

universität
innsbruck

I&tp perspectives | *destinations*
creative writing project



l&t perspectives | *destinations*

creative writing project

- 4 **on the ledge** – *johannes amann*
- 7 **born on a Wednesday** – *Pauline Köck*
- 10 **full circle** – *Clarissa Widner*
- 13 **what if ?** – *Lukas Hartmann*
- 15 **finding happiness can be hard for humans** – *Lea Gopp*
- 18 **sick of wandering around** – *Mirjana Ljubojevic*

- 21 **final destination** – *Anja Katharina Bernhart*
- 23 **self-searching Spanish summer** – *Melina Bleiner*
- 27 **on the open road** – *Stefanie Pichler*

- 30 **tropical survivalist** – *Julia Santer*
- 33 **what mosquitos tell you about yourself** – *Anna Theresa Geisler*
- 36 **there is no turning back now...** – *Alina Eder*

- 38 **next case!** – *Sonja Plattner*
- 42 **what shall I do ?** – *Sabine Aloisia Sohm-Huchler*
- 44 **my dream destination: you.** – *Tina Schöpf*
- 47 **finding your feet** – *Teresa Wolfsgruber*

- 50 **agoraphobia** – *Gabriel Johannes Hagn*
- 52 **there goes my chance** – *Bettina Meyer*
- 58 **the postcard** – *Daniela Wolsegger*
- 60 **fishing for grandpa** – *Celina Riml*

- 62 **the seagull and the girl** – *Hanna Kempf*
- 65 **take a breath** – *Nicolas Freiler*
- 68 **traveling.** – *Adreas Ludwig*

- 71 **stab by step** – *Alexander Gabriel*
- 74 **breaking barriers** – *Sophie Kaufmann*

- 76 **a walk in the wilderness** – *Anna Biasi*

l&tp perspectives | *destinations*

creative writing project

- 78 **spell** – *aliresa amindehghan*
- 82 **lights out** – *pajtim berisha*
- 85 **summer storms** – *patricia biasi*
- 88 **of destinations and destiny** – *winfried stangl*

This fifth collection of short stories comprises the work of the students of the Language and Text Production course, MA Programme, in English and American Studies. The stories were written in spring semester 2022 as an exploration of creative writing and part of the Creative Writing Project, *Perspectives*, with the underlying topic of *destinations*.

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

From a boxing ring to exotic adventures, from Innsbruck to New York or a night on the desert dunes of Isfahan, moments of contemplation, feelings, wishes, criticism, hopes and regrets unfold in front of our eyes, as if in a film, with sensitivity and warmth.

Somber or playful, matter-of-fact or allegoric, each short story is well thought-out and equally arresting for both armchair and seasoned travellers!

violet stathopoulou-vaiz



on the ledge

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by johannes amann

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

I'm taking the bus uphill to the plateau. Moving forward. And upward. I want to be above them. And so I tell them that I am. And I am. Because I think so. "The Cart" famously invented that quote. And he was a philosopher.

People say that you live and learn, but I have already learned enough to know my stuff. Final destination. It says so on the screen behind the driver.

I remember when in the old days the screen only showed the necessary things. No fancy fun facts. No news that surely is tampered with during the process. No pictures in colour. Only text in white and black. They say the phrase is "black and white". I know for a fact, having read it once somewhere, that its "white and black". They claim to be linguini or something. Studied language apparently. Language means nothing. Just like the stupid idea to use different word endings for different meanings. Why can't I just use the same word for two different things? Still, they insist that nowadays words do break bones, apparently.

Of course, I usually know what is right and wrong. I am simply aware whether something is white or black. Any compromise would be wack.

I am standing on the ledge. Looking down on the city I've grown to dislike. I feel discomfort. I feel hatred. I hate this feeling. No, I do not actively chase this feeling. No, it's not me who actively puts himself into situations that inevitably elicit that feeling. No.

Such an unstructured and confusing city, even from above. Convuluted. Bad. There is that disgusting anthracite monstrosity where all of those pseudo scientists work and claim to know medical prevention. Poison! Nobody knows what they cook up and force into my bloodstream. Everybody knows it though. And it's bad. Such a stupid principle. Doesn't work. But I've been

accustomed to their deception. I have learned from too many of their lies - to the point of immunity. I decide what happens with my body. This angers me. I get a headache. Aspirin.

I rub my eyes. Moving, growing, shrinking, morphing white spots in the darkness of my eyelids sliding between me and the scenery.

Or is that unpredictable choreography of chess figurines on LSD on my side of that membranous barrier? ...

No.

Two crooked streets away dwells that dumb marble building, acting all innocent. In this town hall the group of people I dislike, because the group of people I like decides so, decide things that I dislike, like making the air go bad more difficult. Apparently this, in turn, makes everything warmer, which, if it were true, would still be good because animals and trees like it warm. So do I. It is that simple. That dull building is so shiny, almost blinding, even from this distance. Especially that square in front of it, where masses of young people have nothing better to do than cause me stress with the constant clatter of the tricks they do on their skateboards –

...

I breathe, I orient myself, I look for more things I like and dislike. I spot the cream-coloured monument to capitalism and the tiny sheep exiting, hoarding their shopping bags. Baa-g, baa-g your belongings, little materialist sheep. I feel superior.

Just down the alley should then be – yes, there it is – the disgusting ode to communism provoking my eyes with a shimmer that attempts to prohibit me from seeing my taxes being dumped into free "education" for people who often were not even born within the same lines on a map as I was. I bet it cost a taxpayer's fortune to install those fancy smooth walls and windows mimicking mirrors and reflecting so- ...

...

At least the few trees and bushes next to it are a somewhat refreshing contrast to that only colour that is not really a colour at all. Actually, looking back at that building now, it looks more like a light grey.

Come to think of it, adjusting my visual focus away from single targets, much of what can be seen is grey - from the streets in between to a great number of edifices whose facades are not individually coloured per se, but rather show textural and ornamental variation resulting in a broader scope of greys. I wonder how much lighter the shades of light grey can become before they are considered - ...

No.

Also, the riverbanks look grey, although the river itself shimmers nicely in a colour that I am having trouble describing, since it is kind of blue but also kind of green. From here, I notice for the first time that the water is not carried in a straight line but flows calmly in almost a half-circle around the city centre in a shyly embracing manner, like a father who, in a fleeting moment of weakness, just at the eleventh hour, refrains from showing affection to his son for the very first time. Intimately. Timidly. ...

... No

The further this shapeshifting body of water is traveling into and out of the city's periphery, the more fields and meadows accompany it in a palette of earthy and grassy shades. It is also just

now, from up here, looking downwards at the few parks and the patchy woods, that I become aware of the fact that there is not just one plant-green, but rather a whole spectrum, a beautiful gradient, with even some very few exceptions of yellow-and-red-leafed trees. How wonderfully manifold nature can sometimes be and enrich our surroundings! But also complicated. Overwhelming. Uncomfortable.

...

... Does that say anything about me?

... No.

This is my cue to leave. I pack my things. As I quickly turn, decisively in a semi-pirouette, my camera, with which I initially intended to take a panorama photo but didn't, slips out of my hand, slides over the concrete ledge and is tipping over the ledge of the wall. I reach for it. I catch it. That was close.

That doesn't say anything about me. Does it?

[back to contents](#)



born on a Wednesday

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by pauline köck

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

The sun is at its zenith when Levi leaves school with no intention of coming back to his afternoon History lessons. Wednesday is his favorite day because his mum has to work an extra shift in the afternoon, so she never notices that he skips school. Usually, Levi's mum Sarah works in the mornings until 12:00, in order to be home to prepare lunch for her son and help him with his homework. However, on Wednesdays he has the whole afternoon to freely roam around town. Sarah always praises her son for being such a good boy. It's just him and her, his father left when Sarah was pregnant as he hated children and was not ready to be a father. Nevertheless, the long-gone father sends his son a card for Easter every year, as this, of course, is the most important Christian holiday, and Levi has to be reminded of God's sacrifice at the cross. Sometimes he feels guilty. He has persuaded himself that his father leaving was his fault.

Levi likes to be praised for following rules. Broadly speaking, he likes rules. When you follow rules implemented by someone else you will never be out of line, and you will not be called out for being a rebel. Nothing bad can happen if you do what you are told, and nobody can scold you. He tries to be polite, that is how he was raised. He says "please" and "thank you", he respects the elders. He never crosses a street when the traffic light is red, washes his hands before he eats and doesn't eat candy before dinner. Regardless, he longs for a different life, a life like the one he lives on Wednesdays. After all, the chances of being caught are minimal. If his mother ever found out the boy would curl up and die of shame. The school never calls Sarah to notify that her rule obeying son is missing out on history classes every Wednesday. Maybe the reason is that he makes up for the missing classes during Fridays History lessons, where he acts like a goody two shoes model student. The other reason might be that the school's teachers do not really care about their students. They have already given up on life, and now they are just killing time until they are allowed to retire.

Although Levi rebels on Wednesdays, he still has a very strict routine and a list of activities that he repeats. Occasionally, he adapts it or exchanges one activity for another. Some activities, for example, have not worked out in the past. In the early days of his school skipping days, he would go to the river, the place where other pupils who cut class meet. Those kids are older than him. They are already 16 and he only turned 12 last month. All these kids do is throw large stones into the river, day in and day out. Levi assumed that this is what is perceived as cool, but he did not like it, so he cut ties with those stone-throwing teenagers. He never told them why he left as he was afraid that they would beat him up. How would he explain a black eye to his mum? He could not say that the teacher had done it because his mum would surely cause a scene at school and all his good efforts for secrecy would be in vain. For obvious reasons he has never returned to the river after that. Luckily, there were more wonderful things to do during these early summer days.

He always considered himself a huge advocate for eating ice cream for lunch, so his first stop would always be the ice cream shop which is located at the other end of town. Levi preferred to stroll far away from his school in order to limit the chances of being caught. The worker at the ice cream shop already knows the boy, one might claim that he is in cahoots with him. Simeon, the ice cream vendor, is aware that Levi is cutting classes, but he is sworn to secrecy. He is very fond of him, because he too was a school skipper back in his day. Levi admires him for that. He thinks that Simeon is living the life he dreams of: no school and ice cream all day every day. His mother always warns him that people who do not go to school do not have any prospects in life. Simeon living his dream makes him wonder if Sarah might have lied to him, and if she had lied about that what else might she have lied about? Levi feels like he has learned more important things outside of school than during those tedious hours of calculating and learning French. The only good thing that came from his French lessons is a particular word he learned, ‘flâner’, which means to wander around aimlessly and being fully aware of the city’s beauty. In his opinion there is no word in the English language that can do it justice or can grasp its full meaning. After he had learned that particular word, he wanted to experience these things himself and that is when he started his new path of being a rule breaker once a week. ‘The world is my oyster’, that is the motto he lives by.

Ice cream in hand and head in the clouds, he continues his afternoon walks in a small park, where he observes two old men. Like him, they also have a routine and play chess every Wednesday. Levi watches them attentively as he hopes to figure out the rules of the game. To him, none of it makes sense. Every playing piece moves differently, some seem more important, and some are sacrificed like they do not even have a part to play. Nevertheless, he finds it intriguing how the pieces have been carefully carved out of wood. Once, he was allowed to look at them from up close, but he was reprimanded because he still had sticky fingers from the ice cream he had previously eaten. The old men were very forgiving, but he was not allowed to touch the pieces again. This made him feel inconsolable. There are many things the boy dislikes, and being a disappointment is among them. From time to time Levi feels like a pawn with no control over his own life, he feels like the point has come where he has to break free.

The good thing about Wednesdays is that Sarah will not be home until 6, so Levi has enough time to savor every moment of his self-given freedom. The last stop of his tour is always the graveyard. Although it might sound morbid, this is his favorite part of the day, here he gets to spend time with his friend Ernest, who is the graveyard’s caretaker and gardener. He is already quite old, and Levi is afraid that he will soon have to start digging his own grave as he might

kick the bucket in the next couple of months. Ernest is from Austria, a country, he says, that used to be very important, it used to be an empire where the sun never set, but that was a long time ago. Every Wednesday, Ernest reminisces and tells him everything he knows about the Habsburg Empire and how it came to an end in 1918. The course of history could have been different if the successor to the throne had not been assassinated on that daunting day in the early summer of 1914, or how Austria used to have an Emperor in Mexico or a fleet of pirates. He also tells stories about the great wars of the 20th century and how he wishes for the monarchy to be reestablished. Although Levi only understands small parts of Ernest's stories he enjoys listening to the ramblings of the old man. On occasion, he would even impress his teacher during Friday's history class with his vast knowledge of Austrian history. Ernest is a kind man, there is something in his eyes that makes Levi feel safe and understood, he always shares his afternoon snack with the school skipper, sometimes he even gives him a small glass of beer, which he finds delightful. His mother would never allow him to have beer, a rule that may only be broken on Wednesdays. During his short 'career' as a truant, he has come to realize that life as a rebel and rulebreaker has a lot of perks. His mother only ever told him about the consequences, but she never mentioned the things he would be missing out on. Although Levi always says that he likes to be good, he now finds it exhausting. He would rather roam around, not only on Wednesdays, but also every other day of the week.

The graveyard is his last stop on his journey through town. Then he always makes his way home just before his mother returns from work. Levi sits down at the kitchen table pretending to do homework. When his mother asks him about his day at school, he just repeats some facts about the Habsburg Empire. Wednesday evening a sense of sadness overcomes the boy as he will have to obey the rules for another week. Luckily there is a silver lining, next Wednesday is just around the corner. Sitting at the kitchen table he thinks about all the adventures that await him next week.

[back to contents](#)



full circle

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by clarissa widner

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

The first rays of sunshine crept over the mountains, marking the dawn of a new day. Ablaze with light, the forests of the valley beamed in various shades of red. The falling of the leaves announced the arrival of a new season and thus the annual migration of the birds. In an old outpost situated at some distance from the nearby town, a dove sat and watched as the scenery came to life. She was smaller than any of its kind and her plumage whiter than the snow that would soon cover the land. Never before had the little bird left the safety of the valley, for she was still young. Yet she yearned to discover what might lie beyond the tall mountains, and it is hence with good reason that the forthcoming journey was anticipated with high spirits. Ruffling her feathers, the bird ascended into the sky before circling above the rooftops.

She often wondered whether the townspeople could ever leave the valley, their lack of wings ultimately constraining them to the ground. Funny creatures they were, she has always thought, with their lanky limbs and strange customs. The little dove, however, was a curious fellow and frequently enjoyed observing the bustling folks. And thus, she descended upon the crown of a young weeping willow standing in the corner of a little garden. The spot provided a perfect view, the dove found, onto the adjacent house. It was a modest home, not at all grand nor particularly conspicuous, but it had become the young bird's favourite place to be, for she had grown remarkably fond of its residents. It belonged to a young couple and their family dog, a large, yet gentle German Shepherd. Every morning, the dove perched on her tree and observed the husband kissing his wife goodbye and leaving for the day. The wife would often sit in the creaky rocking chair on the porch, sometimes embroidering, sometimes just being lost in thought, with the furry companion laying at her feet. That day, she was raking the leaves in the garden. Though the couple seemed content, the dove had always thought that there was a hint of sorrow in their eyes. Yet for what reason, she could not have known. The day progressed. Flocks of storks and swallows passed over the valley. It was time to leave. Chirping a farewell to the townsfolk, the little bird soared into the air.

For several days the dove journeyed south. The jagged mountains were soon replaced by soft grass-covered hills. She flew over fields and forests, villages and cities, marshes and pastures, all of which were wondrous and delightful. Yet in an instant, the bird came upon a sight that made her little eyes grow wide with astonishment. She had heard tales of this place before. They called it the place where land meets the sea, the dove remembered. She was familiar with mountain springs, babbling brooks, and shallow ponds, but had never encountered such a colossal amount of water. It appeared bottomless and infinite, and the small bird shuddered at the prospect of crossing such an expanse. The rustling of the breeze in her ears, however, sounded like whispers of encouragement. Tempted to discover what lies on the other side, and by fear of being left alone since her kin would soon have advanced, she gathered all of her courage and let the wind beneath her wings carry her over the water.

The air grew warmer, and a shore was soon discernible on the horizon. Upon finally reaching the unknown land, the dove aimed at the first tree in sight to perch and catch her breath in its shade. Beholding the scenery, she was enthralled by the ensemble of earthen tones which presented itself to her. There were no longer fields of grass. Instead, shrubs and bushes covered the rocky ground. Despite all the exhaustion, the dove knew she had to push on, and thus resumed her flight. It was not long until the shrubbery grew sparse. The ground was no longer made of rocks and dirt, but of a loose golden powder that was whirled up whenever the slightest breeze blew. It was accumulated in piles that reminded the dove of the undulating hills she had encountered, and it stretched as far as she could see, much like the endlessness of the sea before. Amongst the piles, the dove made out a group of humans. They were accompanied by bizarre quadrupedal animals with humps on their backs. Some of them were like horses since the humans used them as a means of transportation, others carried cargo. Ah! So these must be the horses of the Golden Land, she concluded for herself. She also found her idea of the name Golden Land particularly fitting, for it reminded her of the marvellous sunset she witnessed every evening. The bird approached one of the riderless animals and settled down on one of its humps. Watching the humans, she decided that they looked distinctly different than the townsfolk. Their faces and bodies were shrouded in cloth. To get a better view, she flew onto the head of another animal, facing the rider. The riders now noticed her too, and gauging by their pointing and laughing, it seemed as if her presence was a source of great amusement to them. The dove recognized that they spoke in a foreign tongue. The cadence of their speech was rhythmic and unfamiliar to her bird ears. The rider in front of her then offered a handful of seeds, which she gladly accepted. The encounter filled her with excitement, but the time for rest had not yet come, and she once again took to the sky.

It had been countless days and nights since she commenced the journey, and the little bird now came upon a place enclosed by a great wall. The more she approached, the livelier it became. People entered and left through its guarded gate. The city itself was swarming with humans. The inner side of the city wall was closely lined with houses. At the far end of the city stood a splendid and monumental palace, its ornamental façade glittering in the sunlight. Perhaps it was the residence of a king, the dove pondered, or a house of worship. She passed over what seemed like a marketplace located at the centre, and the aromatic scent of exotic spices suddenly engulfed her. Descending upon the roof of one of the stalls, she listened to the merchants' incessant chattering that sounded like the gobbling of turkeys on the farms back home. The air was sufficiently warm, and the scene seemed intriguing, and so the dove resolved to make the current site her temporary dwelling until it was time to head back once more.

Several moons had passed. Weary from the long journey back to the valley, the bird sought out a place to settle. As she flew above the little town, she came across the graveyard. Suddenly feeling strangely drawn to a particular spot, she landed on a mossy tombstone under an old weeping willow. The dove felt as if she had finally arrived; not at a place that felt like home, but at a place to rest. The sun was setting. It is said that in the twilight of dusk, the world of the living and dead converge. And just as the sun had vanished behind the horizon with only the last rays reflecting from the atmosphere, a blueish-white hue encompassed the dove. She ruffled her feathers and settled down, her eyes growing heavy with sleep. Once darkness came, the dove contently fell into what she knew would be an eternal slumber. And on the tombstone on which she lay, it read:

Amelia Abrahms

1898 - 1906

Beloved Daughter, Aspiring Adventurer

[back to contents](#)



what if?

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by lukas hartmann

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

Something did not feel right. I could not wrap my head around it even though I tried, over and over again. My life resembled a monotonous circle, a routine that appeared to be everlasting, impossible to break out off. It was not always like that, though I grew up in a big city in the Alps, full of life, eager to learn, astonished at the wonders life had to offer. As a child you don't take life too seriously. When facing challenges, you could always shrug your shoulders and move on. Funnily enough, I thought it would continue to be like that and, oh boy, did life prove me wrong. I have always believed that finding my place in life, my destination, would be full of fascinating and unique experiences.

Here I was now, working in an office, the typical nine-to-five job. My colleagues were all exactly like me, trapped in a hamster wheel with no end in sight. The same daily routine, same greetings, same old jokes by the coffee machine, same old fake conversations. It appeared that we had all lost our way, let the important things in life out of sight.

Pathetic. Is this what my life will look like for the rest of my time on Earth? I won't accept it.

Having shared the same fate as them, I looked at my co-workers in disgust and shame. I felt as if someone had attached a stone to my legs and had thrown me into water, slowly letting me drown. The only time I could truly forget the futility, absurdity and overall purposelessness of this stifling life was when I looked out the window and saw the vast mountain ranges that stretched for miles and miles. In this exact moment, a picture would always arise before my inner eye, a glimpse of the past I cherished the most. I felt as if I was on a high mountain. My grandfather had regularly taken my family to the alpine pastures he owned. These pastures and mountain ranges were a journey that found its end there. I can still remember how in awe of the mountains I had been. There was something special that could only be felt there. It goes without saying that my grandfather felt the same. A moment I will never forget was when he had picked me up and said, "Your destination in life can only be found in places like this where the restrictions of everyday life cannot follow you." A sentence that burned itself into my mind.

At this moment, I swore to myself that one day this is the place where I will end up. Years had passed since I was last with him on the pasture, and I was still in the same city, working the same job, dealing with the same people.

What happened to you? What stopped you from fulfilling your pledge? After all, you are just a coward, unwilling to risk anything.

As I was looking out the window, however, I felt that something was different. For some reason, I could not go back on my word. Nonetheless, I did not feel brave enough to fulfil it. After all, mountains did scare me. These vast, powerful landscapes make you feel insignificant and brutally remind you of your own mortality. A memento mori if you will. But this day, I could hear a calm and soft voice in my head that became louder and louder.

What if?

I tried to ignore it, but it did not stop.

What if? What if you could for once be a man and pursue the path you are destined to walk.

It made sense. This could be the moment; I was finally able to actually live my life. I left the office without even looking at a single person, sprinted home, packed my things, left my mobile phone on the table, and headed out. A wave of adrenaline and excitement, which I had not felt in years, rushed through my body as I approached the alpine pasture I so cherished. A sense of hope arose, a hope for finding a purpose or at least some sort of revelation. I looked up to the mountain tops and froze. Clouds had covered the sky, the mountains engulfed in darkness and thunderclouds evoked only one emotion. Terror.

What are you doing? How arrogant can you be to actually think you deserve to be in this place? Who am I to think that I am entitled to find the destination fate chose for me?

My hopes evaporated for a moment and all the struggle and self-doubt emerged from deep within my soul. I suddenly felt the urge to give up and return. My life at home did not feel as boring as it used to be.

Who needs a clear path in life? You should just take every day as it comes.

It was nothing special but at least safety was guaranteed. It was a foolish idea to leave normal life behind.

What were you thinking? Life simply consists of tedious and restricting routines. It is just the way it is.

I slowly turned around and was ready to break my promise once again. Though, a voice echoed in my mind.

What if?

[back to contents](#)



finding happiness can be hard for humans

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by lea gopp

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

Together we look down at the city. The cars are struggling through the city's afternoon traffic. People are scurrying through their lives. Silence. Sadness. Stagnation. "Well, life doesn't have to be that way bro," my friend interjects. Together we look over the city. In the south, the snow glistens on the mountain peaks. Wonderful world. Wonderful day, it is. A cool breeze and light mist envelop us. The famous cloud enfolds the Nordkette like a gentle bath in soft white cotton. *Everything blurs.*

In the garden there are two big old cherry trees. They are intertwined, the branches seem to have grown together. On the trees hang white heart-shaped sweet cherries.

"White cherries? Are you sure your eyes are okay?"

There is a round wooden table under the cherry trees. Two women are sitting there talking. The rustling of leaves in the wind is the only sound in the garden. And my singing. No airplane in sight right now. No car can be heard, no human sound. I sing a little bit louder on purpose. To provide for a good mood.

"Oh man, you just love being the center of attention. Don't you?"

I sit on a branch that overlooks the garden. From here you can also see the city. Peacefully, it lies there. I look at the women below me. They sit under the branches and wear large, round sun hats.

"Although they sit in the shade? Funny these people."

They don't notice my singing. I stop and approach them. "I just want to have a beach house like she has. I am so miserable here with my life," I hear one of the women say. Curious, I hop on the table. I catch a glimpse of the computer, and there is the beach house. In Sardinia. The summer wind blows a leaf off the table. I glance around me. I spot the white, juicy cherries. I

spot the roses, which look a little thirsty. I look directly into the face of the woman who wants the beach house. A wave of sadness grips me. A plane flies over the garden, rolling like thunder over Innsbruck. I feel the balmy summer wind, and I am on my way.

Here I am now. The vast gentle ocean before me. The beach house behind me. I turn around and look for the cherry trees. But I don't see them. All I see are people on the patio. They are setting the table to have dinner. I see the juicy cantaloupe and go for it. Tastes so good!

"How dare you. Stealing their dinner!"

The family sit down at the table, eats their pasta, and does not even notice the missing cantaloupe. "I'm not happy with this table. I would like to have the one from Instagram. The one I showed you last week," the man says. "I'm just not satisfied. Here it is," he continues. I glance at the picture he is showing to his family. I turn around quickly to the ocean. The sun is about to disappear behind the horizon. The sky has turned into a rainbow with splashes of yellow, orange and red. A bright, radiant light appears over the horizon. A breath of warmth envelops me. The family does not see the glowing sky. I begin to sing. High notes.

"Oh no. They didn't throw the broom at you. They just ignored you?"

Sadness overcomes me, wipes away the beauty of the radiant sky. I am on my way.

"Boy, you've been around quite a bit, haven't you?"

I am on the balcony, surrounded by fresh herbs. It smells like Provence. Or Tuscany. I see a bowl of water, which I can use well after this long trip. I don't hear any airplanes, like in Innsbruck. But there are a lot of honking cars around here. It's like being in a concert with lots of loud and squeaky violins.

"Or when you sing loudly."

Here is the table, smaller than it appeared in the picture. I think of the warm radiant sunset in Sardinia. I think of the garden with the white cherry trees in Innsbruck. The patio door is open, and I hop over the door threshold.

"Have you gone insane? You must have gotten cocky!"

I'm in the middle of the spacious eat-in kitchen. It doesn't look like it did on Instagram. Many packages, clothes everywhere. I see the influencer by the sink. He wears a black T-shirt and white sneakers. Like hipsters do these days. The young man, no more than thirty, promoted the table on Instagram the week before. Now he is cleaning the kitchen.

"Boy, that's not very Instagrammable, is it?"

I see him crying softly. I want to cheer him up, so I quietly hop back onto the patio and start singing. My favorite song. Now he comes to the door, I sing louder on purpose. He shuts the door.

"Sure, he wants to cry alone."

I'll just wait here until he comes back to the patio. I hear cars, trucks, ambulances, people. But I don't hear any airplanes.

"Jeez, where are you? In the country?"

I look over Vienna. The rooftop terrace has a view over the city, as far as Lake Neusiedl.

“Why on earth would anyone want to see such a shallow lake like Lake Neusiedl?”

I think of the people under the two cherry trees and on the patio in Sardinia. A sadness slowly creeps inside me, my heart getting heavier and heavier. I observe the fresh herbs and see their clear structure. Their simplicity contains beauty. Each leaf, an opportunity to spice up life.

“Oh no, you’re a philosopher now too? Stick to bad singing!”

Finally, the man comes back to the patio. He makes a phone call. “I need good pictures! I need over a million followers like David has,” he shouts into his cell phone. I look him straight in the face. His golden-brown curls fall on his forehead, covering the wrinkles of worry. His gentle facial features no longer have any lightness. I start singing again. That’s got to cheer him up sometime.

“Oh no pal, just leave him alone.”

“Life is simply better with several million followers,” says the man now. He ends the phone call and works with the computer on the patio. I stop singing, what’s the point. The scent of the herbs is now sweet. Bittersweet. In the air, I feel lightness, cheerfulness, and joy.

I fly back to Innsbruck, to Seegrube. David is doing yoga here, surrounded by cameras. The city is still asleep. The morning sun illuminates the mountain peaks. The cameramen circle David. The way he performs his yoga poses looks funny. He looks trapped. As if there were no escape from the circle of cameras. While doing the Warrior pose, he falls over. “I can’t wait until this day is over,” he rants. “You have to deliver today, that’s the deal,” comments a woman standing a bit off to the side. Her voice carries a reproachful undertone. David sits down on the ground. He has more than 2 million followers.

“Boy, the Alps are obviously selling well!”

The sun’s rays envelop him. The morning air is fresh, he must be freezing in his T-shirt. “I can’t do this anymore. I don’t want to make content anymore. I wish I had a different life,” he whispers. His voice breaks away.

“Jeez, life must be tough for humans. The road to happiness must be hard to find.

Glad to be a bird.”

[back to contents](#)



sick of wandering around

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by mirjana ljubojevic

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

Here I am, standing at the very gates of my beloved hometown, wondering what has happened here in all these years. Perhaps I should have waited a little bit longer; for truth, now that I look upon this city, I see that everything still looks the same, but deep inside I feel that many things have changed. Now that I'm here, I wonder. As indeed I wonder, had I stayed here, had I not decided to move away, what would my life be like now? Would I be the same person? Well, I wonder. I can't help but wonder. And I will continue to wonder, for the rest of my life, I guess.

All those mind-twisting thoughts, all those what-if questions. They make me doubt whether I am really here now. Am I truly back? I see the huge plum tree, right here in front of me. I see our old house. I see the rusty old fence. Alright, I must actually be here! Without a doubt, I am here, right here. I'm at this very place where it all began – the bus stop down the road: "Hrvacani, Republika Srpska". This is the exact place where I got on the bus. The bus out of my country, the bus towards a brighter future, the bus that changed my life. Back then I was only 20 years old. Does that mean it's already been 30 years since I took this life-changing step? Well, I still remember it as if it was yesterday.

It was a gloomy morning. The sky was dull, completely covered by dark gray clouds. This was the day I left my homeland. I abandoned my beloved home, my safe harbour – everything I owned and could take with me at the time had to fit into one small gym bag. My mother and I lived on our own because, unfortunately, my father had passed away too early. Up until today, I haven't forgiven myself for leaving her behind, feeling so lonely and broken-hearted. The day before I left my homeland, we couldn't help but cry all night. The tears just wouldn't stop. My mother accompanied me to the bus stop. She was devastated, and in a shaky voice she told me to take care of myself, and to come back soon.

I got on the bus, feeling more miserable than I've ever felt in my entire life. I recall the words of the bus driver asking me, "And you, where are you going?" I dug a crumbled piece of paper with an address written on it out of my jacket pocket. He nodded. But where was I even going? I didn't know. The only thing that was sure was that I didn't actually want to leave my country. On the contrary, I had to do it. In the early 90s, the war forced me to leave everything behind, in the hope of a better life in the big wide world.

In the distance I could still hear the horrible sounds of the war – the Yugoslav War – one of the bloodiest conflicts in Europe since the end of the World War II. These terrifying noises made me feel confident that I was doing the right thing. I simply had to leave this country, just like thousands of others had done it before.

Goodbye Yugoslavia, hello Austria. I got there after a tiring 12-hour bus ride. The last stop was Innsbruck. I had never heard the name of this place before. When we arrived there, it was pitch dark. Bozana, my friend from home, had promised to pick me up right there. But where was she? All the other passengers left, just not me. I was standing there, all alone, trapped in the middle of those huge mountains, with no money, no mobile phone, nothing. I broke down in tears and eventually fell asleep on the freezing asphalt. Bozana finally arrived sometime in the morning, but I couldn't be mad at her. After all, she was the one who got me a job as a cook.

Thanks to her I did have a job, but I couldn't speak a word of German and had no idea about Austrian culinary culture either. "What kind of food are they eating here", I thought to myself when I had to serve schnitzel with jam for the first time. I was young, early 20s, and worked hard for my money. Then I met my husband. I still remember every single detail, even after all these years of trying hard to erase those painful memories. The two of us had to live in a small room, less than 10 m², without our own bathroom and kitchen. We had almost nothing. Well, we did have some cheap plastic plates and cutlery. And we had three T-shirts each, and a pillow and a blanket. But that was it! When we first told our story to our three children, this whole misery was so unimaginable for them that they would not believe us.

And our wedding... let me think. Well, it was perhaps the most unusual wedding in our family. It took place on a Monday, more precisely on July 19, 1993, because that was my only day off. Wedding dress and suit? Non-existent! We couldn't afford any of these. I was wearing a plain white cotton dress, my husband an old shirt his father had given him before he had left our home country. Fine dining followed by a celebration in the restaurant? No word of it! Instead, cold snacks on inexpensive plastic dishes in our one-room apartment. But none of that was important to us anyway. What made us feel really sad deep down was that our loved ones weren't able to be with us on such an important day. While I was pronouncing my marriage vow, tears were running down my cheek. As you can imagine, I would have loved to have my mother with me on my wedding day. But that was just an unfulfilled wish, one among many others.

The only thing we had was our love, and no money in the world could buy what we had. We were two warriors who were fighting this battle side by side. Our only wish was to go back one day. Back to our country, back to our parents, back to our roots. But the situation didn't allow it. Everything was still so unstable, even years after the war was over. The years passed, and there was no talk about returning. My mother's heart was probably shattered into a thousand pieces after all these years that we'd been apart. How many times have I just wished to return to her and break free from my life in this foreign country, to cry on her lap like a little child, to stay by her side, to calm my tired soul on her doorstep...

Day by day the years passed, but every single day I remembered the moment when I left my mother alone and when she asked me to please come back soon. But I couldn't. We were fully aware that it was impossible for us to expect our three children to live in such a financially unstable, corrupt country. We couldn't let our children grow up the way we grew up ourselves. So, we stayed, promising our children that their lives would be better from what we had to go through.

Our first-born son started school. A couple of times he asked us something about his German homework. We had no idea, we couldn't help him, it broke our hearts. But he found his way around, found Austrian friends, learned the language. So did our two younger children. Many more years passed, we grew older, and our children went their own way. My daughter is now a teacher, both my sons are engineers – here, in a foreign country. Here, in the country where the two of us came as guest workers, where we started from scratch. My husband and I did keep our promise. Our children are now living better lives than we could ever have hoped for. I now dare to admit that our biggest fear was not being able to offer them anything in life. But we made it. We put them on the right path, after years of hard work, after years full of sacrifices.

And now? After all these years, I finally want to return home. It feels as if there was an invisible magnet pulling me home. I can't fight against this power; I just have to get away. All the money of the foreign world is worth nothing, because my heart wants to go where God created it. I'm sick of wandering around in foreign lands. Really, it must come to an end. Everything leads me back to my homeland. I don't want the glory of this foreign country anymore. I want to go back to my roots.

And now, at this very moment, I'm standing here again. But I soon realize that nothing is the way it used to be. I feel so different here now. I'm standing here, in front of the house where I was born. The house still looks the same from the outside, but the door is locked, and the windows are closed. The grass hasn't been mowed and the colourful flowers in front of the house aren't here anymore.

Mom, I'm back! I'm back, after all these years full of pain in the foreign world, after all these years in which we were missing each other so sorely. Mom, I'm back, but where are you?

[back to contents](#)

final destination

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by anja katharina bernhart

byfoto: anja katharina bernhart © 2022

Driving on the highway for several hours, Sarah and Debbie enjoyed singing - or rather shouting - along to their favourite songs while letting time pass by and watching the sun go down in front of their eyes. The semester was over, and the young women were eager to enjoy the holidays together. The courses at university had been challenging, which only increased their excitement to *FINALLY* be free and go wherever the road took them. The feeling of freedom grew and grew while they were singing, dancing and smoking in the old shabby dark blue van Debbie's brother had lent them for the road trip. Their *FINAL DESTINATION?* Wherever that old blue thing could take them. With a mattress in the back of the car, they felt as free as they would probably never feel again with no obligations and duties, and a whole summer to travel around Europe. The students were keen to visit new places and meet interesting people. Two 24-year-old women - both single - ready to explore the world and go on adventures. Fearless, without the slightest concern that anything could happen to someone so young - only starting their lives - both girls were not wearing their seatbelts. They were free to lean out of the window, reach to the back of the car to fetch snacks or drinks and dance to the loud music without this annoying thing restricting their movement, keeping them in their seats.

At the same time, 35-year-old Claude was driving on the same road coming towards them from the opposite direction. But her mood was entirely different to the ones of the two carefree students enjoying their freedom. She had just left her apartment after another fight with her husband Matt. He - again - had attacked her not only verbally but also physically which left Claude with no choice but to leave as fast as she could. She only had time to grab her handbag and her keys; after that she sprinted to her car intending to put as many kilometres between her and her husband as possible. She just could not stay with him anymore. Their marriage had started beautifully and for a very long time, they had enjoyed each other's company. They had

met at university and were so madly in love that they had decided to get married at the age of 21. But in the last few years, he had changed. They were trying to have a baby for years, unsuccessfully, frustration built up and the romance faded out. When his company slid into bankruptcy two years ago, he started drinking. For a long period of time Claude had thought that time would heal all these wounds and that better days would follow. But after having been beaten up again, there was no waiting for these better times anymore. *SHE. JUST. COULD. NOT.* Driving along the highway, Claude tried to keep herself together, but failed to stop herself from crying. A blurry curtain of uncontrollably flowing tears left her blind. Again and again, she tried to wipe her red eyes clean, but in vain. The stream of tears would not stop; they kept coming and coming. Claude kept driving towards freedom as fast as her car would allow. *FINALLY.* She was so overwhelmed with emotions of grief as well as joy that she did not see the old blue van driving towards her. Her thoughts running wild, she did not focus on driving. Just for a fraction of a second, her car entered the opposite lane of the highway. It was the tiniest moment. The most minimal second that changed it all.

A LOUD CRASH.

Two completely destroyed cars standing still, off-road. Shattered glass, Claude's head smashed to the steering wheel, blood running from an open head wound. The front of the old blue van was completely destroyed. The glass was shattered. No one was to be seen inside. Some distance away from the scene of the accident, two figures were lying on the hard asphalt. They were lying in their own blood, not moving, without a sign of life.

This incredibly tiny, short moment destroyed the lives of not just these three women, but also their loved ones. Even though they were all heading towards very different directions for even more different reasons, they ended up at the *SAME. FINAL. DESTINATION.*

[back to contents](#)

self-searching Spanish summer

photo: violet stathiopoulou-vas © 2022

by melina bleiner

photo: anjel szaszobonon-waz © 2013

“Sí...sí. Gracias...señor. Hasta...hasta...luego.” Savannah spluttered in a quavering voice. Then she put down the phone. Inside she was squealing, her heart was racing and beating so intensely she thought it would break through her ribcage any second now, and her hands were trembling, making it difficult to hold the tray full of aperitif cocktails she was supposed to serve the bridal shower group at table 14. She couldn’t believe it. She had applied for so many summer jobs in Europe, and after countless rejections, she finally got one. The owner of the public swimming pool in Viveros, a small village in Castilla-La-Mancha, offered her the opportunity to run the adjacent bar & bistro over the summer. And she jumped at the offer. Without thinking about it for more than a second. Savannah had just graduated from high school, and on evenings and weekends she worked as a waitress at the “Brewing Beans – Café & Cocktails” in San Fernando Valley, locally known as the Valley, where she also lived. She liked the Valley. She really did. But, nevertheless, she felt this constant urge to get out of the Valley, out of LA, out of the US and explore the world. Even though she was one of the popular kids, the prettiest on the Ravens cheerleading squad of the Brook Hill High School, living the Californian dream so many other girls across the globe were wishing for, she just never felt complete. As if something was missing.

* * *

a few weeks later ...

After an unscheduled layover and some turbulence caused by a heavy thunderstorm, the airplane finally landed in Madrid, and Savannah hurried to the baggage claim and then to immigration. The officer there took her passport and mumbled to himself, “Señorita Savannah Scott, 18 años, de los Estados Unidos,” then he put a stamp into it, and, while giving it back to her, looked into her eyes and stuttered, “H-h-have f-u-f-un h-h-here in España, señorita Savannah!” struggling to pronounce the h-sound. She thanked him and hauled her two

suitcases through the main hall of the airport to the bus that would take her to Viveros. Once she had taken her seat, her eyes fell shut – it had been a long night, and a long flight – but she forced herself to keep them open and take in the views of the landscapes the bus passed through. Right after leaving the city, she spotted “molinos” – windmills, typical for Castilla-La-Mancha, of the type she had seen in the movie of Don Quixote – and even the “autopista” was so different from the highways she was used to in LA. On all sides there were oaks, pines, olive trees, and in-between the crash barriers there were fuchsia pink oleander bushes, stretching as far as the eye could see. Stunning, a storybook pulchritude. Savannah felt pure excitement. The same feeling of excitement she had felt the day at “Brewing Beans” when el Señor Rivera had called and offered her the position. The feeling of fatigue; the very exhaustion from her journey, had vanished, or at least had taken a backseat and was trumped by her thirst for adventure and exploration.

* * *

the next morning ...

Having finally arrived at her tiny two-room apartment and after a good night’s sleep, Savannah opened the window shades and let the Spanish sun in. Unlike her window shades at home, the so-called “persianas” were made of some sort of thick metal, placed on the outer side of the window and shut out even the tiniest ray of light, leaving the room pitch-dark when closed, even during daytime. She stepped out on the five-square-meter small balcony and beamed with delight when she realized that the color of the nail polish on her toes exactly matched the rectangular tiles on the balcony – a blend of a rusty red with an ochre orange tone. It had to be destiny’s calling for her to end up here, exactly where she was. Sipping her coffee, leaning against the railing, she observed pedestrians down on the street and realized that most of them were middle-aged or elderly. At the same moment she recalled what she had read in a travel forum back home: Most adolescents and young adults leave Viveros to go to school or college in a nearby city and only return during their summer break. But since that was about to start, Savannah didn’t give it much thought – neither when she had read it, nor now – and set out for her first meeting with el Señor Rivera. She strolled through alleys and winding paths along olive groves and sunflower fields, already thinking about how she would introduce herself; rehearsing conversations in Spanish in her mind. When she arrived at “la piscina” – the swimming pool – she felt nervous and insecure for the first time since she had accepted the offer. She just stood there for a moment and wanted to brace herself before entering, but el Señor Rivera had already seen her and was coming up to her with his arms wide open. Hesitantly she stumbled, “H-Hola. Que...que tal? Soy ...”, but then he interrupted her, “Ah, Ana, eres tú. Bienvenidos!” Why was he calling her Ana? “How rude of him,” she thought at first, “giving me a nickname without asking for my permission.” But then she remembered that she was in Spain, and Spanish people were even more open-hearted than the sunny people in the Golden State. “Maybe Savannah was too long, too difficult to pronounce, too American for him. And maybe calling someone by a nickname was a sign of affection,” she thought to herself and accepted it silently. From now on, she would be Ana. With a new country comes a new language and also a new identity, so why not a new name? El Señor Rivera accompanied her to the bar & bistro and introduced her to the chef, the commis chef and the two waiters. Then he showed her the menu and told her that she could make some changes, perhaps include some American specialties. Just by reading the names of Spanish delicacies, some of which she had tried before in a tapa-bar in LA, Savannah’s mouth started watering: queso frito, ensaladilla rusa, croquetas de pollo, patatas bravas, calamares a la andaluza, pisto manchego, gambas a la gabardina, bacalao rebozado, ...

* * *

three days later ...

It was Savannah's first day of work, and she was so enthusiastic to get started that she woke up at 6 a.m., half an hour before she had set her alarm clock to go off. Since she had spent a lot of time outside throughout the past days, she already knew her way around the village and ambled to the "churrería" she had discovered the day before to have breakfast. Afterwards she sauntered around the small park and then walked to la piscina and arrived timely at 8:30 a.m. to start her shift. Soon after that, the pool filled up with people, some of them coming to the bar & bistro to get an iced coffee and a "bocadillo de jamón serrano" or an "empanada de berberechos", that had just been delivered by Alejandro, the commis chef, and was still steaming hot. Behind the counter where Savannah was cashiering, customers started to line up in a growing queue, many of them small-talking to her. They were all so extraordinarily nice, asking her all sorts of questions, but she had to fob them off, politely, or the other patrons wouldn't be very pleased. Later on that day, Pablo, a sun-tanned basketball player in a light blue varsity shirt, invited her to come to see a flamenco show at the "plaza de toros" – the bullring – with some friends on Friday. Savannah wasn't sure what to say, but since she didn't want to offend him, she agreed. Smilingly, Pablo took off, throwing his left hand in the air making a waving movement and shouting, "Vale, nos vemos!" As he was walking away, Savannah followed him with her gaze, then took a rag and cleaned the tables. She caught herself humming and nodding her head to the song that played in the background: "Todo de Ti" by Rauw Alejandro, the absolute summer hit in the Hispanic world.

* * *

on Friday ...

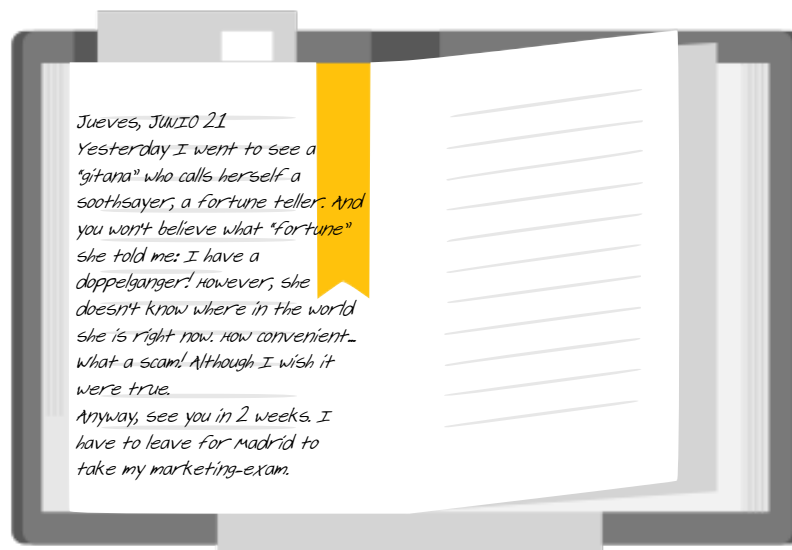
Savannah had just gotten back from work and started to get ready for the flamenco show. She put on a pastel yellow dress, her gold sequined espadrilles, a mauve-pink lipstick and curled her blonde hair into loose beach waves. Then this nervous feeling overcame her again. She was about to meet with a bunch of people she barely knew. Probably Pablo would bring along Daniel, Lucía and Blanca, some of his friends whose names Savannah had overheard him calling at la piscina. She really appreciated how open and nice Spanish people were, but she couldn't help worrying about their authenticity – whether they really meant it or it was a faked kindness. They all pretended to know her. It was too good to be true. "Ring!" The notification tone of her mobile phone startled Savannah out of her troubled head game. It was Pablo. He had messaged her his location. Then he typed, "Quedamos en mi casa antes del show." So Savannah set off for Pablo's house, following the directions that the Google Maps lady gave her. When she arrived there, Pablo opened the door, kissed her on both cheeks and invited her in. The others weren't here yet. That's when she remembered that Spaniards are always late. Hopefully Pablo wouldn't perceive it as rude of her to show up perfectly on time. Nervously, she looked around the room. She couldn't trust her eyes. She gaped. There was a picture of Pablo and his friends at the beach, and one of those friends was her – or someone who exactly looked alike. She got closer and inspected her mirror image. The girl was wearing a black bikini and coral baseball cap with a white A on it that Savannah had never seen before. But the girl was the spitting image of Savannah. Damn. She even had the same distinctive mole next to the smile dimple on the left side of her mouth. Savannah closed her eyes, praying in those milliseconds that it was all just a bad dream. For a moment, she was too scared to open her eyes again, she didn't want to, but then, eventually, she did. Her eyes were open, wide open, and they haven't misled her before. It gave her the chills, but simultaneously she was perspiring, feeling as if her pretty mini-dress was sweat-soaked already. A few thousand thoughts were swamping her mind all at the same time; however, none of them made any sense, none of them were rational. Savannah was in a trance, but then Lucía gently touched her right shoulder and said, "Han sido unas muy buenas vacaciones, no?" Savannah just nodded. Now it all made sense. The whole village had mistaken her for someone else, for this mysterious girl in the photo. That's why everyone had been so amiable, and that's why el Señor Rivera had called her Ana when they first met.

* * *

a few hours later ...

The flamenco show had almost come to an end, but Savannah was still as befuddled and mystified as when it had started. She just couldn't wrap her mind around the unforeseen discovery she had made at Pablo's house. During the show, she didn't talk much, but she tried to carry it off well and play along, but, secretly on the inside, she was just waiting for the moment to bid the others goodbye and call her mom. Pablo, however, insisted on walking her home. She followed him, trying to pretend she knew where they were going to, and with every step she took, her anxiety grew. What would she do once they

have arrived at Ana's house? Surely Pablo would wait for her to get inside, but she didn't have a key, obviously. Since Ana lived close to the plaza de toros, Savannah didn't have much time to think, and the moment had already come. Playing dumb, she said "Oh no, he olvidado mis llaves", but then Pablo reminded her that she doesn't need her keys but instead could just use the fingerprint sensor. Shuddering with fear, she walked over there and hesitantly, in slow motion, put her index finger on the sensor. "Click!". To her surprise, the door had opened. How could that be? Not even twins have matching fingerprints! She turned her head, looked back to Pablo and farewelled him, "Buenas noches, Pablo!" Quickly she hurried inside and closed the door behind her. Then she took a few deep breaths. Not knowing what to expect, she pussyfooted along the hallway into what turned out to be Ana's bedroom. It seemed as if no one were home. On the white writing desk there were more photos, confirming that Savannah had not just hallucinated or gone insane before, and a sky-blue notebook with yellow-gold daisies on it that looked like a diary. Savannah went over there and opened it to the latest entry. While flipping through it, she had already realized that Ana's handwriting also looked like her own. She read the entry from two weeks ago, translating it into English in her head.



Still in shock, Savannah put the diary down and went straight for the door – she just wanted to leave, to escape this craziness of a situation. Already outside, she wanted to run as fast as she could, but her feet didn't seem to move. With her hand that was still willing to move she reached into her handwoven straw bag and pulled out her mobile phone, immediately dialing the number of her mom. "Mom! There's this girl. She's me. She is my doppelgänger. Mom, have I been adopted? Or do I have a twin sister that you have put up for adoption?" she rambled. Her mom exclaimed, beyond confused, "No! What do you mean? I don't know what you're talking about..." Then Savannah dropped the phone. At the other end of the street there was Ana, walking toward her. They both startled and just stood there, a few meters apart, poleaxed. Paralyzed. Savannah felt numb, as if she couldn't move, but then Ana came closer and closer and eventually hugged her. Instantly Savannah felt overwhelmed with feelings she had never experienced before, and she literally felt this hole inside her that was making her feel incomplete her whole life filling up. Now the enigma was solved: her strong urge to travel and explore new places of the world was her subconscious guiding her to encounter her doppelgänger, her soulmate, her second self. Ana invited Savannah to come inside and talk, and this was the beginning of a long night, a long friendship and a long sisterhood they couldn't imagine missing out on. It had been both their *raison d'être* to venture to foreign places, to gallivant, to globetrot just in order to find each other's second half.

[back to contents](#)

on the open road

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by stefanie pichler

byfoto: anjel szaszobonon-waz © 2013

*Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose.*

Song of the Open Road by Walt Whitman

These lines of Walt Whitman's poem touched me when I first encountered them back in my school days. The poem has been on my mind ever since. It has inspired me. Things must be experienced by yourself - with all your senses. Things must be felt, seen, touched, smelled. As Whitman says, "I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell."

Now the day has finally come. I feel free. I could cheer, sing, laugh, and probably cry tears of joy. At the airport starting my big trip. The biggest trip I've ever taken. A new chapter begins, and I feel more alive than ever before. I am on the road. After three long years of living through a pandemic, I am on the road to something beautiful. I don't know yet what it will be and where I will find it, but I am convinced that I will find it waiting for me somewhere. But wait, did I pack my passport? Nervously I rummage around in my backpack and find all the important travel documents. Fortunately. I'm so relieved. I'm off to the first place. Others will follow. While I'm waiting, I watch the people at the airport. I love seeing these crowds of people – I have missed this so much.

* * *

I wake up from the chirping of birds. Other than that, it is completely silent and peaceful. I decide to go to the beach. The sun shines warmly on my pale skin, which is not yet used to the sun. Like bright little stars, the sun's rays sparkle in the deep blue water. It is as if they are waving over to me. I walk on the beach with bare feet and feel the soft sand between my toes. I sit down on a rock and look out to the ocean. I watch the light dance on the waves and listen to

the sound of the waves. The smell of the sand mixes with the smell of the sea - I breathe in the scent. The sun's rays are reflected in the sea and turn the individual spots into colored dots. Birds fly over the water - a light breeze brushes my skin. I look around on the beach – there are no people except me. I look closely at the things around me - the sand, stalks, the palms, the flowers. I dig with my feet until I feel the light moisture just below the warm surface. There is no one on the beach except me. In the words of Walt Whitman: “The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.” But am I happy here? Is this my place? I am on the road.

* * *

I wake up to the impatient honking of a car. It is still dark outside. Turning to the alarm clock I see that it is only 5 am. I remember that I am in New York City. I decide to take a shower and spend a day downtown. In the hotel lobby, a few people check in. They are waiting at the reception desk, staring into their cell phones. They seem impatient. I walk past them toward the revolving door and head outside. The city is alive. I am on the road. Many cabs crowd the streets. In between, people want to change sides of the street - all kinds of people pass on the sidewalks - children, old people, joggers, tourists, people in suits. Most of them seem stressed. After a few meters, I reach a large square and stand in the middle. I turn around 360 degrees - take in all the impressions around me – so many new smells, sounds, lights. I listen to the people - they speak English and many other languages. I don't understand them all. Was that Portuguese just now? Here, the facades are no longer made of glass. I watch the screens - they glow brightly. My gaze wanders to a small screen and gets stuck there. It says, “Do you sometimes feel like you don't know your place in the world?” My attention is caught. Yes, I know this exact feeling. Then the ad continues, “Then apply to be a flight attendant with American Airlines and become a globetrotter!” I'm disappointed. I turn around again and take in my surroundings. As Walt Whitman suggested, here I am: “Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating”. But can I find peace in this city? Is this what I'm looking for?

* * *

I wake up from the crowing of the neighbor's rooster. Although I'm still tired, I get up, make myself a cup of coffee and sit out on the porch. I am now in a small, quiet, sleepy, little village. There is nothing much going on here. It is mostly cloudy and bleak. There are so many large, wide-open spaces and fields where vegetables are grown and only a few houses. I walk to the supermarket, which is so small that many products are not even available. The owner of the supermarket talks to me during the shopping as usual. He tells me very enthusiastically about an event in the village square with food, games, and live music on Sunday. While I put my groceries in my bag, he mentions at least five times that I can't miss it because just about everyone will be there. On the way home, I pass the only restaurant and the waitress smiles and waves at me when she sees me. They are all familiar and friendly faces. Despite not knowing them for long, I am convinced that they would help immediately without expecting anything in return. What convinced me to stay here for so long? The closeness with the community, which I have never experienced like this before. Such a closeness that radiates through my whole heart and floods my body with warmth. Here I am – on the road – and suddenly I have more time than ever before to rest, slow down, step back and reflect on my life. Sometimes it seems as if time stands still; no one is ever stressed. In the countryside, there is no hectic lifestyle, no obsession with material goods, superficiality, or arrogance. Even though I wasn't thrilled at first, over time I got used to small-town living. However, I am slowly starting to look at life in a small town quite differently. Not only nature is beautiful, but also the people are so

welcoming, honest, down-to-earth, and warm-hearted, which makes life here so appealing. I've realized that this rural community is much more real and connected to life than people in the city or in a resort. This authenticity is perhaps also connected with nature - the tranquility of nature in the countryside is extraordinary. In NYC, people listen to fake birdsong to fall asleep, or they have canned flower scents in their expensive, tiny apartments. Here, nature is real and healing. Even though this place might look boring to some people, it is a place that is worth living, working, and spending your life in. Even if it often seems dreary in the countryside, the air is incredibly fresh. For the first time, I have the feeling that I can breathe properly. But in the end, I'm still on the road – I don't know if I've reached my destination yet. Is it really life in a mundane, sleepy town where nothing exciting ever happens? Am I ready to give up on the exciting, vibrant, and dynamic life in the city?

* * *

Will I ever find my destination? I do not know, and that's okay. Because I'm learning that beauty is everywhere. Beauty can be in the hectic, in the simple, the mundane, the ordinary, the tranquility, the peacefulness, the stillness. Beauty can be in our friendships, in our relationships, in our talks, in our everyday worries, in learning, and in different manifestations of life.

But most importantly, beauty can be found on the open road.

[back to contents](#)



tropical survivalist

by julia santer

Today is another hot, tropical day here on my island. I have been looking for refreshment, desperately, and find myself emersed into the crystal-clear water. I am tired, covered in sand and in need of a new shelter. There was a plane far in the distance, or maybe it was a seagull? I am not sure to tell the truth. Over the years I might have forgotten what planes look like.

Today is not a good day for me. It all started with a very heavy rainstorm before sunrise. It was such a violent storm that no one could have missed it. It really swept me out of my shelter. A tremendous thunderstorm. Lightning strokes. The storm was so violent that it tore my shelter apart. I need a new shelter, I want a new shelter and I will rebuilt a new shelter. I was lucky to retrieve some lost palm branches, which were once the makeshift frame over my head. Some of them I found in the ocean and more about 100 feet down the beach. What did not get destroyed from the storm was destroyed by the fallen palm and banana trees. Given this catastrophe, no one could have slept a wing anymore. I have been working hard to rebuild my shelter before the sun hits the horizon tonight and darkness appears once again.

Come to think about it, I have not even eaten anything today. But what could one eat other than coconuts smashed into pieces or smushed bananas all dipped in sand grains? Today is not a good day to go hunting for insects or collecting eatable plants either. Oh, there is a bug crawling next to my left foot – into my mouth it goes. Today, the only activity other than searching for pieces of my old shelter and trying to rebuild a new one, is to do with the water: walking in and out of the ocean. Refreshment. Not every day is the same. Life is like the ocean. Sometimes it is calm and on some days we have to swim against the waves.

Yesterday was a better day. One would even consider it as a day on which things went smoothly: I woke up early after a resting night, the sun kissed my face as it arose in the morning sky, cringing its way up from behind the horizon far away from the spot I was lying in

my beloved shelter. Coconut with a side of bugs for breakfast. No banana. Thinking about it now, I should have had one. Nevertheless, the bugs were not ordinary ones but comparable to the queen in the beehive. In fact, they were huge, about a fingernail big and half as thick as my pinky finger. Their very particular color is hard to describe. It ranged from blue to green with a sparkle of very light and soft purple when held into the sunlight just at the right angle. I have learned to appreciate the smallest moments ever since I set foot on this island. The small and ordinary moments are the ones that matter the most in life. I cannot even remember what it felt like living in the city of Los Angeles. Life was busy and I was constantly in a rush. Multiple university classes, multiple assignments, multiple jobs. Life on the island is relaxed: sleeping, searching for food, preparing food, eating food, going on walks, diving into and swimming in the ocean; it is simple as that.

As I chewed on the bugs in my mouth, I wondered what their life must have been like before I had them for breakfast. Do bugs think? Do bugs have a memory? Are bugs able to communicate with one another? Do bugs build relationships? Do bugs stay together with their families or do they leave their family as soon as they are born? When are bugs able to live on their own? Do bugs have a partner? Do bugs sleep? These are the type of questions that distance me from reality and draw me into such philosophical explorations every once in a while. These are also the questions that keep me awake at night. But I am digressing. Bugs are tasty, and they can be eaten in various different ways. In the mornings, raw they are delicious. Sometimes I roast them over the fire, especially in the evenings. This reminds me of summer barbecues with my friends and family and gives me comfort, yet is gut-wrenching.

On some days I even forget that I used to live in a metropolis, in a flat, and had three roommates: Mandy, Sandy and Randy. It is funny how their names all sound the same. My cat's name was Bubbles. For the holidays I always visited my family and friends. My mom and dad, my brother and my sister, my grandmas and my grandpas, my uncles and aunts, cousins. My friends Lena, Janelle, Payton, Taurey, Max, Jeff, Beth, Nathan and Daniel. On the weekends I spent the money that I had worked hard for on weekdays. I am now somewhere in the middle of the ocean between Los Angeles and Sydney. No need of a job or money or friends and family. Just me, myself, and I. Most of the days I forget that I had once been enrolled in one of the Universities in Los Angeles and had just started my Master's degree. I intended to travel from Los Angeles to Sydney over summer break with a friend of mine. Then came the moment which changed my life forever. I can still see the whole scene unfold in front of my eyes.

We are midway through my flight when the airplane crew starts acting in an odd way. I can tell from their facial expression and the terrified look in their eyes that they know something we do not know yet. Suddenly, the crew rushes from the back of the airplane into the cockpit and vice versa. It is not long until the pilot activates the loudspeaker and with a shivering voice informs us that there is a serious technical issue and that he has to pursue an emergency landing on the water, somewhere in the middle of the ocean. He orders to remain seated and calm.

That is, however, a disrespected order: Panic breaks out. People start shaking and shivering, skipping and sprinting, screaming and shouting. Everyone knows that their life is about to be over. There is such a loud, beeping and disturbing noise on board. Combined with the desperate, raucous screaming of the passengers, it is difficult to bear. I turn my head to my friend and look into her eyes, deeply, wrap my arms around her body and with my heart already beating out of my chest I say to her: "This is not the end, everything will be just fine.

We will be back home for the fall semester!” After this very emotional moment, everything happens so quickly. The plane is diving down, losing altitude so fast that it makes me feel really sick on my stomach. The entire machine is shaking, stirring and almost spinning itself in circles. Abruptly the plane hits the ocean and we are below sea level. I am trying to break a window. The aircraft is sinking fast, taking all the passengers deep down into the ocean. And then black, darkness, I am passing out.

Next thing I remember is waking up, trying to breathe. The sun is burning my skin and I am surrounded by water. Blue, blue and blue. Some wreckage of the plane is floating in the ocean, however, not anywhere near where I am. Nothing I could hold on to. No life raft in sight. Far in the distance there is something that looks like an island. I start swimming with the little energy I have left. After hours of swimming, I finally reach land. The very island where I am now.

Here I am, on my island, a survivor. For the time being, it is the most important thing to me. I survived, that is all that matters. I do not even know whether I want to go back. I am doing fine here. This is my home. Life is a song, I get to write my own lyrics: “Tropical survivalist”.

[back to contents](#)

what mosquitos tell you about yourself

by anna theresa geisler

Ouch! Not again! I can't take it any longer. I stopped counting, but this feels like the hundredth mosquito bite – and that in one week. These are not normal mosquito bites, you know. They don't just itch, they really hurt. No, these are definitely not normal mosquitos. Or maybe I'm not normal.

Everybody else seems to be enjoying themselves. “Isn't this the most beautiful scenery you have ever seen?” one of my friends would say each morning after waking up, and many times during the day as well. And all of the others would agree. “This is the best food, I've ever eaten!” one would say whilst eating, every single time. And all of the others would agree. But I mean, come on, rice and beans are not a suitable side dish to literally everything, and it's definitely not a dish for breakfast, oh and don't get me started on the cilantro – it's in everything and it's disgusting.

I'm not even sure why I came along on this trip. Was it because I hadn't seen my friends in so long? Or was it because I was scared that our friendship would have ended if I hadn't come along, that I would have missed too much time they would be spending together without me? But what does this say then about our friendship in general, and about me? That I'll always go along with whatever is suggested just not to lose them? Ouch! One hundred and one bites! Oh, how I hate it here. One month, four full long weeks, hiking in the thickest part of the rainforest in Costa Rica, and still three weeks to go.

The next day was another hiking day – who would have guessed. After two and a half hours, we came by a little hut in the middle of the forest. I desperately needed a rest. My legs hurt from all the walking and all the mosquito bites. My friends seemed a little annoyed that we had to stop again, so I suggested that they should go on without me and pick me up on the way back. “Are you sure you'll be okay here on your own?” one of my friends asked four times.

And after I had reassured them and explained that I was just really tired and needed to rest, the three of them went on without me. I wasn't scared or anything, there weren't any large or dangerous animals in this part of the forest, so I mean what could have happened to me, except for more mosquito bites?

The little wooden hut seemed deserted. Maybe someone used to live there, but there was definitely no sign of human life now. The fence of the veranda had fallen into decay, all four windows were broken, and part of the roof seemed beyond repair. Plants were not only growing all around the hut but also up its walls. It was quite impressive, actually to look at. All these exotic wild plants and enormous trees that surrounded me. Nature seemed to have reclaimed the place where the hut stood. A little on the left of the hut, beautiful yellow flowers bloomed. I had never seen them before. They immediately reminded me of a poem about daffodils I had once read somewhere. For the first time since I had set foot in this country, I felt peaceful. I put my jacket on the veranda floor and sat down, my head and back resting on the wall. It was amazing to take a break there. I was sitting in the shadow, so it wasn't hot, and I was just more than glad to stretch out my legs and put cream on all my mosquito bites.

I don't know what woke me up, or when I fell asleep, or how much time had passed but suddenly, I was wide awake, and I felt oddly refreshed. I think I heard something or was it someone? Were my friends back already? The thought of walking back to our hostel gave me the shudders. I just wanted to keep sitting there. I realized that I also didn't want to talk to my friends. They can be quite annoying actually. We were doing the same university course when we met and had become a study group. We could work together very well, and we really helped each other out. I had never had a lot of friends in school, but this had never even bothered me much. Still, I was glad to have found like-minded people to hang out with. And I enjoyed our study groups, but with everything else we did together I always felt a little out of place, you know, my friends were very outgoing and kind of loud, and I was quiet and introverted. We had kept in touch after university, but we had barely seen each other before this trip. When one of my friends suggested the trip to Costa Rica, I almost felt like I didn't have a choice.

And then it came to me again. A thought I'd had for quite a while but never fully dared to dwell upon, was in my head clearly now: I did not want to be here at all. I came along on this trip simply because I felt I had to. The next day, I caught a flight back home. I felt relieved just knowing I could go home, go back to my wonderfully clean apartment which I knew was totally free from mosquitos. The sheer thought of my comfy bed filled my heart with joy and excitement.

The trip was horrible, but I actually learned quite a lot. I learned that I enjoy being by myself and that that's totally okay. I learned that I don't fit in with my friends and that that's also okay. I learned that I actually wouldn't call them my friends anymore, we don't have anything in common, really. I learned that it's okay to say no, that it's okay to stay home where I feel comfortable, and that it's okay to listen to my heart and my body. I don't have to go on adventures, I can simply read about them.

While I had been waiting for my flight, I had an odd feeling, and I thought: it was as if I needed all those mosquito bites to really listen to myself. I picked up my poetry collection and looked for the poem about daffodils. And the odd feeling I had had at the airport, I realized, was gratefulness.

...

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

[back to contents](#)

there is no turning back now

by alina eder

Don't you know that feeling when everything at home just gets too much and the weather outside gets too cold, you just want to break free of your daily routine and book a flight to a tropical country, where the temperatures are high all year round? That was exactly what Arianna De Cecco thought. She used to be a teacher, you know, just like all other Italian teachers: ordinary, organized, structured. She liked her job at the beginning, but at that certain moment this is what she thought: She needed something else.

And that was why a couple of weeks later she ended up in Thailand, without a job and without a roof over her head. Having burnt all her bridges in Italy, she was determined to start “the simple life” on the tropical island Koh Tao. She did not choose this destination by chance, but because she had already been there with her boyfriend years ago. She could feel the exact same sadness she had felt when she was on holiday there. It was a shock to see the poverty and the environmental pollution those people have to deal with all-year round. So, why would Arianna, the ordinary Italian teacher want to start a new life in this third world country? Exactly, to make the world a better place. I know what you are thinking right now: what an amazing idea to give up her own life in a rich country to move to a poor country and do something meaningful to contribute to the society. But you are wrong.

By the time she arrived in Thailand she did not feel quite well; actually, she was beginning to feel kind of homesick. After having taken her first breath of the warm and humid tropical air, it was suddenly clear to her that there was no turning back now. Streets without asphalt. 50 degrees. People living in garages. The sweet taste of Thai food mixed with the bitter taste of rubbish everywhere. Stray dogs and cats. This was going to be her new life. She had not even looked for accommodation in advance. She ended up on Koh Tao without a place to stay for the night, and that was the first thing she realized after 24 hours of travelling. The only three things she possessed were the ones she could carry: her backpack, her passport, and her money.

And then the thing happened that must have happened to anyone attempting something that foolish: she ended up being all alone at night without knowing anyone and without having a place to stay. She could remember, though, that there was this tiny place where all the backpackers used to pass their time if they had nowhere else to go.

And then there was this moment when her life would change for good. She stepped into this filthy bar in the middle of nowhere and saw a good-looking waiter. You may not believe in love at first sight, but that is actually what it was. She sat down at the bar, and with sadness in her eyes she asked him for a cold beer. He was quick to realize that something was wrong with her, and she, trusting as she was, told him everything about her life. Everyone knows that strangers should not be trusted so easily. It was like the beginning of a beautiful love story. He felt sorry for her and offered her to stay in his flat, which was a garage right behind the bar, as long as she needed. It was not only for his good looks, but also for the fact that he was the only person that could help her that made her fall in love with him. The bar was filthy and there was this stench everywhere; you could not even distinguish whether it was because of the rubbish in the bushes or because of the deficient sewerage system. Probably it was a combination of both.

A few days later, what Arianna did was find herself starting to work in the bar of her exotic lover. His name was Sansa and he seemed like the perfect match. Although she was deeply sad when she arrived in Thailand, Sansa made her forget all the bad stuff and she began to like her new lifestyle: waking up in the middle of the day, having lunch, serving a few guests in the evening. Sansa was the kindest person she had ever met. To her it felt like the perfect new life. She lived the same happy and flawless day all over again, until some strange men arrived at the property. All of a sudden, Sansa seemed so different. Those men got into a huge fight and Arianna started to be really scared. They must have been fighting about something illegal. When she asked Sansa about them, he was furious. It was the first time that she felt scared around him, for he started shouting and threatening her. It was not until he told her to keep her nose out of his business or she will be dead when she realized that she found herself in a very dangerous situation.

Having lived in this threatening condition for a couple of weeks, constantly waiting for Sansa to be kind and empathetic again, she realised that this was his true face. She knew those people would not hesitate to kill. She ended up being so scared that she did not even dare to escape because she was sure that he was going to come after her if she did. One day, she even stopped eating. She only ate one cup of rice per day to stay alive. That was her way of telling the customers that something was wrong and that she needed help, desperately. It was her only way out.

One day, there was one customer who saw the fear in her eyes and dared to ask whether everything was okay. It was in that very night that he waited for her to finish the shift and help her escape. In the very moment they were getting into the kind man's car, Sansa came back. Nobody heard of the Italian teacher after that. She would not be turning back.

[back to contents](#)

next case!

by sonja plattner

“NEXT CASE,” I heard a voice in the distance murmuring.

It is funny how the brain works when you are dying. You perceive things that you normally wouldn't. Your eyesight and all other senses are sharpened, and you find peace and comfort in the smallest but most beautiful experiences. The changeability of water was one of those things I fixated my thoughts on when I was dying. Water can be murky, dark, bright, dappled, turbulent, calm but also volatile. There is an indescribable mixture of colors meeting on the surface of the sea. I tried to touch those colors with my fingers; but in vain. Full of longing and desire, I gazed up at the imposing surface of the sea. It looked as if it was covered with millions of crystals dancing with each other; a galaxy with thousands of stars. I could hear the ocean whispering to me. I could feel it breathing; up and down like a human body inhaling and exhaling air when falling asleep. The breathing followed a certain rhythm my heart aimed to match. I tried to keep my eyes open, but I was exhausted. Everything became darker. The dancing bright crystals vanished, and the whispers disappeared into the darkness of the abyss.

“Where is our next case, Bailiff?” asked the voice. “I don't have time all day.”

“Yes, of course, your Honor. I believe he is passing over at the moment,” responded Bailiff with a shaky voice.

“Celestial transportation gets slower every day it seems, am I right, Bailiff?” the voice replied.

“You are ahh .. quite right, your Honor. You are always so right,” Bailiff stuttered.

I tried opening my eyes and failed before realizing they were already wide open. It was dark. Too dark. It was like someone shut off the stars and moon and put them into a box inhabited by a Darkling devouring every last particle of luminosity. I was left in a state of disorientation, deprived of my senses. I couldn't see anything; not even my two hands in front of my face. The room was pure black and I tried to navigate in a complete absence of light. It was a place in

which light was consumed and bent and matter was compressed down to an infinity. Time and space merged before my eyes and formed a time singularity, a black hole into which I was bound to fall. And I did. The obscurity felt menacing, oppressive, almost surreal. I found myself swallowed up by nothingness, having vanished into oblivion.

“**NEXT CASE,**” the voice announced assertively.

This time it was louder and stronger and burned itself into my brain as if a cigarette had been put out on my forehead, burning into the lower layer of my skin. The voice run through my whole body like electricity, causing my senses to recover and my heart to...

BOOM BOOM,

BOOM BOOM.

..... I couldn't believe it. I had to listen to it once again.

BOOM BOOM,

BOOM BOOM.

It was clearly a heartbeat. A heartbeat. I could hear it. I could feel it. I could finally breathe. I WAS ALIVE.

“Bailiff, wake him up,” the voice ordered. “This is taking too long. Where does he think he is?”

“But your Honor?” Bailiff asked carefully.

“WAKE HIM UP!” the voice screamed impatiently.

“Yes, your Honor. Certainly, your Honor. I apologize, your Honor,” Bailiff answered subordinately, making his way to me. I still couldn't see anything but I could feel the vibration of the floor and hear the wood creaking underneath his feet. “Excuse me, sir. Could you please wake up? We would appreciate it if you respected the time of the court, sir. We are already behind schedule,” he stated nervously.

I was confused. Court? Why, why am I in court? What did I DO? And why do I not remember how I got here? Where am I? Where the hell am I? I panicked and tried to look around me. There was nothing.

“Is he awake now?” I heard the voice asking. Bailiff nodded. The voice declared, “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I have just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?”

“Why do I need an attorney? Where the bloody hell am I?” I cried out.

“Sir, p-p-p-please keep c-c-c-calm,” Bailiff stammered nervously.

“You are dead, my friend. Dead as a doornail,” the voice proclaimed with a condescending grin on his face.

“I am what?” I gasped.

“Did you hear me, sir?” asked Bailiff. “Do you need an attorney?”

“Of course, I need an attorney,” I responded confused and overwhelmed. “How should I have known that I was going to die today?”

“Not with that tone, sir, or I will have you removed, understood?” the judge warned me. I tried to defend myself but was interrupted.

“Understood?” he repeated angrily. I nodded.

*The judge ordered Bailiff to call for a Mr. Rottenborn and a Mrs. Cunningham. One of which, I assumed was my attorney and the other the prosecutor in this case. Both of them presented their opening statements, which were more a declaration of their love for the judge than anything else. The whole scene was lunatic and reminded me of an animal farm where two golden retrievers were competing for the attention of their owner. In this case, however, the owner being a lazy unfriendly conceited bumptious fat old pig, wearing a long black robe and holding onto the gavel as if it was his pacifier. In rounds, the golden retrievers were showing off their newly learned tricks and were begging for treats and belly rubs. Like attention-seeking dogs they were pacing around the courtroom, interrupting and manipulating each other, trying to please the owner, following his instructions word by word. When the judge instructed them to sit, they sat. When the judge told them to speak, they spoke. And I am sure if the judge had told them to catch their tail, they would have tried. They would follow him as if he had toys hidden behind his back. Preposterous. The scene that unfolded before my eyes was completely ludicrous and absurd. This was **MY LIFE**, not theirs. **MY LIFE** was in their hands. And **MY LIFE** depended on those needy little dogs. I had to speak up and stop this insanity from developing and consuming my fate.*

“This is all wrong,” I exclaimed. “I did not do anything. You must be mistaking me for someone else,” I voiced.

“Silence,” the pig replied harshly. “Let your attorney speak for you.”

“But but my attorney is otherwise engaged. I would like to tell my side of the story,” I begged them.

“I won’t say it again. Order in the court or I will have you removed!” the pig grunted assertively.

“You will get your chance now. Please take the stand, sir!” barked the council.

Did I read that right? Did I read that right? Did I read that right?

And I did. I got up to the witness stand and answered every question as truthfully as possible. I was patient; but after a while, I noticed that they didn’t care about me. They only cared about their little toys and treats. They cared about their competitions and their wins. And they cared about their own reputation and truth. My truth, however, did not seem to be one of their concerns.

Did I read that right?

Yes, you did!

Did I read that right?

Yes, you did!

Did I read that right?

Yes, Mr. Rottenborn. Yes, you read this very, very well.

I tried to remind myself that these are mind games trying to confuse you and make you admit to crimes that you simply just did not commit. Lawyers try to spin a story into another by asking YES and NO questions without giving you the opportunity to explain further and tell your side

of the story. They use your life as their playground and it does not concern them how many children get hurt as long as they walk out with a trophy. The pity is that their games work, and you start doubting yourself. Their words cut like knives into my skin and shattered my thoughts and memories into millions of pieces, making it impossible for me to retrieve them and bring them in order. My memories floated like stars in the night sky, shining beautifully across the surface of my unconsciousness; I was able to see them but unable to reach them. You start to forget. You start to lose yourself in the truth that is presented to you.

Objection, your Honor, lack of foundation.

Sustained.

Your Honor, I am just gonna object on relevance.

Overruled.

Ahh ... objection... hearsay.

Sir, you asked the question.

Ohhh, okay, next question.

*It was almost funny watching them fight over **MY LIFE** like two children fighting over chocolate. At this point, the legal team was conditioned to object to any answers they didn't like even when they asked the question themselves. I got the feeling that the lawyers just learned the phrase "objection hearsay" last week and are now very excited to use it in any circumstances possible. Unfortunately, this was not kindergarten. Unfortunately, it was not just chocolate. It was **MY LIFE**. My voice was reduced to the questions they asked, and **MY LIFE** depended on the answers I could give. I felt as if someone tied a cloth around my mouth, trying to suffocate me, only letting me speak when it supported their claims. I felt like a puppet whose strings were pulled by someone else. I felt rage boiling in my abdomen, threatening to erupt like a volcano, reducing this entire place to ashes. I felt injustice. Pain.*

"The defendant is found GUILTY," the pig declared with a smile on his face

"Guilty?" I screamed in disbelief. This cannot be happening, I thought. "I didn't do it. I promise. This is unjust. This is not fair," I shouted.

"Where do you think you are!" he snorted furiously. "What do you think THIS is?" Although he raised his right eyebrow, I knew that he was not looking for an answer. "Do you think that this could have gone any differently? Do you really think you stood a chance? Don't make me laugh. This is the law. This is justice. This is the system that rules the world, and it is f***ing rigged. Neither life is fair, nor death. Alea iacta f***ing est, my friend. People are biased! Choices are arbitrary! The court is never impartial! People think the system saves them, but in fact it kills them. They spend their whole lives waiting to die only to realize afterward that the final destination, the one they desperately wanted to reach, is nothing more than the same place without WiFi. Welcome to your personal hell loop, pal."

NEXT CASE!

[back to contents](#)

what shall I do?

by **sabine sohm-huchler**

It was placid on the impressive Empire State Building in New York City. Some tourists sauntered along the platform, fascinated by the view. The last sunrays dipped the atmosphere in a tender orange tone. Some seagulls glided in the evening sky. It was their favourite spot. Every year, they came back and celebrated their special day. This year it was different. She was perching on a narrow bench, counting the minutes. “07.30. Where is he?” she whispered. Why did it have to happen to her? The control freak. She had to grin but stopped immediately. The situation made her uncomfortable and she felt remorse. What was wrong with her? She had a fantastic plan. They had a fantastic plan. It was that simple and yet so forbidden, but still she felt so light and independent. A chilly shiver ran down her spine, when she thought about the consequences. But ... she could not help smiling. “Oh gosh, what is wrong with me? Stop smiling!” she sighed.

Her friend had warned her. Surely, she could count on her, but she did not understand her dilemma nor her feelings. It was effortless for a third party to judge and to give advice. Once, she was a judge and the adviser as well. In retrospect, it was hypocritical and dishonest. Currently, she was the one who took advice and felt guilty. She realised that life was not only black and white. Her current situation shone more in a greyish tone with tiny gloomy spots on it. “Do you want to ruin your whole existence? You have everything. Afterwards, there will be nothing left. Just a tremendous void and a worthless life,” oh, her dear friend was constantly theatrical. Maybe she was right. Maybe she was wrong.

She needed to flee from New York because everything reminded her of him. It was not the official reason why she wanted to travel to Canada. It was her husband’s suggestion. “The timeout will calm you down, my dear. The last months have been turbulent and stressful for you. We both have to recharge our batteries,” he offered. Once she reflected on their discussion, she felt guilty and extremely doleful. She was happily married. She loved him

unconditionally, but it seemed that life played an evil trick on her. The fact that she did not want to fit in a role, which society and her family imposed on her, complicated her dilemma. Wife, mother, family, children? These words sounded amiss to her, did not belong to her. “What’s wrong with me? That is a disaster!” Her eyes glued on the watch and she wondered, “Where is he?” They had agreed to meet on the Empire State Building, their favourite spot, to plan their trip. She had an urge to scream, whine, and grin at the same time or to jump from one of the highest buildings in town. No, but she needed to flee from the Big Apple in order to forget what had transpired.

It was late February, she ran into him after work, in the pub where she used to meet her work colleagues for a drink. When she spotted his warm amber eyes, her knees became weak. She could not take her eyes off him. He was attentive but also a bit reserved. The reunion was as awkward for him as it was for her. When had she seen him the last time? It must have been his graduation party where he officially announced that his plan was to accept a job offer in Mexico City. Was it five or six years ago? She was not sure because she could not think clearly anymore. She had dreamt about him many times. She craved for him. Oh yes, she yearned for his presence and attention. When he invited her for a drink, he touched her hand gently. Her entire body froze and all their memories came back. They chatted for hours, and when the bar closed, she accompanied him. She realized her misbehaviour, but at this moment, nothing else mattered. She felt safe in his strong arms. The embrace was intense and intimate. With him, she felt as light as a feather and when their eyes met, she got lost.

When she recalled that brief moment she had to grin and thousands of butterflies diffused and fluttered in her stomach. The night with him triggered something in her and she conceded her desperate situation and her not fitting in. While he was listening, he was caressing her body. After their first get-together, they had to meet again. He was a rescue anchor who saved her from drowning.

She was aware of the fact that her affair would have consequences but she could not think clearly. Therefore, she agreed to a holiday with her husband, where she could collect her emotions and also celebrate their anniversary. It was already 07.45, and she was still waiting on the platform. “Why is he not here? He is always on time. That is uncommon,” she murmured nervously. She did not like unpunctual people, and in this particular situation, it was extremely annoying. Unexpectedly, her phone vibrated. She unlocked it and skimmed through the WhatsApp: I won’t disappear anymore. I will stay in New York for you. Xoxo. Oh gosh, why did he text her in that particular moment? She wanted to restart her marriage in Canada, but now?

“Hi sweetie, sorry I am late, but I just got your favourite donuts,” her affectionate husband stood in front of her with a box in his hands. She stared at him. “What shall I do?” she asked herself silently, staring at the deep orange dot of the horizon.

[back to contents](#)



my dream destination: you.

by tina schöpf

“It is 3 PM on Sunday August 15th 2021, and you are listening to KDKA News: First up, the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated the delta variant to be much more contagious than any other previously known version of the coronavirus - and was right. Since people infected with the delta variant despite vaccination may be able to transmit the virus as easily as the unvaccinated, travel restrictions tighten once again in most parts of the world...”

“Ridiculous! As if the current travel bans aren’t already enough! But don’t worry, I am sure your long-awaited reunion with your sweetheart Adriano will work out just fine.”

Isabelle is right, I shouldn’t worry as much. For the last two months I did everything necessary to turn my most longed-for wish into reality – to finally reunite with the love of my life after almost spending two years apart. This included secretly getting vaccinated to receive the required Covid-19 green certification. Thinking back, I almost didn’t survive confessing it to my parents.

Isabelle and I are currently enjoying cold brew coffee at our favorite café ‘A Cup of Joy’ in the center of my beloved hometown, Ellwood City in Pennsylvania. It feels amazing to be back here. I had missed the tranquility of the place. Ellwood is very unlike Boston, which is where I moved to last January to receive my degree in Veterinary Science at Northeastern University. The Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020 disrupted my initial joy of starting this new chapter of my life and spending time exploring the beautiful historic buildings, the incredible restaurants, and all the lovely green spaces of Boston – no wonder I am still not genuinely settled in there.

Anyhow, there is this other city that stole my heart the moment I arrived: Rome. It was there where I spent my first semester abroad as one of the students being selected for the first-semester global experience program offered by my university. Right from the beginning I was blown away by the phenomenal mixture of history, archaeology, art, religious culture and of course the delicious food. Gelato and pasta – I keep dreaming of it every night! And on top of

that, the incredibly sociable and hospitable people – not to forget: the drop-dead gorgeous Italian men! That I fell for someone as handsome and genuine as Adriano is hardly surprising, isn't it?

“Eloise? Didn't you say your PCR-Test appointment is at 4? Don't miss it! I would not be able to forgive myself if you had to miss your appointment because of me, as much as I would like to continue our catch-up talk.”

“Whoops, I completely lost track of time! Thanks for reminding me Izzy, coffee is on me!”

With a big hug and emotional farewell words, Isabelle says her goodbyes. I linger there for another moment, watching her drive away in her car before I make my way to the Ellwood City Health Center.

* * *

It is now 8:31 PM and I am bawling my eyes out.

After my PCR-test I had to run some last-minute errands and arrived home about 45 minutes ago. Having put the remaining things into one of my two suitcases, I helped my mum and sister with chopping the vegetables and preparing the mashed potatoes for what would be our last family dinner together for a while. It wasn't cutting the onions that made me burst out crying, but my highly Corona-paranoid father with his idiotic and insensitive remarks.

“... What you are doing is so irresponsible, Eloise! I can't decide which idea of yours is most stupid: flying to Italy now that the delta variant is around or falling in love with the first Italian boy you met in this far-off place!”

It is not fair. I did not ask for a new variant to break out, and I likewise did not wish for a long-distance relationship! I had always told myself that such relationships weren't the thing for me and that I never wanted to become one of those naive girls who seriously believe that the man of their lives is waiting for them hundreds of miles away. It is not fair that Adriano lives so far away, and that the pandemic has delayed our reunion for such a long time. I just feel imprisoned here. Not just here in Ellwood, but also when I was in Boston. All I want is to physically be near him, to be able to touch him, to kiss him. Despite all the video chats, the phone calls and messages – it is not enough anymore. I am jealous of the people that get the chance to see him every day. I want to see him every day as well.

And I will. Tomorrow. I must stop these negative thoughts. I cannot let other people like my unsupportive dad ruin my happiness. I know that Adriano and I are meant for each other. I feel it in my heart. And because we are meant for each other, no distance is too far, and no time is too long to keep us apart. Nothing will keep us apart. Nothing has so far.

* * *

It is now 11:08 PM.

I was about to fall sleep, when suddenly a notification lightens up the screen of my phone. It is a message from Adriano:

“Good morning my beautiful Eloise. As always, you are the first person on my mind in the morning my dear love. Today is finally the day we will see each other again. The thought of seeing you later today makes me so indescribably happy. I can't wait to hold you close to me, to hear the beat of your heart and to feel your breath. I can't wait to look straight into your eyes and say, 'I love you'. Babe, soon there will be no distance between us, and I promise we

will make up for all the lost time we missed! All the new memories we will make together will make the long wait worth it; you'll see! Ly "

This sweet message confirms it. I am doing the right thing. I must be hopeful. I will not let the pandemic ruin this very moment I have been anticipating for months now.

Tomorrow Adriano and I will be in the same time zone again, I promise. I can't wait to fall in love with him all over again.

* * *

It is now 7:42 in the morning.

After a 37-minute drive, my mom dropped me off at the Pittsburgh International Airport. Everything at the airport seemed to go well, up to the moment where I noticed that my PCR-test results hadn't come in yet. I wanted to scream and cry with frustration and worry. Could something this minor ruin our such long-awaited reunion?

I cannot let this happen. I must not panic. I need to stay calm and not cry. I have tried calling the health center several times, but nobody is answering my calls. I have checked my emails and messages over and over again - nothing. The lady at the information point said they could not let me check in the flight unless I am able to provide them with a negative test result. While talking to the lady I suddenly felt a stream of tears flowing down my cheeks – well, I guess my plan not to cry didn't work out. But it doesn't make sense! Or does it? What if I am actually positive? Is that the reason why the results are so late this time?

Having waited impatiently for another 20 minutes and having checked my phone for the 100th time, a new notification pops up on my screen. This time it is not from my mom or Isabelle, who I had immediately reported my current problem to. No, this notification is from the Ellwood City Health Center: The results are in!

A cold shiver runs down my spine. My hands are getting sweaty. I have never felt that nervous before in my life. Now there are only two options: negative or positive. This result decides over everything: Can I finally reunite with Adriano, or will I not see him for another unbearably long time?

Please don't be positive, please don't be positive. Just not positive, please. I open the message and click on the attached document. And there it is. A word written in bold. It says... negative! Oh my god - what a relief!

I get up at once, rush to the check in, then go through security. I find my gate and finally board the plane. I did it. Soon we won't be thousands of miles apart from each other my dear Adriano. Just wait a little while longer. I'll be there soon.

* * *

I can see him – finally, the long wait is over.

There he is: My love, my life, my whole world, smiling under his mask.

We kiss, we hug, and into his left ear I whisper:

"I love you –I have finally arrived at my dream destination: YOU"

[back to contents](#)

finding your feet

by teresa wolfsgruber

santiago

Do you dare to go on an adventure with a stranger?

Two weeks earlier, I had found a handwritten note on my pillow at my hostel. It made me inquisitive, thrilled, and uneasy all at once. I had not spoken a single word to him, and yet I would not mind running risks and taking this dude's gamble. But why did he ask me, of all people?

It was early June as I gasped for what seemed to be one of my last breaths under the blistering sun in California's Mojave desert at 109 degrees Fahrenheit.

We were surrounded by an endless sea of sand, enclosed by mountain ranges painted purple and blue. The wind has sculpted the golden shimmering sand into dunes and shaded ripples. Each footstep on the desert sand felt like taking one of the last steps before reaching the mountain peak. It was draining.

There was also a feeling of confinement growing in me, even though there was nothing and no one around – just me and him.

oskar

That's 15 dollars a day, announced the guy working at the hostel. I quickly pulled out my phone and calculated the price into euros. Quite some money for renting two sandboards for a week. Fine, it is a little more than what my small travel budget allows but I guess it is worth to impress him.

I had noticed his presence in the lobby of the hostel the day before and decided to ask him if he would accompany me on a road trip to Death Valley. He seems fun, and I did not want to tackle that seven-and-a-half-hour drive alone.

And in a blink of an eye, I was in the desert with him, climbing up and sliding down those sand dunes on our rented boards, having the time of our lives.

We found out that neither of us is from here. He is from a big city in Finland I have never heard of. In fact, I cannot even recall its name. Still, it felt like we have known each other forever.

There is something about crossing paths with other people. Something I enjoy in general. Whenever I meet another soul, there is a new book, a new story, I can flip through. I find that fascinating.

I am dripping wet, I groan. The place is so dry and my mouth has become even drier. As I was reaching for the water bottle, Oskar handed it to me with a gentle smile on his face. It was the first time I have seen the delicate freckles painted on his cheek bones. We decided to slink back to our rental car. It was luckily equipped with an air conditioning. Moments before we arrived at the vehicle, I noticed small reptile footprints in the sand. The shape looks familiar, I thought.

A pale, almost albino-looking lizard crept out of a withered bush and wriggled its way down a sand dune and through my feet. I startled and looked up. Mamá, ¿dónde estás? I can still remember how I called out for my mom, only to find she was nowhere to be seen.

I began to cry. I was crying like a baby. I was basically a baby. I was only six years old when my mother and I left Mexico to finally see papá again.

I have vivid memories of walking for miles in the pitch dark through the Cuervitos dunes in Mexico, along with a thousand other people. I had not realized that I was no longer following my mom. I was looking around hastily and panicked. I remember that a hand was reaching for mine. More fright welled up inside me. An elderly man grabbed me. He was shivering from the cold of the desert night, carrying a gigantic backpack on his fragile spine with clothes peeking out. His attempt to form his mouth into a smile barely comforted me. I decided to stick with him anyway.

As the sun rays awakened the dead place, the silhouette of a huge fence standing atop the sand dunes emerged. I scanned the 15-foot-high wall with barbed wires running along the top and bottom of the stone. Clearly, we had made it to the border. A thrill of excitement and fear was building up inside me. Please don't shoot, someone cried.

Both our hands touched the door handle of the car. I winced briefly as I was pulled back to the here and now.

I gently rubbed my eyes and looked into Oskar's eyes, which were already glued to mine. His yellow-green eye color was beaming, directly into my soul.

oskar

He told me the story of how he fled his home country and how he almost broke down from exhaustion and fear.

He told me how he had to build a whole new life for himself in a foreign country with a language he did not understand.

He was terrified, and traumatized.

For the life of me, I cannot imagine what he must have gone through. Never did I have to leave the known behind, except when I did it willingly – to travel.

I hate it that I take things for granted. It is unjust that some children go through hell while others have nothing more to worry about than finding their favorite stuffed animals in their closets.

I could see his eyes watering. I too had tears in my own.

We hugged each other tightly.

Oskar was the fourth person I entrusted my story to. It is hard for me to relive the past, over and over.

I do not like the feeling of vulnerability. It makes me feel insecure. Together with him, however, I have an odd sense of security.

I found myself still staring at his eyes.

Sensing a sudden nervousness and shortness of breath, I strove to release the tension and instead glanced at his golden curls stained by the sun. They are almost the same shade as the desert sand. He has tucked his shoulder-length hair behind his ears. A shiny silver hoop with a white pearl dangled from his right earlobe. I looked to his left ear. It was empty. I kept examining his well-defined and bronzed physique. Under his left breast, I discovered black ink outlining an eye with rays running around it. I giggled. He must have a penchant for eyes. A tattoo of a wave wrapped around one of his lower legs too. Oskar truly is a good-looking man. I figured I have never observed him like this before. It gave me a bizarre feeling.

I needed some rest from the choking heat and the choking tension, so I entered the car. Later in the day we pitched the tent and inflated the air mattress. We set up our own little shelter next to the car, ate linguine with tomato sauce from a can and climbed into bed.

The temperature in the desert dropped rapidly during the night and yet my whole body heated up abruptly.

The two of us were lying in the same bed, closer together than ever before. A thousand thoughts wandered through my head. Our fingers brushed lightly against each other. He cuddled up tight against me. His skin touching mine set off tingles from my heart down to my feet. I longed to kiss him. I wanted to feel him inside me.

...

I woke up in the middle of the night with butterflies in my stomach. I realized that it really feels like a swarm of precious insects buzzing around, tickling my stomach from the inside. I never quite grasped what they meant by that, but I suppose I have never really loved someone before. I'm grateful I got to meet him, I whispered to myself. And grateful that I was led to the States.

Oskar took my hand and squeezed it tightly.

Tomorrow is our last day on the road, he remarked wistfully. A cold shiver ran down my back. I sighed.

He still knew nothing of my captivity here. So I told him. As an immigrant in the U.S., I don't have full rights. I don't have a good future ahead of me in Mexico either. Unlike you, there would be no return ticket for me to my home country anyway. All my options would be gone as soon as I enter the place where I was born. I am stuck here, even though I have finally found my feet in the States. I found my feet with you, Oskar.

Discomfort rose in me. Will he stay with me?

As his eyes softly closed, I scribbled a note and sneaked it into his backpack:

Do you dare to dream together?

[back to contents](#)



agoraphobia

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by gabriel johannes hagn

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

One could hear the dread inducing hum of an airplane as once again my eyes were going over the brochure of the travel agency. Anger and hatred were filling me as I looked at it, mocking me, making fun of me. The lonely chair, the fishing rod and that damned boat had burnt itself into my inner psyche. I began to recite its text similar to a catholic praying a Hail Mary,

‘The small but historic island of Delos is only a short ferry trip away from Mykonos. The supposed birthplace of the God Apollo and UNESCO world heritage site lures in people from around the globe with its charming temples and historic ruins.’

My sacred text did not give me any relief. I tried to distract myself by asking, ‘Why did they even have to use this picture in the first place. Would not one of these charming temples or historic ruins make a better advertisement?’ Even though my attempted diversion did not work, I at least managed to release my fixated eyes from the horrendous photograph. I quickly assured myself that the passport and the plane ticket were still on the coffee table. They were. Next, my eyes hastily searched for the clock on the wall. Although my vision was blurred, I could still decipher that there were still about two hours left before take-off. My packed suitcase, waiting patiently for me to pick it up, was placed right next to me. Everything was ready to go, everything but me.

Standing in the middle of the room, I felt reluctant to move. And there it was; the feeling that I was so eager to escape from. It slowly and chillingly crept down my spine and purposefully took control over every section of me. Soon I felt alienated from my very own body. Distantly, I recognised its heartbeat accelerating and the lungs starting to hyperventilate. My being was reduced to thoughts, filled with incoherent voices. ‘I would not recommend you going on this trip, it is like trying to cure a headache by decapitation.’ my therapist was warning me. A silent hysterical lough erupted inside me, ‘Why did I get myself into that? I could still stay. Yes stay!

No one but myself forced me to do this. I never wanted to go in the first place. I only ever wanted to read and do my research. 'The words of my professor came back to my mind, 'It is a once in a lifetime excavation. Not everything is learnt through books. You need to go there, be there!' 'Oh I have been there, I tell you. I have read every book that was written about this damned island, I have searched through every corner of every map of Delos and I have gone over the agencies brochures over and over again religiously,' I screamed internally. I felt imprisoned. I felt imprisoned in my life, my apartment and my own body. Upon this realisation a dark void seemed to consume the little that was left of me, leaving me with nothing but emptiness.

At first there was nothing to be felt, but after a while a soft breeze of briny air began to tickle my skin. An initially only faint crying of seagulls became louder and louder. More and more I felt control over my own body again. As my eyes opened slowly and cautiously, I was dazzled by bright sunlight. Still half dazed by the light, there were only shapes to make out, yet they looked familiar; the chair, the fishing rod and the boat stood right there, in front of me. Though something significant had changed, there was no fear anymore. Warily I crept towards the very chair, whose sole image had mocked me for so long and that I had grown to despise so much. Standing there observing, it began to dawn on me; the chair had no special qualities at all. Still a bit hesitant I removed the fishing rod and took a seat. A deep breath, closed eyes, an overwhelming feeling of calmness.

At the speed of sound my mind crash-landed in my own body again. I could feel how my blood was circulating inside me. I was in control again. Yet, I was still standing in my living room perplexed, my suitcase ready to go right next to me. I had never left, had not even moved one bit. I once again checked the coffee table for the passport and the plane ticket. They were still there. In the same way as before my eyes glanced towards the clock, it felt like hours had gone by, but not even a minute had passed. One hand grabbed the handle of the suitcase, the other snatched up the documents. I took a deep breath and while striding through the front door one could hear the soft calming humming sound of a plane right above.

[back to contents](#)



there goes my chance

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by **bettina meyer**

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

„Wait!

Stop!

Please!

I am begging you!”

Libertá was standing at one of the most abandoned spots on the island.

Shouting desperately. Trembling unwittingly.

Watching her last chance for freedom, normality, and appreciation vanish.

The sailing boat people appeared fast. And just as fast as they reached the island, they quickly realized that this was no place to stay. At least not for ordinary, loving, social people like them. They got off their shiny sailing boat, checked out the island, felt the odd, hostile vibe of the few lunatics inhabiting this paradise-like pearl of the ocean, and decided that they would be better off anywhere else than here.

See, the island itself was a marvellous spot amidst crystal clear water.

Its nature had a bizarre way of being ravishingly charming; some of its cliffs being cut off harshly more than 100 metres above a wild, roaring, yet magnificent ocean. What an incredible sight ! A vast diversity of all kinds of plants promising a never-ending provision of food; let alone all the colours that appeared appetisingly for anyone stumbling accidentally over the island. The ocean may have been wild close to the cliffs, but at the bays, it seemed like a tamed, sweet lion being so smooth one could have thought it was a mirror to the heavens.

The line between the blue of the sky and the ocean’s silky surface made such a blurred impression one might have easily assumed the lucid air of the firmament and the salty water of the ocean were melting into each other; a symbiosis of the elements.

The island's whole appearance was sheerly sublime. Until a certain time, life on the island was beautiful. It undoubtedly had matched its countenance.

Libertá had always loved her previous life there. She as well as her two sibling Dependá and Lukita were born on the island. Their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had been inhabitants of the island, too.

Libertá went to a modest, little school with eight other children in her class. They remained her classmates until she finished her education at the age of 16. Her classmates were her family outside of her house, which she had appreciated dearly as well. They all remained friends afterwards and met often.

Her real family lived in a hut with just enough space for the five of them. However, "enough" was the keyword here. They were always happy with whatever was enough. Having too little was bad, obviously, but enough had always been fine, as long as they all lived happily together.

In Libertá's home there had been fresh, delicious food on the table every day, with ingredients either collected by her mother on the island's immense and endless garden or traded at the weekly market.

Libertá enjoyed the secret excursions she used to take with her mother by boat on some days just a little bit off the island in hopes to catch a few fish. It was not solely the fish she was looking forward to; it was simply the precious time she had with her mother, laughing, hugging, fishing on a tiny boat. It was often past the sun's setting point when the two women arrived back on the island, sometimes with fish, sometimes without, but always filled with joy.

Libertá had also been dreaming of having her own family. Soon after her school education, she began to teach at the local kindergarten. She was incredibly passionate in her doing; her job was not just a job but clearly her vocation. The relationship between her kindergarten kids and her was bilateral; the kids couldn't wait in the morning to finally go to kindy and hug their favourite teacher Libertá. One day, she was sure, she would have at least five children. She would become a fabulous mother; her family and all her friends knew that all too well. Libertá was vivacious from within; she was vibrant and full of endless love for everyone. Harmony was her greatest desire.

Sometimes when she walked home after her work at the kindergarten, she dropped by her grandmother's house. The lady was nearly 80 years old and therefore needed someone to help her sometimes. Libertá was more than happy to be of any kind of help; she wanted everyone to be happy around her – she found her fulfilment in the joyful eyes of others.

The whole island-society had been functioning well. Modestly, nevertheless empathically.

So, why is it then that Libertá was standing there, shouting for the sailing boat to return and take her with them? Why would she want to flee her home, her paradise, her haven?

Simply because she was not welcome any more. She was despised by everyone. When people saw her, they would veer off the forest's trail just to make sure not to come close to her. Libertá lost her job, she lost weight to a worrisome point, lost nearly herself.

What had happened to this once aspiring, affectionate and admired woman?

One day, four people of the island's oldest agreed that life on the island had been too slackened, making it fragile. They decided to interfere in the island's people's society and announced themselves the new leaders and heads. They were basically island-presidents. It

made no sense; why would anybody interfere in something that is obviously functioning in an optimal way? Well, authority and sovereignty were just too enticing for the four.

They certainly did decent things; good things they, however, would not have needed any special title for. Things that the society had previously been doing by themselves since anybody could remember. When they realized that the rules they established were easily followed without being questioned, they began to test the limits of the people of the island. One could call it that; or call it what it truly was: toying with the inhabitants' lives.

If the other inhabitants were abiding to the rules, they all lived happily together. It did not matter how strange the rules and restrictions on the island got; questions were not allowed. This unspoken rule was unofficially established as well; silently, but constantly.

But as long as the rules were followed, the inhabitants had the cheeriest, yet most dependent and only brief happy life, so, why would they ever scrutinise anything, right? Their luck and right to live did not depend on their personality, neither their social nor educational achievements. All they had to do was follow the rules. This made life effortless for fools, of course; one was allowed to be terrible at his job. All they had to do was fit the four leaders crazy restrictions puzzle and they were basically awarded with all praise imaginable.

It seemed as if the four leaders were gathering each day, gambling with what they could bother their inhabitants next. One day, they came up with the rule that people were not allowed to stand in the shade anymore. So, each and every inhabitant stood, ate, slept, drank, talked, taught, learned, and lived in the glaring sun. They were all covered in red, serious sunburns; their skin peeling off brutally. But you see, that did not matter. It was the rule. No one scrutinised anything; it was just done.

Libertá was some other kind. She did not match the president people's puzzle. At the beginning of the new era, she slipped into following the rules as well. It had to be done, right? They sure had their reasons why they were restricting the island's inhabitants. She started to become suspicious but did not say anything at first. She did not want to cause any trouble; she had always been an empathetic and caring person. So, she did what she was told.

However, one day, a few days after the no-shade rule, she tried to escape occasionally into the shade. Whenever she felt no one was watching her, she quickly hid her feet under a leaf, stretched an arm towards a hut's roof, or, when she was lucky, managed to catch the shade of a whole tree. She became so talented in seeking shade without being seen by anyone that eventually she was the only person on the island without massively sunburnt skin. Of course, the others became suspicious – was Libertá not one of them? Why would she not be sunburnt? Certainly, the always so responsible Libertá would be smart enough to keep living in the sun, for the sake of the rules, right?

People began watching her and eventually caught her. They caught her right in flagrante delicto. She was in the shade with her full body.

Libertá's accomplishments and her tender personality were forgotten instantly. For the island's society, it was immediately clear that she asked too much, disobeyed too much as she even refused to stand in the sun. But standing in the sun wasn't that hard, so why wouldn't she? She even sought for shelter from the sun, this brazen brat!

She quickly became the people's target, especially the leaders' target.

She was hunted; called a danger for their well-performing, constantly obeying society. Over the next few weeks and months, everything changed for Libertá. Parents had stopped bringing their children when it was Libertá's shift at the kindergarten, breaking the woman's as well as the children's hearts. It came to a point where her boss told her she should not come back to this place; they would not want to have anything to do with someone like her.

On her way home that day she was crying silently. She thought to drop by her grandmother's house to again check on her and maybe seek some advice.

She was quickly disabused. As soon as the old lady caught a glimpse of Libertá, she stood on the front porch, hands crossed in front of her chest, blocking the door with all the force her weak body still had. She was careful not to step inside her hut; it was not night and of course, she was not allowed to leave the sun as long as it was up. These days you had to be especially careful not to be seen by a nosy neighbour or some prying passer-by – all steps were monitored, and people were happily reporting others, even if it was an accidental seek of shade.

“What do YOU want here?!” , grandmother's words spat towards Libertá, leaving her in pure shock, “I certainly want nothing to do with mavericks like you!”

“But grandma, I just came by to check on you, have some coconut water with you, as usual? Are you okay?”, Libertá thought her grandmother's old brain had perhaps suffered some sun-damage over the past week. Again, she was set straight.

“I hear you are not following the rules! I saw you walking here, enjoying some shade, you fool! All you must do is avoid the shade! You have the whole night for whatever you idiots would want to do! Not even capable of that, I see! Don't you dare to come back here!”, her grandmother had never spoken clearer.

Libertá's world began to crumble. What had she done? Had she done any harm to any other human being? It was still her most important wish to see everyone happy. But what should she do? The sun was so hot, her skin burned easily, she hated to rip off layers off her skin in the evening. And overall – what harm did she cause by seeking shade?

She went back to her family's hut. Her mother was standing in front of it, in the glaring sun, burned overall. She was red. Red from the sun and red from the rage inside of her. She was not able to speak, her anger wouldn't let her. So Libertá's siblings, Dependá and Lukita, stomped towards her. Libertá loved them dearly; Lukita was nearly like her own child. She arrived when Libertá had already been 14 years old. She opened her arms to hug them and asked them if they were okay. Both were covered in severe burnings, but not thinking for a single second to take three steps underneath the shelter of the treetops and let their bodies recover. Libertá's loving salutation was not mutual. They wouldn't think of hugging her back.

“Leave right now! We want nothing to do with you! You disgust us. In fact, don't come anywhere near us!”, both her siblings shouted at her.

Libertá managed to ask them in what way she had harmed them. In what way her apparent misbehaviour affected their well-being. Had she known that her behaviour of seeking shade also appeared to be harmful to others, she would certainly not have done so. The sun injured her skin. The shade was close by. The shade was saving her skin and her eyes from being burnt to an alarming stage. And the most important thing; she did not harm anybody else by doing so.

But her siblings would not hear. They acted as if Libertá was an idiotic, foolish, hazardous, and insurgent person. All the love Libertá had given and received up to that point was gone. Had

never existed. They not just acted as if her sister had gone insane now; but as if this had always been the case. Worse, they acted as if they were purely annoyed by her obvious incapability of following rules and then trying to seek appreciation of others for her wrongdoings – at least in the eyes of the four leaders and the blinded fellows. They pretended Libertá was wrong in her doing, treated her in the worst way. Did they have any idea how they hurt their loving sister?

What right did they have to judge whether Libertá was right or not or exaggerating in any way?

When had the abuser ever had the right to judge the victim's feelings?

Especially in this situation – how could one level this intense pain caused by discrimination and hatred if they are not affected by it themselves?

How could they say, “Don't act like that – it is all not that bad! If you would only follow the rules!”, if they cannot comprehend the pain their insults and exclusion caused to the most fractional point?

All these questions arose in Libertá's head – but no one would answer her. Foolish as she was, she apparently did not deserve to be answered to. How dare she even would ask questions, let alone expect plausible answers. The fair times were in the past.

Libertá had no other choice than leaving the inhabited part of the island. On her way, she wanted to buy something from a local market. A sign kept her on the outside: “Sunburnt only.” So it had come this far. She was not even allowed to enter shops anymore. She was kept on the outside. Her loving society had started to deprive her of her most fundamental rights.

No one would give her food; she was not allowed in any kind of shops, let alone shops where she could buy something to wear, a blanket, a hat, or anything that would protect her from the sun. She was chased off the local market – how dare she visit markets, greet old friends, or simply exist? Her parents began telling people they had two children; Libertá was a shame.

Libertá stopped following the rules; she lost her right to live happily. A right that had been to this point unconditional and untouchable.

So she left. After a long hike across the cliffs, she found a tiny cave. This was her new home, away from all the hatred. She was fully cut off from the until then supporting society. All she had earned; all she had loved; it was taken away from her. Her sole crime was disobeying one rule that did no harm to others. Her sole crime wouldn't have been a crime under normal circumstances.

She managed to live by herself; it was lonely at first but liberating as well as hard once she got the hang of it. But she knew, she couldn't live like this forever.

There was absolutely no chance for her to go back and obey the lunatics' rules that harmed her, simply to please others and be in their circle again. These conditions were insane. She needed a get-away plan.

And then there came the sailing boat. This was her chance.

Nobody was close by; Libertá left the modest hole she had to call home. She had to escape this insanity, this hatred amongst its people. Sooner or later, they would all die from their collective rage, even though they would not actually know for what concrete reason they hated each other.

She longed for a place where she was loved and appreciated for her precious personality, for her reputable achievements, for her aspiring purposes.

She ran.

She ran as fast as possible.

She ran across the root covered floor through dense bushes of the forest. She passed by the palm tree that had provided her with nourishing coconuts the past few weeks; she thanked this tree silently and hoped to never have to face it again.

The boat had hoisted its anchor, Libertá was sweating. Not just because of her once-in-a-lifetime sprint, but for the anxiety she was feeling. The anxiety of being left on this marvellous, yet hateful place.

She reached the bay, gasping heavily.

“Wait! Please”, she cried out. She knew this was the only chance to leave. Who knew when such a chance would be offered again on a shiny, silver platter?

“Stop! Take me with you!”, Libertá words appeared to be one single scream.

But the boat did not turn around. It made its way back to the normal world as fast as possible.

Its people couldn't stand to stay on this island full of people hating each other for disobedience. Libertá was left there. Left again. Her fight was not over yet; never would she become one of them, obeying pointless rules, acting as if she was one part of this obscure, disgusting puzzle where they all acted as if they belonged together as one united, joyful society, when all they were was a shameful group of hypocrites, not realizing that their happiness of life was only a one-sided, temporary relationship under pointless restrictions.

Libertá suddenly knew, either would she get a hold of this boat, or she would soon not have any more reasons to stay alive there; lonely, hated by everyone. Her wish for a family of her own was still there, but impossible on the island. It was either death or this boat.

She jumped into the water, cutting her foot on the sharp edges of some coral. She did not care. It was life or death now.

After the sprint of her life, it was now the swim of her life.

“Hey! Stop!”, Libertá was slurring; so much water had already made its entry into her body. It didn't matter. Her body was in full alert. She was bleeding, nearly drowning, but she was so close, she couldn't stop now!

The saltwater made her eyes burn; her body would soon give up. Her energy was decreasing now faster than before. She felt it. She felt her body giving up; her feet becoming heavy, her arms immobile. She had no chance. She would die right there in the open ocean. This would still be better than being alienated and excluded on the island, she thought. Her mind became calm, she knew what was coming. She closed her eyes and let it happen, let her body slip into the ocean.

Water entered through all openings of her body – she didn't care. Naturally, she gasped for air, only filling her lungs with more and more water.

And right before the last drop of water would enter her lung, suffocating her and leaving her dead to the floor of the ocean, two strong hands reached for her body and hoisted her on the boat.

She made it.

[back to contents](#)

the postcard

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by daniela wolsegger

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

“She really needs to come back to reality. She’s been gone for far too long. It’s not good for her,” the mother said furiously. There stood a woman who was remarkably tall, and she was completely baffled by Sarah’s behaviour. That tall woman was Sarah’s mother. Right next to her, sitting on an ancient armchair, there was Sarah, a nineteen-year-old girl. Her petite figure was leaning against the backrest of the chair, and she seemed to be gazing into space. It appeared that the girl neither heard what her mother was saying, nor that she cared at all. Suddenly, the girl’s face started to change. The previous frown turned into a captivating smile. What was that all about?

In the meantime, all Sarah could think about was that place. It was a place where she felt safe. A place where she felt at peace. A place where she could just be. She was sitting by the sea all by herself. In front of her, there was the English Channel which had always fascinated her. All she could see was one single sailboat that seemed to be sailing away, towards the setting sun. She could feel the warmth of the sun on her face, her arms, and her shoulders. The waves were gently drenching the sand and the murmuring of the waves was hypnotic to her. Sarah was sitting on the warm sand. She had never been one of the people who brought their own towels or blankets to the beach as she preferred to feel the sand under her body. She was sitting, hugging her knees to her chest. That was her favourite sitting position when she had to think.

Having spent some time in that position, she realized that something else was there in her field of vision. She turned her head a little and perceived some blurry object. But being blinded by the sun, she could not immediately identify said object. Once her eyes got used to the brightness of the sun, she made out the outline of something that had to be a wooden chair. It looked like it was past its prime as it seemed to almost be falling apart. A fishing rod was leaned against the chair, apparently left there by somebody on purpose.

“What a picturesque scene,” she thought. “This scene would be perfect for a postcard.” The old chair with the fishing rod in the centre; the sailing boat and the setting sun in the background.

The rays of sunshine in all the shades you could imagine underlining that perfectly peaceful scenery. The waters below mirroring this effect. The waves, with underlying streaks of blue that clash with it. The sand below her body that had collected all the warmth of the day and that was sparkling like a thousand tiny jewels. The familiar smell of the saltwater and the humid sea air. It was almost as if the photograph would be able to catch all that. Even the calming sound of the waves.

Sarah already had the layout of that postcard in mind. It would be very simple; just the photograph of that beautiful scenery and the word 'Brighton' printed in ocean blue on the top half. The next thing she thought about was who she would send such a postcard to. Her mother? Her father? Or even her sister? Well, probably not. After all, her hands were tied. It wouldn't be possible for her to send these postcards. The thought of that made her sad. She realized how her mood had suddenly changed and therefore, she decided to find a distraction. She immediately got up and started walking towards the water. Having reached the water, she stopped. The setting sun was such a beautiful sight that she had to take it in once again.

Then she took a step forward and carefully set one foot into the water. She could feel the pleasant chill spreading throughout her body. The moment she set her second foot into the water, that sensation only became stronger. The warmth of the sun and the cold of the water. It was the perfect combination that made her calm, cool and collected.

As she was standing in the water, her thoughts became clearer. She remembered why she loved that place so much. The well-known Brighton Pier with its famous amusement park, thrilling roller coasters, exciting game arcades and the fish-and-chip stands. The Royal Pavilion with the Brighton Museum & Art Gallery nearby. Also, of course, if one is interested in such things, there is the Brighton Racecourse. In fact, she didn't care about that. She had never been a girl who cared about horse races or anything like that. All she ever wanted was to enjoy the little things in life. She never cared about any kind of luxury, but she took her entertainment seriously. That was also one of the many reasons why she would take every opportunity to get back to Brighton. As a child, she had fallen in love with that place and when she became older, she only grew fonder of it. As they say – absence makes the heart grow fonder – and that is an expression that certainly was true for Sarah. The more time she had to spend away from that place, the more she fell in love with it. Because of that, she kept getting into fights with her mum as her mum didn't like it when Sarah spent so much time away from her.

It was right at that moment when Sarah realized that her mother seemed to be complaining about her. She could not really understand what exactly her mother was saying but it had to be about her. Just by listening to the way her mother was talking, Sarah thought that her own behaviour was being criticised once again. What was different this time, though, was that her mother wouldn't seem to stop. Therefore, she decided to take matters into her hands to allay her mother's wrath. So, she eventually had to say goodbye to Brighton and take off her VR headset. She looked her mother straight in the eye and she said, "What? I know that you've been talking about me... again." "Finally! You've come back to reality! I've missed you. Please, come and sit with me", her mother replied.

The mother's complaints really had been directed at her daughter who had been in a virtual world this whole time. No wonder why Sarah had not replied until now. She was living in her favourite place, the postcard.

[back to contents](#)



fishing for grandpa

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by celina riml

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

If you think the title of this story is macabre, you need to organize your thoughts and let them unfold on a deeper level. You will go on a journey and learn about my grandpa, myself and maybe also a bit about yourself... and how fishing is connected to all of this.

So let us start with the end of a storybook life when I lost my grandpa 5 years ago. I grew up around him, helped him in his workshop, laughed about his comb-over when a breeze picked it up, and had breakfast with him when grandma was gone. We were inseparable. Until the day he passed away.

My biggest anchor, trust figure, idol and teacher gone. This unbeatable man defeated by death. Who will hint at my running nose and offer the hanky that he would use to polish his car, clean the lunch table, dry an apple, and blow his own nose? Who will pick me up from the station after a week in boarding school, ask me how I am and immediately make me feel valued, and at home?

On the day of his passing, I felt like part of me died too. A certain numbness overtook my body and mind. I could not accept that in a blink of an eye a person could just be gone. I could not accept that he would never encourage me again. “He is just on holiday”, I told myself. I felt lonely. Nobody could understand me like he did. Without words we communicated. On an emotional level, beyond reach for others. How would I connect with strangers and put myself out there without his assistance? How am I supposed to assess a situation without his guidance?

The home I grew up in with him as a father figure – chilly, stale air. Tiled stove cold. The medicine he forgot to take on the day he died, still on the kitchen counter. I made myself

realize that he will never make fire in wintry nights again, snore during his daily nap, or make a silly show about each present that he would get on his birthday. I will never again be woken by the odor of burnt white bread in the morning that he laid on the stove to defrost. It always burnt. Same did the pizza in the oven that he put on full grill and completely forgot about. And when I told him that black pizza was harmful, he would ignore my concerns assuring me that this is what a pizza should look like and that he loved the special toasting flavor. Never again will the smell of fresh arolla pine tickle my nose when he returns from the workshop and sits down at the lunch table, 30 minutes after grandma called, yelled, screamed, and shouted. Lunchtime was at 12 o'clock. Precisely. Neither a minute earlier, nor a minute later. He never arrived on time – and when he did, he left the dining room again to be off the grid when food was on the table.

I imagined the place where he will be put. Grandma is already there in a coffin and I don't like to visit her. It's a cold, dark and scary place. Piles of snow are covering the gravestones. The holy water in the stoup frozen. Masses of snow could slide from the steep church roof any minute. In no way possible I want to associate this bitter place with my joyful grandpa. In my mind I have this cheerful image of him standing next to a summit cross, both hands in the air with a big smile, showing his spick and span dentures. This is how I want him to be commemorated. As a citizen, selfless enough to rise in the middle of the night, to hike to the water reservoir of the municipality, and check the water status after heavy rain. As a neighbor who would come and help mow your lawn. As a down-to-earth artist with an impeccable vision of nature who uses everyday objects to create extraordinary pieces. As a handyman who would be at your service at any time and make it his purpose to fix the issue. As an exceptional athlete who would run up and down the mountains in record time, and clamber onto his stilts from the balcony of the stable at seventy. As an honorable helpful, gifted, and lovable man.

Sharing these anecdotes of my grandpa, I realize that everything he did was complimenting others. Everyone. Without prejudices. But most importantly his family and ultimately - me. He brought the art of complimenting to perfection. In his presence one felt appreciated and heard. With him being absent, there was no support anymore, no pat on the shoulder and no self-confidence. The approval of a family member creates an affectionate sensation, just as flattery does and when said appreciation is gone, people try to get it back by fishing for compliments. I thought I had to do the same, find another person who would make me feel like he did, fill the void, but that is an unattainable goal. Instead, I try to continue his mission, humbly spreading kindness, lending a helping hand and being inquisitive. Although I can never live up to his legacy. He was one of a kind.

We are from the mountains, no lake nearby and grandpa did not really fish. But what he did was repair things. A Hoover, a bicycle, anything he could grab out of the huge container at the recycling yard. Until the day, when he fell into one and grandma said, "No more fishing rubbish for you."

[back to contents](#)



the seagull and the girl

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by hanna kempf

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

It's noon when I engage the hand break, unfasten my seatbelt, open the door and step out onto the white stretch of beach before my eyes. I inhale a deep lungful of the salty ocean breeze and immediately feel lighter and somewhat more at ease. My shoulders relax and I feel the corners of my lips pull up into the beginnings of a smile. The rushing of the waves and the cries of seagulls envelop me and temporarily drown out all the thoughts in my head. I am acutely aware that I have parked in the middle of a beach, but I could not sit in that car for one second more. Thankfully it appears as though I am the only person out here. Wouldn't that be one way to make an impression on the Italian people? A twenty-something tourist madly driving onto a beach only to jump out of the car in a hurry and then just stand there, next to the car, inhaling ocean air. I don't even want to imagine the thoughts running through their heads as they observe the situation. But thankfully, the only witnesses to my frankly odd behaviour are the seagulls soaring over my head and a few little crabs that have already hurried away upon my car's approach into their territory. Not too bad. Could be worse.

I sigh and take a few steps away from my white jeep and plonk myself down on the sand. I briefly consider lying down and making sand-angels, but the idea of having sand in every crevice of my body while continuing my drive is every bit as appealing as it sounds. Meaning not at all. Instead, I attempt to force my body into something that remotely resembles a Half Lotus position. It seems I can't get my legs to cross at the customary tight angle, but it will have to do for now. I guess it would really pay off to do some stretching exercises every morning, as I had put down on my New Year's resolution list. Not that it is that bad... It could definitely be worse.

As I am sitting there in the sand, I close my eyes and let the tranquillity of the ocean wash over me. I listen to the rhythm of the small waves lapping against the shore. There is a peaceful tenderness to it that eases the warring tumult of my emotions. The soft rustling of the blades of

grass to my left being swayed by a gentle breeze washes away the angry voices shouting in my head. The warming rays of the sun slowly dispel the cold anger humming in my veins. I find myself gradually relaxing as a different emotion begins to flow through my body. Something that could almost be defined as contentment. I find myself thinking that things are not too bad right now, they could be worse.

But the fragile moment of peace does not last long. My racing thoughts make sure that I remember why I set out on this road trip, this journey of self-discovery, in the first place. While my mind drags up these memories, the simmering anger humming through my body turns into a searing hot stream of lava burning me from the inside. I pinch my eyes shut in an attempt to return to that peaceful state of mind, but as I feel my nostrils flare with the suppressed rage, I give up. Annoyed at myself I open my eyes and let out a startled shout as I stare into the eye of a curious seagull that has landed about a foot from me. Abashed at my own reaction, I stare into the beady eye of the bird, who I swear, is staring right back at me. I had never noticed it before, probably because I have never seen a seagull this close before, but seagull eyes are actually quite pretty. A black pupil surrounded by a ring of pale lemon-yellow that catches and reflects the light in a sparkling sort of way. The light in the bird's eye speaks of a mild curiosity as it looks at me. Great, I think to myself, now I even have a bird look at me and think 'what is wrong with this girl?' As if reading my thoughts, the bird tilts its head to one side and continues what seems to be a scrutiny of my person. I can almost feel the judgement rolling off the greyish white plumage. Wonderful. Not only am I being judged by society and everybody I know, but now a bird, a stupid seagull above all, has joined the ranks. I probably shouldn't assume that seagulls are stupid, but my annoyance cancels out my rational thinking. Just when I think it's already bad enough, the whole thing gets even worse.

I have to laugh at myself for sitting on a desolate beach somewhere along the Amalfi coast, having a judgement-filled staring contest with a seagull. After a while I cannot handle the silent judging anymore and ask "What? Never seen a mess of a person?" Oh joy, now I have taken up TALKING to a BIRD. If only my mother could see me now... Actually, come to think of it, I doubt this behaviour development would surprise her much these days. To put it in her own words: "There isn't much that surprises me anymore when it comes to you." I guess having to deal with my crazy quirks over the last 24 years has given her the ability to face my peculiarities with a sort of cool indifference. I can only imagine the horror one must feel to witness one's child trying to explain a meme on their phone through bursts of uncontrollable laughter with tears running down their cheeks. Or coming home from a night out only to find said child absolutely distraught over the death of a movie character. I would like to say that these scenarios are absolutely made up, but my poor mother has indeed dealt with such situations on multiple occasions since my birth. But back to my conversation with the seagull. Of course, there is no reaction to my question. It just continues to stare at me. I decide to just go with it and keep talking to the bird. "You know, I already get enough judgment from everyone around me so you can really save yours for someone else. I am almost certain that I am not the weirdest thing you have ever seen, so run along and let me be." Much to no one's surprise, the bird does not take flight but rather tilts its head the other way and continues staring. I should have said it should fly along. But I am too tired to try again so I just continue staring at my unlikely companion. Staring into that sparkling, lemon-yellow eye, I find myself thinking about what it might feel like to be a seagull. Would it be worse than being human?

Does a seagull have to deal with the constant pressure put on them by society? If a seagull is 24 years old and single (disregard the fact that seagulls only live between 5-15 years, I have a point to prove), does it have to deal with the constant judgment filled comments as to why and

how one can still be single at that age? Because how could one possibly be happy on their own? There must simply be something wrong with them. If a female seagull claims that it does not want to procreate, would that mean it failed its one purpose in life? If a seagull finds itself to be a little different to all the other seagulls around it, does it feel pressured to conform to the standards set by the other birds, or is it free to be whatever it wants to be? Do seagulls constantly pick on the other seagulls for every oh-so-small oddity in order to achieve a straight and narrow bird-society? Does a seagull feel pressured into living a predestined life in which it finds a partner, builds a nest, has gull chicks, and live their life for their partner and children? If a seagull were to be sexually quite experienced, would it also be called a whore? And if a seagull were to be sexually rather inexperienced, would it also be called a prude? If I were a seagull, would I still feel this need to escape the pressure of humanity? If I were a seagull, would I constantly worry about what other seagulls think of me?

I wonder if any other species, other than humans, concern themselves so much with the lives of others. Or if our fellow earth inhabitants simply let their fellow beings live their life as they want to live it? What if we, as humans, stopped our constant judging and criticising and would start to live in appreciation of differences and individuality, would earth be a better place?

[back to contents](#)

take a breath



photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022

by nicolas freiler

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais © 2022

“Where do you want to be?” I thought to myself, sitting on a deserted beach somewhere on the east coast of Italy on a Tuesday morning. I didn’t mean where I wanted to be geographically, as I was equipped with a map that had a thick red line on it, telling me where to go, and red circles, which I had drawn, around the most interesting destinations. I had parked the rental car on the side of the road and, as I would later find out, left the car door on the passenger side open after taking out my backpack, lost in thoughts about my life.

I had just finished my studies and before looking for a job in my field of expertise, I had planned to make a road trip across Europe to find myself. A bit of a cliché, I know, but at the time, it was the best I could think of, as I was in serious need for some direction in my life. I felt like I was only a passenger on a journey, not deciding where to go, not choosing the destinations myself, but instead only joining someone else's ride. That’s why I had decided to leave the comfort of my home and travel across Europe all by myself, but so far, if anything, it had only raised more questions than it had given me answers, and I desperately needed to clear my mind.

So there I was, sitting on the sand, a few meters from where the waves were gently washing in and out. I looked over the sea, and there was a clear rising and falling sensation, as if it were the Earth’s breath, up and down, in and out.

Steady.

Stable.

Looking at it helped me calm down. For a moment, it stopped the thoughts from racing through my mind, and I felt I could go through them one after another.

When I was a teenager, I had this very clear plan and knew exactly how my life was going to unfold. I would find the love of my life at sixteen, figure out what I wanted to do professionally by the time I finished school, travel around while studying for my dream job, then apply and get hired for said dream job, settle down, get married, and move into my future home all by the time I was twenty-five and have children at thirty.

Now, there was obviously loads of youthful ignorance and optimism involved in this life plan of mine, sure, but if there is a scale for 'having one's life figured out' with my teenage view on the one end of it, then where I was at the time felt like the exact opposite end. I was 25 with no wife or future home in sight, and after some failed relationships I didn't even have a girlfriend at the time. Professionally I wasn't doing much better either. I had got a Master's degree in Project Management and Organization, yes, but I didn't even know whether I wanted to work in that sector. "You can't even manage your own life, how could you possibly hope to manage a project for a big business? It's not that you didn't make it to where you want to be, it's the fact that you don't even know where you want to be, that's even worse." These thoughts came like a voice in my head, uttered by somebody else, yet at the same time, I knew they were mine. I knew they were something that I was running away from, hiding away in a deep dark corner of my subconscious where that something was slowly building up like water behind a dam, but the water had become too much and the dam couldn't hold it any longer. "You're a loser, a failure, you will waste your life, you are already wasting your life, stop doing nothing and figure out where you want to be in life! What you want to do!? You have to make choices or you will be sad for the rest of your life, you have to know what you want, you have to you have to you have to –

And then I heard it.

The sea.

The waves.

I closed my eyes. Relaxed.

Listened to the waves, listened to them more closely.

Noticed their steady rhythm.

The Earth's breath.

I followed the rhythm with my own breath, breathing in as the waves built up, and breathing out as they crashed on the sand.

In...

and out.

Up...

and down.

And I started counting the waves as they crashed in, started counting my breaths.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine.

Ten.

And all the pressure was gone.

It was like magic to me. All these thoughts that were crushing me just a moment ago, no, they hadn't disappeared, but it was as if they had taken a step back, as if *I* had taken a step back and created some very important breathing room for myself. I could think clearly again. I took a final look at the sea, then stood up, turned around, walked back to the car, and continued my journey.



If you think that from that moment onwards everything started to make sense and things started to fall into place for me, I have to disappoint you. Life is not a movie. Rarely are there these turning points, these moments of epiphany that change absolutely everything. But the rest of my trip was a lot happier, not because I found answers to all of my questions, but rather because I didn't need them anymore. Of course I still worried from time to time. It is, after all, very human to worry, and I still thought that I needed to figure things out for myself. At the time, I didn't even come to the realization that there are no set destinations in life where one will or should be at a certain time, something I only came to understand much later.

But what I *did* learn that day was that simply being, simply existing was a natural state of life. We humans focus so much on being somewhere, be it in our careers or in our love lives, that we forget to just be. From that day at the sea onwards, whenever life was crashing in on me like waves in a storm, I remembered to take a second, breathe, and just be in the moment.

You don't need to know where you want to be, it is okay to just *be*.

[back to contents](#)

traveling.

by andreas ludwig

5 am. It is cold. Very cold. How much can a human body bear? Can one freeze to death? No, negative thoughts just make it worse. Think about something good. For example, a warm cozy bed, such as the one I would always fall asleep in at home, and a thick blanket covering my whole body and providing warmth and comfort. Oh yes, now it feels better. At least in my head. But honestly, I need to go now. “It’s going to be cold. You’ll need a proper sleeping bag,” they said. And right they were. Was it a good idea to go on this journey?

Traveling on your own is stupid. That’s what my mother always told me. Why would one do that? You surely have seen ‘Into the Wild’, and you know how it ended. What if you get robbed? What if you encounter dangerous animals? What if you get lost on the outskirts of the boondocks? To be honest, a real adventure demands risks and threats, which makes me hope for some of those fears to become true. **But don’t tell my mother.**

What is a journey without experiencing some risks? Right, business as usual: Another last-minute submission, another drunken evening at the pub, another administrative task – that’s as exciting as it gets in my world. Our society provides almost everything we need: food, entertainment, education, healthcare, personal relationships, and much more. It’s almost impossible to fall through the net of securities and assurances provided by society. But where is genuine excitement to be found in this template full of superficial elements that supposedly provide happiness? Can happiness even exist without the slightest chance of being outside this safe space? I don’t think so. That is actually why I opted to cut the strings and break out of my safety net, at least during this journey.

Traveling is not about the destinations, but it is about the journey. That is a very stereotypical assumption, but its core message is true. In its pure form, traveling does feel like accomplishing a process: In the beginning, there is a plan which seems to be surreal or impossible to accomplish. Next, research is done and gear is assembled. Then the journey

seems to become more feasible. Still, it is like a rough outline of an essay: There is a plan, but you cannot know how it ultimately turns out. Going on the journey provides the opportunity for something new to surface. Yet, the question to be answered is if and how it emerges.

So here we are. This is what I asked for: It's just myself, my backpack, and a dusty road full of Spanish gravel in the middle of nowhere somewhere in the Pyrenees. The blistering sun is burning on my skin. My shoes are digging in the dirt of the road. I can taste the sweat running down my face. I observe a view that is spectacular and frightening at the same time: A deep valley, marked by some trees and thin outlines of mountains far on the horizon, which could be real mountains. Also, my feelings couldn't be more contradictory. On the one hand, I am happy to be on my way, and it feels like accomplishing something. On the other hand, I hadn't thought that the journey would be so demanding: My back hurts. My legs hurt. My feet hurt. Though probably suffering is part of the game. At one point everyone has to carry their cross.

Traveling is physical. Every human being has to carry their personal load in their daily lives. Whilst traveling the load seems to fade due to the pure excitement that can be felt, but at the same time it literally presses down on your shoulders. Due to that physical experience, traveling teaches us that we have to carefully distinguish between essential and unnecessary items because the less weight one has to carry, the easier the journey will be.

By now my body has got accustomed to the heavy load and my feet have found a common ground with the road covered with tiny rocks and grey sand. But my mouth feels very dry, and I can feel the sand grains sticking to my tongue. My throat feels parched, and my muscles do not seem to work properly anymore. I need water! Where is my second bottle of water? Right, I did not want to bring it due to its weight. What a pity. Still, I need water. When can I reach the next creek? Oh, it's 10 miles from here. That's ... half a day of walking. That's doable or ... that must be done. I would give everything for a drop of Adam's ale but no there is no time for daydreams. I got to go, now!

Traveling is not entirely about the journey, but it's also about being sensible. I've never craved for a drop of water as much as on this journey. What should I wear tonight? Does my Tinder date really like me? Will my professor finally like my essay? In our daily lives, we spend way too much time on irrelevant things, but we do forget about the things that really matter. Seldom do we appreciate the very basics that only exist due to our privileged lifestyles. So sometimes we should ask ourselves: What does really matter?

There it is! The creek looked more welcoming in the description, but finally, I can rehydrate. I would have never imagined that a bottle of water peppered with various types of insects and unknown particles can be as refreshing as a cold can of beer whilst sitting at the Inn during the summer term. Drops of water flow down my throat and revitalize my dried-out body. All the sand grains that had settled on my tongue are finally flushed down my throat. I feel alive again. Oh, crap, the sun is slowly vanishing from the sky. Where do I sleep tonight?

Traveling is about choices. Can you recall standing in front of an ice cream vendor having to decide which flavor you want to take? Life is full of such choices. Still, we often make the wrong decision. Why do we do that? More often than not, we base our decisions on our emotions and do not act rationally, or we wait too long and cannot decide anymore. In my case, when I made my decision, I had to take a scoop of lemon because all the strawberry was gone. Did that decision ruin my life? I don't know.

'Hola! Cómo estás?' Finally, some people. Hopefully, they can understand English. Luckily, they do. 'What are you doing here?' they ask me. I say that I need a place to stay for the night.

‘It’s going to be a frosty night! Our jeep is minutes away. Do you want to join us on our way to the village?’ they reply. ‘No, gracias,’ is my answer. Although it seems to be a golden opportunity, I’d rather stay on my own. Maybe they are maybe nice, maybe not. Since I am by myself, it makes way more sense to not join them. I decide to continue my search for a place to stay. It’s mid-September. How cold could it be? Besides, I can camp practically anywhere!

This must be it. What a view! A lake with water that is as clear as the sky. A sharp mountain face that could protect my tent from possible gusts of wind. No signs of dangerous animals, such as bears and wolves. Indeed, it has got a bit chilly by now, but hopefully, my mum’s sleeping bag will serve its purpose.

And serve its purpose it did. Not only did I make it through the night, but since then I appreciated having a good night's sleep even more. Even though I did not sleep very well, I got to experience a clear sky full of stars. Thus, I made the right decision.

Traveling is exciting.

[back to contents](#)

stab by step

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2022

by alexander gabriel

byfoto: anojec szaszobonon-waz © 2022

They stopped.

It was not a difficult situation to grasp, people stop moving all the time. Personally, I invest a lot of energy every day to finally reach a point where I am allowed to stop moving, but as with everything, context must not be ignored. People do not usually stop at a place that is reserved for motion such as the end of a stairway. I have spent many an occasion internally screaming at people who have somehow reached the conclusion that the area between my university's entrance, the library and the stairs that lead into the building is a prime location for congregation.

But the group in front of me just stopped, and I was unable to make out a particular reason for it. The second thing that I could sense stopping for a second was my heart. There was no obvious reason for this either, but it happened all the same. I could feel myself falling downwards into a non-existing abyss that cared very little about the fact that it did not exist. The impact of the situation was easily strong enough to give me the indisputable impression that I also had to stop where I stood. It was not even my choice, but rather an inevitable result of the people stopping in front of me.

The whole thing reminded me of standing in an elevator. It is one of many situations that necessitates a very specific and deeply ingrained performance of all the people that partake in it. You enter the elevator and face the door, unmoving, unimpressed, barely breathing. You might be with others, but no one dares utter a single vowel. The elevator might stop before any of the passengers reach their destination and a new challenger could enter the stage. Every person in the moving cabin must offer their most direct and always slightly indignant stare to ensure that the newcomer is aware of the heinous crime they have committed. Everybody does it, no one knows why, but we do it alongside the companions we have met in the cubicle that moves up and down.

But there was no movement to speak of in my current situation, the opposite was the case. The entire scene seemed to have frozen in time in my mind, every muscle in my body tensed up and my mind was working overtime. I could not ascertain why the group of men had stopped in front of me, so I tried to focus on what I could see. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that there were in fact not three but four of them. One was obscured by one of his fellows almost as to lie in wait, hiding in plain sight. I did not dare breathe or move, even my thoughts seemed hushed to a whisper. Did they know I was behind them, or was this all planned from the start? If it was, for what purpose did they stop in front of me? Was I about to be mugged? What do you do when a group of people comes for you, I cannot fight off four people, should I just turn around and run? But what if a fifth potential robber was right behind me? Should I call for help or could that just make it worse?

There is a certain eeriness to complete solitude, but there is also tranquillity. The only thing worse than knowing you are alone in a scary environment is knowing that you're not. You might have had that feeling when you were younger, or perhaps after experiencing a terrifying story. You are in your room, and you cannot shake the feeling that there's something there. You can only make out slight tones of grey, interloping and shifting around you, encircled by the dim sounds of the world resting around you, some of which you just can't place. Is there something there? You could swear you've seen it move past the curtain. Frantically and faster than you thought you could have ever moved, you turn on the light and of course there's nothing there, it's just your room. Embarrassed, you turn the light back off and lie down. But the moment the room falls dark again, that something is back as if it has remerged from an eternally black spot of obsidian, so dark that no light can ignite.

The danger that loomed in my situation was not hiding in the dark but in the minds of four if not more men, standing in front of me. I was still frozen in the same moment, my foot hanging in the air, never completing the step that began the moment they stopped. In a fascinating display of the intense influence our mind can have on our body, it felt like cold sweat had broken out within moments, every fibre of my body felt exhausted from completely freezing up, but for a moment. The man closest to me put his hand into his pocket, was he going to brandish a knife at me? I could feel myself losing what little control I had left, falling even further beyond the dark, back into my own body, still paralyzed with fear, standing on the stairway with one foot in the air.

The sensation of being stabbed is not complicated, a sharp enough blade makes its way through everything that's too soft to withstand it. In fact, the human skin has enough give that, for a long time in some procedures surgeons would only do a preliminary cut and rip the skin open with their hands. Most witnesses describe the process of being stabbed as equally painful and cold. A piece of steel that is piercing your skin and freezing your body in a way you have never before experienced and cannot brush away. The victim usually crumples and experiences spasms all over their body as the body panics in reaction to the danger. This makes one hyperventilate, which puts a further strain on one's consciousness and elevates one's blood pressure leading to stronger bleeding and faster blood loss and eventually total collapse. The average-sized human adult carries between five and six litres of blood. That's enough liquid to completely cover the floor of a medium-sized living room. Was this going to be my fate? Will my blood drip its way down these stairs, filling the cracks between the rocks as I helplessly disappear?

It happened; my foot hit the next step and a drop of sweat pearled off of my forehead. It seemed like the loudest thing in the universe, I felt the vibrations of my foot hitting the stone

circulating through my entire body, paralyzing me with fear. Every ounce of my being seemed to just stop. But the slowly turning heads did not meet my gaze. They were directed towards the closest man who had stopped first. He turned around and with a furious expression took his hand out of his pocket, holding nothing, not even a clenched fist. His rage was displaced by disheartenment and seemingly a quite similar stress and anxiety that had filled my heart for the longest moments of my life. After another excruciating half-second pause he finally exclaimed: "I think I dropped my cell phone."

[back to contents](#)

breaking barriers

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz © 2022

by sophie kaufmann

byfoto: anojec szaszobonon-waz © 2013

From a young age, each of us is under great pressure to meet the demands of society and find a well-paid job. For many people, the path of life seems already paved, they flow down the river and do not dare to swim against the current.

Two years ago, I graduated from the LMU Munich Faculty of Law and immediately after picking up my diploma, I was expected to dive right into the working world and take a high position. The acquired knowledge about German and European law has opened many doors for me. And indeed, I started working as an intern for a renowned lawyer in town, but soon realized it meant nothing to me. The internship included boring and absurd tasks like sorting files all day long, there was no chance of getting an insight into the profession. All I wanted was to experience being in court observing interesting trials, but the job had nothing to do with that.

What I did, was put the blame on my boss and hold him responsible for my miserable situation. I continued searching for a similar job and soon had a job interview. It was successful. Immediately I started working for them, but my enthusiasm did not change at all. Even though I was given responsibility and worked actively in actual cases, it turned out that courtrooms, defendants and lawsuits were not meant to be my aspiration. Suddenly, a world collapsed for me. Seven years of studying law, and now? Had I wasted seven years of my life?

I fell into a deep hole. I felt like a failure. I could not think of a way out and lost my sense of happiness. I had no idea how to continue. After consulting with the law firm, I quit the job and took some time off. I packed my backpack and flew to South America. The desire of traveling the world was always present in my mind and the moment was right. My rough plan was to spend six months somewhere in the world, to reflect on my life and choices, and come back having a destination in life.

I spent the first two months in a wide variety of places in Peru. On my trip, I met people from all over the world, with whom I stayed in several hostels. Adventure programs were on our daily to-do lists. Honestly, there were parties every day and at least temporarily, I was able to forget all my worries, was finally happy again and felt free. However, I knew this carefree lifestyle could not be a permanent condition, and so I decided to travel on to Colombia.

Having arrived in Bogotá, I was greeted by the loud noise and dense air of the city. Cultural shock. The South is known to be quieter and therefore, I set off straight away. On my way there, I met a girl from Germany who was in the same situation as me. She was studying mechanical engineering and doubted whether this was really her destination. We exchanged ideas, had shared beliefs, and then decided to look for a hostel for the upcoming time. We snorkeled in the Pacific Ocean, partied until the sun rose on the horizon of the sea, hiked to breathtaking places and met a lot of local people who showed us the real Colombian life with all its traditions and dangers. It was unbelievable.

After two months of unforgettable moments, I decided with a heavy heart to travel on alone and find myself on the way. Only two months of my planned time in South America were left, but except from being happy again, nothing has changed. I traveled to Panama and wanted to spend the rest of my journey there. One day, as I was lying on the beach of Boca del Drago, listening to the waves of the ocean and feeling the sun rays on my skin, a shadow appeared above my head. Two young women approached me. They probably noticed immediately that I was a foreigner who is traveling and asked me what foreign languages I spoke because they were looking for a substitute teacher for the local middle school in the village. At that moment, I spoke Spanish and English fluently, so I did not hesitate and agreed to take up the job. What followed was an appointment to discuss further.

Six months later, I found myself still in Panama. I was teaching English at the local middle school and really thrived on the work. I enjoyed working with children and was always happy to see the progress they made. However, it was also clear to me that I would have to return to Europe at some point. I had signed a contract until the end of the school year.

Back in my hometown, I realized that by chance I had found my designation – teaching. Becoming a teacher and passing on all my knowledge and life experiences to the next generations. Having informed myself about the requirements, I applied in several schools.

Today I am teaching law at the COLE International School in Innsbruck. Finally, I found my dream job and a profession, which I really enjoy. Seven years of studying were not a waste of time. The subject had always interested me; I had just taken the wrong path. After having worked in different fields, I found my way. It was a long process getting there where I am, but the most important is to find a job, which is fulfilling me. I listened to myself and not to statements of other people. After all, we work all our life to be able to earn a decent living, and what could be worse than doing something that seems like a waste of time? We have to leave our comfort zone, go beyond ourselves, show courage, and then we will be rewarded. We have to break barriers.

[back to contents](#)



a walk in the wilderness

photo: violer stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by anna biasi

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

On a calm and windless weekday morning, I step outside of my apartment at the break of dawn. My home is situated right in the heart of the lively city centre, making it convenient for managing everyday life but also rather expensive. The monthly rent is slightly higher than I can afford but who is able to resist a view of the abundance of skyscrapers in this magical city? Paying a little bit more to be part of the hustle and bustle seemed like a reasonable idea at the time. Now I'm not so sure anymore as the bills keep piling up. The reality of living from paycheck to paycheck can simply not be romanticised. But this is something for my future self to worry about.

In my attempt to suppress the negative thoughts running endlessly through my mind, I start strolling around the densely populated city. It doesn't feel densely populated at all before sunrise. At this time of day most people are probably still tucked into their comfortable beds, the ringing of their alarm clocks still an hour or two away. The crowds of tourists have luckily not appeared yet, but when they do, the sounds of humans will definitely drown out the sounds of birds I can hear chirping on my walk. Normally I wouldn't get up this early either, but today I feel like a voluntary early riser. I didn't want to take my car and decided to walk, knowing that it would take me significantly longer.

The sun hasn't quite risen yet as I cross the familiar bridge over the flowing river, leaving the city behind me and walking towards the distant forest ahead of me. I notice a little duck floating on the ribbon-like body of water beneath me. It looks peaceful, almost as if it didn't have a care in the world. As I continue my walk my mind wanders to all the wildlife I have never encountered anymore since I moved to this urban environment. I used to love going outside and observing the animals in our backyard at my family house, especially when I was a young child. They always appeared so unperturbed and untroubled and seemed to be in a harmonious relationship with nature. But then again, this was a long time ago. Things have changed and everybody grows up at some point.

I do enjoy my life in the city and I'm not sure why the people I interact with on a daily basis

are always so stressed out. Shouldn't we be our most relaxed selves because the majority of us can enjoy luxuries and comfortable amenities like roofs over our heads, food in our fridges and affordable health care? I wonder why in this day and age human beings need nature to escape their routines and daily lives. People use wilderness as a place to forget about reality, a place where they can seek solitude and find spiritual healing. How come a space once associated with savagery and danger has now become a spot where one can find oneself? How come so many people feel the need to spend half of their month's income on so-called wilderness retreats where one can plant flowers, go on hikes, sleep in self-made tents and gather berries and mushrooms in an uncultivated and uninhabited place? Wilderness is considered a sublime and transcendental space largely untouched by humans, when in reality it is merely an uncivilised piece of land that is separated from humanity for a reason.

I breathe in the cold but crisp morning air as I walk beside a field of wild flowers that slowly merges into the once distant forest. At first, there are only bushes and shrubs but gradually the small plants turn into vibrant trees. I notice how I normally don't pay much attention to the flora and fauna around me, but now the trees feel like divine entities with various animals lurking behind them. The sun has risen by now and its light glistening through the leaves reminds me of the reflective surface of the skyscrapers where I work.

As I continue my walk I suddenly get a weird feeling from within me. Why am I so judgmental toward people enjoying nature? I touch a bright green leaf next to me and the sensation on my fingertips gives me a slight rush. Slowly, I close my eyes and take in the light breeze of wind I can feel on my skin. Maybe life in the city does go by a little bit too fast sometimes. Maybe it's good to soak up nature once in a while to nourish one's soul. Maybe I should try focussing more on my mental health and on ridding myself from unhealthy and negative thoughts that occupy my mind than on my career, I wonder. Somehow it feels like I am fulfilling a childhood dream of adult existence out here in the woods. There is something liberating about being able to walk anywhere my feet take me, not having to worry about the time I have to be home or the places I'm not permitted to go to.

When I open my eyes again, my surroundings feel different. The trees around me don't appear like annoying objects that always seem to be in my way when I try to get somewhere anymore. I unexpectedly get a feeling of appreciation toward them. These living entities are the reason I can breathe in fresh air, nature is the reason I am alive. I can somehow see why people are intrigued by the tranquillity that is associated with it. There is clearly something lacking in my life and I start longing for those carefree days of early childhood. These thoughts feel like my happy place and my worries slowly start to vanish. While thinking back on my youth, feeling joyful playing with the animals in our garden, I notice the forest becoming less dense. I reach a small glade where a woman in linen clothing approaches me. She looks calm and at ease with herself as I notice she wants to communicate with me.

“Good morning, we have been expecting you. Please put your belongings into the box provided next to the birch tree. They will be returned at the end of your stay at our wilderness retreat.”

[back to contents](#)



spell

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by alireza amindehghan

byfoto: arjeter ruzajobonon-ara © 2013

The bells were chiming as the caravan was crossing the sterile desert and the row of camels with shiny rings and pendants dangling on their faces paced on the sweltering sands. The riders had veiled their faces with black shemagh scarfs which left only their beady eyes visible. Their weightless, ghostlike bodies on the camels' humps swayed from side to side. An endless high-frequency rattling alarm besieged the desolate desert. Mesmerized by the cameleers' sacred chant, the caravan moved forward like a train headed to an unknown destination.

She could remember only some foggy, vague images when she jolted awake. But still, she felt a bit dizzy and thought to herself that it might be pre-travel anxiety. It was still dark outside. Her eyes half open, she looked out of her bedroom window. Two jackals were wandering outside playfully. They usually rambled out there until early dawn and went to their holes again when the light came back. She never knew if they were shy or misanthropic. She had a long journey ahead, waiting for about a year. Observing the meteor showers in the heart of the Central Desert.

It was a six-hour monotonous trip to Isfahan. In forty-degrees-plus heat on a sizzling summer day, driving on the scorching asphalt of an old two-way road full of big pits scattered on its face like pockmarks. The stoned, semi-conscious drivers of transit eighteen-wheelers speeded on the opposite lane and passed the with the deafening roar of their wheels. Arriving at a rusty, handwritten sign which said "Dunes" they turned to a dusty detour and after twenty minutes of bouncing up and down on a winding, bumpy road they entered the village.

Long rows of dusty SUVs had pulled over along the driveways. The sixteen-century caravansary was located in the last village and nearest to the sand dunes. At the entrance, two old palm trees with wounded trunks stretched up to the spotless blue sky and some log seats were around the embers from last night's gathering. She had to duck her head down to pass through a slim wooden door and enter a dark corridor that led to the main paved porch which

showcased the mansion's elegance. Abundant red geraniums in earthen pots had been arranged at the edge of a big, shallow, turquoise pool. On the main porch, the sweet aroma of red blossoms of pomegranate trees had allured golden bees.

Upon their arrival, a local old woman welcomed them with a floral teapot, cinnamon sticks, and pink damask rosebuds set in a wicker tray. A cool breeze whirled through the cracked adobe walls of the caravansary and cuddled Afsoon's brown hair. She had faded freckles and large green eyes.

"Are you here for the falling stars?" asked the old woman.

"Yes, we will be your guests for a couple of nights," replied Afsoon.

The old woman paused and gazed at her eyes for a few seconds and said "you'll stay here longer."

Afsoon was taken by surprise by what she just heard.

"Be careful dear! It is very dangerous at night, with black scorpions, wild beasts, and the caravan of ghosts!" the old woman warned them.

Afsoon who was already acquainted with these regional fallacies smiled and said "they do nothing to me."

"Many have gone out there at night and never came back," replied the woman.

The old woman looked nearly seventy years old, with deep lines on her sunburned skin. She had a strange dot-shaped tattoo on her pointed chin and a weird accent. She breathed out oddly at the end of each sentence. On her right hand, she had two saffron yellow gold bracelets and on the other a ring with a big green opal.

Afsoon tried to get her thoughts together and asked "what did you mean when you said..."

The old woman interrupted her and said "It's your destiny."

Although she tried not to mind what the old woman had just uttered, she was still a bit anxious. When everybody went to their rooms to rest, she climbed a row of brick stairs in a corner of the courtyard to the arched roof of the building. She leaned back to the big windcatcher and stared at the horizon. The sun like a lazy bloody ball was sinking behind the farthest sand dunes and yielding to the gravity of the desert. The thought of having left her city to stay in this oasis kept haunting her.

She was not that bold, wild girl anymore. A thirty-four-year-old woman who despised the tumult and troubles of city life and felt alienated among people, unable to blend into the world. She knew herself better now. No more ambitions and wild dreams. Simple things could make her rejoice. She had always dreamed of getting out of the country, but her moods changed as she grew older and made her more attached. Enjoying her solitude she felt like her heart was captured in these old mud-brick houses. The tranquility of this outlying oasis constantly lured her.

After taking a little rest they headed to the dunes. Camps must be set before it got too dark. They went as far as they could to avoid any light pollution, searching for absolute darkness. After two hours, the majestic feast of stars began. There were millions of stars above their heads. The Milky Way could be seen with naked eyes. The local guide pointed to Saturn and Jupiter with his laser pointer. Shooting stars were traveling across the dark sky. The guide

explained about Polaris and other constellations; the Great Bear and Andromeda, or the Chained Lady. She wondered how mysterious the cosmos was. Full of undisclosed secrets.

Afsoon and Arash lounged on a handmade rug and gazed up at the stars. It was two years since they first met on a trip. He always followed his heart and loved to be on the road and that was what she liked most about him.

“They are so close I want to reach out and take one,” said Afsoon.

The guide explained to the group that some of these stars have died millions of years ago and their light has now reached us.

She thought about the immortality of stars. “I wish we were immortal”, she murmured.

“Maybe we have died but we do not know it yet.”

“Don’t get creepy,” said Arash.

The falling stars were putting on an exquisite show across the sky showing off their beauty. They spent the night in a tent and got back in the morning and did not leave their rooms until evening. At night guests gathered around a large brazier near the caravansary, they drank some wine and listened to folklore music. Everybody went back to their rooms to pack and leave early in the morning.

They were sleepless and lay down under the canopies on the main porch. The stars twinkled through the leaves of the old palm tree.

She sipped a little wine and lit a cigarette.

“You know what it is that feels best here? A deep calmness, being weightless. It seems all the anxiety is over. As if there is no more search or quest, all the roads end here, It makes me feel safe,” said Afsoon.

“Let’s go to the dunes tonight,” she said impatiently.

“It is very dangerous at night darling. It is suicide!” said Arash.

“We won’t go too far, I want to be there, it’s the last night, look up at the stars! Do you want to miss all of these? Please.” She urged.

They took the last bottle of wine and drove off to the dunes. There was no one in the village. There were no lights. Arash was trying to pass over the small hills stepping on the gas. He switched on the high beam headlights and tried to follow the tire tracks on the sand. He put the car in high gear and speeded to climb a huge hill. The car jumped and landed with a horrible sound on the other side of the hill in a deep funnel. It took a few minutes for them to come to their senses. Arash got out of the car, turned on the flashlight, and shone it on the tires. All four wheels were stuck in the sand. He knew it was impossible to get out of this big sand funnel on his own.

"We got stuck," said Arash.

“I told you it was a bad idea,” he added.

“We have to stay here tonight and wait for help.”

They spread an old rug on the sands and lay on their backs. The stars seemed touchable and sparkled like precious gems on the long blue gown of the sky. They did not blame each other for this, although loneliness and darkness were horrifying and they did not know what would happen to them. Being glad to be in that part of the desert at that moment, she lit a cigarette

and took a deep hit. White smoke floated in the eternal darkness of the desert. They could hear their heartbeats in that deep silence while the shooting stars lit up the sky above their heads. they kissed.

Feeling a little tipsy, she pointed her finger up at Andromeda and asked: “Do you think the chained woman watches us?”

“Maybe, if she is still alive!” he replied.

They heard a sound, but it was too dark to see anything.

“Did you hear that too? Was that a bell?” she asked nervously.

“Maybe some camels are wandering out there,” he said, although he knew they were too far from the village and it was very weird for the camels to be there at night.

“I have decided to stay here for a while, I can’t come back with you,” said Afsoon.

“Won’t you stay here with me?” she asked.

Arash remained silent and took a gulp of wine. Darkness had stressed them out while the ringing bells seemed to get closer and louder. Their vision was blurred and nothing could be discerned in the absolute darkness. They held their hands tight. Her heart was racing, she had an odd sense of déjà vu. The bells rang uninterruptedly while the figure of a caravan was emerging in the dark. A cold sweat rolled down their skin. The old woman’s words were echoing in her ears. Being speechless she felt numb and dizzy and remembered the eyes she had seen behind the black masks. It felt as if they had no control over their bodies and could not move a muscle, as if they were spellbound by an invisible force. It felt like going down in the sand, like being devoured by the inescapable gravity of a black hole.

[back to contents](#)



lights out

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by pajtim berisha

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

I try not to act scared. Breathing through the nervousness, looking at my wrist, while my hands are being wrapped up, it seems as if I cannot only feel but also see my pulse. I'm focusing to imagine my racing heartbeat slowing down. To approve the hand wraps, the athletic commission employee signs their name with a permanent marker. The evaporating solvent that is released creates this pleasant odour that, on the one hand, is reminiscent of school, a careless time; but on the other hand, its fumes have an inhibiting effect on the brain, very much like sedatives or alcohol. Inhaling them too much, further adds to my nausea.

“Okay guys, get ready.”

As I approach the ring, the noise becomes louder. This practice is the closest to the Roman gladiators of the past, with the two combatants entering the arena, fighting for victory. It is the equivalent of Rome's choice of entertainment for the masses, held in theatres; however, this one is not as legendary as the Colosseum. Still, both display a spectacle where humans are entertained by another human's pain. You can smell the booze; you feel the heat coming off the Brazilian crowd who – as soon as I walk out – start chanting “Uh vai morrer”, which translates into English as “You are going to die.” I am a modern-day gladiator. Whatever you think about the sport, we are all animals by nature.

The walk to the ring becomes more of a sprint. Before entering the ring, thick layers of Vaseline are applied by the cutman on the forehead, above the eyebrows, some of it over the cheeks. It lubricates the face, making the skin more elastic. Decreasing the friction, lowering the chance of lacerations.

The lights go out, the crowd begins to roar and shout. My opponent's entrance song is setting the tone in the arena, injecting energy, igniting a fire among the fans. Some think the build-up, the ring walk, or the face-off are the most nerve-wracking times before a bout, but it is the long wait, this period that is the most daunting. Even after all the experience with several fights, you

never get used to the feeling, you never learn to overcome the fear. All sorts of thoughts go through your head. It is the toughest sport; it is the loneliest one. You start to doubt yourself. Have I trained enough? Is this the last time? Simultaneously trying to motivate yourself, drive yourself to complete the task. This self-motivation keeps you going, even after setbacks. People can be motivated by internal or external factors. Whether this is the desire to achieve goals, medals, belts or wealth, motivation may be a result of several factors. In my case, it is the need for money, the love for my family. I hate every minute of fighting, but I could never quit, I would rather suffer now than live the rest of my life as someone that is not able to provide for his loved ones.

My adversary enters the floor. The disparity in size is apparent. The previous day he weighed in at 235 pounds, 45 pounds over my natural weight. Usually, there are weight classes to ensure that both contestants have similar circumstances, the same amount of force; however, this is not a usual promotion, but resembles more a sanctioned underground event. Rules are different. Some of the procedures, such as the signing of the hand wraps by an 'official', are merely implemented to keep up appearances. No tests on performance-enhancing drugs. Neither payment for medical bills nor any treatment for sustained injuries.

The referee calls us to the centre of the ring. We face each other off for the last time, staring into each other's eyes, trying to find a movement: twitching, blinking, the first one to look away, any sort of insecurity. Fear – we both feel the same thing; however, it is what you do with it that matters. Do not attempt to hide it, project it onto your opponent. His eyes pierce straight through me, like a predator looking at its prey. You can sense the animosity. When you stare at your enemy, you hate his guts because he is the symbol, the embodiment of all your struggles, the anguish, the sacrifices. No, I cannot let anger take over, not controlling one's emotions hinders one's performance.

“Follow my instructions! Protect yourself at all times! Touch gloves if you want to.”

It's showtime.

I start with my favourite combination: Jab, cross, lead hook to the body. It is like hitting a brick wall. My left hand already in pain. He never flinches. He counters, although my guard blocks most of his punches, it feels like sledgehammer blows to my arms. He throws an overhand right...

“The scan shows that there is a lack of blood flow in certain areas of your brain. Given your history of concussions, the repetitive brain trauma, you might have developed CTE. Do you notice any signs?” The doctor is aware of my slurred speech, but not of the coordination impairment, the memory loss I experience regularly. He advises me to quit. “At your age, you should seriously consider retirement.” The question is not at what age I want to retire, it is at what income. “Any further punishment could cause severe irreversible damage or may even end fatal. You are putting your life on the line, Mister.” I am aware of the ramifications. I know it is not a game, if you screw up in tennis, you lose a point, a set. You don't play boxing, if you mess up, it is your health.

“...five...six...”

Where am I? What is going on?

“...seven...”

It is the referee's count. I want to stay down. I can't. I must rise to my feet, get off the canvas. Blurred vision, I need to get clear-headed. The referee glares at me, his lips are moving, but my

ears are still ringing, I nod and just grunt as if I understood him, turning back toward my corner, hoping he does not decide to wave the fight off. Not able to recall the fall, or any of the last seconds, he examines me, assessing my condition; it continues. I am compromised, thrown back into the fire. While I understand how fortunate I am to have survived this round, I have no choice but to keep moving forward. Seemingly impervious to pain, my opponent gladly takes four or five punches in order to land one. He tries to go for the finish, unleashing a flurry of hard shots. My ribs are hurting, my chest burning, the neck sore, a metallic taste in my throat.

Don't care; I am willing to endure as much punishment as necessary. This sport -as life- is all about pain, how you handle it is the difference between losing and winning, victory or defeat. Bruised, battered, bleeding and hardly able to see, I know this is only going one way. I am determined in my relentless pursuit that nothing – I mean no matter the consequences – will stop me.

[back to contents](#)



summer storms

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by patricia biasi

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

9 p.m., one late August evening, she left in a storm. The rain pattered against the windshield in an impetuous rhythm, crackling like burning bracken in a bush fire. Teeming down in an almost biblical flood, a Noah's-Ark cataclysm of water, heaven's gates had been opened in a cloudburst of big, sopping drops. The wind whipped up into a frenzy, a swirling vortex of violent gloom. Boiling black clouds swallowed the mountains, turning the air into a dark and vengeful abyss, racing across the night sky, thrumming with the charged energy they were desperate to release. A flashing blade of lightning struck, illuminating the darkness with white bursts of light. It tore through the sky in electrifying fireworks, hissing and spitting like bonfire. Crashing thunder roared furiously, echoing powerfully through the valley. A menacing exclamation of heaven.

"It will only dribble," they had predicted. But she knew different. It had started with a tinkling sound, like the clinking of the champagne pearls in the bottle they had just popped. A gentle breeze whispering through the trees, faint clouds blotting out the golden summer sun. The storm came with a sepia hint to the silver-black sky, a shrieking omen of the carnage that was about to occur. As the first droplets landed on her arm, she swiftly finished the last sips left in her flute. "Why don't you stay a little longer," they had offered. "Wait it out. It will be over in a moment." But she didn't want to stay. Instead, she said her goodbyes and hurriedly started the car. In a strange way, she liked thunderstorms and the feeling of cleansing purity they exuded.

They had been sitting on the teak porch in George's garden. Recently divorced, he had gotten to keep the summer house, a relic from a once loving relationship. Now, it was vacant for most of the year, only to be used sporadically to invite friends for garden parties over the holidays. Once the festivities were over, though, George would return to the city like everyone else. Well, everyone except for her. She was the only one that had never left.

“Hot yoga,” exclaimed Benjamin between two bites of cake. “It’s been transformative to my workout routine.” “Which studio do you go to?” George enquired, visibly sweating from the sweltering heat of a late August afternoon. “Don’t say that adorable Vietnamese place next to the Boba spot? I’ve been doing spiritual sound baths there for a while.” He took a sip of champagne to cool off. “What have you been up to, Amelia?” “Jacob and I have been going on hedonistic city breaks, as we like to call them. We’ve been to Tel Aviv, Berlin, and Budapest. Next week, we’ll go to Amsterdam...” They chattered away about how they liked to spend their free time. All in their late 50s, they were now able to ‘finally focus on themselves’, as Matilda liked to put it. Some of them had been in decade-long marriages, children out of the house, some recently divorced, some newly in love.

The sun was blazing on the porch, even the bees seemed too exhausted to fly. George took another sip of champagne and sighed, “It’s so good to finally see you all again after such a long time.” A long time it had been, indeed. They were old friends from high school, or rather acquaintances that used to be friends a long time ago. She didn’t really understand the need for their annual get-togethers. They didn’t even like each other that much. At least, that’s what she had thought for some time. In her mind, they didn’t have anything in common anymore except for reminiscing about long-gone days. For some reason, though, they had never put a halt to the tradition. In a way, they all felt an unspoken duty not to stop. Well, maybe she was the only one who felt that way. After all, she had stayed when all the others had left and gone to the city to study art history, learn about the wisdoms of the ancient Greeks, and go to bottomless brunches on Sundays. She felt the kind of distance where she just couldn’t relate to the others’ discussions, interests, or life decisions, as much as she would like to. Some part of her was longing to sympathize with their problems, yet she couldn’t help but often see them as shallow and superficial.

She had always felt a certain fascination for their lives, though. Indeed, she’d spent much of her adolescence deeply envying them. She felt it was unfair that she had never gotten the choice. Growing up working class, her parents wanted her to get a job and become independent early on. She didn’t blame them for it. They simply held different world views, which they, in turn, had adopted from their own parents. There was no time to concern oneself with the study of excavations or the flow of ions when there were bills to be paid. She never complained, either. She’d had a simple but good life. She’d built a career, bought a house, and raised two children with her wife. They would spend their days swimming in nearby lakes, watching barn swallows at dusk, and going on little vacations to the countryside. She was content, yet a part of her was wondering what it would have been like if she had gotten to leave. She often caught herself glorifying the others’ city lives. She felt a certain fascination with what else might have been out there, at times disparaging her own, provincial life. All this idleness, boredom, feeling trapped, daydreaming about going on an adventure. For a moment each summer, she got to take a glimpse into what these adventures could have looked like.

9:30 p.m. Raindrops were splattering against the windshield, the wipers struggling to keep up. In the distance, she could make out an oak tree struck by a flash of lightning. For a moment, she thought about what would have happened if it had struck her. In the infinity of the cosmos, it wouldn’t have mattered at all. She felt humbled by the thought. A brief encounter with grandeur, offering a consoling perspective on the brevity of human existence. She accelerated the car; raindrops flying towards her like stars towards a spaceship. To her relief, these annual get-togethers usually served as a reminder that the grass, genuinely, wasn’t always greener on the other side. What mattered wasn’t so much where one happened to be located but how they engaged with whatever, or whoever, happened to be around. There was no glamorous city

centre. There was just her, here, now, somewhere on this pale blue dot, surrounded by unobtrusive beauty, with a too-often neglected need to reopen her mind to vastness.

‘Ping,’ a text appeared on her phone. “Drive home safe.” It was her wife, who would always conceal life’s truths in casual conversation. She would put the kettle on and, while the water was boiling, say things like “Ordinary lives are heroic because ordinary things are never actually ordinary. There is immense skill and true nobility involved in not succumbing to madness at the paradox of being alive.” She slowed the car down and refocused on the road ahead of her. The storm raged on.

[back to contents](#)



of destinations and destiny

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

by winfried stangl

photo: violet stathopoulou-vas © 2022

My name is Jack Whitaker, today is the 5th of August. You can call this my story or the babbling of a drunk man, I don't care. You can see this as a lecture on the purpose of my existence or as a mere recollection of some crucial moments in my life without any ulterior implications, I couldn't care less. This isn't about you and what you may read between the lines, this is about me. About what I want to get off my chest before I, perhaps, take my last breath. If you imagine the course of your life to be a road, sometimes bumpy and sometimes smooth, there are some destinations along my road that I want to show you. Places that I frequently visited in my mind. Conversations and experiences I've had. Moments that shaped who I've become. I can't really tell which one of them is the main culprit that had me get into my car on this particular night. Today is the 5th of August, and it might be my last day. I cannot tell you if this is going to be my final destination, or if I am destined to see another day, week, month, year or even decade. It is a bit funny, I have to say, that you will meet a great number of people throughout your life that are hell-bent on telling you what your destiny will be. This in itself is not funny, but the fact that most of these people don't know a single thing about their own destiny makes me chuckle, at least a little. How on Earth should they be able to tell me about my destiny? For years I've been bombarded with their ridiculous or selfish suggestions and predictions, but I bet on the last bottle of beer I have left that none of them know if I shall see the light of the next day. Anyway, I don't want to sound too bitter. Get in, you don't have to buckle up. It's just a story after all.

The first destination of our trip, and perhaps the first major one in my life, was my seventh birthday. It was marvelous, with this huge cake for me and my friends. They were all there, all the people I considered to be cool and funny at the time, which is probably something like the equivalent of being successful and intelligent as an adult. All the people I adored were there to dig into a pile of sweet dough with cream and strawberries with me. Obviously, they all had brought presents for me, which their parents had wrapped neatly because the kids would have

never been able to wrap presents by themselves. Just one thing bothered me about that day, and that was my friend Jonathan not being allowed to come to the party. My mother had always expressed her disdain for that boy and his family. In her eyes, that child embodied everything that some people might hate about children. His clothes were mostly ripped from playing games of catch or hide and seek in the forest. I don't think I have ever seen him wearing trousers that didn't have a spot of soil or tomato sauce on them. He was wild. Screaming like a maniac while running around and fighting imaginary enemies or other non-imaginary children with sticks. That was one thing my mother particularly disliked about him, him being loud in general. 'This damned child, always screaming like he sat down on a thumbtack. Can he never shut up?', she often said. She was right, you know. I have never met anyone with such a strong voice. When he suddenly got struck by some spell of excitement, he would just exclaim some nonsense like 'Fantabulous!' at the top of his lungs. What a weirdo. But you should have heard him laugh. Do you know those moments during which time seems to slow down for a while? Like when you lock eyes with a special someone that takes your breath away. Or when you see a squirrel running up a tree and jumping from branch to branch for the first time in your life. It was always like that when Jonathan laughed. I remember this one time it was raining outside and we were playing indoors, when he opened a drawer in the kitchen and saw sprouts of potatoes growing towards the light. He laughed and giggled, eventually saying to me, 'Look Jack, the potatoes don't like being locked in either. I'm just like them, I'm a potato!' I listened to his pearly laughter for what seemed like an eternity. It was beautiful.

Later that day I told my mother about it, and she snorted, 'Yeah, I agree. This child is definitely a potato'. When I asked her if I could invite him to my birthday party, she replied that I shouldn't surround myself with such people. 'It is not your destiny to hang out with such people. How are you supposed to learn anything?' From there on, she found excuse after excuse for not allowing me to go and see Jonathan. A few months later, we moved from York to the outskirts of Derby, and I haven't heard of Jonathan ever since. My parents didn't seem to mind at all that I wasn't able to inspect potatoes and caterpillars together with him anymore because that way I could focus on school and extracurricular activities. Not that I had known anyone with whom I could have done those things in my new neighborhood. I was a stranger in Derby. Not even the local gang of cats liked me, and they accepted treats and cuddles from anyone else. I figured that I needed to explore my surroundings if I ever were to connect to it and other people, but my parents intervened. They declared the parks to be off limits because of all the shady people that could be lurking there. This was all around my seventh birthday. Not my best one, at least not in retrospect. Anyway, enough about Jonathan and dirty people.

Fast forward to the next destination, my last year of elementary school. There used to be this one old man living down the road. Most of his family had either died or forgotten about him when I first spotted him on a sunny Saturday morning in his garage. Actually, he had turned it into his workshop a long time ago. So, there he was with all those fascinating things. There was this woodturning lathe with which he could make things like chair legs or walking canes. Then, there was also a bandsaw he could use to cut a wide variety of shapes of wood. He also had a sanding machine, and ... well, that's not important, sorry. One day I just walked up to him, he took off his ear protection and looked at me. He said nothing, but just stood there smiling at me. I eventually managed to say, 'Could you make me a sword?' His smile became even broader. 'Why don't you make one yourself?', he asked me. 'I don't know how', I replied. 'Well, then let me show you how to do it. Pass me that slat of wood from the pile behind you...yeah, that one, thanks. Now, have you ever operated any of those machines or used any of the tools before?' He helped me make my very first sword, and I loved it. I

returned on multiple occasions, and there was so much to learn every time I stepped into his workshop. My next pieces included a walking cane with a crown at the top end, and it made me feel like a king with a scepter. After some time, he even allowed me to help him with some furniture that had been ordered by another neighbor of ours. Hell, he even let me do some unsupervised work after he had made sure I knew how not to chop off a finger using one of the extremely sharp wood carving knives. That was an enormous amount of trust he put in me there, and I hardly ever disappointed him.

When I eventually had to tell my parents what exactly I was doing whenever I disappeared on the weekends, they were in shock. ‘Irresponsible piece of shit!’, my father screamed, ‘Putting our child in such danger for his own benefit! Where’s my phone, darling, I need to call our lawyer. This guy is done!’ As I found out later, they actually filed a lawsuit against him for child endangerment. I don’t know how this played into him putting up his house for sale and moving away only weeks later, but I had the feeling that it had to do something with that. When I asked my father why he was so mad at the old man, he put a hand on my shoulder and said to me earnestly, ‘Son, I definitely don’t want you to lose a hand in some kind of accident only because of some senile pensioner. This is not your destiny. Look at your perfectly healthy hands, they have to stay like this a bit longer. Without them, you won’t be able to become a surgeon. That is your destiny, not some lousy workshop down the road, making toys and furniture until you grow old.’

For some reason we moved again a short while after this incident. They said something about the neighborhood not being safe enough, and something else about the carelessness of the working class. There were some obvious tensions between my parents and our neighbors, which became apparent when the branches of their hedges reached over the fence into our garden. ‘I don’t care about how it looks, son. This is about them not respecting the boundaries. That’s what we all have to do! They need to get their act together and trim the hedge because otherwise I’ll just start parking my car in their garage. No, I will not calm down, honey!’

You know what, I’m just going to briefly summarize the rest because, to be honest, thinking of all that pains me. During the following years, I was signed up for the local swimming team. For some reason, my parents thought that I could have a future as an athlete if my academic career would fail. I was 14 years old when they told me that, and I had straight A’s. I finished high school and applied for medical school. You should have seen the smiles on the faces of my parents when I received my letter of acceptance. They were truly proud of me on that day. My mother even laughed a pearly laughter, just as Jonathan once did. And my father smiled a genuine smile at me, which reminded me of the old man in his workshop, who smiled at me in just the same way whenever he watched me work eagerly. It felt like a dream come true. I just wasn’t sure if it was my dream. ‘You will be a great man and an even greater doctor,’ my uncle told me when he visited us shortly after, ‘Someone with steady hands and a sharp mind is destined to become a brain surgeon, I’m telling you!’ Yeah, he wasn’t the only one to tell me that. My whole family did, and so did my friends. In the heat of the celebration, I asked my parents if I could go out clubbing with some pals that I pretended to know well. ‘Sure thing, but don’t forget the rules. No hook-ups and no throw-ups. If I smell a trace of alcohol in your breath when you return at 11 pm, you’ll be grounded for a while. Have I made myself clear?’ Ah yes, quite the loving mother.

At university, I met this one girl that always looked at me with a dreaming gaze. I didn’t know much about love or relationships, so I took the kind of attraction that she expressed towards me as the one thing everyone was talking about. That had to be love, or something like it. My parents got wind of that, and later asked me to ask her out. Stephany Carmichael, that’s her

name. Everyone was so happy to hear about the two of us becoming a couple. ‘You are going places, son. Do you even know who her father is?’, my father asked me. I didn’t have a clue, but apparently my girlfriend’s last name meant that immense wealth was headed my way. You know what, let’s cut right to the chase. I married her, now I am the father of two children. I downright despise her family, but my wife has told me that’s okay. Apparently, that’s what everyone in their family feels for each other.

People just kept whispering things into my ear, and I hated to disappoint them. Ah, what the hell am I even doing here. Driving the car and recording my voice as if I had anything valuable to say. Bottom line, it’s all just like a sick joke. Sick! F*****! Joke! Until the accident, my life seemed to be quite alright, you know? Good income, nice house, two children and a wife. I was a made man, but then I went for a morning run and some drunk piece of s*** ran me over with his car! This degenerate was on all sorts of different substances when he hit me and almost ripped out my entire right arm. Only because some trash human being can’t control himself, I get to be a cripple for the rest of my life? F*** that! I can’t work anymore and have to take loads of pills and go see a physiotherapist every week to ensure that the little feeling that I have left in my arm doesn’t fade entirely. But what would I care, the little feeling that I have left is mostly pain anyway. Can you imagine how painful driving the car is right now?

I just don’t get it, I did everything everyone ever expected of me, and this is my reward? My wife can’t stand the sight of me anymore. When I checked her text messages tonight, I saw that she was very much in touch with one of my colleagues from the clinic. Is this my destiny? Is it?! What is my next destination, I ask all those smartasses that were there to whisper to me all my life?! And most importantly, where the f*** is Jonathan? I think I need him right now...I need him. That one little brat that thought he was a potato. Of all the people, that’s the one...

What’s that? Speed limit? I went through all this just for some lousy sign to tell me to slow down? No, f*** you! No more curfews, no more restraints, no more limits. I want to feel this, even if it’s just for once. I want to feel something different, just for a second. Look at the lights flashing by! It’s like standing in a storm as a child. Holy mother of...this is awesome! It’s like in the movies! Hang on, I’m gonna roll down the windows so you can hear by the roaring of the wind how fast I’m actually going. CAN YOU HEAR THIS? 200 KILOMETERS PER HOUR AND NO ONE WILL STOP ME. Just this one time...one last destination. Perhaps the only one that I will ever get to choose myself.

[back to contents](#)