RACE & CULTURE

A Story of Humanity Beyond Borders



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I once lived for six months in an apartment in Lisbon with people of various nationalities, and today, on a date meant to remember one of humanity's most ill-fated chapters — the phenomenon of racism — I want to tell a personal story that changed me.

I arrived at that apartment, in the extreme outskirts of Lisbon, one of the poorest and most run-down areas, mostly Portuguese speaking, with people from Brazil, Angola, São Tomé, Mogadishu, Madagascar, and a few from Portugal itself.

The language wasn't familiar to me, but in some of the slang it recalled dialect forms from my own city — and the historical memory that the Portuguese had once colonized my home wasn't just probable, it was certain.

One expression that always made me smile was when they said, in Portuguese, FOCU MEU — which in Calabrian dialect has the same meaning.

I paid attention to everything. Alfonso, Osvaldo, Paolo, Roberto, Antonio, Ramon waited for me every evening for dinner. I was the oldest, and they wanted my stories.

One story that went down in history was the one about bruschetta, bussetta, and busadero — three words, three completely different things — and I would play with it, weaving my stories, pretending

not to understand, creating overlaps and misunderstandings on purpose, and everyone would end up howling with laughter.

They made me tell the stories in Portuguese, and at the end of each one I'd let out a “vaffanculo” in Italian as a kind of liberating release, and everyone would smile.

No one ever noticed the color of my skin. I was the only white man among so many other colors, but in the evenings, gathered, we were a rainbow of happiness and smiles.

They even made sure I had food to eat when I had no money to buy it myself, and they did it with dignity and elegance, all while telling me I was a professor of communication, a rascal with women, and someone who had turned his mind into a treasure to give away, never to exploit.

So, to whoever reads me: this is what a world in motion looks like — and when you least expect it, the most unthinkable help arrives, the way only the Portuguese know how to give it.

Goodbye friends,

Ferdinando

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