HOMECOMING - VERA AND ANNELIES

Transcription

Coming Home: Vera and Annelies

A story produced by Jennifer Pettersson

Annelies (thick Rotterdam accent): *I just went like that, “kissing noise* bent down and kissed the ground. People stared, but I didn’t care. I was so happy, so overjoyed. I saw HEMA [Dutch convenience store]! I saw… my daughter she says: “You need one of their sausages?” I go, “oh my god, d — do I!” Because you’re like, you’re just not used to anything anymore.

VO: It’s the middle of the summer when Annelies arrives at Schiphol airport. She’s been away for years.

Annelies: *Well, it’s so beautiful, the Netherlands, you know. I’m used to it again now, but when you’re coming from there it’s all so beautiful: the trees, everything is so fresh, so… because in Peru everything’s black. From the exhaust fumes.

VO: Annelies had actually wanted to come home much earlier, but she had some delay. Three and a half years…

(Music)

VO: It’s October 2006, and Annelies is in a suburb of Lima. She’s just about to leave for the airport. She’s made an arrangement to collect a suitcase. A plaid suitcase, something that can’t be too conspicuous.

Annelies: *But that suitcase, it smelt so bad from the mothballs! So I said, what’s it for? They said, “Yeah, it’s because of the dogs. So they can’t smell what’s in it.” OK, but here I am a Dutch woman, why would I be crossing the border with a suitcase full of mothballs? So I took the mothballs out, sprayed it with perfume to get the smell out. But yeah, I was thinking, “this isn’t going to work, this isn’t going to work…”

VO: Annelies takes a taxi to the airport and goes to the check-in desk.

Annelies: *I was nervous, because I felt like it was going wrong. And I kept thinking in the back of my mind, “maybe I should just leave this suitcase here?” No, can’t do that, because then you don’t have any luggage, aren’t they going to say something about that? So I just went, to the desk, and I was stopped by two men. They had already been standing there, and they started to smell my luggage. And then they
asked if I would open my suitcase. So I asked: “do I have to take my clothes out?” No, I didn’t. But they started moving my clothes around, and tapping on my suitcase. And that’s when I knew. It’s all over.

Then the moment came and they opened up the whole thing, pulled the lining out of the suitcase, and yes indeed, there it was: three big ol’ bricks. Seven kilogrammes.

(Music)

VO: Annelies is taken to a police department in Lima. She is put in a cell in the basement, where she and many other prisoners sleep on paper on the floor.

Annelies: Then the rats just crawl right over you, horrible. So nasty, a stench that just made you gag.

VO: After being held there for 15 days, she goes to prison.

Annelies: I wasn’t thinking that I was going to end up in the Hilton. But then they take you to a prison that’s just totally open. Cold! It’s all wide open. Then they put you down in the corridor. And that’s the first stage.

VO: In the prison, you work your way up through different stages of sleeping comfort.

Annelies: From the corridor, you move up to a room. And just that, you’re so happy. And you get to sleep under a bunk bed. I mean, you’ve got one on top, and one below, and you get to sleep under that. So you’re still sleeping on the ground. But then you feel like it really is the Hilton. The Mind Your Head Hilton.

Vera: A coffin!

Annelies: It really did happen to me, that cockroaches fell right in my face.

Vera: It’s really just like a coffin. The lower bed is about ten centimetres above you, ten centimetres off the ground. So yeah, it’s just like you’re at your own open casket funeral.

VO: This is Vera. She’s been imprisoned for a year when Annelies arrives. They meet in the prison’s work room.

Vera (laughing): You were always drinking coffee, crocheting, always crocheting that blanket! Oh, those damn blankets. Oh…

Annelies: A two-person bedsipread! It gets surreal when your kids in the Netherlands are sending you money so you can survive. And so you tuck away a little money. And
then you start, well I wrote a lot, but because I could crochet, I crocheted things for my grandkids. At some point you keep crocheting caps. But the kids keep growing, they don’t wear them, those caps. So then you start crocheting a bedspread. And then you send the kids that. Of course, it looks a fright, that thing, but for me it was a way to do something in return. And that’s how I got to know Vera, with crocheting.

Vera: And knitting, that was it, yeah. The circles, the squares, more squares, and still more squares.

VO: From that moment on they stick together as much as possible.

Annelies: We just really liked each other. We also started sitting a little bit apart from the others. Not to say like “we’re better” or anything. No, we were just sick of them. You have to work, so you have to follow the rules, and I wanted to play by the rules because I wanted to go home. And then at some point I requested to be transferred to Vera’s wing. And yeah, with good behaviour I was allowed.

VO: But they are an odd couple.

Vera (laughing): In a normal life, I would probably never have come across Annelies. Simply because she comes from a completely different world than I do, you know?

Annelies: She’s a very different type.

VO: Annelies is a sixty-year-old woman from Rotterdam with blonde-dyed hair, who spent some of her life at home raising her kids and some working in restaurants. Vera is 36, grew up in a very different environment, and leads a very different kind of life.

Vera: I went to all the festivals and things, you know, survival camps and stuff like that, and I went backpacking… (ha ha ha). Hiking through Italy, and, yeah, that kind of thing. That wouldn’t have been anything for her, no. I can just see her with her backpack on, putting up a tent with the Red Hot Chili Peppers playing in the background (ha ha ha). Ummmm… no. But yeah, we just clicked.

Annelies: She just didn’t seem like the type to be in prison, well, now, I’m not the prison type either, but she was so sweet… I just thought she was a sweetie right off the bat.

VO: It’s difficult to understand how these two amiable, charming women would have made the decision to smuggle drugs, and put themselves in this situation. And it’s as if they themselves don’t really understand it either.
Annelies: *I never dared steal so much as a crumb, because I’ve never had so much as a parking ticket in my life, I really mean it!*

VO: But in reality, she had had problems for a while. Annelies’ youngest son was a drug addict, and she came into contact with drugs when he moved back in with her.

Annelies: *That’s when it actually started going downhill with me, because I let him do drugs at home. I thought “then at least he won’t be doing it outside, he’ll be doing it here at home.” And at some point you just get sucked into it.*

VO: Annelies starts doing drugs herself and racks up debts. Drug smuggling seems to be an easy way to make money fast.

Annelies: *And that’s not something you would condone as a mother, but at that point I didn’t see any other way out, so I told my son “well then, as they say where I come from, if you want to go to Hell, then let’s go together.”*

VO: Vera also developed a drug addiction: Cocaine. She starts using together with her partner, a man with whom she has two children: a boy of three and an eight months old baby. They live in a house they can’t afford, and they fight a lot.

Vera: *Normally, as a mother, you have to always choose to protect your children. So you pack up your kids and you go, if you’re in a relationship like that. But for some reason, I just couldn’t walk out on that man. I tried, I really tried, but every time I went back.*

VO: The worse the relationship gets, the more drugs they use.

Vera: *I just wasn’t myself anymore. Just totally not myself.*

VO: When her partner decides to start smuggling drugs, Vera goes in on it. But secretly, she hopes they get caught.

Vera: *I just didn’t see any way out. Then you think, isn't it better if I just get locked up? Then my children will go to some better place in the Netherlands, than if I keep getting deeper into this, in this relationship, doing drugs, and everything that comes along with it. I was thinking “this is really getting ugly, and it’s wrecking my children too.”*

VO: Vera is arrested together with her husband and children. They are carrying 9 kilogrammes of cocaine. The arrest means the end of the destructive relationship and the addiction, but Vera hasn’t really thought the other consequences through. She faces a 15-year sentence. And her children will be taken. Where to is not clear.
Vera: My eldest son I didn’t even get to see anymore, because he was somewhere playing. They just grabbed him and took him away. And I was nursing my baby. They took him from my arms and… yeah, just took him away. So in that holding cell for 15 days I felt like… like I was going crazy…

VO: Once in prison, Vera tries to think of her family as little as possible.

Vera: I tried very hard to put my children and everything, you know, everything emotional out of my mind, because I saw so many people who it just broke, or who got truly sick from it. Missing their children and all that. I just pushed it all away from me. Think like “Yeah, you have to manage to survive some way.”

VO: By contrast, Annelies is thinking of her children the whole time. She writes letters and makes presents for them.

Annelies: I had never lived a day without my children, so for me that was the worst. But I stayed strong, I just kept thinking “The day will come when you’re back with your kids,” and that kept me going.

VO: Vera and Annelies spend the years crocheting blankets and painting pillows. But Vera also starts fighting her sentence. And Annelies’ as well.

Annelies: Vera did so much for me, she meant so much for me. Because I was having such a hard time with Spanish, because I’m older and I just had no interest in learning it. I wanted to get out of there. My only thoughts were: the day will come when you will get out of here, that I land back home.

VO: Thanks to Vera’s efforts, Annelies’ sentence is reduced to three and a half years. Vera’s own sentence is stuck at ten years, but she could still get time off for good behaviour. Annelies is the first of the two to be released.

Annelies: And then they call you: “Bander, liberta! Tu liberta.” You’ve received your freedom.

VO: But she cannot yet leave the country. She has to spend the last year of her sentence on the outside.

Annelies: And then you walk outside, and then you look outside and you just don’t know where you are! Busy! Cars everywhere, left, right, everywhere. Shouting on the street everywhere, people: “papapapa!”, I took a step back. I wanted to go back inside!

VO: For a year, she walks the streets of Lima. For a while, she lives with nuns in a convent, sleeps for a few days in a park and stays in the homes of other ex-convicts.
When the year is almost at an end, her eldest son sends her money to buy a ticket home. And when Vera is released a year later, Annelies comes to pick her up.

(sound of aeroplane)

Vera: What did we do then? I don’t even remember. I think you made way too much food for me (ha ha ha). I ate like crazy. I wasn’t used to eating anymore, because in Peru… in fact you have so little money, you just scrounge what you can. And it’s mostly beans. I really ate myself sick, ha ha ha.

Annelies: I already had a house, of course, and it was already furnished, so I thought it was so great that Vera could finally sit on a normal sofa, because, yeah, on the inside you didn’t have any of that, obviously. I was proud of it, too. “Look, Vera, this is for us!”

VO: Annelies still can’t really believe that she has a place of her own, and that she’s managed to furnish it nicely, with hardly any money.

Annelies: Everything in here is worth nothing. Not a penny. The most expensive thing here is the floor and my TV. Everything else is “Action”. Sometimes at night I go out and stand on the balcony. Yeah, it may sound funny, but when I put the candles on and stuff, I step out on the balcony and I think (whispers): “how beautiful.” Then I’m so proud, then I say, “Nice, huh Vera?” “Yeah,” she says, “so beautiful.” Sometimes I also say, you know, you get used to things fast and I say “Is it still pretty?” “Course it is,” she says.

VO: When Vera returned to the Netherlands after five and a half years, Annelies was waiting for her, but no one from her family. Her children have been placed in a foster family, and her parents have disowned her.

Vera: They’re still angry. They simply couldn’t understand it, they always lived by the rules, and they just couldn’t handle it. I begged for forgiveness probably a thousand times, I tried to explain what an addiction problem is, but they just couldn’t get it. It’s really sad. Because I love them very much, but I have no contact with them. So I just have to accept that. But I miss them, yeah.

VO: Annelies has also lost contact with her family.

Annelies: My eldest son doesn’t want to see me anymore. My youngest, who I actually did it for - I also did it for myself, for the money - he went to jail. And my daughter, she really loves me... she really does, but Anja is so busy. She has friends, has acquaintances, she has her work, so, yeah, I don’t see her either. We talk on the phone, I know she’s doing fine, but there’s no… it’s not like I hoped it
would be, like my little girl that I can hold in my arms. Because, you know, that’s all
gone (sniffs).

VO: Annelies and Vera enjoy their regained freedom, but life at home is more difficult
than they had expected. Sometimes they think back on their time in prison with
nostalgia.

Annelies: Sometimes I miss it, yeah, the friendship with some of the girls on the
inside. Caring for each other. Yeah, I miss that.

Vera: I’m just really having a hard time. Really, really hard. Because I… in prison I,
let’s say, still had some sense of self-respect, because I was working, I was doing
things. You have a routine, you don’t have to worry about where your next meal was
coming from or whatever, you know. You had a place to sleep. In fact, you can close
yourself off from it a little. The only thing I was thinking about was that I wanted to get
out of prison. So you have a goal. But then you get here, and in fact your life is
pointless, really.

VO: Vera can’t see her children in the foster family as much as she would like to. She
has no illusions that she will ever regain full custody, but she’s doing her best to build
up a bond with them.

Vera: The first time that I saw them was very scary. You have no idea what to expect,
I didn’t even know how big they were, or I mean how small they still were. But when
they came in, it was actually very much a homecoming. I heard the voice from
through the door, and just that was so emotional of course. And they came straight
for me and the elder, he’s the one who put his arms around me right away, and then
he got spooked a little. And the little one was more hesitant, cautious, checking me
out to see if I was ok. And then at some point I started playing with him, and then he
started to open up a little.

VO: Finding a job will also take time and effort. Working as a teacher, what she used
to do, is no longer in the cards now that she has a drug history. The only thing that’s
easy right now is their friendship. That’s how she gets through her days.

(Sound of keys. Door closing.)

VO: Vera’s youngest son has his birthday coming up. She’s bought him some
presents.

Annelies: So? Did it work out?

Vera: Yeah, for the kids…
Annelies: *Is it like that game, ‘Operation’?*

Vera: Yes

Annelies: *Okay! Oh, that’s great! Sure…*

Vera: *You think he can do this…?*

Annelies: *Of course he can!*

Vera: *She’s my mama…*

Annelies: *What fun!*

Vera: *She’s the one who took care of me, you know, the one who does show me some love, you know, and listens to me…*

Annelies: *If she’s gone for a day, I start to miss her. I’d call her up and say: “Are you coming home already? This is no fun anymore! I’ve been looking out the window, to see if you were there”. It’s like having a husband! (laughs) You know, because you miss it… to be close.*

VO: They have each other, but in some sense, they are also condemned to each other. In prison, and now, on the outside, in freedom.

Annelies: *I had expected, well, my grandchildren, they’re big now. Look, they don’t have to come over and see their grandma every day, of course I understand that, but I never see them at all anymore. And that’s what I have Vera for, that’s when she says: “Annelies, buck up,” you know. “You have to go on.”*

(Music)

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