK, and I don't mind them not coming" my mom whispers between heavy contractions, "they'd be in the way anyway, right?"

The old English style taxi arrives. They make it to the hospital; it is almost midnight. My mom is given a bed and some medication to lessen her pains. One hour and twenty minutes later I was born. It is Sunday, March 4, 1951. They say that children born on Sundays are fortunate.

First Years

As an infant, we lived in a small flat on the second floor of a five-story apartment building on Franckes Vej. It was a dead-end street, closed in one end by a ten-foot brick wall behind which one could see old villas with lush gardens. Our apartment building was built at the end of the industrial revolution. It was old, with a wooden staircase and dirty walls with obscenities written all over them.

“This place is fine, and it’ll do for now.” That was my dad’s answer every time my mom would complain about the noise from the kids running up and down the stairs at all times of the day. He left her with the children and a few pieces of furniture to sign up as a professional soldier with the artillery, fifty miles outside of the city. When she would complain that being abandoned with two infants in a half-empty apartment was intolerable, he would say “I’m doing this for us, for you and the kids, and all I hear is your constant complaining. The military was great for my dad, and I am going to make something out of myself.” he told her.

She would get quiet and endure. Whenever she left the apartment to go shopping, she would have to haul her children around in a baby stroller or carry them. As soon as she got up in the morning, she would look at the space in the bed next to her, and the tears would come. Conversation with neighbors was out of the question because she came from an academic family and thought them proletarians. She kept to herself and even stopped talking to us. The apartment got cleaned and

cleaned because there was nothing else for her to do. She started reading books and tried to disappear into a parallel universe of excitement, but it did not work. She still felt alone and abandoned. When she received a letter from my father one day telling her that he had fallen “head over heels” in love with a waitress, it was the last straw. She showed up at the barracks and made an ugly scene. He followed her back to Copenhagen like a wet dog on a leash.

I was barely two when my mom fell apart. She had a nervous breakdown and had to leave us.

“You have to get better” her mother would tell her in German. “You must be strong and be a good mother. How can you be any good when all you do is cry all day?”

Our mom went to her sister’s family to recover on their farm in the western part of the country and was gone for several months. My sister and I were cared for in different places and thought we were abandoned forever. When my mom returned to pick me up again, I didn't recognize her but started to cry and clung fearfully to the woman who had taken care of me in her absence. My mom was devastated. She stood pale faced and teary-eyed with her arms outstretched, her voice cracking “Come to mom, sweetheart, don’t you know your mom again?”

My dad tried to mend the wounds he had caused. He got a job back in a grocery store where he had worked before meeting my mom and moved back in with the family. A year later, my parents found a better, but not much bigger apartment in a nicer neighborhood

near the Carlsberg Brewery. The district was Frederiksberg, and my sister and I grew up there.

Angels and Stars

One of the first things I remember from my childhood was sitting by the window in my parents' bedroom looking up at the million stars flickering in the night sky.

“What are those blinking lights, Mom?” I asked.

“Those are the angels, and if you wave to them, they will see it and wave back at you” my mom answered. I moved closer to her on the chair. It was cold by the window, and intricate ice flowers had formed on the lower part of the windowpane. They looked like fancy glass carvings, but when I put my fingers on them, they would melt away and turn into water drops. I stood for a long time and waved to the stars, as if in a trance. The next morning, I drew a picture of the angels on a piece of paper and gave it to my dad.

Another time when I was watching the night sky with my mom, one of the stars seemed to be moving slowly across the air to the West

“Look, Mom, one of the angels is leaving!”

“No, that's a Sputnik,” she told me.”

“What's that?” I wanted to know.

“It's a small Russian spaceship with a dog inside,” she explained.

I thought long and hard about that one. What was a dog doing up there, and could it see and talk to the angels? I drew another picture with the space dog Laika barking at the angels. When I gave it to my dad the next morning, he laughed and said that was the funniest drawing he had ever seen.

The Russians, and not the Americans, were the prominent part of my childhood experience. They were first in space, they were a dangerous nation who invaded other countries ostensibly to protect them against the West, of which we were a part.

The tiny nation of Denmark and the rest of the Civilized Western world trembled with fear of the Soviet Union. As children, we were always scared and afraid of the Russians because our parents were terrified. From them, I learned that the Communists were planning to drop nuclear bombs on the West and destroy the whole world. That was very scary to us kids. It installed in us a well-founded fear. When the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, all the tenants in our building gathered in the only apartment where a family lived who had a television. We watched with disbelief how the Russian tanks rolled into Budapest. It had a sobering impact on the Western world. The Russians also watched it on television. They saw images of the glorious, liberating Soviet army protecting a small country from the evils of capitalism. The Russians wanted to make sure that all people in the world had access to healthcare, that all had a job and that no one needed to sleep on the streets at night. That's what I remember they used as an argument to invade Hungary!

Besides the fear of the Russians, I also feared the sound of airplanes because our parents had filled our heads with horror stories about running down to the basement during air raids in the second world war. As a result, the sound of a passing airplane always made me look up. I would wake up in the middle of the night, heart

pounding, hoping there would be no sirens alerting us to an attack. Our whole neighborhood was full of the reminders of the war which had ended just six years before I was born. There were bomb shelters on every street, and there was a terrifying memorial at the end of our block for the victims of a catastrophic event. It was in the last year of the war, when a raid on a building where Germans held Danish resistance fighters, went very wrong. The British bomber planes flew in very low over the city in bright daylight, so as not to be a target for the German anti-air guns. One of the aircrafts flew between our apartment complex and the buildings on the next street. The sound of the incoming bombers broke the quiet of the night and blew out most of the windows on its way towards Frederiksberg Alle'. At this moment, at the end of our street, one plane hit a roof structure and had to drop bombs to gain altitude as fast as possible. The missiles landed on the French Catholic school where the children had just walked out on the playground. The school was hit directly. Over one hundred students and their teachers perished in the bombardment.

The sound of my mothers' voice when she told us those war memories shook me with fear. The stories were real; people had died right here at the end of our street. The planes had come when no one expected them, and the bombs had killed indiscriminately. It was not hard for me to imagine the terror of sitting in the darkness under our house in the coal cellar with everyone else, just waiting and hoping that nothing would happen. As long as I lived on that street, I would listen and be aware of the sound of passing planes.

A bear with a dress

As a child, I loved to help my mother in the house. She has told me that I made her life impossible because I never wanted to go down and play by myself but insisted on being around her all the time. If she cooked, I would cook, if she did laundry, I wanted to do the same. I especially loved to keep her company whenever she folded the sheets and towels after they had been hanging outside in the courtyard to dry. Putting the newly washed fabric up to my nose, I thought I could smell the divine essence of air itself. Often my mother would knit clothes for the family. Then I would hold the yarn while she wound it into a tight ball. Working together, we would chat about everything. She would tell me about her last dreams or about books she was reading whether I understood or not. In between, she told me stories of our family, about how she had been as a child and about how her parents had been wealthy and prosperous when they lived back in Leipzig in a country called Germany.

There seemed to be no end to my mother's stories. They were like a fairytale book which never ended. Sometimes it was about fat ladies who told a police officer to piss off, sometimes about a talking parrot named Jakob who belonged to my great-grandfather, and sometimes sad stories about uncles who had fallen in the first world war.

In the kitchen, I had to taste whatever she was preparing for dinner or baking. I became skilled at creating beautiful knots out of the flat dough, and I

helped with the kneading in the different stages of bread making. In the fall, my mother would buy different types of apples and berries which we canned, to have vitamins enough to last us through the winter. The whole house smelled sweet, and everyone in the apartment building would know we were canning. I became a master in the exceptional skills of house chores, and as we worked, she would lecture me about how important it was that I grew up to become a “Real Man” and always add “Not like your father.”

“Yes, Mom” I would respond while she put an apron on me so I would not stain my clothes from the berries.

Although my sister was older than me and could have been my superior in the housekeeping business, she didn't seem to care about women's chores much. She would be down in the backyard playing hopscotch and throwing balls against the wall with her friends. She played a lot with a bigger boy who lived upstairs in another apartment and whose name I have forgotten. Sometimes the girls would let me play in their games as well. They would throw rubber balls against a wall and say rhymes or numbers until a ball fell and another girl would have a go at it. I had a few boy playmates, and we had a great time climbing garden walls, stealing apples and getting into trouble. Whenever I would get in a fight, my wooden clogs were my last resort in the line of defense. A quick kick would get me enough respect, and they would leave me alone.

In the bedroom I shared with my older sister, I had my stuffed animals, and she had her dolls. I was