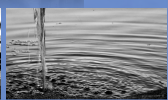


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# l&tp perspectives | *aspirations*

creative writing project



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creative writing project

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This fourth collection of short stories written in winter semester 2021/22 under the topic of *aspirations* comprises the work of the students of the Language and Text Production course, MA Programme, in English and American Studies.

The photos have been chosen as an incentive to produce divergent and varied texts, with distinct writing styles, on a variety of issues approached from different perspectives.

From relationships, empowerment or emancipation to insecurities, loss and moments of epiphany, feelings and anxieties are portrayed with sensitivity and the inner thoughts of the protagonists invite us to take a moment and see certain situations under a new light.

Somber or playful, matter-of-fact or allegoric, each short story is well thought-out, and, more often than not, hits home!

*violet stathopoulou-vais*

# imprint

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

by katharina mantl

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

There was a time when we thought it was over. A time when there was no going back. A time when we all came to the point of no return. It was a decision of all or nothing and we knew that everyone had to contribute one's share.

While inhaling the cruel arousing taste of the brownish broth they call coffee, I read the subheading of today's newspaper. I cannot really make anything out of the dramatic choice of words but an annoyed eye roll. My husband glances up to me and gives me a mischievous smile. He knows me well enough to know that I cannot take pleasure in those endless and overdramatic elaborations of the past. The final sip of my caffeine dose signals the end of breakfast time and at exactly eight o'clock I rise from our breakfast table with a fake energetic swing. As I lock the door in the same unconscious way I always do, I suddenly pause. The pure smell of fresh snow ascends through my nostrils and I can hear the crunching sounds from the boots of some passers-by as they walk on the white blanket. Then this almost innate feeling arouses. It arouses every year when the first snow falls. I wish the feeling could have something to do with the aromatic smell of gingerbread or the cozy crackling of wood in the fireplace but I suppress the growing unpleasantness that unfurls inside me and leave the house as vigilant as the stars.

On my way to work the sun comes out and my earlier insecurity melts together with the hundreds of thousands of frozen water crystals that have already started to cover the whole city. I enter the oval-shaped building where I work and use the elevator to get to the 34th floor. Betty, my trusty assistant, welcomes me with a broad smile. I wish her a good morning and I manage a brief smile. The moment I notice that Betty is taking a deep breath before a next utterance, I wave her off and tell her that I am busy for the whole day and I will not be available for any calls or meetings. I rashly close my office door behind me and lean against it until my pulse calms down. The uneasy feeling sneaks in again but I try to suppress it with all

my might. I slump into the leather office chair and stare at the moss-green office wall. I can clearly remember how the interior designer made such a fuss trying out all imaginable colours of green just to find the perfect texture and varieties of green for me.

*knock, knock, knock*

The person hesitantly knocking at my door can only be Betty. Snatched back into reality from my mental excursion about all possible differences between moss-green and olive green, I tell her to enter the room. Loaded with a massive pile of envelopes, Betty opens the door with her elbow and carries the bunch of processed wood to my desk. I take a deep breath and thrust aside the pile to the very end of my desk without even looking at it. Her sensitive antennae sense that something has been wrong all today so she asks whether I would join to this wicked party tonight where everyone would get together with some champagne and canapés to celebrate. I shake my head heavily looking towards the mountain of mail on my desk. Betty gives me a sad smile and assures me that she will reserve a place at the venue just in case I would change my mind.

As soon as she leaves the room my eyes focus on the pile of post. The feeling I have wanted to suppress at all costs is present once again. Like every year I have been able to dodge the cheesy and bittersweet wishes and greetings at least for half a day. I exhale as if I were preparing for a biathlon sprint and open the first envelope. I find myself holding a crêpe, moss-green... *how fitting*... card in my hands. On the front there are four words imprinted with glitter paint: HAPPY NEW EARTH DAY. I open the card with puckered lips and the moment the card unfolds in an angle of 30 degrees the refrain of Michael Jackson's song "Heal the World" dings out of the hidden loudspeakers. I cannot suppress a mild smile in the light of this irony.

I rise from my seat and face the width of the city's magnitude through the glass wall façade that covers the whole building. It started snowing again. I watch the silent flakes slowly wandering down from the cloudy sky and while everyone is preparing to celebrate our new earth, I rest my warm hand on the cold glass window. The window steams up around my handprint.

I silently murmur to myself:

"Rest in peace earth"

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## the flooded memory

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas @ 2021/22

by daniel saurer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas @ 2021/22

“Grandpa! Grandpa, look what I have found!” roared the young boy while feverishly scrutinizing an old and slightly blurred photograph. “Where is this place?” he inquired with a flicker of excitement. “I want to go there!” With a timid smile on his face and a little help of his wooden cane, the old man effortlessly hoisted himself from the smart armchair standing in the corner of the living room. The place was significantly influenced by modern and technological interior furnishings. He sluggishly sauntered across the squeaking beechwood parquet approaching his daughter’s offspring. While the well-aged man fumbled for his spectacles in the breast pocket of his green and white checkered flannel shirt, a moment of silence occurred.

“This, my boy, is a very special place,” explained the man with a steady voice. “It is the place where I met your grandma. Unfortunately, however, it does not look like this anymore.” “But why?” asked the young boy while staring at his grandfather with a puzzled face. “You know, once, the earth was more than just a home and shelter for all the living creatures and organisms. It was a planet full of fertile soil, energy resources, and a biosphere full of life.” The child, even more bewildered than before, started to scratch his short dark blonde stubbles sitting on his skullcap while listening to his ancestor. “If you really wish to go there, there I will take you. May I suggest we conduct our trip this upcoming Sunday as this is the day where I am allowed to use and drive my car again.” The boy’s raised and quizzical eyebrows started to relax as, at the same time, a grin filled his face.

\*\*\*

On said day, the two started their adventure by packing all the essentials that would facilitate their excursion in order to face the elements outside. A relatively old jute bag was filled with two plastic free bottles of water, sunscreen, and a fallout helmet which covers one’s whole face in case a sandstorm was going to brew. “You never know these days,” muttered the old man casually as he carefully stacked the two masks on top of the water bottles. “50 years ago, one

could have thought we might be taking the pandemic a little bit too seriously,” the man chuckled after he had experienced a vivid flashback of how he had spent over two years of student’s life in an eight-square-meter room. The young boy, not particularly sure what his granddad was addressing, insecurely started to imitate his grandpa’s facial expression.

After the old man had scanned the QR code with the board computer of the electric car to register and start the engine, the two started their journey to the beach. It was a hot and gloomy day. Gloomier than usual. “What are these folks doing on that field?” asked the boy playfully while he was observing a dozen of workers installing giant pipes on a dingy and what seemed to be lifeless acre. His grandpa, not entirely sure whether they were working hard or hardly working, explained that it was the government’s intention to revitalize farmland with genetically modified crops which were, according to microbiologists, better assimilated to the hot and dry climate of the area. The old man then went on raging about the increase in taxation in order to finance all the projects which had been established. A pause for reflection occurred. “But better late than never,” concluded the old man in a composed manner.

Only minutes before they reached their destination, the two had driven through a neighborhood called Booshy. Not many years ago, this was the part of the city where the rich and wealthy dwelled in their noble mansions surrounded by front yards as big as a football field. As the old man steered his vehicle around a sordid metal front gate, he explained, “This, my son, is how the elite deals with problems.” “What do you mean, grandpa?” “Well, they have the necessary wherewithal and decided to move up to the north where temperatures and weather conditions are more stable.” “So, they are like all the animals escaping in higher altitudes,” remarked the young boy with a sense of satisfaction. “Not quite but, in a way, similar, indeed,” replied the old man with a trembling smile underneath his well-trimmed, yet thick, moustache.

As the two of them finally arrived at a parking lot by the shore, they were greeted by yet another devastating storm. The old man, not relying on any aid, heaved himself out of the car and fetched his cane from the otherwise empty trunk. “The ocean breeze I was used to when I was your age was nothing like this destructive gust of wind we have been having for years now,” the old man bellowed against the vicious gale. To the confusion of both of them, a large number of what seemed to be giant airplanes were circling around at a high altitude. Authorities were injecting aerosols into the stratosphere. A procedure that has turned the world into an even darker and more sinister place.

“You can see the white ocean blanket just outside of the shallow water,” the old man uttered as he pointed his index finger in the direction of a particular fixture. “And this is, I assume, where I met your grandma,” he mentioned with a soft and slightly shaky voice as he looked down to his left. Nobody moved for a few seconds. “There were once fruitful palm trees that provided shade and the golden sand was the perfect mattress for an afternoon nap. Now, this is nothing more than a flooded wasteland. A desolate landscape.” Tears trickled down his cheeks.

Not impressed by his grandpa’s observations nor by his emotional confession, the young boy excitedly wished to know whether he would be allowed to go and jump into the ocean or not. A short moment of silence occurred. Then, his grandpa gazed at him with a pale face and suddenly realized that it had been his very fault that future generations have been robbed of their sanctuary.

Time froze.

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the awakening

## the awakening

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by gregor neureiter

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

*“Childhood should be carefree, playing in the sun; not living a nightmare  
in the darkness of the soul.”*

*Dave Pelzer*

“Be quiet!” I hiss to myself as I stay tuck in my wooden castle. A wondrous place only I know; A place where the evil Dragon has never found me. “Trust me... we will be safe.” I force myself to calm down, as I sit on my shivering hands like I always do when I hear the Dragon’s steps. Loud, dull steps stumbling around my defensive line. His roars, and incomprehensible confusion of words, somehow human but more of a gibberish mumble, reaching out to me: “Robert! Get here you little brat!” The walls are shaking but I stay put! I learned the hard way that fighting the Dragon is never an option...

The air was still fresh in the early morning hours; the sun, however, hid behind a wall of fog showing its beauty only through nature’s moist veil. There were frost flowers on the windows, while their living brothers and sisters had been covered under a white blanket, ready for a long-awaited slumber. “More milk... honey?!” my mother repeats as I gaze out the window. “Yes please,” I respond while she pours it over my favourite cereal. When he’s not at home, life is good. That’s what Mom and I think. When dinner is served, the door opens, and the room immediately fills with cold air as he enters the room. He slams his briefcase on the counter in a manner that makes Mom, me, and the glasses in the cabinet shake. He loosens his tie and walks straight to the said cabinet. A squeaking sound of an unplugged cork fills the room with darkness, as if an evil spirit is released from a bottle. I know that every time I feel this void it won’t take long until the Dragon rises and haunts us.

Laughing becomes slur and slurring becomes rage as the bottle empties and the room fills with fear. As the smoke burns my eyes and the reek of the dragon starts to crawl up my nose, he unfolds its wings. I stumble back against the sofa, but the dragon keeps coming, its nostrils



breathing black poison. Closer and closer. His claws leash out, piercing my plate armour. Dent it. I kick and scream while tears blur my vision. The dragon keeps scalding me over and over, while my body is rattling in waves of pain. “No!” I yell at the top of my lungs as a bright light nearly blinds me and the sound of thunder shuts my ears deaf.

I wake up panting, snared in my twisted sheets, drenched in sweat. Wrenching my body from my damp sheets, I crawl out of bed and walk towards the window. It is pitch black and the fog has covered the moon reflecting only a dim white light on our backyard. The sound of rain pelting against our tin roof interrupted only by the sound of thunder; the same sound as in my dream, is all I hear. While trying to find the switch of my reading lamp in the dark, I knock over a framed picture of our family. It was a long time ago when Mom used to wear her blonde hair in a flipped bob like Jackie O. He had his arm wrapped around her, his hand gripping her shoulders like claws. Now that I think of it, I barely remember him. He ran off when I was six. Mom must have really loved him, though, because I couldn’t recall her even looking at another man all these years.

I set the frame back to where it was; Mom watching over me, while he remains covered by the post of the lamp. I tiptoe out the front door trying not to wake Mom. I put on my white trainers and a raincoat. As I walk to the garden house my thoughts flutter back and forth between the old picture and the dream I had. “I have to make sure,” I mumble under my breath. Though I hardly ever have nightmares, the dragon piercing my armour was a regular feature of my childhood.

Mom’s shovel is right where I expect it to be and as the fragments of my memory pull me towards the border of our property the rain becomes a light drizzle, but my heart starts pacing. My white trainers are covered in mud by now. I stop at the weeping willow, the one I can see from my bedroom window. I stand under the branch where my tire swing used to hang. I remember imaging it being my noble horse while the old stump was my castle and the fallen branches my swords. I take a deep breath and start digging.

The wet earth gives away easily until the rhythmic sound of digging is stopped by something solid. A metallic clank – iron hitting iron. I fall on my knees and begin to scoop away the dirt with my bare hands. Faster and faster already knowing what I would find there in the mud.

Bones, large ones. Bones of a beast – with a belt buckle and a gun. His gun. A mahogany grip with his initials on the side. I swallow as my mud-covered shivering hands clasp the weapon. So, the memories have been real, not just in my imagination.

“You shouldn’t be out here Robert.”

I drop the gun and gaze into Mom’s eyes. I haven’t heard her come up, yet I wasn’t surprised to see her. She was always there whenever I got into trouble. As she was the night she saved me from the dragon.

“And you shouldn’t be here neither!”

“Do you think I will let you catch a cold here in this awful rain?”

I shake my head in silence. I love my mom. She had been upset when I insisted on going to a university in another state; but was thrilled when I reconsidered and decided to start community college here in town and live at home instead. I didn’t dare go away and leave her. She and I are bound to this place.

“Would you get the other shovel and help me rebury him, before anyone notices?” she says softly.

She reaches out and strokes my back. My back, with all the battle scars and little marks. Quickly she takes the shovel, and we rebury the dragon. I am glad that this time I get to do it myself instead of watching Mom from my bedroom window.

“Mom,” I venture, as we had put the last heap of dirt over Daddy’s bones, “What if anyone finds out?”

“They won’t. It will remain our little secret darling.”

“Our little secret... Yes.” I repeat flattening the last heap of dirt on the dragon’s grave. *It* will never hurt anyone anymore. Like a knight in shining armour, I get up from the ground and pledge to myself, right here under the weeping willow: “I will break the circle! Be something different than a dragon.”

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## live up to ...

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by annalena egger

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

6am, the alarm clock goes off. You get up, get dressed, swallow down some breakfast. You get out, into the car and to work. You are an eager employee, from day one you have showed an effort to do the best you can. The best one can. There is hardly anyone who is more diligent than you, more polite, or quicker in responding to the clients' needs. Your appearance is always flawless and your temper always according to what seems to mostly suit the client's. It is what you have to do. You are expected to.

You work in an office, that's what seemed to be a good option after finishing your degree in economics. Your original plan was to spend some months travelling and then continue studying abroad. But life came in between. I remember how your eyes beamed when you talked about your travel plans. And how watery they were when you told me that your mom was diagnosed with cancer. Now, in hindsight, you say that she seemed very worn out when she helped you move your stuff out of your shared flat. She had been working all her life and had rarely ever taken time to rest. Your travel plans were cancelled. Instead, you moved in back home, started working and helped alleviate your mom's pain. It was what you had to do. You were expected to.

For two years or so your mom slowly faded out. You saw her get weaker and weaker; her body did not respond to the therapy. On one of the darkest winter days, she died. There was not much time for grief. Things had to be organised. And your family never failed to make a good impression, not even at a funeral. It was what you had to do. You were expected to.

After that, life went on. When I met you, you would not speak about it, unless you were directly asked to do so. That was the only time I saw you cry. The only time in these 18 years of knowing you. I wonder whether I know you at all. You have always been tough, and you

have never let yourself go. You have always achieved everything, you would have never settled for less, anyway. You have always worked; I don't even know how old you were when you started. On Saturdays, you worked in your aunt's catering business. On Sundays, you were a waitress. During your holidays from school or university you worked. Not that you had needed to. Your whole family has gained considerable wealth through diligence and cleverness. You went on nights out and you were the loudest, the funniest one. That was one of the rare times you would act impulsively. Still, when everyone else slept in the following day, you went to work. You had to. You were expected to.

There was never anything that you were not in control of. Except for your mother's illness and falling in love. You had once told me that you need a lot of time until you can trust someone. Most guys would not invest so much time. I wonder whether it is their impatience or your fear of losing control that makes it so hard for you to fall for someone. You don't allow yourself to give in to the unpredictability of tender love.

You were raised in a cage and made aware that everyone could look into it. Being infallible is crucial when the world ends at the mouth of the valley. You were raised in a way that no one could bitch about you. Rational behaviour, hard work, and solidarity towards your family were the values that your parents had equipped you with. High virtues by all means, but they have deprived you of your independence. Despite all your responsibilities, your maturity, and your achievements, you are trapped within the mental cage they have constructed for you. You have learned to always put your- self and your own needs aside. Their expectations have become yours and you live within the limits they have set for you. By now, they don't even need a key anymore.

Your past has made you who you are today, they say. And everything happens for a reason. But whose creation is your past? And which reasons are your own?

5pm, you drive home. Some of the furniture you ordered should have arrived by now and you want to check on it. Your parents had bought you a flat and you are now ready to move in, busy with choosing materials, colours, and textures. No wonder that the flat is close to your parents' home. I expected it to be so.

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## come hell or high water

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by sarah stöckl

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

One tepid summer evening, as I opened the creaking window of my room, craving a breath of cool air, my gaze fell on the stars. The very stars that were majestically enthroned above our world like kings. They, who observed all the happenings on Earth, feasted on the suffering of the human race, thinking that mankind had imposed its misery on itself. However, the kings were in the wrong, as not all humans were equally to blame for the Earth's forlorn state. The kings could never understand—“Penelope”, a soft whispering interrupted my train of thought. “Penelope”. There it was again! My stare detached itself from the stars as I caught sight of an inconspicuous figure.

I took a closer look and realised it was a woman whose grey curls framed her friendly face. The woman held the hand of a bright-looking, red-headed girl, who grinned at me happily. The two of them stood in the middle of my garden and signalled to me that I should step up and join them. What a grotesque spectacle was I to witness! Since I felt an inexplicably powerful connection to the bizarre duo, I didn't dwell on it any longer and headed for the garden. When I arrived in the garden, the woman and the little girl welcomed me warmly. Why did I feel like I had known them for years? “Penelope, we want to show you something,” the smirking girl announced proudly, snatching my hand, and dragging me into the nearby forest.

Having reached the thicket of the forest, the grey-haired woman suddenly pointed to an old, strange looking tree with a thick trunk. As my eyes followed her gaze, I noticed that the tree had a hollow place in its stem. Apparently, the little girl already knew what to do next, for she rushed ahead, straight towards the tree and skilfully crawled into the opening. I only caught a glimpse of her vibrant, red hair before the tree completely devoured the girl. “Now it's your turn, Penelope. You will not regret it, I promise”, the woman requested firmly but kindly. My turn? I hesitated. After a moment's pause, however, I decided to summon up all my courage and emulate the little girl's deeds. I crept into the hole; the entrance to a narrow, sinister tunnel.

I tried to keep my eyes wide open, when at the end of the tunnel, I was blinded by a glaring, white light. After I had allowed my eyes to slowly adjust to the brightness of the light, I carefully opened them again.

The woman and the girl both faced me and stared at me expectantly. The woman began, “Welcome to Terra Mulier. I am su—“

“Penelope! Penelope! Is it really true that in your world you have to work jobs that you don’t like? And... and is it really true that men are in charge of whole countries although they destroy your planet, pollute the waters, wage wars and inflict violence on others?” the child inquired hastily. Before I could even think about answering these questions, the girl was gently reprimanded by the woman, “Hush! Give Penelope a chance to take it all in first.” *Take in what? Where was I?*

An overwhelming feeling of confusion seized me when I felt the reassuring touch of the woman on my shoulder. It was as if she had read my mind. “You are safe here in Terra Mulier. Come, I’ll show you everything.”

The woman leisurely guided me to a broad path. The path we strolled along was embedded in a green meadow that looked as soft as silk cushions and was adorned with the most brightly coloured flowers I had ever seen. I took off my shoes and felicitously wandered off in the grass; the lush green under my feet felt like a noble, expensive carpet. Walking barefoot released the inner child in me and I felt exceedingly carefree and light, as if nothing in the world could do me any harm. Looking to my left and right, I saw a string of small bungalows with their front doors wide open, revealing their tastefully furnished interiors. Some people were sitting in front of the bungalows, cheerfully laughing, and eating together. The sweet scent of the flowers mingled with the mouth-watering smell of the food and created an almost overwhelmingly dizzying mix.

To my surprise, we passed several women whose bodies were snugged by silky, translucent dresses exposing their bosoms, which made me wonder, “How come the women feel comfortable wearing revealing clothing like that openly on the street?” My guardian chuckled softly. Her wrinkles deepened as her mouth twisted into a wide and rather eerie grin.

“My dear, the revolution has brought about some profound systemic changes. The patriarchy has been dismantled. Our women don’t have to be afraid that their bodies could be sexualised. We – here in Terra Mulier – have freed ourselves from the shackles of oppression. We raise all genders equally and put a special emphasis on teaching consent.”

*The revolution?*

The woman's opulent voice pierced the sultriness of the air as she continued, “Since men have ceased to function as rulers of states, there has been no more violence nor war.”

“Who is in charge of Terra Mulier then?” I desperately sought to know.

“The leadership of our country is composed of a democratically elected council of women who collectively undertake all political decisions. Concerning major issues, the council seeks the opinion of the people. Since the election of the council of women, the world has prospered. The cycle of destruction, which was perpetuated by the rule of men for millennia, has finally been broken. As the old proverb says, “Boys will be boys, will be men, will destroy.” We are now educating the new generation to be free from oppressive, patriarchal values, so that people

of all genders can live in peace. And as you can see,” the woman gestured towards the locals of Terra Mulier who were approaching us, “the people are happy.”

My eyes were wandering around jumping from person to person to confirm what the woman had claimed, and it struck me. Everybody seemed like they were enveloped in an aura of contentment. Suddenly an intense feeling of distress swept over me as I pondered the atrocities happening in my own world. I was not a resident of Terra Mulier.

“Can’t I stay with you?” I inquired in a trembling voice.

“I am afraid you can’t, darling,” the woman replied, gently stroking my hair. “We brought you here for a reason. There would still be so much that I would like to show you, but I am sorry, your time is up now. In a few minutes you will be back in your bed feeling like you have just woken up from a delusional and very confusing dream,” the woman uttered in a soothing tone.

\*\*\*

I was startled. *Where was I?* My whole body was covered with beads of sweat. I felt the hard mattress of my bed pressing against me. I was at home again.

The woman's voice reverberated inside me like an echo, “We brought you here for a reason,” she said. And I knew exactly what this meant.

I would have to fight for a world like Terra Mulier.

As long as boys and girls were raised with a different set of values, I would have to fight.

As long as girls were told to protect themselves by covering up their bodies, but boys were not taught about consent, I would have to fight.

As long as equality was a never-ending construction site, I would have to fight.

Come hell or high water.

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# fret

by philip brugger

“Which way?”

At a crossroads corner, a young couple is standing amid a flow of passing people, surveying the surrounding structures, pointing at promising locations and shaking their heads when these locations prove to be a mirage.

“Where do we need to go?” the woman asks again.

“Le... Ri... No, straight ahead,” the man says, checking his phone for confirmation, “It’s on the next corner.”

The couple advances and crosses the road while meandering through rushing and strolling figures, fighting the current. The vigor of the city is returning. People are leaving their warm, protected nests and venturing back into the outside world. A change is bringing on the growing vitality, though a residue of skepsis still pervades the crowds. Some people reluctantly cover their bodies with thick clothing, suspicious of the current happenings, whereas others eagerly welcome the transition by showing skin. The buildings shed their somber, lifeless colors and absorb the tonic, invigorative rays of the sun, giving them a pulsing glow. Interspersed between the concrete structures, different kinds of trees protrude and wrestle for their share of the limelight, presenting their radiant splendor.

“It must be here somewhere,” the young man asserts, though a tad of uncertainty is still audible in his voice.

The two keep walking when the man finally announces the good news with a sense of relief:

“There it is!”

The young couple hasten towards the end of the block and vanish into an entrance below the sign Grillin’ Me Softly. They walk down a set of steps and find themselves in the middle of a spacious, peopled room. The interior of the restaurant emanates a nostalgic, but vibrant



atmosphere. Tables and chairs are colorfully imbued, rusty lamps are hanging from the ceiling, the bar is made up of different vintage parts, and objects of adventure, such as a road bike and a surfboard, decorate the walls of the restaurant. A typical hipster place, one might say.

A waitress approaches the young couple from the bar: “Welcome to Grillin’ Me Softly, guys! Did you make a reservation?”

“Unfortunately, not. Is there a table for two available?” the woman retorts.

Both look at each other nervously, fearing that their lunch plan is at risk.

“Lucky you! Follow me, please,” the waitress replies after a quick look around and leads the two through the restaurant to a table in the back corner. Both thank the waitress, take off their light coats, hang them on the backrest and make themselves comfortable on the chairs.

“I’m starving!” the young woman says.

“Me, too! I almost snatched a fry from the people over there,” the young man says.

They look around and take in the ambience of the restaurant.

“Nicole’s right. This is a cool place,” the man comments.

“It does look neat. Hopefully the food is as good,” the woman responds.

“I hope I’ll be able to choose the right burger. You know me,” the man says, shaking his head from side to side and grinning.

The woman smiles tenderly and replies: “Just take what your heart desires, babe,” and continues with a different subject, “Can you believe that in two months we’ll be graduating from high school?”

“I know. Then we’re finally free from these shackles!”

“Time to leave the nest.”

“On to the next chapter in life.”

“No longer spring chickens.”

“Welcome to the jungle. Adulthood!” the woman says in a deep, solemn voice.

They burst into laughter. The man reaches over to hold the woman’s hand, and they look each other in the eyes.

“Are you nervous?” she asks.

The man looks away pensively, searching for an answer in his surroundings. His lips are about to form an answer when the waitress appears and hands them the menu.

“Here you go! Our specials are displayed on the board over there, “ she says and aims her arm above the bar, “I recommend the Bold Burger. It’s my favorite! Do you already know what you want to drink?”

“Could I just get a mineral water, please?” the young woman responds decisively.

“Absolutely!” the waitress says, notes it down on her pad and looks expectantly at the man, “What would you like?”

“Uhm. Uhm,” the man mumbles helplessly, fidgeting with his hands, “Uhm. I’ll take the same, please.”

The man relaxes again. The waitress notes it down, gives them a friendly smile and retreats

“Panic!” the man says in a funny voice while also making a face.

Again, the woman smiles and responds: “Oh honey! There’s no need to panic. Anyway, water’s good for you.”

They each grab a menu and study it. It doesn't take long for the woman to put it back down and say: "I'm taking the Bold Burger. It sounds delightful. What are you taking, babe?"

The man does not reply immediately, absorbed in thought. After a while he says: "Well, I had my head set on a simple cheeseburger. But I'm not sure anymore."

"Well, then take the cheeseburger."

"But all these burgers sound delicious," the man broods, talking more to himself than to his girlfriend. He continues in a monologue: "The Bold Burger sounds really tasty. It has jalapenos in it. Hm. On the other hand, I could go with the American Classic. I think the guy over there is having one," pointing to a man two tables down. "That's my dad's favorite, and he does have taste." A waiter passes the table, carrying a dish. "Did you see that? Wow! That looked like a Surf & Turf," he says, returning to the menu, "Phew, that's pricy. I certainly don't have the money for that. Hm. This one sounds exotic! The Aussie Burger has pineapple and fried egg in it. Perhaps I should try something new. Or maybe, I should just have a salad and do my part in saving the environment."

"Make up your mind, babe. This isn't chess!" the woman says.

The waitress pops up, puts down the drinks in front of them and questions them: "Have you found anything to eat yet?"

The young woman looks at her boyfriend, who is still preoccupied by the menu, turns back to the waitress and responds with an apologetic smile: "I think we still need a moment." The waitress nods and directs her attention to an adjacent table.

"So, what are you having?" the woman inquires.

"Hm... what do I want? It all sounds so good."

"Just pick one."

"But what if I don't like it?"

"I'm sure you'll like it!"

"OK, I know. I'll take the Aussie Burger." the man says and closes the menu determinedly.

"Finally!" replies the woman relieved.

A short moment passes before the man reopens the menu and starts up again: "Never mind! It's too risky."

"Are you serious, babe? It's not a life-or-death situation. Just pick something!"

*Why is this so difficult? How am I supposed to make important life choices when I can't even decide on a burger? This is brutal. I feel like a helpless, little kid... Hiding from responsibility... Fearing the brunt of potential regrets and unknown consequences. For Christ's sake!*

"I'm still undecided."

"Hurry up!"

"OK, OK, OK. Stop rushing me!"

"I'll become *hangry* if you don't make up your mind!", she says playfully.

"Fine! I'll take the American Classic," he says and puts the menu to the side. The woman, not wanting to chance it, quickly beckons the waitress over.

"So, what can I get for you?" the waitress asks.

“I’ll have the Bold Burger with fries, please,” the woman replies.

“Perfect!” the waitress says, jots it down on her pad and repeats the question to the man, “What can I get for you?”

“Um. The American Classic with fries, please,” the man utters uneasily, “No, wait! Um. I’ll have the Cheeseburger with fries. Yes, right. The Cheeseburger.”

“Ok. Thank you! It’ll be right out,” the waitress says, taking the menus and dashing towards the kitchen.

“That was a hard nut to crack,” the girlfriend says and takes a sip of her drink. Her face remains in a slight frown while she forms a half-hearted smile. The boyfriend is still anguished, looking from side to side and playing with his hands.

“Dang it! I should have taken the Aussie Burger!” he admits eventually, at which the girlfriend lets out an annoyed sigh.

Their conversation falls quiet while they anxiously await the liberating arrival of their food. Their eyes wander around and observe the doings in other realms of the restaurant. Waiters and waitresses bolt around the room, balancing a plethora of plates on their arms or delivering a single beverage. A couple of friends seated by the window are conversing fiercely, using all body parts to emphasize their point. A large group of people sitting at a big table raise their glasses and bellow a toast to one of their members: “To Billy and his new fancy job!” The waitress comes fired through the batwing from the kitchen, holding a Bold Burger in her left and a Cheeseburger in her right. She maneuvers past her colleague serving another table, nods to a woman requesting the bill, spins around a person looking for the restrooms, accelerates towards her destination before stopping abruptly in front of the young couple’s table.

“A Bold Burger for you and a Cheeseburger for you. Enjoy!” she says, puts down the dishes and vanishes again.

“This looks so good!” the young woman says and immediately starts eating her burger. The young man nods affirmatively, already having taken a bite from his burger and chewing passionately. A moment of silence passes as both turn their whole attention to their food.

Eventually, the woman declares: “Mhm. I just had a *foodgasm*.”

“This is a piece of heaven!” the man replies.

“I want to marry this burger!”

“This burger is life! How could I have ever doubted you?”

The two chuckle with their mouths full and barely prevent scraps from flying all over the place. Having finished their meals, the couple lean back and nestle in their chairs contently. The young man starts rubbing his belly with a big smile on his face. At this sight, the young woman starts giggling again.

“So, how do you feel now?” she inquires.

“It’s all gravy, baby!” he answers with a grin.

“I guess you’re happy with your choice, then?”

“Most definitely!” he says, “When in doubt, trust your gut.” They chuckle.

Relaxed, the man blurts out: “Should we go to the movies tonight?”

“Sounds good. What movie?”

Hm...

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## the days

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by thomas landauer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

I open my eyes and through the little holes in the blinds the rays of sunshine manage to light up my room. This makes me happy immediately. I get out of my bed, I open the blinds, and I take a glance outside the window. My eyes get bigger as I see the bright sky. Not a single cloud is to be seen. This is how I know that it will be a marvelous day.

I dash to the bathroom to brush my teeth. Fast. At the speed of light. Because I want to make the most of this gorgeous day. My mom has already prepared a delicious breakfast with everything I can imagine: freshly baked bread, scrambled eggs, and a tasty glass of orange juice. Normally, I put hazelnut spread on my bread, but today I prefer strawberry jam. My mom knows what comes next. As every day in summer, I am going to ask her if I can go outside to play with my friends. I put on my ‘outside clothes’, and head to my best friend’s house who, as convenient as it is, is also my neighbor.

I ring the bell and ask if he could come and play with me. While he is asking his mother, I am thinking to myself: “Why would she say no? It is holiday time!” Shortly thereafter, my best friend is already at the door. Our ‘crew’ – as we like to call our group of friends – normally consists of six people. Today, however, it is only me and him since all the others have already gone on vacation. We automatically set off toward the forest behind our houses. There is nothing to be said; this is what we do every day in summer. We stroll for a bit through the forest until we reach our favorite tree. Looking up from the ground, it seems as if the tree were so high it could reach the sky. We once climbed it – all six of us. Plenty of space. An insanely huge tree. This tree could certainly fit my whole class.

Today, however, it was just the two of us. What makes this tree special is that there are several levels which you can climb onto and spend some time, not really doing anything. Our favorite spot on the tree is where the main branch splits into three branches, which somehow resemble

a fork. The branches are in such a position that we can literally lie on them as if we were on a sunbed.

We climb the tree and clamber to that very branch. We are careful because we know that climbing a tree can be dangerous. However, we have been doing this for a long time, so we are pretty good at it. This spot on the three branches is ideal as above it there are no other branches, and hence there is no obstacle between the sun and us. The sun rays strike tenderly our faces. We lie there and talk about anything and everything that comes to our minds.

After summer we will already be in fourth grade, and this is why we chat about our plans after middle school. Luke tells me that he wants to focus on his ice hockey career. He is a fairly good player and if he practices a lot, he will certainly become a big shot in ice hockey. He even plans to move to the United States in order to sign a contract with the National Hockey League. His plans fit perfectly with mine. I have always wanted to be a pilot when I am a grown up. We plot ideas that I could be his private pilot and fly him around the world whenever he has an ice hockey match in a different country. We spin our thoughts around this possibility a little bit longer, and we build imaginary scenarios of how we could still be friends in the future and how we could spend our future lives together. We tell each other we can't wait to grow up.

“We are always going to be together,” he says.

“Of course,” I reply, looking up at the clear blue sky.

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Years later, now, I have moved out from my parental home, but I still visit my mom quite often. When I visit her, I pass by that area – where our special tree was. The forest has been turned into a playground. Some of the trees have been used for the production of playground equipment. As I see one kid in a hollow tree trunk, I immediately think of our tree. I pause for a moment and find myself staring at it, losing myself in thoughts. I reminisce about the times and all the good moments I had on its branches. I look back at my younger self with a big smile on my face. Although I have pursued another path in my life, which is different from how I had imagined my future to be when I was still a schoolboy, I would not want it any other way. It is odd how my life differs from what I had pictured it back then. Thinking about it from where I stand now, I could have enjoyed those little moments in my childhood a bit more intensely instead of wishing to be an adult. But I guess that is just how life works.

Now as I am thinking about it, I realize how absurd it is, to a certain extent, that, when you are young, you just want to grow up as fast as possible. However, when you are an adult, there are moments when you would do anything in the world in order to be able to relive one carefree day of your childhood.

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## when I grow up ...

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

by erika niederlechner

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

*“I will never forget it. It is seared on my memory. It feels like a hideous scar. A deformed protruding scar that everybody gapes at. I am tormented by the thought that every person that meets me only notices this fearful scar. Because, to be honest, I’m afraid that I became the scar at some point. Whenever I think about it, I feel this sharp, racking pain as if I were sitting on this old rickety chair in this exact moment. I can still minutely picture myself staring at the jittery doodles carved on my tiny desk while my thoughts were rambling in the future. In a future I was so excited about...”*



When I grow up, I will conquer the world. Everybody will know me. People will turn on the TV and see my face. I will be famous. I will be a president. I will be an actor. I will be a scientist. I will be everything, except for boring. It’s so silly that Jessica’s dream job is to be a princess. Why would anybody want such a boring job? I definitely don’t want to become a princess. I want to change the world and you can’t do that if you’re a silly princess in a silly castle waiting for your silly prince. Boring, boring, boring. I want to work at so many different places. I want to see the world. I will travel to every country on this planet and in the whole galaxy and nobody will be able to lock me up in my room for hours. I will fly. I will swim. I will drive. Away.

When I grow up, I will be as clever as the fox in the story I read in class yesterday. I can still remember it: “T-t-the cl-cle-clever f-fox was w-wait-waiting for t-t-this mo-moment.” I love reading. I wish I got some books at home. I’d love to have some... When I grow up, I will be as clever as the man in the suit who reads the news through the TV window, dad watches all day long. I will be as clever as Ms Miller, who knows everything about animals and numbers and trees and words, also those long and complicated words that make my head ache. I will be the cleverest person on the whole planet.

When I grow up, I will be as bold and brave as a lion. I will be like Simba, no, even better, and I will save the world from bad people. I will protect everyone, especially children because they are so small and cannot protect themselves. I feel like adults can say and do whatever they want and I as a child have to do everything they say. But I want to grow up, so I can also have a say. When I'm an adult, I will listen to children. I will buy them books. I will read to them. I will say nice things to them. I will be so brave that I'll even answer back to bad and mean people that are always bad and mean, especially to children. Children will think that I am the boldest person on the planet, and they will want to become like me.

When I grow up, I will be so creative and do so many things. I don't want to sit at home all the time, yelling at others and doing nothing except for watching TV. I will have so many hobbies. I will be able to draw, and nobody will disturb me and shout at me. I will be able to sing, and nobody will disturb me and shout at me. I will be able to dance, and nobody will disturb me and shout at me. I will be able to do everything even if others say it's stupid and doesn't make sense. I will do so many things and nobody can ever stop me.

When I grow up, I will have so many friends. I'll never ever be lonely. I will be friends with everyone, everyone that is nice to me. I'll be friends with all animals and all humans, say, with all the nice ones. I'll meet so many people because I'll visit every country on the planet and every place in the galaxy. I'll be nice to the people on the moon and the people under the sea and even the teeny-tiny people on Lilliput. Ms Miller told Jessica once about those small people because she had read the story about Gulliver so well. I wasn't allowed to read that story even though I could have read it as well as she did, no, even better. But I'll read it when I'm an adult and older than Ms Miller. Then I'll read stories to all my friends all the time. And I'll have so many friends. At least 2, no, even more, 300. And I'll never have to wait for hours at home, alone.

When I grow up, I will be nice to everybody. I'll be the nicest person on the planet, no in the whole galaxy. I'll be especially nice to children. Maybe I'll have children myself sometime. I'll only say nice things to them. I once heard a mom say, "Becca, you're so stupid," or, "Becca, you're such a disappointment". I'll never say such mean and bad things to children because they hurt. I'll only say good things like, "it's so good that you can draw a blue cat," or, "you have so many good ideas". I'll be nice to every person, every animal, and every toy. I won't take them away from children just to punish them for being bad. I'll become Ms Super Nice! I think that'll be my superpower.

When I grow up, I will be happy. I will laugh all the time. My tummy will ache a lot because I'll be laughing so much. But better my tummy hurt because of laughter than... Funny. I'll be so funny. I'll make everybody laugh. They will love me so much because everybody will be happy when they see me or think about me. I'll make everybody's life so much easier and funnier and happier. And the sun will shine all the time just to see all people laughing. And it will never be dark, because it only gets dark at night when I'm not a good kid, mom says, but I will be the best person when I grow up, so it will never be dark and scary again. People don't need to sleep and think about all the bad things they've done throughout the day, because it will never be night again, only day, because I'll only do good things, because I'll be so happy. I'll never ever have to cry again.

When I grow up, I will be free, as free as a bird in the sky. I'll be able to do whatever I want whenever I want to do it. Nobody will be able to stop me and hurt me. I'll be able to go wherever I want, to see whatever I want, and to get whatever I want. I won't have to listen to

mean adults or parents or teachers or anybody else who is mean. I'll never ever have to see these mean people again... I'll be a superhuman. I'll be a super adult. I'll be...

“Are you daydreaming again? You have to listen more carefully. Your test is terrible! What should become of you?”

Rebecca offers an answer with a wide smile on her face: “A scientist, an actor, a pilot and an astronaut.”

Ms Miller bursts into laughter, “Sure, and pigs can fly! Why do you have to be so stupid? You'll get nowhere in life...”



*“How do you feel after having relived this moment?”*

*“Imagine somebody gives you one of these beautiful glass sculptures which twinkle and glister in all the colours of the rainbow when beams of light reflect in it. You are afraid to touch it since it seems as brittle as an eggshell. You know how fragile it can be, but you swear, you promise to yourself that you will guard and protect it at any cost since you know that it won't be safe at home. You imagine how everybody will be astounded to see your dainty figurine, how it will shine on top of your drawer, how it will be the most beautiful glass piece one has ever seen. But as soon as you contemplate the future claspings your tiny glass statuette, you can see the person who gave it to you smashing it onto the floor while sneering at your face. You see how it shatters into a bazillion of tiny shards. While the small razor-sharp fragments of the figurine still magically shimmer in the light, you know that they can never really be fixed again... I had so many aspirations as a child. My imagination was endless. My dreams, however, were like the glass figurine, smashed to pieces. And the only thing left is this shattering noise echoing in the void that is left inside of me...”*

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## dreamscapes

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by katharina egger

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

### *Dreams*

*are like clouds. They seem solid like a wall of bricks but also fluffy like cotton candy.*

### *Dreams*

*are like the mythological river Styx. It is no longer Earth but not yet Underworld.*

### *Dreams*

*are like stairs. They lead you into the deepest depths of your mind, where hopes, aspirations, and wishes are stored.*

Some people hope to get a promotion, and some aspire to become a world-famous actor. Others wish for a cute kitty to take care of, and others desperately wish for a source of inspiration.

*Do you know what you are currently aspiring to – what your wishes are?*

These are questions that had been bothering the little boy of this very story for quite a while. He was about 14 years old. An age where boys love to play soccer, trade Pokémon cards or fall in love for the first time. Unfortunately, it is also the time to choose which career path they are going to follow for the next couple of years – a daunting decision – influenced by parents' unfulfilled dreams, societal expectations, and personal interests. A few months earlier, he had decided to continue his educational adventure via high school rather than vocational training school. However, this little boy, at first, still had no idea what he aspired to become or what he wished for...

“It’s already 8 o’clock, time to go to bed, my darling.”

“I really want to watch this episode of ‘Hercules’! Pleeese, let me watch it. I promise it’s the last one for tonight!”

“Tomorrow is your first day at high school. You need to be well-rested for this very special day. So switch off the TV and brush your teeth.”

The boy, absolutely annoyed by his mother’s strictness, made his way to the bathroom in order to follow his daily bedtime routine. After brushing his teeth and changing into his “Hercules”-pyjamas, he was finally prepared to drift into the realm of slumber and dreams. Despite an exhausting day of preparing for school, he could not put his mind at rest. Fractions of ideas, thoughts, and fears passed by his inner eye like supersonic shooting stars.

*what do you want to become?                      don't hesitate                      decide!*  
*make a decision                      beware of your grades                      do as you are told*  
*take up a profession with excellent reputation                      earn a lot of money*

These voices of relatives, parents, and teachers slowly faded away and his vault of mind became painfully silent as he entered the realm of dreams. At first, his surroundings were pitch-black. No light visible. No sound audible. Then, out of the blue, he could faintly hear wings flapping. As the flapping sounds gradually grew louder, the scenery grew brighter. The little boy rode on the back of a white-winged horse above the fluffy clouds. Bright sunlight made him incapable of keeping his eyes open. He could not longer withstand the urge to blink and the whole landscape changed within seconds. He was no longer riding beyond any solid ground but glided, light like a feather, millimetres above a crystal-clear watery surface. The beautiful face of the youthful boy reflected on the blue surface of the ocean. The boy began to mistrust his senses, which apparently sent contradictory stimuli. His lungs filled with humid and ice-cold air letting shivers going down his spine. The crystal ocean evoked a similar shivering. The blazing sun, however, warmed his chilled skin with every fiery ray and the fluffy clouds reminded the boy of his cosy bedsheets which, again, catalysed a warm and tingling feeling.

These conflicting sensations puzzled the little boy, and he asked the winged horse, “What is going on, horse?”

“This is your very own dream, my friend! YOU have to tell ME!” “Do other people also dream of you?”

“Of course they do. I usually ride with them as high as I can, which then provides them with some sort of idea or even vision.”

The winged horse spread its wings and soared high into the endless cloudscape. Puffy clouds had blocked the boy’s vision, but as soon as they broke through the dense blanket of clouds sunlight surrounded them, but they were not alone. Clones of the winged horse cantered along the scenery carrying various famous personalities on their back – Aristotle, Einstein, Curie, and many more.

“You wonder why they are here, am I right? Well, they come here, like you do, in order to find answers to their subconscious questions and develop ground-breaking visions or ideas.”

Seeing these people struck a chord. The little boy was aware of the incredible deeds of these

personalities and he thought that being able to impress others with your ideas and vision, like Aristotle and similar fellows before him, shall be his goal. As if the horse had read his mind it grinned knowingly and vanished into thin air. After floating in the midst of the cloudy sky for a few milliseconds, the boy plummeted like a heavy stone towards the crystal water surface. He started screaming, fearing that he would break into pieces as soon as he touched the watery but hard surface. In the blink of an eye, he was no longer falling but sitting in a gondola surrounded by greenish water and dark cave walls.

“Oh, hello little human! Where have you been? I have been waiting here for hours!” said an old, bony woman, almost witch-like.

“You have been waiting for me? How is it even possible you knew that I was coming?”

“I know the life-story of all humans on your Earth. I am aware of their deeds, actions, wishes, and hopes. So, I knew you were coming to converse with me about your hopes, aspirations, and wishes. So, my little human, what is it that is bothering you?”

The little boy looked at her, perplexed but having realised an important matter. “I don’t know what I should become, what profession I should pursue, and what life I want to live.”

“Look around you. Can you see these shadowy figures drifting in the water? These are, let’s say were, humans like you – younger ones, older ones, wise or foolish. Despite all their differences, they had one thing in common – uncertainty. They did not know what to become, what to pursue, and how to live. Nevertheless, they managed to follow their individual path, and trust me, they all led lives and experienced adventures worth telling and remembering.”

The woman’s wisdom astounded the little boy, and he desired to learn more about all the adventures of the men and women swimming in the greenish river.

“Hush, don’t be such a nosey little human. You have to accumulate your own life-stories rather than copying the extraordinary escapades of others.”

“Where do I find such interesting stories?”

“Everywhere! Just follow your dreams and aspire to become someone great! But since you are so eager to learn, I grant you one single story – the story of Darios:

*A lone pilgrim had been living for aeons at the lopes of Olympus. Some might have thought he is doomed to climb the stairs to the peak of the mountain for eternity. Indeed, he was obligated to do so, but not as a curse, just out of free will. He was such an interesting fellow. Even though some referred to him as ‘lone’, other pilgrims and seekers of his wisdom accompanied him on his journey up and down the mountain.*

*One day a young adolescent, Darios, ascended the stairs to Olympus in search of answers. He, like you little boy, faced many difficulties and was desperate enough to seek the pilgrim’s help. He hoped for his wisdom to illuminate the right path that would lead to a prosperous future. His glance wandered around, up, and down the monstrous steep. Daunted by the massiveness of this natural formation, he heard a voice behind him.*

*‘Hello, young fellow! What’s the matter?’*

*One character trait of the pilgrim had always amazed Darios – his perseverance to climb up and down Olympus just for the sake of gaining wisdom. Still astounded by the calamity of the pilgrim Darios asked why he had started climbing that mountain.*

*‘The answer, my friend, might appear plain to you, but I was in agony. I perceived myself without any purpose. I was not a talented craftsman nor a trader nor an artist nor a diplomat. The only thing I have mastered in my short life was assisting others in their journey to happiness by merely listening to them. Not only my parents also the whole village called me a fool. That is why I became a pilgrim – a pilgrim to wisdom. I have always dreamt of visiting the place of the Gods. I knew I had to pursue this very dream in order to lead a fulfilled life. Now to you, Darios.’*

*‘I don’t know what I should become, what profession I should pursue, and what life I want to live.’*

*‘I know you have been troubled for quite a while now. I recommend keeping me company and as soon as you know your purpose, you are free to go’, suggested the man and smiled sagaciously.*

*Darios wandered on in the cheerful company of the slowly ageing pilgrim. At some point, decades after they had first met, Darios knew his purpose and was allowed to go. He never regretted having spent decades at the slopes of Olympus searching for his life-path, because he now knew that patience and perseverance are key to reach your goals and fulfil your purpose.”*

Silently, all thoughts to themselves, the witch and the little boy slowly drifted along the currents of the greenish river. The little boy reflected on Darios’ story about the pursuit of happiness, and he became aware that he himself had to strive for the same. Before he was able to comment on the story, the witch uttered a final remark, “Dare to hope, my little friend. Dare to aspire! Dare to pursue happiness and dare to make all your deepest wishes come true.”

This was the only sentence the boy clearly remembered as soon as he woke up. Even though he could recall glimpses of his dream – a winged horse, a boat tour on a river, the story of Darios, and generally highly philosophical conversations, solely this utterance stuck in his head. Re-uttering it made him overflow with hope and made him feel brave. He was finally able to leave his cosy bed and begin a new chapter of his life – high school. The boy still had no clue what profession he wanted to take up, but now he knew what kind of person he wanted to become. He hoped to become a visionary, whose ideas and visions will carry him as high and fast as the wings of the horse. He aspired to lead a life filled with stories and adventures worth being told and remembered. He wished to have the perseverance to pursue his goals, like Darios, and to defy all difficulties.

*So, what about you?*

*Remember, dreams are windows to your subconsciousness. Let them speak to you and listen closely this night...*

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## I'd like you to sit next to me

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by anna maria amann

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

„I like coffee, I like tea, I'd like you to sit next to me”.

The words of this children's rhyme echoed in my head while I sat on the very left deck chair on the busy mountain top. It was astonishing to see how the place was extremely vibrant. Kids wobbling around, struggling to walk properly in their skiing boots, adults calling for them or trying to gather their gear. Still, the four chairs next to me remained empty, as if they were not there or as if they were already occupied. I did not bring any friends with me, came here all by myself on purpose. Here is the thing with the people I know. If I were the first to sit down on a chair the others would not follow, they'd just keep standing. I have never been one to lead them or get them to do a specific thing; they would not follow me as far as a group of chairs.

I turned my head towards the chair next to me,

*“Have you heard of Caspar David Friedrich?”*

*“Let me think...” replied the chair, “sounds German. What is he up to?”.*

*“He once drew a famous painting where a lonely wanderer stands on a mountain top, gazing off into the distance with a sea of fog covering the valley before him. It is a piece of art deriving from the romantic period.”*

The chair went into a long thought.

*“But,” it began, “why is the period called the romantic period if he stands there all alone on a mountain top? Doesn't the term ‘Romantic period’ suggest that there is something romantic to be seen?”.*

I took a deep breath and replied,

*“standing upon a sea of fog and embracing the beauty could be romantic to witness all alone, without having someone next to you.”*

Just as I said that a feeling of loneliness stroke me. I could not wait for any kind of reply the chair was about to give me. I now felt like the wanderer in the famous painting, but I depicted him as a happy man, because on his mountain top there weren't any empty chairs beside him with which he tried to talk.

“...came here all by myself on purpose...” Now, why did I decide to do so in the first place? Just the day before I attended a party, no; a loose get together. A work colleague had brought me along. I knew some of the faces, we all had mutual friends. In fact, we have probably spent many hours together, most of them drunk. Ava, aforementioned friend from work, disappeared in the crowd as soon as we hung our heavy winter coats on an already worn-out hook. Although the party consisted of maybe 15 people at most, I did not speak to Ava again that night. They had a way of doing that, leaving one all by themselves. It should not have been a problem since I knew plenty of the others. Still, conversation came slow and never lingered for longer than a few minutes. People are usually not overly interested in my personal life, and I get tired of asking questions. At home I had created a small list in my head with things that actually interested me about others.

*“Do you think that in reality introverts have greater egos than extroverts? Would you reckon most of them just like to brag with their introvertedness as if it made them worthy or special?”*

At the party I had not dared to ask anyone these questions I had come up with. Maybe I wanted to be alone, not surrounded by these men and women I could not properly speak to. That was when I decided to a take trip on the very next day.

I knew, from stories I had read on the internet, that visiting beautiful places by yourself was supposed to be healing, cleansing, refreshing. Since time was short but the urge of experiencing something so-called beautiful was blatant, I decided to come here, to this mountain top. Leaving my smartphone at home would have been the proper move, but just the thought of an emergency was an excuse good enough to bring it along. The trip was off to a bad start since me and the other passengers of the cableway had to break through this wide sea of fog covering the ground. I managed to leave my phone in my pocket, only holding on to it with my right hand, letting myself float through greyness. The fog suppressed the process of cleansing and refreshing in that my mood dropped drastically by looking at it. When I surfaced over this foggy blanket, I immediately felt the inevitable urge to take out my phone. I wanted to take a picture of the landscape, since this grey mass of air was now beneath me. I was too busy to notice that my mood had not brightened by watching mother nature, covered in sunlight and snow.

A notification popped up as soon as I took a glimpse of the screen. Ava had published a photograph on Instagram, showing herself with a bunch of people I recalled from the party the previous night. She captioned the moment with some nonsense as people tend to do. Something like, “always surround yourself with your loved ones”. The phrase itself had no particular impact on me. I just didn't know how these people felt. Did they question themselves, their needs, their feelings, or did they just recognize them, take them for granted and act in a way that seemed suitable? Was there a metaphorical fuel that carried them? An impetus that did not question simple actions, but only big ones? I felt different. How nice it would be to see people's true feelings. Why they say things, why they laugh, is it joy or just an act to meet others' needs? Was I the only one questioning my entire existence in a unique, embarrassing way?

A cold breeze stroke me, distracted me. I suddenly became aware of the sundowning lights, those weak rays of sunshine you see but you do not feel on your skin. What if it was the same with people and society as a whole? You only witness people's behavior, but you can't know its true significance, as with the rays of sunshine in the evening. You see them but you can't feel them. It was then that I realized something; people did not fully grasp the meaning of my actions. They could guess my intentions, but they could never know the true emotions that came with them. It is me that is the last one to assess myself, the one in charge.

Suddenly, I felt a new surge of strength flowing through my body. An aspiration to take my life by the hand and force it into a new direction, doing things on my behalf, for myself, by myself. No more pleasing, no more appeasement. Simply enjoying myself. I took out my phone to take a picture of the sunset and turned to the chair next to me:

*“This sunset is not that bad, don't you think?”*

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## a thick layer of ice

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by **margherita biraghi**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

It had been almost a month since Marta had gone to the deckchairs, and for the first time in three years, she went alone. That place of reflection, where she used to spend hours with Fabian fantasizing about their future - their home, their job, their family, in short, their life together, wrapped in his embrace, where she felt so safe and secure, at peace - was now nothing more than the source of the worst flashback ever.

Fabian, the man she thought was the love of her life, kissing someone else there in the deckchair, on the same deckchair, with the same passion, with the same smirk before their lips touched, the same look that had been making Marta melt for a year now, all his attention was now directed at someone else, Hannah, the only one of Fabian's many colleagues whom Marta trusted. It was around 2:00 a.m., and Marta had taken five minutes away from the party to talk to her sister on the phone.

Five minutes... Five minutes had been enough for a rather drunk Fabian to forget about Marta, their story, their plans, their promises, their love. The moment Marta saw them, she got petrified. She dropped everything from her arms: phone, keys, drink, and bag, she couldn't believe it, she couldn't understand why. She felt as if she was drowning in freezing water, with a thick ice layer forming above her head. She was still able to see them from there; she had tried to scream, bang on that ice layer as much as she could, calling Fabian's name in despair, but he wouldn't listen. All Marta could hear, was Hannah laughing. It annihilated her. It crashed her like nothing else ever had. I guess that in that exact moment, she actually understood how deeply in love she was with him.

After more than ten months of a long-distance relationship, she had finally moved there to Innsbruck to give her love story with Fabian a real chance. She hated what she had seen, but at the same time, while watching it, she felt like she couldn't look away, frozen, motionless, inert in the face of the sudden and totally unexpected collapse of her bright future. That kiss



between Fabian and Hannah, which lasted no more than a minute, had demolished a year of her life, leaving her once again wounded, confused, alone, wondering why it had happened. Had she done something wrong? Did she do something that brought her boyfriend to kiss somebody else?

*I have never been a fan of long-distance relationships. I tried it once, a few years ago, but it didn't work. I have never been a fan of relationships in general: I know that every time I finally start becoming attached to someone, this person walks away and leaves me alone, hurt, confused, wondering why it has happened, what I have missed, what I have done wrong. After three unsuccessful relationships, I vowed to stay alone for a while, to protect myself, my emotions, my self-esteem, but when I met Fabian, I couldn't stay true to that vow: I was in love, again, and I didn't want to give up on the chance of being happy with someone only because I promised myself not to, out of fear of getting hurt again.*

Apart from not liking relationships, she did not like love, or monogamy, and consequently marriage. She did not miss any opportunity she had to speak her mind about marriage and children with friends and acquaintances. "Marriage is just a contract" She'd say, "An old and obsolete social construction." She was convinced that if two people love each other, there would be no need to sign a contract. She thought more or less the same about Valentine's Day, "The most commercial holiday there is" as she would usually define it.

She also wasn't one of those girls for whom starting a family and having kids was the main priority. Anytime we'd bump into anything concerning the topic – a commercial, maternity clothes in a shop, a young woman with her children passing by – she'd "whisper" into my ears: "Well, a woman is PERFECTLY COMPLETE even without a family of her own and kids, there's no need for those things", making sure that the poor woman close to us would hear her. Let's just say that a stable relationship, marriage, and children were not among Marta's aspirations, not until Fabian came into her life at least.

But little by little, and probably without realizing it, Fabian had shown Marta how beautiful and comforting it was to have someone always by her side, someone who made her feel beautiful, wanted, important, and listened to, and every time she went with him to Graz to visit his cousins and saw him playing with them, Marta's heart skipped a beat, and all she could see, was Fabian playing with their children (and a dog, of course, when they moved in together, they would certainly have gotten a dog). Suddenly, motherhood had started not to be such a bad idea in her eyes.

Ten long months apart, except for a few weeks spent together there in Innsbruck, her happy place. After all, those deckchairs were the place where she and Fabian had met, but that is another story. In those few weeks they had spent together, being in the same place, in the same house, in the same bed, those loungers in the cabin up in the mountains have been their refuge, their paradise. No one else around, just them and the boundless nature. The two of them were so high up that they were above the clouds, which hid the city and gave the couple the chance to be completely themselves and imagine the life that they could finally begin to live together.

But that minute had shattered everything: her story, her heart, her new aspirations, as well as the deckchairs, her happy place, leaving Marta with an indescribably deep emptiness and excruciating pain, everywhere and constantly. After what she had seen that night, Marta no longer dared to go back to the deckchairs: every time she thought about it, her thought returned to that horrible night. Those deckchairs no longer made her feel good, she could no longer see anything other than the events of that night, no dreams, no hopes, no plans, and no Fabian.

Only her imperfections, the extra kilos, the anxiety, the fears, the useless arguments, and above all the previous betrayal by Fabian, which Marta, out of love, had forgiven.

Even though she was more than certain that she still loved Fabian with all her heart and that he was the only man with whom she wanted to share her life, how could she trust him again? Fabian had already cheated on her once before, but, if nothing else, it had happened while Marta was still in Spain, far away. This time, she was right there, in the same country, in the same city, at the deckchairs, with him, and had to witness it with her own eyes. It would have been one thing to be worried about her boyfriend going out while she wasn't there, but to have to worry and have to remain constantly vigilant even while they were in the same room... she wouldn't allow herself to accept that, she didn't deserve it, it would have been too much to have to deal with. She loved him, though, a lot.

With Fabian, Marta finally felt ready for a serious relationship, she wanted to get married, she wanted children, and a dog, especially a dog. And now it was no longer possible. "I am no longer eighteen" she'd say sobbing, "people will not try to cheer me up telling me that I am still young, that there is still time for me to find someone else, to fall in love with someone else". Poor Marta, hearing her and seeing her being so desperate, so deeply hurt, was breaking my heart as well. Hearing Marta, the strongest and most independent person of my inner circle of friends, saying that she felt like she had become a real-life version of Bridget Jones, a character I knew how ridiculous seemed to her, was unbearably sad for me.

I stayed there until she felt better and stopped crying. I hugged her goodbye and right before letting me go, she asked me "What can a woman aspire to when she has had everything she believes in taken away from her?"

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## when the cork pops

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by nina perauer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

Pop... Champagne everywhere – overflowing, as I shake the bottle enthusiastically and scream in a high-pitched voice. It’s just like a movie scene (a very stereotypical movie, I might say) and I am the main protagonist. I did it! Today is my day! The day my life-long dream came true.

*Become successful. Become powerful. Be someone.*

I’ve worked hard for it, and I know I deserve this. My favourite colleague, Maja, approaches me and pulls me out of my thoughts, her face warm like the auburn gold afternoon sun, glowing with joy.

*“I am so proud of you, Liana! You must be really happy now!”*

I smile and raise my glass of champagne.

.....

I pull myself out of bed the next morning, stumble into the kitchen and glance into the fridge. I notice an unfinished bottle of champagne, illuminated artificially by the mellow light of the compartment. All that power, all that pressure, all those bubbles - all gone. A feeling of exhaustion overcomes me, and I gather all my willpower to drag myself into the living room where I slump into the couch. I notice a jet-black spot on the ceiling where the cork that popped out of the bottle defeated the snow-white layer of paint that has been carefully applied just days before. A flash of memories rushes through my body and captures all my thoughts. I feel panic. The panic that nowadays accompanies me everywhere I go, lurking deep in my bones like an animal carefully sealed away waiting for its capturer to make a mistake. Always ready to break free. But I will not let it – I am the uncompromising guardian of this monster’s

prison. I bury it deep within me where no one can see it although it is always there, trying to drag me down with it.

*“You must be really happy now.”*

Happy. I still feel the artificial smile plastered on my face yesterday. Muscles that contract but do not reach within me, incapable to stimulate my internal world of feelings. Now, alone on the couch my façade drops. The frozen smile on my face melts down and my exhaustion comes to light. It is tiring - appearing to be joyful even though it is actually just an act. I feel like there's something between me and the real world. I float in space and there is this thin layer between me and earth preventing me from participating. It precludes me from really engaging in life and feeling its richness. Life hasn't always felt like that...

What has happened to me? I used to feel so much – feel so real. I used to be so vibrant like there was a volcanic fire within me that fuelled me with energy. Every day, I felt this strength and whatever challenge lay ahead of me, I worked through it like lava burning through the vast mountain soil. When did this unbreakable inner strength, this incredible source of energy extinguish? All that's left now seems to be nothing but ashes... I used to be so content. I used to be so self-confident even back then when I had nothing.

*Nothing.*

I worked crazy hours cleaning shabby hotel rooms (which is not quite healthy if you are allergic to dust mites) while studying full time. I lived on a low income, so all my earnings went straight into rent, food, and coffee. What's even worse is that despite keeping my nose to the grindstone, I could only afford a place where others would only settle if they got paid for living there. Why so? Let's say, my flat was not really meeting standard requirements. At first, I thought it was a great catch. Right in the heart of Vienna at a cost of only 200€ a month. That was an offer I could not reject even if the bathtub was positioned right in the middle of my living room. Even if it was a bit old-fashioned. Even if I had to share a toilet with the landlord living next door. This was especially irritating as he was a rather big-boned 50-something old man with a strong personal odour (he reeked just like goat cheese that matured for an extra-long time). When I entered the toilet, I could still smell him and his excrements even after several hours after he used it. But I mean, what is perfect? I am not perfect, so my flat did not have to be either. But the longer I lived there, the more it dawned on me that 'not perfect' was a bit of an understatement.

It was horrific. Now, looking back on my experience, I feel relieved that I survived this time there – literally. Once I walked into my apartment and the windows were gone. All of them! In the middle of NOVEMBER! Not just for a day or two but for a whole month. I was living on the ground floor, which meant that every night I lay in bed freezing to death pretending to feel safe with nothing more than a thin layer of plastic separating me from a potential serial killer walking past. Taking my windows out was probably some form of payback from my landlord because I once refused his really generous offer. I had been aware that he ogled me each time we crossed ways in the hallway, but I still did not expect what was to happen. One day, when I really needed a pee, he surprised me on the corridor (a memory I still attempt to repress). With a creepy smile on his face, he said, “Hey beautiful, wanna come in and see my bedroom? I want to show you something.” When I declined politely, he went on, “I promise, you will never want to go back once you join me in my private quarters.” The way he raised his eyebrows made it quite clear what he meant: Sex. From that moment on, I always made sure the coast was clear before leaving my premises. Each time I had to use the toilet, I pressed my ear to the

door as if I was a special agent on a mission to find out whether my enemy was roaming around the corridor.

Of course, in retrospect, my neighbourhood could have been more pleasant and neither my living conditions nor my job were ideal, but somehow, I didn't perceive the situation as atrocious. Materialistically, I had nothing, but I encountered everything that life would throw at me with a pinch of humour. Sometimes, when I was kneeling in front of the door, waiting for noises that would give away my landlord's presence, I would burst out laughing until I could hardly breathe anymore because the whole thing was just ridiculously absurd. When thinking of the countless coffee sessions with my crazy best friends, I can still smell the freshly roasted beans, that wonderful fragrance of my favourite café. Then, over a steaming cup of coffee we would talk about anything and everything including all details about my new, not so favourite, admirer. Their advice on how to go about the 'situation' was as diverse as possible, starting from calling an exterminator (because, obviously, it could be argued that my landlord was like the pest) to having a rational talk about why his behaviour is inappropriate (a tip coming from my more mature teacher friend). I remember the affection I felt for every single one of them. I remember the light-heartedness that surrounded us. I remember how I used to love my life.

*Back then, I had nothing, although somehow it felt as if I had everything.*

My eyes itch which distracts me from my train of thought. I start rubbing and notice an eyelash caught on my fingertip.

*Make a wish.*

What could I wish for? It seems like I'm on top of the mountain that I aspired to defeat my whole life. I always thought that on the top, I would feel free. On the top, I would breathe in the fresh air and feel light. On the top, I would feel content when looking at the vast valley in front of me. But while being focused on the climb, I did not notice that the weather had changed and suddenly the warm sunshine had been replaced by a cold and unforgiving wind. Now, all I see is fog. All I feel is emptiness.

That's not how I had planned it. This is all wrong. A desperate feeling rushes through my body and starts to overwhelm me. I need to get out of here. I slip into my running shoes, rush out the door and start running. I run and run and run until my heart races and I can hardly breathe anymore. Then, my lungs force me to stop because my body yearns for a rest. Here, in the middle of a beautiful park, I hear the birds singing their hearts out, reaching for love. I can see the vibrant yellow flowers stretching towards the sun, craving for their life's source. I can feel the wind caress my cheeks. I breathe in and breathe out. I let go of all my thoughts and I feel how I slowly reconnect to my inner self. I feel the pressure that accumulated within me, *pop*, leaving my body. I feel a tiny, fuzzy feeling awakening and spreading this inner warmth that I've missed for so long. I feel it slowly reappearing from deep within me.

The monster inside me cringes, blinded by the light. I know it is not completely gone. Not yet. Still, once this light becomes stronger, it will burn the monster down into a small pile of ash. At this moment, I suddenly understand. I understand something about myself – my keenest desire. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Then,

*I make my wish.*

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## changing course

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by philip mikisek

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

I lean against the rusty red railing on the top deck. All the clouds hanging in the grey morning sky are beginning to slowly disappear as the sun climbs higher in the midday sky. I glance up at the sun and allow the rays of sunshine to touch and warm my pale face. A gentle sea breeze is whispering in my ears and the smell of fresh saltwater penetrates my nose, leaving a salty taste in my mouth. As I look across the dark blue and seemingly bottomless ocean, I see waves crashing into each other, creating giant splashes of white foam in various shapes. I do enjoy the spectacle unfolding far out the sea. I slowly run my fingers through my tousled hair, I inhale deeply through my nose, I open my eyes widely in an attempt to capture the stunning beauty of the sea in its entirety. I relish the moment, but an awkward feeling is sitting at the back of my head. I do not give it much attention, though. For now.

I reflect back on the first couple of days of this trip when the sheer amount of people onboard simply overwhelmed me. I now realize that in the last few days, I've run into only a handful of passengers. "Has everyone else disembarked?", I wonder. I don't remember having docked on land during this trip. I hardly remember anything that might have happened on this trip when I come to think of it. I try to recall when I first set foot on this ship. The memory eludes me. I think about the ship's destination, but, again, I cannot seem to remember where we're headed to. The memory eludes me. I try to recall the number of days I must have been on this ship. The memory eludes me yet again. A state of agitation takes a hold of me. I begin to regret my decision about embarking on this journey. A journey I so readily agreed to.

I direct my attention towards the other remaining passengers on the deck. Some are slouching in wooden deckchairs basking in pure sunshine; others are strolling around the deck while enjoying their ice-cream or a refreshing beverage. There is a group of middle-aged men that draw my attention in particular. They don't seem to have put too much thought into their choice of clothes and are wearing the usual holidaymaker's attire: sandals, a pair of baggy

khakis, and a white polo shirt. The three are chatting loudly with each other. Seeing their hand gestures, I figure that they are in the midst of a heated discussion. I slowly approach them. My presence immediately interrupts the flow of the exchange. They direct their attention towards me, blankly staring right at me. “Can we help you?”, one of them asks. I inform them about my plight, of not being able to remember concrete details of the journey and ask them about the ship’s itinerary. The man shoots back, “We don’t know where you are headed to. We can’t help you. This is not your typical sea journey.” For some reason, this absurd answer triggers something in me. My heart starts beating like thunder in my chest and I can feel adrenaline rushing through my veins. I rush away from the three men and quickly head towards the inside of the ship. A sudden wave of dizziness overtakes me, and my vision becomes increasingly blurry. With my left hand I brace myself against the wall and try to move further towards the inside of the ship. I become weaker and weaker and just as my feet are about to give way under the weight of my weakened body, I can feel a set of arms lifting me back up, preventing a potential encounter with the ground. I try to regain control of my body, but my attempts are futile. I need to lie down. I need to rest.

I am awoken by a warm, oblique ray of sunshine. I flick my tongue over my parched lips and begin to scan my surroundings. Despite the lightheaded and stupefied state that I am in, I can tell I’m in one of the seating areas of the lower deck. Through the windows, I can see that we’re still at sea and land is nowhere near. There is an old man sitting across from me. It must have been he who caught me just before I fainted and put me in this chair to regain my consciousness. The man is of slender nature. His oval face with a pointed nose, hazel eyes and well-groomed eyebrows radiates calmness and security. I find comfort in his friendly and familiar look. It takes me another half an hour to fully regain control of my senses. I stare at the strange but somehow familiar man. Out of the blue, he utters with a smile on his face, “I know, it can be overwhelming to wake up and realize we’ve forgotten where we are going.” He continues in a calm manner, “You, too, have recognized the predicament we’re in. Not a single soul on this ship seems to remember the endpoint of our journey.”

I’m immediately intrigued by the calmness and tranquility the man exudes while saying this. What fascinates me most is that even though the man doesn’t know where he is going, he still manages to put on an infectious smile and appears to be completely unbothered about this ordeal. While I’m at my wits’ end, he seems as though he is at peace with the world. Slightly confused, and still a little lightheaded, I sit up straight and hesitantly stutter “Are...Aren’t you worried at all?”. “No”, replies the old man. “There’s no use in losing your mind. Eventually, we will see where the ship docks. Let’s enjoy our journey because what else is there to do”. For some reason, the wise man's words resonate in my mind. In a certain way, I can't help but await my fate and accept my destiny. I join the man in his intention and decide to enjoy the ride because what else is there to do?

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## (fe)male power

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by theresa pichler

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

Gasping and shaking Marianne tumbled out of the engine room. Her dark blue overall was torn open and the cold wind and moist air on deck felt like a jab in her face after having been in the engine room for twelve straight hours. At the same time, the air made her feel like being able to breath at least a little. She stopped at the railing and grabbed the metal banister so tightly that her white knuckles bulged towards her. “What the f\*\*\* did just happen?”, she muttered into the dark. What did Sven even think? That she was just a stupid sex doll for everyone to touch? What made him think that she would like to sleep with him during her shift in the middle of the engine room, surrounded by loud noises and covered in dirt and smut from the whole day?

Slowly a fair amount of anger started to rise up inside her body. The shaking out of angst almost seamlessly developed into a tightness and vibration out of anger. Why did he just come up to her like that and grab her? At first she thought it was another prank that the boys enjoyed playing on her, as she was the only girl in the engine crew. If anyone had asked her one hour ago if sexism was a thing on this ship, she would have said that her boys were gentlemen through and through and that they respected her in a way she would have never expected. Even now, she understood Sven’s sexual desire. It was not like she didn’t miss intimacy and sexual contacts. They had been on this ship for two months now. It was time to get some solid soil and human contact – also sexual – in their lives again. Many of the crew missed their families and wives. BUT this did not give Sven permission to just touch her like this. If he’d asked properly and taken her for a beer or two, she probably wouldn’t even have said no. Sven had always been a nice guy and she didn’t have anybody waiting for her at home anyway.

She couldn’t move. And she didn’t really know how long she had stood at the railing, staring into the dark, far too calm water. Her thoughts tumbled over and over. She felt a strong desire to call her dad and tell him about tonight. However, she knew deep down that she could not do that. He was the one who never understood her aspirations to pursue a career as a ship



mechanic. He never fully comprehended her technical interest for ships and her deep love for the sea. He had warned her that something like this might happen, before she had taken the job on board. Marianne loved her father and appreciated his concern, but she never really heeded his advisory words. She always thought that she was strong enough to deal with anything that would come up. She had always been very proud of herself and how she managed to survive felicitously in such a man dominated environment. She even thought of herself as being a prodigy at what she does. And the young woman really was good at her job. So good in fact that her application for the position of the mechanical conduit on board didn't provoke too much resistance within the crew. Tomorrow would be the final assembly, where the decision should be made. She was eagerly looking forward to this day, but now she was unsure how to move and even get to her cabin and wash the shame and smut of this horrible day off of her.

She turned around when she heard the sharp noise of a door being slammed. Sven had followed her on deck and stood there in front of her with a wild expression on his face. His fly was still open and his eyes fixated Marianne. The young woman felt the same uncomfortable feeling of terror rising inside her body again as about twenty minutes ago. Sven menacingly headed towards her and she closed her eyes and prayed that it at least would pass by quickly. The moment she had finished this suffrage in her head, she was aghast about her own thoughts. When did she become such a demure girl incapable of acting and just accepting her fate? Sven was only one or two steps away from her now and the wind already carried his intangibly bad body odor towards her nose. With a sudden outbreak of power and strength, she kicked her foot and landed an accurate blow between his legs. As he went down to the floor with an expression of pure and unbearable pain on his filthy face, she looked at him in disgust and walked away. "At least I know what your birthday present will be – I'll let you know your doctor's appointment for your castration." Leaving Sven behind on the wooden floor of her favorite spot on the upper deck in fact had something really satisfying to it. With her newly gained feeling of victory over the species of smutty, lubricious men, Marianne went to her cabin and took a long satisfying shower before she went to bed.

The next morning she woke up with a strange feeling in her tummy. She still felt empowered and proud of herself, but at the same time really exhausted and tired. Nevertheless, she needed to get up and go to the big assembly. Automatically reaching out to grab her torn apart overall from last night a shiver ran over her back. Trance-like, she pulled out a clean and less memory-tainted overall. She closed the zipper much higher than she normally did, but still felt exposed. A long sleeved T-Shirt and some leggings underneath would protect her. "At least it will be a challenge to touch my bare skin now", she mumbled to herself and went to the assembly.

She sat down at a table with Mike and Tom, who were clear-sighted guys in long-term marriages. Both of them had always been nice to Marianne and, as they both had teenage daughters, they were always a bit worried about her. In their own way, they would protect and take care of her. When Sven entered, Marianne pretended that she didn't see him and avoided to look into his eyes. Though, she observed every movement he made carefully. The assembly had already started and at some point everyone was applauding and cheering towards her. Ending her distracted state of mind, Mike patted her on the back, leaned over and said astonishingly: "I knew you would get it, congratulations!" I really did it, Marianne thought. All that she'd ever worked for. For a brief moment Marianne felt happy and light again. It was as if it had all been worth it and she smiled. "Congratulations Marianne, it has been a tough decision, but thanks to an enlightening conversation with your colleague Sven, I finally recognized that there cannot be a better choice for the position than you", she heard the captain

deliver his speech. “I may warmly welcome the first female mechanical conduit on board, Marianne Jenkins! Would you give us the honor and say a few words?”. Marianne stared into Sven’s eyes, who only smiled smugly. Was it wise to accept this position? What was Sven up to? Did he want to apologize or put her into a very deep dependence on him?

As everybody wanted her to, she got up, still a bit shaking, but supported by the crew’s rush of encouragement. “Thank you, it is an honor for me to accept this position, as this is what I dreamed of and worked for my whole life. I am looking forward to working with all of you, even though there will be some personnel changes within the mechanic crew on board. But let’s not talk about that today, thank you for your trust, Captain, and I wish everyone a good working day.” After Marianne had sat down again, some members of the crew smiled at her and nodded reassuringly. Exactly as she had hoped for, Sven looked scared. She knew that he heavily depended on his job on board and unlike him, she also knew that she would not fire him. He was a good mechanic and she needed him in the team.

In the brief moments before her little speech, she had decided that she would not be the only one suffering from the occurrences of last night and she will let Sven expiate for making her feel unsafe on her beloved ship. Until the day she felt strong, safe and confident in her own body again, they would both suffer. Marianne was certainly not a woman to play games with and she was determined to become the independent, strong woman, she always aspired to be.

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# decisions, decisions, decisions

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by hannah graf

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

Breath in. One, two, three, four, five, ... NO! Breath out.

*“Yes or no?”*

I'm interrupted. Well, thank you very much. I don't even have five seconds to meditate. I just wanted to take a short breather and calm down a bit. That always helps me when I'm nervous, stressed or excited. Always the same stress, always the same hurry. What kind of world do we actually live in? I don't even have time to make an important decision in peace. What is all this stress for? And does it pay off?

The man across from me leans forward and looks at me with his warm brown doe eyes full of expectation. He raises his black, thick eyebrows and looks at me penetratingly. His gaze pierces my body like needles, I feel it down to the last nerve cell of my existence. Yes or no?

I close my eyes. It smells like freshly roasted chestnuts. From somewhere in the background I hear the song “Super Trouper” by ABBA resounding from an invisible loudspeaker. Some people around me are humming along. A glass falls to the floor and shatters into pieces. A baby cries. On the table next to which I am standing, in the middle of what feels like a thousand stuffed animals, sits a big teddy bear. It seems as if he looks at me questioningly, with his black big beady eyes. I see a little boy, he puts his tiny little hands in front of his head, squinches his face up and plays an imaginary trumpet. I have to smile benignly. At the same moment, an ice-cold shiver runs down my spine. What if I make the wrong decision? What happens if I say “yes”? YES. What happens if I say “no”? NO. Should I go for it? YES. Or rather not? NO. What if I decide to do it and then realize it wasn't the right decision after all? What if, as always, I get my hopes up too high, and then it is not what I had imagined? NO. I row back. But what if I decide against it and then regret it later? What if that was my chance to shine? YES. Far too many questions for no answers. I know decisions bring clarity and end diffuse

states. But the more I think about this decision, the more difficult it becomes. In my mind's eye, I see myself standing in front of the abyss. Should I jump or not?

*“Yes or no?”*

The ticking of the big clock lying on the makeshift table next to me is getting louder and louder. Tick, tack, Tick, taCK, TICK, TACK. Normally, the ticking of the clock would calm me down, but now it makes me squirrely. TICK, TACK. Small drops of sweat run together on my upper lip under my mask. The smell of old clothes tortures my nose. TICK, TACK. The fear of making the wrong decision paralyzes me. Reason versus feeling. Head versus gut. My heart is pounding loudly in my chest. I can hardly breathe. TICK, TACK.

I take a deep breath and look at the man across from me. He is expecting an answer from me right now. Not just an answer - a decision. Of course, I know that. I must make a decision now. The horizon so near, and yet so far. I can soon be free. I can soon start my adventure. Or maybe not. Yes or no?

*“So, Miss, what is your decision? Do you want to buy the book or not? Come on...”* he blurts out in a slightly irritated tone.

I am at the flea market. The bookseller standing behind his bookstall is busy today and people are waiting. He looks at me impatiently. I can feel it. Without even looking. A long queue has already formed behind me. I look at his hand. His hand, holding the book.

Breath in. One, two, three, four, five, ... YES! Breath out.

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# catharsis

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by ghazaleh rahmani alashti

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

Is it a necessity to figure out life's meaning?

Some are so deeply involved in giving a meaning to life and finding out the very reason for minor and major incidents that happen to them or people around them that they forget life is to be enjoyed, not over-analyzed.

Sometimes she envies those who live life without the need to contemplate things since she assigns herself in the first group. For the upcoming journey, the one she had been planning, she had a feeling it would be the truest thing she has ever done in life. As a spiritual person - at least she conceives herself as one - she tracked all the cues and omens and deeply and strongly believed she was on the right path of life, undoubtedly, and that she was meant to do this exactly at this point in time. Therefore, she felt so in peace and so confident as if a force was protecting her all the way and knew that if anything happened, either good or bad, it would be for her best.

She got off the plane so recklessly - as if the whole universe was conspiring to help her find her way. That was the first time she was travelling abroad all alone but, surprisingly, fearless as she was, she felt like being in her hometown. She wasn't pretending to be strong, to wear a mask so that others wouldn't find out her weakness. No, she was being strong effortlessly and she felt secure. It was as if since she had decided to live in another country, she was sailing on an ocean and the waves were pushing her towards her destination - and finally she had arrived. The last wave threw her to the shore and now she had to take herself to a safe place, the house she had rented a month before.

It was a little complicated to find the train station and take a train to the city where she was supposed to live, especially without knowing the language of the country, but she made it. Maybe that was beginner's luck as Paulo Coelho says in *The Alchemist*; the difficulties seem

easy to you when you start something. Finally, she found her train and got on it. While being on the train, the picturesque scenery amazed her but she was too sleepy to fully enjoy it. She put all her effort not to fall sleep because that would be a near disaster.

When she arrived at her new home, exhausted and jet-lagged, just like a lifeless corpse washed to the shore by the waves, she lay down on the bed, used the pile of her clothes as a pillow and took a long nap. After waking up she felt confused and just wanted to eat something and maybe go back to sleep - nothing else mattered to her. She didn't even call her loved ones who had been waiting impatiently for her call to see if she's safe.

The next day she felt the urge to get herself together and started doing the most mundane of things. It took her a while to know that the power that surrounded her no longer existed. Maybe that was all a hallucination. She thought she knew everything about life by now. With all the turbulence and ups and downs she had been through, she assumed she had the audacity to think that she knows all life's games and tricks and is ready to embark upon her new journey. At this moment she had an epiphany; the universe is smirking at her - *there is a lot more to know, little girl*. After taking her stuff out of her luggage, she felt like she needed some fresh air and a walk. After all, she needed to explore her new neighborhood. As she was taking a walk by the river, she felt as if loneliness had never haunted her like this before, as if that was a totally new level.

Days passed by and she tried her best to deal with this new life and the dizziness she was experiencing like a boxer after a fatal punch who attempts to get up and not give up. For her, it was irritating not to know what was going to happen afterwards. She tried, tried so hard to find a meaning but still nothing. She talked to many, her mother, her younger brother, numerous of her loyal friends but none could help. The very best they could do was to sympathize with her. That was an inner struggle. She had to find out where she is at, what her role in life is, and she shouldn't expect anyone to understand. She knew talking might lessen the confusion but could not give her a solid answer. It was her job to figure things out.

Luck was not with her as she couldn't make new friends and this, for a sociable person who had always been surrounded by different groups of friends and acquaintances, was not less than a nightmare. Still, she tried to adapt herself to the new situation and, in fact, compared to the big question mark on her head about her future, that was not too hard. The more you spend time on your own, the more you overthink and then you end up making a mountain out of a molehill. But who was there to warn her to stop it?

She thought maybe a trip to somewhere nice could change her mood and cheer her up. She did it spontaneously. On a Friday evening she bought the ticket online, without even checking the weather, to a place where she longed to visit for a long time. That was only two hours from where she was living, so she didn't plan spend the night there. She just went there and enjoyed it a lot and seized every moment of being there regardless of the cold and foggy weather. Still, she felt the warmth of the tears on her cheeks while watching the scenery on her way back home from the train's window. What was that? Perhaps something between depression and confusion but with no hope of getting well anytime soon. She wasn't able to see the end of the tunnel she had stepped into and was walking all in darkness. She knew there is supposed to be light at the end and it's not going to be like this forever, but hope was dead in her heart and she was feeling hapless and lost.

Winter arrived. Big white snowflakes were dancing past her eyes. She wasn't used to observing such magical scenes for she was an oriental girl and where she came from it rarely snowed.

After a couple of hours there was snow all over the place. So what was better than taking a walk in the woods? She became accustomed to these lonely walks. The woods looked unreal. For her it was like she entered Narnia. She looked up and let the snow touch her face. That was as if she entered a new phase now; she began to enjoy the little things, stopped worrying so much and went with the flow of life. She was feeling more at peace with herself.

After a few days of snow, one morning she woke up and looked outside the window. The grass was appearing once again and the snow was all gone. The sun was shining and colors were returned to the whole city. The immediate thought that came to her mind was: “as the snow disappeared all of a sudden and silently, your problems and worries will do so, in a morning, without you even noticing.”

She felt relieved and smiled. She was no more concerned about her place in the world and was assured that the power that brought her all the way here would guide her and protect her. Her faith was restored once again and she felt proud she had sustained. She is now ready to welcome whatever surprise life may bring with open arms.

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## soaring heights

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by julian benzer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

“Not again,” he mumbles in a slightly annoyed voice. It has been months since he has been out. Out of this prison. Out there in the living world, going to cinemas, cafes or bars and actually engaging with strangers. Well, you cannot possibly call that living. In fact, life nowadays has more in common with a rotting carcass as every consequent lockdown seems to suck out more of its precious essence. He presses his hands against his knees and as he rises from his parents’ sofa, he exhales a deep sigh.

“Something wrong, honey?” his mother caringly asks as she walks out of the kitchen. He answers in a slightly exaggerated manner, “They’ve extended the lockdown, again.” “Oh, that’s unfortunate, but I’m sure you’ll be fine. Come, I made us dinner.”

### Νησί

Days pass by and the boy is lying on his bed aimlessly staring at the ceiling. “A few more days and I’ll surely merge with the bed,” he thinks. “I’ll probably die of boredom before that happens though. It’s like I’m trapped on a lonely island with nothing but the sea surrounding me. Oh, how I wish for this punishment to end and to escape this prison.” He spots two insects flying near the ceiling. “The vultures are already circling above me,” he jokingly thinks.

Right then his phone starts ringing and as if struck by a sudden lightning he shoots up from his bed and picks it up from the nightstand. “Hello?” It is his friend David, and he seems excited for some reason. “Hey Icarus, it’s me David. You’ve got plans for tonight?” “Are you calling just to mock me, you clown? Of course I don’t have any plans. It’s lockdown. Have you already forgotten?” he says slightly annoyed, yet still intrigued by his friend’s question.



“Forget about that lockdown, aren’t you itching for some fun too? A friend at work told me about a huge rave in the woods tonight, near the old quarry. You in or what?” Icarus takes a moment before answering him. “I’ll have to ask my mom first, but I’ll text you as soon as I know.”

He hangs up and drops back into his bed. Of course, he is not going to ask his mom for permission - he is too old for that. Something else seems to bother him. He should have immediately said yes, if not shouted it, but he did not. After all this complaining and being on the brink of becoming a vegetable, he was handed freedom on a silver plate, yet he did not grab it. “Maybe I really shouldn’t. After all, aren’t we in a lockdown for a reason? I can’t believe that I’m even considering going there. Usually, I’m the one complaining about such people.” He rears himself up and looks around. Absolute silence. “F\* it!” he says and stands up. A few quick taps on the phone and everything is settled. He starts getting dressed in fresh clothes and notices his euphoria rising with each item he puts on. Like a nuclear reactor whose core has gone out of control he accelerates, gaining in speed as he grabs his stuff and runs down the stairs into the entrance hall. Upon seeing his older brother’s delivery jacket hanging on the wall, an idea pops up in his head. “People won’t suspect a delivery guy going on a rave. They’ll assume I must be heading to work.” So, he quickly changes jackets. “Bye Mom! I’m going for a walk!” And out he is, without even giving his mother a chance to answer.

## Φιλοδοξία

In a matter of minutes, Icarus finds himself at the agreed meeting point where David and his other friends were already waiting with some cold beers.

“Clever, taking your brother’s jacket”, David remarks.

“I know, right?” Icarus answers before snatching a beer out of David’s hands, juggling it in a flash.

Most of them do the same and open new ones for the short journey to their desired destination, the rave near the old quarry. As they approach, they begin to hear distant vibes, music. They feel they are in the right place, getting closer and closer. The faint ripples of strong beats reach their feet and get stronger with each step they take. They can already sense the vibrations travelling through the air. A tingling sensation befalls Icarus, as he increases his tempo, now walking almost rhythmically. Suddenly, he stops. Before his eyes unfolds a vast valley filled with an ocean of people. He simply cannot grasp it. From up here, the crowd looks like a sea at storm, dancing and jumping in all directions. Even the most experienced seafarer would not dare enter such a storm. However, like a fierce maelstrom that dares the seafarer to prove his skill, the crowd pulls Icarus and makes him want to become part of it. His thoughts are interrupted as David approaches from behind and grabs his shoulder. With his other Hand he offers him a tiny purple thing. “Let’s try to enjoy this night as best as we can, shall we?” So, Icarus spreads his wings and jumps, or so it feels. The ocean consumes him and his friends. Loud electronic music booms against their eardrums. Deep sensational bass ventures through their bodies as they crack open one beer after another. Flashing lights. People. Substances. Pure ecstasy. Everything Icarus has wished for finally came to be.

## Πτέρυγα

Beep! Beep! Beep! Icarus' hand emerges from under his blanket and furiously slams his alarm clock. It is the morning after, and where there was music, bass, and ecstasy last night there is headache, nausea, and intense thirst. He gets up, takes an aspirin, and realizes that he hadn't taken off his clothes before going to bed last night. "Must have been a wild night," he happily thinks to himself. However, something is not quite right. This was not his first rodeo, so he knows what a hangover feels like, but this is different. He slowly ventures down the stairs, the same stairs he so hastily and excitedly ran down yesterday. He is coughing quite a bit.

"Oh, that doesn't sound good, sweetie. Sounds like you caught a cold." His mom walks around the corner and puts her hand on his forehead. "And you're really hot. Best you lie down for the rest of the day. I'll make you some soup," she lovingly offers.

"Thanks Mom, I'll just brush my teeth really quickly before heading back to bed." Icarus walks into the bathroom and starts brushing his teeth, but the coughing simply won't go away. It becomes so violent that he must stop. He feebly leans over the sink, his throat on fire. Upon opening his eyes again, he sees something red mixed in with toothpaste. "S\*t!"

## Πτώση

THOSE ARMS, THAT HAD SEEMED TO UPHOLD HIM, RELAXED. HIS WINGS WAVERED, DROOPED. HE FLUTTERED HIS YOUNG HANDS VAINLY—HE WAS FALLING—AND IN THAT TERROR HE REMEMBERED. THE HEAT OF THE SUN HAD MELTED THE WAX FROM HIS WINGS; THE FEATHERS WERE FALLING, ONE BY ONE, LIKE SNOWFLAKES; AND THERE WAS NONE TO HELP. HE FELL LIKE A LEAF TOSSED DOWN THE WIND, DOWN, DOWN, WITH ONE CRY THAT OVERTOOK DÆDALUS FAR AWAY. WHEN HE RETURNED, AND SOUGHT HIGH AND LOW FOR THE POOR BOY, HE SAW NOTHING BUT THE BIRD-LIKE FEATHERS AFLOAT ON THE WATER, AND HE KNEW THAT ICARUS WAS DROWNED.

excerpt from: *Old Greek Folk Stories Told Anew* by *Josephine P. Peabody*, London, George Harrap, 1910.

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## young love

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by **martina frank**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

There is nothing more nostalgic than looking out the train window while listening to music. He was sitting comfortably, his laptop stretched out in front of him like a solid newspaper turned at an angle, his backpack next to him on the soft, comfortable train seat, the suitcase on the luggage rack above him. He had not packed much; just the essentials. Outside, the snow-covered mountains and the sun were trying to outshine each other. It was a beautiful winter day, almost too beautiful to be spent on a train. In the two years he had lived in the area, he had gotten to know almost every valley and nearly every peak. Despite the unbearable cold in winter, he had made himself a home, her warmth had evened the cracks of his frozen heart. As if it were possible, he tried to absorb every bit of detail he could take in. His eyes followed the elegant edges and curves of the mountains, which were occasionally interrupted by one or more trees growing along the railway line. It felt wrong to leave everything behind, and he did not know whether he would ever return.

### **she**

The cup was so hot it burnt her hands. She used to love coffee, but now everything was tasteless and dull. She stared into the steaming brown void, observing the little bubbles which gathered in a spiral shape. Outside, snowflakes were beginning to gracefully descend from the sky. They tumbled around in the air and delicately landed on the frozen ground. It had been beautiful in the morning, but then the wind brought thick masses of clouds which painted everything white and grey. She had decided to take the afternoon off and relax; everything had been so exhausting lately. With “Don’t Know Why” by Norah Jones playing in the background, she started tidying up all kinds of things lying around in the apartment. If he had still been there, he would probably have cracked a stupid joke and helped her pick up all the

bits and pieces which no one needed anyway – he would have stressed that – from the floor. It felt empty without him.

**he**

She had always hated decisions, so when asked which was her favorite color, she would say turquoise, because it was a mixture of blue and green. He had always dreamed of sharing his whole life with her. He had imagined her drawing, sitting in her beloved rattan chair on a wooden, turquoise-painted porch, her eyebrows pulled together, her mouth slightly parted in concentration. With his inner eye, he could see how he would run towards her with their two children shouting “mama!”, and he would feel her hugging him and the children with the radiant smile he fell in love with when he saw her for the first time. He quickly shook off the thought and tried to focus on the empty word document. “Finding words for what you are feeling frees you”, she had always said, unaware of the fact that talking about feelings is not easy when you have never learnt how to.

**she**

Being with him had felt so right. She had trusted him completely. He had been her lover, her best friend, her roommate, her partner in crime. She hated to admit it, but when she looked into his eyes, she would see the next few decades of her life. They were the same age, and she had always thought he was too young to be with her. She was an old soul, untouched by the worries of ordinary life, always thinking, always dreaming, always feeling deeper than the average person. At times she thought she was too profound. Sometimes, though, she thought she was too shallow, but he had made her feel perfectly okay exactly as she was. He was calm, caring, at times naïve, but always considerate. Their love was pure, almost untainted by past experience. Unafraid of what the others would think, they let it all out. She often had to pinch herself because her life felt so surreal. Two free spirits flowing into union. She never wanted it to stop. What he had done was a mistake, but she could not see past it. He had taken her trust away, and along with that her light.

**he**

The white of the empty page burnt into the back of his head. “Introspection can hurt sometimes”, she had always used to say. One day, a few weeks after he had told her, he had come home to find her lying on the floor and crying, knocked down by her despair like an injured animal on the side of the street. Not many people come to know true pain, himself included, but he was sure he had witnessed it that day. He had tried everything and given her all of his love after that, but love has to be welcomed in order to be felt. The weight of his love was unbearable and he did not know how to deal with it, so he pushed it onto her.

**she**

He had pierced a wound so deep through her heart that she did not know whether she would ever be able to recover from it. But she saw through him and she felt for him. She had experienced it, too; hurting a loved one too much to stay together. She felt his guilt and his shame and the anger. It tore her apart, but she knew that she was learning, she knew that everything was going to be alright. She put the pair of socks she had just picked up into the bottom drawer of her new dresser. Outside the window, a crow was shaking the snow off its feathers.

**he**

The train came to a halt, at a small station. From a distance, he could see a bird flying around. It reminded him of the German song they used to listen to when they had been madly in love: *“die Vögel scheißen vom Himmel”* - or something like that - and *“alles dreht sich wenn du dich verliebst.”* A lonely ran down his cheek. He wrote a single sentence: I will become the person you deserve.

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## one day ...

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais  
photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22  
photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by **theresa mösinger**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

Stella has always felt that she was special. She has never been the popular girl at school, never admired by others. Neither the smart one, whom classmates could turn to with their questions in calculus. She was not particularly athletic, attractive, articulate or amusing. She did not have many friends. Nevertheless, Stella always felt that she was special – and one day, everybody would realize that.

Stella had a particular talent that made her special. A gift, one could say, that distinguished her. The moment her fingers grasped a pencil, and her eyes caught a blank space on paper, she would reveal her magic. Sketching bridges, churches, houses, libraries, offices, and as many buildings as one could possibly imagine, she created brave new worlds. She transferred her aesthetic visions into marvels of architecture – on paper, for the time being. She was able to instill life into those otherwise inanimate entities by envisioning the people that would claim them: How they would feel when entering one of her buildings? What they would think when crossing the river on one of her bridges? Whom they would marry in one of her churches? What they would read when nestling down in one of her libraries? Her drawings were so sophisticated and vivid it was difficult to imagine that these buildings did not exist yet. So, Stella had a particular talent that made her special – and one day everybody would see.

Stella lived under special circumstances. Her mother was working three different jobs in order to make ends meet. Her father was absent – a taboo topic not to be spoken about. He had left the family for a life without responsibilities or duties. It was her who had to look after her three little siblings. Good thing that they were all cramped into one tiny bedroom – that really made it easier to keep an eye on them. So, while her classmates would meet up after school and go shopping in the mall, Stella would pick up her siblings from the kindergarten or the primary school and bring them home safe and sound. While her classmates would come home to find dinner ready on the table, Stella would try to rustle up a decent meal out of the few things that

were left in the fridge for three tiny, hungry mouths. While her classmates would adjourn to their cozy bedrooms and do their homework in peace and tranquility, Stella would give the three little ones a bath and put them to bed, then do the laundry, wash up and clean the kitchen. Despite all this, she tried hard not to fall behind with her homework and would stay up late to finish it. It was not a rare sight for her mom, coming back home late after work, to find her daughter sleeping at the kitchen table, bent over her schoolbooks. So, Stella lived under special circumstances – but one day all of this would change.

Stella had a special relationship with her mother. Being the first-born, she was the only one of the four children who could vividly remember the time when their mom would fulfill all her duties with tender and loving care. She remembered the bewitching bedtime stories that mom would read out for them. She remembered the sweet songs mom would sing with them. She even remembered the taste of the crispy Christmas cookies that mom would bake on cold winter days. All of this Stella remembered vividly and woefully, apprehending that these days were over and she herself had to carry the burden of taking care of the little ones. But not even once did she complain, for she knew that her mother did not voluntarily sacrifice all her time to earn just 7.25\$ per hour. Simply speaking, there was no other choice. As a mother of four and no social security system in place, it was tough to pay the rent each month and still afford enough groceries for them to survive. However, Stella's help did not go unnoticed. Every once in a while, she would find a new pencil or sketch block on her desk. Her mother had seen how she could unfold her architectural ideas on paper and wanted to support her as much as possible. But even if those little thank-you gifts were well-intentioned, they caused pangs of conscience for Stella, as she was well aware that they could not afford such additional expenses. So, Stella had a special relationship with her mother - and one day she would show herself grateful.

Stella had a special plan. She aspired to enroll at university and study architecture so that she could turn her passion into more than a collection of unrealized projects. She wished to see her visions come true and could not wait to touch the smooth concrete walls of her first building. What is more, she could not stand seeing her mother working all day long for wages that barely paid the rent. She wanted them all to break free from the social and financial constraints that had limited their lives for so long. Her mother should not need to worry about expenses when entering a grocery store or finding a bunch of bills in the mailbox. Instead, she should be able to afford all the beautiful clothes, delicate meals and interesting books that she had been deprived of for so long. She ought to enjoy some free time for herself and take a break from all these jobs that had seized every minute of her life for years. But until then, it would be a long and stony way for Stella. In order to finance her studies, she would have to work part-time. That alone would not suffice, though. She would have to excel at her courses to receive a scholarship. She did not, under any circumstances, intend to strain her mother's finances any further because this was the path that she chose for herself. For her there had never been another option but architecture. Still, she knew that it was going to be difficult to live up to her own expectations. She knew that it would require all her mental and physical strength. She knew that it might not end up well and her choice might prove to be disastrous. But she also knew that she did not want to settle for less. She had to show herself grateful for all the sacrifices her mother had made. To build the finest house for her mother – that was Stella's life aspiration. That was Stella's special plan - and one day it would all come true. One day...



## the feeling

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by janine niederkofler

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

*“Why can't we be born with aspirations that match our parents' expectations for us?”*  
*“Why can't we have something like an innate awareness of what, let's say, our parents want us to be and think and automatically imitate that before we even leave the womb?”*  
*“Why do I have to wish for something different, and how can I change that?”*

These, among many more, are the questions that usually keep Laura awake for most of the night, ruminating on the whys and the hows. As she is lying in bed, she is thinking about where it all went wrong. Being the only child of the owners of an influential and renowned automobile manufacturing company, she has never been expected to do much else other than follow in her parents' footsteps and continue their legacy. And with her school grades, she probably wouldn't have any problems studying business either. But that's not the problem.

There's something she can't quite relate to, something she cannot compare to anything else she has ever experienced. The feeling. Is it like a thousand rocks having been placed on her chest? Or being in a small room whose only exit is slowly being shut and, for whatever reason, knowing that the moment that very door is closed, the only escape is the one we all have to face sooner or later, the one that means there is no going back? Or being ...

It doesn't make sense to even think about this. Laura needs to distract herself by doing the only possible thing that'll put her continuously wandering mind at ease just for a quick moment. She grabs a book from her extraordinarily-packed bookshelf, trying not to knock down another ten while doing so. She opens one of her favorites, her fingertips slowly sweeping over the words, wondering how a few letters in black ink on white paper can mean so much to a person like herself. As she is going through the pages, her life transforms. Her surroundings are not her familiar surroundings anymore. She is not herself anymore. Suddenly, she is a British



governess in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, working at Thornfield, teaching Adèle, and falling in love with Mr. Rochester.

Is that the life she desires? No, but in a way, yes. She wants to write stories, help transform other people's lives, and assist them in escaping reality. She truly believes that if she were stronger, she could muster the courage to tell her parents. In fact, she has attempted to do so numerous times, but she has never quite succeeded. Why?

Because of *the feeling*.

As soon as she begins talking, her chest tightens up, she starts feeling nauseous, and her vision becomes blurry. Is this guilt? Or fear? Should she even feel guilty? Isn't everyone free to choose whatever they want to do? Again, so many questions.

In fact, her aspirations are quite simple. She just wants to be free, free from other people's expectations, free from the fear of disappointing her parents, of not being a good daughter, of not being grateful enough of the many opportunities and privileges they have provided her with. And, of course, she wants to write. She wants to write stories that inspire people, she wants to write stories that make people cry, she wants to write stories that ...

She could think of possible stories all day, but her main problem is *the feeling*.

It has been with her for more than a year now, yet nobody but her has noticed. *The feeling* reminds her of evil characters in fairy tales, whispering to her, telling her things she does not want to hear, demanding that she do things she does not want to do. Maybe she should tell someone about *the feeling* one day, but not now because she has decided that today is the day. Today, she is going to tell her parents about her dreams and aspirations. She closes her book and puts it back in the location which is designated for her all-time favorites. Before she leaves her room, she stops in front of the mirror next to her bedroom door. As she looks at her reflection, she tells herself:

*"You can do this. You are worthy of being able to follow your dreams. Your aspirations don't have to match your parents' expectations for you. You don't need to have an innate awareness of what your parents want you to do and imitate that. You have the answers, now act."*

She turns around quickly and determinedly makes her way to the living room, where her parents are sitting. She enters, looks at them straight in the eye... and stays silent.

*The feeling*. *The feeling* is back, and it is stronger than ever before.

*"Laura...what's wrong? You're pale as a ghost,"* her mother remarks.

Laura, now shaking like a leaf, announces: *"I...I don't want to take over the company."*

*"Wait, what? Since when? You've always wanted that,"* her mother wonders.

Laura musters up all her courage and asks: *"How would you know? We rarely talk, let alone about this. You just assume that I want to because that is what you expect of me! But I don't want to, I want to become a writer."*

Her mother declares with an unusually high-pitched and loud voice: *"A writer? Nonsense! Haven't we brought you up differently? Look, I get it that you like books. You can read and write as much as you want in your free time. But becoming a writer? Scratch that. You have to realize that your father and I are not going to support you financially forever. You'll need to keep your head above water, and with writing...trust me... you won't make any money. Very few*

writers actually become successful, you know that, right? Actually, now that I'm thinking about it... Are you out of your mind?!? We have created the perfect opportunity for you! Don't you appreciate what we've done for you? Aren't you grateful?"

Grateful... *The feeling* worsens. Her chest feels tighter than ever before, her head starts pounding, her vision turns blurry, and, finally, breathing is impossible... What is happening, you may ask? In this moment, no one knows...



Laura is content. She doesn't have to take over her parents' company, and, what is even better, she doesn't have to feel guilty anymore because she has realized that she cannot make her parents proud of her now anyway. No, not after everything that has happened ...

But she is happy. Actually, she does not understand why everyone else looks so serious. She even notices a tear running down her mother's cheek, a sight she has never seen in her entire life.

Thinking about *the feeling* which has been haunting her continuously and very persistently, her story must have ended here. She knows that *the feeling* would not leave her alone anytime soon. But she does not care because where she is now, she would gladly stay forever. There are endless possibilities for her to read and write in peace. There is even a blooming garden with lavender, purple coneflowers, and day-lilies. They all magically turn the air into a sweet floral perfume. The food, though, is in desperate need of improvement, but that does not matter much, anyway. As long as she has her books, a pen, and some paper, she is content.

But what about *the feeling*? Will it go away? Will it leave poor innocent Laura in search for a new soul to crush and a new heart to break? For now, she can enjoy the sweet smell of the array of flowers in the garden. She can sit on the wet grass and feel the sun's warmth caressing her legs. And, for now, she can read and write.

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## the garden (of miracles)

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by corina milena schmuck

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

It was a gloomy stormy evening. The clouds were hanging extremely low. It smelled like wet dog – it was pouring. I turned the bedside lamp on and looked outside. I glanced over my beautiful garden and spotted something unfamiliar, something that in fact shouldn't be there. Shouldn't be there at all. There was a flower I had never seen before. It was attached to the stem of a sunflower. I take care of my beautiful garden every day, but I had never noticed this particular flower before. It did not have a pretty colour – nothing close to the other flowers in my luscious flowerbed. It was kind of a dark burgundy or even closer to some sort of murky brown, almost black. In fact, it was utterly hideous. I felt so confused, the sunflower looked hurt, if anything then suffocated. Nevertheless, the sunflower was still standing there like a mother to their child.

The next day I inquired at the garden centre. They told me with disbelief that this flower is very unusual in such a size and must have been growing there for more than a year. I could not believe their words because I thought my garden had always been healthy and flourishing ever since my mother started growing it. I asked them anxiously if the flower was harmful and whether I had to get rid of it to save the rest of the flowers in the garden. The head of the garden centre repeatedly asked me if I was sure I hadn't noticed the flower whilst it was growing as it must have harmed the other flowers. The flower pushed its way in and made space for itself. I responded with a clear 'no' but still, I couldn't see how this flower could have damaged my garden to such an extent without me ever noticing it. I was frustrated as I had put a fair amount of work into the upkeep of this beautiful garden. I regularly watered all the flowers and provided them with the necessary nutrients, and each and every morning I played them Clair de Lune, so that they could grow with the sound of the melodies.

Still, I had to take the whole matter quite seriously in order to stop the flower from growing and damaging and possibly destroying the other flowers. After having had the garden checked,

I was given a special herbicide to try to poison the foul-smelling flower before extracting it. The whole process was extremely exhausting and scary as I did not know what was going to happen to the garden with all the venom, the chemicals. And since the suffering of the garden was unnoticed for a long time, I was in shock, and it felt heavily, deep in the pit of my stomach. How could this flower have possibly grown without me noticing? How could this still be happening after having meticulously taken all precautions to prevent such a dangerous and threatening incident? Why did it have to happen to *my* garden – to my very own beautiful garden?

The day had come. The flower was to be removed. The leaves had to be snipped off and the root had to be dug out. But I still had hope for the rest of the garden – for all the lovely, fragrant flowers, for they still were lovely. This whole episode was depleting down to my core, but eventually everything turned out well and the flower could be extracted without damaging the rest of the garden, leaving the rest of my flowers fully intact. Now the garden continues to grow and flourish, and the heart of the garden is still pumping full of life.

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## oh, the places you'll go

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by sophia ennemoser

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

Congratulations!  
Today is your day.  
You're off to Great Places!  
You're off and away!

~Dr. Seuss~

They are all queuing, with their botox-smooth faces and their expensive haircuts, elegantly dressed, wearing the latest fashion. Their perfectly manicured fingers are clasp the newest iPhones and high-end designer bags. Their elaborately painted faces frozen in an expression of absolute superiority. They are standing in line to be the first ones to try on the new winter collection. *How enviable ... wouldn't it be great to be so rich ... to wear the most expensive clothes?*

Gucci. Versace. Louis Vuitton. Prada. Cartier. I see the names of one prestigious brand after another popping up at every corner. One high-end fashion shop after another lined up along the most elegant boulevard of Zürich: Bahnhofstraße. I know, it's disappointing. Not really a great name for such an elegant place. One would think such a boulevard would only deserve a fancier name, something like Königsallee or Kaiserstraße. But that's how it is. Anyhow, I am walking along this street astonished or rather shocked by so much luxury surrounding me.

Picture me, a not very fashionably dressed young woman, sitting in a far too expensive restaurant. The scenery behind the big windows is nothing less than stunning. An almost 360-degree view of the surrounding mountain peaks covered by the first snow of the season glistening in the sunlight. Inside the restaurant much less stunning conversations take place, as at our table, which is why I am daydreaming about mountain peaks glistening in the sunlight.

But just then, my boyfriend softly touches my arm and brings me back into reality. I have been asked how I like Zürich so far and although he is a great conversationalist, I still need to answer one or the other question myself. How I like Zürich so far... well, where should I start.

This morning I was strolling around the city with my boyfriend and his friends. We were sauntering through the narrow streets of the old town, admiring the splendid old buildings against the most idyllic backdrop of the Zürichsee amidst the gentle hills and mountain ranges. It is a beautiful city indeed. Every couple of minutes we heard the engine of a luxury car roaring, as yet another Mercedes-Benz G-Class drove by. Apparently, a popular winter car for those who drive metallic-blue Lamborghinis or bright red Ferraris in summer. *How enviable ... wouldn't it be great to be so rich ... to drive the most expensive cars?*

Whether I could imagine living in Zürich, that is the next question my boyfriend's inquisitive (or simply polite?) friends ask me. They had both moved here a couple of years ago because Zürich is the best city to make money. A lot of money. You don't need to pay as much for taxes here as in Austria or Germany. Yes, the cost of living is higher but still you are able to save more up. And then you can make your savings, your money, work for you. You just have to invest wisely in stocks and, right now, in crypto currencies. It is a good time to enter the market, as many have sold their stocks out of pandemic-panic and the crypto market is pumping. They are moving into a new apartment, a luxurious new construction. They show us a video. ... *Can I imagine living in Zürich? No, not really. I would not be happy here. It is too far away from my family and friends, from the garden I have planted, the forests I walk almost every day, from everything that is dear to me actually. Honestly, it doesn't seem like my kind of place.*

Where I would like to live then, they ask me. Whether I like to travel, what kind of places I like, where I have been so far. This beautiful girl sitting across from me explains that she really likes to travel. She is from a small village too, felt suffocated there. More cows than people. An awful place to live. She travelled a lot. Spent some time in America as an au pair. Then another six months in Australia couch-surfing, staying in hostels, sleeping in tents somewhere in the outback. She has a busy job now. Not that much time to travel. Yet every now and then she can make a trip. It is important to see the world. To go to as many places as possible. Her partner agrees, not with the hostels or the couch-surfing, but with seeing the world. He'd rather go on a cruise. Sleep comfortably in a bed while the ship takes you to places. Less of a hassle and less dangerous. ... Also, less of an adventure and less memorable, she retorts.

They show me some Instagram pictures of their last vacation. They both look fantastic and their surroundings even more. They are on an almost empty beach in Bali. The water is crystal clear, the sand golden, the palm trees look like they are bowing to the setting sun. They smile into the camera. A broad smile, pearly-white teeth. Their skin is sun-kissed. She has freckles on her nose that have now vanished in the cold European winter climate. In the picture her hair is also bleached from the sun and the salt water; it looks slightly (but stylishly) dishevelled by the sea breeze. Their bright orange matching swimwear shows off their athletic bodies. He holds her tightly in his strong, brawny arms. The perfect couple. If I want to follow them on Instagram, they ask. Then I could have a look at the rest of their photos in case we want to go to Bali next year. I tell them that I do not use social media. They look puzzled. They ask me why not.

My boyfriend jumps in. He talks about this friend of his who quit his apprenticeship and went to Indonesia. He is doing courses there, to become a yoga teacher and surf instructor. He enjoys his life in Bali. It's less rigid, less stressful than here in Europe. They are fascinated, ask for his Instagram account, swipe through a couple of his pictures.

Him in white linen clothing doing yoga poses on a porch, in the background a steep cliff, seemingly endless green jungles and the wide blue ocean. Him on a scooter driving down a long winding road. Him on a simple wooden swing at a beautiful beach watching the sunrise. ... *How enviable ... wouldn't it be great to be in Bali .... to live such a life?*

Suddenly, another memory pops up in my mind, like one of those ads on websites. It was something somebody said in a literature class at university, which kind of stuck with me. We had just read "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" and were starting to discuss it, when one girl almost indignantly said that she thought it was a terrible or at least terribly sad story because Mr. Chips did not make anything out of his life. When he was young, he had aspirations, he had goals, he had dreams and wishes. None became true. He died an old man having achieved nothing, having reached nothing, having done nothing remotely special. I was surprised - or was I not? In a society where everybody wants to be special at all cost, wants to be unique, anything but ordinary, a story like this seems scandalous. A man who is satisfied with what he did, with how he lived, with what he saw. The story, considered to be an ode to the ordinary, must be frightening to those who fear an ordinary life the most. To people who must go everywhere, see everything, chasing fame or power or money or experiences...

I really enjoyed the story. I enjoyed it like many other little things. The little wonders you see every day in your ordinary life. Like mountain peaks covered by the first snow of the season glistening in the sunlight. Or the narrow streets of an old town. Or the even smaller things, such as watching a bird sitting on your windowsill. Or drinking a hot cup of tea on a cold winter's day. Or dancing when your favourite song plays on the radio. One would think that this is enough, enough to make us satisfied and happy and fulfilled.

For some, though, this is not enough. It might never be enough. So, they keep on climbing and chasing without rest.

Today is your day!  
Your mountain is waiting.  
So...get on your way!  
~Dr. Seuss~

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## the window to epiphany

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by franziska eller

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

*She'd come to not enjoy working at the ski lodge.*

To her it seemed as if every person who went there to have a drink, couldn't fully appreciate the surroundings and wasn't aware of how fortunate they were at this moment; to be able to afford to go to such a place, let alone have a drink in this divine setting. The lodge, located near St. Moritz, was built in the 60s. A time when the mountain village experienced economic prosperity - a trend that was to continue until today. She, Annie, a twenty-seven-year-old girl from Austria with long auburn hair and amber eyes with a distinct golden hue, had been obsessed with the, oh, so golden age of skiing and fresh powder snow. Films like "The White Ecstasy" and countless nostalgic photographs of ski meccas such as Grenoble, Zermatt, Courchevel, and Ischgl had always captivated and enchanted her. A warm and comforting longing to experience all this herself would settle in her heart, whenever she dreamt of being present at one of these places during that time. That's why she had decided to quit her job as a secretary and move to St. Moritz to start a new life as a concierge. If only she had known what would await her. Coming from a small town in the heart of Austria, she knew a lot about winter, snow, and skiing, but little about the *beau monde* society of St. Moritz.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first week as a concierge had been a punch in her face.

Annie suddenly realized that she had known nothing about the etiquette that people expected of her. She also didn't know that being wealthy and influential were the two key factors of how people would treat you. St. Moritz was not at all what she had imagined it to be. It seemed as if



snow was the currency of the Alps, a reason to wrap up in thick, luxury fur coats, eat overpriced fondue with paper-thin grated truffles on top of it and drink gallons of champagne – of course, if you could afford to do so. If you couldn't, you simply were not right in St. Moritz, and she certainly wasn't. Now, working as a concierge for more than one year, she'd gotten used to jet set filling up the great hall of the lodge, savoring the unrealistically beautiful and precious sides of life without ever being aware of them. Her rhapsody about this place had been dulled, and she seldom lost a thought on how she had imagined St. Moritz to be. The glittering imagination of the fusion of sport, winter, warmheartedness and the art of skiing had worn off and had been replaced by a sobering reality.

It was the early morning of the 27th of December and she stood in the great hall. It was almost half past six – most people wouldn't get out of their beds until ten – and she enjoyed the serenity and quiet of the moment. She looked out of the big glass windows, watching little snowflakes dance through the air, finally landing on the ground, forming fluffy clouds of snow. That's when he caught her eye. He must have been standing there for at least twenty minutes, one hand in his trousers' pocket, the other hand clasping a cup of a hot beverage. His black hair, flecked with grey, was tousled back. He was wearing glasses that were rimmed with thin metal, and had a neat looking knitted sweater draped over his slouched back. Studying him, she remembered, that he and his nine-year old son had checked in just a couple of days before – Kane, yes, that was his name. Mr. Kane from Berkshire. Torn out of the moment of silence, she decided to walk over to the gentleman to ask if there was anything he might need.

“Good morning, Mister Kane, is there anything I could do for you? Maybe something warm to eat or another hot drink?”

No answer.

She inquired again “Mister Kane?”

He finally averted his eyes from the window. “Ah, yes... I mean, no. No, thank you. I... I'm just enjoying this quiet moment.”

“It's fascinating right? I always wish that I were one of those snowflakes, they seem to be...”, she searched for the right word, “weightless.”

“Desirable... yes, being able to be carefree, getting whirled and carried around, feeling weightless.”

They both glanced out the window, cherishing the moment together. She flashed a look at him and noticed that deep dark circles rimmed his eyes, his hand still clutching the cup.

“You know, I've been to St. Moritz before,” he offered, “when I was just a kid. I came here with my parents, every winter actually.”

He smiled.

“We'd rent a hut and spend Christmas there, it was magical. Some of my best memories go back to that time.”

As he said that, his eyes started to sparkle. Annie knew that sparkle all too well. It was the same sparkle she had gotten every time she'd dreamt about coming to St. Moritz.

“So much has changed. It used to be such a warm and welcoming place, and people had so much fun, of course. To see and be seen, that's what it seems to be about today. What a pity.”

Annie wasn't sure what she should answer, Mr. Kane was speaking to her very heart. Though, she wasn't sure whether she could confess that she felt the same way, as it might influence her job. She looked at him once again. He radiated a certain kind of melancholy. As if he had experienced a great sorrow, so great that he could not deal with. In that suffering there was, however, a lot of warmth and cordiality, so, she decided to confide in him.

"I agree with you. Though we are surrounded by beauty, people do not seem to see it. They come here to be pampered, to party, to celebrate and most importantly to spend a lot of money, but they can't see the beauty that lies outside these luxuries."

Not wanting to say too much she asked him: "What about your son? Is he enjoying his holiday?"

"Honestly? I don't think so. The lodge is stunning and the food exquisite. But I can tell that he isn't enjoying himself."

His once smiling face turned into a frown.

"I'm here because him, you know. Last May he got diagnosed with leukemia .... I.. I thought that we should do something special, that's why we came here."

He paused for a moment, deep sorrow spread over his face, gripping his whole posture. She could remember the boy clearly; he had the same hair as his father and his skin was very pale when she first saw him. *'The world is an unfair place,'* she thought to herself.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," she said sincerely, "if there is anything that I can do for you ..."

Her voice dropped knowing that there probably wasn't anything that she could do that would change the predicament of that poor little guy and his father.

"No, thank you. But thank you, really. It was nice having a genuine, sincere conversation. We'll see what we can still make of this holiday. It's my fault, to be honest. I should've known that St. Moritz right now is a posh place. Lots of my friends actually told me so. I probably should have listened to them."

He slowly straightened up and looked out the large window one last time. During their conversation the snow flurry had developed into a blizzard.

"I need to go now. But it was nice talking to you!" He showed her a kind smile, waved at her, strode down the great hall, and finally disappeared behind the heavy carved oak door at the far end.

\* \* \* \* \*

She kept thinking of the conversation with Mr. Kane. Thoughtfully, she looked out the window. This short exchange had stirred something in her. Something that had been dormant inside her very soul for a long time. She sat down on the chair in front of the window and looked out for what felt like an eternity. All the feelings she had originally associated with the golden days of skiing slowly emerged.

They were still there.

At that moment, she realized that those feelings never emanated from the places themselves. It was more the mood that these images and films triggered in her. Mister Kane had told her how much he had enjoyed these holidays in St. Moritz in the little hut. At that moment she understood that ideas did not always have to be restricted by reality. Rather, one should arrange one's reality according to one's ideas. At that moment, she decided to find a hut where she could experience that very feeling – that feeling of warmth. What she had in mind wasn't an image, but rather a mood, an atmosphere that she wanted to find. The hut should be welcoming, filled with warm-hearted people and loving words. Staying there, one should feel at ease and have a happy-go-lucky mindset that would light up even the darkest of days. She wanted that place to bring joy to herself and to guests like Mr. Kane and his son. It should feel real and simple, not overly flashy, or luxurious.

It should feel like home.

She looked outside once more, watched the snowflakes fall once more, and a small smile flitted across her face – she had found her purpose and her aspiration. And she finally realised what she had been looking for, for so long.

*She'd go and find that hut and create that atmosphere.*

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## the untouchable companion

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by temidayo moles akinyele

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

*This story is totally based on imagination. You are about to go through the realm of the unknown where nothing exists but voices...read carefully without imagination {a loud laughter fades through the background}. Two voices appear shortly in a mirror hung on the wall without him knowing as he is fast asleep.*

\*\*\*

{Voice 1}: Yes, I am really happy, today is the day. I hope he will understand our message, because I have tried to tell him before. I am just so tired. Why can't there be a place where communication is easy? A world where we do not need to say much before anyone understands.

{Voice 2}: He has always had that moment. I wish he could see the beauty that lies beyond his view. The craving for more than he could think of and the perfect energy that lies with me. Yes, I will reveal myself to him today and tell him I can be the only friend he can trust and talk to, more than he craves to talk to others. I always want to talk and I always listen to him but today I will make sure I show myself so he could love himself more than anyone else.

\*\*\*

*The visible...*

A different day with different metrics, yet a perfect time to at least imagine if there could be a better world where communicating with the invisible is possible, perhaps through an application or a medium. Today being Tuesday is the reason why everything seems beautiful starting with the excitement from the phone call I have just received, to the sight of my room which seems different from how it was last night, to my bed, and most importantly my mirror. Woke up early today, quickly put on my clothes, so I would not miss my train, but just then I saw something that fascinated me in the mirror. I saw two different images. In shock, I took my

time to dither. “They look like me, but is this really me?” I said to myself as I glanced again to cogitate voraciously. Forgetting I have a train to catch, I asked the one in the left corner of the mirror “who are you?” Surprisingly, he said “who are you?” Being anxious, I pointed towards him asking once more but this time in a commanding tone mixed with a little curiosity like a commander expecting total pliability. “Who are you?” I said, and he just re-echoed “who are you?” It was then that the second image started laughing. In my surprised state and being out of patience, I shouted at him. Then silence. Being caught in this fantasy, I went to get my notes.

*The two voices continue the dialogue as he leaves the room.*

{Voice 1}: That is what you always do. You always do the exact opposite of what we agreed on. Look at just how noisy you are! What impertinence. Rubbish!

{Voice 2}: You were too fast to show up. Why didn’t you wait for me? Just be calm, everything will go as planned. I’ve always told you, take things slowly.

At this time I knew that maybe there is a drama I had been too blind to see but I feel I have the time today. Quickly, I pick up my notes and drink some water. I feel a little tense realising what I have just heard and see the unseen but there might be a new message I have to decipher. And I convince myself to go back to see and really know, who these creatures are. I have to make a choice, to sacrifice my appointment for Narcissus. Of course!

\*\*\*

*The communion of the visible and the invisible...*

Going back towards the mirror, as I gaze through the curtain I can see both of them still talking and arguing seriously. I interrupt them, “gentlemen shall we begin?” Turning at once to me with expectancy, I look straight into their eyes, “who goes first?” I say. They both understand, then they interrupt each other with same words: “I will go first”. Then, the first one says insecurely, “Why do you always want to be the first? You are so rude. You don’t even have manners”. Then, the other says genteelly with a voice like a perfect breeze that often blows in summer when the sun is out, “I am sorry if I made you feel that way”. The words had a deep sense of love and from his facial expression he felt sorry and honest. Then, I address the first one, “Why do you appear first and why are you angry?” He takes a deep breath first and then a moment to choose his words. He starts by saying “I tried to be perfect and do everything right. It is painful to try to do everything and yet not have the result you want. I try to remain calm but he always makes me feel I am not enough. This is the reason I try to always talk first. I don’t trust anyone, I only love myself and want the best for me. They have wronged me so much and I have to seek revenge and beat them out. Honestly, nobody loves me. When I feel I have someone that I can really trust, they turn their back on and I do not want to compete anymore ...” Before he continues I quickly interrupt him with another question, “Why do you feel everything is a competition?” As if something just broke loose in him, he responded with a shout “Yes! Yes! Yes! Everything is a competition. Just look at the way he is looking at me, like I am wrong, No! Don’t tell me to calm down. Don’t tell me I am shouting. He is the one making me shout.” He looks so inferior and intimidated while the other person remains quiet. So, I quickly address the other person asking him same question. It takes him some minutes to respond but his first words are “I am so sorry if I make you feel inferior. I always want you to know you are more than how you see yourself. I don’t struggle for anything because I am in a place of peace and rest. Every necessary energy I need comes to me. I want to share this with him. Perhaps, I hope, this time we can talk without a fight.” He says this looking to the left and

then keeps quiet. I observe the way he spoke and his facial expressions. He looks so honest and you could see the love in his eyes.

\*\*\*

*The moment...*

For the next few minutes, I am surprised there is no argument as I continue to stare at the mirror. "This is perfect", I say to both of them sounding like a man who has finally got the magic of these hidden images. I think I know what these is all about, now, you guys, are me. You are voicing out what I think about every second and from your voices and tones I can easily see who you really are.

To my surprise now they both laugh and smile. It becomes more interesting because I know these conversations always happened within me. They are both a light I cannot touch and energy from within. They are my moods and my emotions. As I continue to gaze, it feels like I am a modern Narcissus, who fell in love with his image while gazing his reflection on the water, but this time, this is different, I have two images who are now my companions. Unhesitatingly, I ask the first one what name I should call him. Spontaneously he says "call me Frank", which is actually my third name. Then, I ask the second one and he says, "you can call me Martins." We both smile as he knows exactly what's on my mind. You are "Rodan Frank Martins", he says. Then, I say, "This is beautiful let's make the perfect team and keep each other company. Let's have deep conversations and let's always tell each other everything. Emotionally we can help each other out and and stop fighting."

So we agreed. Then Martins told me that they had always wanted to talk to me but I never took the time to notice and they always appeared but ... and while he said this, Moses nodded his head in agreement. I asked them what they would like to eat but the both affirmed, "we are not hungry." I said "it is okay then", and Martins reminded me of my meeting. I checked my wristwatch. "It's in twenty minutes," and off I went to catch my train. "Don't worry you won't miss your appointment," I heard as I was locking the door.

\*\*\*

*...and his reflections...*

After I left the mirror their images keep reverberating in my head but with peace and harmony this time. It gave me a reason to smile and try to think of the questions I would like ask my invisible company. The image I only see in the mirror. I do now is look at my mirror then start...

\*\*\*

*The invisible...*

{voice 1}: Are you happy now? You have revealed our secret to him.

{voice 2}: Our secret? Oh now it is OUR secret?

A new voice appears...

{Loud laugh fades}

THE END

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## silence and other mysteries of the universe

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by ronny kern

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

Professor Leya Maxwell's laboratory fell silent; a whispered cracking of electricity was the only result of the latest experiment. She threw her notes into the air and slammed her head onto the desk with a loud “thump.” Her hair was adequately scattered for a woman of her profession. Her countenance of a mad scientist fit in perfectly with the stereotypical stained lab coat, mocha brown trousers, and nailed shoes. Even her stormy dark-grey eyes, filled with a nick of motion, seemed to inherit the mania of a lunatic which is the result of having seen more pages under neon than days filled with sunlight.

Slowly the door opened, and a shocked assistant poked his head through, “Are... Are you okay Professor?”

Maxwell grunted in response and pushed back her chair and rose. “I am so close to stabilizing the plasma. There is just ...” “One tiny part missing,” completed the assistant. “You keep saying that. However, I know this is not my place or anything ...” He stared towards the ceiling and stammered on. “And I truly do not want to talk down to you in anyway ... I was just thinking. Maybe...”

The Professor sighed deeply and let herself slump back into the chair, “I get it, John.” She looked straight into the eyes of her assistant. “You are quite concerned about my well-being, however, have you looked at yourself and your academic success recently?”

Shock filled John’s face. He froze, unable to speak nor shake. Maxwell’s gaze remained firm while she got up once more and came closer.

Once more, static electricity engaged as the sole barrier against deafening silence.

She grinned, stepped forward into earshot and said softly, “You are right, we both need a break, so I’ll invite you to dinner.”

John snapped out of his stasis and tried to recollect himself, “Eh, yeah... No. I mean. Yeah. Why did you have to frighten me like that?”

The Professor stepped back and laughed wholeheartedly, “You should have seen your face! I just could not resist.” Maxwell slowly got a grip on herself. “But my offer is genuine. We both need a good meal.”

Fifteen minutes later she pushed the doors open and inhaled warm evening air filled with the laden scent of flowers, earth, and a hard-working day. The buzzing streets contrasted her quiet laboratory with a constant flood of busy cars, and even busier people. A dark cloud crept closer and dampened the light foreshadowing an ensuing thunderstorm. A deep and saturated roll of thunder rumbled through the streets. The wind started to pick up together with the frantic rush of people. It felt to Maxwell like just a moment until the loud buzzing ceased and only a few stragglers lingered.

“What a peculiar change,” she noted to herself, “this storm caused the city to become still – serene even.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting Ms. Maxwell,” shouted John as he rushed down the flight of stairs outside the physics department. “I couldn’t find my briefcase, and then I lost my glasses, and then ...”

He continued his explanation; however, Maxwell was once more lost in her own thoughts. She looped back to the thunder from earlier and could only speculate about the marvellous inventions harnessed by energy utilization of a simple strike of lightning.

She recalled the soft hum of electricity. The feeling of charge in her fingertips. “So much energy and power,” she thought, “I can save so many by just solving this last small ...”

She was yanked from her thoughts as she felt a tapping on her shoulders. She only then realized that she stared at her own hand like a maniac.

John’s voice followed shortly, “You were utterly gone. I am sorry Ms. Maxwell, but you really need to take a break from work.”

She slowly lowered her hand and could only nod, her thoughts still lingered on this static crackling, she just could not understand why.

The electric charge in her own circuit remained even when she sat down in her favoured culinary whereabouts: Lil’ Joe’s Steakhouse. It was a slow Tuesday evening, apart from them only a handful of people were tactically scattered around the room so everyone could enjoy as much privacy as a 25 m<sup>2</sup> restaurant can offer.

She ordered the usual consisting of a medium-rare steak, some fries, and a hearty craft beer. After exchanging some pleasantries, they waited for their food in silence. It was a frank silence where both parties were just too tired to talk, yet both needed the presence of another human being.

Not long after, their food was served, and both devoured it in a matter of minutes. Maxwell only then realized how unhealthy her lifestyle had become. The last time she regularly ate three meals a day was probably in college when she still lived with her sister. “She was always the responsible one, grounded in reality,” the Professor thought, “At least one of us became happy.” She smiled to herself and before her thoughts would climb down once more into those dark, past days where nothing pleasant remains to be salvaged, she needed to distract herself.



“John.”, She said, “I have never asked you why you always stay so late. I mean a handsome lad as yourself must have someone waiting for you, right?”

He seemed perplexed, not only by the certain reanimation of their conversation, but also by that personal question.

He briefly washed down his astonishment with a big gulp from his second beer and answered, “Yeah, I actually do. But she is the same sort of lab rat as I am, so before midnight the apartment is only a dark, hushed hull.” She saw the double-edged sword of love in his eyes and realized that she had no right to ask these questions. Blushing slightly after the realization, she resorted to the only topic she knew: Science.

“Anyway, how is your doctorate coming along? You must be close to finish, aren’t you?”

His expression lightened by the welcomed subject change. They were, in the end, quite similar.

His eyes, now filled with a shimmer of scientific mischief, assiduously explained his research, and before long, forgot the sadness the silence had caused.

“You have to see, by polarizing the leptons I was able to mitigate any deviant interferences, practically rendering the test tube soundproof from an electromagnetic perspective. The inert gas-mixture was too conductive, so I resorted to vacuum instead which again reduced deviant paths and generated more electrons drawn towards the anode. I still have some improvements in mind to silence it further before I can start with the data collection, but ...” he went on, and the Professor just listened.

Half an hour later, John ended his detailed account with a satisfied smile and laid back on the chair. Maxwell propped herself on her elbows and contemplatively observed John like a science experiment.

“Why is it so important to soundproof your experiment?” She asked.

“Well,” he summarized once more, “the magnetic field of our heating coil around the beta emitter was interfering – and caused chaos and visible noise in the Geiger counter. So, we had to silence the procedure by encapsulating the cathode to not only accelerate electrons in one direction, and ...”

She was out the door the second she knew the solution. It had always been around her and yet she had never noticed: Silence.

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## a unique case or a positive outlook?

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by nina ampferer

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

Knock, knock, was the sound coming from the door marked with the sign: "House No. 104"

The little boy did not look at it, however, because even if he did, he would not have understood what it meant. House No. 104. There were no such signs decorating houses in his home country. Without lifting his head, the boy waited for someone to open the door. He was still in complete uncertainty as he did not know whether the door would open and, if so, who would be on the other side. Was it a woman who lived there alone and was probably already asleep or was it a family who would not even care to open? Fear of uncertainty was written all over his face. Was it two seconds, two minutes or already two hours that he had been standing in front of that very door? "Does the doorbell work at all?" he asked himself. In his mind, it felt as if he had been waiting for days.

The moment he detected movement behind the door, the boy began to tremble. Finally, the time had come. The door suddenly opened. The boy still looked down towards the landing and did not dare lift his head. Only when he heard some sounds coming from the mouth of the person who opened the door did he slowly raise his head and looked at the person straight in the eye. It was a man in his nightclothes who looked as if he had just woken up. The man and the boy looked at each other and did not say a word for a while until the boy started uttering words that the man could not decipher. It took some time for the two to find a way to communicate using non-verbal communication. It was evident that the boy needed shelter and did not know a soul in the city. The man opened the door wide and indicated through a hand gesture that the little boy could enter. The boy was evidently overjoyed when he was invited into the house. Still, his mind would never stop worrying about his own future and the future of his family. Once indoors, a lady came to meet him as well, smiled at him in a friendly way and offered him a cup of tea and a blanket to warm himself up. After he had finished his tee, they sat in silence. It felt warm and homely and soon he fell asleep on the couch...

The next morning, just as his eyes were barely open, the boy took a deep breath. The smell of freshly baked gingerbread reminded him of being in a bakery. By the time he opened his eyes to double-check that it wasn't a dream, a generous portion of gingerbread and a glass of cold milk had already been placed beside the couch on a side table. He sat up but did not touch the food as he was not certain whether it was actually served for him. After all, he didn't want to be disrespectful and eat the breakfast of the house residents who so openly welcomed him. So he simply straightened up and stretched himself until his bones cracked. He felt strong and ready for a new day. When he got up, the friendly lady came up and greeted him. The moment she pointed to the gingerbread and the milk indicating that these were for him, he began to eat eagerly. After he had eaten, the lady led him into a room full of toys. The toys looked somewhat well-used and rather old-fashioned but were still in good shape. The boy walked through the room and took a closer look at some of them. They ranged from all sorts of dolls to Lego.

"You're probably wondering why these two old people have so many toys," the lady said, pausing a little. "We have two grandchildren, you know... our son has two toddlers who come regularly and play with all these. When they come again you are welcome to play with them."

The boy only partially understood what the woman was saying. However, he understood the key message in the statement and nodded. As he continued to look around for other toys, he suddenly saw a ball with various thread-like strings inside. When the woman realised that the boy was focusing on it, she switched off the light to show him the glow of the ball. As soon as one touched the ball on a specific spot, it looked as if all the glowing strings pointed towards the hand and shone brightest there. The boy then burst into tears. Quickly, the woman switched the light back on and wanted to turn the ball off. The boy, however, held the ball in his arms as tightly as he could, as if it had reminded him of his past. It was clear to the woman that the ball had an extraordinary meaning for him. She continued to watch the boy until she began to speak again. "I know you don't understand everything I'm saying. Maybe it's for the best ... but this globe is very special. When you touch it, all the threads stretch in your direction. This happens all over the world. So when you touch the sphere you may even feel a connection to your home. You can always remember, and you will never forget where you come from. Even if you have found a new home with us now ... if you want to stay with us of course ..."

Days passed, weeks passed, months passed. The boy gradually learned more English every day and was able to narrate more and more about his past. According to him, he and some of his relatives had come to this country but for some reason had been separated. He had been left all alone and desperate to find shelter and food. His parents had been gone long ago.

"Where I come from ten thousand candles were burning as the skyline had caught fire.  
We all carried the longing in our hearts and have been dreaming of a fresh start for so long.  
Our gaze absorbed in the stars as not much remained of our homeland.  
When finally, the distance called us, and we wandered away.  
Now we have come so far and seen so much that we do not understand.  
Climbed mountains to stand here today.  
Swum across oceans to escape wars.  
Crossed borders and marched in tears until we finally found our new identity here."

This what he wrote when he started attending school and learning to write in his new language. And he was 104 times grateful to the elderly couple, his new family. After all, 104 turned out to be his lucky number.

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## the ice beneath me

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by jaqueline riediger

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

I'm so powerful  
I don't need batteries to play  
I'm so confident  
Yeah, I'm unstoppable today  
Unstoppable today  
Unstoppable today  
(*Unstoppable* by Sia)

I use my breath rather than my voice “just a few more steps.” The falling snow melts on my pale face. It mixes with the sweat on my forehead, runs down and paves its way through my eyebrows. It stops.

Gathers.

Till drop by drop it falls on my red cheeks. Hot and cold water unite. Warming and cooling one another. Cold from the eyebrows, warm from the eyes.

“Just a few more steps...”

My ski boots pull me towards the flood of ice and snow. Every time I move forward, the white beast holds me back. With each step, its ice-cold claws grip around my legs, stopping me to carve my way through the endless elevated expanse. Its white pelt freezes my fingertips and all my movements whenever I dare touch it. I am not moving from the spot; the great peak will simply not come nearer. These boots are definitely not made for walking in the snow, neither am I. Personally, I love the summer, the beach, the sea. I love lightness. It was her idea to

spend this year's holiday in the mountains. It was her idea to hit the slopes today. It was her idea to go off-piste.

She makes all decisions. When. Where. What. And she just expects me to simply adapt. It's been that way ever since I met her.

I stop.

My hands have turned burning red, but feel like ice. I pull them closer to my lips; breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. My glasses start to mist up in just a few seconds. Breathe in. Breathe out. The steam blocks my sight, but the ring on my left hand shines bright through it. Our ring. You chose it. Of course, you did. I loved it at the beginning, but not anymore. Breathe in. Breathe out. We need to talk about that. And we need to talk about other things as well. We should have done that this morning. Hell, we should have done that months ago! But you decided not to, so we didn't.

Breathe in. Breathe out. In. Out.

I can somewhat feel my fingers again; clench them into a fist and stretch them out again.

Absently, I repeat it several times.

"Just a few more steps," this time it is my voice. Little frozen sharp crystals cut my fingertips, when I cling into the beast's pelt. I keep ignoring the coldness. The creature allows me to step just a few more paces towards its head. I push my upper body towards my blood red hands and pull my right knee higher; the left, I can only drag. The pain draws the air from my lungs and nearly chokes me.

We should have talked about it this morning. I hear you asking, "About what?"

About what? **About what?!**

Maybe about the fact that you've changed. That we've changed. Maybe about the fact that everything this very ring stands for has changed.

*Nonsense! Everything's fine.*

No, Eve, it's not! You keep pushing yourself too far and keep forcing me to come with you. Keep putting me in situations in which the only feeling I experience is pain or danger. Keep dragging me to places I don't belong to. Expecting me to simply **adapt** to every situation. Apparently, we can't separate because we share a heart. Or at least we used to share one until last summer. The longer we follow the same path, the more I realize how far we grew apart. The more I realize that I have had no say in choosing this path. And no say in you branching off. You keep pulling the strings that slowly but surely will choke me some day. You've been changing and with every decision you make, the rope continues to get tighter and tighter. I can already hardly breathe.

But I will not allow myself to suffocate. Not this time. Not after having come so far. Beasts are only beasts as long as someone allows them to be exactly that. Fear only remains fear as long as you empower it. All the attempts of holding me back had been successful in the past.

But not this time. This time it is me who gets to choose. It is me who decides what happens next. No more oppressive feelings and no more coldness. Neither in my hands nor my heart. I decided that the tightness in my throat finally needs to make room for my voice.

With these next few steps, I will decide the future. **My** future. They require careful planning. Every thought, every execution needs structure. One rash move will send me plummeting and freezing to death in the flood of cold that lies beneath me. And even though these steps scare me, I cannot stay where I am. Maybe the ice will break beneath me. Maybe my heart will. It has been too long that I have been trapped in this iciness. Someone needs to defeat the beast and if not you, Eve, then I will. I will start this battle for both of us. Courage is what the white beast fears and what finally enables me to climb those final steps.

Shivering I come to an end. I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. “You got this, Eloise”, I mutter to myself. My lungs fill with air, my eyes with water. This very water starts to block my sight when I exhale.

Inhaling once again. Then I perform a final act of courage.

“Eve, I know you expect me to forgive you for last summer, but...”

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## in search of ultimate freedom

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

by markus bader

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

*“How do you find your **freedom** in a modern, free world? Is it enough to have the **freedom** to choose between fish and steak in the canteen during lunch break? Maybe vegetarian, if you dare. Maybe it is enough to have the **freedom** to choose between 400 TV channels in the evening? Five days a week, people flock to the office towers in the cities in the morning, and in the evening, they flood back home. If you were to see this spectacle for the first time as a casual observer, you would compare the flow of people to the ebb and flow of the tides. People profess to enjoy their lives because they have so much **freedom**. Five days a week, however, this is not the case for most of them. The faces you see in the morning and evening in cars, and public transport speak a different language. If that's what happiness and contentment look like, you probably don't want to be happy and content.”*

These were Konstantin's thoughts as he stood once again in front of the buffet in his company's canteen. He has been trapped in the hamster wheel for five years now. Trapped in a prison of concrete and glass in search of the **freedom** he had longed for.

*“What will it be for you?”* the cook asked as Konstantin stared into space. *“You have the **freedom**, today we have steak, fish, or could it possibly be something vegetarian?”* the cook pressed on as if to irritate him.

*“Some people are looking for a different kind of **freedom**. You don't find that kind of **freedom** in a canteen or the offices of this world. This kind of **freedom** is found in the remotest corners of the earth. Especially on the snow-covered peaks, the higher they are, the greater the feeling of **freedom** becomes,”* shouted Konstantin throughout the canteen.

*“Next, please,”* stuttered the visibly annoyed cook.

*“The fish, please,”* murmured Konstantin, still amazed that he had obviously just revealed his innermost thoughts to the entire staff.

The path to his dining table was paved with the probing eyes of his work colleagues. It was impossible to disappear into the anonymity of the crowd as usual, and it was as if he could sense the thoughts of the others.

*“Is he crazy?”* the guy from the accounting department thought to himself.

*“Another one who is overwhelmed with the freedom to choose his food. I’ll say it again; one menu a day, and I wouldn’t have to wait so long for my food if another one doesn’t know what he wants.”* The well-fed parking attendant was sure.

Konstantin was also sure of something, namely that he had to escape from this prison, this hamster wheel, this constant choice between fish or steak. The sooner, the better. While he wolfed down his frozen fish, he pulled out his mobile phone and took a look at his bank balance.

“That’s easily enough for the expedition!!!”

Only now did he realise he was standing and shouting his thoughts all over the canteen once again. Now it was official. Konstantin would forever be the crazy one, and he didn’t care. Yet another reason to escape from this nightmare of concrete and glass.

...

Over the next few days, Konstantin felt his inner fire returning, and it blazed more than ever before. Without any doubt, he informed his employer that he would not return to the office for at least three months. So the two parted ways.

What followed was an intense phase of planning. As he wanted to escape both the mundane world and the imposed choices, he planned the expedition himself and did without an agency. The goal of his dreams was the summit of Dhaulagiri 1 via the south face, alone and in ‘alpine style’. There was no need for Konstantin to persuade his three best friends. They joined the expedition to the Himalayas without any hesitation.

...

After a long, arduous journey, Konstantin saw for the first time the object of his desire. This white pyramid of snow and ice had fascinated him for years. The dazzling white of the snow on the steep flanks of the rugged giant is only interrupted by the slightly bluish shimmer of the eternal ice. It is a mountain built on dreams and desires, covered with disillusionment and tragedy, yet, for him, it is also the epitome of **freedom**.

What followed was a monotony that could drive almost anyone to the brink of madness. Konstantin and his friends had to acclimatise to the high altitude. Every day was like the one before. Getting up at 5 a.m. Having oatmeal with hot water for breakfast, and at the same time, sharpening ice axes and crampons. Packing the equipment into the rucksack. Departure at 6:00 a.m. Climbing the seemingly endless flanks of the mountain, gaining a few more metres of altitude every day. Descending again to the base camp. Having freeze-dried noodles for dinner. Crawling into the sleeping bag, overtired. This routine was repeated every day for the next fourteen days. This routine would drive almost anyone to the brink of madness, except



Konstantin. For him, it was not monotonous; each day was more exciting than the one before. He could finally make his own choices. He didn't have to make banal decisions about whether he wanted fish or steak for dinner; he had to decide which route the group would take on summit day and what equipment they would need.

He made all decisions for the group. Everyone was strong, and everyone was ready. So, it was to be the infamous 4200-metre-high south face. A four-man team led by Reinhold Messner attempted the route in 1977 but withdrew at just over 6,000 metres because of the danger of loose rocks and ice. A Slovenian soloist succeeded in the first ascent, but after almost a week on the wall at 7,200 metres, he had to turn right because he did not trust an overhanging, 400-metre-high transverse rib of rotten rock. The direct route from the base of the wall to the 8,167-metre summit is, therefore, still outstanding. Now it was up to Konstantin and his friends to tackle this exceptional challenge. The last day at base camp dawned bright and sunny. Konstantin inspected his equipment one last time, and sharpened his ice axe and crampons. He counted the food rations and carefully packed them into his backpack. The last night in the safety of base camp flew by. No team member slept a wink; they were too nervous and excited.

So now it came, the day when Konstantin and his teammates would tackle the south wall. They set off early in the morning to get as far as possible on the first day. In the small cone of light from the headlamps, they trudged step by step towards the wall. Their path became steeper and steeper, and finally, it was time to unpack the ice axes. They hammered their ice axes into the eternal ice with precise strokes to gain further height. The wall became almost vertical, but Konstantin and his team made good progress, taking turns in the lead. He made all decisions concerning the guiding on the wall without a shadow of a doubt. Then the first rays of sunlight hit the mighty south face.

*“Do you feel how warm it is today? That's not good,”* one of the company called out.

The first snow and ice chunks were already loosening higher up above the group.

*“It's far too warm. We have to turn back. It's far too dangerous!”* yelled another friend.

*“I can't turn back. I have to keep climbing!”* screamed Konstantin.

*“That's insane. We're turning back! Right now!”*

More and more snow and ice came off the wall.

*“Then turn back. I'll continue alone.”*

Once again, Konstantin made the decision without any hesitation. He was ready to risk everything for his dream and his mountain. He continued alone and sent his friends back to base camp.

*“If you want to achieve something big, you have to be willing to give something big.”*

Konstantin told himself this sentence over and over again.

He felt richer and freer than ever before.

Around noon, he noticed that every time he hammered one of his ice axes into the ice, the whole wall around him shook.

*“The further up I climb, the better the ice gets, it gets better, it gets better...”*

The next blow was too much. The ice around Konstantin broke away from the vertical wall. A rumble of thunder accompanied the ice masses on their way down. Konstantin was in the middle of the free-falling ice masses rumbling down towards the valley floor.

He felt no fear, no remorse, no sorrow. He felt free. He fell down the mighty south wall with a smile on his face. Faster and faster.

...

His body may be trapped in the snow and eternal ice. His soul, however, is free and in a place, Konstantin loved so much. His body may be in a prison of snow and ice; nevertheless, his soul found the ultimate **freedom**.

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## the origin of tomorrow

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by **teresa folie**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

Growing up I have always aspired to be a businesswoman like the women I saw in the city when we visited the grocery store once a week. They were wearing suits or grey pencil skirts and looked all busy with their phones close to their ears.

Unlike them, we used to take the bus to the grocery store, my mom and I. It has always been just the two of us. When we had bought all the food for the week, we would take the next bus back home. I would sprint up the stairs of our apartment building to hold the door for my mom who dragged two heavy grocery bags and put them down by the kitchen counter. Back then, I did not notice the exhausted look on her face or the bags under her eyes. Now can I see that she looked tired – tired of life. She had not been hiding her exhaustion and the stress, but I just did not see it then. Now I do. Our apartment was small, but still, I had my own room where I would go and study. The furniture was an assortment of different styles and kinds of wood. We got most of it second-hand. Still, the apartment was cozy and had always felt like home for me.

Most of the time I was alone. My mom would cook for me and talk to me for a while when she got back from her third job late at night. While preparing the food, I would sit at the kitchen table and listen to her talking about her day or I would tell her about my school day. One day I asked her why she had chosen to become a shop assistant which was just one of her jobs. She told me that she wanted to work in finance and has started studying at university when she was twenty years old. “You’d like it there, too,” she said smiling as she tossed some spinach and tomatoes in the pan. She had to quit her studies when she became pregnant with me, she told me with a heart-rending smile. She had always wanted to finish her degree but after my father had left, she decided that it would be best if she took on a job. She had to work hard every day of the week, and even as a kid I knew that and I missed her. Back then I did not know why she worked so much but now I understand that we struggled financially. I knew that we were not as

well off as some of my classmates but that did never bother me. My mom provided me with everything I needed.

As I got older, my mother would always tell me to try my best and study hard so I would be able to get a scholarship to study at university. She encouraged me on my way and supported me with more than money and food. Even though my mother had been saving some money for my education, getting into a good university was not easy. It was so expensive, and my mother's monthly income was barely enough to pay for our rent and food.

Even if achieving my goals seemed impossible, she always believed in me. My dream to become a lawyer eventually became her dream, too. I had setbacks and struggled with motivation during my studies. Through it all, I still lived at home. I offered to take on a job as well, but my mother insisted that I concentrated solely on my studies. When I finally held my degree in my hands at graduation day after four demanding years, tears of joy ran down my face. My mother was beyond proud and smiled as a friend took a photo of the two of us. She looked much younger when she smiled, even though she was only 42 at the time.

That was one of the rare moments she seemed genuinely happy. It seemed like all the years of hard work and worries finally fell off her chest. After the graduation ceremony, she told me that she had arranged a little party to celebrate my achievement. Some of our friends and family were there and we had a wonderful time. When I was lying in bed that night mom came into my room. "You know that you achieved more than I could have ever wished for. I am so proud of you," she told me holding back her tears.

...

I made it! I really did! As soon as I finished my degree I moved into the city and when I was offered an amazing job opportunity in another state, I took it and moved across the country – all by myself. For the first time, my mom was not by my side supporting me. At first, I called her every other day; but eventually, I was too busy, and it became once a week and then once a month. Now I realize that I should have called more often, told her that I love her more often, visited her more often.

It would have been her 76th birthday today. Even though she was no longer with me and she would never be with me again, I decided to write a letter to her telling her everything I wish I had when she was still there.

Dear mom,

I am looking at the photo we took the day of my graduation right now, standing in my loft apartment on the twelfth floor. Surrounded by high quality dark wooden furniture I write this letter sitting on my large beige comfy couch. Although I can afford expensive furniture now, I kept the big wooden dresser you got me for my first college dorm room years ago. It makes this place feel more like home. I now see that nice furniture does not make a home but people do. You did.

At my age, you had to take care of a toddler in a small apartment,

working three jobs to pay the rent and all other monthly expenses. To raise me, you gave up your dreams. You never got to have the job you wanted as life got in the way.

You were young - full of life and hope for the future. As a kid, I did not know what you sacrificed to raise me but now I do. You never got the chance to fulfil your dreams, never finished your university studies.

I knew that you were exhausted, but I never dared ask you if you were happy. I wish I did, and I wish I had told you that you had always been my role model even though you probably thought I wanted to become a successful businesswoman like the ones we used to see in the city. But what I truly desired was to become as independent, strong, and loving as you have always been.

Because of you, I had never felt my dreams won't come true. Even if there were times I doubted myself, you never did. You are the origin of my high aspirations. You are the origin of my success.

Love,

Hope

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## never give up

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by aislinn katzlinger

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

*I want to tell you a story. A story that should show you that childhood dreams can come true, no matter how unattainable they may seem.*

*When looking at the picture, there seems to be only one goal. All that is wanted is to get up to the top, no matter how long or hard this will be. The important thing here is, that you never deviate from your goal and never give up.*

*Now let me narrate a little success story:*

Horses

There are people who consider them as animals.

There are people who consider them as objects.

There are people who consider them as friends.

Then, there are those few who consider them as family.

If you take a closer look at the development of the horse, you will notice that horses have always been like family for people, sometimes even more than family. They helped with the field work, pulled and carried us from A to B and fought to the bitter end in many a battle.

There are numerous advantages to owning horses or even just having them around from time to time. Of course, horses need a lot of time and care, a fact which some are not aware of, but which is definitely rewarding. After all, riding is not just a hobby or a sport, but an act of the heart. Horses behave in a unique way - a way we are still trying to understand.

Now, imagine a little girl. Her obsession with horses apparently began at a very early age. She cannot say exactly when she discovered her love for horses. There is absolutely no family background to this obsession. She once found a photo of her mother and father going horseback riding in Ireland, but otherwise she would almost consider them as absolute city people.

The girl, her name is Aislinn, was born in Tyrol, Austria, where she still lives. One of her earliest memories is visiting relatives and friends in England and one day being allowed to go to the nearby stables. She rode on a white pony whose name she forgot, but his soft, warm fur – she would ever remember. Maybe that was the day she became a horse girl, but her first riding lessons at the age of 7 were in fact the turning point.

She can't remember the first time she read a horse book, even though she was apparently a precocious reader. Not knowing the exact moment of entering the world of fictional horses and riders, she knows that her childhood was imbued with the characters from this horse world. Black Beauty was her first horse movie and was to be her last for a short time. Her mother found her crying in front of the TV, as the story was so beautiful and sad at the same time.

She spent her childhood and early adulthood longing for a horse of her own. Until then, she had spent her life immersing herself in horse books, sophisticated fantasies, wishful thinking, and all this while riding other people's horses with varying degrees of success.

Her most sophisticated – and heartbreaking – fantasy came from a competition hosted by a local newspaper when she was an eight-year-old child, in 2004. Can you guess what the prize was?

Of course, a pony!

One can only imagine the panic that such a competition must have caused among the parents of pony-crazy children and how they would quickly hide the newspaper from longing eyes. Once she saw the advertisement, she set her heart on winning the competition and somehow managed to apply. Of course, she didn't let her parents know. It was her cousin who helped her send the application in. She was convinced that she would win this pony. In her mind, the pony was already hers the moment she took part in the competition. She saw herself lead him into their garden, put him to bed in his (non-existent) stable, ride him through the alleys, pin everything in his (non-existent) gear, and drive him on the weekends in his (non-existent) box, pulled by a real (and tiny) Hyundai, to the riding school nearby.

She lived deep in this fantasy for weeks, waiting for the announcement that the pony was going to be delivered to her. It was so real that almost 20 years later she can still remember almost all the details. However, this memory is nowhere near as vivid as her heartbreak when the actual winner was announced, and as you can imagine it wasn't her.

She asked her mother to write to the editor and check if he hadn't made a mistake. It is not far-fetched to say that this disappointment and sense of loss only reinforced her lifelong longing for her own horse.

The arduous quest for a horse-share began, since she was constantly told that she could never afford a horse of her own. After many dashed hopes and bitter disappointments with fellow equestrians, she still cherished the dream of owning her own horse. Finally, her parents relented, having realised that this passion for horses was no fleeting phase but real. In a sense, riding had become an integral part of her life. Ironically, it was her father who ultimately found a horse for her. In the depths of winter, they went to see him three hundred kilometres away.

Her childhood dream came true when they took him back to Tyrol on a cold, snowy December day. Seven years later, he is still with her and has become a true companion. She still pinches herself that this childhood fantasy became a reality, and her childhood dream came true.

*Never abandon your aspirations, no matter how hard the way up is.*

## she's got it all

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by leonie marth

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

She wants to achieve great things, be someone, and that means making sacrifices.

*20 April 2022, 11:00 p.m.* | As the floor outside her office is being swept, she is still sitting at her desk. Some of the books in front of her have not been dusted since she's moved into the office a few months ago. The screens in front of her, spreading their light in the dark room which has become her second home, have not been turned off in a long time. She's working late, she's being productive, she's living her dream. That is, until her phone screen lights up, and a low-pitched sound, too familiar, fills the room. It's her mother calling. Just as she's reaching for her phone, it goes silent again. She's certain that her mother would have just told her to go home and work less because she simply doesn't understand the words 'work ethic'.

*10 May 2022, 9:45 a.m.* | The rattle of the coffee machine interrupts her racing thoughts. The line in front of her is not very long. She needs her daily dose of caffeine. Now. She's exhausted. Suddenly, she hears this very familiar, shrill voice calling out her name from the back of the coffee house. It's Sandra. Oh dear God, Sandra, her college friend. This loud but lovely person had invited her to a dinner party on the 12th. She has forgotten to call her back. "SO nice to see you! How are you? You look terrific!" She needs to get out of this conversation. Fast. She has to finish this report before noon. But Sandra's rambling on about her life and how fulfilling it is to stay home with the kids, a decision she cannot relate to at all. How can someone be that unambitious? How can someone prioritise family over success ...? "The dinner party on Saturday... Are you com—?" Her phone rings. It's her client. She has to take this call.

*12 May 2022, 9:31 p.m.* | The lamp in her office is flickering, struggling, fighting to survive, just like her. She's had a long day. What day is it anyway? It's the 12th. She goes to the mini-fridge and takes out a bottle of cold, soothing Chardonnay. She can have dinner with her



friends any other day, finishing this budget analysis cannot wait. She pours herself a glass of wine and stares into the void, into her computer screen. She's not alone. The others understand how important it is to get this business up and running. At least she hopes so. She starts questioning whether or not she has made the right decision. Should she call Sandra and tell her that she can make it after all? Should she just go over there and surprise them? They'll surely be delighted, they haven't seen her since she has started to work more. But they know that reaching a goal sometimes means having to prioritise work, don't they? She's got this weird feeling...

*31 August 2022, 8:32 a.m.* | An unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line asks, "Are you interested?" Her eyes light up like the flickering, bright lamp in her office she still hasn't had fixed. Of course she is! What a question. Finally! A chance to talk about making it on her own at this start-up conference! Her success in online marketing and in creating a business by herself is her greatest pride. Who should she tell about this call first? Her mother? No, she would just be upset... Her friends? Sandra? Wouldn't it be weird to call her after not having talked to her in weeks? She's chosen this path herself, she has created something great and has made her mark in the field. She's achieved everything by herself, alone – Is she lonely? Her buzzing phone interrupts her train of thought. It's... no one. Is she imagining things now?

*20 September 2022, 7:16 p.m.* | She feels her nervousness to the core of her body, but the warmth of the stage lamps calms her down. " – My journey has been a challenging one. Many decisions weren't easy, but my work is fulfilling. I chose this path and I wouldn't change a thing if I had to start all over again. I aspire to develop my business further, to grow it. I could never have done this without —" She's achieved great things, just as she wanted. She has become successful, just as she wanted. It seems as though she's got it all...

Still, this feeling lingers. This emptiness is consuming her just as her work did a few months ago.

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## up in the air

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

by **veronika kiesenebner**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2021/22

I'm up in the air,  
uncertainty growing fast -  
no pain to compare.

I woke up in the middle of the night, bathed in sweat. My heart was hammering against my breast. Even though I was sweating, I felt a cold, tight sensation in my chest. The light from the street lamp threw a strange flickering shadow against the walls of my bedroom. No sound was to be heard, except the wind that was howling through the trees outside. It was the third night in a row that I was startled out of my sleep. It was the third night without him by my side. He had left on Tuesday morning after we had had coffee together. Kissing me on my forehead he had whispered, “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I love you.” These were his last words. His last touch. His last smile.

Little did I know how much his absence would affect me... how much distress it would cause me. We have only been together for a little over five months, but everything feels different with him – in a good way. He had decided to go on this expedition long before we had met. Conquering the Eiger North Face had always been his grand pursuit. It was on our very first date that he had told me all of the men in his family had climbed this mountain. Back then, I did not have the slightest idea that he was talking about one of the most daunting and notorious climbing routes in the world. I only found out later that it had been considered invincible for centuries. But there was nothing that could have kept him from setting out on this expedition – neither me nor his human reason. Once he had taken it into his head, he was not open to persuasion. Guilty of being unsupportive, I eventually gave in and decided to assist him in achieving his goal. That was what I was supposed to do – wasn’t it? When he left three days ago, he gave me his word that we would be able hold each other again in four days’ time. It was that promise, I clung to. It was that promise, that set my mind at ease each and every time anxiety built up inside of me. It was that promise and the thought of him holding me in his arms that sent me to sleep again that night.



I woke up at four minutes past nine. Quite unusual for me. I have always been an early riser, but the constant worrying must have been wearing me down the past few days. After checking my phone for any notifications or missed calls, I crawled out of bed and groped my way to the bathroom. My eyes were swollen from lack of sleep. Even though it was Friday and the weekend was in sight, I could not muster any strength, let alone any excitement for the day. I did not bother to put much time and effort into covering the dark circles under my eyes and slipped into the very first pieces of clothing I could find on the pile of fresh laundry next to my bed that was still waiting to be folded. It was a light blue sweater, the one I had worn on our second date, and plain black jeans.

The plan was to meet a friend for brunch as I had expected I would need some distraction from the thoughts that would be plaguing my mind in his absence. As I was already running late, I rushed to my car and slammed the door behind me. My fear must have turned into anger. How can someone be so selfish? Leaving his loved ones in uncertainty and risking his life for a futile quest. Or am I selfish? Selfish for not approving his aspiration. Either way, it does not change the fact that he is gone and his return is up in the air. Even though I admire his dedication to achieve the lofty goals he has set to himself, I would rather he aspired to something less arduous and life-threatening. Driving through the streets, I was wondering if his lust for adventure could ever be satisfied and if I were to find myself on pins and needles every single time he would go on an expedition.

My mum called just as I was crossing the parking lot, walking towards the café. “Did you hear anything from him?” she asked with a note of concern in her voice. “No sign of life yet – no sign of anything!” I responded and tears started welling up in my eyes. It seemed as if she was the only one who could relate to my fear. Like me, she has been experiencing fear of loss ever since my sister unexpectedly died in a car accident three years ago. The grief of her death still walks beside me every day like a shadow. It is always there. I cannot run from it, I cannot hide from it and I could definitely not endure going through the same pain again. “Everything's going to be alright,” my mum assures me, “He will call today.”

Heartened by her encouraging words, I stepped into the warmth of the café and spotted my friend. She had already taken a seat in the rear corner, reading the menu. Most of the tables were occupied with people in their twenties squeezing together to accommodate the large crowd. The smell of freshly ground coffee beans and baked goods made my stomach churn. I had not eaten in more than twenty-four hours when I had last forced myself to have some muesli for breakfast. Just as I was heading towards our table, my phone rang. The sound of my ringtone made my heart skip a beat and brought back this tight feeling in my chest in an instant. I reached into my pocket with trembling hands and grabbed it. I looked at the screen and there it was: Peter. It was him...

Was it really him?

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## the possibilities to live

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by katharina ludescher

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

~ ~ ~

If you could choose another version of your life, which one would you choose?

Does the freedom of choice make you happy?

~ ~ ~

*Aria*

Aria walked home from her therapy session, but one question remained with her. “What do you want to do with your life?” This question had been asked by so many people in her life; her mum, and even her few friends. They were all eager to know what the next step in her life would be. A step out of this misery she dwelled in. They all wanted this fog hanging over her life to clear. They compared her to her former self, the happy and kind child she used to be before it happened. But Aria does not dwell too long in those memories, now carefully tucked away in her subconsciousness. After her regular therapy session, she went straight to her apartment. As soon as she opened the door, the room felt dark and empty. This very sight started draining whatever energy was left in her. She was all alone, even her friends had given up on her and had left town, only checking up on her occasionally. They were all busy living their lives, had partners, some even had children. Sitting there all by herself in the dimmed light of the living room she thought about the question of her therapist.

Sabine, her therapist, did not intend to hurt her with this question. She only wanted Aria to find a way out of her misery. What does she really want to do with her life? She wondered about that herself ever so often but had found no answer to it. As a child she had dreamed of being a marine biologist, diving in the ocean, and researching various natural phenomena; she had dreamed of being a mum, having a small family and a loving husband; or even once she had dreamed of being a professional climber, ascending Mount Everest with ease. She had always

been good at school, had good marks, and was at the top of her class. Everyone had great expectations of her. But she could never decide what to do. People had accused her of being indecisive and she had felt insecure about herself and her talents. Some even had called her a quitter. She tried so many things. She practised tennis until she resigned, she took up climbing until she quit, she tried swimming until she stopped. But ...

She does not want to think back to any of this.

When she had been swimming, she did it to escape herself. She had put all her energy into it, but, alas, this had only led to her being hospitalised and find herself in the care of Sabine. This happened four years ago. Aria is now twenty-two years old, and currently between jobs. She had worked at a bar and served drinks and food to rich snobs; however, her boss made it clear that her mental state, or as he used to call it 'her gloominess' was not good for business. For his business. He had suggested that she should reorient herself professionally. This is a nice way of letting one go... She suddenly felt so tired, she could not even drag herself to bed and fell asleep on her couch, drifting off into the realm of dreams.

*Pax*

Pax got woken up by morning dew dripping on his face and suddenly bolted up. He was late. They would be so angry with him. It was his first day in this job and he was already late. He dreaded facing Alerion, the elder. Pax got scolded a lot lately – his head was always somewhere else. He hurried to the centre of the village, hidden inside an old tree trunk. He tried to sneak in, but he was not that quiet. He could feel an ominous presence behind him. As he turned around, the elder was hovering above him with the signature expression he liked to wear on his face. A mixture of disappointment, sadness, and kindness. It made Pax feel even worse than he already did. But against Pax's expectation, he did not get scolded and Alerion hurried him to the others that were already gathered in a circle. They all got quiet as the elder began to explain: "Quick, we have to get to work. Many people depend on us. As you know we are the Aspirations, our work is important. So, please gather around and you will be assigned you a human."

Aspirations are little things flying into your ear, showing you your possibilities and your potential, as well as different versions of your life. Pax was already nervous, and his heart sank to his feet when he got his human assigned. She was depressed, stuck in her life, experienced hardships, and trauma. He asked himself, how could he help her find the potential she had lost for so many years. He flew off, with an uncertain feeling. He entered a dark apartment. The bed was empty. His human was on the couch, sleeping calmly. Pax slowly got closer to her face. She was fast asleep, so still. It seemed as if her body and soul were in completely different places.

Very carefully he flew into her ear and went to work ...

*Aria*

Usually, Aria did not dream, or at least she could never remember doing so. But tonight, it was different, she was aware she was dreaming while she was still asleep. Very strange indeed. She was not alone. There was someone here with her. As she tried to look for this person, Aria noticed her surroundings. Everything was white, the ground, the walls, even the ceiling. Once she focused, was there even a floor or a ceiling? Her feet were under her but still, they did not seem to touch the ground. Then she saw something or, rather someone, very distant though.

No, that someone was just very small. A little human, probably male. Aria got scared, tried to run away but she couldn't. There was no starting or ending point to this place. Suddenly ...

~ ~ ~

*"Hello there, I'm your Aspiration, and I'm here to help you,"* said the little one.

Aria turned around and faced this little thing. *"Who are you? And why are you so small?"* she asked.

The little thing got closer to her, *"I'm Pax, and I'm your Aspiration. I'm here to show you your potential. This state, you're in, has been going on for too long, it's time to find hope."*

This was too much for Aria to handle. She sank down, and surprisingly she could feel something tugging at her sleeve.

*"How can that be? Are you a fairy?"*

*"Do I look like one?"*

*"Well, yes I wouldn't ask otherwise"*

*"I don't hand out money in return for some teeth ... So, no I am not a fairy, I am an Aspiration. Something wrong with your ears?"*

*"Well, you are mean."*

*"Sorry, but I'm nervous. After all, this is my first job."*

*"Oh, lucky me."*

Pax calmly explained exactly why he was here, how he would allow her to enter different versions of her life and then let her choose the perfect life for her. These versions of her life only stem from a single decision at a point in her past. He explained how one step was responsible for a whole new version of her life. How there are endless possibilities to choose from. Aria asked if she was happy in those other versions. To this Pax had to answer that these versions hold some of her most wished dreams, nevertheless, her happiness depended on Aria alone. Suddenly, light orbs appeared around her. Each one was the entry to a different version of her life. She simply had to touch them and would wake up inside her own body but in a different life. She held out her hand to the closest light orb ...

She wakes up underwater. She is confused, walks around the room and tries to find clues. Then she sees it. Aria is a marine biologist, her cabin on this ship is full of books. Some were even written by her. Next to these books are awards with her name on them. She did something with her life, she was successful. Looking out of one porthole she can see darkness, but here and there she can see fish. It is so exciting! She has not felt like this in a long time. Does this mean she is happy here, has she escaped her past? She walks into her bathroom and investigates the mirror, but what she sees is not her, she is so skinny; just skin and bones. There are a lot of medicines, more than she could count. What is wrong with this life? She got her dream job. But apparently, she is not happy. Aria stayed in this body for a day, she experienced *her* life, it was exciting, but she could feel she was not happy. The people on board avoided her and she kept to herself. In this life, she had so much expertise but the people around her only talked to her when they needed information.

She mainly stayed in her lab; she was researching how pollution affected methane concentration in the depths of the ocean. While looking through her phone she saw a few photos with other people. All seemed to be related to work. No friends, no husband, no children. This Aria immersed herself solely into her work. It made her feel lonely. When Aria found out that her past trauma was present in this version as well, she lost all hope. With this realisation, she could feel herself slip from this life back to Pax.

In the next life she is on a tour to Mount Everest inside a tent; in the next she has a husband and kids; then, she is a teacher, a florist, a millionaire. There are endless numbers of lives, but once experienced, they all made her feel one thing. Unhappiness.

She jumps from orb to orb, from life to life, but she never finds the happiness she is searching for. She always gets back to her starting point.

Pax always wondered why and kept asking what had been different or what had been missing in each version. After the 148th version of her life, Aria began to cry. And she finally explained how her life had become to be this hollow. As a young adult, she had been sexually abused by a stranger. The culprit was never found. Her life was different after this, she couldn't motivate herself to do the things she wished to achieve – wished to do. She thought she was a burden to her family, friends, and herself. She wanted to be like everyone else around her, she had ambitions, she wanted to do everything right. But even in all these versions where she did all the things she had dreamed of, this single incident haunted her.

Pax finally spoke: *“This incident wasn't your fault, you cannot avoid something that is your fate, whether it is good or bad. Fate will follow you into every version you will choose. You could have done nothing different to change this path of yours.”*

After all this time Aria could see, it had not been her fault.

Pax asked: *“Do you now want to enter another life? Or are you ready to choose?”*

Aria was ready, she knew which version she wanted to live. *“I want my old life, the one I came from, the one where I am still dreaming of all the possibilities. I don't need another version. I can be everything I want in my life, and I finally found a way how. Thank you, Pax. For your first job, you did great!”*

This was the realisation she had always needed to finally get back on her feet. She could be anything she wanted to be. She could make these versions a reality. To start this journey, it was important for her to finally heal from her trauma. With a little smile, Pax sent her back to her sleeping self. When Aria woke up, she could remember everything so clearly. Only this little person that had been with her was so hazy. But when she got up, she finally knew what she had to do to reach everything she ever wanted – she needed to work on herself and finally get better. For the first time, in a long time, she felt a glimmer of hope.

~ ~ ~  
Happiness is up to you ...  
~ ~ ~

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## dream big

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by linda maschler

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

**D**reams. Hopes. I have many. Who does not? As a young girl, I have always dreamed of becoming a doctor. I saw doctors on the news, on TV shows, or in movies. I saw how they helped people. I saw how their hands could heal. I saw how people always looked up to the so-called gods in white. I saw how people would receive the help they were searching for. I saw how fascinating the human body was. How every single person on this planet has the same anatomy but yet is genetically so different. Ever since I was a little girl, I only had this dream. But the older I got the more I got to understand that my dream was simply just that – a dream.

When my friends and I talked about our dream jobs they always told me I was crazy and that this is a man's job. When I told my parents about wanting to become a doctor, they said pretty much the same. "But dear, I do not think that you are made to be a doctor. Choose something that is more feminine, like a nurse or secretary," or "Oh sweetheart, how should that be possible when you get married and have kids? Kids need their mother to be at home. Husbands earn the money." I was told this over and over again, and after some time I started to believe them. That is just how it worked at that time.

Back in the late 60s, it was very uncommon for women to study, more so to study medicine to become a female doctor. If women were interested in medicine, they would become a nurse or a midwife. There were some female doctors but most of them had trouble finding a position and then if they did, they had trouble being accepted amongst the male doctors. So, instead of arguing and disappointing my parents, I settled for the next best thing – I became a nurse.

But I was never entirely happy with it. While I still could help and heal people, it was the doctors who told me what to do and it was the doctors the patients listened to. Even if I knew the answer to a question, even if I knew the diagnosis and even if I knew what medicine would



work best – I was never asked. I was always overlooked and ignored. I was not valued or respected. But deep inside me, I knew that I would have made a good doctor. I knew that I would have made it through medical school. I knew I would have been able to help people. And so, I watched in agony how more and more women enrolled in medical school after the Higher Education Act of 1972 banned discrimination on grounds of gender.

I was still yearning to become a doctor. I was eager to go to medical school and get medical training. I was ready for it. I was ready to do it all. But yet again my dream was destroyed by the second line that appeared on a pregnancy test. While my husband would have encouraged me to pursue my dream to become a doctor, I could see that he was relieved when I was no longer able to. So instead, I became a housewife and a mother. I pushed my dream aside again. And even though I enjoyed being a mother and a wife, I felt incredibly out of place. I constantly had the feeling that I missed out on something. I felt a void in my life that haunted me. I was happy but at the same time, I was not. My friends never understood me because I had everything a woman could wish for in her life – a house, a husband, and a child. What more could I possibly want? But I wanted more.

I felt that my purpose was not complete. I felt that I did not exploit my full potential. I felt that I was drawn to do more.

But this is life, isn't it? Every person in life has a dream, a goal. Some achieve it, others do not. It is important though to fight for what we believe in, to fight for what we aspire to in life. Otherwise, we will simply break. It is easier to just quit everything and not go until the end, because the path is difficult and we are often not used to inconveniences. We would rather have everything we wish easily and at once. This is how dreams die, and how goals become unreachable. This is how life is. Life throws us many obstacles along the way, and we can either stop or we can overcome them. We have to make a decision: one way or the other. Opportunities do not knock – we have to reach and open the door. So, it is important to remember one thing: never give up and keep fighting. Even if it is hopeless sometimes, even if you do not see yourself going through, even if you see yourself fall. Just remember everyone at some point in their life is going to lose a battle. We fight and we lose. But what is important then is that in the midst of that battle we do not lose ourselves. This is when we will be tested on our very souls. It is these times that allow us to look inside ourselves and we try to keep fighting.

...

Here I am sitting at my desk, 44 years old, looking at my medical degree. I received it a couple of days ago. It took me longer than expected or anticipated and it was not an easy way. But I finally achieved my dream. I am now a doctor.

I would like everyone to keep in mind that your biggest enemy in life is yourself – your fear, your doubt, and your indecision. So, be the soldier of your dreams, the knight of your goals, and the keeper of your wishes. Be the creator of your own dreams and see them come true. Just keep in mind that regardless of how difficult it may seem from time to time, keep on climbing and never stop pursuing your dreams because the best view comes after the hardest climb.

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## fly high

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by paul erler

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

*My hands are cold. Freezing cold. So cold actually that I am left with barely any sensation in my fingertips. Yet every time I reach up to find another suitable spot to rest my hands on, a hot and violent sensation shoots all the way from the very tips of my fingers up through my arms. “What the hell am I even wearing these gloves for?” an angry voice suddenly blurts out in my head. “This was supposed to be a nice experience. Yet it sucks. It just sucks. And I knew it right from the start. Screw that!”*

\*\*\*

Two weeks earlier. I was lying in my bed, looking at the ceiling of my crammed room. I didn't care enough to take charge of the situation, so I just periodically threw out the most unnecessary objects when I couldn't avoid the clutter any longer. Since that moment was long overdue, I sat up, took a deep breath of stale air, and got cleaning. I grabbed a stack of old DVDs and placed them neatly next to that old TV that my brother had given me for my 16th birthday. “Two more weeks until the ski trip,” the voice in my head reminded me mockingly of the very fact that I had pretended to be such a good skier in front of my whole class. Just the thought of that made me break out in cold sweat. I have only practiced skiing a couple of times when I was still in kindergarten, but that was ages ago, and I can only vaguely remember what it felt like, yet for some reason I just had to say it. I had to prove it to them. Prove that I was also part of their group. So many of my classmates were experienced skiers, but I had never been able to practice it properly because my family wasn't able to afford it. “If I fail to deliver, I am most certainly out of the game forever,” the voice concluded. Hopeless, I sat down on the bed again and inclined against the back wall, with my head placed heavily onto the sweaty palms of my hands.

One week earlier. For the 5th time today, I took out my mobile phone to watch videos of famous skiers on YouTube. “This is ridiculous. There is no way I am ever going to become this good within a week. Maybe I should just search for something else. How about “How to go skiing without killing yourself. That sounds doable!” At this point I was pretty sure that I would faint as soon as I placed a foot onto a ski. My mind had not allowed me the slightest bit of rest during the last week and my predicament certainly didn’t seem to get better. If anything, I only noticed that I felt even worse as the days went by. I wasn’t even sure anymore whether I was still hungry or I just ate as part of some sort of daily routine. Since I couldn’t really focus on the content of the clips, I finally decided to accept my fate and make a fool out of myself, even though I was fully aware that it would destroy my reputation forever.

The dreadful day finally came. As I expected, the sky was clouded, and I could feel the icy wind touching my cheeks. Indeed, not a particularly pleasant sensation. Even though our class consisted of a fairly large number of students, I barely noticed them and their voices seemed to be heard through a thick veil of fabric. So much happiness. Everyone was so excited. Some of the boys started throwing snowballs around and periodically landed a hit onto a group of girls that stood a little apart. Why couldn’t I just be as talented as them? It didn’t matter. Now there was no more avoiding it. Somehow, I needed to figure this out while doing it. Trapped in this cold hell, I first put my right foot onto the ski that I had placed neatly in front of me on the cold and compressed snow. Then my left foot followed. “So far so good,” the voice acknowledged hesitantly. I watched as my classmates approached the ski lift, sitting onto the lift chairs in groups of four. Up to this point, I had somehow managed to maintain my cool, at least on the outside, yet now my heart began to race again. I and some other students moved closer to the lift, two on my right side, one on the left. At this point, I perceived the rumbling of the gears above me only as a vague sensation as I inched my way forward and focused all my attention to the lift chair that was approaching me from the back. When I finally managed to sit down on it and sensed my whole body being lifted off the ground, I could barely contain myself from laughing out loudly. From up here the view was stunning. The sun had come out now which was why the landscape appeared so picturesque, so unreal. A true winter wonderland. When we arrived at the top, stepping out of the lift almost seemed too easy. All you had to do is stand up. I felt some sort of exhilaration, but the biggest challenge was yet to come. I still needed to prove that I could ski as well as they did.

Some of my classmates had already begun to descend the slopes, and the others were ready to follow them on their way down. I hesitated at first, closely examining their movements. It looked totally effortless. “Is this really as easy as it seems?” the voice contemplated. I had to give it a go and pushed myself forward using these odd sticks. I knew that many people’s eyes were on me now, so I tried to give my best. At first, everything seemed to be under control, but as soon as the slope became steeper, I could feel my heart dropping as there was one aspect of skiing that I had forgotten to consider up to this point. I realized that slowing down was not nearly as easy as I had imagined, and panic settled in. While heading down and gaining speed, a large white hill was suddenly right in front of me. “You can’t be serious,” the voice screamed. There was no avoiding the snow ramp that appeared in front of me. For some reason, all the pressure inside my body suddenly dissipated when I lost contact with the ground. Even though I wasn’t sure what exactly had happened during that time, I felt the soft snow abruptly stopping my descent downwards. Dazzled, but not hurt, I looked around me. My skis seemed to have left me as soon as I took off, well before landing onto the snow that was now enveloping me like a cold grave. “That’s it. I am probably dead. And I also managed to

make a fool out of myself in front of everyone,” the voice said, in a resigning manner. But just then I realized that I wasn’t feeling any pain at all. Nothing seemed to be broken or hurting.

When I stood up, I finally began to understand that I had jumped off one side of the slope and ended up in an open area below. Up on the slope I could see my classmates waving at me, so I started climbing upwards. All of the apprehension that I had felt during the last weeks seemed to have gone away and made space for something else. Anger.

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*The freezing cold in my arms makes it so difficult to climb, yet there is no avoiding it. My classmates are only a few meters away and I can already hear their voices. Even though I am still angry at myself for not being able to prove to them that I also was a good skier, I realize that no one of them is laughing. To the contrary, some have taken their helmets off and are smiling at me whole-heartedly.*

*“That was amazing,” my best friend shouts to me. “Are you insane? That one was the biggest kicker of all. And you just went straight at it. So impressive!”*

I can barely believe what I am hearing, but somehow, I have not only managed to survive my first real skiing experience, but I also turned into some sort of a local hero as all of my classmates saw me jumping over the kicker at full speed. In fact, my friend told me later that nobody had believed my stories of being a good skier anyway, but that they were so impressed with my performance that nobody even gave it a second thought. On the way back, almost everyone, even the best skier of my class, asked me to join them on the slopes one day. Eventually, I felt profoundly relieved. I had not only spent the last weeks worrying for no reason at all but I seemed to have become someone that all the other students wanted to spend time with. Success at last!

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## high hopes

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by m. p.

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

I have always had high hopes. In fact, I already did when I was a toddler. At that stage in my life, my desires revolved around getting everything I wanted as soon as I wanted it. If I look back at these days, it is apparent that this was the time when my wishes were fulfilled most often. However, probably I was not aware of that back then because, after all, there was a non-negligible amount of crying involved.

When I got a bit older, my aspirations changed. They did not become more modest, though. It was probably during the time I attended kindergarten that I started longing for always being the best at everything. The problem about this, in retrospect, is that, indeed, I usually succeeded. Every victory and every achievement fostered the need to be on top even more, and it turned out that this very urge would accompany me throughout my entire life. It was a never-ending vicious circle. Still, at least at that age, I was mostly able to overcome all the – admittedly, not all too big – odds.

I kept being the smartest, the sportiest, the best one when I entered primary school. However, there was one new quest that I needed to pursue, which I had previously thought to go hand in hand with being the best. Unfortunately, at this point in my life I started realising that this was a misconception. The pursuit I am referring to was gaining my parents approval. As humble as this yearning may seem compared to the one before, sadly, this one turned out to be incomparably more difficult for me to achieve, and I would struggle to do so until I realized I did not actually need to. Unfortunately, this understanding lay far ahead, and, ironically, as soon as I realized it, I had, finally, earned at least my Mum's recognition. But that is a different story.

Anyway, for as long as I did not receive the appreciation I needed from my parents, I had to find other ways to shine. I decided to become a professional skier. When I realized this was not

going to happen, I put all my ambition into tennis. Targeting this new goal only at the age of 12, in the back of my head, I already knew it was just about impossible to reach, too. Still, I needed something to work towards in order to be respected at some point in the future.

The skier and tennis player of my childhood and youth turned into a singer at the beginning of my twenties. One could argue, I jumped from one passion to another as soon as I figured out I would not get to be famous and popular with the previous one. Maybe this thought had always been part of the shifts, indeed. In fact, my chances of becoming a professional would have been higher if I had focused on music instead of sports right away. However, the longing for belonging, for being cool, for doing what everybody expected me to do, hindered my seriously taking up this pursuit earlier. Nevertheless, I still succeeded in making a living as a musician. Of course, this does not mean I lived my dream, reached my goals or satisfied my ambitions. One can always dream bigger, want more and be disappointed about whatever they fail to achieve. I did dream big – too big; I did always want more – too much; and I was, indeed, never truly happy with what I had accomplished.

For a long time, I lived a life that felt like it was somebody else's. I did have the perfect relationship but being always preoccupied with standing out, it had never been anything like I had really aspired to before. I did have kids who I loved but I always regretted not being able to make them proud of their father by showing them the prestigious trophies he had not won or the famous stages he had not performed on. Looking back at this time of my life, I must say it was nice. It was good. However, I could never stop thinking it was not as special as I had always wanted it to be.

As I got older, my hopes started centering more and more around staying healthy and fit. The more physically and mentally restricted I got, the humbler my desires became.

*Keep my head clear and my body mobile – as clear and mobile as possible, that is. Let me still remember my family next time they come visit.  
Make the pain go away.*

My wishes are, now, phrased like prayers.

*Release me from my suff-----.*

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*I learnt one thing during my time on earth. Dreaming big may be considered good. Living in the moment is certainly better. I have the feeling I wasted major parts of my life not appreciating what I had at the very moment and always yearning for more. However, my biography contains many highlights one could aspire to. In fact, it was a life worth cherishing. I missed this opportunity. Hopefully, I can do better next time.*

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#1in7

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

by anna troppmair-sperk

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2021/22

“It's not about what you want right now - it's about what you want most. Keep on going.” The words of the bubbly blonde inspirational speaker on YouTube still rang in her ears. Her mother always frowned when she saw her watching this kind of videos, trying to find a sliver of positivity to help her get through the day. She told her that they would only make things worse with their fake, upbeat voices. But to her, they were a form of hope, of solace. Seeing other people who had gone through their struggles gave her the motivation and strength to carry on. And also, what does she know anyway, she thought, while picturing her mom's critical face.

She sat on her bed and cried. At first, the tears slowly streamed down her face, then she felt a large sob rise up her chest and slowly release itself. And another one, and another one. She hated herself for crying so much, but at the same time, she also felt immense relief. Just a few moments to herself to digest the bad news she and her husband had received once more. Once again her doctor had looked at them with a blank expression, trying to explain what had gone wrong this time and why it simply wouldn't work for them. Something that seemed to come so easy and natural to so many other couples. It can't be that hard, her grandmother had exclaimed. I mean look at me - 9 times. And you are both young and healthy. I just don't understand.

She tried to clear her mind and forget what the doctor had said. Being able to hit pause for a short moment in a world that kept moving without mercy and did not have time for her worries. She curled up in fetal position and wished the floor beneath her would just open up and swallow her as a whole. Once more she thought about the video on YouTube she had just seen and the blogs and the groups and all of the people thinking of them and cheering them on. They would get there, eventually. She could feel it, through all of the darkness and the pain. But when? The clock was ticking... every day... every month seemed too long. She had longed

for this for so long. When will it finally be our turn, she wondered. She didn't even dare look at her social media accounts anymore. Too scared of what she might find there. Pictures, announcements, she couldn't face it anymore. Other people living their best lives triggered her. She wished them all well, but she could not stand being on the sidelines, a mere spectator observing their success. Suddenly she heard a soft thump from the kitchen and a loud miaow.

Her cat, Finley had come back from his afternoon stroll in the garden. Now he wanted some dinner. She peeled herself from the bed and forced herself to get up and open a can of cat food. Maybe that's why so many old people have pets she thought. They force us to get up and keep going. The sheer force of their animal nature.

She opened the fridge and peered inside. It was almost empty, some leftovers from last night's dinner, an apple that had seen better days, and some of the medications she had used during their last treatment cycle. She quickly shoved them under a pile of vegetables on the bottom shelf. As she closed the fridge, her gaze fell upon a picture she had almost forgotten. During one of their last treatment cycles, she had had a nervous breakdown in the kitchen at one point. Fearfully she had wrapped her arms around her husband and pressed her face against his back. He was flipping through a magazine. His brow furrowed, thinking about something he seemed so close yet miles away. All of a sudden he had stopped and shown her a picture in the magazine. "This is us!" he had said. "We are like him, climbing up a steep mountain full of snow. It seems impossible and hard and scary, but I know that eventually, we will get to the top, just like he did." She had nodded and taken his hand. Every time one of them felt like giving up, the other one somehow found the strength to carry on and pull the other one along.

She smiled thinking back at that moment. She touched the picture with her fingertips and slowly traced the climber's silhouette.

We can do this, she thought. We just have to keep on moving, just like him. Onwards and upwards. She checked her phone and saw an encouraging message from her best friend. There were other messages in a group chat with fellow warriors. She would answer later, she thought, and put her phone on the kitchen table.

She heard the key turn in the lock. Her husband had come home. She raced to the front door to greet him. I don't know how I could cope with this without you she murmured into his ear. Best climbing partner ever.

• • •

It would still take some more climbing, but in the end, after a long and arduous journey and with the support of many others they finally made it. On a cold winter day, as the first snow fell she gave birth to their son. They would call him Oliver.

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## finally, days start at dawn

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by julia strasser

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

Failure is not crushing,  
It is the pouring of every ounce of heart and soul,  
Into an endeavour,  
For once you've given it all,  
How do you replace what you have lost?

My darkest days, filled with solitude, marginalization, and abandonment. Again, these days, on which I feel this heavy, 150-kilogram weight pressing against my skullcap, are recurring. A pressing feeling that confines me inside my limited or rather restricted personal sphere. Almost crushing. Stuck.

At dusk, my days start. The world pauses. The world silences. My mind goes on a rampage. Lying in bed on top of this rose-patterned bed cover, I fill in my diary on this heart-breaking, shattering relationship. Smelling the blue ink, pictures of reality start to blur as my eyes fill with tears. Sight changes. I believed in love at first sight. I am a believer, or at least was. People knew this but took advantage of my open, welcoming, and pure heart. When I was just seventeen, I saw him. A gentleman, good-looking, smiling with all his gleaming white teeth, approaching with a whispering, seductive voice: "Let's have your favourite tea some time under the night sky, share our deepest thoughts!" I was startled; yet, in a positive way. Serendipity. The night advanced and I wanted to put my best foot forward: good manners, well dressed, perfectly confident. Oh, how I loved his smell, his entangling perfume – *Bruno Banani*, the green one. Over the next hours, days, weeks, months ... he guided me and invited me to trust him. We spent our first holiday at the Californian coast. We wrote love letters, expressing our ardent love. I dearly loved him. With time passing by, I started witnessing his flaws and imperfections. He hid them, disputed them. Then ... he left me and all our shared dreams behind, and out of the blue stopped adoring me. I still remember this moment as if it was yesterday, makeup mingled with tears running down my face.

Heartbroken. I was dropped like a cask of litter. Especially at nightfall, when no one can interrupt my emotional outbursts, with rain tapping onto the rooftop drowning my cries, I feel the energy being drained from my body. Trying to recompense the loss – I am paralyzed. A lingering aftertaste of previously failed connections. Shackled by pre-empted expectations, I have long stopped opening up. Have constructed my mind as an edifice in which I'm trapped. Yes, it's lonely inside this mansion.

At dusk, my days start. The world pauses. The world silences. My mind goes on a rampage. With your deeds, my trust in humanity decreased. Sitting there, without company at the dinner table having a glass of Pinot Noir too many – that's when I am in a dreary place you wouldn't want to see – contemplating about not meeting those imposed expectations. It feels like I missed my alarm and slept in, but little do you know how I need this little more time. When meeting all those people to impress, I just want relief from my stress. Facing. Racing. Pacing. On the outside, people would always think I look happy and content – I am incapable of expressing my feelings. That's what astrology always tells us about *Gemini*; they are expressive, yet they want to cover up their vulnerability. I don't want to look weak and exposed, present my naked mind. I regret the fact that I won't stop struggling to find who I am. I keep lying to myself that I do the best I can. But the problem is – I don't fix things; I just try to redecorate the stained walls of my mansion. I despise watching these trust patterns eating me alive, and with broken legs I chase perfection.

At dusk, my days start. The world pauses. The world silences. My mind goes on a rampage. Another burst of emotionality challenges my personal traits. I am an introvert. Genetics, I kept telling myself. Yet, on days like these, I start to wonder ... Is there really such a thing as being an introvert? I start doubting it and now like to call it societal conditioning. It's obvious. They need winners and losers. Those who either stand up or give in. I don't want to be either one as I realize that I need to pursue this inner urge even with no particular goal in mind. Looking in the mirror, I reckon that my eyes, the one thing I have always loved, treasured about myself, have lost their sparkle. They are not the optimistic, inviting, and bluish-green shimmering seraphinites anymore. Rather they represent a broken, dull, and closed front door to a vacant mansion. I continued looking, deeper, more thoroughly. I widened these doors, managed to enter this house. I used this paralyzed state to search my mind. It took time. It felt like ages. What am I searching for? After staring, searching, strolling, I found a glimmer of light. I located the reason why I always admired those gemstones deep down in the last corner of the basement. In a wooden box sealed with strong, but rusty, metal chains I found joy, ecstasy, fearlessness, even a heap of light-heartedness. All this time I had them locked away, had tried to seek comfort in others while I kept forgetting that all I needed was right there; shut up in a box. Taking a deep breath, the chains flung open. The light streamed out of every single narrow crack and re-painted the halls, filled the holes I had drilled into the walls with enraged fists. A calm and familiar voice reassured me: "No anger, anxiety or arrogance should mark a single day from now on."

∞∞∞

Now finally, her days start at dawn. The world pauses. The world silences. Her mind in tranquility. She has found freedom in falling, lightness in approaching. There's a light in the dark – she feels its warmth. In her hands. In her heart. In waves, she keeps finding herself, and her beautiful soul is carried away. Now, from the darkest place, glancing through a bruised heart, she can see the light again. Skyrocketing serotonin levels. *Amaranthine self-love*.

## the writer in me

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by johannes zeller

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

*“Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless – like water. Now you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup; you put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water my friend.”*

- Bruce Lee

Arnold looks at the bottle in his hand and dwells upon the famous quote of Bruce Lee as a person interrupts his train of thought with the words, “Are you still with me? Five minutes until showtime!” He places the bottle of water back on the table next to him, adjusts his tie and takes another look at his prompt cards. He slowly walks up and down the room, going over the pivotal parts of his speech, while continuously keeping eye contact with the clock on the other side of the room. Although he appears calm and ready, the tension is seemingly growing as the seconds elapse. As his eyes are wandering through the chamber, his preparation process is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a young man who offers him a glass of water with the words, “Mr Schwarzenegger, is everything alright?”

*Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless – like water.*

Arnold reaches out for the glass and takes a sip while carefully inspecting the nervous teenager from head to toe. The young man looks as if he has been down in the dumps for a long time, although one could easily guess that he has not even entered his golden years. His face is white as a sheet. Dark circles under his eyes. Tiny brown curls that escaped the worn-out beanie now hang about his forehead like a curtain which was purposely placed there to hide something. His shirt needs ironing and mending, while his oversized trousers have probably never heard of the old saying “every shoe fits not every foot.” Not only his physical appearance but also his facial expression suggest that he is spent and on the brink of despair.

The young man constantly avoids making eye contact, not daring glance at the legendary man close-up. He bites his lower lip as if he wants to prevent words coming out of his mouth. He looks nervous, standing there like a deer caught in the headlights. “What is the cause of his behaviour? Is he just frightened by my appearance or is he doing a job he has grown to hate?” Arnold wonders.

After finishing his observations, he sets the glass aside before addressing the evidently nervous young man, “Thank you very much. What is your name, son?” The fellow, surprised by the kindness and calm presence of his interlocutor, searches for appropriate words but ultimately plucks up all his courage and mumbles, “My name is Jakob.”

Having answered the question successfully, the slightly relieved Jakob turns around in an attempt to leave the room. However, at this very second, he feels a hand grabbing his shoulder. Jakob is unable to move, his feet rooted to the ground, his knees locked. Time stands still. “Why would he prevent me from leaving the room?” Jakob asks himself. A thousand thoughts are running through his mind, but none offers a reasonable explanation for what he is just experiencing. On the one hand, Jakob just wants to ignore what is preventing him from leaving the room, but on the other hand he is curious about Arnold’s reason for doing so. “What next?” Jakob ponders. The young man is torn back and forth but ultimately decides to go for the latter. He hesitates for a split second; however, eventually turns around and is looking straight into the eyes of Arnold, a man strong as an ox and built like a Greek god. Jakob, once again frozen to the ground, discards his original plan and just keeps starrng.

Out of nowhere, Arnold breaks the silence by saying, “I have observed you and how you approach your tasks at work.” Fearing the worst, Jakob wishes the ground would open and swallow him up. He tries to come up with an excuse or an explanation for the expected complaint, but is stunned as the man questions him, “Are you really passionate about your job?”

“Am I?” Jakob ponders upon Arnold’s question. However, as much as he racks his brain for an appropriate answer, he cannot find the right words to describe his feelings. Being confused, the young man immediately directs his eyes to the floor. “Why would a famous person, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, be interested in my life?” the young man wonders. Other than his friends, no one has ever asked him about his dreams and goals in life – not even his parents. He takes a deep breath. “I, I, ...” stutters Jakob, before taking a short break, accompanied by an awkward silence.

Arnold, who is known for his strong accent and very few but powerful words, tries to comfort the him. “It is okay if you struggle to find the correct words; however, it is not acceptable to not pursue your dreams!”

Encouraged by this simple utterance, Jakob replies, “To be honest, after graduating from high school, my parents urged me to enrol for a bachelor’s degree in law. According to them, it is my destiny to become a lawyer and take over their law firm after they retire.” He takes a deep breath and continues, “Nevertheless ...”

Again silence, until Arnold tries to encourage Jakob to continue his story by asking, “Nevertheless what?”

Jakob starts fidgeting. Usually, he would change the topic of conversation at this stage - not this time though. “I can do this! I am done with running away from the truth,” he tells himself. The young man starts feeling more confident. He had never had the courage to tell anybody

about his true feelings and thoughts concerning his original passion: writing. An apparently relieved Jakob answers, “Nonetheless, since primary school I have always had the aspiration of becoming a successful book author whose words would inspire people all over the world.”

*Now you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup; you put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot it becomes the teapot.  
Now water can flow or it can crash.*

Arnold says calmly, “Listen, Jakob. My parents wanted me to pursue a career as a police officer and thus to follow into the footsteps of my father and grandfather; nevertheless, I had different plans. I dreamed of becoming the greatest bodybuilder of all time, but nobody believed that a boy from a tiny village in Austria would be able to do so. In the end, I achieved my goal by winning Mr. Olympia multiple times. Then I wanted to try my luck in the movies but was rejected by numerous producers due to my strong accent. Now my accent is my trademark and the reason why I had such success in the film industry. Having achieved all of this, I wanted to give something back to the country and people who had supported me along my way and hence I decided to run for election as the Governor of California. Nobody believed in me, but I succeeded and turned the state of California into a forerunner in taking measures against climate change. At present, my aspiration is to alert society to the issue of global warming. But enough about myself. What I want you to understand is that there may be doubters and there will be obstacles along your way, but you have to follow your passion and pursue your dreams since it is your life and only you are responsible for shaping your future.”

Suddenly, the door opens, and a woman enters the room reminding Arnold that it is now time to go on stage. He hands the glass of water over to Jakob and walks past the speechless young man before turning around one last time wishing him good luck for his future.

*Be water, my friend.*

Jakob, really moved, pauses for a second as he reflects on Arnold’s words. “What am I doing here? Why have I never had the courage to speak out what I was thinking all the time?” he wonders. He has obediently followed the instructions of his parents for his entire life without ever expressing any doubts.

The very next moment, Jakob decides that it is time for a change. In the blink of an eye, the young man runs past everybody towards the exit, constantly reminding himself that it is high time to pursue his own interests instead of listening to all the naysayers. No more weekend jobs and law studies. As soon as he arrives home, he opens his laptop and starts writing an application for an undergraduate program in literature and linguistics with the words:

“Be water my friend.”

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## the red herring

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by saskia aigner

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

They are staring at me hungrily. I know it's time. It has been for a while now. And yet, I can't bring myself to touch it. Usually, I have no problem at all, using it for practical reasons or just to be entertained; to kill time, to distract myself. Now I can't even look at it without getting goosebumps from head to toe, without a lump taking root in my throat, without my palms, my head, my face, my everything starting to sweat. How do you even get goosebumps and sweat all over simultaneously? Isn't that a contradiction in itself? There is a fancy word for this kind of thing, but I don't have time now to navigate the jungle of my mind, to cut a path through the dense undergrowth of lianas and vines solely to impress you. I'd need a mental machete for that and even if we leave my current state out of the equation, nobody in their right mind would hand me a machete, mental or not. But I digress. Goosebumps and Sweating. Gross. I am sweating like a 91st-minute-Cristiano Ronaldo, the sweatiest soccer player on the planet – according to almighty Google, at least. Feel free to look it up right now if you want. Careful, Cristiano, with a 'C', or else it may distort your results.

That's me, giving you time to google.

See? He totally looks like he took a bath, but have you noticed his hair? His hair is always immaculately preserved. Probably sold his soul for it. Looking perfect like that. Maybe I should consider that as an option too, being the heavy head sweater I am. So ... did it work? My diversionary tactic? My red herring? Firing an endless stream of my far from original, nonsense thoughts at you? To distract you and me from the thing that we should be really talking about? The thing I should *do*? It did, right? Ha! Talking about nonsense stuff, there is one last thing I wanted to discuss ... a red herring? What does a herring have to do with diversion? Glad you ask! I'll spare you the boring details, but essentially if you want to throw someone off your track, what you must do is slowly smoke a herring, turning it red and REALLY smelly in the process. See where I'm getting at? It is supposed to work with hounds,

but maybe you could give it a try with overly enthusiastic admirers or even hungry mouths too. Actually facing your problems is generally overrated, after all, am I right?

But let's come back to me, my sorry self, and my incapability to do the deed. Thanks to you and me talking nonsense, my sweating and goosebumps have subsided to a normal level. What's left is the finest layer of salt covering the whole of my body. If you look closely, you can even see the tiny salt crystals on the few hairs that haven't fallen victim to gravity yet. I would say they're kind of pretty if it didn't feel so gross.

They are still staring. Big eyes and all. Luckily, my mental conversation with you has only lasted a few moments, so they know nothing about our bonding over the red herring. In case you haven't gotten it by now, I'm stalling. I really, really, really don't want to do it. Can't even explain why. And yet, they always force me to. To grow, to make progress, they say. Little monsters. Hungry monsters. Eyes pleading, I lift my gaze from the root of this evil to the monster sitting to my left. No reaction. Just an unyielding pair of eyes meeting mine. Admittedly, a pathetic effort to cheat the gallows.

I venture a view to my right. Different eyes, same outcome. This time it's pity staring back at me. Scanning the room, it's dawning on me that there is no escape this time. Nobody will sacrifice themselves in my stead. The feeling of helplessness gives way to anger. Not the kind which gets you all hot and raging, but the kind that calms your taut stretched nerves and rigid body. The kind that makes you not care a jot about anything and anyone. The kind that pushes you over the edge, free-falling.

With trembling fingers, I reach for it. It's just as I remembered. Its promise of power as manifold as its risk of ruin. When I take it in my hand, I get a sense of familiarity. I know its curves and edges, its cool surface the color of melted lead, its shape perfectly fitting in my hand. The stroke of my thumb almost a caress, I go through the motions as old as the thing itself. When I'm ready, I lift my gaze once more, slowly bringing my pointer finger to my mouth, placing it vertically over my lips, lowering it again. When the tip of my tongue darts out of my mouth, wetting my dry lips, getting them ready to perform, I taste salt. Exhaling my final breath, I clear my throat from the lump still sitting in there. I will my thump into motion. Tap. I bring it closer to my face, a slow, rhythmic sound reaches my ear.

A crackle.

A voice.

A question.

It's time.

*"... Hello, ... I'd like to order ..."*

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## turning 24

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

by elisabeth zimmermann

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2021/22

*Glittering. Sparkling. Shining.  
The three words that best describe Jenny's present life.  
Glamorous. Superficial. Posh.  
The three adjectives that best describe the last two years.  
Ups and downs. No meaning. Artificiality. Lies. A good show.*

There was Jenny, standing amidst the exquisitely decorated terrace, her best friend Mona bustling about as if she had organized a party for the Queen herself, tottering rapidly on her Louboutins.

*"Cocktails here!"*

*"No, the table over there. And be careful with the floor's surface!"*

Mona was pointing towards the extravagant bar. Jenny's sister was crouching in the corner and steadily posting the ongoings on her popular *Instagram* channel. She clearly seemed annoyed. Seemed to not get enough attention.

This Saturday felt so plain, so not telling. Jenny was standing there quietly, throwing her wavy shoulder-long blonde hair. She slightly nodded her head and asked faintly:

*"But what are we even celebrating?" "Your 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, my darling. It will be amazing. So many guests will be arriving any minute now."*

Jenny was still figuring out the occasion for this pompous event. Why are they celebrating her? Her life has been a complete mess for the last two years. She was a mess... a rather organized one, she had to admit, but still a mess that would turn 24 tonight. She hurt people. She was cold, superficial. She put on a good show. She was entertaining but hurting. Nobody saw because Jenny hid well. The many games being played with her head, mind, and body. She was restless, exhausted, and tired. She always tried to abide by her surface look; her positive mind overshadowed everything, and her show was rather convincing.



*Why was she always reminiscing? It is over... no glimpse of it in her present. Why can't she just live in the here and now? Something was holding her back... or rather someone. She should be grateful and the happiest girl; her 24<sup>th</sup> birthday fete, her best friend and sister who decorated the whole apartment in such a lovely way and spent so much time and effort on making it her perfect night. She could also be proud of her graduation with distinction ...*

Jenny was a kind-hearted girl who looked rather self-confident. Her clear brown eyes conveyed the impression that she was a tough, veracious woman who had always known what and who she wanted, though she was very easy to be persuaded and naive in many ways. Her sovereign flaw was her quality of getting attached very easily.

The place looked flawless: the golden glitter, scattered throughout the superb apartment, the rolled-out red carpet, the exquisite fancy food and drink bars, and the shining glitter ball in the middle. She felt like dancing, so she grabbed Mona, and they just forgot the world around them. She felt happy. However, her cheerfulness swiftly developed into a different feeling that was arising in her body: something uncomfortable, something uneasy. Her golden dress was swinging over the dance floor. Something would happen tonight. But she was not able to figure it out.

Ten minutes later, the first guests arrived, carrying with them their exorbitant celebratory mood. They were all dressed poshly, neatly...

*There was nothing true in Jenny's life anymore since he... Ahhh, she wanted to stop thinking. Wished to just switch off her thoughts.*

All of a sudden, there was an immediate change of atmosphere. The sky turned grey and blurry, unusual for that time of the year. Strangely, only Jenny could discern this blurriness. A blurriness that did not allow her to perceive the world, the guests, the party. A blurriness that shadowed everything. Her thoughts were blurry too. This consistent state of blurriness which had been persisting for the last two years... There it was, the very thing she felt the moment she woke up: an anxiety, a restlessness crawling up her body.

Back and forth. Forth and back. Stepping aside. Jenny was not able to keep calm and ignore this feeling in her chest, tangling her pounding heart. Her being up here. Standing amidst all the people she was supposed to know, these staring expectant faces, crying for her attention. She turned around and saw...or dreamed - she was not sure anymore - three very familiar faces. She knew them. She knew them very well: Liam, Tim, and Henry.

Her hands started shaking uncontrollably. Her sweaty hands. She looked away. It was only a dream, wasn't it? Jenny could hear her blood pumping. Oh no, Mona - stupid and incredibly egoistic Mona - could not stand her being indecisive anymore and intended Jenny to find her "true love" and rekindle it this very evening. Unwittingly, she had unleashed much more. Once, Jenny did thrive for love, true and honest love. That was not her anymore.

*Some people take baby steps to settle down. Some people refuse to settle at all. Sometimes it's not statistics. It's just chemistry. And sometimes, just because it is over, doesn't mean the love ends. (Alice)*

In the twinkling of an eye, Liam approached her and exclaimed: "Hey Jenny, Mona was so generous and invited me to your birthday party. You look absolutely amazing. I am really happy to be here." Jenny suddenly felt set back to 2019 and she reminded herself of his penetrative voice and the very words that overwhelmed her.

*“I am so sorry that I left without saying goodbye! I was afraid I would not be able let you go - you would have begged me to stay.”*

Ouch, this hurt Jenny. And there it was again; within two minutes, he provoked this feeling in her: The idea that he was at the longer end of the curve and Jenny dependent. Liam could definitely tell that she was nervous. He approached her. Her thoughts interrupted their conversation.

*A strange familiar, and at the same time unfamiliar sentiment surrounded her. Pain. Endless pain. Her wounds started hurting. Irreparable.*

In the end, she thanked Liam for leaving her the way he did. He crushed her former aspirations and by this, showed her that he possessed her. Love would not possess; that could not have been love.

*Once upon a time when Jenny was a tiny, naive, and inexperienced girl with good grades and even higher aspirations (to become a successful doctor one day...) she met this troubled boy Liam, a high-school-sweetheart with his messy hair and irresistible grin. From the moment she first said “I love you” they spent the most amazing time together. They grew older, were no longer children. Three years later, they stopped respecting each other; stopped realizing how their small deeds, disloyalty, and lies destroyed everything they had so beautifully built up. A year later, their relationship collapsed. But their timing was right when they realized that they had never stopped loving each other; they rather developed stronger feelings, still intertwined with jealousy, fear, and anger.*

Pain. It was pain she now felt. When she saw him standing there with his charming smile and defined body; the person she thought was meant for her. She had been convinced that nothing could break their bond; however, life did. Jenny faced him. It seemed like meeting a stranger. She was not able to look into his eyes as they could eventually reveal something known, something familiar. His glaring dangerous black-brown eyes, which confirmed to her that she cannot trust him... Jenny failed in saying anything; she seemed paralyzed.

*Too many memories, and thoughts that captivated her now... She felt like they had spent their whole life together – a familiarity creeping up in her – but this was not the case; he broke up with her two years ago, and it was gruesome.*

His eyes passed over her, lingering. What was it? Remorse? Pain? Pity? Did he feel sorry for her?

*She was always so sure that it was love – her real true love. Intense. Exciting. She had - indubitably - decided to commit to their relationship. She never hesitated. Her troubling thoughts were thumbing. It was not the breakup that hurt the most; it was the post-trauma that followed. In Jenny’s case, it meant waking up and checking her phone for the message that was not there anymore...*

And then she reminded herself of the incredibly beautiful moments: They travelled the world together; their safari in South Africa, their endless summers in Spain, and their seemingly infinite kisses in Berlin. Always together, never separated.

*She thought that Liam was perfect, loyal, honest. But the hidden feelings of loneliness, of distress, troubled her. Her body had steadily demonstrated to her that something*

*was wrong: Something in her was not able to trust him and love him unconditionally...  
An instability; later expressed in their many fights.*

Her body now again perceived Liam without the rose-tinted glasses. Her body perceived the truth. Last year, Jenny tried to avoid him, which was indeed easy as their paths had diverged, and there were no points of reference anymore, just the fading memories. Her former great love became a stranger. Jenny would have never thought that this was even possible; she had always trusted that a deep love would connect them forever...

*She remembered the good times when they were cuddling in her childhood bed and talked about everything, even about becoming parents, building their home, and buying an apartment in a Mediterranean setting. They had so many dreams... But they were too young. Their aspirations crashed... and Jenny's life was turned upside down.*

Why was she always dependent? Was it because she was a woman and needed a strong man to care for her? She had invariably been told to look for a caring husband, to not be alone. Why could she not let go of this deeply rooted perception?

*A lovely family, a caring husband, and a happily ever after. But no, that was not life, not how it was supposed to be, not if you love on account of fulfilling expectations. Not if you force yourself in a 'cage' of supposed love, mainly created by society.*

He is no longer part of her life. Her troubling thoughts intertwined with her curiosity: What has he been up to? What were eight long years worth if she could only feel pain, anger, restlessness, and confusion? At last, even if it hurt so much to admit, their connection was toxic. Their end turned out to be rather abrupt. There was no 'happily ever after' ...

She wanted to let go, to get herself another drink when she suddenly stumbled over her feet, and as she turned around, she faced Tim's beautiful face.

*"Hey Jenny, everything's alright? How are your studies going? Thank you for the invitation!"* Jenny had to smile, but at the same time she felt like crying. She had not invited him. She would have never dared to. With wide-spread arms, Tim approached Jenny.

*She loved his hugs. They were her favourite thing. So honest. So true.*

Tim was Jenny's colleague. He worked at her aunt's café where she occasionally helped out. He smiled at her.

*Stupid. But right at the same time. When he smiled, everything was good again. It was infectious.*

She smiled back. But then she perceived Tim's look. Was he disappointed? Something was slumbering behind his surface, something not identifiable, not definite... which described Tim and Jenny's connection in the last year the best. It had always been so easy to talk to him.

*Their regular team meetings and work shifts turned into a friendship. A friendship that meant telling each other everything. And sometimes it would be like that; they would both sit together after work and talk about everything. Holding deep, meaningful conversations. But sometimes it was different. He seemed non-transparent then...*

There was something different now arising in her body. A tension that was growing fast. Maybe she had just imagined everything. Maybe it was a long, beautiful daydream with only

one protagonist: Jenny herself. Maybe there hadn't been any tension. She felt so stupid rethinking these thoughts, as it would not solve the mystery.

*Acting irrationally for once triggered a complex relationship. It was never her intention. She was just so grateful that she could switch off her thoughts when she was with him. The sound of his voice she fell for. He had none of those traits of her ex-boyfriend; Tim was kind-hearted, charming. A nice contrast. It was the mixed signals. Jenny loved him as a friend but then again, there were his values that matched hers, which made the whole thing so exciting.*

However, Jenny's indecisiveness got in their way. Clearly.

*The beginning of a meaningless connection with a person that meant so much, in so many ways ... something too recent to be labelled. Stagnated.*

Again, their eyes meet. Deep. But Jenny had to let go. There is too much they never shared, too much that was left unsaid..., but was there ever a right time? When it came to Tim, Jenny's head was full of questions. Still.

*Was it all a mistake? Would she regret it? Would she be hurt? And so far, there had been no single answer. Just question marks in her head. And they would continue to stay there, never answered. Loosely. Disconnected.*

In the end, they never got serious. They went back to being friends; maybe it was wrong to call it 'going back' when they were probably never anything else but that. And then she regretted having made out and having been involved emotionally with him. In the next instance, she did not. But when Tim smiled at her and she looked in his eyes, there was still that feeling, this existing attraction. Tim had a certain charm in his looks, a fact he seemed not to be aware of. Something special Jenny failed in defining.

*And then they smiled at each other, and it was gone. Maybe things could have turned out differently. But maybe it was all supposed to be like that.*

A longing for this known and still so unknown guy and their good times. Even if she felt salvaged in his warm expressive steel-blue eyes, she knew that sometimes things had to stay the way they were – and in their case – unsaid, still, silent. None of them was ready for the truth.

*It was neither legitimate nor rational. And even though it was short, Jenny will always remind herself of his deep gaze, her rapid heartbeat, his smooth touch... and a tension that had never stopped.*

Jenny shifted from one foot to another. She was insecure. She did not like how she felt being with him at that very moment. The waitress that was approaching her asking for help in the kitchen was an angel sent from above; she was released, free to leave. She shortly touched Tim on his shoulder and wished him a wonderful evening.

*I'm so obsessed with the idea of being in love that I just, it's like, I completely lose myself. Like, I forget what I want and I just disappear. I'm like the horse in 'The Neverending Story'. (Alice)*

Could this night get even worse?

Oh yes, there was her answer, in the corner: Henry who was slowly walking up to her.

*"Oh Jen, I missed you. You never called back..."*

Jenny was overwhelmed. Again. And she did not know what to say.

*Should she tell him that he was her dream man and everything..., but that it wouldn't work out...*

Henry stared at her with this insincere grin. She had unsettled him and his usual charming appearance, which she loved so much, was gone. Regardless, Jenny initially felt joyous, even excited, as she faced him. His sensitive, caring, and empathetic nature was everything she ever wished for.

*Henry: the boy she randomly met at her best friend's party in summer. The boy with whom she started a nearly 'perfect' relationship. The boy who she dumbled repeatedly. One of them was not ready. That one was Jenny. It was coincidental. Wrong timing. She loved to remind herself of their first encounter; drunk Jenny was partying with her friends when she met this charming, good-looking man. Henry was staring at her, and she stared back, in the middle of a crowded room. She immediately felt a true connection. When they kissed for the first time, time stopped ... They enjoyed every moment to its fullest. They could not grow together any closer. But then it stopped. Stagnated.*

Henry approached her; intending to kiss her. But that was over. It could not happen anymore. "It's nothing personal, you know," she quietly murmured, avoiding eye contact. But she felt so bad for having left him.

*And that was it. That was why it never worked out with this Prince Charming; he made her feel interesting, attractive and that was more than anything Jenny received from anyone else for a long time. He gave her a feeling of being seen, of being appreciated, being worthy of his world. And we all want to be loved, right?*

*But what had hindered her was her lacking love as she was not able to love anymore. Even though he put everything into their connection, Jenny's effort was missing.*

All the time Jenny reminded herself of Henry, she could merely see his warm chocolate-brown eyes in the bright sunlight, reflecting his kindness in which she felt stable and secure. It was the absolute right thing; however, at the wrong time. "It hurts me too, you know...", she stuttered. She felt an overwhelming desire to be close to him ... but now it was not her feelings, rather rationality telling her that she was not able to put up with this situation anymore.

*They would laugh, sometimes endlessly. They hardly slept and never got tired of talking, laughing, and crying. It was unjust to deceive herself. She was not ready. She was not able to give him what he deserved. This incredibly beautiful daydream was about to come to an end.*

"So Jen, you really are breaking up with me now...?"

Jenny did not want to call it a 'break up', but that was exactly what she was doing at that moment, and strangely, it felt relieving. Henry stared at her for the last time, disappointed, and then rushed out of the apartment. She was sure that even if it did not last, it was worth it.

Now Jenny desperately had to get some air. Uncountable thoughts were circulating in her mind. She headed for the fancy decorated bar and poured herself a drink. She wanted to be alone, for a moment at least. But there he was: Liam, leaning at the back door, grinning – this

damn charming smile she fell for in summer 2014... Jenny was trying to conceive the situation when he was suddenly standing much closer than she had imagined him to ever be ever again.

*“Jenny, you look so amazing. You know...,”* he stumbled. *“There is no day I don’t ask myself if I made the right decision to let you go... I mean I’ve never felt for anyone the way I do for you. It was difficult back then...”*

*That was what she had wanted to hear all this long time. But now, it sounded so wrong. A meaningless phrase, a lame excuse, only slightly covering the truth.*

Jenny was paralyzed: She had not been able to contact him over the last years, ignored his calls and messages, and now he was standing opposite her.

*Was he really flirting with her right now? After tearing out her heart and leaving without a goodbye?*

It felt so familiar when he approached her. Had she had too many of these to-die-for cocktails? His left hand was moving down from her waist, and the other smoothly touched her face.

*All those memories. When they were 15. Their party nights. Drunk talks. Everything was present.*

Jenny was caught again. There it was: Him taking control over her, over her mind, over her body. His gaze penetrated her. It did not feel right; actually, it felt so wrong. But she gave in.

*Everything had changed. They had changed. They had grown; had grown out of their love. His kiss felt strange on her lips.*

She finally realized: Her past lay behind her. Her future ahead of her. And she was not willing to let any piece of their common past into her present. It had to stop. Now. At that very moment. Everything seemed so clear. In this instance, she gratefully smiled at Liam, went a step back. She felt relieved. In the blink of an eye, a distinct feeling of epiphany rushed through her body, the sky cleared. Allowing her to perceive its shiny star-spattered sky.

*That was what she had needed. All this time; no comeback, but closure.*

She had to go. But it was Mona and her sister the ones she would miss. She dashed through the crowd and hugged Mona. *“Thank you for everything! I’ll call you when I arrive. I love you.”*

She confronted her confused face. But Jenny had no time for lengthy explanations; she just ran and left everyone standing in the room, ignoring the judgemental looks. Escaping. Escaping her own party.

*Go, Jenny. Go. That was the only thing she could hear in her head. Liam. Henry. Tim. Mona. They were all so important, but at that moment, it felt so extremely... liberating. She would not have to please anyone. Her greatest but most painful lesson. She was ready now. Ready to let it all go. Ready to move on. Ready to find her true self. On her own. She would not allow them to make her feel devastated again. It was herself now she wanted to focus on. Where was her confusion? Her discomfort? Her anxiety? It was like the clearing sky had carried it all away.*

...

The city was asleep. She was alone but felt in no way lonely. She certainly did not know what she was heading for. She now, for the first time, dared to look at the ticket she was holding in her hand, the destination in bold: **Berlin main station**. Jenny felt present in the moment. Her only aspiration was to get away and leave behind everything she had tried to hold on to so tight, aiming for her fragmented life spans to be merged.

*Who was she going to spend her life with? Maybe nobody. Or everything would turn around and surprise her. Life surprises. This uncertainty was what made her feel alive. Life is not predictable; it flows, circles and we are standing amidst. Sometimes people return, sometimes they disappear forever.*

Moving away, letting the big troubles seem so indefinite, so indifferent... Let them disappear behind the exciting city lights.

There she was: Sitting all alone in a randomly chosen train. On her own. Overwhelmed. She was starting a new chapter in her life. She had escaped. Just ten minutes before turning 24. A good age. A good age to leave it all behind. She diverges. The troubles, the pain, it all seemed so far away now. Unattainable. It was about her. Her wandering stopped at this very moment.

*The thing about being single is, you should cherish it. Because, in a week, or a lifetime, of being alone, you may only get one moment. One moment, when you're not tied up in a relationship with anyone. A parent, a pet, a sibling, a friend. One moment, when you stand on your own. Really, truly single. And then... It's gone. (Alice)*

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