

From Senegal to Selfie Sticks (Fiction)

“Selfie stick?” I ask while offering a selfie stick to an eastern European tourist couple. The woman tightens her hold on her purse and her husband’s arm wraps against her a little tighter. That’s the only response they give.

“Selfie stick?” I ask to the group of American college students walking by. No response. I continue to offer selfie sticks to every passerby until late evening. I’m not sure what time it is; I just go home when the tourists do.

‘Home.’ Florence isn’t my home. It’s just where I live right now, trying to survive in a city prejudiced against my existence. It’s nearly impossible to get a real job here; that’s why we all resort to spending our days fruitlessly trying to sell selfie sticks. It’s better than outright begging. At least I can pretend that I’m actively trying to make money.

As I begin my long walk home from the Duomo, Malick, a fellow Senegalese, joins me. His arms are loaded down with the variety of jewelry he sells near the train station. Slung on his right shoulder is a dirty green backpack holding more of his wares. He flashes me a quick grin, his white teeth bright against his dark skin.

“How did you do today, Hamish?” Malick asks.

“No worse than usual, I sold two selfie sticks and only had a few people outrightly glare at me. How about you?”

“Excellent. I had an entire Chinese tour group interested. They ended up buying ten necklaces and four bracelets. That’s the best day I’ve had all month.”

“Well in that case, you’re buying dinner.”

That’s just how it is; someone has a good day and they help out those who didn’t have as good of a day. It made it harder, though, when everyone had a bad day. The

months of low tourist rates are hard on all of us; hunger is just a normal part of life as a Senegalese immigrant in Italy.

We continue walking through Florence, until we've practically left the city. The March night air feels cool against my face, but then, it always feels cold here compared to Senegal. We reach a line of somewhat worn looking buildings on a dark street. At the third building on the right, Malick pulls a key from his pocket and unlocks the front door. We climb two flights of darkened stairs, the sounds of talking and laughter comes from behind several doors. Our apartment door is unlocked and we walk in. Khadim and Aziz are already in the apartment, and by the looks of it, have been here for a while. I raise my eyebrow at them questioningly.

"We knocked off early 'cause its Khadim's birthday," Aziz says in response to my unasked question.

Khadim's birthday. Right. I completely forgot. Khadim is beaming at all of us, beer bottle in hand.

"Twenty-six today. So what did you guys get me?" Khadim asks.

"Happy birthday Khadim. For you, I got you something extra special," I say while pretending to rummage through my bag, "a selfie stick!" I say while flourishing the selfie stick, like I would for a tourist.

"I hope you got me a phone to go with it. Otherwise I'm just going to use it as a backscratcher," Khadim says while smiling, which reassures me that he's not offended I didn't get him anything.

I laugh and help myself to a beer from the six-pack sitting on the table, tossing one to Malick, who has flopped down on the faded red armchair.

“So what were you saying about the Americans before these two interrupted?”

Aziz asks Khadim while waving his hand towards Malick and I.

“Oh yeah. So I was on Ponte Vecchio, like normal, and I offered a selfie stick to a couple of Americans. Then they stopped and had a whole discussion about how ‘people like them should just go back to Africa and hunt giraffes.’ And so I say to the lady, ‘miss, I don’t eat giraffe, but I’ll take some thiéboudiène¹ if you’ve got it.’ And then the lady’s eyes got all big and her face got all red and her and her friend scurried away.”

We all chuckle at the story. I take a long swig from my beer, thinking about thiéboudiène, which then sends my mind back to my family. I’m supposed to send them money at the end of this week, but I don’t know if I even have enough money to get myself through the week. The whole point of me leaving Senegal was to find better opportunities here so I could help support my family from afar. I’ve been here nearly two years and have little to show for it; finding a regular paying job is all but impossible for Senegalese immigrants. Aziz notices my change in mood and chucks a half-stuffed pillow from the couch at me.

“Hey! No glum faces on Khadim’s birthday!” Aziz scolds.

“Right, sorry Khadim. Guess I’m pretty bad at celebrating birthdays.”

“It’s alright, man. I’m just happy to be spending my birthday here with you guys in this beautiful city,” Khadim responds with an authentic big grin.

I guess Khadim’s right. There are a lot worse places I could be right now than an apartment in Europe with my three best friends.

¹ Thiéboudiène is a typical Senegalese dish composed of rice, fish, and tomato sauce, accompanied with a variety of herbs and vegetables.