



STAY
TRUE
TO
WHO
YOU
ARE

THE
EXTRAORDINARY
TRUE STORY
OF VANESSA
VAN CARTIER

WINNER
DRAG RACE
HOLLAND 2021

STAY TRUE TO WHO YOU ARE

The Life Story of Vanessa van Cartier

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KOSM•S

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Foreword

When Vanessa asked me if I would consider writing the foreword to her book, I immediately said yes. Why? Because Vanessa has been one of the most inspiring people to me in the past year. I first saw her during a live session on Instagram with Envy Peru. Vanessa was in America; Envy was in Amsterdam. I didn't know Vanessa van Cartier, but I had heard about her from many friends who had seen her perform in Mykonos, among other places. I started following her and thought: What a beautiful queen.

Then we got in touch through social media. She'd heard that Drag Race season 2 was coming up and let me know that she would love to participate but didn't know if it was possible; could a trans woman participate? I immediately said, "I'm going to ask if you can audition". It was permitted, and I didn't interfere further. Because of my role, I have to remain objective.

I have seen her at work during Drag Race and thoroughly enjoyed her; the looks, drama, honesty, and all the insights she

gives! How she found the love of her life is a wonderful story. That she has had to fight for who she is and wants to be. Her whole story is inspiring, not only for me and the scene but also for everyone. She won because she is a true queen who inspires people with her entire being and shows people a different perspective.

Vanessa, in a word, is love. I love her; she's in my heart. Not because she won, she did that all by herself. I'm proud to call her my friend. If the book is only half as inspiring as she is in person, it's a must-read for everyone.

Dear Vanessa, spread your wings and spread the word.
Love, Fred van Leer



A Proud Swan

‘I am grateful for my life. That might sound insane once you’ve heard my story, but who’s to say that I would have achieved anything if I’d had a nice childhood and my life had been easy? Maybe I would have become a spoiled child who didn’t have to fight for anything.’

Across from me sits a beautiful woman, one I would describe as a natural beauty, even though I know she didn’t come into the world looking like this. We first met online, as is often the case these days. Still, it’s different to see each other in real life, and something we’ve both been looking forward to. We’d arranged to meet in a beautiful house belonging to friends of Vanessa in Amsterdam. She was born and lives in Belgium but is regularly in Amsterdam.

Her voice is soft. She wears a shabby sweater and a cap, with little or no makeup. If you look her up on the Internet, you’ll mostly see pictures of her wearing big wigs, lots of makeup and glittery costumes. That’s Vanessa, the artist. She tells me later that in terms of personality, she may be the same on stage and in everyday life, but in terms of appearance, the difference

is huge. A drag queen will rarely consider an outfit to be over the top. But at home, Vanessa feels comfortable in her casual clothes.

‘I don’t have to dress up beautifully every day, do I? This is who I am. One day I look in the mirror and think I’m ugly; the next day I see a beautiful woman looking back at me.’

I have to laugh at that comment. I suspect it’s recognizable for many women, and certainly for me. And it doesn’t always have to do with makeup or clothes.

‘I do love pretty dresses; that probably doesn’t come as a surprise. But everything at the right moment, right?’

She exudes tremendous strength, but I see an extraordinary vulnerability alongside that strength.

‘I have a fantastic life,’ she continues. ‘I’m a happy woman. I have a wonderful daddy and mommy and a dream of a husband. The corona epidemic was tough on me, as it was on all artists. But now I’m back on stage regularly, and I love it. Of course, I would rather have had a happy childhood. Everyone wants that, right? But maybe if I had, my life wouldn’t have become the fairytale it is now.’

‘I believe we all come to earth with a purpose; maybe inspiring others with my story is my purpose. I get messages daily from people telling me that I am teaching them never to give up. That’s pretty intense to hear. But it also gives me strength. Stay true to who you are and dare to dream; those are my mottos. They are just words, of course, but they are powerful words. If you can tell a story around that, then it has more value than a crown on your head. So I’m grateful for having the stage to share my story. I do that through my

performances, with the acts I perform, with the stories that I share online and that I'm telling you now.'

She looks at me with an engaging smile. I'm not surprised she does so well on stage.

'I believe that when you're struggling in life, you should try to find the secret to why something happens. You have to look for the key that will open another door for you, allowing you to go in a different direction. I have found that key, and now all the doors in my life are beautifully open.'

Therein lies her strength, her ability to be almost thankful for everything that happened to her, however painful it may be. Vanessa talks easily; she is open and honest and sometimes jumps from one subject to another. But she has a story to tell. That much is clear.

'I am thankful
for the podium
I get for my
story'

'There will undoubtedly be another door that will close, but then I will look for the key again. It takes courage, that's for sure. But I believe in that journey. Ah, I sound exactly like a philosopher, and that is something that I certainly am not.' We both laugh heartily, but then she looks at me seriously and says, 'I am a beautiful swan, though, and I always knew I would become one.'

Vanessa Van Cartier came into the world 42 years ago in Belgium as Aurelio Crokaert. While Vanessa has been her stage name for years, she actually became Vanessa three years ago, in



name, body, and passport. No one calls her Aurelio anymore, even though it took some family members a while to adjust. A shadow passes over her face when I tell her that I've seen a movie of Aurelio. She seems uncomfortable, almost as if I'm talking about a youthful indiscretion that she'd prefer not to be reminded of. Maybe my impression is wrong because I hear a lot of affection in her voice when she talks about herself as a child.

'I believe that anyone who goes in search of that key can find a fairytale life, although the road to it often is not easy.'

Vanessa grabs a picture and proudly shows it to me.

'Look at me sitting there, as a little boy, with my little legs pulled up, back against a stone wall with a beautiful inflatable swan beside me. It was in Spain, where I always went with my grandparents. What happy months they were. They were in stark contrast to the rest of my life, but don't let me get ahead of myself.'

‘As a child, I was rarely as happy as I was in the pool there in Spain with that swan. I wasn’t an ugly duckling. My mother always says I looked like “an angel.” But I felt something was wrong. That animal was telling me something, an ugly duckling or an angel; it didn’t matter. It was letting me know that I would become a beautiful swan myself. I felt that inside, I knew it, and that certainty carried me through a lot of misery. Maybe that’s why I was so infatuated by that inflatable animal. You can imagine the drama when the inflatable swan died because I let it touch the hot exhaust pipe on the back of a scooter, where it spontaneously melted and deflated. I cried my eyes out. I’ve always cried easily and quickly, and I still do. My father didn’t like that at all. My father plays a major role in my story. So let me just start at the beginning, with my parents.’