



# A Miscarriage of Empathy

Let us be like trees, different in colours, forms, leaves, and branches yet embraced deep  
under the soil... in their roots.

Khaled Al Bokaee

## Daan is a Dutch refugee

“Hayya alal falaah, Allaaahu akbar”. The morning prayer tingled from a local mosque.

“God damn it, when on earth I will get used to this, my heart is jumping out of its cage every morning” mumbled Daan as he was itching his eyes. He dragged his body slowly to the bathroom and looked into the mirror. “Today is a new day, a transformative day, with some luck!” smiled Daan with his mouth tightly shut. Six years ago, he escaped his home village Bennenbroek, in Noord-Holland. It was a small village on the coastal side of the Netherlands. A land, which endured a disastrous rise of the sea level, the water has left a big chunk of his country sinking under the sea.

Today, he is having his first job interview after years of being on and off unemployed or working in places where he did not blossom. In his home country, Daan has passed two scientific degrees in engineering and one practical degree in building dams, barrages, and bridges on water. Daan often jokes about it; “ we learned water management, but nature gave us its biggest middle finger. Tja, I think the only water that we can manage is the one entering our body, and maybe the one leaving it, hopefully!” says Daan often to new locals that he meets.

Daan is a tall young man with a well-defined figure, his eyes are icy-blue located on a broad face with unattended, tenuous, and golden-coloured hair. He has a long neck with lucid blue veins on both sides. Daan’s small nose and soft skin gave him an expressive sharpness in his face as if he is constantly in fixation mode. His hands touch the surface

sides of his knees as he walks, and he has thick and wide palms. Working in bike reparations gave him ever-grey fingers and torn-off nails with oily black outlines. The sound of walking softly on dead leaves in the autumn is the nearest resemblance to his voice. People loved listening to him, sometimes parents from the neighbourhood tugged their grounded children to him. “ Can you please tell your story to my irreversibly spoiled kid, maybe he will appreciate his privileges and listen to me more” parents would say with connected eyebrows and a cold look at their children.

### **In Soak**

Daan is immensely loved by the shop owner in the old city of Damascus. His boss, Abu Talib, is an old, grizzled man with a thick white beard and visible nose hair. He gained lots of weight lately, especially after he hired Daan. Abu Talib stopped fixing bikes and was sitting all day bubbling with his neighbours from the spices Soak. He would proudly express how happy he is with his new worker, even though Daan has been working for three years. He would say “this Dutch guy's hands were moulded to fix bikes” “only God knows what chips are implanted in the head of our Syrian youngsters nowadays. All they want is to work in robotics and technologies.” Pheew! man, those refugees saved our lives by filling in all the positions that Syrians trifled with” he breezed to his ninety-two years old neighbour “yeah, wallah, I am telling you brother, without the Swedish Chris, I would not be able to drive my car. Also, the ceremony of my granddaughter’s graduation would

have been dull as hell without the vegan Dutch catering of Lotte, and without the Belgian Mark, we would not have clean public toilets in this very Soak." "Ahem", cleared his throat, "but we should never be acknowledging and grateful because they are still refugees, and that is exactly what we expected from them. These are the roles that we as a society knotted for them, you get my point inshallah?" uttered Abu Talib in a hassled breath as he is afraid of any hidden listening ears. His shop is located in the narrow street adjoined to the soak that gave it a continuous smell of a mixture of Damascus Jasmine with Cardamom and Cinnamon. When it rains, the rainwater mixes the place with even more natural aromas. Daan always cherished the smells " It brings me back home to when I was a child, my dad used to prepare us some Middle Eastern dishes using the same spices that I smell now, and he used to keep the window open when it rains. He thought that by opening the small window and shouting at God or scolding the sky, the rain might stop, he saw it coming, I think, days of unstoppable and unruly rain washed me away to Damascus eventually" Daan would tell Abu Talib, who often fall asleep while diving deeply in his leather chair holding his wooden stick loosely with two hands.

When Daan entered Damascus for the first time, people were staring at him, following him with their gaze as shepherds following a spooky fox from a distance. " I am so different than these locals...the vast majority in here has a different outlook" whispered Daan to himself. Later he met some other groups of people that locals call the "*early Cockatoo*" implying the white birds, who Syrian people accepted as the first wave of Caucasian white refugees fleeing countries like New Zealand and Australia. Countries that were gobbled by the sea many years earlier than Holland. Daan arrived at a relatively young age, which

helped him grasp the basics of the Arabic language quickly. When he speaks, Syrian people tend to be less patient and more agitated with his slow Dutch accent. They would say “let us switch to English for it is handier” Or “you’re lucky that Syrians speak English very well” Daan would escape further comments by simply switching to English as it is his second language.

### **On the Train**

It is 15 o’clock, and Daan is travelling to his Job interview. He uses the train as always. He sits in the silent cabinet, never reading a book or a newspaper there. However, it is his favourite spot as people are silent and not talking to each other, which would make him feel somehow less lonely. He would observe people glued to their smart devices even if they are together. He turns his neck to the recently cleaned window and glimpses a herd of cows from a distance. His mum’s family used to have an endlessly big farm, where countless cows and pigs lived. He recalled his abrupt and tiresome visit to his grandparents to save them from the floods. Swiftly he places his wide palms covering his ears against the grim and thunder-like sound that the cows gave when they drifted away with the water. It reverberates in his head sometimes, even if he is sleeping. He did not know what to do “should I cry or should I smile that my grandparents are still alive” he said, soothing himself. Daan’s family, like the great vast majority of Dutch refugees, ended up in makeshift refugee camps in the mountain areas of Germany and Austria. Places, where they used to visit for a short winter-sport holiday, are now quite disorderly and crowded with refugees. He wondered how his family have been enduring life. They made the

toughest decision to choose one single survivor of the family and send him on a spine-chilling boat to Syria. His mother had to sell all the jewellery that she and her mother had to a French smuggler. Lucian, the smuggler is a small-boned man with a faint knife scar on his face. He told Daan once with a heavy French accent “ History, hein! My great great grandfather used to help North Africans to penetrate Europe, quoi, and now I am following his legacy, alors, I hope he’s proud of me.” Lucian miraculously agreed to have Daan on his boat despite the low price the family managed to pay.

Daan has not been able to see his family ever since. They video-call sometimes and he tries to send them money. The money often arrives with half of its original amount as he sends them via other smugglers and money traffickers. “This is my duty. I am merely paying them back, they enabled me to have a second chance for a new life, again that might ease the survivor guilt that has been keeping me awake at night” Daan hushed his thoughts as he was stepping out of the train.

### **In hosts hands**

While Daan was waiting in the 16th-floor hallway, his future employers had some coffee-machine chitchat. “We should not judge a book by its cover” Sara declared, making a stop sign with her left hand and holding a cup of tea in her right one. “ I agree for sure but, this position is highly sensitive and we need competent people with the best intentions. Only pure and authentic Syrians care about this land, the rest are all guilty until proven

innocent” chanted Ahmad, her colleague, while itching his lower chin. “ I wholeheartedly agree with you Ahmad, they are causing a housing crisis, cultural crisis, and public security crisis. Ughh man, you can literally place any adjective before the word “*crisis*” in describing refugees, but only the negative ones Habibi” said Sam with a lame smile on his face. “There are people in my family, who have been on the waiting list for innumerable years for a social house” dissolving four cubes of sugar in his tea “ My own younger brother lives in a tent within an old building with his friends, he is almost a homeless, wallah!” said Sam after a careful sip of his tea.

In the interview room and on the other side of the table sit two men and a woman, all dressed formally in black. On the left, Ahmad, a middle-aged Syrian man, was born and raised in Damascus. He wears a pentagon-shaped ring with a red and shiny stone in its centre. In the middle, a young lady, Sara, had her hair half-covered with a scarf and showed a golden neckless on her black, long-neck shirt. To the right, Sam, his parents escaped New Zealand 45 years ago, he is what they call a third-generation of *Cockatoo*. His parents helped build the land after a devastating war. They all warmly welcomed Daan and signed for him to take a seat.

Sara: Would you like to drink something?

Daan: No, thank you.

Ahmad: alright, great, let us get started then.



Sam: let me kick off by asking you this, most of your home country is underwater, how come you think you can occupy a job in water management and help us develop bridges and dam up this country?

Daan started swallowing up his throat and shuddering his leg: "It was not my fault what happened, it was a man-made, global, and natural catastrophe. Most developed and underdeveloped countries had a dog in this fight. I just gave myself a second chance to live and try to make some difference in the world by applying what I have learned both in academia and in life"

Sara nodded with a bright smile.

Ahmad: "thank you, we see that you have Syrian nationality by now. Would you describe yourself as a good citizen?"

Daan inhaled all the leftover air in the room thinking of an answer to such a question:

"uhmm, I do not know. Next to all the volunteering jobs and community services that you can read in my CV, I uhmm, and since day one in this country, I donate my blood every three months, and I clean my street and the public parks that I walk in. I greet and smile at plants, trees, pets, babies, and the elderly that I cross paths with. I salute bus drivers, cleaners, pavers, postwomen or men, and everyone, who often goes unnoticed and overlooked."

Ahmad obviously brings Daan's talking to a halt: " Tell me Daan, in this society we believe in God, do you believe in him?"

Daan: " I believe that we are all spiritual beings, who are having a human experience and not vice versa, I am not sure if I believe in the specific God that my hosting community believe in"

Sara: "do you ever consider going back to your home country?"

Daan: I cannot.

Sam: "Do you feel at home here in Syria?"

Daan: "Yes and no, in answering this I never use bold words like; always, everywhere, with everyone, defiantly, or absolutely. It is relevant"

Ahmad: "Do you have trauma, do you see nightmares or get flashbacks, are you mentally stable? Will the rest of us feel safe around you in this company?"

Daan: " No one chooses to be a refugee but thanks to my refugeehood I am a hero in resilience, it is on the psychiatrists to decide if I have trauma or not. We as refugees are easy prey to the wildness of folk psychology, anyone can throw a diagnosis on us and box us in as they wish it even has a name; gaslighting". Taking a deep sigh "but I am a firm believer in Post-Traumatic Growth and that is mainly what I observe in me and my fellow refugees" They all look at each other with a touch of surprise on their faces overshadowed by some confusion.

Sara: "Alright, I think we know enough by now, we will call you soon with our decision, thank you for your time"

## **THE END**

Dearest reader,

Daan is one of 100 million, yes you read that correctly, 100 million people are currently displaced on our planet due to war, violence, climate change, and oppression. Daan might be dreamed-up. However, what he went and still going through is far from fictional. Daan could be a living example of 100 million refugees with profound respect and appreciation for the uniqueness stemming from individual differences and individual experiences. The end of this story is not written, for I believe, with hand on heart that you have the full capacity, autonomy, empathy, and compassion to jump in with both feet in any Daan's coequal life and impress us with what you have within.

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