

I Once Knew

Vincent

Michelle Rene

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Dedicated with love to my mother, Donna, my husband, Brian,
and my son, Aiden.

A special thanks goes to all my supportive friends and family,
especially Shell and Cathy. You were my first fans.

A Note from the Author

The people in this book were real people, and the events in this book are based on actual events. However, while this story was inspired by actual events, it is a work of fiction. Some facts have been changed and some events have been added for the sake of storytelling.



*“I put my heart and my soul into my work
and have lost my mind in the process.”*

-Vincent Van Gogh

Chapter One

I am an honest woman, and because of that fact, I was an equally honest girl. As a grown woman looking back on my childhood, I can see that honesty was not always considered a valuable trait or even a virtuous trait in young women. The manner of my honesty often exasperated matters. I coated very little with the sweet tongue of honey as was the custom for young ladies of my time. To be very plain, I had very little use for such practices.

In the late nineteenth century, The Hague was a center for Dutch artists and dealers who helped deliver unto the world a new era in revolutionary painting. This was true for the countless struggling artists and art dealers that lived and worked there. It was a center for an explosion of expression that was shadowed only by the even larger revolution happening in Paris.

However, my moeder and I knew nothing of the major artistic strides created in our fair city because my moeder was an alcoholic whore. I did say that I was honest, so it should be understood that I would not label her as such to purely insult her. The plain truth was that she sold her body to feed us in times of great need. To cope with her intense misery and sorrow, she would turn to the comforts of liquor.

My moeder was named Clasina Maria Hoornik, but no one actually called her Clasina. Anyone who really knew her referred to her as Sien. To me, she was Moeder. She had been Moeder to two other children, but they had not lived. The first was a girl made so frail and tired by Sien's lack of nutrition that the turmoil of birth was too much for her to bear. The baby was born early, and she was born already dead. The second was a boy that my Moeder named Wilhelmus Hoornik. He too was weak and frail, and when Sien's

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body became unable to produce milk for him any longer, he too died after only one year of life.

Losing babies was not uncommon for women as poor as my moeder, and I was so young that I did not remember the loss of the first child. The second child however, little Wilhelmus, I do remember. I was only a very young child myself, but I do have some blurry colored memories of holding his little body in my arms. I remember feeling how light he seemed, lighter than a baby ought to be.

I could not help but wonder why it was that I was the one strong enough to survive when others wasted away. Was I cursed or privileged to be strong enough to survive this world? Sometimes, in moments of great terror, I thought that it would have been easier to fade away as they had. When faced with the intense need of hunger, such things are easy to think.

The Hague was the city, and with the city came the smells of the city. If we walked down almost any street, we would encounter the sights and smells of everything real that we could not afford. From the scent of the newly dyed cloth to the warm fragrance of the food merchants, everything we saw was only available if we had the coins. Of course, we had none. The fine linens hanging in the window were only for show, and the fresh milk and cheese at the dairy man's booth could only be wanted from afar.

The worst for me was when we passed the smoke house. I loved meat so very much. The smell of smoked pork and beef aroused a yearning in me that could be surpassed by nothing else as far as I was concerned. It was a deep want that was rarely satisfied.

Meat was a luxury. On the rare occasion that I did receive a bit of meat, it was a gift; a rare and beautiful present that I savored for as long as I could manage. For the most part, we ate bread when we were able to eat at all. Sometimes, Moeder managed to get some milk with our bread. Once in a great while, there was cheese and

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even a potato, but black bread soaked in water to soften it was normally our supper.

Normally, Sien worked as a seamstress, and she even tried to work as a charwoman like her mother, the woman whose name I bore. However, her ugly appearance, sorrowful demeanor, and reputation for prostitution limited her employment opportunities in The Hague.

She lost most of the reputable charwoman positions to young, pious girls with clean, round faces. All were devout Catholics or Protestants from good families. Sien prayed but never took to religion the way the devout did, and her apathy to it made people wary of her. Be a girl Protestant or Catholic, it did not matter. A girl just needed to be something.

Her skills as a seamstress were decent enough, but she often would miss appointments and deadlines because of drunkenness. When that happened, her only option was to go back to the streets and sell her body for a coin so that we might have a bit of bread for our supper.

The winters were the hardest. We had a tiny apartment that consisted of one room that acted as bedroom, kitchen, living room, and a small washroom with a chamber pot in an alcove that we curtained off with a bit of fabric. The whole place always smelled like emptiness felt.

Moeder and I would not bother with night gowns or any kind of sleepwear in those winter nights. We would go to bed fully dressed and huddled together on our one little mattress under the warmth and comfort of a thinning blanket. Moeder disliked wearing her bonnet in the house or anywhere that she did not feel obligated for reasons that she described as feelings of confinement that turned into headaches. I, on the other hand, would wear mine to bed during those brutal winter nights in an effort to warm my ears while I slept.

I hated winters. We always had less of everything. Less food, less money, less comfort. Money for coal or wood to burn was

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never available, so we slept with the chill biting us to our very bones. The warmest part was Moeder's warm body wrapped around mine. She used to cup herself around me and wrap me in her arms against the chill. I was always grateful for that. She was the only thing in the room that did not feel empty and cold.

Chapter Two

The discomfort was at its peak when Sien brought the men she catered to home for their exchange. Luckily, this always occurred before bedtime, so the awkwardness of being roused from my bed was never an issue. This act of barbarism had a routine. When I heard the tone of two voices, one male and one my moeder's, outside my door, I was to make for the curtained washroom before they entered the apartment. Once behind the ratted curtain, I had to face the wash basin and close my ears to block out the grunts and desperate motions of what was taking place on the mattress that I slept on when the event was done. I always shut my eyes and ears to the deeds in our room, but I heard them anyway.

The men knew I was there. How could they not? Most knew Sien and knew she had a daughter. She had developed a reputation around The Hague. Plus, it was not difficult to spot my shoes under the tattered curtain that covered the alcove. However, it was another matter entirely for them to actually look into my eyes.

Most men looked instantly remorseful and small when I was not able to get to the alcove in time and they came face to face with the possible results of the action for which they were about to pay. In those times, I was to politely curtsy, duck my head, and escape to the alcove as quickly as I could manage.

Some men lost their zeal and left the apartment to go home. I imagined that they ran home to whatever daughter or sister my face had just reminded them. Most were able to continue with their plan after only a small amount of coaxing from Sien. She often told them that I was half deaf, and when I plugged my ears, I could hear nothing at all. A little liquor and a few small lies paved the way. Of course, the truth was that I heard everything.

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It was in January of 1882, the year that I was seven years old, when the change of my lifetime occurred. It was a particularly difficult winter because Sien was again pregnant but only so much that she was barely showing. The man who fathered the child was a man who had become a regular client of Sien's, but when she broke the news to him that she was to have his child, he left the city to live with relatives abroad. He gave her a few coins for her trouble and apologized before he departed. He was not a bad man, just a weak man, and she harbored no ill feelings for him.

The baby he left behind was an issue though, and, by that January, food was even scarcer than it had been before. My grandmother had brought us a few items she could spare, but her husband had died some years before and her charwoman pay could only afford her so much.

That January seemed colder than ones past. I was curled in a ball trying to stay warm on our mattress one evening when I heard a male and female voice outside the door of our apartment. I grumbled out of tiredness and exasperation. My stomach echoed the grumble with the call of emptiness as I rose from the mattress and made my way silently to the alcove. I knew Sien had gone out to try to find "business," as she called it, that evening, but I had thought that it would be for naught. The night was especially cold, and most people would not be roaming the streets when it was that frigid. However, time was running out for Sien. The more pregnant she looked, the less "business" she would attract. We had already gone two days without eating.

I had made it behind the curtain just in time before the door opened. Heavy footfalls entered the small apartment. I sat on the floor and slumped against the wall waiting for this all to be over so that I could go back to bed. It was cold, and I tensed against the inevitable shivering that I knew was to come. I began to allow my mind to wander as it did to tune out the noises around me when I heard Moeder say my name.

“Maria?”

No. Not only was she saying my name, she was calling to me. I was perplexed. Was she really calling me to come out? I was nervous and desperate not to make a mistake, so I waited and listened. If I came out too soon, there was a good chance I would ruin the deal. Then, there would surely be no food. It was silent for a while and then I heard it again.

“Maria? Come out please.”

I stood up timidly and peeked out from around the curtain to see Moeder standing there beckoning to me, her hand outstretched. A man stood next to her looking at me. I instantly felt like I had made a mistake, and I almost ran back behind the curtain.

“Come out, dear. There is someone I want you to meet.”

Confusion swirled in my young mind. Moeder had always told me how important my invisibility had to be when she brought “business” home, and now, I was to meet one of these men? I did not want to meet him. Shyness flooded my cheeks and face. I was unaccustomed to experiencing shyness, but my cheeks were flushed all the same.

“Come forth child. Do not shy away. We both know you are not meek,” she said coaxingly.

I walked out of the alcove and approached the two of them standing side by side. The man was not tall in the least. He had the face of someone about the age of my moeder, maybe younger. The clothes he wore were poor in appearance but clean and well mended. His skin was fair. His hair was a strawberry blond color and was cut fairly close to his head all around. He had a short, manicured beard of a lighter color. His eyebrows were nearly the same color as his skin and therefore seemed almost invisible at first, but when I saw them knit in an expression of kindness, I relaxed a little.

It was his eyes that really struck me. They were a grey blue, not a terribly uncommon color in the The Hague, but the way the blue cast itself around pushing at the black of his pupils and

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reflecting the little bit of lamp light in the apartment was remarkable. The contrast of somber grey and vibrant blue gave even the most commonplace of his glances great depth of emotion.

Only as an adult remembering this moment can I glean all of this meaning and articulate it. At the time, all I could understand about his gaze was that his eyes could somehow appear somber, kind, and intensely understanding all at the same time. It struck me as remarkable.

“Maria, I would like to introduce you to Mr. Vincent Van Gogh.”

Chapter Three

“Maria Hoornik,” I replied extending my timid child’s hand to the fair haired man. He smiled softly and took my hand in his in a gesture of greeting. His hands were rough and cold. They almost felt a little oily. I thought to myself how strange oily hands in the winter were.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Maria,” he said as he released my hand looking over to Sien with an expectancy I did not understand.

“So, where would you like me to be?” asked Sien gesturing around the room.

“Perhaps by the stove for your own warmth and comfort,” he remarked with a light smile.

“Alright,” she said as she began to move across the room to our stove which provided very little heat due to its lack of use. “Maria, please light the other lamps so that we may have more light.”

I did as I was told all the while wondering at the expense and what was happening here? I was never involved in Moeder’s “business,” and this whole interaction frightened and confused me. While I was lighting the last lamp, Vincent came over to me and offered a good bit of bread with a little cheese smeared on it. My eyes grew wide as I took it from him. I tried to not to show how desperately I wanted to devour the entire thing right then.

“There you are. That’s your payment for being my helper this evening,” he said with a satisfied smile. “Perhaps you will be a part of my studies, too.”

I froze. What were studies? Is that what he called what he was going to do with Sien? He would want to do those things to me? I was a young girl, too young for such things, but I knew that there were men who enjoyed despicable acts with children. Poor children

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knew such things. Moeder would never allow that. Even so, fear coursed through my body and infected my face.

“Do not fret so, child. Tonight, you are only my assistant,” he said sweetly while patting the top of my head. “Now, go and fetch my satchel. Then, you may eat your bread.”

He walked calmly over toward where my mother had positioned herself near the now lit stove and pulled a chair around to face her. I was not sure what “an assistant” meant, but as long as I was not the focus of his attention tonight, I knew that I would be safe enough. I just hoped that I was not made to watch.

I retrieved his satchel and brought it over to him. Something rattled around inside the bag that was unidentifiable to me. He bade me to sit next to his chair and eat my dinner as he posed Moeder like a doll on the floor. I ate and tried not to make a sound.

He signaled her to move her face this way and that or to move her legs forward and back until the position was to his liking. When he had gotten the pose correct, he looked down at his satchel next to me and removed some paper and a thin wooden board. He then extricated a smaller wooden box full of the rattling noise I had heard earlier. When opened, the box contained lots of pieces of black bits. The entire inside was covered in a fine black soot and the black bits of rock were what had clattered around inside.

“Now, what I need from you, young Miss Maria, is to open this box and hold it out to me whenever I reach down for a new piece of charcoal. Would you do that?”

I nodded. It seemed to be a harmless request, but I did not comprehend these bits of “charcoal” as he called them. He laid the paper on the board and began to draw with the black rock in his hand. His face, knitted with concentration, seemed to focus intently on Sien as he drew on his paper. It was not long before I could recognize the point of her nose and the line of hair in his handiwork. He was drawing her. He was paying her to sit still for him so he could draw her.

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“Mr. Van Gogh is an artist, Maria,” Sien explained while she sat still on the floor. “I am posing as his model.”

An artist? I knew artists. Well, that statement was not honest. I had seen paintings a few times in the windows of fine gallery shops during our walks around the city. When there had been women depicted in those paintings, they were lovely, rose-cheeked beauties. They wore fine clothes and had a healthy appearance full of fleshy waists and round bosoms. They were not Sien.

My moeder was ugly. My honesty had no ill meaning when it came to my moeder because she knew she was ugly. She was thin and gaunt with stringy hair and a large, pointed nose that did not help with her sorrowful demeanor. Unless she took the energy to smile, which she rarely did, she had the general disposition of sourness. The fact that she smiled at me now was probably due to the fact that we were eating and that she did not have to take anyone to bed.

I thought about Mr. Vincent Van Gogh and his choice of models, and I could not help but judge that he must not be a very good artist to choose such an ugly model. How would his drawings and paintings ever be beautiful if his model was so far from beautiful? Either this man was a very bad artist or a really strange person. Perhaps he was both.

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